



Plunkett Model of Co-operative Development

Contents*

Overview	1
What is Plunkettism?	1
The Seven Key Concepts of Plunkettism.....	2
Community Response	5
Conclusion	6
Endnotes.....	7

Overview

The Co-operative Innovation Project (CIP) worked closely with the Plunkett Foundation of the UK to think about how the activity of co-operative development is carried out around the world, and what the successful Plunkett model (“Plunkettism”) looks like. This chapter provides an overview of Plunkettism, and links the key concepts of Plunkettism to the experience of co-op development in western Canada.

In the summer and fall of 2014, Peter Couchman, CEO of the Plunkett Foundation and a member of CIP’s Project Management Group, led seminars with CIP team members to think about the activity of co-operative development. The following section draws from the resources created by the Plunkett Foundation and used in the CIP seminars.

What is Plunkettism?

Plunkettism is an approach to developing co-operatives that promotes community-based organizing.

Sir Horace Plunkett was an Irish leader in British parliament and a member of the Dunsany branch of the Plunkett family, who believed that, in Ireland and America, “the city had been developed to the neglect of

* Reference: Co-operative Innovation Project (January 2016), *Plunkett Model of Co-operative Development*. Part of Co-operative Innovation Project Final Report. Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan.



the country.”¹ A staunch supporter of co-operative business, Plunkett would travel from community to community on his horse, holding (or responding to invitations to) community meetings that would explore what problems a community was facing, and to consider ways in which a co-operative enterprise might address those problems.

The idea behind building a new co-operative can start three different ways.

- **Big Bang:** “A new co-operative idea spreads rapidly through a society and large numbers of that co-operative are formed. After a time, the rate of progress slows and then ceases. At this point, gravity takes hold with mergers and, sometimes, the collapse inwards of the model, and the disappearance of any long term co-operative development support.”² In this example, there are a few ‘early adopters’ of the new co-operative business model, then a rapid rise and expansion, followed by a slowing. In western Canada, a good example might be the co-operative retail model of food stores.
- **Responder:** “Here there is a co-operative development support structure that is available if people contact the service and ask for it. There is very little promotion of the co-operative model.”³ While there is promotion of the co-op model in western Canada through youth engagement (camps and leadership retreats, curriculum, and co-op building), and through media and other avenues, the majority of Canadian co-operative development responds to requests when groups ask for co-op development support.
- **Community organizing:** “Here the role of the co-operative developer begins by inspiring a community that some of their problems can be solved through forming a co-operative and then aiding them in the development of it. Plunkettism is one of the traditions to draw on this approach.”⁴ Other co-op development traditions that preference community organizing are the Antigonish movement in Atlantic Canada.⁵ In Saskatchewan, the *Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life* (1952) used the community forum method to ask communities to discuss local problems and consider solutions.⁶

For CIP, activating ‘Plunkettism’ within the project parameters across western Canada meant starting at the ground level: creating community forum events designed to discuss community needs. These community events were, in essence, our version of “Horace on a Horse.”

The Seven Key Concepts of Plunkettism

1. The best way to achieve social change is through economic change.

Plunkettism believes that co-operatives, as an enterprise-based approach and ownership model of “organized self-help,” achieves social and moral successes that include and go beyond economic benefit. Plunkettism, though, is not a social movement, but an economic one. The key aspect of Plunkettism is to encourage people to go through a process where they discuss what changes are needed, and how they will achieve them. It’s about listening to the challenges they face, instead of imposing your own issues or



solutions. Plunkettism, as a method of co-operative development, looks to find ways that a co-operative solution could help.

2. Co-operatives have to be supported to succeed in the technical, the economic, and the social.

Horace Plunkett outlined these three steps as the “Three Betters: Better Farming, Better Business, Better Living.”⁷ Originally developed to promote and build agricultural co-operatives, in today’s vision of Plunkettism, technical support (‘Better Farming’) lies in helping with business plans, community engagement, legal processes, and financing. The technical structures ensure that community groups have solid tools and plans in place as they build their co-operative enterprise. The question is, what will our intervention be in our local market?

Economic support (“Better Business”) is the co-operative business foundation, in supporting communities who choose to use co-operation as a tool to benefit the community. Co-operatives are a sustainable and resilient business model, and build ‘better businesses.’ The question is, how will our local business be run?

The Plunkett model views social support (“Better Living”) as the connection between the co-operative business and the community in which it operates. This is where the growing co-operative asks itself, “what is our ultimate purpose?” Local empowerment – solving local problems through a co-ordinated and co-operative local solution – builds both communities and individuals. Community engagement at all stages is critical: “Without community buy-in of the project and continued engagement, [the co-operative enterprise] is likely to fail.”⁸ Horace Plunkett described “better living” as “making country life more interesting and attractive.”⁹ We used this question during community forum meetings to ask: what is missing, that would make your community better?

3. Co-operatives have to stay connected to the community from which they come.

Plunkett noticed that co-operatives generally did well looking after their technical and business side, but too many would abandon their social mission over time. This, he said, was a fatal flaw. Communities are all different, with a unique set of people, problems, and opportunities. However, there are few problems that haven’t been solved somewhere, by someone, and possibly using co-operative techniques. In Plunkettism, it is important that a co-operative community enterprise remains closely linked with its community, in a two-way dialogue through public meetings, forums, questionnaires, feedback or other connecting systems. This ongoing dialogue ensures that a co-operative can adapt to its community’s changing needs.

4. How we attract people to form co-operatives is a vital part of the process.

In Plunkettism, supporting the development of co-ops means not one, but four critical stages. These involve *inspiring* the idea of co-operative solutions through open communications (often starting with an in-person community meeting) that fully investigates the problems at hand, *exploring* how and in what best ways a co-operative solution might fit, supporting the *creation* of co-operatives, and finding ways to help ongoing growth and change within co-operatives that can then *thrive*. These stages are much more than a “Responder” approach that waits until a potential co-operative asks for help, or a “Business” approach that only helps a group through the technical aspects of building a co-op business. Making sure that co-operative development considers all four of these stages is critical, as in the end, the co-operative that builds is much stronger.

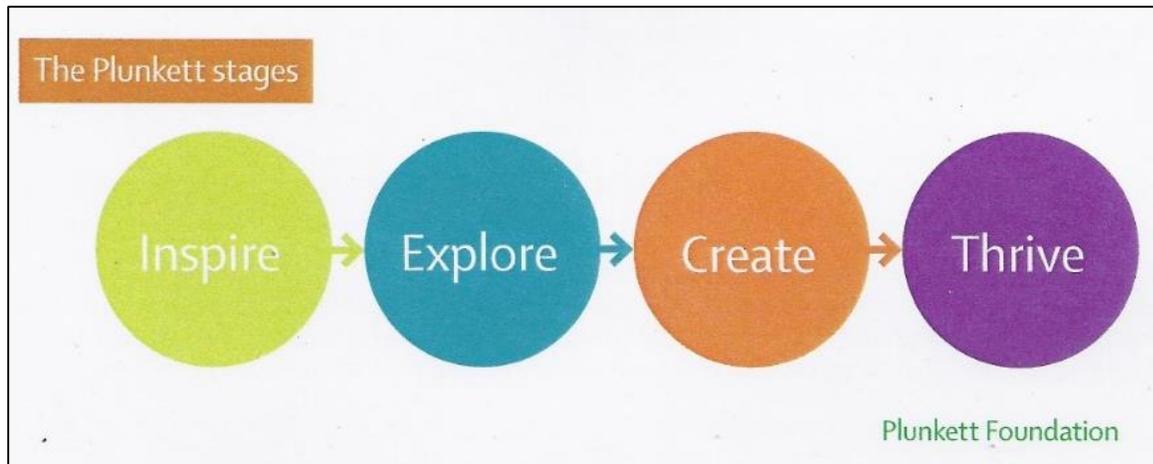


Figure 1 The Plunkett four stages of co-operative development

5. Co-operative development is a team activity, not the work of one heroic individual.

In the Plunkett model, the axiom is “no one person knows everything.” Whether that refers to the team working to help a community build a co-op, or the people in the community itself, co-operation is about leveraging differences. Being comfortable with tension, with opposing views or political stripes or motivations for being involved in developing the co-op, is part of what it means to be a team.

Moreover, a co-op grows alongside other businesses and business models – it’s about growing the larger community business health. In practice, the best co-operative development is when more people – from both the community and from those working with the community to develop the co-op (such as co-op developers from provincial associations, private developers, legal or accounting or business support, or others) – are involved. That point is important and should be reiterated: Plunkettism deliberately goes against the classic ‘lone co-op expert’ idea of co-operative development, where one developer is expected to know everything. Robust co-op development involves a multitude of supporters and experts along the way.

6. Government has a role in the development of co-operatives, but it is a limited one.

Government support for co-operative development lies mainly in removing barriers, creating a supportive policy environment for co-operatives to form, and in supporting the early stages of co-operative development. There is no place in Plunkettism for overt political stances; co-operatives and the people who are members of co-operatives cross all walks of life and all sides of the political spectrum. In co-operative development, it is project over politics. To that end, all governments, no matter their ideology, can support co-ops as locally-driven self-help solutions. Communities drive development. Governments may, or may not, assist.



7. Learning from others.

Co-operatives are a world-wide phenomenon; the active development of new, and growth of existing, co-operatives is different in every country. Culture, circumstance, political and legal structure, funding support, and many other factors dictate the kind of approach taken and the varying results. In Canada, a community-based approach supported co-operative development examples including the Antigonish movement, and the Quebec caisse populaires movement. Learning about different models and approaches to co-operative development from around the world helps bring new ideas to new places.

***“Hasten Slowly”:** this saying – which is the Plunkett family motto – captures an important concept for co-operative development. Developers know that building a co-op takes time. In Plunkettism, a co-op is built at the speed of the community, not the speed of the developer.*

Community Response

Participants were asked to provide evaluations of each community event. When asked: “What will you take away from this community meeting?” respondents said:

- *A great turnout that showed a tremendous amount of community caring.*
- *Better understanding of everyone's needs. Chance to open lines of communication with people in other communities and maybe start working together.*
- *A sense of belonging/sharing with my community.*
- *Re-affirmation of strength in community members.*
- *Pride of community. Need for community conversations on key issues.*
- *Keep an open mind for opportunities to improve community.*
- *A more complete picture of my community and its volunteer groups.*
- *Nice to hear local issues/topics from a wide range of ages and occupations.*
- *Being hopeful that the community will grow and work together for everyone.*
- *That there are people in my community interested in development to meet local needs.*
- *Feeling good about my community and the energy of the people around the table.*

Community events became one of the ways the CIP project put Plunkettism into action in western Canada, to test whether or not communities would be responsive to community-based open meetings. We concluded that, given the warm response and the comments and feedback provided, that such community events have an important role to play in community and co-operative development.



Conclusion

The CIP team found that the Plunkett model of co-operative development provided a fresh perspective on the approach and process of co-operative development. Through workshops with Peter Couchman, the CIP project team came to view co-operative development through a broader lens, one which considers pre-development *Inspire* and post-development *Thrive* activities as critical to a robust co-operative development environment.

The community-based approach, as part of a potential *Inspire* process, was tested through CIP's 26 community meetings. We found that, in addition to launching or supporting a focused conversation about the possibilities of the co-operative model as a local solution, the CIP meetings gave communities a space and place to discuss, amongst themselves, local problems, goals, and solutions.

As a result, CIP clearly showed that concepts provided by Plunkettism, such as open community events and other forms of community-based and community-led development initiatives, have an integral role to play in the community-based and co-operative development of rural and Aboriginal communities in western Canada.



Endnotes

¹ Horace Plunkett, *The rural life problem of the United States : notes of an Irish observer*. New York: Macmillan, 1910, 1910.

² Plunkett Foundation, "Plunkettism," 2014.

³ Plunkett Foundation, "Plunkettism," 2014.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Learn more about the Antigonish movement at <http://coady.stfx.ca/coady/movement/>.

⁶ Harold Chapman, *Sharing My Life: Building the Co-operative Movement* (Saskatoon: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, 2012). For the Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life, see <http://uregina.ca/~sauchyn/socialcohesion/Archgd2.htm>.

⁷ Plunkett, *Rural Life*, 1910.

⁸ Plunkett Foundation, "Plunkettism."

⁹ Plunkett, *Rural Life*, 1910.