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**Co-operative Membership
as a Complex and Dynamic
Social Process**

MICHAEL GERTLER

January 2006

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UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN

Centre for the Study
of Co-operatives

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CO-OPERATIVES



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Cover design by Byron Henderson
Editing, interior layout, and design by Nora Russell

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION
Gertler, Michael E. (Michael Eden)

Co-operative membership as a complex and dynamic social process /
Michael Gertler.

Originally a chapter in: Co-operative membership and globalization.

Includes bibliographical references.

Also available in electronic format.

ISBN 0-88880-506-3

1. Cooperative societies—Membership. 2. Cooperative societies—Social aspects. I. University of Saskatchewan. Centre for the Study of Co-operatives II. Title. III. Title: Co-operative membership and globalization.

HD3448.G47 2005 306.3'4 C2005-906137-5

Printed in Canada

08 09 10 / 5 4 3 2

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Membership as a Human Experience*

MEMBERSHIP IS A HALLMARK OF HUMANITY. We humans are gregarious and well equipped for an intense and complex social life. We are unparalleled in the range of associations that we maintain, and in the degree to which we modify our group memberships over a lifetime. While the capacities to form lasting relationships and to co-operate are important for individual and group survival, membership is its own reward. We derive satisfaction from belonging and mutual recognition. Though membership, at times, may be costly, it provides us with resources, with social supports, and with opportunities for personal development. As individuals we gain our singularity by virtue of the memberships that we seek out or that are imposed upon us. Our individual identities are constructed out of past and present memberships in different groups. We define ourselves, and are defined by others, based on inclusions or exclusions that we have experienced with respect to groups.

“Member” can denote a person belonging to a group, or each of the individuals belonging to or forming a society or assembly. “Membership” may denote the fact or status of being a member of a society, assembly, or other organized entity; the body of members collectively; or the number of members in a particular organization.¹ While some of these meanings focus on the existence of, and the size of, a group of members, others focus attention on the status of being a member, and on the content or nature of the relationships involved. The membership of a partic-

* This paper was originally a chapter in a book titled *Co-operative Membership and Globalization: New Directions in Research and Practice* (Saskatoon: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, 2004). It is reprinted with permission of the author.

ular person, and the membership in terms of the group collectively, can have particular qualities and characteristics.

We can explore the potential and complexity of membership by considering the diverse meanings of the suffix “-ship.” It is used variously to denote an office, position, or occupation, as in *authorship* or *kingship*; a quality, state, or condition of being, as in *kinship*, *partnership*; acts, power, or skill, as in *leadership*, *workmanship*; relationships between persons, as in *comradeship*; someone with a certain rank or status, as in *your ladyship*; and also the members, collectively, of a class of persons, as in *readership*.²

While not all of these aspects of membership surface regularly in relation to co-operatives, such meanings highlight multiple latent interpretations of co-op membership. These meanings draw attention to the skills and powers involved in membership, and to the complex relationships that exist between each member and the organization, as well as among the persons who are members. These meanings also link back to, and highlight, the dual character of a co-operative as an association and an enterprise: members associate in order to carry out various collective goals.³

Membership is a widely used—though less frequently analysed—social arrangement that encompasses an array of rights, privileges, responsibilities, and obligations. It can be viewed as a set of structured relations and practices within which an individual takes on various roles and levels of activity within a formally or informally constituted group. As a social institution, membership can also be viewed as a set of norms and rules for association which themselves may be expanded or renegotiated.

The modifiers that can be attached to the word “member” remind us that it is a status that is often qualified or amplified in some manner. One can be an active, associate, charter, clandestine, continuing, ex officio, founding, honorary, life, long-time, loyal, minority, new, past, potential, or sponsoring member. The conditions attached to membership as a category are likewise varied: open or closed, voluntary or compulsory, hereditary or by invitation. One’s membership may be conditional, permanent, probationary, renewable, temporary, or trial.

When we think about what it may mean to be a co-operative member, we can start by identifying and considering a number of overlapping concepts: activist, adherent, advocate, associate, client, customer, elector, investor, leader, office holder, owner, partner, patron, practitioner, promoter, proponent, shareholder, stakeholder, user, or volunteer. Co-operative members draw on membership experiences as band members, church members, clan members, club members, faculty members, family members, gang members, library members, party members, professional association members, service club members, team members, and union members. These kinds of membership may inform expectations, attitudes, and behaviours when it comes to co-operative membership.

The approach of individual co-op members with respect to membership, and likewise the collective membership culture of a co-operative, can vary and also change over time. Membership may be formal and legal, but passive and lacking in substance or solidity. On the other hand, it may be substantive, and associated with multiple forms of attachment, commitment, and activity. Such differences have significant repercussions for a co-operative organization.

Characteristics of Co-operative Members and Memberships

IN COMMERCE it is common practice to analyse the customer base and to target specific subgroups with particular kinds of communications and incentives. Politicians gather intelligence through polls and target specific audiences with particular messages. Co-operatives also face a membership and a broader public that is increasing in its diversity and particularistic interests. It thus becomes important to identify relevant subgroups within the membership and to address their concerns, preferences, and needs. Members and memberships have temporal, spatial, and socio-demographic characteristics. Members also vary in

terms of the scope and intensity of their involvement and commitment(s). These dimensions interact and overlap so that the relevant characteristics of members and membership rarely belong to only one domain. Our conceptualization of membership must perforce be multidimensional and dynamic, accommodating many possible locations and mutually conditioning connections.

Each co-op member has, and the members collectively have, a unique socio-demographic profile. Although this profile reflects the structure of the communities from which the membership is drawn, it can vary significantly from the general makeup of the population when subgroups are over- or underrepresented. A co-op's membership can be characterized in terms of gender ratios, age distribution, ethnic origins, occupations, family or household characteristics, income, or other socio-economic indicators. Averages do not tell the whole story. There may be subpopulations with characteristics that mark them as significant subgroups or subcultures. Furthermore, the members collectively can be characterized in terms of their diversity or homogeneity.

Temporal dimensions of membership include variables such as length of membership, the mix in terms of new or long-term members, time of joining relative to key events in the history of the enterprise, and trends in terms of growth or shrinkage in membership. The time of joining in relation to the individual's own age, and the extent to which membership is passed on intergenerationally, are also significant. Each member will have their own activity-level trajectory with respect to involvement in the co-operative over time. Members may be active or inactive for a range of personal, life-cycle, or issue-based reasons. A co-operative member might be active in one organization and quite inactive in another, including another co-operative. Given the time required, it may not be possible to be active in multiple organizations. Variability in terms of individual patterns of activity over seasons or lifetimes is not necessarily a bad thing from the perspective of organizational sustainability, but it is important to know something about these patterns and to identify any emerging trends.

Activity level is itself a multidimensional construct. There can be

many measures of the intensity and scope of member involvement in a co-operative. Examples include volume of business, the relative share of business done with the co-op, and the degree to which a member participates in co-operative governance. The character of member affiliation and identification with the co-operative can also be conceptualized in terms of indicators such as satisfaction with services and governance processes. Members can be characterized in terms of their commitment to co-operative philosophies and in relation to their commitment to a particular co-operative.

As a process, globalization involves a wholesale reorganization of spatial as well as temporal relationships. Individual members face important changes in the spatial economies of the regions in which they live and work. Co-operatives likewise confront new spatial relations with suppliers, customers, competitors, and their own membership. Relevant socio-spatial characteristics of the membership include the location of residences and places of work, mobility patterns related to commuting and shopping, longer-range travel in terms of places of origin and geographic dispersal of family members, and travel related to recreation or retirement. Under globalization, goods, people, and information tend to travel greater distances. This has significant implications for the “local” quality of co-operative membership.

Membership from a Member’s Perspective

MEMBERSHIP AS A SOCIAL FACT, as an identity, or as a structural relation can be approached and examined from the perspective of the individual, the organization, or the community. Membership issues from the standpoints of communities and co-operative organizations are explored further below. From the individual’s perspective, membership in a particular co-op is one among many formal

and informal memberships. In the mix of other activities and associations, the co-operative may be a minor or major involvement. Membership in the co-op may be tightly coupled with other memberships, or it may be an isolated and somewhat disconnected part of the person's life. The experience and practice of co-operative membership have a range of obvious and less obvious characteristics, with dimensions that are at once social, economic, political, and cultural.

Co-op membership may be viewed as personally advantageous or as an act of generosity and faith. The membership may be seen as conferring a higher social status, as neutral in this regard, or as an instance where the individual contributes her/his reputation and resources to help a community organization. It may be a minor involvement or a central aspect of personhood and livelihood. It may involve strong or weak commitment, and the presence or absence of co-operative consciousness. Membership may be maintained only passively, through inertia, or because there is no viable exit strategy. On the other hand, it may be a status that is valued intensely, that is taken up with high hopes and strong resolve to invest in the organization. Like more widely recognized kinds of identities, membership can be contingent—sensitive and responsive to particular circumstances and conditions. As for other aspects of identity, co-op membership may be claimed and defended in some situations, and scarcely acknowledged or admitted in others.

Co-op membership may involve consciously *doing* business differently. Transactions are carried out in contexts and ways that deliberately realign interests and relationships. Patronage of a co-operative may be viewed as a contribution to building a different type of economy, one that pays closer attention to the full range of interests one has as a resident, citizen, and user of services. Patronizing a co-op can be a social and political act, even as it is an economic act. Membership may reflect confidence and optimism given a high level of social capital circulating in the community, or it may be an effort to build something solidary in a community that has often failed to act collectively.

Membership from an Organizational Perspective

ORGANIZATIONS HAVE THEIR OWN INTERESTS with respect to membership: Leaders and managers may experience member adherence as a source of legitimacy and strength, but also as an encumbrance. The importance of membership and positive member relations from an organizational perspective can be explored by asking two questions. What are the advantages (to a co-operative) of a positively engaged and satisfied membership? What are the risks and costs of a disengaged and alienated membership? A membership that is positively engaged may be more likely to view the co-operative as a source of useful and trustworthy information; may be more willing to try new products or services offered by the co-operative; may be more loyal to the co-operative in the face of competitive marketing and various kinds of inducements from other enterprises; and may be more likely to provide helpful and constructive feedback to staff and managers, who will consequently experience a more positive work environment. A positively engaged membership, moreover, will be more likely to think like owners, helping the co-operative to control costs, improve services, and upgrade products; may be more willing to invest in upgrading facilities and enhancing the skills of co-op staff; may be more likely to support management in new undertakings; may be more likely to see the co-operative as a partner in economic, social, cultural, and political projects; and will be more likely to promote the benefits of the co-op and co-operative membership to others.

On the other hand, there are predictable risks and costs associated with an alienated or disinterested membership. It is more likely that such members may treat the co-operative as a service provider or market outlet of last resort; more likely that they will patronize the co-op opportunistically, only when there is a distinct advantage in terms of price, terms,

or conditions; and more likely that they will terminate their relationship with the co-operative in response to any minor problem or difference in terms of price or conditions. Such members may also be less likely to support innovations that involve any new costs or risks. Alienated members may fail to pass on co-operative philosophies or commitments to family members; may ignore co-operative communications; may not provide any constructive feedback to staff or managers; may be unwilling to participate in co-op governance; and may bad-mouth the co-operative to community members.

While positive member relations may be viewed as a desirable objective in the abstract, co-op managers may have practical reasons for reducing investment in member relations and for relegating membership issues to the back burner. Depending on the organization and the situation, these reasons might include the cost of building and maintaining strong communications and member relations programs; the cumbersome character of democratic procedures, which require consultation and negotiation before an organization can respond to a challenge or an opportunity; and the contradictory expectations that are raised through participatory exercises. Assertion of general membership prerogatives may conflict with the need to take steps to secure the patronage of members who do more business with the co-op. This issue is part of a general set of unresolved pressures with respect to equal versus asymmetrical treatment of members who belong to different categories in terms of types or volume of business. Managers who emphasize membership also risk alienating customers who, for any reason, may not want to become members. Managers may also find themselves excluded from business networks if too much emphasis is placed on the co-operative difference.

Large, well-established co-operatives enjoy many advantages. Larger size and maturity, however, bring new challenges in terms of member involvement. There may be fewer opportunities for the exciting kinds of pioneering activity that the founding members experienced. Moreover, in large organizations there may be opportunities for only a small percentage of the members to assume direct roles in co-operative governance. Activist members may then seek other ways to be heard. Large co-operatives, therefore, face particular challenges in fostering, accom-

modating, and managing member participation. Managers may react by reducing commitment to substantive member participation, resorting instead to a kind of perfunctory staging of meetings and elections, and to collecting feedback mainly as a form of defensive intelligence gathering. The result may be a further diminution in member participation, which will be read as confirmation that people are too disinterested or too busy to take part in co-operative governance.

Membership and Communities

COMMUNITIES CAN EXPERIENCE organizational memberships as sources of social cohesion or as sources of division. Both tendencies may be active. Where belonging to a particular co-op or credit union reflects divisions along political, religious, or ethnic lines, membership may strengthen ties within a particular group, but reinforce separation between social groups and networks. In contemporary communities, co-operative memberships commonly span pre-existing social divides and link together some of the diverse strands that are present. Co-operative memberships thus reinforce and stabilize certain aspects of “community of place.” Membership connects people in a common project and shared interest. In this sense, co-operative membership may serve as “bridging social capital” in that it links people who would otherwise have little occasion to associate or to develop joint projects.⁴ Co-operatives and co-operative membership can also contribute to a broader social climate that propitiates joining, volunteering, and collaborating.⁵

Co-operatives may compete with other organizations for what are, at least in the short term, scarce community resources—volunteers, time, energy, and capital. In the long term, however, co-operatives can help to increase the supply of such resources by building human capacity, creating new links, and expanding the pool of leaders and community activists. Positive experiences developing alternative economic institutions,

or innovating with respect to service provision, can also lead to a change in outlook and mentality that comes with successful collective action. This transformative kind of *cognitive praxis*⁶ leads to an expanded concept of what is possible or achievable.

Membership as a Complex Dynamic

LIKE THE CO-OPERATIVE ITSELF, membership is a hybrid entity. It is, at the same time, an economic, social, cultural, and political phenomenon. It carries formal rights and obligations, and informal but nevertheless tangible expectations and benefits. Membership is an ideal and an aspiration, as well as an emergent reality. Membership is interpreted in the sense that individuals have to make sense of its meanings and implications. Membership is also interpreted in the sense that it is acted out, revealed, and deployed as a form of social action and discourse.

Membership is not separate from members, and members are not separate from all the social relations of the community and surrounding society. Race, ethnic, and gender relations, relations between old and young, between those more or less able, between recent and less recent immigrants, and between wealthy and poor, will all enter the dynamic. Membership includes experiences of recognition and acceptance, and opportunities to interact positively with fellow citizens. There are, to be sure, instrumental concerns such as exchanging information and building relationships. There are also aesthetic, visceral, or experiential aspects to membership that have to do with owning a piece of, and belonging to, something that has permanence, solidity, potential, and a complex social purpose. A co-operative organization also has a physical presence in terms of space for meetings, services, or administrative activities. Ideally, co-operative spaces become significant places, invested with positive meanings and associations.

It is important to understand the latent as well as the more obvious aspects of affiliation, adherence, and identification. It is most common

to note and address the economic and social-psychological dimensions of membership. These are attributes that get identified early when people talk about motivations and processes that underlie joining, patronizing, or supporting a co-operative. These dimensions are also, not coincidentally, the qualities that receive most attention in mainstream managerial and marketing literature. While significant, these properties do not exhaust the list that is relevant to co-operative entrepreneurs. Left aside are key dimensions of co-operative membership that may distinguish the co-op organization and furnish important elements of co-operative competitive advantage.

The reasons for joining and supporting a co-operative are typically complex. In addition to economic objectives, there may be political objectives, social goals, cultural sensibilities, and ethical concerns. Given the relative neglect of such matters in the media and education, and even in co-op communications, individuals may not be equipped to fully explain these issues. They may nevertheless harbour strong feelings about sharing, neighbouring, democracy, and community, sentiments that seek expression in co-operative forms of enterprise. Whether or not they are regularly acknowledged and articulated, these preoccupations may be operative and relevant. Those who are interested in building co-operative membership, and in developing co-operatives via member-oriented strategies, must cultivate the capacity to engage with these concerns. They are important not only as significant bases for increasing member interest and loyalty, but also because ignoring them may eventually lead to alienation and dissension among members who are expecting more from their co-operative.

Because joining and supporting a co-operative has social and collective aspects as well as an individual and personal dynamic, it is useful to recognize the relevance of social and collective processes that motivate and facilitate association and adherence. Membership is something experienced most fully as a group process. One needs to study and support membership as a collective dynamic, and as something that is regenerated through association. Methodological individualism may not serve us well, either as researchers or as personnel charged with member relations development responsibilities.

Membership in a co-operative reflects the reciprocal character of joining and belonging. One belongs to the co-operative, and the co-op comes to belong to you. Members belong to the co-op, but they also own and direct the enterprise. In the case of founding members, or of member-leaders who help to develop and renew the organization, membership also includes a vigorous strain of social and economic entrepreneurship. The term member here labours to convey a multifaceted relationship that involves organizational innovation as well as ownership, association, participation, and patronage.

Achieving membership is a process that does not begin or end with the signing of a membership form. It is also important to understand the social and cognitive processes that underlie the successful development of a strong member and a strong member-based organization. Membership is a conscious process that involves frequent intelligence gathering, assessment, and re-evaluation. One invests more in memberships that yield social or financial dividends. Moreover, one is more likely to identify strongly with an organization that contributes to a positive, and less contradictory, identity. Thus co-operative membership has a reflexive and dynamic character.

Co-operative membership, like other forms of social relationship and association, is a socially embedded and embodied experience. We are co-op members as whole people, with histories, biographies, and bodies that signal to others that we are old, young, male, female, or likely to be categorized as belonging to some racial or ethnic minority. We also experience membership from our own situated perspectives, and interpret the possibilities and meanings based on our own needs, constraints, or opportunities. When studying membership issues, it is necessary to go beyond the idea of the “average member” and to analyse the membership as a set of overlapping subgroups and subcultures.

Membership is something we accomplish, and the groups and organizations to which we belong are, in some measure, the product of vision and imagination—by ourselves and by others. Like communities of all kinds,⁷ groups and organizations have an imagined quality in that we perceive their characteristics and boundaries by combining knowledge

and experience with desires and ideals. Joining and building a co-operative organization are, in part, acts of imagination, vision, and faith.⁸ These may be principled decisions undertaken out of solidarity with future generations unknown to ourselves. Our understanding of co-operative action must therefore go beyond narrow concepts of present-oriented utility and rationality.

Membership Challenges for Co-ops

CO-OPERATIVES FACE short- and long-term investment decisions with respect to developing relationships with (and among) members. How should co-operatives view the investments necessary to develop positive member relationships? For co-ops, the calculus and the practices involved go well beyond the rationales and modalities of customer relations and goodwill promotion that are deployed by conventional firms. While co-operatives might well emulate some corporate communications strategies and attempts to promote a service culture, they need to develop their own distinct logic and approach to building strong relations with (and among) members. For co-ops, membership in its more substantive forms is both a fundamental distinguishing feature and a key to economic viability in a transformed market-place. Given the strong links between robust member relations and the development of both the co-operative and its host community, an amply ramified approach to membership is both a means and an end. Membership that is tangible, authentic, and beneficial in multiple ways will be a key feature that distinguishes a co-operative from other enterprises.

Co-operatives face diverse challenges with respect to member recruitment and member relations. This diversity increases when one considers different kinds or classes of co-operative. The membership issues confronting a large retail co-op bear only partial semblance to member relations concerns in a small production co-operative. While it is important to acknowledge the diversity of these challenges, it may also be useful to entertain the proposition that co-operatives collectively constitute

a distinct and significant class of membership-based organizations, with an overlapping array of membership challenges and opportunities that arise due to the particular principles by which they are governed. These include orientations towards voluntary participation, equality, serving member interests, democratic control, and community.

Co-operative organizations eager for member engagement and participation can be both welcoming and off-putting. Different people (and the same people at different times) may be attracted to or repelled by organizations that reach out to them and encourage integration and identification. While those in search of community may find this kind of organizational advance appealing, it may not be seen as desirable by someone who is already overloaded with organizational obligations. Individuals who feel that their identity is somewhat marginal to the enterprise, or that their interests are minority interests within the organization, likewise may be disinterested in strong engagement. Such a person may be willing to affiliate, but unwilling to identify with, or to be identified with, the organization. This may be non-negotiable and beyond the capacity of the organization to address in any substantive manner.

The Rights Revolution⁹ and some strands of consumerism have predisposed many individuals to emphasize freedom, choice, and flexibility. Moreover, the dominant culture puts a certain premium on disengagement, on being cool, detached, or uncommitted.¹⁰ There are people who, at a given time in their lives, do not wish for heavy engagement with an organization, who prefer an arrangement that appears to give them greater autonomy and even anonymity. This might be true of certain subgroups such as single, mobile, young people. These are potentially important members, but they may not be willing to engage fully with the organization at this particular time. Nor are they likely to be susceptible to the same kinds of recruitment messages as those who are eager for a stronger form of association and involvement.

A co-operative that seeks to connect with a large group of members representing diverse backgrounds, circumstances, and interests, must be open to a diversity of membership styles and forms. This does not imply institutionalization of more than one class of membership, but rather

recognition of diverse ways of connecting with the co-op, and a healthy variation in modes of belonging and contributing. A co-operative needs many types of members. A co-op with a strong membership profile and program will find ways to deepen its relations with many kinds of members (and potential members).

In addition to positive relations between the organization and individual members (or subgroups of members), co-operatives might benefit from consciously promoting durable forms of networking among members. This will strengthen the membership base and reflects a commitment to intra- as well as inter-co-operative co-operation. The co-operative has multiple reasons to be interested in the well being and success of its own membership as members of families, communities, organizations, and enterprises.

Many people need to be asked or invited personally in order to become active as leaders, volunteers, or participants. This may be particularly true and important in a co-operative. People perceive co-ops to be social as well as economic organizations and may be waiting for social contact and social dividends. If these kinds of connections or benefits are not forthcoming, the co-op may be judged more harshly than another kind of organization. Moreover, co-operatives present a context in which personal approaches may be more readily accepted. Many other kinds of enterprise now find it useful to mimic and to implement certain dimensions of membership as they attempt to influence their customers or clients to form more lasting and loyal relationships. Though presented in language that invokes membership, most such initiatives offer only a hollowed-out version. Corporations may use different levels or classes of membership to provide perquisites to preferred customers. Co-operatives generally do not, and cannot use different classes of membership to bestow differential privileges. On the other hand, corporations typically find it untenable to instigate the more developed forms of membership that imply commitment to shared ownership and control, and to the social development of members and their communities. This is where co-ops can easily outdistance and outshine the competition.

The commercial appropriation of the language of membership may

lead to a debasement and corruption of the idea. The widespread implementation of such customer relations strategies presents a strong challenge to the co-operative sector, which has held out membership and its attendant benefits as a distinguishing feature. In this context, it is important to analyse the various *dimensions, qualities, and gradations* of membership, and to explore their implications for individuals and communities. For co-operatives, it is important to distinguish between weaker and stronger forms of membership, and to find new ways to further develop the latter.

With increasing size and associated member heterogeneity, co-ops will often find it easier to opt for “cooler” versions of co-op membership that put less emphasis on membership as an identity or as a significant focus for activities. Membership issues and co-operative identity may fall below the consciousness threshold for many patrons and other stakeholders. This may be temporarily expedient for managers and may also reduce some of the potential points of conflict among diverse members. It will not, however, appeal to everybody, especially those more philosophically committed to co-operation. Moreover, it may rob the co-op of identity and dynamism. The cooling of membership as a pivot and focus will also rob the enterprise of a key tool for approaching, integrating, and connecting with a diverse population of members and potential members. What starts as an easy method to facilitate growth and minimize friction can end up as an impediment to the development of the member-based enterprise and to the reproduction of co-op leadership.

Membership-Based Development

THE MEMBERSHIP CHALLENGE for co-operatives is to expand opportunities for constructive member engagement, and to develop substantive, authentic, and beneficial forms of membership. This must be accomplished while accommodating multiple styles of membership. *Membership development* here denotes policies and pro-

grams designed to promote member recruitment, retention, loyalty, and participation. *Member development* refers to activities or initiatives to further the growth of individual members as fully competent participants in the organization and in the broader community. Member development is important for democratic organizations that rely on the quality of their elected leaders and on the wisdom of the voting members. Members are also likely to look on their co-op more favourably when they see it as a place to access new experiences and acquire new competencies. Moreover, the co-op also gains when its members are successful as community members, family members, and economic actors.

Membership-based or *member-based development* signals a stronger alignment towards building the co-operative through close working ties with members and by fostering a strong member-oriented culture. This strategy recognizes and embraces the particular character and challenges of a co-operative organization: It can generate strong allegiances and commitments, but it is also vulnerable to the disengagement or disaffection of members.

The rise of fundamentalist movements reminds us that membership can lead to behaviours that are heedless and exaggerated.¹¹ Membership in organizations tinged with fundamentalist characteristics (e.g., extremist political movements, politicized military units, chauvinistic national formations, or charismatic religious sects) may lead to the sacrifice of rights and freedoms—one's own, and particularly those of other people who are not seen as eligible for membership.¹² Co-operatives rarely inspire blind faith or unquestioning adherence, and this is a good thing. The loyalty they seek from members is an engaged and thoughtful loyalty, based on transparency and substantive understandings with respect to overlapping interests and projects.¹³

Membership relations represent the best opportunity for distinguishing a co-operative among the proliferating choices available to potential patrons. The 1990s should be remembered not only as the dot-com decade but as the dot-org decade, in which millions of new organizations were founded. In Canada, the number of registered citizen groups increased by more than 50 percent between 1987 and 2003, reaching about

two hundred thousand (or about one group for every hundred adults).¹⁴ Despite the widespread experience of time pressure, there is a growing interest in meaningful participation and democratization. This is an important phenomenon of our era and a historic opening for the co-operative sector.

How can co-operatives capitalize on this will for engagement in an era that has been characterized as a time of disengagement?¹⁵ One option would be to reconfirm their social movement character by more explicitly differentiating themselves from other forms of organization, and by adopting a discourse that more adequately communicates this realignment. While there are risks arising from re-engagement, closer collaboration with movements for democracy and social justice would allow co-operatives to confirm their role and identity as socially responsive and progressive enterprises.¹⁶ This would also be an opportunity to connect with individuals and groups that could be strong supporters of the co-op were they to perceive it as an ally and as a socially relevant organization.

Many co-operatives have been successful in renewing their membership base. This is self-evident when one contemplates the number, size, and range of co-operative organizations that exist. Given rapid changes in the characteristics of the communities in which members and potential members live and work, however, and given equally rapid changes in the expectations, preferences, identities, and personal situations of the individuals involved, co-operatives will have to explore new ways to connect with existing or would-be members.

Some co-operatives are reticent about marketing the benefits and virtues of membership. Aggressively marketing memberships may be seen as impolitic in certain contexts. Some co-ops may be wary about recruiting new members for fear of adding unworkable diversity. Still others may have doubts about the capacity of the organization to mount an effective recruitment campaign. Whatever the cause, failure to more actively market membership may lead to slow erosion of the membership base. In the absence of messages reinforcing adherence to the co-op, this may also include problems retaining existing members. Integrating new members involves cost and effort, and there are risks involved.

Greater risks, however, await a co-operative that fails to renew its membership and to reach out to people who represent new kinds of diversity in the community.

Decisions with respect to joining a co-op are influenced by peers and family members who provide models and precedents, and by other influentials who help to reduce anxieties or questions around the decision.¹⁷ It would be useful for co-operatives to learn more about the process of joining—or not joining. This would equip them to intervene more strategically and increase the possibility that new members will be enlisted under conditions that promote a strong, positive relationship.

We need to think systematically about membership as a dynamic social process. It is a mistake to treat it as a black box yielding only two possible outcomes. Members don't only join; they investigate, affiliate, confirm, and reactivate. Along the way, it may matter how they experience recruitment, installation, recognition, consultation, and accession to leadership positions. Moreover, a co-operative may have different meanings, and yield different experiences, depending upon who we are. Members and their co-ops can use such insights to improve member relations and to promote more positive and beneficial dynamics around all membership processes. An orientation towards membership-based development offers the best prospect for fulfilling the unique promise of the co-operative as a durable organization broadly responsive to member needs and hopes.

Endnotes

1. Adapted from *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
2. Adapted from *Gage Canadian Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Gage Educational Publishing Company, 1997).
3. International Joint Project on Co-operative Democracy, *Making Membership Meaningful: Participatory Democracy in Co-operatives* (Saskatoon: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan, 1995).
4. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
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7. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Verso, 1991).
8. See William Coleman, "Globalization and Co-operatives," in *Co-operative Membership and Globalization: New Directions in Research and Practice*, eds. Brett Fairbairn and Nora Russell (Saskatoon: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, 2004).

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10. Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2001).
11. Carol Schick, JoAnn Jaffe, and Ailsa Watkinson, eds., *Contesting Fundamentalisms* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2004).
12. See Bauman.
13. Brett Fairbairn, *Three Strategic Concepts for the Guidance of Co-operatives: Linkage, Transparency, and Cognition* (Saskatoon: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan, 2003).
14. Harvey Schacter, "Social Entrepreneurs Devoted to Change," review of *How to Change the World* by David Bornstein, *Globe and Mail*, 10 March 2004, C3.
15. See Bauman.
16. Michael Gertler, *Rural Co-operatives and Sustainable Development* (Saskatoon: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, 2001).
17. Roger Herman, "Choice of Organizational Form in Farmer-Owned Enterprises" (master's thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2003).

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