

*Knowledge Creation and Mobilisation
in the International Co-operative Movement:
the Roles of the Co-operative Learning Centre*

by

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Co-operatives are most commonly known by their physical presence. They are stores, financial institutions, agricultural depots, co-op housing projects, medical service buildings, and schools. For those somewhat familiar with them and their purposes, such buildings are also symbols of social power, of people joining together to meet their common economic and social needs. They are more: they are manifestations of knowledge learned in communities from others, from collaboration with like-minded people in other places, and through exchanges with people in far off places, in these days potentially, almost anywhere around the world. In fact, the movement has always been essentially about knowledge, though observers of the movement or even its leaders rarely describe it in this way – and perhaps do not even consciously think of it in such terms very often.

In fact, the connections among co-operative organisations and co-operative movements on the one hand, and knowledge creation and mobilisation on the other, have profound historical roots. All of the great co-operative traditions – consumer, banking, agricultural, worker, and service (health, housing, etc.) – emerged because they originally engaged in considerable knowledge creation (notably in understanding why and how the kinds of co-operatives in which they were interested could be most effectively developed). They were also deeply engaged in knowledge mobilisation, particularly in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. They made particularly effective use of pamphlets and even published newspapers devoted almost exclusively to co-operative news and comment. They published an impressive array of books, and, as the decades went by, made some use of film and radio. In many instances,

notably in the agricultural and community banking traditions, they employed field men to distribute information, hold community meetings, and organize co-ops.

The movement also consciously and unconsciously benefited from networks that today are not generally as integrated with co-operatives as they once were or in some cases are not as powerful as they used to be. The networks included trade unions in many countries, farmers' groups, and political parties, women's organisations and adult education circles. Immigrant groups and religious organisations also "spread the word" about co-operatives, as did governments interested in encouraging them and a few educational institutions involved in their development. One could conclude that knowledge about co-operatives was created in a few significant circles and distributed reasonably widely amid the great transformation of the Industrial Revolution and the growth of cities associated with it.

Consequently, by 1950, there was a reasonably large though hardly sufficient or complete body of knowledge associated with co-operatives. What had been accumulated, however, was readily available to a segment of the world's population interested in co-operative development and having the opportunity to learn about it. The movement has grown rapidly in the succeeding fifty years, but the distribution of sound knowledge about it has not kept pace; nor has knowledge creation, notably in the forms of research and sustained reflection, developed as the movement requires and governments could use. Many co-operatives and many movements, finding themselves in difficult competitive situations, have reduced their contributions to co-operative knowledge creation and mobilisation. General research, never a movement strongpoint, and independent training programmes are not emphasized even as much as in some points in

the past. The research communities, within and without universities, have not carried out the kind of research needed to make steadily more effective institutions or to build as many vibrant movements as there could have been. Efforts to utilize new media, such as radio, film, and television, were haphazard at best, even though there were briefly some notable achievements, for example in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. The blunt truth is that the movement largely missed the main communication revolutions of the later twentieth century, especially in contrast to the relatively effective use of media between (roughly) 1880 and 1950; the creation of knowledge special to co-operatives has not kept up to the needs.

The gaps become especially evident when one considers relationships between the global North and South. Many of the most important new co-operative initiatives are taking place in the South, notably in Asia, and as economic power shifts, those experiments are important to understand. The importance of co-operatives for southern countries – and indeed for global economic health – in agriculture and Fair Trade, in fostering better production, and in assuring more equitable distribution can scarcely be over-estimated. For decades the assumption has tended to be that the rest of the co-operative movement generally learned from the movements in the North Atlantic world. To the extent that was true (and it was only partly ever right), it increasingly is less true today: the lessons come as often from the other direction. But how do we secure this knowledge? How do we build on it to develop the information and research that are necessary to make their potential impact fully realizable?

Fortunately, by making imaginative and comprehensive use of the computer-based communications systems and the goodwill of co-operative organisations and researchers,

these information gaps can be filled quickly and comparatively inexpensively; the changes wrought by modern communication revolutions provide many of the answers to the questions contemporary globalisation processes create. The challenges, though, are to define exactly what is needed, what is possible, and how the work can be undertaken.

What is needed?

First though, we need to understand the kinds of knowledge needed to create effective organisations and build robust movements? A simple way to do so is to list the kinds of knowledge that are required. A preliminary, but hardly complete, list would include the following:

- a) understanding of the economic and social circumstances in which people in a given community find themselves;
- b) information about the nature and possibilities of co-operatives as ways to meet economic/social needs;
- c) information about the kinds of business their co-operative will be undertaking;
- d) information regarding government policies that might affect the development and operation of a given co-operative;
- e) training and advice about the most effective ways in which people can develop and operate a given co-operative;
- f) knowledge about similar co-operatives in other places;
- g) information on networks beyond communities so as to learn from them and perhaps to develop joint economic/training activities;
- h) ideas about how to form federations, alliances and networks of co-operatives; and

- i) information about other kinds of co-operatives that could be useful in meeting economic and social needs in a given community or set of communities.

These kinds of knowledge approximate what researchers, teachers, students, and public servants, as well as people in communities, could use in understanding and fostering co-operative development. The list is more complicated than a quick reading of it might readily reveal. It would require information on a wide variety of co-operatives serving a multiplicity of goals from the cradle to the grave (a listing of different types of co-operatives in existence in 1980 numbered over 300). Cultural dimensions, particularly important for co-ops given their social roles, would require considerable consideration. There are variations in organisational form caused by stakeholder interests to be understood and varying ideas about appropriate democratic structures to be considered. Policy issues, especially in an era of powerful neo-liberal influences, require considerable research and exchanges. Nor is the policy area simple or easily delimited: it includes regulations under relevant statutes, departmental involvement, funding systems, and ongoing inspections; it requires consideration of a wide range of policy programmes from health to agriculture, from housing to fishing, from economic development to community building. “Effective operation” includes governance, the raising of capital, board training, and human resource development, all within the framework of co-operative values and principles. What might appear simple quickly becomes complex.

In all of this, there is an overarching need for the communication of the best resources available, for increasing opportunities for dialogue among all those who can benefit from learning from others, for the development of research honed within co-operative traditions and values, and for the accumulation of accessible information. There is

another overarching need to provide useful knowledge for governments so that some of the common errors in co-operative development often made in the past (and sometimes in the present) can be avoided. Finally, there is a general need to develop resources on co-operatives so that teachers at all levels will be able to help students learn about the possibilities of co-operative action.

What is possible?

Globalisation is a cliché of our times; it is also a reality, perhaps nowhere more obvious than in the fields of knowledge creation and mobilisation. People who once worked in isolation creating knowledge in a given sphere of endeavour can regularly communicate almost instantaneously with others sharing the same interests. The field of Co-operative Studies is a case in point. Until recently, people sharing that interest could meet only infrequently and irregularly, if at all; serious sustained discussion between the global North and South was usually impossible.

Today, this is not the case. People engaged in Co-operative Studies can meet in various conferences and, most importantly, can sustain meaningful dialogues easily because of computer assisted communications. Moreover, the numbers of researchers are growing: there are at least some 700 specialists today connected through a number of networks, many of them associated with the International Co-operative Alliance. They come from the academy, governments, and co-operative associations. A remarkable feature of the work they undertake is that it engages both researchers and practitioners creating a kind of praxis that is immediately useful in the classroom and in the field. The challenges are to ensure that research and associated practice become quickly known and fully reported; that research is designed through pooled researcher/practitioner

discussions; and that what research reveals practice evaluates. Most of the knowledge created within the field of Co-operative Studies is not intended to rest relatively unused within libraries; it is intended for immediate and practical use.

At the same time as researchers and practitioners create new knowledge, more older but still useful knowledge is being identified. For many reasons, most academic programmes around the world have ignored co-operatives for the last half century. The result is that a lot of information about co-operatives has been unavailable, located in generally inaccessible reports and in journals that are rarely in nearby libraries and seldom influencing the curricula of educational institutions. They have also been published in several languages, less a barrier now than it used to be. It is also true that, while co-operatives have not been as active as one might like in the different kinds of media, they have nevertheless produced some very useful films and videos that deserve wider circulation.

It is not difficult to see what a systematic and careful use of the computerized learning and resource materials and increased opportunities for interaction could permit. By bringing together individuals and organisations interested in co-operatives around the world, it is possible to build up speedily a body of knowledge about co-operatives that would be immensely useful to people in communities, co-operators, government officials and development organisations. Some of the kinds of knowledge it could provide are as follows:

- knowledge already produced but inaccessible
- new findings from researchers, co-ops and governments

- repositories for existing knowledge about co-ops currently difficult to access
- a special effort to develop resource bases that would be of interest to those responsible for the development of government policies
- best and latest contributions about how to operate co-ops effectively, including governance and human resource development, marketing and capital accumulation
- information about individuals and organisations specializing in research and teaching about co-operatives, thereby contributing to more effective curricula about co-ops within educational institutions
- a storehouse for film and video dealing with co-op themes
- a special section for the use of youth interested in co-operatives as part of their studies or seeking information about co-ops as a way to secure employment in existing co-ops or in co-ops they start themselves
- a variety of ways (e.g., chat lines, courses, a researcher, and an inventory of institutions involved in teaching about co-ops) through which people, individually or in groups, can learn about co-ops
- support systems and pedagogical tools for teaching about co-ops
- information on the latest regulatory changes in co-op legislation around the world, and
- information on the various ways in which co-ops can be funded, an issue of great importance for co-operative development

The development of such a website or set of integrated websites would also contribute significantly to the generation of new knowledge about co-operatives; it would contribute immensely to the dissemination of knowledge around the world.

What is possible?

The world of co-operatives, co-operative development, and co-operative policy development could take a major step forward if the knowledge already available were brought together for easier use. It would make an even greater step forward as that knowledge was utilized to foster greater research, increase understanding of co-operatives through appropriate curriculum changes, encourage more research around the world, and expand opportunities for more meaningful two-way exchanges about co-operatives between the global North and South. The key elements of the knowledge can be organized so as to maximize access even in areas where computers have relatively low capabilities. It is possible to develop a website in which many languages can be used and many forms of media housed. It is possible for people around the world to contribute information about what they are doing or are studying for the benefit of others and as a way to encourage communications among people with similar interests. It is possible to emphasize specific topics for special consideration: e.g., assisting women, youth and other target groups organize co-operatives meeting their special needs; enhancing health services through co-operative organisations; creating employment and developing financial services; improving agricultural production and marketing; and improving relations within communities through greater inclusion in co-operative enterprise. It is possible that the development of this basic resource could contribute significantly to the development of an international network of co-operative organisations rooted in

communities and local institutions and concerned with building a genuinely inter-related alternative to the centralized institutions and economic organisations more commonly associated with globalisation. It would be an association based on respect for local and national differences and on the value of encouraging democratic practice as a useful way to achieve economic growth while respecting cultural differences and varying social needs.

How can the work be undertaken?

This kind of project can only be accomplished through collaboration among many people and organisations around the world. It must be based on the recognition of the value of genuinely international will honour the remarkable work on co-operatives done throughout the world and, in particular, make more available information on the research on, and effective practices for, co-operative development. By using open source technology, the project we are seeking interest and support for can make it possible for widespread engagement in the development of a resource base that will greatly enhance the roles co-operatives can play in facing local, national and international issues today.

The Co-operative Learning Centre (CLC), being developed by the British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies at the University of Victoria in Canada, will mobilize international research on co-operatives, co-operative thought, and co-operative policy issues to meet the needs of researchers within and without the academy, policy makers, community developers, and people involved directly in co-operatives as members, leaders, and managers. It will particularly respond to the needs of Human Resource Development (HRD) programmes within co-ops. It will provide a central focus for Co-operative Studies (CS), an interdisciplinary, multilingual, and international field

of enquiry, providing information and guidance for those wishing to learn about co-ops and about research into co-operative themes. It will make more accessible past and current research in the field and stimulate further research, bringing together researchers within and without the academy. It will link researchers and practitioners around the world, with special efforts being made to cross the digital divide generally separating the North from the South.

Our specific objectives are as follows.

- To include as many resources on co-operatives as possible in multi-media as well as print, given copyright rules and author approvals.
- To develop further our key word index so as to provide an easy and useful way of accessing the resources.
- To develop ways to review resources as they are submitted so as to eliminate inappropriate resources while protecting the academic need for free and open enquiry.
- To develop the multi-lingual capacity of the site so as to allow researchers and others to have access to collaboration tools and to learn about the work of others.
- To provide a free online service for the publication of results of research CS.
- To provide resources for teaching about co-ops in educational institutions and for training within co-op organisations.
- To provide youth interested in the co-operative model with multi-lingual access to collaboration tools, training information, advice on starting co-operatives, research resources, and career information.

- To provide multi-lingual access to an index of co-op related training institutions, education institutions and resource centres around the world.
- To provide people working in HRD within the co-op movement with multi-lingual access to collaboration tools, resources and information.
- To provide people working in co-ops with multi-lingual access to collaboration tools, best practices guides, shared resources, and other information to aid them in running their co-operatives.
- To provide vulnerable groups in society with co-op development resources and

Technically, the CLC is being developed using the website content management platform Drupal¹. This Open Source² software provides an easy-to-use interface designed for non-technical users to collaboratively maintain the multi-lingual network. Through any web browser, network maintainers can manage user accounts, upload multimedia files, and translate website content. Website users can access network resources and also submit content to the network in multiple languages. Researchers can easily communicate their research by posting documents and findings on the website through an easy-to-use interface. They will be able to contact other academics within the network, review and comment on posted research, and create and manage collaborative projects. The built-in translation system allows researchers and collaborators to easily provide translations of materials, research and site content through their web browser. Some of these features can already be viewed on the CLC draft website (<http://www.learningcentre.coop>); other

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drupal>

² Open Source programs are co-operatively produced projects developed by the community that uses the programs and available to everyone free of charge. To be certified as Open Source, software must be distributed under a license that guarantees the right to read, redistribute, modify, and use the software freely. The CLC will run entirely on Open Source software.

collaborative research tools and communication features developed by BCICS include the Social Economy Student Network (SESN) project – <http://socialeconomy.info>.

We invite questions and expressions of interest by anyone concerned with the development of co-operatives or interested in the exciting new field of Co-operative Studies as a researcher/practitioner field of enquiry or as a way to develop better policies for the encouragement of co-operatives and the more effective mobilisation of community resources. Please contact us at Rochdale@uvic.ca and follow the progress of the CLC on our website (<http://bcics.coop>).