

Editorial

This journal has always been concerned with both historical and contemporary perspectives and research on co-operation. This is particularly the case in this issue. One of the reviewed papers and one of the shorter articles address historical themes. Iselin Theien examines the political debate within the NKL, the Norwegian Union of Consumer Co-operatives, during the 1930s concerning whether the Norwegian consumer movement should remain politically neutral or whether it should be clearly allied with the labour movement as the 'third pillar' of socialism. This debate may be of interest to observers of the UK consumer movement in recent years with periodic suggestion in the co-operative press that the traditional political affiliations of the movement should be ended whilst the 'hype' surrounding the establishment of the Co-operative Commission suggested that New Labour had rediscovered the co-operative movement as its third arm. In his article, Peter Collier provides an account of the development of a major co-operative archive in the south east of England and, in the process, highlights the tension between local, regional and national concerns in the preservation of records and artefacts of co-operative history.

The other reviewed and shorter articles address highly contemporary issues for the co-operative movement. Laurie Mook et al examine the Expanded Value Added Statement as a way of assessing the social impact of co-operatives and enabling them to demonstrate accountability to their stakeholders other than in the narrowly financial terms of the conventional accounting process. In his paper, Cliff Mills addresses the highly topical issue of how legal frameworks can be developed to protect the assets of co-operative and social enterprises against the possibility that future members may elect to demutualise or dispose of the enterprise for personal benefit. He argues the case for a form of incorporation for such enterprises in which locking mechanisms could help to ensure that their assets remain committed to the benefit of a wider community than their current investors.

A question which is raised by both the historical and contemporary articles in this issue concerns the extent to which co-operation should be regarded as a social movement. How far should co-operatives be understood as mutual self-help initiatives which exist simply to benefit their members and how far do they exist to transform the wider society or to achieve some social purpose on behalf of stakeholders other than their immediate members? To the extent that those engaged in co-operative studies need to understand co-operatives as member benefit organisations, they need to view them in the context in which they were established and developed. The approach to collecting co-operative archives advocated by Peter Collier helps researchers to achieve this focus. However these archives also provide evidence for those wishing to examine the extent to which many past co-operative activists regarded themselves as part of a wider social and political movement. This broader perspective on co-operative purpose has developed into a growing awareness of the accountability of co-operative organisations to stakeholder groups other than their immediate members. The two articles on contemporary issues can be viewed as an attempt to define the legal and accounting frameworks required to institutionalise this wider accountability.

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