

## Editorial

This issue is devoted to issues, which have been the subject of much discussion at two key co-operative conferences held in the UK during this year.

In June, the Co-operative College, in association with the International Association for the Study of Co-operation in Education (IASCE) held a conference on Co-operative Learning and Responsible Citizenship in Manchester. As Cheryl Turner notes in her paper, the term "co-operative learning" is capable of alternative interpretations. In some the emphasis is upon mutual self-help within the learning process itself whatever the purpose of the learning. Other interpretations place greater emphasis on the empowerment of the learners for co-operative action as the purpose of the process. The four papers included here, based upon presentations at the conference draw together these perspectives to demonstrate the centrality of co-operation to both the concept of citizenship and to the nature of the learning process through which it is nurtured.

The Society for Co-operative Studies acts, amongst other things, as a bridge between academic researchers and co-operative practitioners. For historical reasons, the practitioners who attend its annual conference tend to be drawn mainly from the UK consumer movement and this has tended to influence the focus of the conference themes. This year, however, the focus on extending the boundaries of co-operation gave the conference a more outward looking perspective. One session, at which there was lively discussion, was devoted to the lessons to be learned from the success in many parts of the world of the credit union movement. In the Republic of Ireland, in particular, the values and principles of co-operation have found expression through credit unions. Almost half the population of Ireland live in households in which at least one person has membership of a credit union. In contrast, retail consumer co-operation failed to take root. In Northern Ireland, about 34 per cent of the population have a similar family connection with a credit union whereas the comparable figure for the rest of the UK is less than 0.5 per cent. Retail consumer co-operation was more successful in Northern Ireland but predominantly within urban Unionist communities. Perhaps more research is needed on the nature of the relationships between different types of community and the types of co-operative action, which will be perceived as relevant by their members.

Olive McCarthy's presentation at the conference included a

discussion of the role of the Irish Credit Union Movement in community development. Her article in this issue has been developed from that discussion.

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