

# Supporting Rural Co-operation - the role of the Plunkett Foundation

**Edgar Parnell**

## **Introduction**

In this the first edition of the new joint publication of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, which now incorporates the Plunkett Foundation's *World of Co-operative Enterprise*, it seems appropriate that this be marked by providing readers with a briefing about the Plunkett Foundation. In particular, elucidating how it seeks to fulfil its main purpose, which is to support rural co-operation. Such explanations about the activities of 'Plunkett' (as the Foundation is popularly called) may also be regarded as particularly apposite in light of both the publication of the Rural White Paper in Autumn 2000 and the Co-operative Commission's recommendation that a new 'Co-operative Foundation' should be established.

It is perhaps surprising that the Plunkett Foundation is not more widely known, given the fact that it has been based in the United Kingdom since 1919. Indeed, it would be fair to say that Plunkett is better known for its work in developing and supporting co-operatives internationally than it is within the UK. This article, in addition to explaining what Plunkett is and does, is intended to shed light on the way Plunkett operates, the concepts underlying its approach to co-operation and rural development, and how it will seek to carry out its purpose in the more immediate future - all with a specific emphasis on its role within the UK.

## **Yesterday and today**

The Anglo-Irish pioneer of agricultural co-operation Sir Horace Curzon Plunkett established the Foundation to carry forward his life's work in the field of rural and co-operative development. Sir Horace, who was the driving force behind the establishment of the Irish co-operative dairy industry, was a figure of considerable international influence. As a close friend of the US President, Theodore Roosevelt, he helped design the American system of support to rural areas. His ideas and practical approach to rural development still seem of remarkable relevance even in today's world.

Since its inception, the Plunkett Foundation has played a special

part in supporting UK agricultural co-operation, while at the same time, it has always placed at least equal emphasis on working outside of the UK. In its early days it focused on the 'Empire', then on the 'Commonwealth' and, since the 1950s, working in the newly independent states of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific. The last decade, which was marked by the collapse of Communism, was a period when Plunkett shifted the main focus of its work towards Central and Eastern Europe.

At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, when UK farming is in crisis and rural areas are in decline, Plunkett is increasingly turning its attention to supporting rural co-operation within the UK. The fact that total income from farming in the UK is set to fall by 27 per cent, when compared with 1999 - highlights the need for more 'co-operation' in agriculture. This statistic also reflects the acute difficulties faced by the agriculture industry as a result of the dramatic fall in farm income levels over recent years. The benefits that could arise from a greater use of co-operative ventures to help address the full range of rural problems has yet to be appreciated by many policy-makers. However, this determination to make an increasing contribution in its home country does not mean that it intends to neglect rural co-operative development in the rest of the world.

Plunkett pursues its objective of supporting rural co-operation, by facilitating the exchange of information, undertaking action research and encouraging networking between co-operative practitioners; also, by providing advice, guidance and training both to those who are working in co-operatives and to those who promote and support them. Funding for these activities comes mainly from those who can afford to purchase such services and from agencies that wish to support rural development. In addition, some income is derived from: investments, membership fees, the sale of publications and arranging conferences.

## **Business co-operation**

Plunkett has amassed a unique experience in the field of 'business co-operation'. This model of co-operation comes into being when the members of a co-operative are businesses or entrepreneurs. Although business co-operation is most widely used in agriculture it has a much broader application. It is a fast growing model in many countries, and because it provides a framework within which small and medium enterprises (SMEs) can compete, offers the only significant alternative to a world dominated by mammoth globally operating companies. SMEs look to their co-operatives to provide a range of benefits, including:

- Increased profitability for their business, by securing better returns for their product or service.
- Sharing in the 'value-added' to their produce at subsequent stages in the marketing chain.
- Helping their business to respond to dynamic and changing markets for their product.
- Increasing the underlying value of their individual business (the market value of their business).
- Helping them to manage the independence of their own business (by avoiding forced sale or takeover, by remaining competitive in a global marketplace).

Within the UK, government and others who are concerned to improve the nation's competitive capacity and to safeguard diversity in our business structure, have yet to fully appreciate the value of strongly encouraging business co-operation across a wide range of industries.

### **Rural development**

If any country or region is to benefit from an economy that has an acceptable balance between its urban and rural areas then specific strategies need to be designed and implemented. The typical underdeveloped rural area in industrialised nations will commonly have the following characteristics: low population density, difficulty in sustaining high standards of local services, a shortage of affordable housing, relatively restrictive planning regimes and the migration of the most creative elements of the workforce. Also, in those rural areas which are seen as attractive dormitory locations, the presence of commuters pushes up property prices and places pressure on some local services; usually without increasing the income of local businesses but increasing pressure on road systems and causing environmental degradation. The problems created by such features require that a very specific strategy be formulated.

In developing countries, also within the transitional economies of Central and Eastern Europe, rural underdevelopment is commonly even more acute, resulting in extreme poverty. Rural areas in these countries share many similar features to those found in industrialised countries, however, their governments usually lack the resources and capacity to effectively intervene to address the underlying problems without substantial external assistance.

The strategy required to combat rural underdevelopment is one that will help to deliver both sustainable rural businesses and an

infrastructure that supports an economically active rural population, but at the same time positively promotes sound land management and environmental practices. In the UK, the recent Rural White Paper sets out to address many of the issues referred to above, but surprisingly makes very little reference to developing rural co-operation; although the establishment of a 'Community Service Fund' to grant-aid community operated services may prove to be supportive. Plunkett maintains that co-operative and mutual enterprises could play a very significant role in rural areas by supporting wealth-creating enterprises and through the provision of the social infrastructure necessary if rural life is to remain attractive.

The White Paper highlights ten main ways of reinvigorating rural areas, mentioning: support for village shops and other services, health and learning facilities, providing affordable homes, transport services, supporting rural enterprise and helping farming to become more competitive. All of these fields of activity are obvious candidates for co-operative action and the scope for co-operatives within the framework of the kind of rural strategy advocated is considerable. Rural dwellers will normally more readily embrace co-operative action; this is due to the existence of a higher level of mutual dependency as part of the prevailing culture. Even so, if creative and innovative approaches are to be successfully developed in UK rural areas, then a considerable shift in the typical mindset of policy-makers will generally be required. Not only has the UK agricultural industry had to deal with the devastating impact of BSE, but it has been suffering from a most unfavourable exchange rate, and in 2001 it is threatened by a new disaster caused by the Foot-and-Mouth disease outbreak. Co-operation in the countryside is now going to be needed more than ever before if rural livelihoods are to be safeguarded.

### **Economic activity in rural areas**

**Agriculture.** Agriculture has been the traditional mainstay in rural areas and despite the current crisis in UK farming it should be expected to maintain this position for some years to come. Although the fortunes of agriculture are currently primarily determined by policies set by national government, EU policies (in particular the Common agricultural Policy), international commodity markets and World Trade Organisation (WTO) agreements; there remains considerable scope for regional rural policies, including local food initiatives, to positively impact the situation.

## International comparisons

*Internationally, agriculture depends heavily on the existence of successful co-operatives to remain competitive. In general, agricultural co-operatives offer strong advantages when providing vertical and horizontal integration: including activities such as the supply of inputs, access to finance and marketing (especially for smaller-scale farmers), also the provision of information on fertiliser, crop chemical and pesticide use, animal waste disposal and storage, genetic and biotechnology, new seed varieties and livestock breeding methods, as well as the source of information on international market trends. In the EU, agricultural co-operatives comprise 44,260 co-operatives having 14 million members and about 720,000 employees. They are represented by COGECA (General Committee for Agricultural Co-operatives in the EU). The annual turnover of its affiliated co-operatives is estimated at about Euros 150 billion per annum. Taken together, their market share of farms inputs is estimated to be 55 per cent and their share the market of agricultural output is said to be 60 per cent. In Japan, agricultural marketing co-operatives handled 95 per cent of rice, while in Finland co-operatives were responsible for 79 per cent of agricultural and 31 per cent of forestry production. Fourteen agricultural co-operatives in the United States were included in the "Fortune 500" list of largest corporations. Agriculture in Canada, Australia and New Zealand rely upon agricultural co-operatives to secure their international markets.*

The overall profitability of farming industries is, in fact, significantly affected by the extent to which primary producers can share in the value-added at the subsequent stages in the marketing chain. It is estimated that farmers in Sweden, Ireland and Denmark are able to secure up to 200 per cent of the base value of their produce, whereas in the UK it is only 40 per cent. There is, therefore, considerable scope in many cases to make agriculture much more viable than it is at present.

Despite various past efforts by the UK government to promote more effective co-operative ventures in agriculture (for example, via the Central Council for Agricultural and Horticultural Co-operation and latterly, Food from Britain), there still exists ample scope for considerable further development, and in this connection regional policies could be most helpful. Newer forms of 'business co-operation' can be especially relevant in this context

The changing policies emanating from the European Commission (EU) first outlined in the Commission document

*Agenda 2000*, can be expected to result in a wider division between those agricultural businesses that make their income and profits from the increasingly competitive international markets (which are, in response, rapidly expanding their scale of operations) and those that rely for their existence upon various grants that are intended to sustain rural communities and achieve environmental objectives. It is apparent that effective co-operative activity will be required to ensure the success of both types of farming ventures and this is well recognised within the framework provided by more recent EU agricultural policy initiatives.

In addition to the more conventional roles for co-operative activity in agriculture, more recent developments have included: new forms of "Farmers' markets" for the direct selling of produce; county food groups - jointly marketing speciality foods; "machinery rings" which provide computer-based arrangements for making the most profitable use of farm machinery and equipment; forestry and woodland management co-operatives (often linked to renewable energy projects) and agro-tourism related activity based around the farmhouse guesthouse.

#### **New forms of agricultural co-operation**

*A new development in the agricultural sector is the increasing vertical integration from primary producer to final consumer. In the USA, for example, so-called New Generation Farmer Cooperatives (NGFC) have given farmers larger earnings through selling processed products instead of raw products. Through production contracts, granting delivery rights and delivery obligations, all business functions can be streamlined. The huge amounts of money needed for constructing the production plants is attained through direct investments from the members. In order to control production the co-operatives have closed memberships. As the shares (delivery contracts) are tradable on the market, there is strong member involvement and control. During the course of a few years, more than 50 new co-operatives have started and there is good reason to label this process a "Co-op Fever" (Campbell 1995). This NGFC model has had substantial impact on hitherto neglected rural areas. Re-migration is significant (4,000 residents in North Dakota alone); disposable incomes of farmers have risen (11 per cent in North Dakota between 1990 and 1994) and new employment is being created (3,500 jobs in North Dakota). The NGFC model has since spread from North Dakota and Minnesota to Wisconsin, California, South Dakota, Iowa and Canada.*

**Non-agriculture.** Considerable opportunities also exist for co-operative action in respect of economic activities in rural areas, which are not directly related to agriculture. The need to attract new businesses is most urgent when the employment and wealth generated by agriculture is declining. The non-agricultural ventures requiring co-operative support services range from existing rural craft-based businesses through to high-tee and internet-based services that can prosper in rural locations.

Most enterprises choosing a rural location can benefit from various forms of co-operative activity, for example, business support services, joint marketing and purchasing, etc. Creating the conditions that will attract businesses and potential employees to rural locations will often be dependent upon the kind of business support services that are only economically provided on a mutual basis. Likewise, the availability of acceptable living conditions for both entrepreneurs and employees will, in some cases, also be dependent upon the existence of mutually provided services.

### **Mutually provided services in rural areas**

The reduction in range of retail outlets, entertainment facilities, pharmacies and health services, banking services, educational opportunities and even post offices, is a common trend in many rural areas. This in addition to the withdrawal of local authorities from the provision of some services previously provided directly by them. The withdrawal or curtailment of many services in rural areas has had far reaching detrimental effects, creating a syndrome of compounded decline. However, there now appears to be at least some recognition by policy-makers that reliance upon the market to deliver essential rural services is often unrealistic, especially if this depends solely on the emergence of businesses that act primarily in the interest of their investors. Some policy-makers are also beginning to realise that there is a need to stimulate the creation of free-market institutions that can provide self-help solutions to socio-economic problems. Investor-owned firms cannot be expected to provide many of the services most needed by rural populations, quite simply because they do not offer adequate profit opportunities. In most cases the only viable alternatives available are in the form of mutually provided services.

Although many of the mutually provided services are yet to become widely available, there are adequate examples in various parts of the UK that can provide models as the basis for expanding

such activities into other rural areas. Some examples of the provision of mutual rural services include:

- Rural credit unions - filling the gaps left by departing commercial banks.
- Retail services, including shops, post offices and pharmacies, which may be provided either by existing retail co-operatives or by new community co-operatives.
- Transport co-operatives of various types, including car sharing, joint car ownership, rural bus services etc.
- Community-owned pubs.
- Housing co-operatives for ownership and tenant management.
- Healthy living centres.
- Community information services based on computers (here the experience gained in some EC funded area Sb schemes has particular relevance).
- The management of rural areas to promote responsible access to the countryside.
- The provision of mutual services that support tourism.

The successes of mutual/co-operative ventures in both urban and rural areas are similarly dependent upon the existence of the main 'drivers' (elaborated later) for their success. Of course, the factors that disadvantage rural areas in general, and in particular the distance from service providers with the associated additional travel costs, impact upon the prospects of accessing these support services. Therefore, in rural areas additional support is often essential if co-operative/mutual ventures are to become established. Some of this support can come by way of those schemes part-financed by national government and the EU. In addition, many other potential partners or sponsors for the activities outlined above can be identified, including: independent local community development foundations; national agencies e.g. the Countryside Agency and the Post Office; local authorities at all tiers; non-governmental organisations e.g. English Heritage, NFU etc.; as well as private business of all types - especially other more mature co-operatives.

### **The 'drivers' required for co-operative development**

Historically many of the most successful co-operative enterprises were born directly out of adverse economic conditions, and it could be said that their leaders were often driven by extreme conditions to overcome the formidable obstacles facing the development of their enterprise. However, the periods of most significant growth and multiplication of co-operatives usually takes place once certain



specified conditions are in place. Plunkett's activities are primarily concerned with helping to ensure that these drivers are in place to support the development of rural co-operation. These conditions or drivers can be identified as follows:

**Accessible information about co-operative forms of enterprise.** It is essential to have information accessed through a well-known initial point of contact. This enables the wider public to obtain initial information about how co-operative models of organisation can be deployed to address current problems and opportunities. Such information about co-operatives should also be made available to those professions, e.g. accountants and lawyers that may become involved in advising co-operative enterprises. Information points need to provide the route for users to benefit from the more specific drivers identified below.

**The existence of networks.** Networks can provide a source of examples of best practice and are able to support the transfer of practical experience between co-operatives. This includes the opportunity to make visits so as to study relevant existing co-operative ventures.

**The availability of competent mentors.** People are required to act as mentors: people able to provide sound advice and guidance to co-operative ventures without seeking to exercise control over the enterprise. The source of such mentors can vary from an individual patron to well organised specialist support agencies. However, it is important to appreciate that those institutions that are focused on supporting investor-controlled businesses are hardly ever the source of such mentoring. Conventional bankers, business development agencies or traditional business schools rarely play any significant role in developing co-operatives. The availability of specially tailored development and training programmes that integrate business management fully with the governance requirements of co-operatives is a related aspect of stimulating the growth of strong co-operative enterprises.

**Access to sympathetic sources of finance.** Once co-operatives become well established they can often readily access traditional sources of business finance. However, in the early stages their setting-up and development is frequently inhibited by the absence of adequate finance. A key factor at the formative stages of a co-operative's

development is often the ability to access finance. In the best examples of the successful growth of co-operatives it will usually be found that a co-operative banking institution has been established (e.g. the now very substantial agricultural co-operative banking systems in Germany, France and the Netherlands; the Mondragón co-operatives in Spain, etc.). Alternatively, specialist financial intermediaries are established which can facilitate access to finance for co-operatives (e.g. in the USA: the National Co-operative Bank, as well as some similar regional institutions). Scope exists for many new forms of finance to be deployed by both new and well-established co-operatives

**Co-operative clusters.** The formation of networks and the availability of competent mentors frequently result in the development of clusters of successful co-operative enterprises. The clustering of co-operatives within a given geographical area can provide reinforcing evidence of the success of co-operative models of enterprise. This, in turn, fuels the strengthening of confidence in such models, which results in an increased access to networks and mentoring support, as well as sympathetic financing and the managerial talent that is attracted by the opportunity to participate in successful enterprises.

**Providing a positive public policy framework.** Most of the above-mentioned drivers can be initiated at a local or regional level. However, any significant development of co-operative enterprise will normally also require the existence of a positive framework in terms of national public policy. The most important requirement is for the special needs of co-operatives to be recognised by those policy-makers and bureaucrats who, all too, frequently cause untold damage to the prospects of co-operative enterprise development by constantly seeking to make co-operatives fit into a pre-determined policy framework that is often inappropriate to co-operatives. Government will normally require assistance in creating the positive policy framework required, which involves: appropriate co-operative legislation, a fair taxation system, a recognition of the nature of co-operatives when preparing competition rules, the development of financial institutions able to support co-operatives and the fair treatment of co-operatives within the education system.

The way that Plunkett seeks to address some of the above needs can, perhaps, be best demonstrated by reference to a current project, described below.

### **A project to support agricultural co-operation in England**

A current project, covering England, run by Plunkett involves providing support for co-operative and collaborative activity in agriculture. This is being part-funded by the Ministry of Agriculture (MAFF). The project links with other elements of the marketing chain and covers all agricultural sectors and products within those sectors. However, where sectors are in particular difficulty, greater emphasis is to be given. The initial sectors targeted will be fruit and vegetables; pig meat; beef; sheep; grain; protected crops and milk. The object of the project is to assist by improving the competitiveness and self-sustainability of English farmers and growers: by encouraging them to develop effective marketing structures and business practices, enabling them to maximise added-value opportunities for quality agricultural products through achieving secure long-term and profitable markets at home and abroad. The project commenced in November 2000 and shall be completed by the end of October 2002.

The Agricultural Development Scheme 1999 recognises the need for the agro-food industry to improve its competitiveness and particularly for farmers and growers in England to do so through better marketing. The UK and other EU Governments have long recognised that the establishment of an efficient, collaborative producer infrastructure is too important to be left to chance. Therefore, they have offered substantial encouragement to producers in order to increase efficiency and competitiveness through collaborative marketing, and more importantly perhaps, to ensure that producers are geared towards helping themselves. The England Rural Development Plan, through the Rural Enterprise Scheme also recognises the need for the improved marketing of quality agricultural products as a key means of adding value to agricultural output and improving economic returns in rural areas. It also points out that it can help to create and/or sustain rural employment and develop regional distinctiveness.

Against a background of continued low prices for farm products and substantially reduced levels of agriculture income, the long-term future for individual farmers and growers is in considerable doubt. Purchasing power continues to be concentrated in the hands of fewer buyers, consumption patterns can alter dramatically, e.g. growth of the organic sector, decline of the 'door step' delivery of

milk, and methods of distribution (particularly where the maintenance of freshness is important) require constant improvement. Quality of product has become an increasingly important issue given the concentration of the retail sector and its access not only to home produced products but also, to a whole range of imported goods. It has become more important than ever to recognise the links between the various sectors of the food chain and their interdependence. This requires producers to respond more positively to the needs of the market place. Producers need to organise themselves to:

- Improve the consistency and quality of their product.
- Provide continuity of supply.
- Establish better methods of growing, grading, storing and delivering produce.
- Develop new added value product lines.
- Promote their products to their customers.
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This generally requires co-operative action on the part of producers. Farming and its associated co-operative/collaborative enterprises - i.e. Farmer Controlled Business (FCBs) are characterised as having:

- A large number of relatively small businesses.
- A large number of informal business groupings.
- Lack of a strategic perspective, little real strategic planning and co-ordination.
- As a direct result of current financial adversity and in the absence of innovation by existing FCBs, tanners are being forced to re-invent the wheel and form small new groups.
- Resultant problems in formation due to the absence of readily accessible, properly informed, advisers.
- Private sector restructuring - leading to oligopoly.
- Lack of knowledge and awareness by professional advisers (accountants, lawyers and business consultants) on the principles and practice of collaborative marketing and business co-operation generally.
- Lack of accountancy expertise, particularly in relation to taxation benefits of mutuality etc.
- Inefficiency and lack of strategic co-ordination caused by the fragmentation of the existing FCB sector.
- Problems associated with non-executive fanner director boards - lack of knowledge and expertise in this context, lack of knowledge concerning corporate operations generally.

- Unenlightened farmer board attitudes to senior staff employment.
- Lack of an attractive career structure for executives.
- Absence of innovative alliances - the failure to replicate European approaches.
- Unenlightened and inefficient use of resources by existing FCBs.
- Failure to innovate and generally implement modern IT in the context of the Internet.

The above shortcomings are to be addressed by the project.

### **Project Services**

Plunkett will provide: an independent specialist source of information about the principles and practical application of collaborative marketing within the agro-food sector, an enquiry service for existing and proposed FCBs, a signposting facility to specific expertise and where appropriate, in-house consultancy services. In particular, the project will provide:

- Individual documentation on the key aspects of collaborative group formation and development, e.g. marketing, legal, financial, business planning, contracts/legal agreements and director responsibilities.
- The production of a detailed practical guide on the formation and development of FCBs in the UK.
- Access to key specialists for telephone advice and guidance.
- Access to the Plunkett Library through the Internet.
- Telephone and Internet access to Plunkett's resources for general co-operative/collaborative enquiries, e.g. basic group requirements, grant availability, key contacts such as the Registrar of Friendly Societies, Companies House, Federation of Agricultural Co-operatives, National Farmers Union; MAFF etc.; existing FCBs and regional development agencies.
- Access to a new Plunkett website, which will include regular features on collaborative issues and provision for on line purchase of information.
- Initial examination of the proposed or existing business to ascertain what specialist expertise is required in terms of marketing, legal, financial, general development and training.
- Provision of potential sources of expertise, e.g. commercial organisations, individual consultants, and 'model FCBs'

willing to participate in the transfer of best practice such as is facilitated by MAFF and other development agencies.

- As an independent body invitations will be made through the media to potential service providers to apply for inclusion in the approved Plunkett database.
- Critical key areas of consultancy will be provided under the Plunkett 'banner' along with appropriate quality control procedures. The most appropriate consultants to be determined by an internal independent selection panel.

Plunkett will also provide independent advice and guidance to MAFF and other development agencies on the developments within the agriculture co-operative/collaborative sector. Plunkett already produces the only authoritative information on FCBs in the UK through its *Directory of UK Co-operatives and Farmer Controlled Businesses* and its *UK Statistics on Agricultural Co-operatives and FCBs*.

## Planning for the future

Moving on from the approaches to rural development adopted by Plunkett and the practicalities of the specifics of a single project, the future direction mapped out for Plunkett can be reviewed within the context of this information.

Following an extensive consultation process by Plunkett Trustees, a new broad strategy for Plunkett was agreed. The strategy was prepared on the basis that the Plunkett shall continue to have a significant role to play in terms of supporting rural co-operation both in the UK and overseas. The Trustees agreed that a Business Plan should be prepared to cover three financial years i.e. 2000-2002. It was further agreed that: in order to deliver the programme of work envisaged by the new strategy a three-year period of investment would probably be needed. The key elements of the plan are summarised below:

**Strategy.** The Business Plan sets out a programme of work to deliver its now clearly defined purpose, which is: '*The Furtherance of Rural Co-operation*'. This takes account of the shift towards a much wider acceptance that co-operation needs to be supported for both agricultural and non-agricultural activities in rural areas. The plan requires that:

- Plunkett be recognised nationally and internationally as the premier organisation concerned with the theory and practice of rural co-operation.

- In order that such recognition can be achieved, it will be necessary to maximise potential funders' awareness of the unique attributes that Plunkett offers and recognition of the services that it can provide to rural communities.

In particular, it needs to re-establish its position as:

- An independent source of information about the principles and practice of co-operation in rural areas.
- The main source of best practice concerning the custom and practice of creating, developing and implementing co-operative/collaborative activity in rural enterprises.
- The identity/image that Plunkett should convey to all its audiences is that it is: the lead organisation - the first choice for independent advice and consultancy on collaborative and rural issues, also that it is professional and innovative, while remaining friendly and approachable.

**Services.** The services to be available to support rural co-operation will include:

- Consultancy relating to co-operative business and development.
- Expertise in the direction and management of rural co-operative ventures.
- Advice and guidance, covering the design, formation, direction and management of co-operative/collaborative ventures.
- The formation of co-operatives.
- Facilitating alliances and mergers between co-operatives.
- The maintenance and operation of a consultant register and non-executive director database.
- The supply of information (including the Plunkett co-operative library, publications and websites).
- An action research capability.
- The provision of training (especially for co-operative directors), workshops and study tours.
- Organising conferences and seminars on co-operative and related topics.

**Clearing House/Signposting Facility.** A major element and a key area of Plunkett's service is to provide a rapid response service to technical queries and requests for specific

consultancy or training. As part of the re-focusing onto key activities it is necessary to strengthen the staff capability and to provide for the re-training of some existing staff so they can continue to improve their capacity to support such a service. However, Trustees and other Plunkett members will need to be involved in the delivery of this service.

Whilst the above services relate to both UK and international work it is agreed that Plunkett would, where possible, work in co-operation with and/or in partnership with other organisations. This will involve supplying consultants or other direct inputs. However, it is likely that the provision of information, including guidance as to best practice, will form the main basis of future international work.

**Promoting Plunkett.** Without being exhaustive, the following were identified as 'key' contacts and opinion leaders to be targeted when promoting Plunkett's services: rural co-operatives of all types, government at all levels, including: MPs and MEPs, the European Commission, regional and rural development agencies, regional co-operative councils, universities, colleges and business schools, appropriate non-governmental organisations, also TECs, business Links and their successor organisations, trade associations and other special interest groups, banks, solicitors and accountants, plus potential co-operatives and co-operative members in rural areas. The task of influencing the above listed audiences will involve:

- Working with the regional Co-operative Development Councils/RDAs to publicise Plunkett's services.
- Attendance at events and seminars where key decision-makers are present, including a presence at the Royal Show.
- Encouraging Trustees, Patrons and Plunkett Members to use their contacts to 'open doors'.
- Arranging Plunkett Open Days to promote Plunkett's rural work and to co-coincide with other special events.
- Continuing to arrange the annual Milk Groups Conference.
- Arranging a Grain Groups Conference.
- Arranging a Meat Group Conference.

### **A new 'Co-operative Development Foundation'.**

At the time of writing, the Plunkett Trustees have not yet had the opportunity of considering what relationship Plunkett may have with



a new Co-operative Foundation, as proposed in the Report of the Co-operative Commission. Certainly Plunkett has some experience to offer, should this recommendation be converted into reality. Plunkett, which has hitherto mainly specialised in agricultural co-operation, is increasingly involved in all the forms of co-operation that have an application in a rural setting. Consequently, Plunkett should expect to have, at the very least, a close working relationship with the proposed new foundation.

Sir Horace was a frequent contributor to Co-operative Congress debates during his lifetime, and Margaret Digby, a former Plunkett Director, was a member of the 1956 Independent Co-operative Commission. In more recent times, Plunkett played a leading role in establishing the UK Co-operative Council (UKCC) and the Co-operative Law Association. So it will be appreciated that Plunkett should expect to continue to play its part in the wider range of co-operatives that make up the totality of the UK co-operative sector.

### **A 'new start'**

The year 2001 promises to provide a 'new start' for Plunkett in many respects. Richard Moreton, a former Plunkett staff member who has since enhanced his experience of rural co-operation in various situations, has taken on the job of Chief Executive. Other new staff members that will bring additional skills to the small team now running Plunkett shall join him. The current Plunkett Chairman, David Button, took over the chair in the latter half of 2000. He is a specialist in supporting agricultural co-operatives. Changes are also taking place within the Board of Trustees, which already boasts a wealth of experience in co-operatives and rural enterprise. Additional Trustees are to be nominated to the Board who have practical experience of rural co-operation; at the same time at least one more leading academic in the field is expected to make their experience available to Plunkett. The combination of a reinvigorated Board and a strengthened staff team should give a boost to Plunkett as it gears-up to meet the needs of rural co-operation in the new century. Already new projects are being considered and new partnerships are being developed, which give cause for optimism about Plunkett's continuing place as a key player in rural co-operative development for some time to come.

**Edgar Parnell is currently Vice-Chair of the Plunkett Foundation, and was its Chief Executive from 1984 to 1997.**