

TONY WEBSTER ON BEHALF OF CoRNet

AN EVENT FOR THE 2025 UNITED NATIONS YEAR OF CO-OPERATIVES!!

PROPOSAL FOR AN ONLINE CONFERENCE JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2025

States, Co-operatives and Co-operation: Democratic Structures of Governance and the Design and Impact of Local, National and International Policy on the Co-operative and Social/Solidarity Economy

Introduction: The Complex & Evolving Relationship between the State and the Co-operative and Social Economy Sector

The relationship between co-operatives, the social/solidarity economy and the state has always been a complex and sometimes troubled one. Co-operatives, in particular, place strong emphasis upon their autonomy from the state, but this has not prevented either efforts on their part to shape policy or attempts by the state at local, national and even international levels to either design policy to promote the social economy or indeed control the sector more directly. An additional complicating factor is that state approaches to the sector have been shaped by a very wide spectrum of ideological perspectives from the socialist left through to neoliberalism. Moreover, trans-national quasi-state bodies such as the EU have long sought to develop policies for the social/solidarity economy. In this respect, the definition of state here includes local as well as national government institutions, and also trans-national bodies with some legal or other 'state-like' powers such as the EU or the UN. A wide definition is also applied to co-operatives and the social/solidarity economy, which will include as well as co-operatives, some charitable organizations, community interest companies, social enterprises of varying kinds, and also organizations which have sought to develop 'co-operative ways of working'.

The Central Importance of Participatory Democracy

But in discussing the relationships between local or national state institutions and co-operatives a major theme must be how such relationships can build and sustain democratic accountability and promote participation in democratic structures within both co-operatives and state. A major challenge for states and communities around the world is how to promote active democratic participation, not just in electoral processes and state bodies of representation, but in pressure groups, informal networks and economic/commercial organizations. A major theme will be to highlight how relatively small co-operative and related organizations might offer fresh ways in which wider participatory democracy can be facilitated and encouraged generally.

The conference organizers are aware of the deepening crisis of democracy across the world. Since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, and Fukuyama's hubristic claim that history had ended with the victory of liberal democracy and capitalism, a harsher reality has dawned. The rise of authoritarian regimes in Russia and China, and the success of right wing, populist and anti-democratic movements in the USA, Hungary, Poland, Italy, Brazil and Argentina, have all been accompanied by a retreat and imperilment of the democratic ideal. In Britain, even parliament's power was challenged in the heat of the BREXIT debate. Of course, this itself is partly the result of declining democratic engagement, as fewer people become active in pressure group, party or representative politics, giving rise to a general passivity which has engendered a 'plague on all your houses' cynicism. This has certainly fuelled support for anti-democratic populism. Co-operatives especially offer a different and participatory form of democratic engagement, which offers not just the prospect of a fairer distribution of wealth, but also a strengthening of democratic engagement at the local, and

ultimately national levels. This therefore is a central theme of this conference and papers relating to this are eagerly invited.

Who is this Conference For?

This conference invites speakers from a wide range of academic, national or international contexts. Economic, social, political, business, historical, cultural, interdisciplinary or practitioner-led approaches are all welcome. In addition to the role of co-operatives and the social economy in promoting democratic participation as outlined above, topics might include examination and/or assessment of specific strategies employed by the state at any level, how such policies were designed, or indeed how and why co-operative movements have sought to shape state policy. This might include policies or strategies to promote economic development, to alleviate economic and social problems or to address short or long term deficiencies in the mainstream economy. The legal framework within which co-operatives operate will be an important facet of the conference. The emergence of the 'digital economy' has provided the basis for new types of co-operatives which operate online, and a theme will be the opportunities this presents to enhance support for co-operative formations and development. It also includes policies designed to integrate co-operatives and the social economy into an interventionist/socialist economy, as well as other models offered across the political spectrum.

One of the reasons the conference is online is because this overcomes many of the financial obstacles and costs of attending an 'in person' conference, which is often beyond the reach of many. The conference organizers are especially committed to maximizing diversity in race, religion, gender and sexuality and we are eager for papers which reflect these perspectives on the conference theme, and for colleagues to come forward to share in the design and delivery of the conference.

How will the Conference be Organized and When will it take place?

We think that the best way to organize this as a global event is to run a series of online seminars over several days, at times which are convenient for those in different time zones. The plan will be for key presentations to be recorded so all will have access to presentations and papers. These will be uploaded to a conference website. There will be small organizing committees in different parts of the world to promote the conference, and collectively these will form an overarching conference committee. As diverse a range of participants in both the conference, and in conference organization is a priority.

Why Now?

This conference is timely. In the UK, the emergence of the 'Preston Model', 12 years of 'Big Society' attempts to create and/or harness the social economy as more democratic and locally-owned deliverers of public services. This is a good moment to evaluate the records and direction of travel of these initiatives. As a result of this thinking and especially impelled by the emergency needs of the COVID-19 pandemic, communities around the UK have witnessed the emergence of local projects working for the common good. These initiatives have enjoyed a creative drive and a vision independent of the various large organisations that are ostensibly networkers and drivers of the social economy, such as Co-operatives UK and the ICA. Nevertheless, working jointly with ABCUL (representing Credit Unions), the Building Society Association, the Association of Financial Mutuals and the National Industry Liaison Group, Co-operatives UK has recently joined these organizations in drafting a joint prospectus which stresses the need for government to work more closely with the democratic economy (<https://www.uk.coop/prospectus>). The conference asks to what extent initiatives for change can be developed from such large organization perspectives compared

to the vitality and drive of smaller, localized groups in community. Given the forthcoming general election, possible change of government, and the continuing challenges faced by British economy and society it is hard to think of a better time to reflect on and explore the many varied policies attempted here and around the world, with a view to developing ideas and approaches for the future.

The growing climate crisis and the need for new strategies to avoid ecological disaster underlines the need for alternative approaches to wealth creation based on the kind of social and ethical principles which have long underpinned co-operation. The international movement, as represented by ICA, has long been interested in the relationship between the state and the co-operative movement and only recently 2025 has been designated by the UN as a Second Year of Co-operatives, and the role of the state features as an important theme: The resolution:

“recommends reviewing existing legislation and regulations to make the national legal and regulatory environment more conducive to the creation and growth of cooperatives by improving existing laws and regulations and/or by establishing new ones, especially in the areas of access to capital, autonomy, competitiveness and fair taxation.

In addition, the resolution calls member states to consult cooperatives in the preparations for the voluntary national reviews for the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. It also invites governments, relevant international organisations, the specialised agencies and local, national and international cooperative organisations to continue to observe the International Day of Cooperatives annually, on the first Saturday of July, as proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in its resolution 47/90.”

<https://www.ica.coop/en/newsroom/news/resolution-calls-second-international-year-cooperatives-2025>)

For all these reasons, the conference seems timely, appropriate and likely to offer a rich and potentially useful contribution to the future development of the social/solidarity economy.

What Might be our Intended Outcomes?

Of course, conference organizers and participants will determine this; but it is envisaged that major academic outputs (books, articles) will be supplemented by other outcomes of value to practitioners. One aim might be to create a global network of grass roots co-operators, able to utilise the new communication technologies to facilitate international exchanges of ideas, experiences and other forms of co-operation. The aim would be to facilitate contacts between grassroots co-operators rather than the ‘big institutions’ which tend to dominate the co-operative world.

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