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Rose Marley – CEO, Co-operatives UK: The Distribution of Power and Wealth

Mike Wistow

Rose Marley joined Co-operatives UK in January 2021 as chief executive officer following the departure of Ed Mayo. Rose, who has worked closely with the Co-operative Group over several years, has a background in social enterprise and is now on the Board of SharpFutures, the community interest company she co-founded in Manchester, UK to support young people into employment in the creative digital industries. In 2021, Rose was included in the Top 100 Women in Social Enterprise (Euclid Network, 2021). Mike Wistow interviewed Rose for UKSCS shortly after her appointment focusing on co-operation, and research, policy, and practice. Much of Rose's conversational style in her responses has been deliberately captured in this article to give a sense of her energy and passion for what she talks about.

I met Rose Marley at the end March, almost 100 days since Rose took up her new post as CEO of Co-operatives UK. The 'hundred days reflection' is an odd concept — if we'd been born without thumbs it would no doubt be 80 days — but three months or so into a new job is enough time to formulate some thoughts, although these might be honed based on later insights. I flagged up at the beginning that I was going to conclude by asking Rose for her thoughts about the interaction between research, policy, and practice, but that I would first roam more broadly around the topic.

I started by asking Rose, as she was talking to people and settling into her new role, what examples she had come across that had struck her as being effective co-operative organisations. The response was thoughtful and wide-ranging, and we talked for the best part of an hour.

Rose defines her background as being wider than the narrowest definition of co-operatives:

I've worked mainly in the wider social enterprise sector and that's where I've cut my teeth in terms of the social economy. The night before the interview, my husband asked me what question would absolutely floor me if I was asked it and I replied, "What's a Co-op?" I wasn't being flippant! All through January I've been asking the comms team to give me an answer in one sentence — not the legal definition, not the seven principles, but something I can say to the person on the street that means they can easily understand what *is* a co-op. We need something that encompasses a big retail co-op, a small worker co-op and all the other variations, something that is absolutely the same for everybody.

By now, I realise I'm interviewing someone who is passionate about what she does, prepared to re-think — perhaps re-present is a better phrase — what co-operativism is so that it can be made demonstrably relevant for the modern world. Rose continued:

"It's really confusing and complicated to explain to people. I guess the key thing I've now come away with is this twofold definition — and this is to be tested and to be argued with because I'm still testing it — but, when you distil it down, to me it's the **distribution of power and wealth. All co-ops distribute power, and all co-ops distribute wealth.**

Rose is a personable as well as a passionate speaker and I'm now also hooked into listening closely as she expanded and gave examples:

This is a real key point because what's happening at the moment is this growth of conscious capitalism, as ethical considerations are becoming a marketing tool. I saw an ad the other day for a company promoting that it 'gives back'; what it meant was that you got a bit of discount every time you used the product. So how do we explain, simply, how a co-op actually does make that point of difference? This is why I came up with, "We distribute power. We distribute wealth."

You know you are in the company of an interesting thinker when they can go on to explain a philosophical idea by challenging existing thinking and giving tangible examples of

co-operatives she has experienced. Rose is passionate and she gives me these additional insights while, as she put it, talking at about 100 miles an hour. The challenge, she feels, is that co-operatives do not have the research evidence to demonstrate, *clearly and simply*, how they make a positive social impact on their community because they distribute power and wealth — whereas the market is doing a good job of ethical communications when it is really something entirely different. Hmmm, here is a research challenge for us all.

To make the point about how co-operatives are different, Rose continued by going back to my original question of what she'd come across as good examples of co-operativism:

All co-ops are unique and that's why this is so hard to explain. The distribution of power and wealth is what draws me. I do get genuinely excited about this stuff so I'm going to use the example of how two very different organisations responded to the pandemic. One was a worker co-op in digital services — and the whole worker co-op thing absolutely does fascinate me, I think there's a very, very, specific skill set needed there. The pandemic happened and the potential for furlough arose. I asked how did they decide what to do? They replied, "We just said, who wants to go on furlough and who doesn't? and the people that wanted to, went on furlough and the people that didn't, carried on working and we all carried on at our full wages". I pushed the question, "But weren't some people thinking they could just do nothing and still get paid?" They said no, they continued with a reduced workforce because some people rightly chose to take furlough because they've got childcare considerations or other reasons. That particular worker co-op did better numbers within the pandemic with a smaller workforce, yet everybody still got paid the same.

Similarly, a bicycle co-op asked themselves "Right, what do we do?" and they very specifically went to the co-op values and asked, "How do we show solidarity? How do we show our customer base, our stakeholders, ourselves, that we make a positive contribution towards the fight against the pandemic, and that we're doing that in a considered way that also works for our business?" They decided to show solidarity by offering all key workers free puncture repairs. So, we keep the shop open, we're available. If you're a key worker come in, you've got a problem with your bike, we'll just sort it out. But of course, what happened was that their business improved, they retained all their customers, got new customers, because of the puncture repair strategy for key workers.

These were both completely different responses, completely unique to their needs. And this is my point. What interests you? What grabs you? It's this idea that a collective of people has established their own way of doing things that suits that group of people and the community they operate in, that they've set out to serve. I think it's fundamental to co-ops, it's the glorious reason co-ops are wonderful. And, in those two examples, it's also the reason it's really hard to describe to the person in the street what a co-op is and why should they join one. Why they should start one and how will it make a difference.

I suggested that Rose had prompted some thoughts in me, one of which was about co-operatives having a more positive view of human nature. Her reply was interesting:

I asked that particular worker co-op, "What do you do when you have a problem?" And they said, "People leave before we ask, because they just can't cope without the hierarchy. They can't find the power; they can't find the things that they want". Their even more beautiful human response was to say, "We're doing this, join us — or don't. And if you don't want to, we're cool with that".

I moved on to ask about the potential for meta-analysis so that it is possible to draw out the themes of what is similar in terms of, say, a small bike project or a big retail co-operative and whether Rose felt we could help take co-operativism forward by this kind of work. Rose first returned to the theme which I have put as the title of this article: "This is where I've got to, where I've distilled it down to that phrase 'the distribution of power and wealth'".

Our conversation moved on to talk about the findings of how different age groups perceive co-operatives and, in particular, a recent YouGov survey (2021) commissioned by Co-operatives UK that highlighted that different age groups perceived co-operatives in different ways. We recognised that these were not necessarily provable generalisations, but, within that constraint, there were some interesting findings.

And then we touched on another potential seam of gold for the future. I was reflecting (from the loose starting point of translating research into policy) that there is not much publicity, awareness, or expertise easily available when setting up a new business — the accountants and lawyers tend to default to sole trader or limited company. Rose's personal energy and enthusiasm sprang out again:

The gaps are everywhere — there are gaps in the education sector where co-operative models are not in there; in further education, in higher education, it's just not there. You go on the government website about how to set up a business it's not there; you go into the Chambers of Commerce and the businesses supported by services through new enterprise support, it's not there.

So, I guess its two-fold: there's the **policy issue**, which I am working on at the moment, to try and find where we can we can influence that; and **working from the ground up** is the other way to do it. You look for sectors and geographies and types of people that have already got co-operation within them. They're operating as a co-operative — but they had no idea that's what they were doing. We can find people that are already co-operating and then give them the tools to do it in a more formally constituted way that will enable that to flourish and grow. That's my strategy, it's two-fold. I'm talking to government about some ideas around how we can make co-operation more visible, chipping away with education etc., but let's also expose people to co-operation. Credit unions in sixth forms for example, we're not showing them this, but when we do, they think it's new and exciting. There are some brilliant ads on YouTube from Denmark. The whole ad is for investors and it's about people saying, "We're going to own this, it's going to be great" ... and every time in the advert they just end up at co-operativism, and they realise "somebody did it, they already did it". You can understand why I say that young people do think it's new, because they've not been exposed to it until they discover it for themselves. That's a huge challenge. But time and time again the thing I've observed is that in the co-operative movement, for whatever reason, we've become so inwardly focused. We're not doing that kind of thing; we're preaching to the converted a lot of the time.

Rose continued:

So, we've got to do three things. One is to expose people — both younger people and those within far more business structures — to the model. Two, take the model to where co-operation is already happening. Then you can enable it to flourish and grow all the time. For example, I'd be keen to see credit unions in sixth forms, and not just because sixth formers get exposed to a co-operative way of working so it becomes a 'go to' model. In itself, that would be great. But actually, also, you're giving sixth form pupils the ability to start not just managing their own money but thinking about how you invest. Number three, once you're into that that particular age group, that very specific 16 to 18-year-old group, they are a really powerful way into the family and the wider world. The 'competition' to credit unions, when you're living hand to mouth, the people that will make themselves very visible will be the loan sharks — and we're not making ourselves visible as credit unions, as mutuals, and as co-operatives. And actually, you know, right now, in response to the pandemic, they've been doing some brilliant stuff where you can loan against your child benefit, and the child benefit will pay your loan back, so you don't need to worry about it. So, I think we've got to be in spaces in a very practical way. It's about putting practical things in place that people use, and it's a bit nudge psychology. Rather than suggesting theoretically, just start a co-op because it does all the innovative things. Actually, if we provide the opportunity for constituting co-ops in a place they can flourish, the ground bed is already there.

I explained to Rose that my own (limited) research background is in criminal justice and the 'What Works' studies in the 1990s/early 2000s — practical, evidence-based practice built on an under-pinning social-science basis (see further information, below). By now, I felt in a position to probe a little more about the potential for meta-analysis, for practical research, seeing a synergy in what Rose was saying and what we did 20–30 years ago. I suggested: "In effect, you're describing a living laboratory, aren't you? What if you pulled all those small examples of good co-operative practice into a meta-analysis of why it works so well? This interaction between research, policy and practice could be scaled up more widely perhaps?" This led us onto a discussion about the most effective ways of developing and using interactions between and within research-practice-policy/practice-research-policy. In line with her comments above, Rose moved into a very practical approach to this inter-relation:

I think the fact that it's really unique for different types of setups is part of the challenge. The way that research works in the social enterprise sector is twofold — either it's running-a-survey-can-you-fill-it-in-

and-we-might-do-some-focus-groups [MW: harsh I thought but sadly recognisable] and the other way of doing it is we've-done-a-deep-dive-but-from-my-desk.

As this latter comment was also sadly recognisable, I prompted, “As opposed to going and talking to people?”

Yes — and therein lie the problems as far as I'm concerned. When you walk into a place you learn something very practical. I hadn't realised how many co-ops were already in my life — not just the shops, but watching bands in a community-owned venue, for example. Or being part of something that is presented to me as a social enterprise but is actually a co-op. I do an open surgery where anyone can talk about anything to do with co-operation — and it's brilliant, it's the best day of the month. I don't do any preparatory reading or research. Someone messaged me on LinkedIn, “Can I talk to you about sustainable coffins?” Yeah. So, people appear on the screen [MW: the interview is being held in the 2021 lockdown] and I've learned more in those days by just asking why did you do that? And what is that? And what's going on? I really struggle with academia when they don't go and have a look and ask and see and feel whatever it is. Just go and talk with the people.

By now I have a strong sense of Rose's ability to interact with people in a very positive way without ducking from challenging them, of her sense that ‘unpeeling what a co-op is’ is far less important than going to co-operatives — in the broadest possible definition of that term — that are working well, of her sense that what is important is researching what makes that happen, how it can be sustained and scaled up:

I'd love to see the mindset of research change actually and be a lot more getting out there and under the skin of things. There's an absolute need for all that quantitative stuff and focus groups — but you know I'd love to say that research is a lot more about going and seeing, and then capturing how that turns into practice. If you say to a bunch of young people, do you want to start a co-operative, you'll get that blank look. If you start talking about collaborative tech, you're in — it's an easy win with that particular audience. Let's widen the scope. Things like equal care co-ops where you're tackling some big societal problems. These are basically saying our members are going to be the care workers, so the carers themselves want to know they're getting a good wage, and the people booking the care know the workers have the same values, as well as the right skills to do the job. So, this is my point about research into policy, I do it the other way round. I'm very much coming from the practical side — you get it into policy by doing stuff, you prove stuff and then you write it up and you then roll it out. I believe it's called action learning! This is what we are trying to evidence with the Ownership Hub. We go into one geographical region to work in a concentrated way to raise awareness of worker co-ops and employee ownership. And once you've gathered evidence to show it works, you can secure funding to roll it out nationally.

We finished with a reflection on the Japanese concept of going to the gemba — usually taken to mean the workplace, but the most eloquent translation of which is “the place where the truth can be found” (see for example, Imai, 2012; Womack, 2013) — and its concomitant idea that practitioners should be recognised as experts on the same level as researchers.

At the end of the interview, I continue to be left with a strong sense of Rose's passion for her new role and how she would welcome research which can demonstrate effectiveness in practice so it can then be used a) to be able to explain simply, to anyone, what a co-operative is; b) to help change policy; and c) to help practitioners, anywhere, in their quest to better distribute power and wealth.

The Interviewer & Author

Mike Wistow is a trustee of UKSCS. Mike has a long history of involvement with public and charitable sector organisations. He has previously been a trustee in a community arts organisation and a college of further education, and secretary and chair of National Probation Research and Information Exchange (NPRIE). He is the founding Director of Aegir Consulting Limited which has worked with several third sector bodies on developing and implementing longer-term strategies.

The Interviewee/Contributor

Self-employed from a young age, Rose Marley cut her teeth the music business in the era known as 'Madchester' before turning her hand to social enterprise, inspired by the lack of social mobility in the creative industries and in search of something more impactful. In 2020, Rose was event director for *Together in One Voice* — a mass singalong and live YouTube event across Manchester during Covid lockdown. She was appointed by Andy Burnham, Labour and Co-operative Mayor of Greater Manchester, to lead a pilot campaign improving local travel opportunities and raising aspiration for young people in Manchester. She is the chair of the Social Enterprise Advisory Group for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, an RSA Fellow as well as a member of the Industry Advisory Group for the new School of Digital Arts (SODA) at Manchester Metropolitan University.

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Further Information

For more information on Co-operatives UK open surgeries, see <https://www.uk.coop/news/co-operatives-uk-offers-open-surgeries-new-ceo>

SharpFutures — <https://sharpfutures.org.uk>

The National Probation Research and Information Service ran a series of what works conferences in the UK from 1995 on. For more information on evidence-based practice, policy, and research, see Moore, R. & Kenton, O. (2021). *Building the evidence base for high-quality probation services: The role of probation providers*. Research & Analysis Bulletin 2021/0. HM Inspectorate of Probation; and the Centre for crime and Justice Studies — <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk>; Raynor, P. (2018). From 'nothing works' to 'post-truth': The rise and fall of evidence in British probation. *European Journal of Probation*, 10(1), 59-75.

See <https://www.togethermcr.com> — for more information on the *Together in One Voice* event.