

Editorial

In this edition of the journal, we have a rich mix of peer-reviewed articles from the UK, Ireland and Europe. We are also joined by our new co-editor — Dr Jan Myers. Jan has a background in working with and in co-operatives, self-help, third sector and social enterprises. She is currently a faculty member at Newcastle Business School at Northumbria University and has been an associate with Cardiff Institute for Co-operatives Studies and part of the Canada-wide Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network. We are very pleased to have Jan join our editorial team.

The first paper in this edition is of particular interest given the growing interest in food security and food democracy. Caraher, Smith and Machell report on an evaluation of food co-operatives in England, part of the Making Local Food Work initiative. The paper initially provides an historical overview of food co-operatives in the 1970s and 1980s and the ideological split between ecological and political drivers and economic and price driven initiatives. This discussion also makes the link with social and economic benefits of food co-operatives. This has continued to be a key context for the promotion of community food projects and co-operatives through community and health development initiatives linked to Government policy, for example tackling inequalities in health and food poverty. A distinction needs to be made here between community-based, often volunteer run, food projects and the development of larger, retail food co-operatives (the latter much more a US phenomenon although some notable examples in the UK such as Unicorn in Manchester). The paper focuses on the former and, indeed the research confirms that many 'food co-ops' are not formally registered as co-operatives. The authors suggest that by non-registration these 'food co-ops' may be missing a trick in attempts to reclaim ownership and linkages to food and for community involvement, and they raise an important distinction between service delivery and community ownership and engagement with reference to the growing expansion of food banks in the UK. They do, despite this, point to the value of secondary co-operatives — or a "co-op of co-ops" — as vehicles for supporting the viability and sustainability of local "food co-ops" and food projects. Even so, they warn of the top down push for solutions to food poverty linked to the development of projects referred to loosely as co-operatives and the need to clarify and distinguish between different types of community-based and non-profit distributing food delivery mechanisms.

The second paper is a welcome review of worker co-operatives in the Irish context. As the authors state worker co-operatives 'account for a small proportion of economic activity', but there is continued and growing interest in the performance outcomes and social and economic benefits of employee ownership. More recently, with the UK Government interest in public service mutuals and employee owned and managed public services the question of future prospects of worker co-operatives that the paper raises is pertinent and timely. Gavin, Moroney, Carroll and Ward point not only to supportive policy and enabling infrastructure to support the development and viability of worker co-operatives, but also the strength of the sector itself in shaping and defining its role, influence, and contribution to the development of other co-operative ventures. The paper draws on mutual incentives theory and aspects of social capital and raises questions about the levels and types of trust that exist in communities that may engender, or not, more collectivist approaches to economic and social development. The authors bring in examples from Spain, Italy and India to reflect on the Irish experience.

As in the first article, the authors point to the difficulty of definition, both in terms of registration, but also in how co-operatives self-identify. What is also seen is the role of co-operation for non-standard or 'vulnerable' self-employed individuals (in this case taxi drivers, and actors) that has been evidenced in artists and artisan co-operatives with regard to control, influence, and visibility. They observe the impact of a championing and promoting body such as the co-operative development agencies, which has been noted elsewhere (see for example parliamentary debate on the draft Co-operative Development Agency (Winding-up and

Dissolution) Order 1989 for an interesting question and answer session on the potential impact on new and developing co-operatives).¹ As well as commenting on the relatively speedy influence of a new worker co-operative network, the authors make a number of recommendations that they suggest may help to energise and support the Irish worker co-operative sector.

Our third and final peer-reviewed paper comes from Germany and raises the important issue of co-operative values and governance in large and growing co-operatives. The authors, Hill and Doluschitz, provide a study of German co-operative experience and consider the values in practice across a number of co-operative businesses. The study has been undertaken against a background of structural change in co-operatives sectors in Germany. In the Baden-Württemberg region, while the numbers of co-operatives particularly in rural, agricultural and banking sectors, have been declining in some instances the membership has been growing, resulting in fewer, larger co-operatives. During the same period, a newer, developing sector of trade co-operatives (for example service providers in commerce, crafts and energy sectors) has seen growth both in numbers of co-operatives and in membership. While traditional co-operative values and principles are still seen as relevant in today's co-operatives, the authors also suggest more market- or customer-focused values and markers of professional practice linked to honesty, reliability, sustainability, fairness, and security are increasingly important. These are seen as displacing some of the 'core' values of democracy, self-help, and equality although the authors note the influence of political and environmental factors in foregrounding certain values and behaviours over others, as well as the types of co-operatives surveyed. The authors point to the need for further research to identify values specific to co-operative legal, and operational, form.

The final paper in our series is a paper is a non-peer reviewed think-piece article from Gray, Stofferahn and Hipple. This is an interesting overview of the background leading up to the demutualisation of a large agri-co-operative, Dakota Growers' Pasta Co-operative. What is interesting in this short piece is the focus on argumentation and narrative used to defend movement to privatisation, and to justify different interests. Some of this surrounds the focus on private and individual responsibility for socio-economic issues such as unemployment, poverty, and family-farm loss, and the use of 'expert' voice that can give legitimacy to one side or the other in order to tip the balance which in this case led to demutualisation of the co-operative. The article takes us on the journey to this tipping point and post-conversion. The paper concludes with recommendations of possible ways in which co-operatives and policy makers might stave off similar attempts at demutualisation.

The journal concludes with an important review of Gordon Nembard's work, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* by Caroline Shenaz Hossein. This work offers an account of the social and co-operative economy in the lives of Black people in the United States from the 1700s to 2007.

We thank all authors for their contributions. Thanks to the editorial board and our dedicated reviewers. See the journal website for details of future editions and call for papers: <http://www.thenews.coop/journal>

Jan Myers and Paul A Jones – Co-editors of the Journal

Endnote

- 1 Co-operative Development Agency, HC Debate January 1990, Vol 164, cc1039-61, available at <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1990/jan/10/co-operative-development-agency>