

# To Co-operate or not Co-operate: a Case Study of Food Co-ops in England

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Food co-ops are highlighted in UK policy as one way of improving food provisioning systems when formal state and commercial services fail to deliver. This research takes a case study approach to food retail co-ops in England funded under a community outreach programme. The co-operatives surveyed had different priorities, some ranking health and food prices as more important than those associated with sustainability. In the majority of cases there were no formal membership structures and no involvement of members in decision-making. All operated on a part-time basis, few had business plans for future development, and many were reliant on voluntary labour or inputs from other organisations for their survival. Many food initiatives using the title food co-op were not formally constituted as co-operatives, losing both the potential power and advantages that formal incorporation can provide and opportunities to engage in processes associated with “democracy”. There is potential for a “co-operative of co-operatives”, with local food initiatives being members of the larger co-operative. This would enable leverage in areas of lobbying and food purchasing and provide additional leverage in terms of changing the food supply system to be more sustainable.

## Introduction

The need for categorising and analysing the different types of civil society food distribution channels in the UK has been highlighted, especially as the number of such alternative outlets for food distribution grows (Freathy and Hare, 2004; Morgan et al, 2006; Kneafsey et al, 2007; Food Ethics Council, 2011). Key amongst alternative food distribution channels categorised as community based enterprises are food co-ops (Hines, 1976; Co-operatives UK, 2011; Niven, 2012). Historically these often emerge out of the growing range of local community based food projects that frequently address issues of inequality, sustainable food systems and links with the land and growing (McGlone et al, 1999; Dobson et al, 2000; Caraher and Cowburn, 2004; Caraher and Dowler, 2007). Concomitantly there is an emerging dialogue from both government and funding bodies to support “food co-ops”. This is highlighted by UK government policy referred to as the “Big Society” (Norman, 2010). The “Big Society” concept aims to shift power to the local level and presents co-operatives and other mutually worker owned enterprises as the building blocks for a new economic model (Blond, 2010: 218-19), and as a way of addressing economic austerity where civil society can provide local services formerly supported by the State (Willetts, 2010; Caraher, 2011).

In May 2014, the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act was passed by parliament (HM Government, 2014). This aims to consolidate a raft of existing legislation and strengthen Government commitment to Independent and Provident Societies (IPSS), including clarification of two types of co-operatively owned societies:

- i.) Co-operative societies (businesses owned and run by and for their own members).
- ii.) Community benefit societies (businesses operating for the benefit of the community, such as housing associations).

Some key features of the Act relate to membership and the requirement to keep a register of members. At a minimum, membership must be three individual members or two registered societies.

Food co-ops potentially offer a way forward by addressing a range of issues including sustainable food supply chains, localism and food justice and democracy (Schanbacher, 2010; Carolan, 2013). These later concepts, of food justice and food democracy, are where the relationships with individuals/communities and food is based on a model of dialogue and

citizenship as opposed to a consumer model of provider/ supplier (Food Ethics Council, 2010). Freathy and Hare's work from 2004 highlights the need to further examine and classify the modes of operation in food co-ops. In addition, not a lot has been written about consumer food co-ops in the UK. The main body of academic work and practice has focused on farmers' markets, commercial box schemes, community supported agriculture, food banks and so on. This project seeks to fill some of that gap by presenting case study findings from an evaluation of food co-ops in England.

## **Literature Review: Food Co-op Research in Britain**

The International Co-operative Alliance<sup>1</sup> on its website defines a co-operative as "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise". There were over 6,169 independent co-operatives in the UK in 2010, found in all parts of the economy, from healthcare to housing, farms to football clubs, credit unions to community owned shops, pubs to public relations, and wind farms to web design. The co-operative movement has developed a number of guides to help those setting up a co-operative (Co-operative Wholesale Society, 1999; Co-operatives UK, 2011), and the Co-operatives UK website<sup>2</sup> features case studies related to food, including examples of worker owned co-operatives as opposed to community owned food co-ops. Co-operatives are not about making profits for shareholders, but creating value for members – this is what gives them a unique character, this is where they go beyond the existing market mechanisms to address issues beyond profit (Sandel, 2012), including issues such as sustainability and fair trade. They also have the potential to address food democracy and food justice by offering a fair price to both producers and consumers. Issues of food democracy can become a key feature (Carolan, 2011 and 2013) because food, unlike other goods for sale and trade, has specific characteristics or features related to health and cultural associations, and a role in family and social life. Additionally control and ownership of the food chain by a small number of corporations has given impetus to community based initiatives such as food co-ops to reclaim ownership and linkages to food (Belasco, 2007; Albritton, 2009; Paarlberg, 2010).

Research and evaluation in the area of retail food co-ops is not extensive and has mainly focused on process and impact indicators as well as evaluations of schemes designed to deliver food to those in areas of deprivation. There is a body of literature on the food co-op movement of the 1970s which was based on the principles of pricing and alternative and sustainable ecological actions (Belasco, 2007). Ronco's 1974 book on American food co-ops demonstrates how even then, food co-ops were split in their agendas, with some taking an overtly political approach and others focusing on the provision of cheap/affordable food for their members. He highlights the fights that went on in many food co-ops over these ideological issues of price versus sustainable and fair trade actions (see also McGrath, 2004). In the UK, Hines' 1976 book on setting up a food co-op emphasised the cost saving benefits for members and the potential environmental benefits as a backdrop. In addition, a good deal of the existing literature focuses on the potential health benefits of a group of projects classified as food co-ops (see for eg Lockett, 2000; Caraher et al, 2002). The evaluation focus of these projects was not the setting up and running of co-operatives, but on co-operatives as delivery services in areas of deprivation or with groups that were deemed hard-to-reach, and on improving health through the delivery of low cost healthy food. This newfound enthusiasm for co-operatives was built on localism and united the political left and right in the belief that small, principled alternatives can build healthy communities (see Sharzer (2012) for a critique of this principle).

The limited body of UK based academic literature available portrays food co-ops with a variety of management and organisational structures that can include local activities run by volunteers, to those where a statutory or paid worker has been given time to engage with the local community (Caraher et al, 2002; Towers et al, 2005; Elliot et al, 2006). Funding or other support can come from local authorities or health authorities, lottery monies or other charitable

sources (Dowler and Caraher, 2003; Caraher and Cowburn, 2004). Access to food, meaning the shops or markets people can reach with ease, and the choice and cost of this food, is governed by decisions in which few ordinary citizens play any part. Food co-ops, along with growing schemes and alternative systems of accessing food can be seen as one way of addressing this disengagement from the dominant food system and of the abandonment of sections of society by the mainstream (Caraher, 2011). Food co-ops are thus among the most popular initiatives identified by the health sector to tackle food poverty and poor nutritional intake (Caraher and Dowler, 2007; Anon, 2010).

## **Food co-op evaluations in the UK**

There have also been evaluations of food co-ops operating fruit and vegetable bag schemes — where customers order and collect a bag on a weekly basis. In Wales and Cumbria these schemes required multi-agency partnership working to ensure sustainability and were valued in areas of deprivation (Towers et al 2005; Elliot et al, 2006). This multi-agency approach was necessary for the inclusion of staff time from other agencies to help the co-operatives run and to compensate for lack of organisation of volunteers and co-operatives in Wales were not defined by membership or registration. Price and Sephton's 1995 evaluation in Bolton found the success of eight food co-ops was related to a tradition of community development and a sound process of consultation between health professionals and the local communities (see also Caraher et al, 2002), again the co-operatives in Bolton were not formally registered. Closer examination of the literature suggests that many of the food co-ops described were not formally constituted co-operatives but a catch-all phrase for a type of food project with a central supplier distributing through or to local systems. Freathy and Hare's (2004: 38) work in Scotland began to develop a broad co-operative typology that reflected different phases of food co-op development which ranged from traditional/early stages, through trading up to being developmentally mature. This typology describes the process of business development as opposed to changing management structures or changes in the principles of operation. It suggests that the journey to becoming a co-operative is developmental and for groups, consists of a number of stages.

McGrath (2004) notes how food co-ops that developed in the 1970s were easily distinguishable from supermarkets but more recent decades have seen larger co-operatives developing along supermarket lines with fixed high street outlets and special offers. Clearly a food co-op is engaged in accessing and making food available for its members but the reasons for this may vary from cost and affordability, through health, to concerns about the environment. Any of these, or a combination of factors, may give a different flavour to a co-operative, for example, through sourcing only local food (Katchova and Woods, 2011), not sourcing meat, or through members contributing to the work of the co-operative (Ronco, 1974; Hines, 1976). It may be that the key issue is one of the co-operative nature of the enterprise around food, however defined and agreed by members. These issues are explored further below. When national chains such as the UK or Danish based co-operative movement move to a model based on professional management, such concerns may receive less priority as they compete against the commercial retail sector.

## **Methodology**

This paper sets out findings from an evaluative research programme of food co-ops in England. This was part of the Making Local Food Work (MLFW) programme (2007-12) that was managed by the non-governmental organisation, Sustain — The Alliance for Better Food and Farming. MLFW explored how community food enterprises, including food co-ops, reconnect “people and land through local food and increasing access to fresh, healthy, local food with clear, traceable origins”. The overall programme of activities was funded by a grant from The National Lottery. Underpinning the food co-ops evaluation was the supposition that a food co-op would not be eliminated or defined at the beginning of the project but that this would emerge from the research process and analysis. For inclusion in the programme, a food co-op had to be

engaged in the delivery of food and be on Sustain's<sup>3</sup> food co-op project database (120 were listed in 2010 — although the final figure in 2012 was 486). This was not a research decision but an operational one implemented by MLFW and Sustain who pointed out on their food co-ops website that:

many community-run food co-ops also go by many other names such as food clubs, social food outlets, food groups, or simply describing whatever they do, for example operating a bag or box scheme, community market, fruit and vegetable stall or mobile store. For the purposes of the MLFW project we have used the term food co-op to describe any outlet run by local people that is involved in supplying food for the benefit of the community, rather than for private profit.

Thus, all food co-ops listed in the database were considered suitable for inclusion in the research.

The study used a mixed methods approach, drawing on the experiences of those engaged in food co-ops and the diversity of these enterprises. Following an initial analysis of Sustain's database to provide baseline data, evaluation tools were developed to conduct case study research. This provided a focus at the local level in line with the MLFW aims of "reconnecting people and land through local food" and, acknowledging that case studies are good for uniqueness and completeness of a case but not for generalising from the unique to the general (Thomas, 2011), the case studies were developed to find out what models existed and how co-operatives were developing in the specific areas. The findings in this paper draw on data from ten food co-ops located in three out of the nine regions of England: the North East (NE), London and the South West (SW). These regions had established food co-ops that were supported by local mechanisms, thus enabling the researchers to more easily connect with a range of food co-op types in each of the regions. Following a phased approach, the methodology included: 8 semi-structured interviews with co-ordinators across England, 48 (30 users, 18 with workers/volunteers) interviews and ranking exercises at each food co-op, and observation and feedback from local users through graffiti walls.

Survey ranking exercises on the environmental, health, economic and social benefits of the food co-ops were conducted in order to evaluate the perceived impacts of each food co-op by its users (30 across the ten co-operatives studied). The options in the ranking survey were on a scale of 1–4, with 4 indicating the issue perceived to have the highest/most important impact. The data was entered into Excel spread sheets and analysed with the results presented as spider-web diagrams (Figures 2 and 3) to show the inter-connectedness and relative importance of the various elements to different projects. The models developed provide a visual representation of the priorities, are useful as indicative tools, and they provide a means for exploring other issues and emerging questions for further research, but they are not quantitative measures. It is important to note that although the charts do not represent an equal or large distribution of ranking priorities, they still provide some initial indication of how stakeholders view issues.

## Findings

The case studies and data from the ranking exercises are presented below. All the cases are presented under the rubric of the term food co-op as this was the term used by the project and MLFW programme. This will be examined further in the discussion. In order to contextualise the research findings, secondary analysis of the national database was used to characterise key features of a typical community food co-op in this project (Table 1).

### A regional typology for operational differences

Table 1 provides an overview of the 120 food co-ops on the Sustain database: 25 rural, 2 suburban and 92 urban, with 81 of these only open a day or less per week, 9 open daily. Sixty-nine provided fruit and vegetables only, 10 just dried goods, and 32 provided fruit, vegetables

and dried goods. One hundred and twelve defined themselves as consumer focused, there were no producer or worker owned co-operatives on the database. What emerges from this initial contextualisation is that few of the co-operatives were bound by membership, or by sharing ownership and making decisions democratically (Co-operatives UK, 2012). Activities were highly reliant on volunteers and the desire to serve a community but in the majority of cases, the co-operatives were not formally constituted.

**Table 1. Breakdown of “typical” co-operative characteristics from the national database \***

<b>Area of Analysis</b>	<b>Typical Characteristics</b>
Location	Urban/small village/town/housing estate.
Type of Food Co-op	Few had membership requirements.  The larger co-operatives usually at a regional or sub-regional level operated as a co-operative for co-operatives: individual co-operatives were users or customers of the larger co-operative.
Pricing	Below cost based on supermarket prices, due to low overheads and use of volunteer labour.
Products available	Fruit and vegetables were the dominant produce, mainly box and bag schemes.
Distribution point/method	Community centre /public space; limited to a specific day/time in the week.
Plans	Only 2 had business plans.
Labour	Highly reliant on volunteer input, few had paid workers.  Some were reliant on paid workers from other agencies devoting some of their time to the co-operative.
Funding	Dependent on state support whether direct or indirect eg premises or staff time contribution
Links to other organisations	Often worked with another food project partner such as transition towns or a healthy eating initiative.

\* N = 120

The following sub-sections present the case studies from the three regions in England. These provide details of how food co-ops operated in these diverse regions and highlight not only operational differences but also others that were linked to their geographies, histories and social demographics.

### **North East Region Case Study: a central supply function**

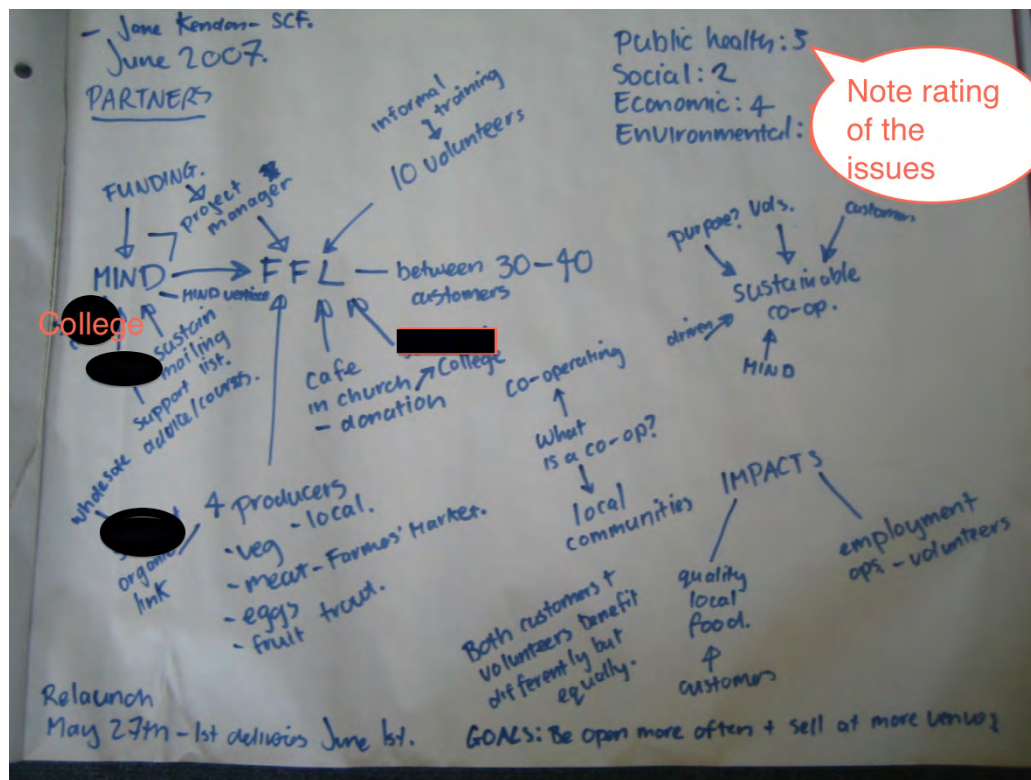
The case study in the North East (NE) had a streamlined/centralised approach to food co-ops and delivery. There was a central distribution and purchasing agency which was a social enterprise fruit and vegetable distribution service that provided bags or boxes of mixed fruit and vegetables to local co-operatives. The three co-operatives studied were in former mining communities with poor transport links to shops and with high levels of unemployment. In many areas, food access was an issue and the co-operatives offered value for money and access to fresh fruit and vegetables. The central agency also provided strategic support, training and marketing materials to the local co-operatives in the region. Thus, this centralised fruit and vegetable scheme did not deliver directly to end-users or customers; it was a co-operative for the local co-operatives. Feedback from the local co-operatives indicated that this centralised structure was key to the success and conception of the individual food co-ops. It also acted as a champion for the local food co-ops with funders and supporters. One local co-operative coordinator suggested that the central distribution agency was the food co-op and that the project she worked for was a “community project”.

Two out of the three local co-operatives were in community centres, the third was located in the grounds of a local primary school. From the semi-structured interviews, ranking exercises and observations, it is clear that community centres present opportunities for overlapping activities and have the benefit of full-time employees who can support and oversee the tasks associated with the food co-ops. A co-ordinator indicated that the co-operative had enabled them to learn more about the community they were operating in and that food provided a forum for engagement.

### South West Region Case Study; grassroots activism and sustainability focus

The agency co-ordinating activities in the South West (SW) describes itself as “a grass-roots charity” that aims to make people aware of the social, health and environmental effects of growing, buying, preparing and eating food. It did not operate like the regional organisation in the NE which distributed food to other co-operatives. The co-ordinating organisation’s function in the SW was to support and develop others in delivering services and it had helped set up and arrange distribution at the regional level through an existing organic wholesale delivery business.

Figure 1. Mapping exercise with food co-ops in the South West\*



\* The picture has been redacted to remove named organisations

The three local co-operatives in this area varied considerably. They were unlike the co-operatives in the NE which presented a streamlined model with the partner organisation, and demonstrated a range of operational models with various functions. One was a weekly food co-op run by 9-11 year olds in a local primary school, and a second co-operative, closely linked to the transition town movement, had been set-up as a shop and ran weekly in a local pub where customers came to collect bags of produce. In this co-operative the products ranged from locally grown organic fruit and vegetables and local honey to dried goods sourced through a wholesale co-operative. Local users of this co-operative often brought baked goods, jams and so forth to sell. The third co-operative in this region was supported by a mental health charity. This co-operative provided organic fruit and vegetables from a local producer. It was heavily dependant on funding from the charity which employed a former volunteer to coordinate the food co-op at different locations, and operated partly as a mechanism for people with mental health issues to develop skills and experience that could increase employment opportunities.

The social aspect of this food co-op was also important as it provided an environment for people with mental health issues to find peer support. A mapping exercise indicated the number of partners involved in operating this food co-op and demonstrated the links and complexity of local organisation (Figure 1).

### London Case Study: divergence in operational delivery

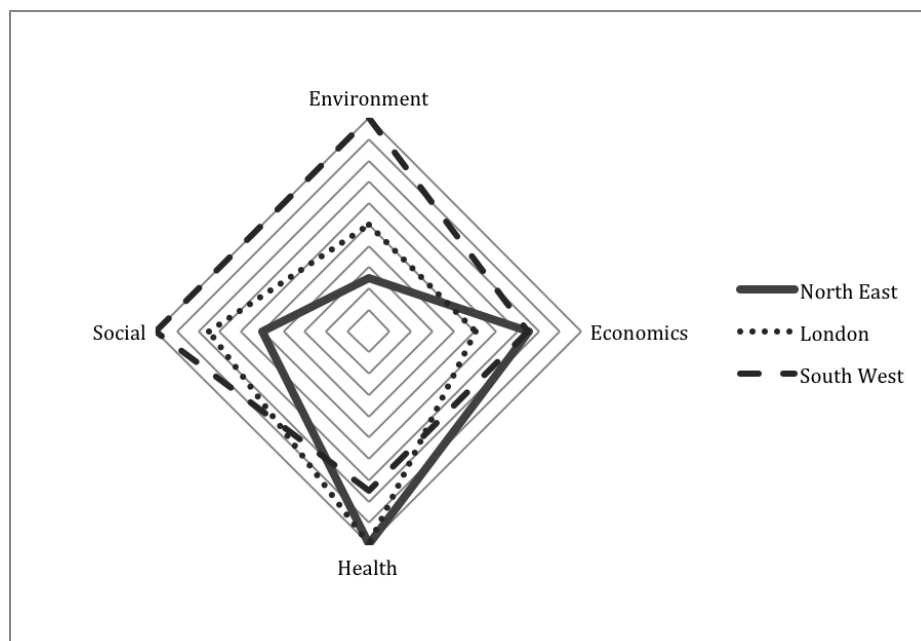
In the London area case study there was no overall agency providing advice and support to local food co-ops or, as was the case in the NE. This is not surprising given the scale of London and the difficulties with travel from one area to another.

One local co-operative was run by volunteers and operated independently as a weekly “bag” scheme for fresh fruit and vegetables and was based in a church in west London. A local street market trader supplied the produce and customers came from the church and from the local community which included young families and Polish immigrants.

The second co-operative was a social enterprise that managed 10 co-operatives in one borough, akin to the model in the NE, with a range of co-operative models in operation. One co-operative on a housing estate was managed by two part-time members of staff and volunteers and was set-up like a market stall. From observations at the co-operative it was clear that it played a significant cultural role on the estate selling a range of African produce such as plantain, yams and a range of chilli peppers. Central buying from the markets had less emphasis on “local” and more on achieving value. The social enterprise was responsible for fundraising for the co-operatives and for staffing costs associated with four paid members of staff.

The third local co-operative also operated like a market stall. However, this co-operative was located on a school/urban farm in a location designated as a priority economic and social regeneration area. The urban farm is linked to a secondary school that provided integrated learning across disciplines through activities on the farm. The co-operative sold a combination of wholesale produce and produce grown on the farm. Volunteers from the community remarked that there was not a food access problem in the area rather there was an issue with the quality of fresh food on offer in the many local independent shops. The volunteers emphasised the good quality of the produce they offered and that they were trying to change attitudes towards growing food and sustainability.

**Figure 2. Overall ranking of environmental, health, social and economic impacts**



## Values and Impacts

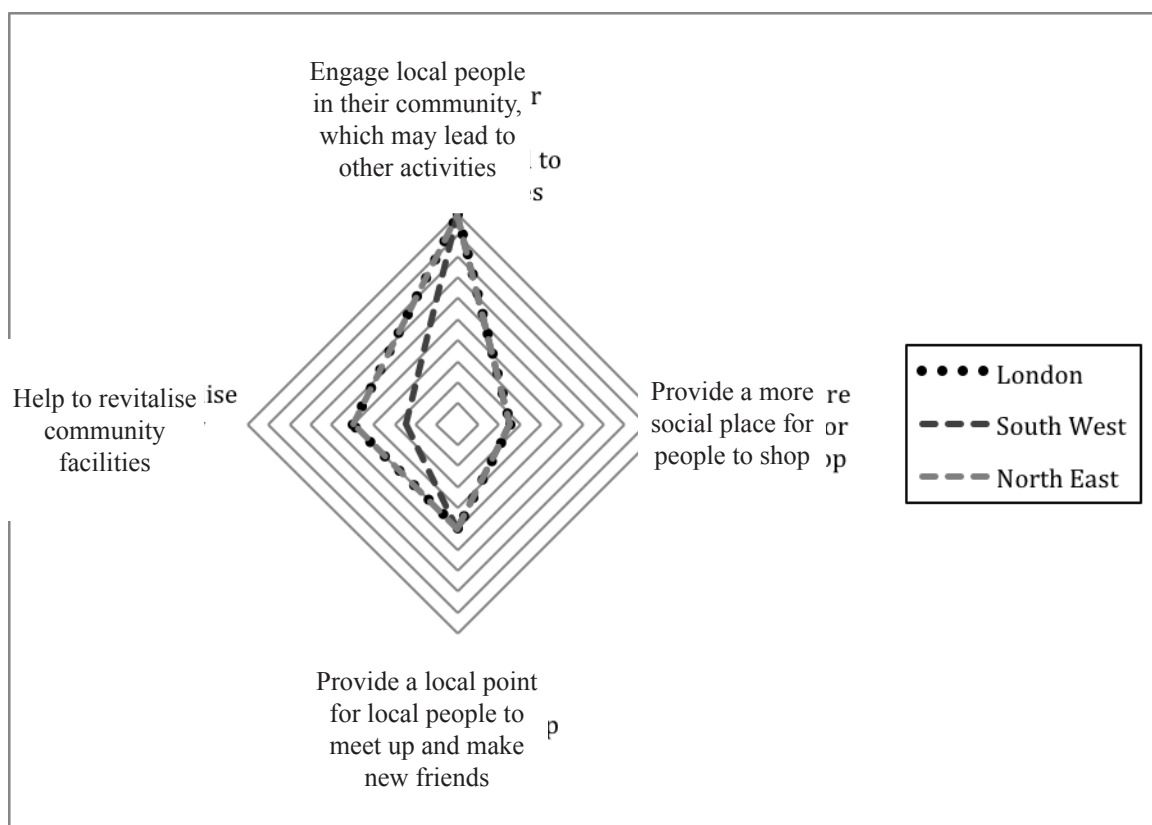
Survey ranking exercises on the environmental, health, economic and social benefits of the food co-ops were conducted with customers, volunteers and paid and unpaid food co-op coordinators in each of the regional areas. The results are presented as spider-web diagrams (Figures 2 and 3) to show the inter-connectedness and relative importance of the various elements to different projects. The options in the ranking survey were on a scale of 1 – 4, with 4 indicating the issue perceived to have the highest/most important impact.

As shown in Figure 2, social and environmental impacts were perceived as the most important impacts of operations for co-operatives in the SW whereas in the NE, environmental impacts were perceived as the least important outcome of the food co-op. This could reflect the structure of the model employed; namely, buying from a wholesaler and redistributing to a range of communities. All three areas ranked health outcomes as important, and in London and the NE these were perceived as the most important impacts of the co-operatives through their potential to increase access to affordable fruit and vegetables and other healthy foods.

In terms of social benefits, all three areas ranked the opportunity to “engage local people in their community, which may then lead to other activities” as the biggest perceived social impact of the food co-ops (see Figure 3). The feedback from the NE data and interviews highlighted the importance of revitalising local communities, reflecting their constituency of former mining villages badly hit by unemployment and the loss of local shops.

The perceived economic outcomes were the most disparate across the areas. The NE ranked “help support local producers, growers or other smaller or more ethical suppliers by providing an outlet for their goods” as the most important. London ranked “offer new skills and work experience that could be used in other settings and possibly help them get paid employment” and the SW ranked highest the opportunity to “help ensure money spent stays in the local community”.

**Figure 3. Social benefit ranking results by question \***



\* Note that London and the NE rated the social benefits in the same order and there is an overlap of their ranking on the chart.



## Discussion

Hingley and colleagues (2011) show how co-operatives can address local and sustainability issues by using their purchasing leverage. Some of the “co-ops” in this study were attempting to change the retail and or sustainability landscape but were hampered by the small scale of their operations, although “the co-operative of co-operatives” model in the NE and that of one of the London agencies supplying to 10 local co-operatives show how this might be possible. In the light of the changes to co-operative legislation, the case studies indicate that although the process to become incorporated may become simpler, there are factors which the legislation will unlikely be able to impact. Among the reasons why the smaller enterprises were not considering being incorporated as food co-ops were the following:

- They did not have sufficient capacity to pursue the application process.
- For some, food was a means to an end such as wider community engagement or involving people with specific health needs.
- Concern that membership will put people off and the “co-op” would lose both customers and volunteers; the informality was seen by some as a benefit to the operation.
- Pragmatism of decision-making – it is easier if not everyone has a say in every decision.
- Awareness – the lack of significant presence from the co-operative movement to guide the process.

This is not to blame or point a finger at the individual organisations but to point out that the full benefits of registering as a co-operative or the principles of co-operative enterprise are not being realised. Perhaps what is more worrying and a lesson for funders engaged in promoting co-operatives is that they need to think about and address ways of making it easier for organisations to engage. One of the key lessons learned from the research was that funding and support agencies could assist by setting up structures to encourage incorporation and/or engagement; the “co-operative of co-operatives” model would be one way of doing this and help tackle issues related to food democracy.

Just as the essence of the operation of many early American co-operatives was to revitalise local economies by ensuring more money stayed in local systems (Belasco, 2007; Ronco, 1974), reconnecting consumers to the food system is a declared intention of many of the food “co-ops” in the present study, yet few work at any structural level of supply to achieve this (Kneafsey et al, 2007; Sharzer, 2012). There was, however, evidence of a model of “co-operative of co-operatives” operating (Ronco, 1974) as the regional structure in the NE and to a lesser extent London illustrates. The “co-operative of co-operatives” model uses a centralised co-operative, with community food projects as its members. Some of the “mother” organisations that supplied the food, as in the NE and the SW regions, were formally registered as co-operatives and attempting to operate by changing the dominant food supply system or offering an alternative version to it. The potential existed for them, especially within the regional structures, to collaborate and use their joint purchasing power to leverage change. This change can be at the economic level but also at the cultural and social level in terms of engaging communities and changing supply systems in order to move beyond traditional neoliberal economic models (Sandel, 2012). Such a move would be possible under the new legislation introduced in 2014 where a co-operative can have a minimum of two registered societies as members. Extending this idea, the London region, with its diverse distribution systems and various food co-ops/ food projects, could benefit from a number of sub-regional “co-operatives of co-operatives” constituted around wholesalers or alternative supply routes into the capital. Such an approach in London, and in other regions, could build leverage at the purchasing level and bring about change in the food system through bulk purchasing. This would help get

over many of the criticisms levelled at local food systems and help build a community focused sub-movement that is necessary for change (Niven, 2012; Noll, 2014; Werkheiser and Noll, 2014).

Some argue that integrating more efficient business values into a co-operative detracts from the original goals of the co-operative movement — for example, McGrath (2004: page 1) in her historical review of co-operatives says “that’s capitalism, not a food co-op” — however, many of the co-operatives in this study were at the opposite end of the spectrum and were, as one participant noted were, “volunteer food delivery projects not a food co-op!” This was especially true of those operating at a local delivery level where the scale of operation was not, judged by those running the schemes, to be at a sufficient level to make them want to become an incorporated co-operative. Thus, the case studies in this research add a new dimension to the recent government proposal to simplify the legal process of setting up a co-operative. The majority of the “co-operatives” in these case studies do not aspire to this legal status, implying that current definitions are “elastic” at best. It may be, as Freathy and Hare (2004) point out, that there are a series of stages which groups need to progress through before they aspire to co-operative membership or to be formally registered as a co-operative. This process is highlighted by Haedicke (2012) in the analysis of the translational process of food co-operatives from the counterculture movement of the 1970s to a more business and professional management model of operation. Funders and those promoting food delivery projects could be more proactive in setting out structures that enable these small-scale projects to become incorporated as co-operatives or buy into a co-operative structure such as being members in a “co-operative of co-operatives”. Why this did not happen can perhaps be explained by Seibel’s concept of “successful failures”. Seibel’s work on non-profit organisations found that they operated within a context where there were challenges that were both inevitable and unsolvable, although highly visible. These were spaces where the state and the market have failed and which voluntary organisations were keen to fill. Their involvement can thus be celebrated by politicians and the public alike, thankful that well-meaning others are addressing such difficult issues. Meanwhile such celebration reaffirms the importance of the work these organisations are undertaking, providing legitimacy to their work. His conclusion was that in certain circumstances certain organisations are believed to be doing the best they could in difficult conditions, and their voluntary or faith based nature made criticism socially unacceptable. This could be applied to the current delivery of food to those in need. A similar criticism has been applied to food banks which operate on the basis of charity or philanthropy, arguing that being constituted as co-operatives with membership would provide a different basis to the way they operate (Caraher and Cavicchi, 2014).

The analysis shows the majority of the “co-operatives” in the case studies departing from the co-operative model that encompasses features such as membership, democratic decision making processes and equal ownership, to a new emphasis on delivering specific goals within the communities where food “co-ops” operate. A similar conclusion was reached by Beecher et al (2012) of food co-ops in Stroud England, where the majority were found to be informal networks using the term co-operative without incorporation or membership status. Our study demonstrates how a primary goal of the food “co-ops” visited in the SW region was to enable local people to access local and organic food, whereas a primary goal in many of the London and NE region food co-ops was to have an impact on the health of vulnerable communities by providing fresh fruits and vegetables, echoing the findings of Caraher et al (2002) of the emphasis on food co-ops to deliver health outcomes. This focus on outcomes has overtaken the processes and means to achieve these ends and has resulted in community needs and involvement being neglected or rushed which are aspects that a formal co-operative structure demands — albeit under the umbrella of a business model or plan. Using a formal co-operative approach, including the “co-operative of co-operatives” model, it would be possible to engage the community through needs’ assessment. Such a move would require membership and shared ownership and for customers or employees to be able to exercise control via their membership and ownership of the co-operative.

## Conclusion

The “co-operatives” in the study represented a split between newly operational and established. However, just as Freathy and Hare found in their study in 2004, the majority were heavily reliant on volunteer labour and it is suggested that the development of a business plan could encourage members to look at short to medium term issues of volunteers versus paid workers. Whether paid workers or volunteers are the way forward was an issue that was not being considered by many of the projects surveyed thus jeopardising long-term sustainability of delivery. The emphasis on volunteerism at the food “co-ops” visited was manifest in a range of ways; for some food “co-ops” volunteers were absolutely necessary to provide staffing to enable the provision of fresh fruit and vegetables. Whereas for others, the volunteers were essentially beneficiaries, as the food “co-op” was designed to provide work experience and training. In nearly all cases, it was clear that volunteers were both a necessity and a risk that could impact on longevity. Combining users/customers and volunteerism with membership can create “buy-in” at co-operatives, as exemplified by Ronco’s work (1974). Having a membership that combines both a membership fee and an expected monthly voluntary time contribution to working at the food co-op creates a feeling of ownership and belonging.

The majority of the “co-operatives” in our case studies lacked a formal co-operative structure that resulted in little buy-in by users beyond being customers. Additionally there was an indication that not only was it volunteer time from local community members that was important but time contributed by professionals who frequently had another role. Often their interest in food co-ops was about delivering health benefits through the mechanism of the food co-op, such as by providing affordable fruit and vegetables. Their involvement was often via clients who used the co-operative sometimes as customers or volunteers and/or work premises being used in connection with food distribution. The point is not that volunteerism or labour in kind is an inappropriate response to local or community food issues but that the lack of a formal co-operative designation and thus formal membership means that the needs and involvement of the community are not addressed in a systematic way, as is the case with a formal co-operative structure. While Price and Sephton’s (1995) work points to the role and importance of health care professionals in setting up food co-ops, such involvement also comes with a danger that they are delivery services to a community and not community engaged or owned. It also leaves the co-operatives vulnerable to changes by not having a plan to deal with professional withdrawal.

Murtagh and Ward (2009) point out that a danger of many retail food co-ops is that they advantage the already privileged. The case studies here show a definite targeting of those lacking access to affordable healthy food. The downside is that without the structure of a formal co-operative, they may not fully engage in food democracy which is concerned with linking consumers and producers. The nature of a formal co-operative structure lends itself to this sort of development. The case of democratic processes and involvement of members is key to co-operative enterprises and registration as a co-operative imposes or places a requirement for collective decision-making. For the majority of groups in this research study, not being registered co-ops meant that they were not engaged in consultation with members. The process of food democracy was therefore not dealt with in a systematic way. If we wish to encourage more groups to formally become co-operatives, then we need to understand the barriers. As discussed earlier, we are not suggesting that all food co-ops automatically link consumers with producers and engage in food democracy, but that the principles informing co-operatives lend themselves to these approaches.

The work of co-operatives, as well as their organisational structures, pre-dates the current UK government’s emphasis on the “Big Society” and the provision of food through alternative structures. A key issue may not be the nature of the social enterprise and social entrepreneurs but the funding and money available to support and run enterprises of whatever nature (Mawson, 2008). In the light of developments in the “Big Society” agenda and its delivery by civil society and charities, co-operatives offer an opportunity to communities of people that have a

common local agenda and who can agree to collectively address it. However, the approach to community development through co-operatives can also contribute to what has been labelled in the title of an article “death by a thousand cuts” (Kruger, 2011: available online) as cuts in public services and private provision of food prove inadequate and solutions are handed down or passed on to community initiatives who are expected to deliver more for less. Perhaps in order for co-operatives to be most effective, a community needs to be faced by an obvious and common problem like the Rochdale Pioneers were in the form of food adulteration. Food has become such a complex and divisive issue, it is perhaps not surprising that food co-ops have become somewhat tangled-up in the social, health, environmental and economic issues surrounding food and the original aims of the co-operative movements have faded.

The case studies indicate a need for further research into the typology of contemporary food co-ops and the ranking exercises, although based on a small number of responses, give some insight into the variations of impacts, ethos and objectives that different types of unincorporated food co-ops are focusing on, as well as the problems they face in their operations. There is a danger that contemporary policy support for food co-operatives sees them as a means of delivering to some key groups what the conventional neo-liberal economic agenda finds difficult, without offering the support, training and investment necessary. The policy direction set by the UK government seems to see co-operatives as alternatives to mainstream provision and where traditional neoliberal economic models have failed to deliver services or goods. The danger of such an approach is that they can become relief or aid services to communities who cannot access mainstream food retail or which the dominant food system does not serve, without offering the support, training and investment necessary.

From these research findings, any relationship between food co-ops and central government comes across as somewhat misinformed and perhaps insincere and suggests that they are being promoted by government, funding bodies and communities without a clear understanding of what the key features of a food co-op actually are. Many of the food co-ops visited for this research exemplify reasons why the traditional food co-op model is often too complex for the small-scale operations of many community food projects that are labelled as “food co-ops”.

Without clarification of the different types of food co-ops operating today, there is potential for messages to become increasingly complicated and that food projects labelled as “food co-ops” risk becoming casualties of a mistaken identity. Our earlier statement “that’s a volunteer food delivery project not a food co-op” highlights the risk that simply labelling all food delivery projects as food co-ops could result in a disservice to both.

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## Notes

- 1 <http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles> accessed 2 July 2014.
- 2 <http://www.uk.coop/grow/case-studies> accessed 1 July 2014.
- 3 <http://www.sustainweb.org/foodcoops/> accessed 1 July 2014.

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