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Sustaining communities: The Roots of Hope Cannabis Cooperative and the struggle for social equity

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In 2022, the US state of Rhode Island passed a landmark law that legalised the sale of cannabis and required that 25% of business licenses for cannabis stores go to verified worker-owned co-operative businesses. The efforts to pass the law were led by organisations and activists dedicated to creating wealth-building opportunities for Black and Brown communities long targeted by the over-policing and racism that characterise the war on drugs. The emergent co-operative cannabis businesses that have emerged from these communities include the Roots of Hope Cannabis Cooperative, and this article analyses how the co-operative understands and envisions Principle 7 of the International Co-operative Alliance co-operative principles. The article argues that the co-operative's vision of "concern for community" elaborates a vision of sustaining communities over the long term. Their vision of using worker ownership to create inter-generational wealth — wealth that has long been denied to Black and Brown communities — seeks to resolve presumptive tensions between co-operative members and the broader community by noting how high labour standards and ownership for co-operative members will mean wealth for their families and communities. The vision draws on the Black co-operative traditions of community development and self-determination in the face of disenfranchisement.

Introduction

The US state of Rhode Island is the smallest in the nation, but in 2022 activists won a political battle that could give the state an out-sized impact in the world of worker-owned co-operatives. These co-operative activists fought for and won the passage of the Rhode Island Cannabis Act, which not only legalised cannabis sales in the state but also mandated that 25% of the business licenses for cannabis stores must go to verified worker-owned co-operatives. The cannabis industry in Rhode Island is the only market (in any industry) in the nation in which a percentage of industry businesses must be co-operatives.

The struggle to decriminalise cannabis is a historic one, and one that has often been centred on social equity and racial justice. The system of policing and mass incarceration, particularly

the war on drugs since the 1970s, has always disproportionately targeted Black and Brown communities in the US (Alexander, 2012; Weaver, 2014). The Rhode Island campaign to end the prohibition of cannabis has, in many cases, been driven by activists and organisations dedicated to repairing the economic and social harms of the war on drugs. Activists successfully pushed legislators to create pathways not only for worker-owned cannabis co-operatives, but specifically pathways for worker-owned cannabis co-operatives created by and for members of those communities long harmed by drug policing (Bailey, 2022; Johnson et al., 2022).

This article examines the ways one of those emergent co-operatives, the Roots of Hope Cannabis Cooperative, understands and envisions Principle 7 of the co-operative principles (International Co-operative Alliance [ICA], 2015). It argues that its vision of "concern for community" and the "sustainable development of communities" (p. 85) elaborates a vision of *sustaining* communities over the long term. Their vision of using worker ownership to create inter-generational wealth — wealth that has long been denied to Black and Brown communities — centres on the legacy the co-operative will have on future generations. The concept of inter-generational wealth seeks to resolve presumptive tensions between co-operative members and the broader community by noting how high labour standards and ownership for co-operative members will mean wealth for their families and communities, and draws on the Black co-operative traditions of community development and self-determination in the face of disenfranchisement.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussion about Principle 7 has been rich and varied (Battilani & Schröter, 2012; Birchall, 2022/2011). Some scholars discuss the ways that co-operatives create co-operative equitable outcomes, or are embedded in community and municipal networks (Sutton, 2019). Other recent work explicitly notes the ways co-operatives serve broader communities. Some discuss co-operatives' role in sustainable development in communities (Battilani & Schröter, 2012), sustainable community development (Gonzales & Phillips, 2014) or on social co-operatives (Maddocks, 2019; Weaver, 2016), which have explicit social or community benefits written into their incorporation papers. In contrast, other scholars focus on the degeneration thesis, noting how co-operatives will tend to degenerate into typical capitalist enterprises over time, opting for benefits to the small number of members with little concern for the broader community. Ghauri et al. (2021) noted how in some co-operatives the "talk" does not really match the "walk".

The Black co-operative tradition has historically seen co-operative economics as inextricable from community needs, as a means for disenfranchised or oppressed communities to respond to those needs and build toward community self-determination (Du Bois, 1907; Gordon Nembhard, 2014). Principles from the Black co-operative traditions align with the principles of Kwanzaa, an African American holiday observance that focuses on the betterment of the Black community and emphasises seven principles known as the Nguzo Saba (Karenga, 1997). While Kwanzaa is said to have originated in the US in 1966, the concepts have existed in African and African American culture for generations. Co-operative economics, known as Ujamaa, is the fourth principle of Kwanzaa and is demonstrated by acts as simple as supporting Black-owned businesses and as complex as developing co-operative businesses such as retail, childcare, and farming. Additional principles that are embedded in Black communities include Kujichagulia; self-determination, which represents communities' willingness as well as their right to define themselves, name themselves, create for themselves, and speak for themselves. The principle of Ujima, collective work and responsibility, epitomises the culture of worker-owned co-operatives. Without this, community members have no voice and no autonomy in terms of where, how, and why these entities exist.

Methodology

Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith has noted that “From the vantage point of the colonised, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism” (Smith, 2021, p. 2). Colonial, capitalist, and masculinist ideas assert that knowledge is ownable and that research institutions have the right to extract it. Only specialist researchers, in this view, can adopt the proper distance and discipline to create objective knowledge, as they are unimpaired by biases or the social mores and assumptions of their social position (Patel, 2015).

In contrast, this research adopts a co-operative inquiry and action research approach in which knowledge production is enhanced by recognising that it is necessarily polyvocal and situated in a social context. Co-operative inquiry affirms the importance of co-researching and co-writing as a form of collective knowledge production (Heron, 1996). While colonial research insists that those who are members of, or insiders to, the organisation being studied are “biased” by their proximity to it, “first voice” and “autoethnography” schools have affirmed how those who are “insiders” lend perspectives in ways that “outsiders” would inevitably fail to see. Feminist and participatory action research methods centre the ways that the community or organisation being studied should be co-participating in the research process (Burkholder et al., 2022; Kelly-Gadol, 2014). It suggests that research should be beneficial to the community or organisation, and it should be about action. Research should be about actively making change, rather than conducting research for research’s sake.

The co-research presented here has been conducted by a five-person team: the four founding members of Roots of Hope Cannabis (ROH) Cooperative and a co-operative promoter/ academic researcher. Instead of a sharp break between those who are “insiders” and “outsiders” to the co-operative, each of the four founding members has joined the co-operative at distinct moments, for different reasons, and it occupies distinct roles in their lives. Likewise, the professional researcher, while indeed a non-member and “outsider,” has accompanied the initial efforts to create the co-operative and is involved in all of its operations. In short, proximity to and belonging in the co-operative exist on a spectrum. There are different ways of being inside or outside or both simultaneously.

This team of equal co-authors first planned a participatory process to reflect on the co-operative’s ideas about “concern for community” in May 2024. They then co-interviewed each other about this topic. After transcribing the interviews, team members read through interview transcriptions and held collective discussions about the interviews, their thoughts about “concern for community,” and main points to raise in this article.

Intergenerational Wealth and “Concern for Community”

The Roots of Hope focuses on the idea that inter-generational wealth is how to resolve presumptive tensions about balancing co-operative needs with sustainable and more equitable outcomes beyond their membership Where Bianchi (2022) focuses on place-making community development, ROH’s “community” is less a geographic place than a focus on communities harmed by the longstanding war on drugs. Indeed, the co-operative’s focus for its “concern for community” centres on those communities.

Reforms that decriminalise cannabis have swept the United States in recent years. Even with more states legalising cannabis, however, Black people have been arrested at 3.64 times the rate of white people for cannabis crimes (Edwards et al., 2020). Considering the disproportionate impacts of cannabis policing on communities of colour in the wake of the United States’ war on drugs, new legislation has considered “social equity” policies that mandate redistribution of cannabis earnings to groups most harmed by cannabis prohibition (Larson, 2025; Sheehan et al., 2021; Title, 2021). In the state of Rhode Island, a landmark organising effort by co-operative activists successfully petitioned for one-quarter of the

government licenses for cannabis stores to be reserved for worker-owned co-operatives. The effort from the organisations most involved in the legislation has been to build and promote these co-operative dispensaries, and for them to be led and developed by members of the impacted communities. The emerging co-operatives like ROH are not “social co-operatives” (Maddocks, 2019; Weaver, 2016) in a strict sense, but do tend to have a specific social mission that revolves around broader community goals: namely, cannabis justice and racial equity.

As a worker-owned co-operative, ROH’s members are its own workers. Instead of seeing benefits for its members as a lack of concern for community benefit, ROH sees itself as a small step in overcoming historical and existing barriers to how Black and Brown communities in the US can build wealth and pass it beyond generations (Derenoncourt et al., 2022; Lipsitz, 2011; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). Wealth as a category encompasses much more than income itself, and the primary way people have been denied wealth building in the US has been through a lack of access to property and business ownership (Coates, 2015; Taylor, 2019). Police racism and mass incarceration, including through the racism of the war on drugs and cannabis prohibition more specifically, fundamentally disrupted community wealth building and development strategies in recent years (Alexander, 2012; Kilgore, 2015). Numerous studies show that drug use and distribution are similar across racial groups, but whites are much less likely to be arrested on drug charges. In addition, the existing regulated cannabis industry is dominated by white males and large, multi-state, investor-owned firms. Ultimately, as one former ROH founding worker-owner mentioned, there are few successful businesses in disenfranchised communities. Angel Rios stated that:

> There are a lot of people selling cannabis already on the street level, and it’s an industry that’s really growing but, for someone in the community, like right here … in the Southside of Providence, the opportunity that they’re going to get into a business in the cannabis industry, if you ask me, the likelihood is not very up there. So what ROH is trying to do is turn that around and provide job opportunities, and not only that, but generational wealth, the opportunity to be not only worker-owners but to be one of the first dispensaries in some of these communities.

The focus on inter-generational wealth has been present since the beginning of the co-operative in 2023. ROH emerged out of the social movement for cannabis justice in Rhode Island, so the ecosystem itself is dedicated to inter-generational wealth. ROH is one of the five emergent co-operatives affiliated to the organisation Co-op Rhody, an organisation supporting the co-operatives and partly sponsored by the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (the largest cannabis workers’ union in the country). In 2023, David-Allen Sumner Sr, working on behalf of Break the Cycle Co-operative Hub, an organisation dedicated to creating worker-owned co-operatives for formerly incarcerated people, began recruiting prospective founding worker-owners. The focus of Sumner Sr was on formerly incarcerated and BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour] communities (Johnson et al., 2022). Over the course of the next year, a team of four founders was created, with each taking co-operative training, successfully creating bylaws, seeking investment, and incorporating as a co-operative business. ROH is currently awaiting licensure from the state of Rhode Island, which has not yet released licenses for co-operative dispensaries.

The idea of inter-generational wealth resolves the presumed tension between benefits for co-operative members and the wider community by asserting that co-operative members in this case, are members of the community. More than that, by creating ownership and economic justice policies inside the co-operative, they are creating crucial wealth-building opportunities that can be passed on to family and community members. The economic ripple effects of worker-ownership are not a secondary benefit of the co-operative, but rather a fundamental part of its initial vision. The co-operative has been working closely with the main cannabis workers union in the United States and plans to be a unionised co-operative, thus ensuring the best economic benefits possible for worker-owners. Unionisation is one of the key planks of what the Economic Policy Institute has identified as the “high road” for the regulated cannabis industry, one which is defined by high wages and worker rights (Cooper & Martinez Hickey, 2021).

“Sustainable Development” of Communities

ICA Principle 7 (2015) suggests that “concern for community” is closely related to the “sustainable development” of communities. ROH members suggest that the focus on inter-generational wealth is one way of sustaining communities in the long term. One worker-owner, Tristan Lyle, explained sustainable development by drawing a parallel from his own Indian immigrant community to the business plan of ROH. Noting how his immigrant community believes that a “rising tide lifts all boats”, he said:

> We’re going to be giving jobs to people who otherwise wouldn’t. When you’re able to buy, you buy local. So now that money goes into the local community, so in turn, there are more people spending money. So there’s going to be a need for more help, which means that other places are going to have to hire more. And it keeps increasing to where people just become successful that way. Maybe they don’t have a mansion, but they’re able to pay their bills. They’re able to take care of their kids. They’re able to take care of their family, and in turn, that helps the rest of the community too.

Others suggested that co-operative education is one way to facilitate the way the co-operative could spur sustainable development. The focus here is on making the co-operative one in which future generations of community members make it their own and learn about the co-operative model simply by its presence in the community. Vanessa Urena affirmed the importance of:

> … the educational component, making sure that the next people, the next generation has access to the knowledge and information, so that they’re able to know what the opportunities are. Even for myself, I didn’t know about co-operatives, so I want to make it my mission that the next generation is familiar. And that’s part of that sustainable development, even making the awareness that there’s not one way of being a consumer, one way of being an entrepreneur. There’s another way to do it and to benefit the community at large.

Ja’Nell Henry noted both the educational component and how complementary the terms “inter-generational wealth” and “sustainable development” are:

> I think the generation wealth principle is about sustaining community. And then I think the further question we have beyond worker ownership, for future generations of co-operatives, is how we can educate [community members] as they’ll be building their inter-generational wealth [as well].

An “Ecosystem” Concept of Community

The term “ecosystem” has been one of the growing metaphors to envision and understand local co-operative economies (Freilla, 2022; Hatcher, 2018). The ROH idea of concern for community, centred in the idea of inter-generational wealth, is founded on a naturalistic and “ecosystem” metaphor that grounds much of the co-operative’s business plan: that of a “root.” As Urena stated:

> A root is a metaphor; we are what’s going to keep our communities grounded, us as members of our communities, looking to create an alternative for each other, and create what is actually going to be beneficial. We are that root that keeps us grounded; that’s what we’re trying to do with this co-op. We have the power to help the community in this way, this form of reparations. This is that form of paying back to the community what they have sacrificed for us to be here, in terms of cannabis legalisation. There is still the opportunity for us to reap the benefits of what this plant could do for this. That’s how I describe it. The roots are what keep the tree grounded, firm, on solid ground; that’s my hope with this co-operative. We’re not just selling weed, we’re a place for hope.

Henry added that: “Nothing grows if you don’t have strong roots. So we want to be that strong foundation. If you’re coming in with the knowledge, you have to help build those foundations.”

Community Impact Plans as part of “Concern for Community”

Participatory action research methodologies stipulate that research should be oriented to social action. The action that ROH is taking through this extended research process has been to

initiate the creation of a community impact plan, an idea that it thinks could be a model for the Rhode Island cannabis industry. Since 2024, this research process has involved co-interviewing and collective discussions about concern for the community, and in this participatory process, the co-operative decided to create a formal and official document about its plan for community benefit. Community impact plans have a precedent in cannabis businesses in other US states, such as Massachusetts. Given that cannabis is still federally illegal, state laws that legalise cannabis have given municipalities the final say over whether they want cannabis stores in their locality. At least one state requires cannabis dispensaries to submit a formal plan detailing their community impact, one in which cannabis businesses can discuss charitable or social action programming.

With this in mind, the action component of this research will be the co-operative's creation of its own community impact plan. In contrast to those described above, this plan will be an internal document, not to be submitted to a legal authority as Rhode Island does not require such plans. In addition, while in other states impact plans are partly about reassuring the locality that it will not bring "vice" and crime to the locality through cannabis, the starting point for this community impact plan will be the harm that cannabis prohibition has done and how the co-operative envisions racial justice and social equity through its operations. The plan will be designed to create formal objectives, procedures, and accountability mechanisms for meeting community impact goals around the matter of repairing the harms created by the war on drugs.

Conclusion

The efforts of the Roots of Hope Cannabis Cooperative, like the other emergent co-operatives in cannabis, represent a new and important opportunity in co-operative development. Drawing on Black co-operative traditions that stress the close integration of co-operatives and community and emerging out of highly unequal and segregated urban areas, the ROH co-operative envisions its model of "concern for community" as sustaining communities for the future. It focuses on education, on community development, and on the idea of building inter-generational wealth. Worker ownership and maintaining high labour standards are envisioned as creating wealth opportunities long denied to Black and Brown communities. Finally, the co-operative's efforts to create its own community impact plan represent one way for co-operatives to identify, define, and develop "concern for community" in other industries.

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