

Guest Editorial

Special Issue: The Co-operative Green Economy

I am very grateful to the editorial board of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* for giving me the opportunity to bring together a range of papers that connect the field of co-operative studies with the theoretical debates around the definition of the green economy. The publication of this special issue is timed to coincide with the global conference in Rio that marks 20 years since the global community first reached a consensus on the need to put concern for the environment at the heart of its shared policy-making. During those 20 years it has become clear that the environment cannot be protected unless we address how the global economy works, hence the 'green economy' has been adopted as one of two central themes of the Rio+20 conference.

Much of the discussion around what the green economy means has focused on the need to achieve efficiency in the use of materials and energy. At the more conservative end this can mean simply a form of 'green capitalism', where the economy operates much as it does now, but with a different range of products on sale and powered by a different range of electricity-generating technologies. For others, however, this is too limited a vision, and the growth dynamic and profit drive that characterise a capitalist economy can never be compatible with a sustainable future. That is where the co-operative movement comes in, because two of its central concerns — with accumulation and allocation — are also central to the debate about the restructuring necessary to make our global economy green.

The papers in this special issue represent the beginnings of a fruitful dialogue between academics of co-operative studies and green economists. I hope they generate ideas that will help to inform your thinking and your practice, and that they will inspire further work growing out of the creative opportunities offered by this cross-over.

In the first paper, Mary Mellor outlines what she considered to be "co-operative principles for a green economy". Central to her argument is the concept of 'sufficiency': a green economy will be a sufficiency economy in the sense that it will be an economy focused on meeting need rather than generating profit. This will enable it to exist in balance with the natural systems of the planet. She explores how the notion of 'scarcity', so central to market-based theories of economics, is inimical to the move towards economies based on meeting needs and celebrating the abundance of natural resources, while recognising their limits. A sustainable economy, she argues, would need to be an economy where decisions about the sharing of resources would be made in a participatory way, and co-operative enterprise offers an example of such a system of distribution. It will also require the reclaiming of public ownership of the money supply.

This leads naturally on to the second paper, a historical piece where Cynthia Giagnocavo and Luis Fernández-Revuelta Pérez describe how a co-operative approach to finance enabled the development of a successful rural community under the Franco dictatorship in Spain. If the green economy is to be made up of self-reliant local economies, in contrast to the single global economy of today, then this case study of the province of Almería provides an opportunity to explore the interplay of market motivations, co-operation, attitudes towards the land, and innovation. Central to the argument made in the paper is the importance of the co-operative bank Cajamar, formerly Caja Rural de Almería, which was founded in 1966 and has been fundamental to the development of local enterprise, facilitating the retention of capital in the local economy and its recirculation through networks of co-operative agricultural and industrial activity. This achieved effective regeneration in what had been a backward and moderately endowed region, as well as the building of a strong community and high levels of social cohesion.

In her paper on food co-operatives in the US, Margaret Lund picks up this theme of the link between economic health and social health through a focus on co-operative food supply

networks. She describes the growth of a new generation of multi-stakeholder co-operatives for the provisioning of good-quality, locally-produced and organic food. As Lund argues, in food co-operatives the 'how' of food production and distribution was made as significant of the 'what', in a way that mirrors the growth of the British co-operative model from its Rochdale days. She uses the continuing success of these food co-operatives to challenge the 'degeneration thesis' familiar to scholars of co-operative studies, which suggests that over time co-operative enterprise will be undermined by the prevailing capitalist culture. Because of the high levels of trust they enjoy as co-operative organisations, food co-operatives are in fact able to reduce transaction costs, which enables them to compete effectively with their market rivals.

Lund mentions the bringing of electricity to rural America as a dynamic early example of co-operation in the US, a theme picked up in the first of our shorter papers, by Pat Conaty and Ed Mayo. The paper draws on the findings from a practitioner event supported by Co-operatives UK which sought to link and share ideas between Transition Towns that had committed to developing community-owned renewable energy facilities. The paper details the huge success of the co-operative model for renewable energy in Denmark, and proposes how this model might be shared and supported in a UK context, based on a series of successful pioneering case studies.

The link between co-operative culture and environmental innovation is picked up in the next paper, by Phil Beardmore in which he gives the activist perspective on the transition to a sustainable society and explores why shared models based on co-operative principles are the most supportive means of making this transition. It reports on the Greener Together project, a collaboration between Co-operatives UK, the Confederation of Co-operative Housing and the Plunkett Foundation and draws lessons about some of the factors that influence environmental behaviour. The authors concludes that, while formal co-operative structure is not always necessary, adopting a co-operative approach can facilitate pro-environment changes in behaviour.

The final paper reproduces some remarks I made at the ICA research conference in Mikkeli, Finland, in 2011, where I was asked to speak about the green economy. It pulls together many of the points raised in the other papers in the issue, focusing on the contribution the co-operative model can make to building a green economy in terms of its ability to prioritise balance rather than growth; efficiency in the use of resources to meet needs; and economic and social innovation. Most importantly, the closing of the planetary frontier that a green economy requires brings greater emphasis on the issue of how resources are shared: the co-operative model is a tried and tested means for facilitating just this sort of economic negotiation.

In place of the usual book reviews, we have an extended review article by Jan Myers called *Co-operatives and the Green Economy*. In it she considers three books about the green economy from theorists who agree with the central thrust of this special issue, that building a green economy requires a reconsideration of how the economy is structured and governed. She finds that all three authors find co-operatives to be useful vehicles for achieving the more balanced, equitable and decentralised economy that sustainability requires.

We felt that the coincidence, in 2012, of the International Year of Co-operation and a global conference focusing on the Green Economy was too good an opportunity to miss. We commend this special issue to you as the beginning of a fruitful dialogue between practitioners and academics, and between those who seek to build a just and sustainable economy, whether they approach this from the angle of sustainability or co-operation.

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