

# Food Democracy in Practice: a case study of the Dublin Food Co-op

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Today's food co-operatives are faced with finding solutions for more difficult problems because of the length and complexity of food supply chains. This consequently means effective solutions are more challenging to develop, which the Dublin Food Co-op case highlights. The case also shows that even when co-operation exists in the food supply chain; it could be improved upon by involving a greater range of stakeholders, to move towards the ideal of a fully democratic and participatory method of food supply. However, in the Irish case, examples of consumer co-operation in food supply are isolated, so rather than aiming for the ideal of a perfect participatory food supply system, it could be more valuable to first mobilise and facilitate the development of more organisations with this alternative, more equitable approach so as to begin to challenge the conventional retailer who currently dominates Ireland's food retailing.

The co-operative organisation and its accompanying principles hold the potential to help re-balance power in food supply chains. The co-operative process could play an important role in beginning to address broad problems with conventional, global food supply chains. Problems include: unsustainable long and complex supply chains, limited connections between producers and consumers and concentration of control with a small number of corporations and food retailers (Lang 2004, 1999; Tansey 1994). The Dublin Food Co-op case study discussed in this paper highlights an isolated example of how potential has become reality in beginning to address these broad problems and the importance of introducing democratic and participatory processes into the food supply chain.

## Ireland's food co-ops

Historically in Ireland, co-operatives have played a role in responding to similar issues of inequity and powerlessness in food supply chains. In the nineteenth century, motivations for co-operation in Ireland's dairy industry included a lack of control for farmers over marketing their produce, which was often controlled by large landowners or traders and therefore farmers received a poor return for their produce. Motivations for co-operation were as much about regaining control over farm produce as improving finances (Ward 2005).

Agricultural co-operatives still dominate Ireland's co-operative sector, however, they bear little resemblance to their origins, having experienced a great degree of adaptation and change (Forfás 2007). While agricultural co-operatives originated in response to an imbalance of power in the supply chain, it can be argued that recent changes have weakened the original aims of agricultural co-operatives. Many dairy co-operatives in Ireland today are part

co-operative, part private limited company. Ward (2000) suggests that changes, such as diversification into processing raw materials not directly linked to what indigenous suppliers produce, represents a shift in power away from the local farmer and a greater likelihood that these businesses will be run in the interest of investors. While the origins of co-operation in Ireland helped to rebalance power, changes have yet again tipped the scales away from the producer.

Ireland does not have an equivalent historical tradition of consumer co-operation. Consumer co-operatives are only a speck within Ireland's co-operative sector, whereas in other countries they are one of its dominant types, such as the UK, Japan and North America (Forfás 2007). The case which is central to this paper, the Dublin Food Co-op (DFC), is distinctive in the Irish scene, as a consumer food co-operative. Ireland has one other food retailing co-operative, the Quay Co-op in Cork, which is organised as a worker co-operative. Producer co-operatives have emerged in the organics sector, such as the Leitrim Organic Farmers' Co-op.

Outside the co-operative framework, other initiatives also set out to address problems with conventional, global food supply chains. These are broadly termed alternative food initiatives, such as farmers' markets that aim to shorten the supply chain and reconnect producers and consumers. The term alternative food initiative also includes food co-operatives. Analysis of the DFC highlights that the co-operative approach can go beyond what some alternative initiatives aim to do. While alternative initiatives that do not take the co-operative approach can also help to rebalance power in food supply chains, the co-operative approach has this as its very foundation. The co-operative structure itself should facilitate consumer participation and increase consumer and producer control of how the organisation operates.

## The Dublin Food Co-op: background, origins and development

Consumer co-operation has its roots with the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society in 1840s England. The Rochdale Pioneers pooled their purchasing power to buy food in bulk in response to inaccurate food measures and adulteration of the time (Briscoe and Ward 2005). The DFC is responding to similar issues to the Rochdale Pioneers, highlighting how through time food co-operatives have been established in the face of unfair and inadequate commercial practices affecting both producers and consumers.

DFC's origins are with a group of friends involved in environmental activism in the 1980s. The group were part of an anti-nuclear energy lobby who protested against the building of nuclear power generating plants in Co Wexford. The group's alternative ideals extended beyond environmental concerns to food and farming issues, which fed into the co-operative's initial sourcing principles to trade organic and vegetarian food. The co-operative's principles today include trading local, Irish produce when possible, and when not, to only engage in trade with countries where basic human rights are upheld (see Table 1). The co-operative started out as a small food buying group that bought wholefoods in bulk quantities, which made financial sense. It has moved on from this to become a formal consumer food co-operative.

In its early days, the co-operative didn't have fixed premises, but operated out of founding

member's homes. Progressing from its informal beginnings, the co-operative held a Saturday market on Dublin's Pearse Street for over 20 years, until its move in the summer of 2007 to premises in the Newmarket area of the city. The new venue is roughly twice the size of the Pearse Street site. The co-operative has increased its trading days and is now open on both Thursday and Saturday. The Newmarket area is within a broader regeneration plan by Dublin City Council for the Liberties, an area of recognised need for social, economic and environmental regeneration. The co-operative is engaged with the planning process and aims to be a key resource for the area.

Since the early days, membership has gone from its original small group to now having over 1,000 members. The society's rules placed a cap of 1,500 on membership, but this has now been removed. Aims for the future include expansion, with ambitious aims to increase its membership to 5,000 by 2010.

## Methods

Exploratory research was carried out and the empirical data presented here was gathered by a number of methods. Documentary material was analysed, such as: the society's rules; its website and members' web forum; newsletters; annual reports; and its 2005-10 business plan. A site visit was carried out, with participant observation at the co-operative as it traded. An informal interview was carried out with a staff

Objective	To provide wholesome, nutritious food and ecologically acceptable products and services to members in accordance with the following principles:
Principles	Deal in organically grown wholefoods, and Irish-produced wholefoods, if possible.
	Discriminate in favour of ecologically acceptable products and not deal in meat or meat products.
	Promote the rational use of the earth's resources and in particular to promote the use of ecologically acceptable packaging.
	Discriminate positively in favour of countries which uphold basic human rights, when importing wholefoods.
	Supply wholefoods at the wholesaler/supplier cost plus the minimum margin necessary to cover the co-operative's operating costs and the need for financial reserves.
	Make shopping an amicable, communal experience.
	Promote consumer wholefood co-operatives as an important means of building a locally integrated food economy.
	Encourage the use of the Irish language in social and economic relationships and to promote Irish culture where possible.

**Table 1: Dublin Food Co-op's primary objective and guiding principles**

member and also general discussions with other co-operative staff on the site visit.

The DFC was chosen as a case study because of its distinct character in the Irish context. It acts as a concentrated site of empirical evidence helping to ground recent theorisation in the field of food studies. Stake (1995) makes the argument that the unique case is not an appropriate basis for “wider generalisation or for a theoretical inference of some kind” but rather to “capture cases in their uniqueness” (p3). This makes the unique case more appropriate for showing how academic theorisation can translate into practice on the ground. The broad field of food studies has recently had an injection of complex and diverse theorisation on how food is now, and more ideally should be, delivered from producers to consumers. The newly emerging concept of ‘food democracy’, with ‘food citizens’ its foundational and central actors, has particular relevance and cross-over with food co-operatives and the broad co-operative ideology.

### **The need for consumer participation in food supply**

In relation to the alternative food movement, Hassanein (2003) identifies uncertainties regarding its sustainability and capacity to create meaningful change. Some alternative food activists take a stronger approach than others. A weaker example includes farmers’ markets. This initiative enables farmers to add value to their produce, which helps the farmer, but does not address other food system issues. The foundation of a stronger approach must involve the active participation of citizens in how their food is produced and supplied. People need to practice what is termed ‘food democracy’ and:

actively participate in the food system, rather than remaining passive spectators on the sidelines ... food democracy is about citizens having the power to determine agro-food policies and practices locally, regionally, nationally and globally. (p79)

Food democracy’s key difference to other approaches and academic theorisations is its pragmatism. Hassanein (2003) suggests other discussions have highlighted important issues with food supply, but question what definitions of, for example, a sustainable food system means in practice and asks what it means to equitably balance environmental soundness,

Journal of Co-operative Studies, 42.1, April 2009: 13-22 ISSN 0961 5784©

economic viability, and social justice for all sectors of society? Therefore, Hassanein (2003) contends food democracy must play a central part of the effective transformation of the agro-food system.

Food citizens are active in a food democracy, it is citizen led. The structure of the conventional food system does not facilitate consumer participation and also gives them little, if no, control. Control of food supply has been concentrated with a decreasing number of food manufacturers and retailers. There is also concentration of ownership with agro-chemical companies that supply important inputs for farming. These companies are also diversifying into biotechnology and seed supply. Lang (2004) discusses the role of the consumer in this supply dominated system, arguing it is rhetoric to suggest that the food supply chain is consumer led, rather it is more like a loop: food corporations have large budgets for advertising, which aims to create and manipulate demand, not serve it.

The theory of food democracy aims to re-orientate control back to key stakeholders in the food system: consumers and producers. The food co-operative could be the key tool that helps theory meet practice. Co-operatives, by their very nature, should be participatory and democratic.

### **A participatory system in practice**

The theory of food democracy has been discussed, with the co-operative as its ideal delivery vehicle. The DFC has been practicing a more democratic method of food supply for over 20 years. The DFC case shows how food democracy can be practiced and also some of the limitations that can arise.

A system of representative democracy is employed to govern the co-operative. A co-ordinating body, composed of twelve members, is elected at the annual general meeting. The co-ordinating body is the co-operative’s decision making body and is responsible for running the organisation in its member’s interest. Around ten staff members run the co-operative from day to day, most on a part-time basis and are often recruited from its member base.

Members are encouraged to voice their opinions on how the co-operative should be run, so the co-ordinating body’s activities are in line with member concerns. The co-operative’s newsletter is one vehicle for discussion of issues and regularly calls for members to submit their

views. The co-operative recognises that vocal members' voices can be heard more clearly than quieter members, but advocates that the co-operative aims to remain in touch with all members' views, representing the consensus and not the few (Co-op News 2006).

All members are entitled to trade at the co-operative and can also directly participate in running the organisation through volunteering. The DFC operates a 'help rota' system where members can volunteer two hours of their time every five to seven weeks. All members receive a discount on the co-operative's produce, but help rota volunteers receive a greater discount in return for their efforts.

Food citizens are not model citizens when given the opportunity to participate. Maintaining a steady volunteer base on the help rota has become an issue for the co-operative. It recently had to reduce volunteering intervals from seven to five weeks. This change affects members who already give up their time to volunteer, by having to volunteer more often. This potentially results in further deterioration of the spirit of volunteering within the co-operative. Existing volunteers have to give up more of their time, while others volunteer none of theirs. In an attempt to promote the value of volunteering to new co-operative members, one measure the co-operative has adopted is re-introducing 'Failte'; an orientation meeting for new members explaining their rights and responsibilities.

Mobilising member participation is widely recognised as an issue for the co-operative sector and within food initiatives that attempt to involve consumers. DeLind (1999) highlights issues with mobilising participation in community supported agriculture initiatives and suggests the issue is that "we are dealing with individualised communities and not dealing with communitised individuals", with those who participate doing so for themselves, which she describes as a "highly individual or personalised resistance – a resistance primarily of consumers – not of citizens" (p8-9).

However, beyond the issues with mobilising participation, it can also be argued that even introducing and promoting the concept of participation has significance. The co-operative promotes member participation on an on-going basis. In the broad context of alternative food initiatives, Allen et al (2003) suggest:

Participation may get people and communities to think about issues they may

never have confronted or considered before, and to then become effective agents of agri-food system change. (p73)

Allen et al (2003) also suggest there are other unexpected benefits. These initiatives may be the "seeds of social change" important in consumers developing a "critical consciousness" in which people view food as more than a commodity and fuel for the body (p73). Alternative food practices can provide motivation to others, inspiring a wider movement of such practices (Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002).

### **Participation for whom?**

Another limitation with alternative approaches to food supply is that they are often accessed by the better educated and those on higher incomes. Using a case study of a multi-stakeholder co-operative in America, Hendrickson and Heffernan (2002) ask if questioning the "dominant logic of the system can only be done by those in a position to do it" (p365). This point feeds into wider debates on ethical consumerism. Irving et al (2002) suggest it is more affluent social groups who feel more empowered, and although consumers can hold ethical values, they do not always transfer into ethical consumption practices. Kriflik (2006) recognises there are also a number of limitations inhibiting the consumer to translate their values into practice, such as finances affecting food choice and having the time to seek information on such issues.

The board of the DFC is composed of well educated people, which confirms some of the above points. A bigger issue facing the co-operative is not just to reach out to current members who do not participate, but also to look beyond its membership base. Existing members have already taken a considered step by joining an organisation with such alternative principles. When operating in Pearse Street, it was suggested that the co-operative was an insular organisation that did not integrate with the surrounding community (Co-op News 2007a). Rather than battling to achieve ideal levels of member participation, new members could solve this and wider problems, by reaching out to those who are beginning to question the way food is supplied and harness the energy that often accompanies people with fresh ideals. The co-operative is trying to harness this energy, by the reintroduction of orientation for new members, where the value of participation is

promoted. Food democracy in practice must not become something only for those who can afford to participate. While food democracy can give greater control to consumers, it should aim to do so in an equitable manner.

The DFC can potentially move beyond financial limitations affecting food choice and facilitate participation in a more democratic food supply. It has a different pricing structure to conventional businesses, only adding the margin needed to cover the co-operative's operating expenses. Being part of a better system will still require a greater financial sacrifice from the consumer, than if they buy into conventional systems. However, the co-operative approach should ameliorate the burden to some degree.

### **Ireland's organic food market: conventional and alternative channels**

Organic food has almost become synonymous with a more sustainable food choice. It is often central to alternative food initiatives, which is true in the case of the DFC. This merits some discussion of the Irish organic food market.

There is support for the growth of organic production in Ireland. In terms of land area, organic farms currently occupy 0.9% of Ireland's agricultural land and the national strategy aims to increase this to 5% by 2012 (Department of Agriculture and Food 2007). The market itself grew by 30-40% in the last year, however growth is slowing (Bourke 2008).

The DFC is a specialist trader of organic produce. When the co-operative first established, it had an advantage in the market. Organic food was not widely available and it supplied a niche of consumers. The situation has now changed and the DFC itself recognises this issue as a major challenge:

What was groundbreaking more than 20 years ago has become mainstream, and the disparate strands of the Co-op's ideology can now perhaps be restated as involvement in the global effort to create sustainable living. (DFC 2005)

The organic market is still a niche, but there are a greater number of competitors providing similar produce in the marketplace, such as farmers' markets and health food stores. However, supermarkets are the major competitor. In 2005, 85% of organic produce was accessed through this channel. The total value of sales of organic food through independent

channels was only 15%, breaking down to: 5% independent traders; 4% health food stores; 3% deli specialists; and 2% through box schemes (Bord Bia 2006). Discount retailers operating in the Irish market, such as Aldi and Lidl, now also sell organic produce, further strengthening the supermarkets' slice of Ireland's organic food market (Bourke 2008).

But purely economic figures miss consumer motivations for buying organic produce, which bring to light a different picture of where opportunity lies. Consumers are not just buying an organic product, but also satisfying a wider set of values that relate to how food reaches them and the impact this has on people and the environment. In the Irish context, Bourke (2008) describes three types of organic food consumer, each with different motivations for purchasing organic food. For the 'organic believer' organic food offers a nurturing effect for the consumer and their family. The 'health manager' is the supermarket organic shopper where consuming organic food is central to control of the individual's health. The 'aspirational improver' likes to shop at farmers' markets seeing organic as part of a more sustainable food choice. What is common in the three types is a middle class and middle income consumer, highlighting that the organic market is more accessible for the better off in society.

The organic food retailer can just sell a product. However, some do more than this by upholding a set of wider principles, which the consumer values. Moore (2006b) finds that consumer motivations for purchase of fresh fruit and vegetables at farmers' markets included a lack of trust in the conventional food system, which is represented for them by large retailers. Moore (2006b) found that shopping at farmers' markets allowed consumers to express their socio-environmental beliefs, such as facilitating a personal connection between producer and consumer, creating a better food retailing system and receiving healthy, fresh and environmentally sound produce in the process. DFC's principles cross over with the socio-economic beliefs Moore (2006b) highlights, showing it plays a similar role to farmers' markets in meeting a niche of consumer demand.

### **Harnessing a role for consumer co-operatives in the organic food market**

The co-operative approach can fulfil consumer expectations to a greater degree than other retailers of organic food in the market. DFC's

wider principles, such as its local sourcing, support for human rights and opportunities for consumer participation in food supply feed into a consumer 'niche within a niche', which links back with the types of organic consumer, described by Bourke (2008). These consumers are more engaged with food issues and are not just concerned with how a product is produced, but also the processes involved in how it reaches them. This means the co-operative can compete with the supermarket approach, which is based on pure consumerism, and fulfil more complex consumer concerns. However, the DFC does not operate in a vacuum and must still compete in the marketplace. DFC is not just competing with the conventional market, but also internally with other 'alternatives', most significantly, farmers' markets.

Even though consumers who want more than the supermarket offers have been identified by market analysts, for its economic sustainability, the co-operative needs to reach out to greater numbers of consumers. There is also a wider social and environmental value to such expansion, that the co-operative's principles would be practiced by greater numbers of consumers and the wider positive effects this should have on the food supply system. That said, food co-operatives have a fraught relationship with economic growth. Cotterill (1983) suggests: "as size increases the social ecology of the co-op deteriorates ... the proportion of patrons participating is lower in larger co-ops" (p126). However, staying small also has its drawbacks:

If volunteer labour fails to offset diseconomies of small size, the small is beautiful hypothesis fails the market test. Co-operatives that insist on remaining small will then be driven out of business by their larger, more cost efficient competitors. (Cotterill 1983, 126)

### **A continual cycle of pioneerism**

The DFC sees growth as central to proving the relevance of their ideology in the modern marketplace (DFC 2005). It can be suggested the co-operative has come full circle. In its early days the organisation itself and the produce it traded was pioneering. But with organics well established in mainstream markets, the co-operative must adapt, rather than be driven out of business for the sake of staying small, as Cotterill (1983) highlights. Another similar example where the effects of pioneering activity in the co-operative sector have wider positive

implications is the involvement of the UK Co-operative Group with the Fairtrade movement. It was the first UK supermarket to source its own brand tea according to its own ethical standard (Croft 2006). It now only sells Fairtrade tea, coffee and chocolate and the widest range of Fairtrade goods of any retailer in the UK. Other UK retailers have also since increased their range of Fairtrade goods, with some making significant commitments to it, such as Marks and Spencers who only sell Fairtrade tea and coffee (Food Navigator 2006).

While the DFC was not the only actor in the growth of the organic movement in Ireland, it did play a key role at the retail end. The co-operative itself suggests "in order to change society, you have to become society" (DFC 2008). With the organic market now a well established niche in the mainstream retail industry, organic food has become part of mainstream markets and society. This leaves the DFC with the challenge of re-innovating to address new needs that emerge from conventional supply chains, so the co-operative continues to take the lead in impacting positive change in food supply. Growth is one step towards increasing the organisation's capacity to do so. Any changes in the past occurred on an ad hoc basis, and the DFC recognises future changes need to be more planned and directed. This highlights how within the co-operative sector there is a process of continual innovation and response to changing problems and needs.

### **Overcoming the conflicts of change**

When aims are higher, achieving these poses greater challenges with more difficulties to be overcome. The DFC is now in a phase of change, where it hopes to increase membership and turnover. The co-operative currently trades two days a week, and previously only one. Eventually the co-operative aims to create "a permanent market venue to rival St. George's market in Belfast and the English market in Cork" (Co-op News 2006-7). The co-operative now has its permanent venue at Newmarket, which is the first step. The DFC does not pay members a dividend and had accumulated reserves that facilitated the co-operative's move.

The Pearse Street venue was a community resource centre, so the co-operative had to share the building with many other users, which had practical limitations, such as having to clear away all shelving etc after Saturday's market. The co-operative was also limited by the size of

the resource centre and could not increase the number of traders participating in the co-operative, which has now increased since moving to its new home.

Principles can be compromised in a phase of growth. It is key that the co-operative retains its difference, which is important from two respects. The co-operative's ethos is its edge in the competitive marketplace. The practical implications of its ethos contribute to broader positive changes in the future of food supply.

Being a co-operative, the DFC consulted with members about its expansion plans. The general consensus was of support, however, some members were concerned that growth may compromise the co-operative's ethos. One member expressed concern that the co-operative was going 'all corporate'. Members general concerns related to a fear that the informal, relaxed atmosphere they valued may be destroyed. The co-operative has retained its relaxed atmosphere, with a lively café and social area for shoppers. The social benefits of the co-operative are constituted by its members and not its location. As one staff co-operative member commented: "it's all about community ... the Saturday market is still my community after all these years" (Co-op News 2008). Traditionally, communities form between networks of people linked by place, but the co-operative can also be described as a new form of community, not linked by place, but by facilitating people with similar values to come together through consumerism that fulfils these values. Co-operative members themselves have described it as a "like minded community" (Co-op News 2007b).

While member concerns must be aired and responded to, there is also the bigger picture to consider, that the food supply chain needs more food retailing outlets with participatory structures to rebalance where power lies. The DFC still upholds the same principles and objectives, while operating a bigger market in the physical sense. The above discussion shows that the co-operative has retained its social capital value. However, the changes were not without some consequences, which brought to light a lack of support and understanding for the co-operative approach from some members. The Pearse Street location was in the centre of Dublin city, while the new location is still central, it is less so. A breakaway organic food market is still held at Pearse Street organised by some previous members of the co-operative, however, it is not

a co-operative (Co-op News 2007c). The co-operative has lost some members who felt the new location was less convenient, but has since gained new members in its current surrounding area.

## **Reconnecting producers and consumers**

One criticism of conventional food supply chains is their length. Localising food supply seems the logical solution and is one principle the DFC practices. The local can be, according to Marsden and Smith (2005):

A social space for re-assembling resources of value; a place for evolving new commodity frameworks and networks; a place of defence from the devalorisation of conventional production systems. (p442)

Morris and Buller (2003) describe three types of local, the first being 'parochial localism' which has a support for local farmers and a local area at its core. 'Flexible localism' is where local is used more loosely, where local could mean locally sourced, but also even within national boundaries. The third type is 'competitive localism' where new forms of localism like farmers' markets or producer groups compete with other more traditional local food outlets, such as established local retailers.

To fit the DFC within the types of local described by Morris and Buller (2003), its policy can be described as 'flexible localism'. Irish produce is valued just as much as the more geographically local. The local food concept is bound by a 'local' geographic area. But DFC members come from all over the Dublin region, which makes a narrow area for local sourcing illogical as members themselves may not live within this area. Local for the DFC can mean neighbouring counties, such as Meath and Wicklow (see Table 2).

The potential for localising food supply has also been questioned. Sonnino and Marsden (2006) suggest that we should not assume action at any particular spatial scale is ideal (eg local over global). While scale is important in many respects in this context, Born and Purcell (2006) suggest that:

The local trap is the assumption that local is inherently good ... Local scale food systems are equally likely to be just or unjust, sustainable or unsustainable, secure or insecure. (p195)

In the Irish case, as the market currently operates, localising food is problematic. Ireland's agriculture is limited by climate and changing farm structures, where there is a trend towards fewer small farms. Systems of farming are not balanced in terms food production and consumption; the market is export oriented. National farm statistics indicate the majority of farms produce beef which account for 53% of all farm types. Other sectors are smaller with sheep at 12%, dairy 15%, mixed livestock 13%, mixed livestock and crops 3% and tillage 4% (Department of Agriculture and Food 2008). This paints a weak picture for limiting food supply to local or even national sources.

The vegetarian diet is even more problematic in terms of Ireland's agricultural production, with its reliance on legumes, grains, fruit, vegetables, dairy and eggs, when only 7% of Irish farms produce crops. Research suggests the vegetarian diet draws on a variety of food cultures and is thus highly dependent on the global agro-food system. Morris and Kirwan (2006) argue:

Situating contemporary vegetarianism within the alternative food economy, which is often intent on relocalising the agro-food system

agenda, may therefore represent a significant challenge for its proponents. (p204)

Local is not the only value informing the DFC's sourcing policy (see Table 1). It does not fall into the 'local trap' and places a greater emphasis on the value of a broader sustainable food economy. The co-operative must engage in international trade because of its vegetarian principle. Many staples of the vegetarian diet are not produced in Ireland. Jones et al (2004) suggest that within the wider food context, local foods can "surely only form a small part of the nations diet" (p335), which has even more relevance when a vegetarian diet is consumed. The co-operative's principles also determine it will only support international trade when this is carried out on ethical terms. Imports are only allowed from countries where human rights are upheld. The co-operative also deals in a wide range of Fairtrade goods and until recently its café was run by the international human rights group, Amnesty.

### Co-operatives and the alternative food economy

The co-operative has similarity and difference with other alternative food supply initiatives in

Food traders	Products	Sourcing	Production methods
The co-op	Dry goods	Ireland and international	Organic
Stapleton's Farm	Fruit, vegetables	Local, Ireland and international	Organic
Healy's Farm	Fruit, vegetables	Local, Ireland and international	Organic
O'Sullivan and Kenny	Fruit, vegetables	Local, Ireland and international	Organic
Lange's Farm	Fruit, vegetables, eggs, cheese	Local, Ireland and international	Organic and conventional
Sonairte Ecology Centre and Farm	Fruit, vegetables, preserves, crafts	Local	Organic
Blazing Salads Bakery	Bakery, prepared foods	Locally produced – international sourcing	Organic and conventional
Natasha's Living Foods	Bakery, prepared foods	Locally produced – international sourcing	Conventional
George Heise	Bakery	Locally produced – international sourcing	Conventional
Indian Foods	Prepared foods	Locally produced – international sourcing	Conventional
Greek Foods	Prepared foods	Locally produced – international sourcing	Conventional
Vendemia Wines	Wine	International	Organic

**Table 2: Profile of food traders**



Ireland, most notably farmers' markets. The DFC is different to a farmers' market in terms of the range of produce provided. People can potentially do all of their general shopping at the co-operative, provided they are vegetarian, as it sells staples, fresh produce and household products. Farmers' markets often lack this practical benefit. Holloway and Kneafsey (2000) suggest they are a supplementary food source where consumers don't often do their principal shop.

The DFC is also different in terms of how the market is organised and controlled:

The difference of course between the Dublin Food Co-op and an 'organic market' is that as a members-owned co-operative we are open for any one of our members to become involved and take an active role in the running of the Co-op. After all we are owned by our members and it is up to the members to ensure that the Co-op is running in a way that meets their needs. (Co-op News 2007b)

Members can remain just as co-operative shoppers, but each is also entitled to trade their own produce at the co-operative.

Moore (2006a) suggests there are significant differences within the Ireland's farmers' market sector itself and identifies three types of market: pioneering, privately run and participatory. Pioneering refers to Ireland's first markets, originating in the south-west, with rules on types of producers permitted. Rules centre on excluding at least some industrial processes. Participatory markets are a more recent breed of market that has adapted the pioneering model, often with local authorities or rural development organisations involved. Privately run markets are initiated and controlled by one entrepreneur with rules on types of produce permitted. When organic produce is sold here it must be officially certified, whereas trust in producers can act as a guarantee in pioneering and participatory

markets. Other key differences between the three types are the roles and powers of the actors involved. This effects how 'embedded' the market is within communities. An increasing control of markets by private entrepreneurs or local authorities makes a market less embedded than if trading producers control the market. Pioneering markets are the most embedded, privately run the least. Greater degrees of embeddedness shows greater producer participation – which is the basic aim of farmers' markets, as Moore (2006a) succinctly concludes: "they are supposed to be, after all, markets for farmers" (p140).

The DFC displays a strong degree of embeddedness, showing similarity with the pioneering farmers' market type. It also goes beyond what participatory farmers' markets do by involving consumers as well as producers in the food supply chain. As discussed earlier, Hassanein (2003) suggests this is a crucial step for more effective change.

## Conclusion

The DFC's origins and development highlight how the co-operative organisation approaches problems, which change through time, hence is a dynamic organisation in continual change in response to consumers and the marketplace in which it operates. While food democracy, exercised through the consumer co-operative vehicle, clearly has the potential to move towards a better, fairer system of food provision, examples of consumer food co-operatives are isolated in Ireland. Conventional supply chains dominate Ireland's food retailing. As this discussion clearly highlights individual co-operatives, like the DFC, have great value. However, with so few in practice the next issue is how to mobilise more consumers to put food democracy into practice.

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