



The Active Co-operator: Member Participation

Guidelines on Member Participation and the Research Needed

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This and the previous article focus on aspects that continue to exercise researchers and co-operators internationally. They appeared in the *Society for Co-operative Studies Bulletin* in 1968 and 1970 and focus on local and general retail societies.

The 'Active Co-operator' reports on research undertaken in Staffordshire, UK and looks at the reasons why individuals join a retail co-operative and their engagement with co-operative philosophy and principles. The active co-operators referred to are "committee members, directors, delegates to regional and national bodies, and the leading enthusiasts of the auxiliaries" seen as key components of co-operative democracy. The second paper, "Guidelines of member participation" — brings in a wider consumer focus. Both are of their time but with contemporary resonance.

The Problem

This can be said to fall into two interrelated but identifiable parts:

- (i) that of establishing the appeal of Co-operative societies as Co-operative societies; and
- (ii) that of establishing the reasons why people want to participate in the democratic control processes of Co-operative societies.

The Traditional Appeal

The main socio-political appeal of the Co-operative societies (in the 19th century) was that of a business organisation owned and democratically controlled by the consumers themselves. In a period of political ferment, of the growth of and the fight for recognition by trade unions and socialist parties, and little or no control over adulterated goods, a retail organisation built for the people by the people had a direct attraction (Jeffreys & Knee, 1962).

For a large number of people that kind of appeal has long disappeared. In a period when political debate is often little more than disputes over administrative detail, when trade unions are popularly believed to be too powerful and nominally socialist parties provide conservative administrations, when there appears to be adequate control over the quality of goods and when retailing is efficiently run, the obvious traditional appeal of Co-operative societies no longer commands the same degree of popular support.

Can There be any Appeal Today?

The main appeal of Co-operative societies must obviously be an economic one — any Co-operative which does not give some clear economic advantage to its members (whether in the short or longer term) can have no justification for its existence.

However dedicated the Movement's idealists are, unless their ideas have some obvious

relevance to the everyday lives of a substantial proportion of people, the ideas will remain ideas. In the second half of the 19th century, Co-operative idealism and economic needs achieved some coincidence and gave the Movement much of its impetus and dynamic. In the mid-twentieth century Co-operators are no longer trying to bolster their meagre incomes nor to get the sand out of the sugar. Most of them no longer have a “blood and guts stake in commercial success”. In an era of full employment, rising real incomes, and competitive and efficient retailing, most of the old motivations for Co-operative activities appear to be dead. Co-operative stores today have little distinctive appeal of their own — indeed, it is almost the current definition of a good Co-operative store that it should differ as little as possible from those of its competitors. Further, the situation in food retailing is such that the financial advantages to be gained from Co-operative shopping are little more than marginal at best. Thus, the question arises as to whether an organisation supposedly run by consumers for consumers can provide anything not being provided by other organisations in the present market environment.

A Consumer Appeal?

It has been suggested in some quarters that one distinctive contemporary appeal which Co-operative societies can make is to that section of consumers who are not wholeheartedly prepared to accept modern commercial pressures and a contribution that Co-operative societies can make is to educate other consumers. It is argued, for example, that the uncertainty of the consumer in the face of modern marketing techniques has created a category of people who are quite self-consciously “consumers” and manifest themselves in organisations in the Consumers’ Association and local consumer groups. As organisations of consumers, Co-operative societies ought to be in a position to appeal to this type of consumer. There are arguments against this (as for example in Martin & Smith’s 1968 book, *The Consumer Interest*) but there may be an area of research here in attempting to discover the attitude of this type of consumer to Co-operatives and to make a comparison with the typical and/or activist members of societies.

Why Do Members Participate?

It seems probable that the distinctive socio-political appeal of Co-operative societies in the nineteenth century induced comparatively high rates of member participation. With retailing generally less efficient than was desired and fairly recent memories of various abuses of economic power, Co-operative members had a direct interest in seeing that their organisation was being properly run. In other words, they were not only motivated to use it, they were also motivated to control it.

In addition, it has been argued that there are certain social situations, more common in the past than now, which are more conducive to member participation. From their study of an American trade union, for example, Lipset, Trow and Coleman (1956) suggest several factors which they consider likely to contribute to member interest and participation. Freely adapted to Co-operative societies, it might be that member participation is more likely when:

- (i) The greater is the sense of “community” amongst the members.
- (ii) The greater is the sense of identification of members with the Society.
- (iii) The greater are the chances of socialising in a Society setting.
- (iv) The greater are the number and variety of functions the Society performs.
- (v) The more interested are the members in the Society’s functions.

Each of these considerations may offer areas of research and experiment.

A Sense of Community?

The smaller societies of previous years would frequently coincide with “communities” in the generally accepted sense but in the process of concentration and amalgamations, this coincidence will obviously disappear. That the sense of community is not entirely dead is indicated by some research done for the Maud Commission¹ which showed that more than three-quarters of a national sample of electors were conscious of living in a small local community or “home area” much smaller than the territory of most local authorities. It seems reasonable to assume that much the same would be true of Co-operative societies and whether some form of district or even shop organisation based on these identified communities would do anything to increase member participation is perhaps a matter for experiment.

Identification with the Society?

This is probably partly connected with the community-Society coincidence referred to above and experiments with devolution of democratic authority might be of assistance. A further difficulty arises from the fact that it is probably much easier for somebody who was concerned with the formation of an organisation or associated with its early struggles to identify with it than for somebody who inherits it as a going concern complete with experienced officials. Again, identification with an organisation is probably easier when the members’ contribution is noticeable, and the member feels that his participation is going to make some difference. This is one of the most thorny problems.

Meeting in a Society Setting?

For most members socialising in a Society setting will be in time spent in the Society’s shops. There are possibilities for social activities bringing members together in connection with other activities which increase the likelihood of participation in other spheres. But the prima facie evidence on this is not particularly encouraging. In any case, for most members the primary and only source of contact with the Society is the shop. The old-style Co-operative shop was a point of wider social contact than simply that of selecting goods and paying cash at the checkout and was possibly more likely to create the sense of identification and awareness of the Society as a Co-operative organisation.

The Range of Functions?

The range and variety of functions performed by the Society may well influence the level of participation in the sense that the wider the variety of activities, the wider the range of people who are attracted to take an interest in the Society. For example, part of an American Co-operator’s explanation of higher participation rates in American societies is “the development around the retail consumer co-operative centre, of a range of related services and organisations that both increase opportunities for participation and provide added flavour. These almost always include a credit union, and may include a funeral society, health plan, recreation, travel, insurance, childcare, swap shop, consumer information and consumer legislative activity. Of course, only a few are really active in any one of these-but the cumulative effect builds in a kind of feedback”. Some of these activities are already undertaken in different form by British societies and others are inappropriate in British conditions. But for example, do those societies with strong political and educational activities experience higher rates of participation than those without?

Does the range of educational activities affect the figure? What effect does auxiliary activity have? Historical evidence again might suggest that as the State or local authorities have undertaken activities previously undertaken by Co-operative societies, membership participation has tended to decline.

Member Interest in the Society's Functions

They may also partly account for the declining interest of members in the Society's functions, particularly education. Whether members have ever been particularly interested in the technical details of retailing is doubtful but as retailing becomes considerably more sophisticated, more professional and more technical, the lay member's interest is even less likely to be aroused and the alternatives that are now available make the need less pressing. Is there any possibility of Co-operative societies stressing their role as buying agencies rather than as selling agencies, i.e., that they exist primarily to buy for the members and not sell to them?

The Author

At the time of publication, Brian J. Rose was a tutor in social studies at the Co-operative College.

References

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Notes

- 1 For discussion on the introduction of the Maud report in 1969, see Hansard: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1969/jun/11/royal-commission-on-local-government>

Further Information

- Lipset, S. M. (2010). Democracy in private government (a case study of the International Typographical Union). *The British Journal of Sociology*, 61(s1), 9-27.