

Guest Editorial

Bridget Carroll and Olive McCarthy

Welcome to this special edition from Ireland of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*. It has been produced in conjunction with the Society for Co-operative Studies in Ireland. The papers presented here discuss a range of issues and challenges for co-operatives in Ireland and include research and reflections on community renewable energy co-operatives; the potential for co-operatives to enhance tenant management in housing; the importance of a conducive legislative environment for co-operative development; member engagement in agriculture co-operatives; the role of co-operatives, particularly worker co-operatives, in Northern Ireland; a systems approach to co-operative appraisal and the activities of credit unions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Legislative reform has long been promised for co-operatives in Ireland. Various Bills to amend elements of the legislation for co-operatives have been drafted over the years but not passed into law although a number of legislative and regulatory changes have been made relatively recently, most notably in 2005 and 2014. Publication of the General Scheme of a Co-operative Societies Bill is expected this year following an extensive review by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. While an effective legislative environment is critical to co-operative development, other challenges must be overcome to ensure that the co-operative model remains an accessible option for those seeking democratic and participatory approaches to meeting their needs. Taft refers to a 'cultural struggle' which requires the development of a democratic agenda that embraces diversity of business forms and ownership types (Taft, 2019, p. 9), and in this special edition Mangan reiterates the need for training and education in building public awareness of the co-operative model. While there is need for strong policy supports for co-operative development, we detect a growing interest among mainly younger people and our students in the ethos and practice of co-operatives and new co-operatives continue to emerge.

The first peer-reviewed paper, from Irish researcher Gerard Doyle, explores the factors influencing the development of community renewable energy co-operatives in Ireland and as such is a very timely paper and justified by the fact that Ireland is failing to meet its EU climate change obligations. The research builds on work on community change and sustainable consumption. Drawing on Middlemiss and Parish (2010) and Pringle (2015), Doyle focuses on four categories of capacities required by community groups to successfully develop and run such co-operatives; individual capacity, infrastructural capacity, structural capacity and cultural capacity. Doyle goes on to examine these capacities using evidence collected from the existing five co-operatives generating renewable energy in Ireland as well as data from interviews with key witnesses in support agencies and policy makers. He identifies several challenges that communities face and a dearth of support structures available to anyone thinking of starting such a venture. He proposes that future research might consider whether the type of ownership structure has a bearing on the receptiveness of communities to the installation of such projects.

In the second peer reviewed paper, Anita Mangan examines the fascinating journey of Irish credit unions from being at the margins of society to a nationally recognised movement with distinct and tailored legislation. Through a qualitative exploration of Irish parliamentary debates on credit unions between 1959 and 1999, she traces the shift in public debate from advocacy in the early years of the credit union movement to a more complex mixture of advocacy and critique in later decades, leading to the evolving credit union legislation which was enacted during this period. She demonstrates how this legislation has been important for helping credit unions to grow and that the wider debates about legislation, supported by highly effective lobbying by community activists, have played a crucial legitimising role. Finally, she underscores

the importance of training and education in building public awareness of the co-operative economic and organisational model.

The third article is a short piece by Fiona Dunkin which explores the changing role of local authorities in the provision and management of social housing in Ireland. She charts the introduction of the concept of 'tenant participation' in housing legislation and highlights the perceived lack of focus on and success of tenant management and engagement by local authorities. She goes on to examine the role of Approved Housing Bodies including co-operative organisational structures which she posits might offer "a fresh approach" in terms of tenant management as a means of improving management of social housing. She compares the concept of Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs) in the UK to the approach taken by Co-operative Housing Ireland. She does not neglect the ongoing support that members of housing co-operatives are likely to require for maximising tenant participation.

This is followed by a think piece by James Doyle reflecting on the on-going need for member engagement in agriculture co-operatives in a time of considerable choice in terms of competing alternatives and of pressure on time. Always a central issue, member engagement is currently of added relevance given the challenges facing agriculture co-operatives as a result of Brexit. Balancing short-term and long-term objectives, how member-control is achieved, addressing changing membership profiles and priorities and the need for members to invest time and money are all considered.

Eleanore Perrin, in her think piece, offers a critique of current policy in Northern Ireland which she says bases economic recovery on neoliberal principles. She contrasts a discourse which paints a picture of a vibrant economy in Northern Ireland with that portraying more worrying trends. She castigates the paucity of vision and creativity among policy makers in terms of strategies for post-conflict social transformation. Making a case for co-operatives to be central to tackling structural inequalities, she decries their side-lining by most local councils despite their stated support for the social economy. Worker co-operatives that have emerged in Northern Ireland in recent years are offered as an example of potentially empowering structures that deserve more support.

In another think piece, co-operator Norman Rides proposes a systems approach to Irish co-operatives. In response to what he describes as organisational and cultural capture of existing co-operatives and the low rate of new co-operatives, he proposes the use of Beer's Viable Systems Model in order to analyse weaknesses in co-operatives and to devise appropriate solutions.

In our last short piece, Olive McCarthy highlights the wide-ranging measures and supports put in place by credit unions during the Covid-19 pandemic to support and protect their members. Credit unions are designated by the State as essential service providers and have remained open throughout the pandemic. The activities of two credit unions in assisting their members and in offering help to the health services are highlighted.

Finally, our book review is by Ray O'Connor, who discusses the 2019 Manchester University Press publication *Civilising Rural Ireland: The co-operative movement, development and the nation-state, 1889–1939* by Patrick Doyle.

We hope you enjoy this special edition.

Bridget Carroll and Olive McCarthy

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