

The Cooperative Values: Their Meaning and Practical Significance

BY SIDNEY POBIHUSHCHY, AUGUST 2002

Wisdom generated over the millennia of human experience proclaims that community is the optimal condition for human fulfillment. The co-operative movement and its business, based on the ten values proclaimed by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) in 1995, possesses the only contemporary social-political-economic philosophy/ideology which explicitly and practically promotes and actualizes community health and strength. The onus is on the leaders and members of the co-operative organization and its business to fulfill the objective of community. Co-operative education of the leaders and members of the co-operative is a necessary and, most likely, a sufficient condition for that to be accomplished. The foundation of co-operative education is in the ten values which the ICA proclaimed in 1995.

Each of the ten Co-operative Values discussed below has its own integrity and stands on its own merit. Yet each one of those values has an affinity to one or more of the other values. Also, each one of those values contributes a very important significance to the co-operative movement. The important message here is that while each one of those values is of critical importance to the movement, not one of them stands alone in defining the importance and integrity of the co-operative movement. Taken together, the ten Co-operative Values define, and provide the parameters for, a world view/paradigm. That world view/paradigm is a

wholesome and superior alternative to the status quo of the past and today, especially if human fulfillment and peace are important goals for any society to pursue. The clear implication of those ten Co-operative Values is that human fulfillment and peace are the only ethically and morally justifiable goals for any society.

It is little wonder, therefore, that the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) in its 1995 Congress approved and emphasized the importance of Co-operative Education as articulated in its Fifth Principle.* The individual ten values and the world view/paradigm which they collectively

* ICA Fifth Principle: Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public, particularly young people and opinion leaders about the nature and benefits of co-operation.

define/articulate provide the necessary value foundation for education at least in the Co-operative Movement and hopefully beyond.

Each one of the ten co-operative values is a sophisticated and complex concept. Any brief definition of each of those ten values is not likely to adequately convey their complexity. Nonetheless, the following definitions will convey enough of the meaning of each of the ten values to serve as a starting point for further thought and deliberation.

1. SELF-HELP

This value has a dual referent. On the one hand it refers to the individual person "self" and on the other it refers to the collective "self" such as a co-operative, for instance. Self-help as a value obligates/encourages the individual person to satisfy her/his own needs and obligations through personal effort to the extent reasonably possible under the circumstances. An important need and obligation is the contribution to the realization of a healthy sustainable community. This is a very important element in achieving personal human fulfillment.

As a corollary, this same reasoning/logic applies to the collective "self" such as, for instance, a co-operative. This value obligates/encourages the collective to satisfy its own collective needs and obligations through its own efforts to the extent reasonably possible under the circumstances. It is from this value that the idea flows that each individual member/owner of the collective, i.e., co-operative, shares the responsibility for the success of the co-operative.

2. SELF-RESPONSIBILITY

This value, similar to the previous one, has a dual referent. The individual person is obligated and encouraged by this value to be responsible for her/his own well-being and to take responsibility for any consequences that flow from whatever he/she does in pursuit of personal need satisfaction. The corollary to this is that the collective

"self" is responsible for its own well-being and for the consequences that flow from that pursuit.

3. DEMOCRACY

Democracy is a philosophy/practice of governance in which the people are collectively the repository of authority. The exercise of that authority is democratically legitimate only if the people who will be affected by that exercise are consulted openly and freely. Popular elections in and of themselves do not a democracy make. Free and open discussion, deliberation and consultation are essential preconditions to elections as democratic elements. Of course, that means that the people/members have reasonable access to all the information relevant to the decisions respecting the exercise of the authority of which they are the repository.

4. EQUALITY

Equality as a value flows from the traditional wisdom that each person, irrespective of talent, skill or appearance, possesses an intrinsic value and thus as a human is of no greater or lesser value than anyone else. Each person is intrinsically valuable, without the attachment of inferiority or superiority. While certain skills and talents may be of greater importance to the well-being of a collective, be it a society, community or co-operative, each and every person as a human being within that collective is of equal value. This value is particularly pertinent to decision-making and governance of the collective requiring that each person in that collective has a reasonable opportunity to participate in that decision-making and governance. This value is particularly and peculiarly relevant to *democracy* and *democratic governance*.

5. EQUITY

This value has two distinct but related meanings. One meaning of this value is as an END. The other meaning is that of a MEANS to that END. Equity as an END refers to FAIRNESS in the relationships between and among individuals and the manner with which authority is exercised over persons. Equity as a MEANS refers to the ownership of property/assets with which persons can protect themselves against exploitation by others, mainly corporate interests. In the co-operative, that ownership gives the owner/member the right to participate in the decisions of the co-operative which, along with the participation of all the other members/owners of the co-operative, assures each and all of them fairness in their relations with each other and the collective, i.e., the co-operative. It is the equity which provides the owners with

the right and opportunity to structure the decision-making and governance process that will assure that fairness is an essential characteristic of the co-operative.

6. SOLIDARITY

Solidarity as a value refers to the respect and dignity with which the individual persons of a community relate to one another. It is a relationship that grows out of each person seeing the other as valuable as the self. Solidarity also encompasses the concept of interdependency which is so critical to the health and vitality of the collective/co-operative. Community is an important product of solidarity, or as a corollary, solidarity is an essential characteristic of the successful community/co-operative.

7. HONESTY

This value has the quality of both *end* and *means*. Honesty is a good in itself and is a means to other goods. Honesty is an important prerequisite to continuing good relations among persons and within collectives such as co-operatives. Honesty is both a quality of, and a means to, human fulfillment. Truth is a critically important component of rewarding community and collective life. Honesty is the sine qua non for the individual and the collective of individuals experiencing and benefiting from the truth.

8. OPENNESS

This value refers to the structured and reasonable availability to the membership of information and knowledge relevant to the successful life of the organization/ collective. This value presupposes that the governance of the organization is a democracy, hence the membership collective is the repository of the authority exercised in that governance.

9. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

This value is most relevant to the public image which the co-operative enjoys/suffers in the community which it serves and beyond. On the one hand, it refers to the co-operative accepting responsibility for and ameliorating the negative consequences for society stemming from its actions and operations. On the other hand, social responsibility refers to the co-operative's acceptance of the responsibility to work towards the betterment of society and towards the amelioration of oppressive conditions in that society.

10. CARING FOR OTHERS

"Caring for others" was and continues to be the prime mover in the establishment of successful co-operatives

the world over. This value refers to the obligation that each individual co-operator, each co-operative and the co-operative movement as a whole must act in such a way as not to cause harm or difficulty for others either of today, tomorrow or of the distant future. Additionally, this value imposes the obligation and requirement on every element of the co-operative movement to be pro-active in leadership towards rectifying the structural and social

causes of oppression and indignity. This value flows out of the ancient, but nonetheless relevant, dictum: "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you"!!!!

What follows is a modest attempt at articulating the practical implications and practices of each of the ten Co-operative Values within the status quo, for the individual co-operator and for the Co-operative Movement.

Co-op Values:

Value	Social Observation Often Characteristic of the Status Quo	RECIPROCAL	
		Individual Co-operator's Obligation	Responsibilities for the Co-operative Movement
Self-help	Too often organizations in society are incapacitated by their affiliations and ties to other organizations, especially including those of a less democratic nature	Need for members to re-visit, explore and assess the opportunities to stimulate co-op organizational growth and expansion in the service of persons and the community	Co-operative must draw upon the capacities of its members/owners, and must be experimental and, if necessary, take bold measures
Self-responsibility	Tendency in society to foster dependency, disillusionment and disenchantment.	The wisdom of each person must be offered heard in the collective deliberation and everyone is obliged to be an active and involved member.	The co-op must take the co-operative movement forward, just as the co-op movement must move the co-op toward sustainable community .
Solidarity	Tendency to "watch out only for oneself" prevails and injures everyone. Eg., the "Me Generation".	Each person is a "member" of a movement, and the co-operative movement is much more than a collection of disconnected co-ops and members.	Decisions must be collective and shared, and our capacity for constructive growth emerges from this shared energy. The co-op movement is an organic(living) whole
Equality	Severe inequality in society	One's strength and capacity is valued as that of any other member of the movement	All co-operative and community processes must respect the richness of every person
Equity	Many organizational and social processes are characterized by unfairness, prejudice and bias	The co-operator is obligated to "voice" concerns and ideas and entitled to be heard`	Co-op has an obligation to consult and valorize ideas from all members as a collective
Democracy	Basic lack of democracy across many organizations and across society	Each person is obligated to stay informed, and is entitled to have her/his thoughts voiced and heard	The co-operative must draw upon the collective wisdom of its members both procedurally (eg. Voting) and substantively (ideas must come from the people).
Honesty	Disingenuousness and dishonesty far too common socially	Individual wisdom and integrity premised upon care and reflection are integral to the co-operative movement	Organizational practices must be open and transparent
Openness	Autocracy and obscurity far too common across society	The co-operator is responsible for "dialogue" with the co-op writ large	The capacity for a "members audit" of the co-op must be actively encouraged to maximize accountability
Social responsibility	Many organizations and businesses fail to measure and acknowledge the social costs of their activities	Each co-operator must measure the co-op on the basis of its contribution to the long-term, sustainable health of families and the community	Co-op must measure itself according to the well-being of the community and the natural world
Caring for others	We see a chronic disregard for the well-being of others in our society	One's goals and objectives must be formulated in accordance with the well-being of everyone	The Co-op is not an isolated organization, and thus bears a profound responsibility to all members of the community and to nature