

Planning in Collaboration

Neighboring Food Cooperative Association develops a regional economic strategy in New England

BY ERIC DELUCA, WITH CLEM NILAN, PEG NOLAN, ERBIN CROWELL, AND KRISTIN HOWARD

Keynote speaker David Korten conjured two worlds at the 2008 CCMA conference. One is characterized by empire, in which suicidal competition reinforces assumptions that labor and nature are commodities and people are destined to endure domination and violence. In the other, communities come to the fore, emphasizing relationships, interdependence and balance, with a focus on education and a regenerative environment.¹

In New England that same summer of 2008, a team of food co-op leaders was writing some stories of its own—diverse, plausible renderings of the regional economy, circa 2020. Using a method called scenario planning, they focused on strategy development for the emergent Neighboring Food Cooperative Association.

Developing a regional alliance

Since 2004, when Brattleboro Food Co-op first called a meeting of co-op board members and general managers², leaders from upward of 20 food co-ops based in Vermont, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire have been developing a regional alliance. Aligned by the principle of cooperation among cooperatives, the group agreed to plan collaboratively and leverage assets for the common good. Early efforts yielded a congress—attended by multiple full boards—as well as a manifesto articulating the alliance's aspirations.

In 2007 a steering committee was formed to facilitate the group's development and process in 2008. Also at that time a listserve was established, and the National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA) offered to provide staff support and resources to further these efforts.

The group agreed to focus on the regional cooperative economy. Exploration of potential strategic research directions highlighted the fact that there were many organizations doing great work and that the alliance was at risk of unnecessarily duplicating efforts.³ One uniquely suitable topic emerged—assessing and understanding the economic impact that food co-ops have on their communities.

Measuring local impact

With independent economic analyst Doug Hoffer as principal researcher, and the financial



The alliance brings together co-op and community leaders to envision the future.

backing of co-ops in the new alliance (particularly those in Hanover, N.H., and Brattleboro and Burlington, Vt.), a study was conducted that revealed compelling data: The 17 New England food co-ops surveyed represented \$161 million in annual sales, and \$290 million of overall economic impact.⁴ The study further revealed that the co-ops purchased \$33 million in local products in 2007 and that the ten Vermont-based co-ops, taken together, represented one of the top 25 employers in the state.

This last data point proved potent when, in September 2008, Clem Nilan, general manager of City Market (a co-op alliance member), testified before the Vermont Milk Commission, representing the food cooperative perspective. The Commission had issued a draft order to establish a significant premium for all fluid milk sold in Vermont. The vital economic role co-ops play in the state added power to Nilan's explanation of the fair buying practices of co-ops, which refuted the Commission's assertion that there was widespread gouging on retail milk pricing. The Milk Commission dropped its plan to rapidly implement the tax.

Yet, as powerful as the information from this study was, the alliance soon realized that it represented only a beginning when considering notions of a "cooperative economy." It became apparent that further regional analysis, across

co-op sectors and throughout co-op supply chains, made sense as a future priority. Additionally, lessons might be drawn from places where cooperatives are a leading force in regional economies.

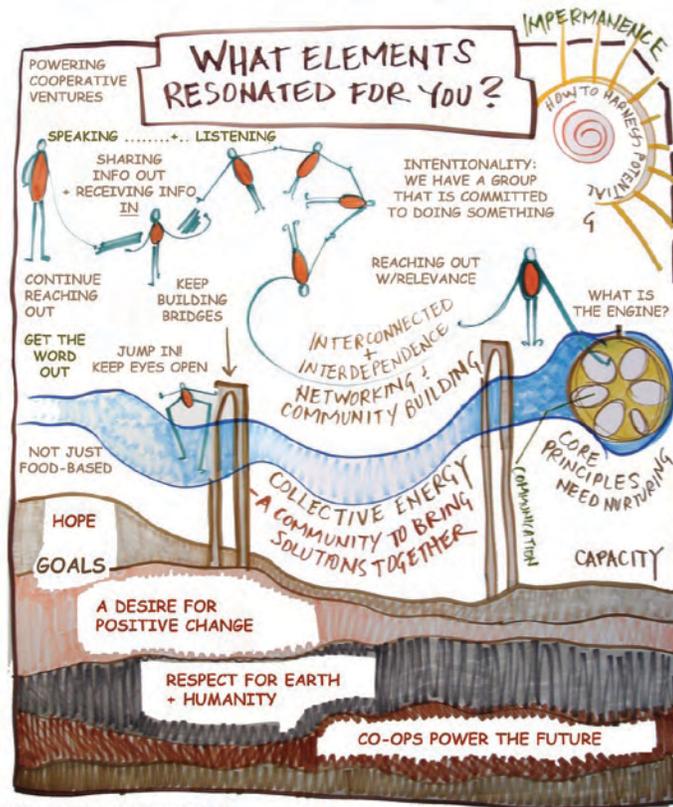
One currently thriving example of a regional cooperative economy is Emilia Romagna in northeast Italy. In this region of 4.2 million people, there are about 7,500 co-ops collaborating across sectors and industries including manufacturing, retailing, agriculture, social services, and credit. Ten percent of the workforce is employed by co-ops, unemployment rates are extremely low, and the standard of living is among the highest in Europe. Central to the impact of the Italian cooperative movement is the intentional and strategic manner in which economic development is coordinated both within and across sectors. For example, by law every co-op in Italy contributes 3 percent of its annual surplus to funds for cooperative development. Co-op sectors—consumer, worker, producer, etc.—are more integrated than in the U.S. and work together through informal regional networks, as well as more formal relationships such as federations and consortia.

Sharing stories of possible futures

Our own Scenario Planning Team incorporated increased coordination and collaborative plan- ■>

ning as a theme in the stories it wrote for the alliance to use in strategic planning. In this method, the purpose of telling stories of the future to those with a stake in that future is to stretch their perceptions and challenge their assumptions.⁵ (See sidebar.) Through reflecting together on scenarios, leaders become sensitized to trends and indicators and are thus better prepared to develop robust responses. Their ensuing strategic conversations represent the enduring value of this work.

Part of the challenge in such an approach is to perceive the co-op—or in this case, the alliance of co-ops—as an element of a living system that includes the whole region. Attention to how individuals within a team interact with each other is integral to developing this perspective and ability. While completing its writing and editing work, the Scenario Planning Team practiced using tools designed by leaders in organizational learning such as psychologist David Kantor. These tools support balanced participation and high



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Organizational learning tools, such as graphic facilitation, support collaborative leadership.

levels of topic resolution. The team's commitment to learning the skills of cultivating conversations with stakeholders has been instrumental in building the coherence of the larger leadership community.⁶

Building bridges

However, the writing team was not alone in its efforts. In committing to learning and using scenario planning as a tool for strategy development, the Steering and Facilitation Committee has continued to seek out knowledgeable and experienced professionals to teach us all, while maintaining accountability for alliance leadership.

For our most recent gathering, a facilitation and meeting design team worked with the 30-person group as it explored together the implications of the scenario stories. A graphic facilitator captured colorful visual renderings of group conversation in real time,⁷ while a longstanding cooperative

Scenario Snapshot: New England 2020

1. What is the future of the regional cooperative economy in New England, circa 2020?
2. Driving forces:
 - Decreasing access to farmland
 - Powerful interests inhibit community creativity
 - Grounded hope
 - Shifts in the global resource landscape
 - Climate change
 - Market-based sustainability strategies strongly promoted
 - Young people passionate about living their values
 - YouTube generation and democratization of media
3. Critical uncertainty: How will communities respond?
4. Excerpts from two diverse stories of the future:*

More of the same: deal with it

When 24-year-old Katie Taylor read about New England-focused private investment in farmland, she put down her *Rutland Herald*, looked at her dog and shook her head. "The rich get richer," she said. It was clear that to follow her dream of becoming an organic farmer, she would need to leave the region. Her fear was that there might not be anywhere to go.

As 2020 approached, local food was routinely featured at every big box food outlet. Many progressive organizations remained true to their individual missions, but did not effectively coordinate their efforts. Food co-op leaders fondly remembered the time when increasing mainstream interest in natural foods meant surging membership and revenue. Consumers now agreed: the cheapest place is the best. Co-ops

committed to paying a fair price to local vendors simply lost customers to the chain across the street.

We're still here, the ones we've been waiting for

In northern New England in 2008, people were uncertain and anxious about the future. Flooding, insect infestations, and even the loss of its beloved maple trees were acknowledged to be in store. America's food system was fragile—based on cheap fuel and dependent on massive transfer of goods from California to New England by tractor-trailer.

Fortunately, some people had already made inroads. New England had many groups working to develop local food and energy, but a conspicuous lack of coordination. Once established, the Neighboring Co-ops' Information and Communication Resource Group (NIC) kept residents in touch with all active groups. Most people's perception of food co-ops had been that they were simply food stores. With NIC, there began a whole new era of participation in food co-ops.

These brief excerpts offer a flavor of the scenarios. If you would like more detailed information, including in-depth versions of the scenario stories, please send your name and organizational affiliation to David Fowle (david.fowle@ncga.coop). David provides administrative support to NCGA and can keep you in the loop regarding opportunities for future collaboration.

* Caveats:

- Scenarios aren't about predicting the future.
- Avoid picking the story you like and ignoring the rest.
- Focus on tone and themes, considering their implications.

◀ movement leader ensured that the group moved effectively through the day. An organizational learning consultant collaborated with an outside professional to bring leading edge thinking to the day's design. NCGA, Brattleboro Food Co-op, and the Cooperative Fund of New England (CFNE) played sponsorship roles.

It proved equally important to begin building bridges with regional organizations focused on sustainability. The Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA)'s Vermont chapter quickly resonated with the alliance's work and

committed the time of staff members to participate in Neighboring Food Cooperative Alliance gatherings. A leader from Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) participated in an interview about the future of the regional economy and then joined directly in the session during which the research results were explored. Finding common goals with effective organizations represents the kind of leverage it will take for communities to thrive in challenging times.

As the Steering and Facilitation Committee prepares to assimilate input from the larger

leadership group and develop a draft strategy, this theme of building bridges is at the top of the list. Stakeholders include not only regional food co-op member-owners but the wider cooperative movement as well.

While we seek to connect effectively with the boards of our member co-ops, we have also been diligent about tracking our processes, so that other regions and sectors might benefit from our learning and discoveries. Whether it's in relation to specific tools like scenario planning or economic impact research, or in the fuzzier science of nurturing an emergent network, our intention is to share our experience and know-how in service of the common good. More to come! ■

FOOTNOTES

1 David Korten, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2006.

2 See "Co-op as Store Becomes Co-op as Community," by Mark Goehring, *Cooperative Grocer* #117, March-April 2005. www.cooperativegrocer.coop/articles/index.php?id=582

3 For example, Vital Communities in Vermont, and Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) in western Massachusetts, produce annual local food and farm guides. www.vitalcommunities.org/Agriculture/localguideintro.htm and www.buylocalfood.com

4 Multiplier effects were taken into account using data from the U.S. Commerce Department and input-output software (IMPLAN). The IMPLAN model was modified to reflect the sales and payroll per worker for the co-ops. Multiplier effects account for the fact that surveyed food co-ops buy from farmers, wholesalers, and service providers who spend some of the money locally for their business inputs, including payroll, equipment, supplies, utilities, and taxes.

5 Scenario planning's history, purpose, and techniques are well documented in Peter Schwartz's *The Art of the Long View*, Doubleday Business, 1991, 1996.

6 *The Necessary Revolution*, by Peter Senge, Bryan Smith, Nina Kruschwitz, Joe Laur, and Sara Schley, published by the U.S. Green Building Council, 2008, contains many valuable tools and insights for convening sustainability networks. David Kantor's Four-Player Model is explained on p. 276.

7 See illustration by graphic facilitator Kelvy Bird, included in this article.

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