

FOOD COOPERATIVES AS COMMUNITY-LEVEL SELF-HELP AND DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Food is central to individual and community well-being and represents a nexus for exploring community development. A community development framework is particularly relevant for exploring food cooperatives' role, helping investigate ties and norms binding individuals and organizations, providing insight into cooperative development and cooperative management relations, and influencing economic self-sufficiency. Food cooperatives motivate the participation of many as a locus where efforts are combined in an egalitarian and democratic fashion. This provides for both food security and community and economic development. City Market in Burlington, Vermont is examined as a case to illustrate how cooperative development aligns with community development, and how relations between these two areas influence economic self-sufficiency. The article explains how cooperative development, at least in the case of a food cooperative, aligns with community development providing an example of economic self-help, because it's about collective efforts expanding community members' access to healthy, affordable food.

Key Words: community well-being, food cooperatives, economic self-sufficiency, community development

INTRODUCTION

Why food cooperatives? Food cooperatives are particularly well positioned to study, since they bring together long standing principles of self-management and a community focus that often has a broader influence beyond the cooperative itself. Given the interest (and crisis, some would argue) of food systems, food security, and reliability, food is a central community development focus. Indeed, the United Nation's universal human rights framework, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, Article 25, establishes the right to food as, "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food." Food is central to individual and community well-being, and as such, represents a nexus for exploring both community development and cooperative development processes and outcomes because it aids both food security and economic self-sufficiency.

A community development framework is particularly relevant for exploring food cooperatives' role. It helps when investigating the ties and norms binding individuals and organizations, providing insight into the nature and extent of relationships in and beyond the cooperative structure. They act as social entrepreneurs, effecting positive changes in their host communities. As seen in some cases, food cooperatives serve as a catalyst in their communities, evolving and changing into social enterprises and influencing not only community development but economic development too, helping foster economic self-sufficiency. It is important to note that one crucial part of smart community development is fostering economic sustainability. Food cooperatives can be seen as providing an example of community members coming together, and working together, to expand their access to nutritious and affordable food (the "economic side"). Thus, cooperatives can be understood as an unconventional but viable route to both community development and economic self-sufficiency. This article explains cooperative development as a means to foster economic self-sufficiency at the community level.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Cooperatives are not new, with a long and rich history globally. Most adhere to a set of guiding principles, usually centering on democratic organization and participation. The Mondragon Worker Cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain are one of the oldest, having been founded in 1956. With their focus on self-governance and a complex system of direct and representative democracy, they are considered highly successful (Cheney, 2001). Self-management is considered key to this long-term success, which is seen as, "a paradigm which covers everything from its organizational form to its role as social project" (Sarasua & Udaondo, 2004, pp. 4-5, quoted in Azevedo & Gitahy, 2010). Few would argue that the Mondragon Worker Cooperatives are not a major community development

influence, serving as the Basque region's largest industrial group, with over 80,000 worker members. Certainly, economic self-sufficiency has been fostered in this region due to cooperative approaches.

Connecting to Community

Azevedo and Gitahy (2010, pp. 6-7) present several relevant findings that bring together this idea of cooperatives as community development:

1. Potential (of cooperatives) as an instrument of personal and community development. Personal because a self-managed enterprise has the characteristic of giving special attention to people, which is demonstrated through various forms of action including decision-making capacity. . . . This is community development because economic self-management tends to respond to the needs of communities and is capable of creating connections with other (social and cultural) experiences, getting connected to other spheres of social development, and the opportunity to be open to the potential of social movements and of assimilating their motivations (the environment, gender, development models).
2. Potential to assimilate things for self-management experiences are usually tied to the communities of their surroundings, and their workers are active participants in the themes of local interest, which makes possible their participation in local development projects, whereas the global enterprise model has capital's nonassimilated character.

The relationship between cooperatives and community development is also about social organization. Cooperatives have this as a central principle, with social relations as a way to "strive to the ideal of community," and relationships as "wholistic, affective and of value in themselves" (Rothschild & Whitt, 1986, p. 55). There are several implications of cooperative social organization and social relationships for community development. Social organization is directly related to whether or not a community will succeed in its development efforts (Woolcock, 1998). As just seen, economic self-management is a means of creating connection with community, and can be considered a form of social organization with potential for impacts beyond the cooperative.

This connection to community can be seen in the third major theme in cooperative theory, the cooperative development process. Harris et al. (1996) claim that it is not enough to desire collective action by a group of individuals facing common problems or opportunities. Rather, cooperative formation also relies on outside institutional support—"although common economic or social issues represent necessary conditions for cooperative development, they do not appear to be sufficient conditions" (p. 25). This "outside" support can be provided by community development organizations. A more recent study of 14 cooperatives verifies this need for outside institutional support via host communities, finding that one of the most important observations is that community support for the

cooperative is “key to its viability and success” (Zeuli, Freshwater, Markley, & Barkley, 2003).

Another connection to community emanates in conceptual and practical dilemmas faced in the theory and practice of cooperatives. Torgerson et al. (1997) state three dilemmas that arise between the social and economic philosophies of cooperation:

1. meaning versus service;
2. efficiency versus democracy; and
3. bureaucratic logic versus cooperative logic (p. 6).

Community development connections help with realizing meaning while providing services, the first of these dilemmas. This “life meaning purpose” can provide “much greater focus to participation and democratic process (Torgerson et al., 1997, p. 6). Assets of a community can be expanded with the cooperative model, especially through open membership and local ownership of enterprises, “cooperatives are believed to enhance participation of local people in both social and economic activities” (Majee & Hoyt, 2010).

Enhancing democracy is a basic goal of cooperatives. At the same time, democracy is a central core tenet of community development theory, and is “valued as a means, not as an end, serving the instrumental purpose of broadening the inputs available in the system” (Cook, 1994, p. 11). Further, community development builds on a very individualistic premise—that every person is unique, distinguishable from others and able to contribute something of value (Cook, 1994), and these contributions help the sum to be greater than its parts. In other words, it is closely aligned with the core tenets and principles of cooperatives. A definition of community development is:

A process: developing and enhancing the ability to act collectively, and an *Outcome:* (1) taking collective action and (2) the result of that action for improvement in a community in any or all realms: physical, environmental, cultural, social, political, economic, etc.” (Phillips & Pittman, 2009, p. 6)

It is seen that core tenets, such as collective action and desire for improvement, are indeed aligned with cooperative management principles. The framework of community development can thus serve as a lens to better understand cooperatives, and the relations between them and their host communities.

What is the difference between community development and cooperative development? Stofferahn (2009) explains it can be found by looking at purposes. Community development purpose is to “improve the well-being of the community, whereas the purpose of cooperative development is to organize a member-controlled organization designed to meet the needs of members” (p. 178). Taking this relationship further, the two terms have been combined into cooperative community development defined as, “a process in which member-controlled organizations develop and operate to achieve the goals of their

members and the broader social and economic goals of the community” (Nadeau & Wilson, 2001, p. 65, quoted in Stofferahn, 2009).

Food Cooperatives

According to the Consumer Federation of America, there are currently over 5000 food cooperatives in the United States (Consumer Federation of America, 2011). Many of these are structured as consumer cooperatives, purchasing wholesale goods and then re-selling to members. Consumer owned food cooperatives have experienced various periods of popularity through time, with the most recent growth period emerging after 2000, driven in part by a high level of consumer interest for finding alternative and healthy sources of food.

Deller et al. (2009, p. 20) provides a history of food cooperatives, from a recent large national study of cooperatives:

Consumer-owned food stores have emerged, grown, and declined in waves since the 1850s. The most recent growth period occurred during the mid-1960s and early 1970s when there was a nationwide resurgence of cooperative food stores. By 1979, an estimated 3,000 food stores and buying clubs operated in the United States and Canada (Food Coop Project, 1975). By the 1990s, however, the changing social and political climate resulted in a substantial decline in the number of cooperatives, accompanied by a period of consolidation and growth for the strong cooperatives. By the mid-2000s, food cooperatives once again experienced growth-driven, intense consumer interest in alternatives to a market system that might not serve their needs. Consumers’ interest and participation in retail food cooperatives tends to increase in periods of social, political, and economic turmoil. Although their secondary needs may vary considerably, cooperative members consistently want their cooperatives to provide price, quality, and selection advantages. Growth periods also occur when large numbers of consumers experience economic difficulties and develop an interest in ownership and control of their retail food sources, when they become concerned for food safety, and when they experience a strong desire for an ethical society. (Hoyt, 1983)

Further, the research team calculated an economic impact effect, using data from just over 100 consumer food cooperatives with nearly 500,000 members. It is interesting to note the level and type of impact on their host regions, from a community development perspective. For example, it was found that over 14,000 employees work in the food cooperatives, with over \$170 million paid in wages and benefits. See Table 1 for specifics of the economic impact, including a very large total impact. The income multiplier is impressive at 1.78, indicating that an additional 78¢ is generated in the local economy for every \$1.00 of income generated by the food co-ops—in other words, the impact of each dollar is felt as \$1.78 in the local economy.

Table 1. Economic Impact of Consumer Food Cooperatives

Economic impact	Multiplier	Unit	Direct	Indirect	Induced	Total
Revenues	1.013	Million \$	2,098	12	14	2,124
Income	1.781		178	59	80	316
Wages	1.474		171	36	45	252
Employment	1.130	Jobs	13,640	711	1,066	15,417

Source: Deller et al., 2009, p. 22.

MY STUDY

This research is an exploration of the relations between cooperatives and community development, including influencing economic self-sufficiency. It explores the links between consumer food cooperatives and community development processes and outputs. Using the case of City Market, the Onion River Cooperative in Burlington, Vermont, these explorations take the form of applied qualitative techniques including participant interviews, site observations, and document review. The guiding paradigm is interpretive, focusing on social relationships and understanding meanings (Bailey, 2007; Creswell, 2007) and using community development theory as a lens for understanding. Embedded analysis is used because a specific aspect of the case is under exploration (Yin, 2003) when the focus shifts to key issues and looking for common themes that transcend the case. The focus in this case is exploring the relationship between the food cooperative, community development, and economic self-sufficiency at the community level.

Is there a way to understand cooperatives and community development more fully? So many common terms and concepts, and how does this impact relations and outcomes? The following figure shows the interconnection between food cooperatives and community development, placed in the context of “cooperative community.” It is similar to, and builds on, the concept of cooperative community development first offered by Nadeau and Wilson (2001), that includes a community impact analysis as part of the cooperative development process (p. 65). Community and cooperative development (called cooperative community in Figure 1) is a way to connect the two, and draws in commonalities while recognizing distinct differences. Further, there are subjective factors that can help gauge involvement and relations. These can be thought of as “capacity factors,” and include such aspects as: positive attitude toward development and activities; participation in community activities; effective implementation of plans; unified vision and mission; and ability to work together and avoid factionalism (Pittman,

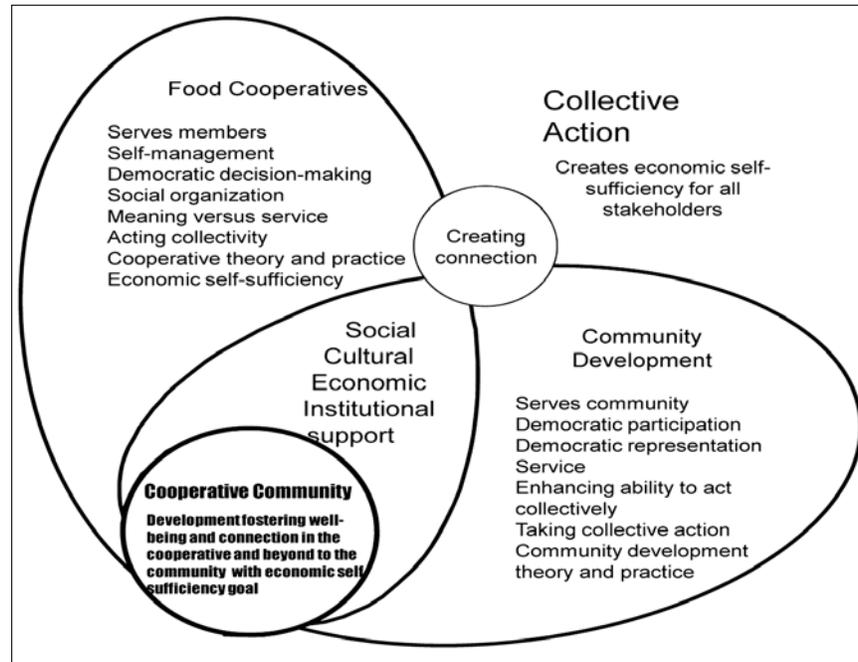


Figure 1. A framework for cooperative community and community development for economic self-sufficiency.

Pittman, Phillips, & Cangelosi, 2009, p. 84). More importantly is the impact on economic self-sufficiency. This is a key part of any successful community development approach, program, or policy. Building economic self-sufficiency is central to cooperatives' mission—they strive to foster it in whatever role they play (housing, social services, food, etc.). The graph illustrates the importance of economic self-sufficiency, and how it relates to the other dimensions of what is involved with community and collective action.

BUILDING ECONOMIC SELF-HELP (AND GOOD FOODS TO EAT)

The City Market, Onion River Co-op is a model of economic self-help, given its socially missioned approach, combined with business techniques that work. Its “triple bottom line” is people (social responsibility), planet (environmental stewardship), and profit (fiscal success). Again, it is key to consider economic self-sufficiency, and this example brings together both community development

and economic development. It was implemented in partnership with the City of Burlington, Vermont after food choices became sparse in the downtown core. Its mission is central to encouraging a thriving and healthy community, where: consumers have local access to progressive environmental, social, and healthful choices; quality of life is enhanced for local residents; the local food system is strengthened; the cooperative model is supported; and owners have a sense of pride in their cooperative. City Market is recognized as one of the best food cooperatives in the nation, given recent awards by national associations, and has grown to nearly 9000 members. Programs for food distribution to needy residents, as well as educational aspects, combine to have social impacts in the community. Further, the coop itself is a major employer, with over 175 employees, offering wages exceeding livable wage standards, and employees earning 25% more on average than conventional supermarket counterparts.

The co-op has become a wildly popular downtown gathering place; it is now listed as “a place to go” in Burlington’s visitor’s guides. It is one of the most frequented destinations in Burlington, and one member describes its impact as an attraction this way,

City Market is definitely a magnet to visitors—it is great as a face for the community and a powerful statement to the outside world with its actions to inspire well-being and understanding of the impact of local foods on the economy and area.

I have to admit, City Market was my very first stop when I arrived in Burlington for a year’s study visit. It was quite by accident, as I was looking for a place to buy refreshments, and what a fortuitous find it was. It is clear that the market often serves as an entry point for visitors to Burlington and also conveys the strong sense of the importance of healthy, local focused foods and the community fostered around that mission. It was striking to see the “community development” connections so clearly displayed on the bulletin board, in the newsletter, and exuded by the general ethos of the place. I knew that I had landed somewhere special.

Others find inspiration by the example City Market provides. In 2011, both New Haven, Connecticut and Burlington, North Carolina opened downtown food cooperatives on City Market’s model. City Market has been recognized nationally as an award winning cooperative with a strong community focused mission. It did not happen easily, and there is a long, complicated story behind its success, one that spans 17 years with many people involved, motivated by the determination to locate a healthy foods option in Burlington’s downtown area.¹ Efforts started in the mid-80s, using a former brownfield (contaminated) site at the edge of the downtown core as the site to draw both visitors and residents alike

¹ For a more in-depth presentation of the process of developing City Market, see Phillips, Seifer, & Antczak (forthcoming).

to the location. It provides an excellent case study to explore connections between community and cooperatives, and touches on all three of the major areas suggested in the framework presented.

Building Community

The need for healthy food choices became more critical when a regional food store chain closed in the 90s, and citizens expressed their desire and need for having access to food in the downtown core. During that time, the City of Burlington's Community and Economic Development Office (CEDO) worked with partners to establish interim measures to ensure people had access to food. Grants were obtained for a bus service to local food stores, a food delivery service developed from a supermarket, and a food delivery business was identified and promoted. A booklet was distributed on information about organizations providing food security to the residents. Research indicated that people spent more each year if they did not have access to a local supermarket and tended to eat more processed, less healthy food choices—more support for ratcheting up efforts to bring healthy choices to downtown residents. Efforts continued to find an operator willing to locate downtown; however, the City had to return a \$1.67 million federal grant when one could not be found during that time (Phillips, Seifer, & Antczak, forthcoming).

CEDO then secured a \$9,000 federal HUD grant for a market feasibility study, providing the industry data showing a need for a downtown supermarket. Afterwards, CEDO received a \$600,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for pre-development work to prepare the site for development. A development package was designed, with the City providing a long-term lease, a historic building, a \$66,000 CDBG grant, and \$2 million in construction financing package to partner with a grocery operator.

It went beyond wanting to find an operator; given its location and need for healthy, affordable food options—the City wanted a partner willing to participate in the community and community development (this is an example of the outside institutional support identified as critical by Harris et al., 1996). A set of principles was established for operators of the downtown food market, stating goals such as supporting a local food system, for example, selling at least 1000 Vermont products. Bids were solicited and both Shaw's (a conventional regional grocery chain) and the Onion River Co-op topped the list of submitted proposals. Onion River began as a buying club in 1973, was not located in the downtown area, and had a small membership base at the time.

Bringing a downtown grocery store to Burlington became a highly politicized process, one that the Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) included in its documentary series, "People Like US: Social Class in America," with the segment, "The Trouble with Tofu" (PBS, 2001).

The choice between a conventional grocery store and a member owned co-operative became emotionally and politically charged. The local media ran a series of articles as public hearings were held, and the issue became rather contentious. Meg Klepeck, City Market's Local Foods Coordinator, provides an overview of what happened: "It was portrayed as a bit of a class war in a Public Broadcast Station (PBS) documentary. A petition called for a citywide referendum providing the City with the ability to offer Shaw's (the conventional grocery store) a \$800,000 tax subsidy. It was defeated and City Council selected the Onion River Co-op proposal. The City added a lease addendum to address resident concerns that arose during this process" (Klepeck, 2010).

City Market, Onion River Co-op is structured as a cooperative that adheres to the principles of a democratic, open organizational structure, with open membership. In this way, it builds collective action and creates connections both within and beyond the cooperative. As of 2011, over 5000 member owners participated in the co-op. A member elected Board of Directors (BOD) represents these member owners, operating under "Policy Governance"; the BOD establishes policies, which are interpreted by the General Manager and carried out by the staff of the store and monitored by the BOD (City Market, Onion River Co-op, 2011a). The business model and organizational structure of City Market, as a cooperative owned by the community, allows and encourages a high level of involvement with the community, as well as serving their members, and is reflected in their guiding principles presented as follows:

- consumers have local access to progressive environmental, social and healthful choices;
- residents enjoy an enhanced quality of life by having access to both conventional and organic products to serve a range of needs;
- the local food system is strengthened by supporting local agriculture and Vermont products;
- the cooperative model is supported;
- owners have a sense of pride in their cooperative; and
- the co-op will meet the needs of low-to-moderate income, disabled and elderly residents.

The Board holds monthly meetings, and any member is encouraged to attend. The Board consists of nine members, elected from among the general membership with annual elections. Directors serve a 3-year term. Two larger "event" meetings are held each year, to encourage as many members to attend as possible. These meetings may be a picnic, a bar-b-q or otherwise festive event to entice members to attend and interact with other members and the co-op leadership. By-laws and the Policy Register explicitly state processes and policies on governance aspects, including budget and financing, governance style, asset protection, customer service, staff treatment, and community outreach (City Market, 2011b). It is clear that self-management and open governance approaches are in place, and this

has helped foster successful operational outcomes. Having full-time, professional staff to manage day-to-day operations is key, and hiring managers committed to the principles of the co-op helps ensure continued progress.

When the Onion River Co-op received the contract with the City, they decided to call the project City Market. They received a \$3 million loan from the USDA Rural Development Division after signing a 100-year lease with the City of Burlington. The longevity of the lease is important to help residents feel connected and that the project is there for the long-term, vested in the community's well-being.

Several members were asked about their perspectives on the co-op and community. It is clear that City Market provides a venue for fostering a sense of belonging and community. For example, one member describes the effect as,

We have been members since our first morning in Burlington over seven years ago. I literally woke up in an empty house (we arrived late the night before) and was one of the first customers of the day for muffins, coffee, and our membership. It helped me feel rooted in our community right away.

Another member thinks that the manner in which the market implements its mission is the key to its success:

City Market has an interesting way of promoting the importance of local foods; little by little people across income spectrums are exposed to alternative foods and become more open to healthier options. If they were more zealous, they would not attract a range of people.

There is a commitment to a mission and scope that goes beyond just healthy foods; however, they want to connect strongly with the community. Part of this mission is to encourage diversity and a mix of people engaged with the market. A member describes the impact of this as,

Take a step back—look at who is here. There is quite a mix of people sitting down eating all together, and it is a reflection of diversity. The market's scope has continued to change and broaden, and this increases membership via natural evolution encouraging more broad-minded and accepting people across a spectrum.

Social, cultural, and economic impacts are many. The 16,000 square foot community-owned food cooperative opened in early 2002 with 2500 visitors the first day. Now, over 3000 customers pass through each day. The impact has been quite positive, as the co-op is a strong community development partner with the City and others, and is extremely dedicated to supporting the local economy and enhancing the sustainability of agriculture. And about those requirements by the City? An initial requirement to carry a minimum of 1000 local products was exceeded, with the market now carrying over 1700 local products. They work with over 1000 Vermont vendors to feature the widest selection of local products in the state—73% of the vendors are located in Vermont and over

60¢ of every dollar in sales stays in the local economy, not at a corporate chain grocery store office located in another state.

“Our model of having a public private partnership for greater good is working. The City went out on a limb for this project; and by conducting the site and market studies, encouraged this project to happen,” explains Clem Nilan, City Market’s general manager. “We have a triple bottom line of People (social responsibility), Planet (environmental stewardship), and Profit (fiscal success), and our model supports all these dimensions” (Nilan, 2009). The impacts have been encouraging.

In terms of human resource impacts, employment created by the City Market is strong. Currently, there are 173 employees, 75% of whom are full-time, with a 65% of those living in Burlington. Average wages exceed livable wages in Burlington by 93¢ an hour, and on average, City Market employees earn 25% more in wages than their counterparts in conventional supermarkets. A strong benefits package is offered, including 100% healthcare premiums paid for full-time employees, a 100% match up to 6% for their retirement program, mass transit benefits, 4-weeks’ paid vacation, and 15% off products. City Market works with the Vermont Association of Business, Industry, and Rehabilitation, the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program, the Association of Africans Living in Vermont, the Howard Center (human services center), and the Offender Reentry Program for encouraging diversity and a wide social impact of the hiring process.

Two other programs round out the social impacts. Seniors Today, which provides “lunch with neighbors” providing over 900 meals a year at no charge and over 4000 meals to four Burlington senior centers since the program began in 2005. Seniors receive a 5% discount on food purchases, too. It is interesting to note that seniors were among the critics of the proposal to bring City Market to downtown and are now some of its strongest supporters. The Food for All member program provides a 10% discount on food purchases to any member who receives food stamps, WIC, or disability, as well as waives membership fees to join the co-op.

The co-op has developed quite a few community outreach partnerships, including the following organizations that serve various community interests: Burlington Area Community Gardens (BACG); Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf (CEFS); Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS); Healthy City Youth Initiative (Friends of Burlington Gardens); New Farms for New Americans (NFNA); Produce For the People; Shelburne Farms Sustainable Schools Project; and Vermont FEED (Food Education Every Day).

The financial aspects have been encouraging and have helped build economic self-sufficiency. Since they are member-owned, the profits generated are returned to members through the Patronage Refund Program. The Co-op was able to give back over \$446,000 to members in 2010. Regarding environmental aspects and impacts, City Market has an array of programs and policies. Teaming with Efficiency Vermont, low cost Earthmate Bulbs are offered to customers, as

well as recycling old light bulbs. They also switched its conventional plastic grocery bags to degradable bags and further encouraged the use of canvas bags by offering a 5¢ refund when shoppers bring their own bags. In the past year, they refunded over \$14,000 to customers that brought their own bags. Other efforts center on physical infrastructure. They have recently undergone a large scale solar project, using the building's rooftop to install an energy generation system.

City Market, Onion River Co-op has developed as a highly successful organization with over 3000 customers daily. In addition to a steady stream of customers, the Co-op has received local and national recognition for its outstanding financial performance and innovative community outreach programs. This case provides insight into encouraging economic self-sufficiency via the cooperative model, with strong institutional support from its host community. It is an effective example of connecting cooperatives with community development, and shows the role each can play in creating those connections.

FINDINGS

This article has attempted to show the importance of exploring food cooperatives and connections to community development because they often bring together long standing principles of self-management and a community focus having a broader influence beyond the cooperative itself. Food is central to individual and community well-being and, as such, represents a nexus for exploring both community development and cooperative development processes and outcomes. The cooperative models align with smart community development practice and provide an example of economic self-help, as food cooperatives are about a collective effort to expand community members' access to healthy and affordable food. A community and cooperative development framework has been presented, to show the connections between these two areas.

Exploring cooperative and community development relations that incorporate economic and social capacity building while at the same time serving as successful business models, for longevity and sustainability in achieving a social enterprise mission, can help foster deeper understanding of these intersections. Some cooperatives are performing in the realm of social entrepreneurship, catalyzing change that helps promote both self-sufficiency and the cooperative while providing community development benefits. In this study, the City Market, Onion River Co-op definitely fits this description. Several findings emerged from the case study analysis:

1. the nature of connection to community influences subsequent outcomes (providing employment opportunities, enhancing economic self-sufficiency, and fostering positive community development processes, impacts, and outcomes); and

2. the role of institutional support was key in the success of the food cooperative in the case study as a means of fostering economic self-sufficiency at the community level.

Fostering community relations strengthens both the cooperative and the community, and provides a broader range of outcomes and impacts than otherwise would be experienced. This in turn leads to more economic impact, and economic self-help and sufficiency by creating and fostering more quality opportunities for residents. The case presented shows the food cooperative as a collective way to build food security while, at the same time, building community.

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