

Historical Tensions, Institutionalization, and the Need for Multi-stakeholder Cooperatives

Summary of presentation given on NC1198 Research Briefing webinar for the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, May 31, 2018.

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In “Democratizing a Rural Economy,” Mooney (2004) suggests that for future generations, social scientists may need to give some greater emphasis to bequeathing not only a sustainable environment but institutions that can set a forum for democratic struggle and voice. As economic entities, agricultural cooperatives may be among the few institutions in rural areas retaining a semblance of economic democratic governance. However, institutionalization processes have left many of these co-ops in a challenged position to sustain their own democratic ethos. The nature of these losses is difficult to understand without historical texture and outside a tension frame of reference.

This presentation will define co-op structure in a manner that specifies some of these tensions and their historical context and pressures, and make suggestions for a more inclusive and possibly more resilient cooperative alternative in the form of multi-stakeholder cooperatives. This latter organizational form may be able to set a development template for addressing various social, economic, and ecological needs, with a more inclusive and enduring democratic organization.

This five minute presentation outlines what a cooperative is, their internal tensions, and the weakening processes of institutionalization in traditional cooperatives. The presentation also suggests the multi-stakeholder cooperative as a possible organizational form that can internalize social and ecological externalities (unlike other organizational forms, and in particular investment models). The presentation ends with a brief comment on three multi-stakeholder cooperatives, i.e. the Oklahoma Food Cooperative, the Black Star Co-op Pub and Brewery, and the Weaver Street Food Cooperative and how each cooperative is able, in-part, to realize (and approximation of) tricot objectives of economic, social, and environmental sustainability.