

2nd Talking coop, Thursday 20th August 2009

REPORT

DFC Values & Vision: Who do we want to be?

The theme for August was designed to help us to explore the bigger picture for where The Co-op is going and how we mean to get there - just in time for the Co-ordinating Body's (CB) current review of the business plan. Some questions that were explored

1. What values underpin The Dublin Food Co-op
2. How should we be together? What's the group culture?
3. Where should The Co-op be going?
4. What's working? What's not working?

PARTICIPATION

Fran Brady, Pauric Cannon, Péars Hussey, John De Courcy, Priscilla Deegan, , Dave Dunn, Anna Felton, Bill Fine, Dot Fine, Kathy McGrath, Mark Malin, Fintan Molloy, Marc Moissard, Dave Moore, Valerie O'Brien, John O'Donoghue, Thomas Pedoussaut, Mai Ryan, Anna Scully, Jean Somers, Roeland Van Elsen.

The speakers corner presentations were given by Roeland Van Else, Bill Fine, Jean Somers, Pauric Cannon and John De Courcy.

Roeland Van Elsen

Roeland outlined four central themes in his contribution.

1. The people of The Co-op

The diversity of the people and perspectives within The Co-op is a characteristic which can be harnessed as a strength. We know that three things bind us together: a care for our planet, a care for our pocket and sense of being in a sharing, co-operative space. A fundamental expression by our members is a trust and respect in The Co-op – an alternative to a lack of trust in other food retail options.

2. A vision for our values.

We can in The Co-op be as free and as happy as we want to be. The concepts of universal creativity and social sculpture can find an accommodating home here at The Co-op. Through listening to our members we get the core values and direction for the future.

3. Where are we going?

We're going here – where we are. We have an organic and Fair Trade food market organised in a communal space. Our work and efforts should aim to celebrate and improve that which we already have. We can incrementally and organically grow towards a simple and clear vision of what we want to be – without the need for drastic mammoth business plans.

4. Short-term goals.

The little touches and the small steps are making a difference in our new home in Newmarket – e.g. the plants and flowers in the back yard from the mini-meithals. These small developments are helping us to make this space a home for The Co-op.

Bill Fine

Bill prepared some thoughts which are here transcribed.

I think there is general agreement on the core values of the Dublin Food Co-operative, these being: democracy, transparency, a commitment to sustainability of the planet and fairness to both producers and to our own employees. While this general agreement on values exists, when we deal with specifics, it is not so clear. Some examples:

Democracy: At the AGM things are agreed by consensus, not by majority. If, however, consensus is not achieved, a 75% approval is needed. Also, from one AGM to the next, major decisions are made on issues not even considered at the AGM (example: taking more space in our current location).

Transparency: Reports are made available to members only once per year. Newsletters are infrequent and they contain little to inform members of the Coordinating Body's plans. There is no formal mechanism for suggestions or feedback on the Coordinating Body's plans.

Commitment to sustainability and fairness: Mixed results in this regard. Perhaps we need a mechanism to further encourage sourcing items produced locally and those produced by cooperatives, rather than multinationals. Example 1: Have producers members pay the DFC 5% on sales of food grown in Ireland, 10% on sales of food grown elsewhere in Europe or in Northern Africa and 15% for food grown elsewhere. This makes food with a smaller carbon footprint from transportation more competitive on price. Example 2: Choose to carry Lilly's cleaning products in preference to others as Lilly's are made in Ireland. For products not made by Lilly's look to UK-made, such as BioD. Carry only the Ecover items for which no Irish or UK alternative is available. Example 3: When an organic Fair Trade item is available, do not carry one that is only organic or only Fair Trade.

So, in what direction would I like to see the Co-operative moving? Currently, I see the Dublin Food Co-op making many decisions based on the economics of having taken on a large rental space, with significant additional expenses, such as utilities. There is pressure to rent out the venue for additional income and to increase the number and variety of products sold. The decision to rent additional space – the room which fronts Newmarket and the upstairs office space – simply increases the pressure to sell additional products, and raise revenue from other sources. Eventually, our current landlord expects us to occupy considerable more space than at present. I fear that taking on even more space, with higher rents will pressure us to make more decisions based on economics rather than on our core values.

Just so this all doesn't sound so negative, I note that the co-operative spirit is alive and well at our meithals and the general atmosphere on Saturdays is very convivial. Also, we do provide for ourselves a viable alternative to the multi-national corporation supplied supermarkets.

Jean Somers

Jean's presentation was based on her experiences volunteering at the Saturday welcome desk which means engaging with newcomers to The Co-op and explaining why we are a Co-op, why membership and why the sign in. This can look like a gatekeeper role and put people off. With the move to Newmarket this role has become more challenging because of the number of people who come thinking they are coming to a farmers market.

This raises the question: what is our priority – get more people shopping in the coop, ensure DFC is financially viable or to promote the collective cooperative ethos, and get more members. Further questions are: are we an organisation or a movement? What is our core message? How can we communicate effectively our core message? The ethos of The Co-op isn't necessarily experienced through shopping – there are intangibles. Jean feels that her participation in The Co-op is part of her lifestyle - many of the 'intangibles' of the Co-op resonate with what she believes in.

Jean found the paper 'Food Democracy in practice: a case study of the Dublin Food Co-operative' by Aisling Murtagh of UCC was very helpful in thinking through The Co-op ethos and in particular found the concept of 'food democracy', a rebalancing of power in the food chain, enlightening. This is particularly relevant for today's culture where we are living more in a market than in a society, where we are meant to exercise power through purchasing rather than through coming together in common cause.

Also, the paper pointed out that farmers markets are also part of the alternative but that The Co-op has rebalancing power more as a fundamental value. Jean found this useful as suggest we shouldn't see just farmers' markets just as competition but also that we can cooperate, are part of a wider movement. Jean is also involved with the Latin American Solidarity Centre which is working on 'food sovereignty' which is a big theme for people in Latin America. She feels this theme parallels the theme of 'food democracy' so there is room for wider interaction around what The Co-op stands for.

For her, then, the Food Co-operative lets her move away from being an atomised, individual consumer to an activist collective consumer. This perspective has helped her in explaining the cooperative to newcomers/potential new members – but not through giving big political message from the welcome desk!

Perhaps a short term goal could be to produce new printed information which assists communicating these messages of the values and vision of the Dublin Food Co-op in the context of today's realities.

Pauric Cannon

Pauric outlined his thoughts on the theme as follows:

What values underpin Dublin Food Co-op?

1. Membership values: Being 'member-owned' and 'member-driven' through their voluntary involvement, members represent the key values underpinning the co-op. The proof of this occurred when we moved from St. Andrew's Centre, Pearse Street to this location almost two years ago. A critical majority of members supported the move thus ensuring its success. Had we been a conventional retail outlet depending on non-member 'customers' and 'passing trade', it is doubtful if we could have survived. Therefore, the move to Newmarket was a litmus test of the value of the loyalty, resilience, patience and commitment of our members.
2. Democratic values: The Rules which form the guiding principles of the co-op and in particular the democratic principle of one-member, one-share, one-vote are co-operative values, that ensure legal ownership of the co-op and democratic control of its affairs by its members.
3. Organic food and social justice values: The aims of the co-op – as set out in the Rules of Dublin Food Co-op - support the values a local Irish Organic food economy and help to build our food security. The co-op also recognises the value of Fairtrade as a means of building trading relationships with developing countries which are based on principles of social and economic justice.

How should we be together?: Ideally, like we are here this evening, in face-to-face conversation with each other. This is the second of the Talkin' Co-op events that have been held. I cherish the hope that these talks will continue into the future, involving members, CB and staff, in co-creative process, lighting the way towards the kind of co-op we would like to create.

What is the co-op's 'group' culture? Community values dominate. It could be said that the co-op is an effective social tool for building

community. Children, also significantly enrich the co-ops community values but we must be ever mindful of their safety.

Where should the co-op be going? The co-op needs to go in the direction of a) value for money for the products it offers its members b) products should meet the highest standards of nutritional value and c) be sourced from producers and suppliers that meet DFCo-op's ethical and environmental pre-agreed standards. The product buying function and stock-control are therefore critical functions on which the viability of the co-op depends.

What's working? The member's Help Rota is working better than I have seen it in a long time. The involvement of members in the management of the Help Rota has been an important contributory factor.

What's not working? Members 'purchasing power' or the co-op's working capital could work more productively. There is for example, duplication of similar products. This means that working capital is tied up in slow moving stock, a situation that tends to increase prices. 'Less is more', there is a need to rationalise our 1200 product range. Reduce product waste: damaged goods, breakages and products with expired best-before dates are not always recorded but ideally they should.

John De Courcy – awaiting proofing.

Unfortunately, the AGM's of the Co-op have in the past had to deal with 12 months of 'stuff'. These Talkin' Co-op sessions are a very useful means of facilitating a two-way dialogues between the CB and the membership. This dialogues is important, if only to keep things within our community fresh and vibrant.

There are set out in our constitution a set of 12 objectives which indicate a value set. Of these, I would like to propose that a focus to nurture (and re-establish in cases) three central values of the Co-op:

- a commitment to wholesome food and ecological goods and services;
Can the Co-op walk the talk of organic, Fair Trade and ecologically sustainable practice?
- education, awareness raising and training
There is a wealth of talent amongst the membership which can be mutually beneficial to share.

- community spirit and atmosphere
Can we make shopping an amiable experience? Can we nurture a spirit of looking out for one another? Can we lead by example if we believe that happiness is contagious?

Within this thinking and around these discussions there is a challenge for us to listen to each other and through dialogue, to bring our values to life through practice and celebration.

I believe that our new home here in Newmarket is working well, and that this can help us to re-focus and re-align our core values.

General Plenary Discussion

Notes from the plenary discussion following the speakers corners presentations:

- Knowledge of our food sources is key motivator for becoming part of The Co-op.
- The Co-op provides an added value shopping experience for its members.
- The early pioneering spirit of The Co-op could be re-energised the help bring to life the shared values and vision of the group.
- The Fair Trade mark and certification, due to its sometimes prohibitive cost, is not always an accurate indication of ethical and ecological value for money. Perhaps The Co-op can look to initiate its own direct relationships with producers, both locally in Ireland and further afield.
- Are the core aims of the organisation meaningful and valuable to us? Are they alive for us?
- The external communications (website, information leaflets, welcome desk support, etc.) are important functions of The Co-op that requires attention.
- Perhaps an induction pack could be prepared to help introduce new members to all things Dublin Food Co-op.