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The Agriculture of the Middle Initiative
Premobilizing Considerations
and Formal Co-operative Structure

THOMAS W. GRAY

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CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF CO-OPERATIVES



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THE AGRICULTURE
OF THE MIDDLE INITIATIVE

THE AGRICULTURE
OF THE MIDDLE INITIATIVE:
PREMOBILIZING CONSIDERATIONS AND
FORMAL CO-OPERATIVE STRUCTURE

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CO-OPERATIVES



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ABSTRACT

THIS PAPER WAS WRITTEN in concert with the Renewing Agriculture of the Middle Task Force, which has noted:

Over 80% of farmland in the US is managed by farmers whose operations fall between small-scale farms with access to direct markets, and large, consolidated, and increasingly industrialized farms. These farmers are increasingly left out of the food system. If present trends continue, these farms, together with the social, economic, and environmental benefits they provide, will likely disappear in the next decade or two. The public good that these farms have provided in the form of land stewardship and community social capital will disappear with them (www.agofthemiddle.org).

This paper has two major foci, 1) the tasks of the agriculture of the middle initiative (AOTM), i.e., its economic, sociological, and ecological agendas, and 2) agricultural co-operatives (and their structures) as an option for AOTM development. When co-operatives are formed, it is from within preexisting socio-economic and historical conditions. AOTM farms (and their potential marketing outlets) exist within this historical context. This paper reviews these conditions and understands them as a context that must be considered prior to any co-operative mobilization. Co-operatives themselves have various internal trade-offs and tensions (business emphasis versus democracy, for example) that are expressed differently, depending upon pressures on the organization. Given AOTM agendas, the historical context, and co-operative tensions, the purpose of the paper is to identify co-operative forms — locals, centralized, federated — that recommend themselves for AOTM development. The

subfunctions of an economic system — production, distribution, consumption — are utilized to sort the various premobilizing conditions. These considerations are presented in three sections: Section I: Socio-Economic Context: Premobilizing Conditions; Section II: Co-operative Organization; and Section III: Considering Co-operative Structures and Dilemmas.

INTRODUCTION

THE AGRICULTURE OF THE MIDDLE INITIATIVE is a bottom-up, multi-centred ensemble of interests that is loosely organized around community/sociological, economic, and ecological concerns of sustainability. Lyson and Green (1999) argue that over the last two decades, two parallel food and agriculture systems have evolved: one progressively large scale and vertically integrated into a global and corporate food system; the other composed of much smaller and more diverse farms oriented primarily to local and regional markets. Between these extremes are farms of the middle. Farmers in this middle range essentially seek to survive by finding a viable place between a food-production system that rewards increasing industrialization and scale and a much smaller system that rewards low cost, small volume, and niche specialization.

These middle interests have two organizing tasks: 1) to build their economic viability while holding ground against some of the most fragmenting and, simultaneously, ordering socio-economic dynamics in our late-modern age (e.g., Fordist industrialization, corporate conglomeration, elite globalization, technology that creates redundancy among farmers and communities, and constructed consumerism); and 2) to build viability in a manner that is consistent with the values and goals of economic, sociological, and environmental sustainability.

CO-OPS A PROBABLE MODEL, BUT NOT WITHOUT PROBLEMS

MOST BUSINESS FORMS tend to be specialized towards making a return on financial investment and are not well suited to pursuing the broader collateral interests of social and environmental sustainability. However, the co-operative business form may be a likely choice for AOTM development, given that co-ops are structured not only as businesses but also as democracies.

Co-ops are organized around three general democratic principles of use:

- ▲ The User-Owner Principle: Those who own and finance the co-operative are those who use the co-operative.
- ▲ The User-Control Principle: Those who control the co-operative are those who use the co-operative.
- ▲ The User-Benefits Principle: Co-operative purpose is to provide and distribute benefits to its users on the basis of their use (Dunn 1988, 83).

Mooney (2004, 1) suggests this organizational form may be ideal for accommodating the many interests of sustainable development, since the co-operative structure is itself designed to meld together the many conflicting voices of a membership organization through the processes of member-based, democratic decision making.

However, co-operative form must be considered with caution. The historical record on agricultural co-operatives integrating so many agendas — economic, sociological, and environmental sustainability, for example — has not been positive. Traditional North American agricultural co-operatives have done well at helping farmers countervail the power of large corporations in the marketplace. They have not had a stellar record of putting sustainability agendas in place, nor of even keeping family farmers (as a group) in farming. Many of today's agricultural co-ops (as organizational derivatives) were formed in the first half of the twentieth century, when production, marketing, and opposition to monopoly interest were exclusively central concerns and environmental responsibility and sustainability

were barely part of the language. According to Fairbairn (1999, 95), many of these co-ops pursued a competitive survival strategy of “expanding, merging, rationalizing,” becoming large bureaucratic organizations in their own right, and distant from their farmer-members.

Fairbairn’s observations are not surprising. As organizations with the dual functions of both businesses and democracies, various tensions are built into the very structure of co-operative organization itself. These tensions are akin to a see-saw that can be tipped in one direction or another, given the nature of external pressures. Changes can occur in a co-op’s competitive environment such that an organization may privilege development of the business rather than the economic democracy, or efficiency rather than equality, or bureaucracy as opposed to participation. Fairbairn’s comment highlights how the tension between democracy and bureaucracy was negotiated over time — “expanding, merging, rationalizing.” The development of bureaucracy was privileged over democratic participation. While co-operatives have much to recommend them as democratic businesses — and as possible forms for AOTM agendas — they operate within a particular historical context. How co-ops might be shaped in a manner to sustain the concerns of middle agriculture — despite such tensions — is a central interest point in this paper.

The first section of the paper provides a brief synopsis of the historical context of the agro-food economy, paying particular attention to the industrialization of *production* agriculture, the parallel development of large, complex, agro-food companies that provide marketing outlets for the *distribution* of production, and the emergence of shifts in the nature of societal *consumption* from labour dominant to late-modern consumerist. Although the detail of the first section may be found elsewhere in the literature, the aim is to highlight realistically the historical socio-economic context (as premobilizing conditions) to co-operative formation and change. Any co-operative must operate within this context. This section is prefaced with a brief summary and outline of a “sustainable agriculture” to emphasize the ideals and goals of the AOTM initiative. Section II reviews co-operative organizations, and their various problematic tensions, as they function in this specified larger environment. Section III makes recommendations on the kind of co-operative structures required to address sustainability agendas, given internal co-op tensions.

SECTION I

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT: PREMOBILIZING CONDITIONS

CONTOURS OF A SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

B^{EUS AND DUNLAP (1990) and Chiappe and Flora (1998) chart the} polemic differences between large-scale versus small-scale agricultural systems. They suggest that these alternatives involve trade-offs and choices between and among some of the following characteristics (among others):

- ▲ farming as a business versus farming as a business and a way of life
- ▲ heavy reliance on external sources of energy, inputs, and credits versus reduced reliance on external sources of energy, inputs, and credits
- ▲ heavy reliance on non-renewable resources versus reliance on renewable resources and conserved non-renewable resources
- ▲ large, capital-intensive production units and technology versus smaller, low-capital production units and technology
- ▲ concentrated control of land, resources, and capital versus dispersed control of land, resources, and capital
- ▲ a narrow genetic base versus a broad genetic base
- ▲ primary reliance on science, specialists, and experts versus primary reliance on personal knowledge, skills, and local wisdom
- ▲ national/international production, processing, and marketing versus more local/regional production, processing, and marketing
- ▲ small rural communities understood as non-essential and dispensable versus small rural communities understood as essential to a sustainable agriculture
- ▲ a larger socio-economy of high consumption to maintain economic growth versus restrained consumption and broad resource conservation to benefit future generations

Green and Hilchey (2002, 15) expand on this work, suggesting that the smaller-scale, alternative development path, oriented as it is towards economic, ecological, and sociological sustainability, has several benefits that include:

- ▲ sustaining the independent, relatively small businesses (family farms) that contribute to the maintenance of a dispersed ownership agriculture, a strong middle class and civil society
- ▲ sustaining the local economy via the “multiplier effects” of dollars spent locally from these farms, the provision of local jobs, and local purchasing of inputs and services
- ▲ sustaining the environment with a smaller scale, low-input production agriculture that better protects water quality, soil, air, and biodiversity
- ▲ sustaining an agriculture that produces an output of fresh, wholesome, and nutritious foods and enhancing the viability of a small-scale, socio-economic culture better attuned to raising healthy individuals and families

Many farms on the small end of the farm-size continuum and near metropolitan communities have been able to reproduce themselves (while emphasizing the interrelationships of an ecologically minded socio-economy) by producing nutritious, frequently organic food that is directly marketed to nearby consumers looking for locally grown “natural” and organic foods. However, the volume that these markets can absorb is limited and precludes their use as a major outlet for mid-sized farms that produce large volumes of products and commodities that are distant from the markets of metropolitan areas. In order to survive, these larger farms (the farms of the middle) must find an economically viable place between, as noted earlier, a food production system that rewards increasing industrialization and scale and a much smaller system that rewards low cost, small volume, and niche-product specialization.

To this end, the paper offers suggestions on how the co-operative form of organization might be utilized to find this midplace and help renew agriculture of the middle farms. As stated, co-operative organizations exist within a historical context, as do the changes they may undergo. From the perspective of this paper, these conditions are understood as a pre-mobilizing context to co-operative formation and are therefore reviewed here, from the earliest petroleum-driven mechanizations, to the “high-modern” reconstruction of consumer tastes — that is, from production through consumption (a path any commercial food prod-

uct must follow). Any co-operative formation (existing or planned) will have to negotiate a path through this context of conditions.

INDUSTRIALIZATION OF PRODUCTION AND CONGLOMERATION OF AGRO-FOOD FIRMS: PARALLEL AND INTERPENETRATING DEVELOPMENT

THE PROGRESSIVE DEVELOPMENTS in agricultural production and corporate conglomeration of agri-business firms are presented chronologically below to emphasize not only their historical entrenchment, but also how their respective incremental developments (that is, food production and large-scale agri-business involvement in the provision of production inputs, food processing, and product distribution) have reinforced and strengthened one another, to become a complex of powerful and corporate-embedded agricultural interests that continually push further industrialization.

- 1) World War I onward: The progressive development and use of tractors and other mechanical implements (as provided by incipient agri-business firms) allowed individual farmers to farm much larger acreages (while creating a tendency to displace the use of animal and direct human power on farms).
- 2) World War II onward: The progressive development of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, other chemicals, as well as off-farm seeds and feeds (as provided by agri-business firms) allowed individual farmers to intensify production per acre (while creating strong tendencies to displace the use of farm-produced feed, seed, and fertilizer with off-farm inputs).
- 3) Late 1950s onward: The development of artificial breeding, and the quality and quantity of animal biologicals and antibiotics (as provided by agri-business firms) permitted increases in yields of animal products per animal, as well as the numbers of animals that could be raised in one location.

4) Post-Depression, post–World War II era onward: A deepening industrial organizational strategy of conglomeration, firm integration (vertically and horizontally), multi-regionalization, and globalization of corporate firms evolved. These strategies gave firms greater resilience and robustness to ride out the cyclical expansions and recessions of a progressively advancing industrial economy, while avoiding a repeat of the collapse of 1929. Other strategies — joint ventures, strategic alliances, and outsourcing, for example — became evident in the 1990s as accommodations to such 1970s and 1980s’ stressors as: oil crises; relaxed regulation of international monetary arrangements after system collapse; coincident inflation and high unemployment (stagflation); organizational downsizings and closings concurrent with the recession of the 1980s; cyclical and product-specific trade wars alternating between free trade and protectionism; and saturation of commodity-export markets and falling prices (Fairbairn 2004, 46–49).

From this context, the high-modern corporation emerged, composed of “networks of holdings, joint ventures, subsidiaries, contracts, and outsourced services” within a larger context of continuing mergers, acquisitions, and conglomerations (Fairbairn 2004, 46–47). These organizational strategies have given present-day firms greater reach, both horizontally (through multiple global location and manifold products) and vertically (from producer to consumer), while simultaneously retaining and deepening their flexibility. And, as documented by Heffernan and Hendrickson (1999), Sexton (1997), Marion and Kim (1991), and Cotterill (1999), these strategies crystallized in the agricultural sector with the development of progressively fewer firms accounting for increasingly larger proportions of the farm-input supply and farm-output processing and marketing chains.

5) Mid-1980s onward: What some have termed a “new agriculture” emerged during the mid-1980s. This “new agriculture” involved not only a deepening in production innovations, but also a blending of production technologies with developments in methods for product distribution to consumers (Boehlje and Schrader 1998; Boehlje 1998; Boehlje and Sonka 1999; Royer and Rogers 1998). These developments have included: the continued deepening of mechanical, biological, and

chemical technologies, augmented with the development and application of new biotechnologies; the continued development of (agri-business driven) food-supply chains that tend towards vertical integration from producers to consumers; the progressive development of information-monitoring technologies that permit trait-identity traceability along a food chain, with possibilities for end-users to provide feedback (end-user responsiveness); and an expansion of the competitive context in the international arena that increasingly involves global sourcing and selling of products by large corporations that have moved from regional and national to multinational status.

These developments have reciprocally reinforced each other, both technically and organizationally, as large corporate actors have sought new and relatively “safe” investments in order to compete (or to escape direct competition) with other corporate actors. Information monitoring allowed for the inspection and standardization of production, assembly, and distribution, as food products are moved through what has come to be a vertically integrated (and organizationally contained) food chain — from dirt to plate. New biotechnologies have offered opportunities for new product development, greater technical control, and expanded opportunities for profit realization. The greater the integration of a food chain within a single (though complex) firm, the greater a firm’s control over product characteristics, deliverable quantities, and timeliness of delivery. The less uncertainty there is, the greater a corporate entity’s facility to shift sourcing and selling geographically (and globally) to maximize profits. A firm’s use of production contracts with farmers can help solidify the food chain at the producer level, serving to stabilize and standardize agricultural raw material for food-chain production.

- 6) Contemporary Agro-Food Complex: The simultaneity of these several trends, although cyclical in impact, has resulted in a structure of agricultural production that exceeds consumption demand, with consequent prices insufficient to maintain long-run farm viability. This structure has produced a complex of impacts, including continued expansions in farm scale (in order to maintain income); debt incurred to finance these expansions; still more production due to increased in-

dustrialization of farming; the redundancy of farmers, given food demand; farm bankruptcy; farm consolidation; and farmer displacement. Functions performed on the farm have changed as well, with increasing amounts of inputs such as feed, seed, and fertilizer being produced off the farm and sold to farmers as purchased inputs, thereby pinching farmers between high input costs and low product prices. The distribution linkage between farmers' production and consumer products is facilitated by increasingly large and diversified firms that provide, respectively, input-supply sales, product processing, as well as marketing (some firms providing all three functions) in an increasingly globalized marketplace.

- 7) Developments in information-monitoring systems and computerization, the continued development of antibiotics, and innovations in farm architecture and engineering have helped to facilitate and expand confined and high-density animal production. In turn, the deepening of these tendencies has augmented pressures that displace production from a family-farm scale, particularly in the case of poultry but also (with major inroads occurring) in the production of hogs and, more recently, in dairy production. Many farmers have managed to survive these trends by entering into production contracts with off-farm agri-business concerns, but have often done so with a resultant loss of discretion over their own farm-based production processes (Boeljhe and Schrader 1998; Thu and Durrenberger 1997).

THE HISTORICAL SHIFTS IN CONSUMPTION: FROM LABOUR/FAMILY TO HIGH MODERN CONSUMER

Labour/Family Consumption

THROUGHOUT MUCH OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, the agro-food regime described above — the production, assembly, and distribution of food products from producers to consumers — had a predominant (though not exclusive) orientation to a labour-driven and family consumer market. The market for food was shaped by a socio-economy that became progressively less rural and increasingly more

metropolitan and urban — the urban population increasing due to people being displaced from farming communities, as well as from population growth generally within metropolitan areas. Giddens (1991, 1998, 2000) variously summarizes aspects of the social and economic organization of this era as:

- ▲ a social system, predominantly of a family form — in which the husband was the breadwinner and the spouse a housewife and mother
- ▲ a homogeneous labour market where men threatened with unemployment were mostly manual workers willing to do any job at a wage that ensured their survival and that of their families
- ▲ the dominance of mass production in basic sectors of the economy, which tended to create stable, if unrewarding, conditions of work for many in the labour force
- ▲ a national economy that was primarily domestic, such that export-import trade had relatively little influence on larger economic dynamics

The linkage between food production and food consumption was made by increasingly large, complex, multi-product, and multi-location businesses that produced standardized, manufactured, and inexpensive edible food products for consumption by a labour force of manual and factory workers and their families. This manner of food production (and consumption) blended well with an overall national economy that was organized for economic growth through the investments and outputs of increasingly large firms within certain basic industries — those producing consumer durables (like washing machines, refrigerators) and automobiles. The production of ample supplies of inexpensive food meant labourers (and their families) had more money to support the consumption of these basic consumer items. The food-consumption diet was one of inexpensive bread and butter, milk, meat, and potatoes (grain, dairy, livestock, and vegetables) (Friedmann 1995). This socio-economic structure — and its trends of production and consumption — shaped a large share of the market demand for food throughout the twentieth century.

Construction of the High Modern Consumer

According to Bauman (2000), Gertler (2004), Beck (1992), and Giddens (1990, 1991), a new path, or new era, of socio-cultural and economic development “noticeably” emerged somewhere in the late 1960s. These authors argue this path is characterized by intense use of tech-

nology (e.g., communications, computers, and biotechnology), globalization, high specialization and high expertise, high consumption, high mobility, and institutional reflexivity. Giddens in particular has suggested that globalization, specialization/expertise, and reflexivity are predominantly important to this era (of high modernity) and are instrumental in constructing a new dimension to consumer demand — augmenting, if not displacing in some instances, the earlier meat-and-potatoes and labour-driven consumption market. This paper will draw upon both modernity theories and concepts of human attachment theory to more fully highlight the shift in the character of food demand from labour-driven to high-modernity consumption. Though Giddens (1990, 1991) does not write about “food” demand per se, his works are suggestive of how these shifts in consumption occur.

In some sense, consumers have been reconstructed during this high-modernity era. “The most fundamental relationship we develop is attachment, i.e., embeddedness and groundedness. Attachment is fundamental to building trust and security, or a secure sense of self” (DeAngelis 1997, 2; see also Cross 2003, Theodori 2001, and Goudy 1990 for sociological treatments of attachment, and Cortina and Marrone 2003, Karen 1998, and Solomon and George 1999 for psychological approaches with sociological implications). Historically, psychological attachment becomes embedded in — and is received (and acted upon) from within — a cultural context of traditions and the norms of “living” and “being” within communities (see Giddens’ 1991 and his discussion of Winnicott). Traditionally, these communities have been located within, and bounded by, geographic locations. However, the interrelationships of globalization and continued development in specialization/expertise of high modernity tend to displace the embedded traditions and earlier ways of living and being. Traditional authorities either become discredited due to the high-tech expertise of others, or are simply reduced to one choice of many choices readily available. New authorities and multiple authorities — in the form of expertise and specialization, as well as exposures to the multiple ways of being, working, and living via globalization influences (and globalization demands) — shift people away from earlier, more familiar patterns of living.

The dynamism of these processes is intensified due to the influence of what has come to be an ever-present reflexivity, that is, “the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity ... to chronic revision in light of new information and knowledge (Giddens 1991, 20).

Knowledge and information, therefore, are constantly being revised and updated and can only be taken as “good until further notice.” This constant reflexivity intensifies and leverages upwards the processes of globalization and specialization/expertise to ever-more-fluid levels. Combined with the pushes and pulls of high mobility, these developments leave many people experiencing the socio-economic culture as “context running away with itself” (Giddens 2002; Cassell 1993; and as reflected in Bauman 2000).

In his books *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), and *Runaway World* (2000), Giddens argues that within this “runaway context,” people carry large amounts of existential anxiety. The processes of globalization, specialization/expertise, and reflexivity disembody people from felt-known and unquestioned aspects of their socio-economic culture.

Within these cultural dynamics, people shift — intra-psychically — away from earlier conflicts about knowing “how to fit where” within culturally embedded patterns (and the struggles of violating (or not) traditions, norms, and acceptance of authority) to anxieties more indicative of troubled self-acceptance, if not rejection of the self by the self. The high-modern consumer has come to exist in a context that demands self-definition and redefinition, while simultaneously contending with increasingly tenuous links to traditional norms of living, and fewer and fewer long-term links to communities with a geographic base, and to communities in general. Giddens (1991) characterizes this era as one of pervasive and structurally embedded existential anxiety. And in consequence, high modernity has emerged as an era characterized by a continued seeking of control of self, risk, and institutions and by a continued searching for the felt-secure (Gray 2000).

REACTION: CONSUMPTION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT DESIRE

Consumption

MANY PEOPLE PLAY OUT THESE ANXIETIES in the marketplace. Consumption appeals because it soothes the psyche directly and seemingly addresses the problematic qualities of high modernity. Attractiveness, beauty, personal

popularity, and acceptance are touted through the consumption of the right kinds of goods and services (Giddens 1991; Bauman 2000). The implicit promise is social acceptance or at least comfort and, as a corollary, safety (Gray 2000).

Duncan (1999) refers to these goods and services as “designer” products. Within high modernity, they provide discriminating choices and part of a constructed home for one’s self-identity. They signify not only “taste” but also political, environmental, and dietary correctness, perceived interpersonal safety, and social responsibility, characteristics well beyond the earlier labour-defined, “meat and potatoes,” “bread and a bottle of milk” in importance. As designer products, they become multidetermined with meaning and cultural significance.

Consumption solutions are ephemeral, however, within the continual reflexiveness of the culture. Solutions are here today, displaced tomorrow, never really stemming people’s existential anxieties. At best, these solutions offer only temporary relief, thereby giving consumption a particular high-modern and only temporarily sated colouration.

Social Movement Desire

Melucci’s (1988) work on “new social movements” parallels Giddens’s (1990, 1991, 1994, 2000) writings on “a life and emancipatory politics.” The dynamics of high modernity, while central to dis-embedment and its own brand of anxiety production, also create conditions for more positive reactions. A drive or desire “to be” (as a positive reaction to existential anxiety) has in part displaced a drive “to have.” As Melucci notes (1988, 329; see also Melucci 1996), “The freedom to have ... has been replaced by a struggle for freedom to be.” This struggle is particularly evident in the demands and articulations of social movements, whereby claims are made for improved quality of life, easier self-expression, and safety in the freer acknowledgment and development of identities — race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality (see also Buechler 1995, Johnston et al. 1994, and Larana et al. 1994 for further discussion on contemporary social movements). Such demands are different from the older co-operative and labour movement grievances (the struggles “to have”) — based, as they have been, in mobilizations for fairer distributions of resources, fairer prices, and greater power in the marketplace.

“Since the 1970s, many of the new or expanding kinds of co-ops have been those dealing with values, lifestyles, or services, rather than basic material goods. Much of the growth in housing co-ops, worker co-ops, community development organizations, women’s co-ops, aboriginal co-ops, co-ops associated with ecological ideas or health, and others, have occurred within this new [high-modern] or post-industrial framework” (Fairbairn 1999, 47). Although “to have” agendas are still present, they have been augmented with a predominant interest to express and deepen identities and ways of being. Slow food, organic agriculture, and sustainable agriculture are multi-dimensional within this context. They provide food-consumption items that are at once both political-economic but also concretely real. These items can have appeal — in an era of existential anxiety — because of their soothing affects as food unto itself, their nutrition value, but also as food that is safe (and perceived less risky) and produced in a manner that seeks to embed production in environmental, economic, geographic, and community sustainability (perceived permanence).

SUMMARY OF THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT AND PREMobilizing CONDITIONS

ALTHOUGH SHIFTING HISTORICALLY in terms of predominance, the trends noted in Section I are all present as an amalgam of influences in the current socio-economic and ecological context. In situations where co-operatives are formed, these trends, rather than disappearing, can be expected to continue, and to set limits on the character and nature of co-operative development. They are likely to include:

- ▲ continued pressure for concentration and centralization of farming via technological development and industrialization
- ▲ continued pressure to integrate food chains from production through processing and marketing, via technology, and organizationally with production contracts between the corporate firm and farmer
- ▲ continued pressure for vertical and horizontal integration among corporate firms

in the food sector (and outside of it, but with food firms) via conglomeration of related and unrelated products and activities at multiple locations, including global conglomeration (and the consequent global sourcing, selling, and processing of products)

- ▲ continued use of joint ventures, strategic alliances, mergers, and consolidations among corporate actors to realize vertical and horizontal integrations and conglomerations
- ▲ continued demand from consumers for products oriented towards addressing the anxiety-driven problems of high modernity — that is, products that can both soothe and provide vehicles (or be advertised and sold as consumption vehicles) for self-expression and identity
- ▲ continued drive from the larger population to find vehicles to mitigate the loss of embeddedness (beyond consumption) that can address safety and permanence— for example, production for economic, environmental, and community sustainability
- ▲ continued possibility of social movements (and co-ops) to mobilize around the needs “to have” in order to mobilize for fairer distribution of resources, fairer prices, and greater power in the marketplace
- ▲ continued possibility of new social movements (and co-ops) to address the various needs for identity, individual efficacy, as well as group identity and community, a needed sense of safety, and an embedded permanence both by pursuing the stated goals of the organization itself, but also through the very act of participating in the organization
- ▲ continued demand for “bread and milk” and “meat and potatoes”
- ▲ continued ability of investment firms to find vehicles for investment in profitable activities, regardless of the interests served by the original activities (co-op social goals for example) — implying continued pressures from the investment firm sector to compete with co-operatives, to acquire them, and/or subordinate them to investment interests

These trends — though shifting historically in terms of predominance — are present as an amalgam of influences in the current socio-economic context. Competitors with an investment interest, searching for a return on investments, will continue to influence the shape of production, the organizational nature of distribution, as well as the nature of consumption. Essentially, the interests of the agriculture of the middle must contend with, accommo-

date, and/or oppose the tendencies of an advanced investment-oriented economy that has resulted in the concentration and centralization of agricultural production into fewer and larger farm units, an organizational conglomeration that consolidates and expands market positions through vertical and horizontal integration, and food consumption that reflects consumers' needs for nutrition, but also soothing, status, and promises of safety and permanence.

The co-operative model provides a strategy for empowering local producers with economic organizational democracy. As businesses, co-ops have had to find profitable consumer-oriented outlets for their producers' products, while historically competing in a marketplace with firms often larger and sometimes global in reach. These pressures, as noted earlier, create a series of tensions that can compromise the original purposes of the organization. Some of these tensions are reviewed in Section II in the spirit of Mooney's (2004) contention that development strategies that do not at least acknowledge their basic oppositions and tensions — or utilize them in their planning and practice — are disadvantaged and will likely tend towards failure. It is important to be aware that when gains are seemingly made, they may be closely linked to coincident losses. Ideally, a co-op can achieve both a positive business response, as well as such larger collective goals as the sustainability agendas of the AOTM initiative.

SECTION II

CO-OPERATIVE ORGANIZATION

This section provides a prologue to the later consideration of co-operative types (local, centralized, federated) and their respective applications to the challenges of the AOTM. Two issues are reviewed here: 1) the internal dilemmas and tensions of co-operative organization and how development of one aspect of a tension may result in compromising a linked opposite (participation versus bureaucracy, for example); and 2) how agricultural, co-operative history suggests the co-operative model as an appropriate vehicle for middle agendas, but only if close consideration is given to these several internal tensions — as played out historically.

CO-OPERATIVE DILEMMAS/TENSIONS

CO-OPERATIVES ARE AT ONCE democratic associations of members as well as businesses (Craig 1993; Lasley 1981; Mooney 2004; Mooney and Gray 2002; Mooney, Roahrig, and Gray 1996). A co-op's structure, purposes, and interactions with its external environment produce tensions and trade-offs between its political and sociological aspects (as an organizational democracy) and its economic aspects (as a business). Mooney (2004), Mooney and Gray (2002), and Gray, Heffernan, and Hendrickson (2001) highlight some of these dilemmas to include the trade-offs and tensions between and among their basic purposes of earnings versus service versus life-meaning, and such organizational dilemmas and trade-offs as: individualism versus collectivism; competitive individualism versus co-operative behaviour; business efficiency versus participative democracy; complex expertise versus grassroots wisdom; centralized decision making versus decentralized decision making; bureaucratic logic versus co-operative logic; and democratic bureaucracy versus direct participative democracy.

Dilemmas in Co-operative Purpose

“Most economic organizations are organized around at least one of three basic purposes, i.e., making profits, providing service, and/or realizing meaning” (Torgerson, Reynolds, and Gray 1998, 1; see also Craig 1993). Exemplar organizations tend to range along a continuum, from investment-oriented firms (IOFs — the dominant US business form) at the profits end to the kibbutz at the life-meaning end (see Figure 1). US forms of co-operative organization are found at different locations on the continuum but predominantly within goals of service. Focus is on economically serving the greatest number of people over the longest period of time (Craig 1993; Nadeau and Thompson 1996). Typically, however, co-operative organizations contain elements of all three tendencies, having earnings needs as well as service and internal participation and meanings mandates (Torgerson, Reynolds, and Gray 1998).

Figure 1. Continuum of Co-operative Purposes

Players	IOF	New Generation Co-ops	Open Marketing Co-ops	Farm Supply Co-ops	Consumer Goods	Kibbutz
Purpose	Profits			Services		Life/Meaning

Organizational Dilemmas and Demands in the Business Environment

How a co-operative interacts with its external environment produces different degrees of tension and trade-offs within an organization, much of it conditioned by the market. For example, participation and democracy take time. The market’s demand for efficiency, quickness, and “being nimble in the market” is ever present and ever felt. These opposing pulls can become manifest in the structural form and in the internal logic of the co-op. Both the needs for efficiency and a predominant emphasis on the bottom line can drive organizational form towards a bureaucratic shape and logic that emphasizes development of organizational hierarchies, centralized decision making, and top-down flows of authority (Breimyer 1965, 1996). A bureaucratic logic, as distinct from a grounded co-operative logic, can displace local responsiveness, decentralized decision making, participation, and involvement.

These linked oppositions are not simply or solely a matter of choice and will. Tensions (and co-operative character) are in precarious balance in the market. Given a competitive market over time, efficiency criteria tend to drive organizational form towards bureaucratic models (organizational complexity and expertise) and away from direct participation and grassroots involvement. When participation declines, as is often the case when organizations tend towards centralization of decision making, it can become increasingly difficult to distinguish co-operative behaviour from the behaviour of investor-oriented firms (and these firms’ exclusionary emphasis on earnings). Such co-ops begin to act like any other business and, in the process, can lose or severely compromise their service and meaning purposes (and economic democracy goals). However, for the co-op to act without recognition of market imperatives (e.g., the need for earnings) is to risk the loss of their business presence in the marketplace.

For example, “many new co-operatives entered the field in the 1970s [and later]

associated with ecological and organic-food movements” (Fairbairn 2004, 46). Many of these organizations went bankrupt during the 1980s and 1990s due to a failure to form strong wholesaler organizations, a necessary degree of layered organizational complexity (Fairbairn 2004). A co-op that demands organizational simplicity, while dismissing other requisites of the market, risks losing its capacity to compete in the marketplace and, ultimately, to meet members’ needs. However, co-ops that are “all business” and leave various equality, equity, service, participation, and meaning aspects unaddressed, risk losing members’ loyalty and patronage. Thus, business co-operatives must face several dilemmas, among them — perhaps one of the most troublesome — the tension between developing bureaucratic strategies (which may be better adapted to the short-term earnings demands of the market) versus strategies that are based within slower, democratically based (informationally complex) approaches that privilege participation, values-based meanings, and economic democracy.

SUCCESSFUL CO-OPERATIVE MOBILIZATIONS: ORGANIZING “TO HAVE”

WITHIN THE PANOPLY of agriculture of the middle interests (social, economic, and environmental sustainability), the cutting foci have involved (and will involve) social-economic and political struggle. In a 2004 article, Mooney suggested that the co-operative organization is ideal for accommodating the many interests of sustainability since it was established with a tradition of countervailing power and an internal structure (democratic) designed for conflict. The ability of co-operatives to sustain struggle through time in a contentious and highly competitive environment, and survive, has been documented by both Gertler (2004) and Mooney (2004).

For example, the origins of many (though not all) US and Canadian agricultural co-operatives are embedded in an era that spans the late-nineteenth century to World War II. Their legitimacy is best marked by the passage of the US *Capper-Volstead Act* in 1922, which

established the legal right of farmers to co-operate (with parallel legislation occurring in Canada). Many of these early co-ops were organized to oppose monopolistic and oligopolistic investment firms at local, regional, and national levels. They were fair share (“to have”) struggles.

Mooney (2004) and others (Torgerson, Reynolds, and Gray 1998) contend that these co-operatives have had eminent success in sustaining themselves through these struggles. Craig (1993) argues that they have been instrumental in breaking monopolies and cartels, eliminating both windfall profits and middlemen, and distributing wealth more equitably. “Though not the dominant form of agri-business (except in a few commodities), the co-operative market share is usually about one-third of marketed goods, and over one-fourth of input supplies (USDA-RD 2006). From a historical point of view, this must be recognized as a success, given the origins of the movement as a form of resistance to the oppressive conditions of monopoly and oligopoly . . .” and its resilience to continue to service farmers over time in the face of this power (Mooney 2004, 78). However, although there have been real successes, these gains have been accompanied by other results that have been disadvantageous to farmers as a group.

Historic Strategy: Individual Collective versus Mutual Collective Benefits

Co-operatives have both individual collective benefits and mutual collective benefits. Farmers who receive a higher price for their individual products when marketed at a co-op are receiving an individual benefit due to the joint action of farmers. The fact that individual farmers can raise a particular product due to being able to reach a market that no farmer could reach individually is a mutual collective benefit (Parnell 1999). Historically, agricultural co-ops have tended to emphasize individual collective benefits, rather than mutual benefits. Most have supported a trajectory that depends upon large, capital-intensive production units and technology, with heavy reliance on external sources of energy and credit. This path of development has been successful economically for many agricultural co-ops and has enabled them to oppose monopoly interests in the marketplace. However, they have failed many farmers (when farmers are considered as a group) because they followed a development path (traditional and capital intensive) that deepened tendencies towards farmer displacement

(Fairbairn 2004; Craig 1993; Gray 2000). Individual farmers have been able to survive (and have been assisted by co-operative presence in the marketplace), but the mass of farmers as a group, particularly family farmers, have not.

Development of Bureaucracy

In order to survive as businesses and to compete with large (highly robust) multinational investment firms, many co-operatives followed organizational strategies that paralleled those of their competitors (as articulated in Section I). This strategy allowed them to develop into a credible, though subordinate, market force (Mooney 2004; Craig 1993). However, their success came with the costs of privileging a bureaucratic logic of “expansion, merger, and rationalization,” and an organizational form that was distant from their own individual members (Fairbairn 1999, 2004; Mooney and Gray 2002).

ORGANIZING BOTH FOR FAIR SHARE “TO HAVE” AND IDENTITY “TO BE” STRUGGLES

WITHIN THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CULTURE of high modernity, collective mobilizations and new social movements tend to be formed more often around concerns of individual identity, individual efficacy, and the need for community, safety, and a sense of permanence (Melucci 1988, 329). “To have” and “to be” tendencies co-exist, but, in general, grassroots predispositions for expression/identity are more paramount (though not exclusively so).

Agricultural co-operatives with sustainability agendas may need to follow both the older market and the more recent identity/expression logics of mobilization. Clearly, these co-ops need a business presence in the marketplace to survive; however, coming together as farmers, with the broad social, economic, and environmental agendas of the middle, may

require farmers to do more than organize for such goals as lower costs, higher prices, and a market for their products (“to have” agendas). “People’s propensity to become involved in collective action in general is tied to their capacity to define an identity” (Melucci 1988, 329). The need to survive economically may bring farmers to a co-op, but “new social movement” history suggests these “to have” agendas may not be enough. Rather, plans more oriented to farmers’ mutual identity as farmers of the middle (seeking to ensure their joint interests of socio-economic and ecological sustainability) may move them beyond struggles for their individual survival (as has been the predominant pattern historically in agricultural co-operatives) to one more grounded in their mutual survival as a group. This process might then re-embed farmers within a system of production that is organized for farmer and community reproduction and environmental preservation, rather than farmer and community displacement, and environmental degradation.

Consumption Desires

Ironically, it may be the larger marketplace and the longings of the larger culture that are facilitative of this embedment process. As alluded to previously, nutritious food raised with environmentally sound methods by family farmers is increasingly understood as a preference among consumers (*Center for Rural Affairs News* June 2004). Images and symbols proclaiming sentiments of “back to the land” and “back to nature” abound in the larger culture and, despite the persistence of “country bumpkin” images, there is also an acknowledgment of the “social and human character benefits of learning honesty, hard work, ingenuity, flexibility, and fairness as part of being reared in a farm and rural environment” (Thu and Durrenberger 1997, 1). More general themes of family farming and rural lifestyles are evident in various advertising images (for example, Nature’s Pride, Country Time, and Florida’s Natural) as well as in the mass-media advertising of such multinational agribusiness firms as Archer Daniels Midland and Dean Foods. These images sell products on a massive scale and in a socio-economic context in which economists tell us “the consumer is king” (the determinant in the marketplace). Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people identify sufficiently with these images to invest their consumer dollars in the various associated products.

Following Giddens, the dynamics of high modernity — globalization, specialization, reflexivity — tend to disembed people from many of their various cultural traditions, norms, and authorities, resulting in generalized conditions of existential anxiety. People have sought to lessen this anxiety in a number of ways, among them simply consuming the kinds of goods that are bundled within promises of social acceptance, attractiveness, beauty, and personal popularity. Other consumption has been oriented to actually creating socio-economic structures that re-embed people within a sustainable, and identifiable ecologically sound, socio-economy.

As suggested above, and in the context of high modernity, consumer desire may transcend the demand for consuming food simply for its soothing effects — given the stressors of socio-cultural disembedding and resulting existential anxiety. The published results of a survey done by Roper Public Affairs in 2004 for the US-based Organic Valley co-operative (www.organicvalley.coop) document consumer support for a family-farm-based, environmentally responsible food system. This survey reports that consumers “trust” a family-farm agriculture over an industrially organized agriculture to conserve resources and protect the environment. There is a desire for environmental sustainability and, according to this survey, a willingness to pay more for food so produced.

Mobilizations in any social movement are captured in part in symbols and identities. If family farmers of the middle were to combine their different needs for empowerment in the marketplace — by augmenting agendas of “getting a fair share” and “the freedom to have” with an agenda of “a freedom to be” — this might improve their chances to live out and express their identities as family farmers, living on farms, making a living farming. Consumers (in their capacity as citizens) may in fact deepen the possibilities of these agendas with their own needs for safe and nutritious food and an expressed need for a sense of permanence (potentially approximated with sustainability agendas) pursued in small to mid-size family farm structures.

SECTION III

CONSIDERING BOTH CO-OPERATIVE STRUCTURES AND DILEMMAS

INDIVIDUALISM, COLLECTIVE ACTION, AND VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

RECRUITING AND ORGANIZING family farmers for collective action and co-operative organization present dilemmas. As Thu and Durrenberger (1997) and Lauck (2000) report, family farmers historically have carried a series of values that include privileging hard work, ingenuity, a sense of fairness, rights of property, individualism, and independence. Individualism and independence, in particular, can be an anathema to collective action.

Co-operatives work best when formed by individuals who have a mutual interest in achieving some goal they cannot achieve as individuals. However, this also implies that individuals acting in accordance with the agreements of a co-op may have to limit some of their individual freedoms to obtain benefits that are only available on a collective basis. For some farmers, neither individual-collective nor mutual-collective benefits may be sufficient for them to give up their respective autonomies. In a co-operative, demands for product standardization, obligatory marketing schedules, and/or various sustainability criteria may serve as a disincentive for some to join, in spite of other possible benefits. This individual-collective tension is ever present — to varying degrees — in co-ops in terms of how readily potential members (and existing members) are willing to give up aspects of their individual decision choices for the benefits obtainable in group action.

However, in Canada and the US, co-operatives are structured in a manner that permits aspects of individual choice and individualism to be expressed. For example, in their

initial framings, no farmer is forced to join a co-op; no member is forced to remain in a co-op; indeed, members may leave a co-op whenever they choose. They can join and participate or they can choose not to. However, once in the organization as continuing members, the individual-collective tension does not disappear but is present in various ways, depending on how the co-op itself is structured. This tension—plus others as discussed previously (e.g., bureaucracy versus participation, efficiency versus democracy)—may then become manifest in the organization. Historically, agricultural co-operatives have followed three organizational structures: local co-operatives, centralized co-operatives, and federated co-operatives.

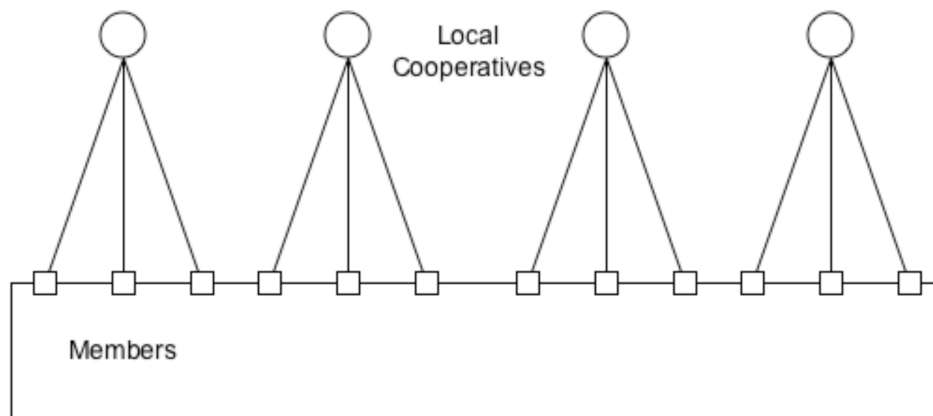
LOCAL CO-OPERATIVES

OF THE THREE CO-OPERATIVE STRUCTURES, locals are the most bottom-up and grassroots (see Figure 2). In general, local associations serve relatively small numbers of members with similar interests; a local co-op may have as few as ten to fifteen members or as many as five hundred to a thousand (Schaars 1971, 50). Among many possible activities, farmers in a co-op may collectively buy supplies and services, market their output, and/or process and market products. Members typically live within a relatively small area and many know each other. Knowing each other provides a rough measure of local and small. Relationships are more informal. Although business must be done and is the central activity of the organization, member participation (beyond business patronage) in governance, in meetings, and in decision making can provide the additional benefit of a sense of individual and community efficacy, relationship, and meaning. Participation in the co-operative itself can create and deepen these latter effects.

Democratic control runs from the members as a group to the local association. A board of directors, elected from the membership, sets policy and may make managerial decisions, depending on the complexity of the business. If the business activity is conducted throughout the year (rather than on a seasonal basis) and has a degree of complexity not easily resolved with part-time management, then a professional manager is usually hired. With

the introduction of a professional manager, a tension between grassroots (member) wisdom and complex (managerial) expertise may become more evident.

**Figure 2:
Local Cooperatives**



Source: Schaars, p. 51.

Local co-operatives have the organizational potential to achieve many of the objectives of the agriculture of the middle. Open, transparent, and democratic, these co-ops can provide a vehicle for farm-member voice and for collective farm-interest mobilization. They are local by definition and, as a vehicle, can articulate in action the agendas of socio-economic and ecological sustainability. As independent businesses, they represent a dispersed, decentralized approach that allows individual members to collectivize (if they choose) in local organizations to support the agendas of a dispersed, sustainability-oriented agriculture.

It must be noted, however, that from an overall policy perspective, co-ordination across locals would be difficult. National AOTM agendas pursued within a “locals-only” structure would be a multi-point policy of the several voices of independent local memberships (as realized in their respective operations, at the direction of their elected officials). Locals, by definition, would almost certainly be responsive to local agendas, as well as to local creativity; simultaneously, they would likely lack co-ordination and congruency across

individual facilities and nationally. It is also the case, given an intense competitive environment, that individual locals could find themselves at a market disadvantage relative to larger firms that were less socially and ecologically responsible. Larger organizations with intrinsic scale advantages are often positioned in the marketplace to exert greater market power, as well as to enjoy greater ease in bringing about co-ordination across varying locations. For these reasons of scale, scope, as well as standardization across region and nation, Yee (2004) suggests that a larger organization in combination with local facilities may be the most appropriate structure for pursuing interests of the middle.

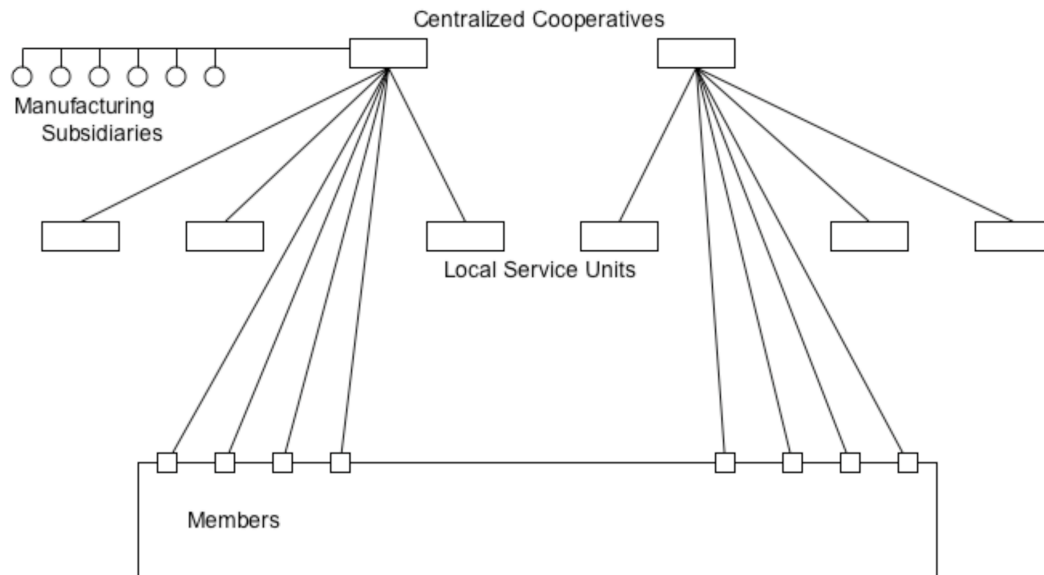
CENTRALIZED CO-OPERATIVES

CENTRALIZED CO-OPERATIVES are similar to locals in that members belong to a single organization (see Figure 3). However, unlike local co-ops, their membership is composed of thousands of farmers spread over a broad geographic region. Typically, these co-operatives are formed to service local members with local sites, but the “locals” themselves are affiliated with a central headquarters location, generally far removed from most farm locations. The locals represent local business sites only and are not themselves co-ops. The governance system operates from the farmer to the central organization. The organization’s board of directors is comprised of members who are elected either directly or through elected delegates. This board sets policy for the management of the co-operative business and is charged with hiring the co-operative executive officer, who in turn manages from the central headquarters. Managers of local facilities are hired and employed by the management structure of the central organization.

The local facilities of centralized associations provide all the services that any local co-operative provides — for example, local assembly, grading, packing, shipping, processing, and purchasing. In addition, centralized co-ops have various advantages of scale, scope, and resources that locals do not have, including achieving greater uniformity of products and services regionally by operating all local units from the centre; lowering operating costs through

centralized control of the handling and marketing of products; obtaining greater bargaining power in the marketplace via lower operating costs and the ability to command greater volumes; and achieving the broad ability to adapt local units to rapidly changing economic conditions (Cobia 1989). In some instances, large centralized co-ops can escape intense local competition by “differentiating their products from competing products with the development of various ‘unique’ product qualities — through branding, advertising, packaging, research and development, as well as intensive processing and product molding” (Sexton 1997, 38; see also see Gray, Heffernan, and Hendrickson 2001).

**Figure 3:
Centralized Cooperatives**



Source: Schaars, p. 51.

However, the nature of centralization tends to simultaneously involve not only certain advantages but also disadvantages. By definition, decision making is centralized rather than decentralized: “Operational control and authority are concentrated in the headquarters” (Cobia 1989, 45). Democracy provisions take shape as a democratic bureaucracy rather than direct participative democracy. The possibilities for members to develop and deepen mutual identities as “farmers of the middle” may be all but eliminated by organizational size and bureaucratic authority flows. A sense of individual and community efficacy, relation-

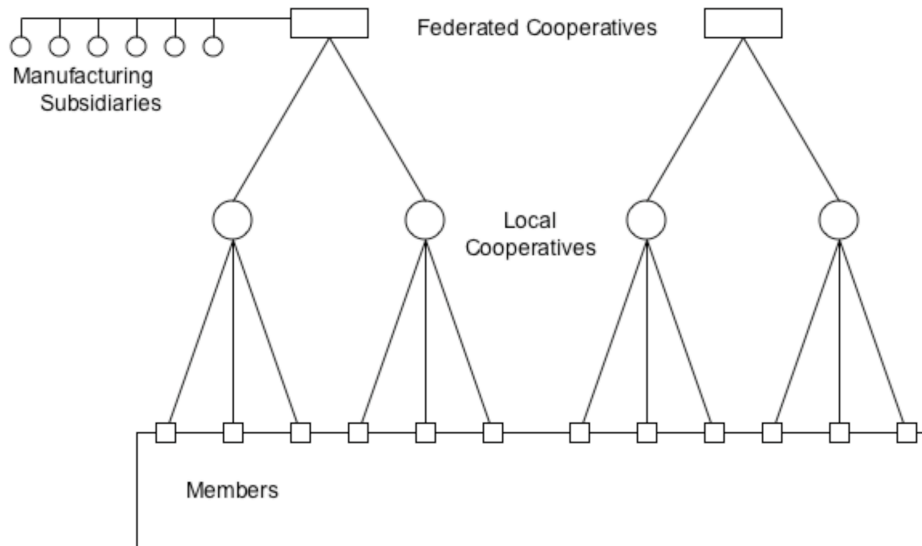
ship, and meaning (qualities obtainable in local co-operatives) can become extremely muted in these large bureaucratic structures.

Under such structures and operations, members may lose an active interest in participating in the organization as a member (thereby using the co-operative merely for purchases and/or sales). As member interest drops, the potential for managerial expertise to gain greater prominence over grassroots wisdom and voice increases. Historically, the pressure to achieve economic success in competitive markets has led co-operative membership to dismiss its own voice (as a collective) in deference to managerial authority. In turn, the authority of managerial expertise has frequently sacrificed activities that do not make an obvious contribution to the bottom line (membership programs) in favour of short-term profits and business survival. In such situations, strategic planning may come to emphasize individual-collective benefits as discussed previously in this paper, with a reduction in (if not elimination of) emphasis given to the mutual-collective goals associated with belonging to the organization (Fairbairn 1999; Parnell 1999; Yee 2004).

FEDERATED CO-OPERATIVES

LOCAL CO-OPERATIVES sometimes join together and form a collective or federation of co-ops (see Figure 4). In a federation, farmers hold membership in local co-ops that in turn form a co-operative of locals. The local co-ops own the federation and typically provide a large proportion of its capital needs. They also elect a board of directors, which then hires the regional federation management. The locals continue to operate as co-ops, with their own boards and management, although the overhead organization may provide management for the local, per a contract arrangement. This federated structure can provide the services and most of the advantages of any centralized co-op. By definition and by structure, federations can be as (or more) responsive at a local level as any unaffiliated local co-op.

**Figure 4:
Federated Cooperatives**



Source: Schaars, p. 51.

Federations of co-operatives fall in the mid-range of organizational dilemmas. They are organizationally complex but structured in a manner that allows for representative democracy at the overhead federation level and direct participative democracy at the local level. “Because the federation is built and controlled in this manner (from the bottom up) the local members’ interest ... may be better expressed in federation-membership communications, and [necessary] member contact more readily maintained because of the direct ties to the local” [in patronage, votes, office holding, and informal familiarity]—than what can generally occur in centralized organizations (Cobia 1989, 48; and as reflected in Schaars 1971).

In some manner, federations are able to address centralization/decentralization tensions as commented upon by Briscoe and Ward (citing Schumaker) in their book *The Competitive Advantages of Co-operatives* (2000, 27).

“Whenever one encounters such opposites [as centralization and decentralization], each of them with persuasive arguments in its favour, it is worth looking into the depth of the problem for something more than compro-

mise.... Maybe what we really need is not either-or, but [both] together” . . . we can find ways to enjoy the benefits of size while staying small; we can get the advantages of centralization while remaining decentralized.

The centralization/decentralization tension is incorporated into the federation structure, as discussed previously in this paper, without sacrificing one for the predominance of the other. Furthermore, given the agendas of the middle and the need to establish and deepen local identities, concepts of heterarchy may apply as well. Heterarchy, as Stark (2001a, 2001b) describes, refers to organizational arrangements that seek to “co-ordinate diverse identities without suppressing differences.” Heterarchical organization can work to deepen the richness of the local, while providing overall co-ordination; federations can allow for deepening of local identities through local co-operation, while providing a central mechanism for overall co-ordination.

Yee (2004) argues, in a parallel manner, that the interests of the middle might best be pursued with federated-like structures. Key features to be centralized within a federation might include: unified branding to cover all members of the co-op (with particular attention to construction of a brand that incorporates the agendas of the middle); a certification methodology administered from the federated regional level to bring co-ordination across the locals and guarantees to consumers; regional and national co-ordination of co-operative activities and flows of product; professional, broad-scale marketing and advertising; research and education; and other professional support services. Although the relevance of these individual strategies may be questioned, a federated structure allows for greater local variability than occurs in a centralized structure, while simultaneously permitting multi-local and regional co-ordination. Such co-ordination may in fact be necessary for survival, in that it represents a capability for managing the larger volumes of the middle in a marketplace that is also occupied by large, investment-oriented, and complexly integrated firms. Federations can provide market presence and scale, while securing and seeking to co-ordinate local member products.

However, despite their advantages, federations, like any organization, experience tensions and conflicts (Mooney 2004). Although a federation of local co-ops may provide,

in addition to co-ordination, degrees of decentralized decision making, local creativity, participative democracy, openness, and transparency, the same dynamic trade-offs that exist within a centralized co-op will exist within a federation. For example, at the regional level, the tension between managerial expertise and the demands for business efficiency versus grassroots interests and local wisdom may be even more difficult to balance. With grassroots members furthest removed from regional decision making, strong incentives may exist (in the context of intense market competition) to privilege and make predominant the criteria of managerial expertise. In such settings, shifts can occur in the internal character of the co-op that can minimize the participative, decentralized aspects of co-operation. As noted previously, development strategies will need to at least acknowledge these basic oppositions and tensions, and/or utilize them in their planning and practice. Mooney (2004) suggests that those co-operatives that do not seek to manage these trade-offs will be disadvantaged in the marketplace and will tend towards failure. Making these tensions explicit, and then planning for them with, for example, member (oversight) governance structures, can help keep the organization aligned with member prerogatives and local needs. Hiding from these tensions, with poorly designed or maintained democratic structures, is likely to result in co-operative failure as a “member” organization.

CONCLUSION

THE OVERARCHING POINT of this paper was to consider various socio-economic, psychological, and co-operative possibilities for addressing agendas of the middle. Much of the discussion has been organized around a hardened (though sometimes implicit) view that investment firms will relentlessly pursue vehicles for investment in profitable activities, regardless of the interests served by the original activities. Given the pursuit of profits and of market power to realize profits, the processes of agricultural industrialization and corporate conglomeration are likely to continue. Farmers of the middle then have the task of finding a place between a food-production system that rewards

increasing industrialization and scale and a much smaller system that rewards low cost, small volume, and niche specialization.

In terms of consumer demand — and from the perspectives of high-modernity theories and attachment theory — consumers want products that not only soothe anxiety but also suggest permanence and personal, community, and ecological sustainability. Farming and food systems that represent the values of sustainability (i.e., permanence and safety) may be ready outlets for consumer spending.

Co-operatives represent an option to consider for farmers of the middle. Co-ops have organizational advantages in terms of democratic structure, transparency, and service. By their formation, they are designed to compete in the marketplace. They have also been effective historically in organizing farmers for power, particularly in opposition to monopolies/monopsonies, oligopolies/oligopsonies, and conglomerate interests. However, potential earnings (and success) will continue to entice other market interests to compete for products, markets, and possible organizational takeovers. The intensity of these competitive pulls can shift co-operative purposes away from service, meaning, and value mandates towards the exclusivity of market earnings.

This paper suggests that a federated co-operative may be the most appropriate structure for agendas of the middle. This structure provides an approach to heterarchy (i.e., “coordinating and enriching diversity”) that entails an overarching representative democracy designed to co-ordinate direct-member, participative locals. Historically, federated co-ops have been able to compete with much larger organizations in the marketplace and provide both transparency and accountability. However, those utilizing a co-operative model will need to be vigilant to the various tensions within co-operative organizations (and any organization) and the dynamics that can shift and maximize some benefits at the expense of others.

With care and consideration of the various trade-offs, farmer-members may be able to incorporate the reality of these tensions within their planning, thereby creating an organization that can effectively pursue sustainability agendas. The co-operative model, particularly the federated co-op, may have the capacity to empower the needs of the middle by providing marketing models for the volume of the middle, organizational capacity and scale to com-

pete with much larger organizations, an overarching organizational strategy for providing standardization and co-ordination, and a local democratic process to allow, engender, and promote grassroots creativity and responsiveness. The model may do so while being sensitive to the organizational tendencies of bureaucratization and the loss of local sovereignty, while simultaneously addressing the needs for market viability.

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