

Building Co-operative Futures: Post Forum Report

Summary

Building Co-op Futures, a forum for “young people” ran from May 24 to May 27, 2003. Participants came from a variety of countries: Canada, Colombia, Iran, Japan, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Some participants had been involved in co-ops since birth, others came with little or no knowledge of co-ops; some participants worked for co-ops or credit unions, others were co-op members or students involved in co-op studies. Though the forum was designed for youth, the more flexible term “young people” was used, as some participants were perhaps younger at heart than by age.

The forum was held at the University of Victoria, on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada. The first plenary hosted by Dr. Ian MacPherson, (Director, BCICS) included a brief history of co-ops around the world. The session developed into a discussion about why the participants and facilitators had congregated, and what they hoped to gain from the forum and co-op movement in general. Afterward, the group gathered for a barbecue, and an evening plenary hosted by Dr. Greg MacLeod from the University College of Cape Breton, Hazel Corcoran from Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation, and Greg O’Neill of the Arctic Co-operative Development Fund in Canada. A number of provocative ideas were introduced to the forum’s participants in this session.

Sunday morning was kicked off by “Who Wants to be a Co-operator” a mock game show hosted by Mervyn Wilson from the Co-operative College and Andy Piercy from the Woodcraft Folk Co-op, in the United Kingdom. Following this, workshops were held on: Co-operative Dynamics (Ian MacPherson, BCICS), Business Plan Components (Doug Willoughby), Marketing Co-ops: are there differences? (Robby Tulus, BCICS and Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives), Getting Going (Peter Bruckmann, BC Co-ops Assn), How do New Co-ops Get Started? (Ramona Faust, Harrop Procter Community Co-op), and A Career in Co-ops (Greg O’Neill, Arctic Co-operatives Development Fund, and Mervyn Wilson, Co-operative College).

On Sunday afternoon and evening, forum participants visited One United Resource Ecovillage, located near Shawnigan Lake, and Providence Farm, which is near Duncan. The Ecovillage, initiated in the early 90s and currently operating as a community association, is in the process of transforming its ownership structure into a co-operative corporation. Members of the group of people working on the Ecovillage demonstrated how they lived co-operatively, not only with each other, but also with their environment and with their neighbours. At Providence Farm, Forum participants were treated to a sumptuous salmon feast. Afterwards there was a tour of the former residential school and a brief recounting its transformation into a training and therapeutic centre for residents of the Cowichan Valley, of the splendid gardens, the stables and riding facilities. While not a co-operative per se, Providence Farm is testimony to the spirit of co-operation, volunteerism, concern for community, and life-long learning.

Monday morning started with a plenary on Co-op Systems in Canada, led by John Restakis of the B.C. Co-operatives Association. The rest of the day consisted of one more round of workshops and then three sets of True Stories. These included stories about different co-operative organisations in Canada including the Student Co-op Federation – Quebec (Martine Vézina), Calgary Co-op (Stuart Cantrill), Saskatoon Community Clinic (Ingrid Larson), VanCity Savings Credit Union (Derek Gent), Growing Circle Food Co-op – Salt Spring Island (Jana Thomas), and Mountain Equipment Co-op (Jamie Girouard).

In preparation for presentations at both the youth forum and the Mapping Co-op Studies in the New Millennium Congress, which followed the forum, about 15 participants gathered on Monday evening to discuss issues around youth and co-ops that had arisen during the forum. The fruits of that discussion were presented for further input to the final plenary of Building Co-operative Futures.

At the Forum's wrap-up there were a number of brief presentations given by some of the participants as examples of work in co-operatives and co-operative studies around the world. Alex Wilde, from the Woodcraft Folk in UK, told of her adventures at the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa in 2002; Vera Goussaert from Winnipeg, Canada, recounted her experience working in Ghana for six months as a youth intern with the Canadian Co-operative Association; Aliasghar Maghsoudi, a PhD student at Mumbai University, India and a citizen of Iran, talked about his work with the Iranian Ministry of Co-operatives, particularly that which focuses on his research on student co-ops in Iran. Mikel Cid, who is pursuing his PhD at Mondragón University, Spain, explained many of the developments in Mondragón Corporación Cooperativa in the last twenty years; Silvia Juliana Mera spoke talked about her research as a graduate student at the University of Texas, which looks at the social economy in Colombia – her native country, the performance of co-ops in that sector, and how co-operatives are a fundamental aspect of the social economy; and finally, Ryoko Shimizu and Kazuhiro Shirai from the Seikatsu Consumers Co-op Club in Japan presented a description and some thoughts about the role of the Seikatsu Club in the globalised economy.

Although the youth forum ended on Tuesday a delegation of seven youth participants made a presentation to the assembly at the opening plenary of the Mapping Co-op Studies Congress on Wednesday, May 28. The presentation, which included a song and a fill-in-the-blank answer sheet, addressed issues of co-operative education, the popularization of co-ops, and co-ops and globalisation, and it posed questions about how to balance the social and economic components of co-operation.

Forum Evaluations

A one-page questionnaire/ evaluation form with 15 questions was handed out at the end of the forum to all participants. Twenty-five evaluations were completed and returned. The evaluations were positive overall, with a wide range of responses demonstrating the diversity of opinions, interests, experiences and learning styles of the participants. All participants, except for two, said that there should be similar forums in the future and that they would attend. People were generally satisfied with the location of the forum, but at

the same time were enthusiastic about the suggestion of holding a future event at a youth camp outside of the city.

Several themes arose out of the suggestions. Those that stood out the most were around youth involvement and discussion time. Many suggested that they would like more youth involvement throughout the forum planning and the forum itself, such as having youth as facilitators and by creating more opportunities for youth participants to share their ideas and experiences. Likewise, many people said that they liked the discussions that took place and suggested more discussion forums and other forms of interaction, such as roundtables, facilitated discussions, group activities and games, open forums, brainstorming sessions and social events. Several people also suggested that they would like more field trips or tours. The evaluations concluded by asking participants what they will take away from the forum and what actions they will take now that the forum is over. The answers on these are exciting, positive and are all included in the “Summary of Evaluations,” which contains the detailed questionnaire responses.

Organisers Response

The forum organisers thought it might be appropriate, and useful to future organisers, if we responded to the evaluations. We would like to comment on a few points, not out of self-praise or self-defense, but for the benefit of future conferences. Firstly, we appreciate the positive responses and constructive criticism. Secondly, you will notice if you read the “Summary of Evaluations” that though we published most comments as written, we did not make public the responses to the question which sessions were most/least useful. We did this partly out of respect for the facilitators, but mostly because the answers differed drastically. The two lists, of least and most useful sessions, were nearly identical. We feel this reflects the reality of organising a forum for a diverse group of people. One of the most prominent comments on the evaluation sheet is that youth need to be more involved in planning. For 16 months prior to the forum BCICS staff tried to organise a youth advisory committee and a web forum, so youth could organise the forum. However, there was little feedback, and no strong organisational role was taken on by youth. We hope that the keen youth enthusiasm that was apparent at the forum, and the feedback that came out of it, will be sufficient motivation for the youth to plan future conferences. In fact we challenge youth to live up to their own demands, and organisers to insist on youth initiative.

As a further word of caution, we would advise that a strong program be in place at least six months in advance of the event in order to solicit support funding from organisations. Many potential participants seem to appreciate this as well.

In closing, a sincere thank you to all participants and facilitators, and to all the co-operative organisations that provided financial support, without which the Building Co-operative Futures forum would not have been possible.