An analysis of the co-operative sector in Ireland

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Recent research in the field of co-operatives internationally has recognised that an essential task in the process of examining co-ops has been the need for up-to-date and comprehensive data on the sector. To that end, various organisations such as the ICA and other representative bodies as well as a number of university co-operative research centres have been engaged in gathering baseline data on the co-operative movement in their respective jurisdictions. This research responds to the need for greater data on the sector in Ireland which has been highlighted most recently by Forfás (2007), the national economic development authority and advisory board and by the Forum for the Co-operative Movement in Ireland, the national representative body for the movement (Forum, 2007). Meanwhile, a review of the regulatory and legislative framework for co-operatives is currently being undertaken by the government in Ireland. Such a review provides us with an opportunity to examine the role of the sector in that country.

This paper will present and analyse data on the co-operative movement in Ireland and will identify and analyse factors influencing the movement’s continued development with particular reference to new co-ops. Gathering data on co-operatives in Ireland is hampered by the fact that there is no national database of co-operatives available in Ireland. The best available information on co-ops in Ireland is through the reports and records of the Registrar of Friendly Societies as well as data compiled by the representative bodies for the co-operatives. The Registrar of Friendly Societies does not differentiate between co-ops and other societies but estimates that the majority of societies are co-operatives.

Compiling data on the smaller sectors is hampered by a lack of classification of the categories of co-operatives as no breakdown is provided by the Registrar of Friendly Societies for certain types of co-ops, for example, workers’ co-ops, which fall under several headings. The situation with regard to official figures on workers’ co-operatives has worsened since the closure in 2002 of the Co-operative Development Unit (CDU), the former government agency with responsibility for the development of workers’ co-ops.

This paper is the first step of an exploratory analysis of the sector. The paper begins with an overview of the size and scope of the sector and then examines a number of recently formed co-operatives in Ireland, including those in existence for a number of years and those which have more recently explored setting up. Preliminary analysis of this research indicates that new co-ops are emerging in the areas of environmental issues, the use of information technology in communications, utilities and organic food production. Issues examined include factors in the start-up process, activities engaged in and how the co-ops are dealing with the economic recession.

The proposed research is stimulated by:

- the concerns of representatives and observers regarding the continued relevance of the movement and the perceived need for the sector to assert and redefine itself
- a lack of baseline data on the movement
• an interest in linking considerations “from the ground” with theoretical concerns of contemporary related research into the evolution of the cooperative form and

• questions of how co-ops today can create new spaces for engagement in policy making as well as continuing to be seen as a relevant organisational structure for individuals and communities in meeting their needs.

The paper highlights the significant achievements of the sector but points to several issues that may need to be addressed if it is to continue to develop.

References:


CICOPA (2009) The impact of the crisis on worker and social co-operatives, Brussels, CICOPA.


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