

Worker Cooperatives in the United States: Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up Approaches

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Introduction

In the U.S., there is some interest within the worker cooperative community in using worker cooperatives as an approach to community-based economic development, particularly within low-income communities, as a means of both empowering people and improving their standard of living. This orientation has not been emphasized much in the world of worker cooperative development, which tends to emphasize worker autonomy and workplace democracy. This is evident in the slogan of the US Federation of Worker Cooperatives (“Think Outside the Boss”) and the name of the USFWC’s research and support arm, the Democracy at Work Institute.

The advantages of worker cooperative development as a model for economic development of low-income communities has been demonstrated (Kaswan 2014). Worker cooperatives constitute a form of community wealth-building in which development is intended to benefit the community, not simply increase wealth for investors. Community wealth-building emphasizes locally-based jobs that are anchored to the community; where ownership is distributed so that the wealth generated by the enterprises is broadly shared; and the economic activity of the community is kept and circulated within the community, not exported to capitalists who have little interest in the business or the community beyond the profit they can make from it (Dubb 2005).

The primary concern in this paper has to do with a tension between two different approaches to worker cooperative development: a top-down model involving a developer who does much of the work to develop the enterprise and then looks for people to bring into it; and a bottom-up approach that involves a support organization that provides incubation and technical support to groups of individuals who wish to start worker cooperatives. A concern regarding the top-down model is that it may impose challenges for getting workers to take ownership of the business. Zeuli, et al. (2004), note that there may be a “high likelihood of failure associated with cooperatives organized from the top-down. Since the members are not involved in the creation of the cooperative, they may never truly feel a sense of ownership and loyalty.” However, within low-income communities where people have little in the way of developed skills or resources to start a business, the barriers to worker cooperative development may be insurmountable, and a developer-led approach will not only increase the chances of success, but will lead to greater expansion of worker cooperatives than would otherwise be possible.

In this paper I will briefly discuss the history and extent of worker cooperatives in the U.S., and then lay out the two contrasting approaches to worker cooperative development. This will be followed by a discussion informed in part by ethnographic research conducted in 2014 and 2015,¹ and I will conclude with some thoughts about the dynamics of worker cooperative development.

Worker Cooperatives in the U.S.

Worker-owned cooperatives have a long history in the U.S. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries it was not uncommon for striking workers to set up their own shops for a time, although

¹ The ethnographic research was funded in part by a grant from the Democracy at Work Institute in 2014. The primary activities under the grant were attendance at the 2014 Worker Cooperative National Conference in Chicago, IL, May 30–June 1, as well as a pre-conference workshop. In addition, I took advantage of opportunities to conduct interviews in person and by phone with people engaged in worker cooperative development in various parts of the country (IRB Protocol # 2014-059-IRB).

these were usually shut down when the strike ended. The Owenite model of cooperative communities saw some new developments in the first half of the 19th century, although these communities were generally short-lived. In the middle of the 19th century workers self-organized in the face of economic crisis, although these were vulnerable to sudden changes in market conditions (Curl 2012). In any case, they made up a very small part of the U.S. economy (Aldrich and Stern 1983). The establishment of the first large-scale labor organization in the U.S., the Knights of Labor, led to the development of hundreds of new cooperatives with close to a million members. However, this turned out to be a short-lived development, as attacks by capitalist businesses and political troubles led to the collapse of the movement. Most of the Knights of Labor cooperatives were gone by 1888 (Curl 2012).

The Great Depression in the 20th century saw the development of new cooperatives, once again as a response to the economic crisis. These were given some support by the U.S. government, but again they were not long-lasting. In part, they fell victim to the new politics of the Cold War, which held that workers owning the means of production was too socialistic. This changed in the new radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s, as new forms of organization arose that sought to establish the basis for a new kind of society. These were often small-scale, highly ideological formations that in many cases sought to operate outside of the capitalist economy entirely. They were mostly focused around food distribution, and it is estimated that between 5,000 and 10,000 small cooperatives were formed (many of these food collectives were consumer cooperatives that operated on volunteer labor, so the members were both consumers and workers). However, “these faced both internal and external pressures. The internal pressures included ideological conflict; the external pressures included the increasing adoption of organic and natural foods—a co-op innovation—by mainstream grocery stores” (Kaswan 2017). Few of them are still in existence.

Worker cooperatives today remain a very small part of the U.S. economy. The 2017 census conducted by the Democracy at Work Institute (DAWI 2018) identifies 450 worker cooperatives in

the U.S. with about 6,700 workers and close to \$500 million in annual revenue. They are geographically concentrated in the San Francisco Bay Area, New York, and Puerto Rico, which together account for one-third of all known worker cooperatives in the U.S. There are strong demographic concentrations, with almost 75% of all members being women, and nearly half Latinx. This can be attributed to the fact that there are large concentrations of worker cooperatives in the home-care and professional housecleaning industries, which are dominated by Latinas (Palmer 2014). Wages are generally higher than in comparable, traditional businesses, and most worker cooperatives distribute significant amounts in dividends to their members (DAWI 2018).

Worker Cooperative Development in the U.S.

In a recent study, Abell (2014c) identified several factors that limit the development of worker cooperatives in the U.S. The first of these is cultural: the liberal ideals of individualism, independence, and self-reliance mean that people are less likely to look to cooperative alternatives. Although the cooperative movement is very extensive in the U.S., especially in the agricultural and banking sectors, ideological opposition to such “communistic” or “socialist” ideas as the workers owning the means of production remains strong. And, because worker cooperatives remain fairly rare, most Americans are simply unfamiliar with them. A second major limitation identified by Abell is the lack of business acumen. To be successful, worker cooperatives must be able to survive in a competitive market environment, but many cooperative entrepreneurs are suspicious of capitalism, even opposed to the idea of profit or capital accumulation, and have little sense of how to run a successful business. Further, many are attracted by the idea of highly participatory collective forms of organization, which requires maintaining a small scale, which also acts as a barrier to growth.

A third constraint identified by Abell is one deeply embedded in the U.S. financial system. Any business requires capital to start. This poses a problem for using worker cooperatives as a tool to

address poverty because people who are poor do not have wealth that they can invest to start a new cooperative. Banks, the most common source of start-up funding for small businesses, remain unfamiliar with and suspicious of worker cooperatives. As Abell notes, other investors remain skeptical, as well. While a broad distribution of risk might be seen as a good thing, from the investment perspective it is often seen as a diffusion of accountability. The result is that it is difficult for cooperatives to gain funding, either to start a new business or to convert an existing one.

Abell discusses two further constraints that, to many, would appear as attractions: democracy and autonomy. The issue with democracy is not inefficiency, as is often claimed, but unfamiliarity. Despite the rhetoric of the U.S. as a shining light of democracy in the world, democratic institutions are quite shallow, limited to periodic elections for public officials. Most workplaces in the U.S. remain highly structured and hierarchical and would better fit the model of tyranny or dictatorship than democracy. This means that people are unfamiliar with basic procedures for democratic decision-making. Further, many who are drawn to worker cooperatives due to their democratic nature may be ideologically opposed to the idea that anyone in the group demonstrating leadership. Abell quotes one cooperative developer who says, "Leadership is a bad word in our movement."

The problem of autonomy is that most worker cooperatives exist in isolation from one another. Outside of places with well-developed supportive ecosystems, such as the San Francisco Bay Area and New York, infrastructure that is specifically geared toward supporting worker cooperatives, to help them address the issues discussed above, is mostly absent. The U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives has begun to address this problem, but it remains a problem area. In many ways, the top-down development model I discuss below, which is based on the Mondragón experience, has been created to address this issue.

Top-Down and Bottom-Up Development Models

The top-down approach to development, also referred to as the developer-led model, has sought to address some of the more significant barriers to worker cooperative development in the U.S., in particular the need for better business skills, training in democratic practices, access to finance, and the need for a support system. Both Arizmendi and Evergreen, discussed below, are modeled after the Mondragón system, and recognize the central importance of Caja Laboral and the establishment of an association of enterprises in a system of mutual support. While this developed organically for Mondragón (although not without intention), in these two cases it was planned from the start. There are some differences in approach, but both of these have met with a substantial degree of success.

There is more variation in grassroots models. One version involves community-based organizations that have turned to worker cooperatives as a means of addressing problems that are faced by people in the community. In some cases this involves outreach to the community to promote the worker cooperative model. I will refer to this model as the incubator model, because it involves the provision of training and support, usually for a set period of time, after which the cooperative becomes fully (or mostly) independent.²

Although there are important differences, the distinctions between two may be less significant than it seems. Even a cooperative that is started as a grassroots effort will eventually take on some characteristics of a top-down development, because any new workers will be brought in to an existing enterprise and will need to learn the arts of participation as well as develop a sense of

² There is also what can be called a consultancy model, in which an organization acts as a consultant to support worker cooperative development on a contract basis. This may be the most common model, but I don't include it here because, while these organizations may see themselves as working to promote worker cooperative development, they are not specifically formed to advance the model of worker cooperatives for economic and community development in low-income communities.

ownership of an enterprise developed by others. At the same time, a cooperative initially developed in a top-down manner, if successful, may be able to develop a strong ownership culture and ethos of worker control, much as can be expected from those organized in a bottom-up fashion.

In what follows I provide brief profiles of two examples of each type of development.

Top-Down Development: Arizmendi and Evergreen

Arizmendi was founded in 1990 as a kind of demonstration project to prove the viability of the developer-led worker cooperative development model.³ A chain of five award-winning bakeries in the San Francisco Bay Area, Arizmendi employs about 130 workers, and the bakeries have total annual revenue of about \$6 million. Each bakery functions independently, but all belong to the Association of Arizmendi Cooperatives (AAC), which provides support services on everything from bookkeeping to marketing to personnel and management issues. The association accumulates assets through membership fees paid by the retail operations of 20% of net revenue, then uses those assets to provide support services and start-up funding for expansion. The association does the initial market research to identify locations, negotiates with landlords and finance institutions, undertakes the design and modification of the space, and then, once all the elements are in place or in process, recruits and trains workers in order to form the new cooperative. New stores have a turn-around time of between one and three years, depending on various factors. Training for workers includes bakery operations, basic business management skills, and democratic procedures. Much of the training is done by workers from established Arizmendi bakeries, as well as members of the AAC support collective.

³ Information on Arizmendi is based on an in-person interview with Tim Huet (2014), one of Arizmendi's co-founders, and the author's own knowledge based on a familial relationship with one of the other co-founders, who is now deceased.

The development of the Evergreen Cooperatives began in 2005 with the establishment of a project called the Greater University Circle Initiative (GUCI), which was formed in order to address the problems of one of the poorest communities in Cleveland, Ohio.⁴ In 2006, the Democracy Collaborative, based at the University of Maryland, was brought in to develop what has come to be called the Cleveland Model. The model uses an anchor strategy, which refers to the idea of capturing a portion of about \$3 billion in annual procurement and services spending by key local institutions anchored in the community and redirecting it to worker-owned cooperatives based in the community in which these anchor institutions operate. The intention is to develop large-scale cooperatives, based largely on the Mondragón model. Currently, three cooperatives have been developed: an industrial laundry, a solar panel installation and home weatherization company, and an indoor greenhouse (Song 2014). As of 2018, the three cooperatives employed over 200, over 130 of whom are worker-owners, and recently launched an initiative to convert local businesses to worker cooperatives with a goal of converting 10 businesses with 600 workers (Heller 2018). Like the Arizmendi cooperatives, the Evergreen cooperatives contribute a portion of their net revenue to the revolving loan fund in order to expand the pool of money available for further investment and support. Unlike Arizmendi, which has been entirely funded through private sources, Evergreen entered into a partnership with public foundations and the city of Cleveland, which was able to provide funding through its economic development funds.

Like Mondragón, the Cleveland Model incorporates support institutions. Evergreen Cooperative Corporation (ECC) serves as the corporate “home,” with the individual cooperatives

⁴ In addition to the sources cited below, the information about Evergreen is based on phone conversations and email with Steve Dubb, former senior researcher at the Democracy Collaborative, and a presentation by Dubb at the USFWC National Conference in 2014.

functioning as subsidiaries.⁵ Administrative functions are handled by ECC, along with partner organizations that provide services such as employee recruitment and training. Unique to the Cleveland Model is the fact that, in addition to worker-owners, the ECC's board of directors includes representatives from other stakeholder groups, including strategic partners, the anchor institutions, and GUCI. This helps to ensure that the cooperatives maintain their orientation toward community development.

Bottom-Up Development: Center for Family Life and Prospera

The Center for Family Life (CFL) has developed or been involved in supporting a half-dozen small worker cooperatives in Brooklyn, NY.⁶ The businesses they have developed include housecleaning services, babysitting and childcare, eldercare, and dog-walking and pet-sitting services. CFL is unique among the organizations profiled here in that it is a project of a Catholic social service agency, and they came into the role of developing worker cooperatives as a way to address the needs of their client base. As a social service agency, the developers are able to take a social-work approach in which they explicitly seek to develop social and group skills.

CFL has a hybrid model of development, including both incubator and developer elements. Rather than starting by developing the business and then recruiting workers to join, as with Arizmendi and the Cleveland Model, they start by recruiting people who would be interested in starting a cooperative. Then, in an interactive process, they work with the group to identify the type of business to develop, and provide training and support services to help them. Once operating, the cooperatives maintain a substantial degree of control, with a high level of participation by members,

⁵ Workers directly own 80% of the company, with the non-profit "parent" company, ECC, holding a minority share of 20%.

⁶ The information about CFL is based on an interview with then-director of workforce development, Vanessa Bransburg (2015), a presentation on CFL at the USFWC 2014 national conference, and their website, <https://sco.org/programs/cfl-co-op-business-development/> (accessed May 15, 2019).

but CFL provides administrative support and maintains a significant degree of involvement for the first 3-4 years. This is seen as a developmental process in which the cooperatives gain greater control over time. As a part of a larger social service agency, much of the funding for the development and support work they provide comes from funds provided by the agency. However, as a New York City-based cooperative, CFL is able to take advantage of a recent city initiative that is providing millions of dollars in grants to support worker cooperative development.

Prospera (formerly known as WAGES) began with a mission to provide economic empowerment to Latinas by organizing worker-owned housecleaning cooperatives.⁷ They take a hybrid approach, as they do much of the development work for the cooperatives and then hire workers into them. They provide professional management as well as training for the workers, who are expected to be able to take full responsibility for the cooperative within 3-5 years. Once the incubation period is complete, the cooperatives are then fully independent.

Discussion

In the discussion that follows, I draw on sessions held at the US Federation of Worker Cooperatives 2014 national conference (including a pre-conference meeting) as well as subsequent interviews, to explore some of the issues related to the top-down vs. bottom-up models.

It may be noted that both of the examples of bottom-up development given here are really hybrids. Pure examples of grassroots worker cooperative development are rare. As was discussed above, people in low-income communities usually have few resources and skills with which to create new businesses. It is very unlikely that they will arrive at the idea of forming a cooperative on their own, and even if they do, they may not be willing to take the risk of starting a business in the absence

⁷ The information about Prospera is based on a presentation at the USFWC 2014 National Conference as well as an interview with former executive director Hilary Abell (2014a).

of a support system. Experienced developers who understand what worker cooperatives (and businesses generally) require in order to be successful, who can provide training and guidance, and who, above all, have access to resources to support the development and help to ensure success, are indispensable to the process of development. In other words, it may be that the top-down model is the only model that can really work for worker cooperative development in low-income communities, and the real difference has to do with the approach the developers take, and whether the cooperatives that are developed remain attached to the developer organization or become fully independent.

In a presentation to the conference, Abell (Abell 2014b) identified four different approaches to worker cooperative development:

1. An industry transformation strategy that seeks to transform an industry in a direction that is better for workers.
2. A single-industry franchise model. Prospera is an example of this sort of development; Arizmendi would be another example.
3. Place-based clusters of diverse cooperatives, such as those developed by the Center for Family Life. Mondragón itself could be seen as an example of this, at least in its early stages.
4. Institutional engagement, or the “anchor strategy” pursued in Cleveland by the Evergreen cooperatives.

Each of these models is different in terms of their approach to development. The industry transformation, single-industry franchise and institutional engagement approaches are most likely to be top-down in their orientation because they presume a scale that a grassroots approach would be very unlikely to use as a starting point. The place-based cluster model is more amenable to a grassroots approach, as it more closely resembles the original model of cooperatives as arising out

of a community coming together to pursue shared interests or address common needs. In this case, the organization provides a home as well as technical support for the community, creating opportunities for members of the community to create businesses, rather than the organization creating the businesses and then bringing the community into them. Or, put another way, the grassroots model creates the cooperatives *with* the community, while the top-down model creates cooperatives *for* the community. Both can work, but the issues and concerns of each are different.

Abell made clear in her presentation that, whether it is organized in a top-down or bottom-up fashion, a cooperative cannot work if the workers don't learn the skills of democratic participation. However, developers need to maintain a fairly firm hand at first, and release control over time. This can happen as leaders arise from within the group, the group learns management skills, and a culture of participation is developed. In a later interview, Abell noted that there may be tensions between the members and the developers around authority and decision-making.⁸ As has been noted, people who initially join a cooperative may have low levels of business skill, so developers must educate the workers around the importance of education, participation and inclusion. In the beginning, inclusion in decision-making comes without authority, although authority must be transferred over time. An important point is to recognize the need for trust-building, which includes recognition that people start with different life circumstances. For developers, this means that it is best to under-promise and over-deliver. It also means identifying people-oriented leaders who can focus on interpersonal relationships.

Another discussion at the conference had to do with the availability of funding. This points to an important advantage for the top-down model, which may appear to funders to have clearer lines

⁸ Echoing this point, another interviewee, Vanessa Bransburg from CFL (2015), spoke of a delicate balance in which the developers take a leading role at the beginning, but with a high degree of transparency about the role of the developers.

of accountability. In the U.S., most local economic development is supported at the city level, although the funding may come from local taxes or through community development block grants provided by the federal government. At the conference, some argued that cities are essential partners while others argued that cities can be unreliable and that it is better to build something that will eventually attract the support of the municipal government rather than count on it in the start-up phase. The city officials present (from Cleveland, OH, Jackson, MS, and Richmond, CA) pointed to the resources that cities can offer for worker cooperative development, including financing support as well as policies that provide for preferential treatment for local and worker-owned businesses. However, participants from community-based organizations expressed the view that developers cannot count on city support. Instead, these organizations sought to build something that would attract the interest of the city so that the city would come to them offering support, without depending on the city to supply it. Some of these participants warned that engagement with political leaders can come with various minefields, and pointed to a concern about the potential for cooptation.

An approach to cooperative development that relies heavily on involvement from either municipal or anchor institutions will clearly be a top-down model, which, while it has its benefits as was discussed above, can also introduce challenges. One challenge is the need to promote a genuine sense of ownership and belonging, which requires education and, for some, a cultural shift. The top-down model runs the risk of failing to effectively embed the cooperatives in the life of the community. Finally, low-income communities are generally understood to be low in important forms of capital: social capital (cohesion and trust), human capital (education and work experience), political capital (a sense of political efficacy and understanding of democratic process), as well as financial capital (Flora and Flora 2013). Considerable attention is given to the problems of lack of financial capital and how to address that, which is where cities come in. However, a lack of attention to the other forms of capital could lead to failure if they are not adequately addressed.

Finally, it should be recognized that grassroots development may not be as egalitarian and democratic as it sounds. In an interview, Tim Huet from Arizmendi (2014) noted that any group that forms to develop a cooperative may rely on a strong personality—a primary entrepreneur, for example—that suppresses rather than promotes leadership development. On the other hand, the top-down model can lead to stronger democratic procedures and more egalitarian practices because leadership development can be intentionally included in the training process, and the vision of a democratic workplace can be given emphasis in the process of recruiting workers. Some self-selection will always be an element in the process of forming a worker cooperative. It may come at the front end for groups that form on their own, but it is present in the recruitment process as well, as the recruits gain an understanding of the nature of the enterprise. The bottom-up model may include people who have a variety of motivations, with one or two people who drive the process and recruit others to join them. These others may then participate as much or more out of a sense of loyalty (a subordinate position) to the “leader” than to the vision of an egalitarian enterprise. In the top-down model, the recruitment process can seek to bring in people who share particular values, and the training process can include the promotion of those values.

Huet also noted that not all worker cooperatives are the same, and that equality can take different forms. Equality with respect to governance is important, but this can coexist with a hierarchical operational structure that includes managers with higher levels of operational responsibility and authority. This may be valuable where workers do not have the skills themselves, or in some cases the inclination, to be entirely self-managing. The challenge in this situation is to find managers who are able to work in an environment where the workers are, in a sense, their boss, but it may be a more effective approach, particularly under conditions where the workers are not capable of or comfortable with operational control.

It's also important to note that the workers themselves may have differing motivations in deciding to join a worker cooperative. Various people, both at the conference and in interviews, noted that, for many low-income people, having a democratic workplace is just not a priority. What they care about most is having a steady job with a reliable income. Even having wealth in the form of an ownership stake in the business may not be as important to them as the day-to-day benefits of a regular paycheck. Developers may understand that, particularly in precarious, low-wage industries such as housecleaning and home care, the only way workers can have a steady job and reliable income is for them to own the business. With ownership come governance and management concerns, and for the workers to maintain control over the business governance (at least) and management (probably) need to be democratic and participatory to the greatest extent possible. Developers, particularly if they come from more privileged communities, may come to their work from an ideological perspective that prioritizes workplace democracy, autonomy, and the idea that the full product of their labor should belong to the workers. The concerns of the workers, however, may be more practical. Democratic and participatory practices need to be taught—these are not something that the cooperative members can be expected to be familiar with at the inception. As Abell notes, democratic participation is essential to the success of the cooperative. However, developers must keep in mind that this may not be a priority for workers, at least not at first.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed the development of worker cooperatives in low-income communities in the United States as falling into two categories: a top-down, developer-led approach and a bottom-up, incubator approach. In developer-led development, cooperative businesses are created as “turn-key operations,” where the business is fully developed by the developers, and then workers are brought in, trained, and then take over the business over time, but the cooperative remains a part of a larger association connected to the developer in an effort to enable the developer

to leverage the success of the cooperatives that have been created in order to develop new cooperatives. In the incubator approach, a developer may take a strong role in creating the business, but the workers will have a stronger role in the business's development and, once the incubation period is complete, the cooperative will operate independently. In both cases, the developer provides essential support and training for cooperative members.

As is clear from the discussion, the right approach depends on a number of factors: the objectives of the organizers or developers, the conditions in the community, and the people who ultimately become the members of the cooperative. Worker cooperatives in low-income communities rarely form spontaneously. Developers provide essential resources: Organization, training, and access to financial resources, plus, in most cases, administrative support. Ultimately, in order to be successful, a worker cooperative needs to be able to function more or less autonomously and under the control of the workers, but this may only come after a lengthy period of development and maturation.

Whichever approach is used, effective training is essential. People in low-income communities, who are used to low-wage jobs and poor working conditions, are unfamiliar with decision-making processes and the responsibilities that come with running a business. These are all things that people can learn, however, given an opportunity to do so. Developing a worker cooperative is a long-term process, one that requires a clear vision of the desired end-point. Initially, that vision may belong only to the developers, but the members will need to be able to grasp and accept that vision (or their own version of it) in order for the cooperative to be successful. The way this is done marks a difference between top-down and bottom-up models, as a more grassroots process will seek to involve the members in the development of that vision at an earlier stage—in fact, it may be built into the training process itself. In top-down development acceptance of the

developers' vision may be part of the recruitment and selection process, as workers may need to accept the vision in order to be hired.

Regardless of their approach, developers must maintain a clear sense of their own goals. If their primary goal is the establishment of worker-owned, democratic businesses in order to promote a social change agenda, then this will lead them to emphasize democratic values in their training and recruitment process, and a diminished role for the developer. If the developer's primary goals are poverty alleviation and decent jobs for low-income people, then they may play a stronger, more controlling role in the development process, but they must not ignore the importance of participation and the development of a sense of ownership and democratic ethos within the enterprise.

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