

FOOD CO-OPS & HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS PROJECT

Cooperative Fund of New England & Neighboring Food Co-op Association

Project Update, December 2011

Introduction

Since the last update in May, 2011*, the Cooperative Fund of New England (www.coopfund.coop) and Neighboring Food Co-op Association (www.nfca.coop) have made progress in the “Healthy Food, Cooperative Communities” (HFCC) project. HFCC aims to increase access to healthy, regionally-sourced food and food co-op member/ownership and participation among economically marginalized individuals and communities in New England; to support information sharing among food co-ops regarding facilitation of participation of marginalized individuals and communities; and to raise the profile of food co-ops as a solution to the challenge of healthy food access in our region.

Project Context

The past few years have brought increased attention to two aspects of food security: access to healthy food for underserved communities, and access to food markets for local and regional food producers. These movements both strive to redevelop a resilient food system in this time of economic and environmental turmoil. Many communities are looking towards food co-ops as an important piece of the food system puzzle. Because they are community owned, food co-ops can balance community needs with financial strength, resulting in a useful tool of innovation to support food system redevelopment that roots economic infrastructure in our region.

Co-op historians will note that in the past few decades, rural and urban communities nation-wide have started food co-ops to provide crucial retail markets for many food-related social movements, including natural foods, organic agriculture, and Fair Trade. While food co-ops are gaining recognition for their role in supporting local and regional food economies, food co-ops in our region vary in their success in recruiting low-income member/owners and in serving their communities. While many have successful programs to address barriers to participation, others are challenged to effectively engage these communities. For many food co-ops, there is the central tension between being affordable to people of all economic means while also facilitating economic support of food systems that provide high nutrition, protect human and ecological health, and promote fair relationships with small producers and farm workers.

In response to these opportunities and challenges, the Cooperative Fund of New England (CFNE) and the Neighboring Food Co-op Association (NFCA) have partnered to help facilitate and expand the application of the co-op model to issues of access to healthy, affordable, regionally-sourced food.

Project Summary

As discussed in the May update, HFCC collaborated with CoopMetrics and the National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA) to survey 29 food co-ops, mostly in New England, on their experience trying to engage economically marginalized communities. We strove to better understand successful models, explore areas of opportunity and share these with food co-ops, community activists and economic development organizations. The survey illuminated a number of interesting programs and challenges, and more importantly, reemphasized the overwhelming interest in developing co-operative models of healthy food access and community ownership.

* For a copy of this report, visit www.nfca.coop/resources.



Out of the survey results, we developed a draft thematic framework for these programs that is presented below. We see these themes as the points of interaction where a previously unengaged person might face barriers to participation in a co-op. By addressing one area, a food co-op may still leave barriers in another area to prevent full participation. We expect to refine this framework, based on feedback from stakeholders, and then make this framework available to food co-ops to analyze their efforts and opportunities for expansion.

1. *Collaboration with Partner Organizations*: Food co-ops will benefit in their outreach by identifying and partnering with organizations who have strong relationships with marginalized communities and who share the goal of healthy food access, like social service providers or community health centers. Examples of such collaboration include publicity for the co-op's products and services, dialog to better understand community needs, and implementation of related programs such as education, training and community-based food subsidies. There is also an opportunity to communicate more strongly the contribution of co-operative enterprise to more resilient local economies, employment, and access to products and services on which our communities rely.
2. *Educational Opportunity*: Relationships with underserved communities offer opportunities for education on how the co-op differs from conventional grocery stores in ways that help the community. For example, education on how to shop for healthy food on a tight budget could highlight nutrition education, the high cost of processed food, meal planning, and how to navigate the food co-op, including the bulk aisle — unfamiliar to most non-co-op shoppers, but essential to eating well on a budget. Education on ownership benefits can highlight member dividends, something no conventional grocer would offer.
3. *Product Affordability*: Co-ops may need to examine the perceptions and realities that sometimes discourage participation by members of marginalized communities, particularly in terms of food costs. If affordability is a challenge, there are many strategies available, such as reducing the margin on certain line of products, or granting an expanded subsidy to eligible consumers. Co-ops also face the challenge of limited economies of scale in local and regional sourcing and may want to look at ways to build efficiencies through collective sourcing and collaboration.
4. *Accessible Ownership Options*: Co-operative membership is the key component to maintaining community control and ensuring the co-op meets community needs. If marginalized communities have difficulty accessing membership, ownership and control, the co-op will find it more difficult to meet their needs and will not benefit from their participation. This will make it difficult to expand healthy food access in a manner that encourages engagement. Many food co-ops have programs that attempt to address this challenge, including subsidizing member shares, allowing members to buy their share over an extended time period, or allowing some levers of control to members who have not fully purchased their share.
5. *Infrastructure*: Co-ops should consider both the internal and external infrastructure to support on-going success of these programs. Internal infrastructure could include budgeting for outreach and education staff, using point of sale programs to facilitate internal subsidy programs, and posting signage in multiple languages, as needed. Co-op associations such as the NFCA could also provide shared resources to support these activities among member co-ops. External infrastructure directly impacts participation of marginalized communities in the co-op, particularly public transportation. But even these external infrastructural barriers might be overcome through the use of satellite or mobile retail outlets, where the co-op provides a limited variety of products for sale in off-site locations.

HFCC began exploring how this framework plays out in reality at NFCA's September Gathering, hosted by the Co-op Food Stores in Hanover, NH. CFNE staff facilitated a panel on healthy food access to an audience that included representatives of over a dozen food co-ops, both existing and start-up efforts. Five co-ops presented their experience in this area:

- Ed King, from **Littleton Food Co-op**, NH, discussed their partnership with a local affordable housing development to offer nutrition classes;
- Clem Nilan, from **City Market / Onion River Co-op** in Burlington, VT, discussed their "Food For All" program of offering 10% discount to all shoppers using public subsidy (WIC, SNAP, and Disability) to pay for their groceries;

- Matt Novik, from **Berkshire Food Co-op**, in Great Barrington, MA, discussed their Community Cards program that distributed 200 \$5 gift cards monthly to community organizations, who redistribute these cards to their clients. Recipients of these cards participate in workshops on Shopping on a Budget and Nutrition;
- Tony White, from **Co-op Food Stores**, NH & VT, discussed their partnerships with community groups to distribute, literally, tons of food each week; and
- Suzette Snow-Cobb, **Franklin Community Co-op**, MA, discussed their “Co-op Basics” program of reduced margins and retail prices on staple products.

A broad discussion followed, touching on a number of key issues. These included: 1) in Vermont, 1 in 3 people will soon be seniors. Co-ops are considering moving away from discounts for all seniors and towards needs-based discounts; 2) Some people who are eligible for public food subsidies don't register. This could be due to a number of issues, but if we rely solely on public subsidy sales to measure our outcomes, we may be missing a significant demographic.

Next Steps

With the support of the Howard Bowers Fund and The Cooperative Foundation, this project is entering a new phase of documenting the details on a few exciting programs. We plan to start producing case studies to help food co-ops replicate successful programs, and to demonstrate to community organizations the potential role food co-ops can play in partnering to increase healthy food access. We hope to examine opportunities to improve on these exciting programs, and identify what fundamental building blocks are needed before a co-op starts considering implementation.

Through this research, we will consider how to establish baselines and measure progress on access to healthy food. We may explore how to compare a co-op's performance to the local opportunities to improve. This will help identify which co-ops are modeling good programs, and which could have the greatest return on investment in new or refined programs.

Making healthy food accessible is a complex challenge and an ongoing need within our Co-op community, and we welcome your feedback so we can continue learning from each other and making progress together.

Contact us with feedback or to update us on any new programs your Co-op is implementing around healthy food access.

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