

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

By Emily Landenberger



NFCA Board Peer Event
attended by Co-op Board Member Lynn Dunton

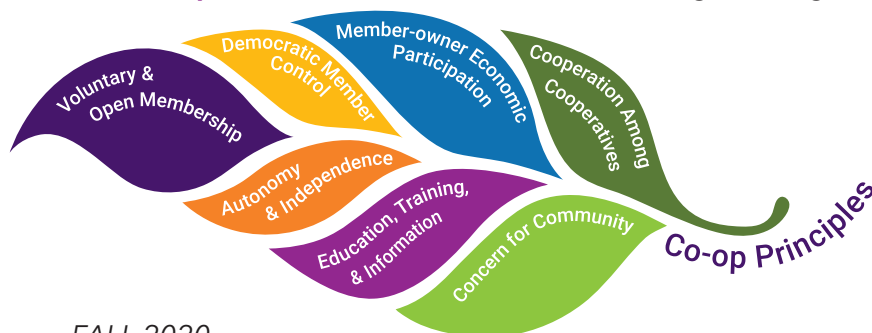


One of the unique things about co-operatives is that they are owned by their community members and exist to meet the specific needs of the communities they serve. This level of autonomy and independence allows co-operatives to be pioneering and innovative in their approach to serving their respective communities. Of course, when you have big dreams of relocalizing a food system, building a more resilient co-operative economy, and furthering the ideals of democracy, cooperation, autonomy, and education, it's advantageous to be able to call on some collective source of wisdom and avoid duplication of effort with other like-minded organizations that share your bold vision of the future.

This emphasis on collaboration is baked into the **Seven International Co-operative Principles**, a set of ideals that form the basis for how co-operatives around the world operate. Co-operatives are

diverse with regard to the types of goods and services they provide their communities, but they are united by these guiding principles which were first set forth in 1844 by the founders of the very first co-op, the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in Rochdale, England. The Sixth Co-operative Principle focuses on **Cooperation Among Co-operatives** and recognizes that "co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures."

This is the very premise upon which the Neighboring Food Cooperative Association (NFCA) was born. In 2004, a group of co-op managers and board members,



including our General Manager, Glenn, convened at the Brattleboro Co-op to explore closer collaboration. Over the course of several years, they began to articulate their collective vision and, in 2007, participants at a subsequent gathering here in Middlebury approved the "Middlebury Manifesto," a document expressing the desire to "further the ideals of democracy, cooperation, autonomy, and education as enshrined in the International Co-operative Principles." The document goes on to state that the intent of participating co-ops is to "reorient the economy from one dedicated to maximizing individual wealth to one calculated to advance the common good," and to "promote regional autonomy in food production and other goods essential to human existence." An overarching goal was to "provide occasions for collective action to build a co-operative economy in our geographic region."

Although the group originally dubbed themselves the Connecticut Valley Neighboring Co-ops, their network expanded beyond the bounds of the Connecticut River Valley, and thus the name evolved to the "Neighboring Food Co-op Association," reflecting Wendell Berry's assertion that "a viable community is made up of neighbors who cherish and protect what they have in common." The NFCA now consists of more than 35 established and start-up food co-ops across New England and New York ranging in size from large, multiple storefront retailers

with thousands of members to smaller markets with just a few hundred. Most of these co-ops have been in operation for more than 20 years and some, such as the Putney Food Co-op and the Co-op Food Stores (Hanover Consumer Co-op), have been active since the 1930s and '40s.

The mission of the NFCA is to support growth, innovation, and shared success among their member co-ops through collaboration, education, and partnerships, including marketing and educational programs, regional sourcing initiatives, peer networking, and mutual support. They act as stewards of many types of work such as development, education, and advocacy, and act as a place for co-ops to share knowledge and resources as we contribute to shared impact and success. As the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) notes, "creating federations that leverage scarce resources whilst respecting the identity of smaller members is key to and the intention of this Sixth Principle."

We're grateful to the NFCA for providing opportunities for collaboration with other regional co-operatives allowing us to share resources, amplify our voices, and leverage our collective strengths. These collaborations directly led to the development of our Food for All program, which seeks to improve healthy food access to community members in need. NFCA also helps us stay connected with farmers and like-minded groups such as NOFA-VT to advance our shared goal of a healthy, just, and sustainable food system. NFCA has also been instrumental in helping us measure and track the collective impact of co-ops throughout New England so that we're better able to tell our story and demonstrate the role of co-operative enterprise in building more vibrant and resilient communities. **We truly are stronger together.**

NFCA Urban Greens Opening 2019

