

## International Co-op Day: Sustainability through Co-operation

Erbin Crowell

This year's International Day of Co-operatives, observed on Saturday, July 7th, is focused on Sustainable Societies through Co-operation. Celebrated annually by the United Nations (UN), the

Day is an opportunity to promote the role of co-ops in building global peace and security, as well as a reminder to co-operatives and credit unions to consider how we can do more to contribute to more sustainable communities.

How did co-ops come to play such a central position in international development?

Co-ops are businesses that are owned and democratically governed by their members — the people who use them to provide themselves with products, services, and livelihoods. This unique structure means that co-operatives are rooted in their communities. And because they are designed to meet the needs of their members rather than maximizing short-term profits, co-ops are more sustainable.

While the co-op model is well suited

to building stronger local communities, the movement has been international in its vision from its beginnings. For example, Robert Owen, often described as the “Father of Co-operation,” traveled extensively to share his vision for utopian villages based on the community he developed at New Lanark, Scotland (now a UNESCO World Heritage Site). But it was the found-



ing of a small food co-op in 1844 by working people in the North of England that enabled the movement to grow globally. By establishing the core co-operative principles, the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers provided the framework for what has become one of the largest social movements in the world with over one billion members.

As Johnston Birchall notes in “The International Co-operative Movement,” co-op activists had begun exchanging ideas across borders by the 1850s. As communities across Europe struggled with the impacts of the Industrial Revolution, co-operative ideas took root and grew rapidly in response to the local needs. While consumer co-operation became the dominant model in the UK in response to rapid industrialization and the challenges it faces by working people, credit unions first emerged in

Germany among rural farmers and urban artisans. In Denmark, small independent family farmers used co-ops to compete with large producers and processors. And in Italy, France and Spain, worker co-ops became an important tool for creating sustainable jobs in the face of increasing globalization. From these early experiments, co-ops have spread to every corner of the world and every part of the economy.

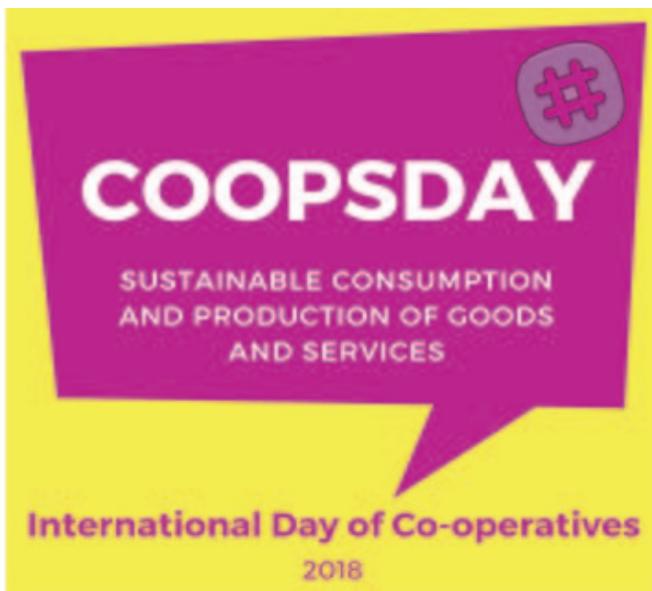
In 1895, activists gathered in London founded the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) for the purposes of sharing information, promoting co-operative principles, and establishing commercial relations among co-ops in different countries. The ICA was particularly successful in helping to establish legal statutes in countries around the world, enabling people to incorporate co-operative enterprises.

From the beginning, the ICA held an international perspective, including a commitment to democratic economic development and global collaboration as keys to world peace. In this sense, it is not surprising that the Alliance developed a relationship with the UN early in its history. Founded in 1945 in the wake of World War II, the UN was established with the primary goal of promoting international peace and security through conflict prevention, human rights, and economic development. A year

Thank you to our sponsors  
Neighboring Food Coop and  
Co-operators Insurance for  
sponsoring Green Living's  
Co-op column!



CO-OPERATIVE  
INSURANCE  
COMPANIES



This year's theme, Sustainable Societies through Co-operation, reflects growing recognition of the challenge of climate change and the need for more stable and resilient business practices in the wake of the Great Recession, as well as alignment with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. As COPAC

for their products and educate consumers about responsible consumption. Housing co-operatives help ensure safe dwellings. Utility co-operatives are engaged in the transition to cleaner electricity and rural access to energy and water. Worker and social co-operatives aim to provide goods and services in an efficient, planet-friendly way, while creating long-term, sustainable jobs."

Your local co-ops and credit unions play an important role in enabling people to meet their own needs and build stronger, more sustainable communities. And together, they are part of an international effort to make the world a better place today, and for future generations. For more information and to find a co-op near you, visit [nfca.coop/co-opsday](http://nfca.coop/co-opsday).

*Erbin Crowell is Executive Director of the Neighboring Food Co-op Association, serves on the Board of Directors of NCBA CLUSA, and is an adjunct lecturer at UMASS Amherst where he teaches courses on the co-operative movement. He may be contacted at [erbin@nfca.coop](mailto:erbin@nfca.coop).*

later, the ICA became the first non-governmental organization to be granted consultative status with the UN.

Over the decades since its founding, the UN has worked with the ICA to identify common objectives. In 1968, the General Assembly tasked its Economic and Social Council with considering the role of co-operatives in economic and social development. And in 1971 the Joint Committee for the Promotion of Agricultural Co-operatives was created, reflecting concerns about global food security. Over the years, the scope of this committee has been expanded until it was given its current name, the Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Co-operatives (COPAC), in 1989.

In 1992, the UN General Assembly accepted COPAC's proposal to adopt the International Day of Co-operatives, celebrated by the ICA since 1923. The first joint observation took place in 1995, commemorating The ICA Centennial and the Next 100 years of International Co-operation. Celebrated annually on the first Saturday in July, Co-op Day has focused on a wide variety of issues, from globalization to employment, empowering women to engaging youth, peace-building to microfinance, and economic equality to social inclusion.

noted in its announcement of the celebration, "co-operatives have two centuries' experience building sustainable and resilient societies. Agricultural co-operatives work to maintain the longevity of the land where they grow crops through sustainable farming practices. Consumer co-operatives support sustainable sourcing

## Be a member. Not just a number.

*At Co-op, we're member owned and member committed. Since 1915 we've been providing protection for individuals, farms and businesses with a large network of local agents, fast and fair claims service, knowledge of farm safety practices and affordable rates. At the Co-op, you're not just a number.*

**INSURING YOU AND YOUR NEIGHBORS**  
HOME • AUTO • BUSINESS • FARM



**Local agents with a local product supporting our communities, local businesses, and farmers.**



**CO-OPERATIVE  
INSURANCE  
COMPANIES**

292 Colonial Drive, Middlebury, VT 05753-5890

Find a local agent by visiting [www.co-opinsurance.com](http://www.co-opinsurance.com) | (800) 639-4017

**Member owned. Member committed.**