



BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

Expanding Co-ops and Fair Trade Networks

Although cooperatives have pioneered in building organics and local food production, we have a long way to go before we'll know what a sustainable food system looks like. We build the road as we travel.

We can see the seeds of a viable future in the growth of organics and fair trade, in the support for expanding local food production, and modeled in existing businesses and farms as well as households that are islands of food and energy conservation. Cooperatives continue to share leadership of such efforts in many communities, not only through their frequently strong commitment to supporting local producers but also through educational efforts that go well beyond the store walls in generating public impact and allies.

These efforts by food co-ops and their allies are building awareness and furthering the growth of food security. We're in a time of strong interest in a safe and adequate food supply as well as unprecedented threats to food security. Co-ops and many others continue to focus the demand for integrity and sustainability in the food system, and this reverberates in public policy as well as household practices.

In the present edition, organic fundamentals and threats to the integrity of organics are reviewed in Cissy Bowman's report, including eco-labels that often are confusing, with products held to less-rigorous standards. You'll also find two different examples from the northern corners of the U.S. illustrating how co-ops build food awareness and a commitment to quality. From Middlebury Natural Foods in Vermont, the co-op shares its well-considered set of product purchasing criteria that define for buyers, suppliers, and citizens just what methods and ingredients are allowed at the co-op. In Seattle, PCC Natural Markets maintains an impressive and popular program of classes on cooking and other slices of the food economy, and their report recommends important ingredients for food education classes.

The cover section, "Building Sustainable and Fair Trade Food Networks," goes more deeply into the kind of commitment and organization that food security requires. Co-ops, as sources

of food education and a cleaner food supply, are needed in hundreds of communities. It is heartening to note that at present there are more such projects than at any time during the past 30 years. The principle of cooperation among cooperatives is a big part of this new landscape. Stuart Reid, heading the Food Co-op 500 program that coordinates resources and assistance for startup efforts, highlights how existing co-ops can provide the extra professional knowledge and inspiration that these cooperative development projects need for a successful launch.

In other ways as well, co-ops and their allies are deepening their impact on local communities and the food economy. Food cooperatives have been instrumental in nurturing the fair trade movement, and indeed many fair trade producers are cooperatives. And a sustainable food system will have to address working conditions, incorporating standards not only for agricultural ingredients, but also for labor. Toward that end, in these pages the Domestic Fair Trade Group is profiled through a listing of diverse member organizations. And a report from Pachamama Coffee Cooperative offers a model of cooperatives and Fair Trade.

"Food Miles and Food Energy," by your editor, attempts to look at the big picture and see how

energy constraints apply to the food economy. Our efforts must transform a grossly wasteful and unsafe food system, which burns 10 or more calories for each calorie it delivers while compromising and depleting water supplies and generating health crises. The current "food miles" campaigns need to be supplemented with a deeper look at production methods, including organic/sustainable, and education about eating lower on the food chain. It is very unlikely that any sustainable food future can maintain the present level of meat and dairy consumption in the typical U.S. diet.

Co-ops are powerfully positioned to collaborate with both producers and the public. Co-ops are essential players in transforming our food system into fair and sustainable networks based in food-secure communities. That is an agenda for the foreseeable future. ■

Existing co-ops can provide the extra professional knowledge and inspiration that cooperative development projects need.

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