

WORKING COLLECTIVELY

by Agnès Papone from Ferme Lavancia in France

Our efforts at organizing a coop of farmers in the Southern French Alps (Nice back-country) began with a tightly-knit organic group in response to local consumers wanting to find produce and farm products without having to drive all over the countryside nor down to the coast. So we had the unusual luxury of being a consumer-driven farmer's coop. After a few years as a smallish and exclusively organic group, we decided to broaden our rules a bit to allow some free-range poultry family-farmers so that we could offer more meat options. There is very little in the way of organic poultry (or poultry generally) in our part of the world. Our farm, Ferme Lavancia, produces organic vegetables, fruit and free range organic eggs, among the other farmers we have goat, cow and ewe's milk cheeses, yoghurts and dairy, honeys from organic lavender and Provence flowers, olive oil and olives, lamb, beef and veal, as well as organic craft beer, spelt flour and grains, duck eggs, jams, jellies and chutneys, pickled quail eggs... I could go on and on!

The governance model we came to by trial and error — after a few false starts, it was itself an innovation. We don't have a hierarchy nor a president, secretaries, treasurers and so forth. We had decided we wanted everyone elected to be on the governance board to be on equal footing and equally responsible. So we have 9 co-presidents, and as it happens we're all women. A few husbands and male partners work together with us on the farms but as far as running the coop, it seems to make more sense this way. It is also a great selling point and surprises people that we're a women's farming coop. In France we can't actually be called a cooperative (even though we initially started out as one) because the administrative burdens related to cooperatives are too difficult for a very small group like ours. So we gave up our coop status and relaunched ourselves as a non-profit organisation, since we don't make any and since we return all our earnings to the farmer-members. We're called Montagnes Paysannes and we're growing about 30% yearly, but not without some growing pains. This year, to improve on our teamwork and communication, we're going to start workshops to address conflicts and overcome difficulties with allocating tasks, workloads and responsibilities. The whole undertaking has taught us many lessons and we are constantly learning. Non-violent communication, zero-waste, grant-writing and reporting, managing human resources.. the list of skills we're acquiring and need to sharpen seems to be never-ending. But nothing a group of fearless farmers can't face.

JUST, AND - THE ART

I recently enjoyed the privilege of participating in a summit on the Art of Cooperation by the ground-breaking cooperators at CROPP, better known as Organic Valley who were featured in the last edition of Organic Matters. Despite the inordinately frosty temperatures we experienced in La Crosse, Wisconsin during the January polar vortex, the mental energies and ideas generated were warming, inspiring, invigorating, and very humbling.

Absolutely nothing about this summit was conventional. Chloris Lowe, a leader of the Ho-Chunk Nation welcomed participants with a beautiful, thoughtful and insightful history of his people in the local area, spanning more than 15,000 years in a mere 15 minutes of fascinating storytelling. I had never before experienced a speaker so generous, so moving and at the same time so grounding. He laid down the roots to grow a productive summit and set the tone for an empathic and constructive exchange of thoughts from a diversity of perspectives.

Thoughts, energies and perspectives on cooperation were the most important outcomes of the summit, gathered from an impressive line-up of thinkers, activists, change-makers and thought-leaders who would probably self-define themselves as practical visionaries. They got our brains cranking about cooperation, ownership, stewardship, shared governance, democracy and social justice. The wealth of ideas that emerged were not just innovative and novel ideas about democracy, social justice and advocacy, but about a real commitment to take the thinking further into ongoing future work. Even the facilitation methods were highly innovative, using a team of facilitators to keep us on time whilst learning and exchanging.

Our visit to the Organic Valley headquarters and the tour of their distribution centre was absolutely fascinating. Unbeknownst to me a significant proportion (>40%) of the owner-cooperators at CROPP are plain clothes, sometimes known as Amish and Mennonite. The CROPP distribution and logistics centre was designed to accommodate loading bays and docks for ordinary, conventional refrigerated lorries, but also with ramps and provisions for deliveries on horse-drawn buggies and carriages pulling up to

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unload organic vegetables! You could certainly picture their collective barn-raising as a model for building a fairer and more cooperative world.

Every detail has been thought of in the design of this state-of-the-art facility. The cheese packing and grating rooms are ergonomically equipped so that work flow is efficient and seamless. All the off-cuts of cheese that aren't big enough to grate are packaged-up and sealed in vacuum packets to be sold, some at the on-site retail shop which features all manner of local, regional organic fare. I delighted my family by returning from Wisconsin to our farm in southern France with packets of raw milk cheeses that were in fact repurposed but very tasty off-cuts. My husband also thoroughly appreciated that I discovered a cooperative local brewery which made fantastic, organic craft beers which were the perfect companion for the cheeses.

We explored quite a few different and inspiring cooperative examples and case studies in addition to Organic Valley, the Cincinnati Union Cooperative Initiative, a Cooperative University Cooperative Bootcamp, The Working World, a non-extractive financial coop, Our Harvest Coop, to name but a few. Pension investments were discussed as a means to rethink stewardship and ownership and particularly to reconsider "power and control: we have power in numbers but cower to the few". Why do we fear to tread on fair corporate taxation principles which would allow for greater social justice, and instead sacrifice them on the altar of job creation, when most jobs are actually created in smaller businesses?

All these ideas seemed very relevant to me as a small family organic farmer, and co-founder of a rural women's farming sales cooperative. From my vantage point, coming from a very small family farm, it also meant thinking about some of our sacred cows that aren't getting enough thoughtful discussion – CAP reform, making our European project more relevant, just and equitable, particularly in agriculture and agribusiness. Making farming more remunerative and farmers a dignified and recognised profession with cooperatives as means to build strength and resilience.

There was considerable discussion on climate change, and of the biggest market failure being that "we are killing the planet". But far from being apocalyptic, the tone of the gathering was hopeful, without being naively utopian or unrealistic. On the contrary, very lively, practical and concrete discussions were had about engaging



people and building movements on core values, and changing perspectives about what has value as opposed to what doesn't. These brought my mind back to our opening from the wise and sage Ho-Chunk leader.

We discussed how to communicate cooperative values more universally, and how to create empowerment, sharing resources such as this one brand new to me:

<https://cooperativesforabetterworld.coop/learn-about-co-ops/types-of-cooperative-businesses/agricultural-co-ops/>.

Many people unwittingly belong to cooperatives or are under-informed about the values of cooperatives. How can we make cooperation second nature, more mainstream, and promote cooperative values to become normative, especially as an economic identity? What if we asked "are you a capitalist, or are you a cooperator?"

Now that I've been back home on the farm, listening again, the beauty, joy and energy of the music reminded me of how lucky I was to participate in the Art of Cooperation. And, how lucky I am to be a part of our local farm cooperative with a group of incredibly diverse and strong women who make the farming experience far from lonely, solitary and isolated. Our coop sells each of our different farms' products together so that our local consumers can access a wide range of organic fare, lovingly made by their beloved farmers. Hoping we can also contribute to making the world more just, joyful and cooperative.