



# THE FUTURE IS COOPERATIVE: What might it look like and how do we get there?

*By Thomas Mengel*

“Such fun!” said one member of Killick Coast North Seniors Co-operative (KCN Seniors Co-op)<sup>1</sup>. We had just finished playing the game Co-opoly<sup>2</sup> at our weekly Games Night in celebration of Co-op Week 2024 (October 13-19 in Canada). Ten players at two tables were each assigned individual roles as members of a cooperative. To win, each cooperative must master various challenges and ultimately co-create a second cooperative for the community. If individual members, or the cooperative, run out of resources, all members of that cooperative lose the game.

“Very different, very different...,” commented another player comparing it to competitive and profit-oriented games like Monopoly or Rumoli, where one or only a few individual players win while others lose.

Everyone loved the fun activities and communal decision-making, much like in the three million existing cooperatives worldwide with over one billion members<sup>3</sup>.

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“Cooperatives build a better world”  
“Cooperatives build prosperity for all”  
“The Future is Cooperative”<sup>4</sup>

The global headlines above frame an essential story, and experts in the field agree: cooperatives are promising scenarios for future economic and communal development<sup>5</sup>. Yet

while cooperatives have had a longstanding presence and significant impact in economic theory and practice, they haven’t yet reached their future potential. They are continuously underestimated and overlooked. While they don’t seem to fit the predominant competitive and neoliberal paradigm of competitive capitalism, they may play a major role in overcoming the crisis of capitalism.

Social care systems have declined at least since the 1990s. Concerns about various social issues have increased ever since. They have been exacerbated due to the financial crisis in 2008, through “government neglect,” and because of the “catastrophic effects” of market ideas invading social policy<sup>6</sup>. The worsening housing crisis in result of commodifying a scarce resource is one example<sup>7</sup>. Seniors’ care is another one, pointing to social care being in disarray, worsened by the demographics of population aging.

We desperately need a value shift, changing the paradigm from individualistic competition and charity-driven social policy to the cooperative values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity<sup>8</sup>. We need to build reciprocal relationships where we give and take, based on equality, equity, and solidarity. And we need to implement restorative justice as “a form of cooperative problem-solving which can create citizens for a more just society”<sup>9</sup>. Only then may we be able to transform our capitalist societies with top-down charitable actions disguised as social policy to a bottom-up humanized economy<sup>10</sup>.

KCN Seniors Co-op Games Night, October 17, 2024.



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At KCN Seniors Co-op in rural Newfoundland, older adults have taken ownership of existing or foreseen challenges and helped co-create future solutions: seniors wanting to age well in their own homes while previously lacking the services and a support network helping them do so. In participatory workshops, community members imagined their preferred futures and jointly identified current and future needs of the community.

They also helped identify a fee structure that would ensure that membership was affordable to all while also supporting the sustainability goal of the organization.

Both in the game—which is a fun way of simulating processes that really exist<sup>11</sup>—and in conversations about KCN Seniors Co-op, the cooperative values were discussed. In addition, honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for others, together with the framework of gender equity, diversity, inclusion, belonging, and anti-racism, were adopted as guiding values for the co-op.

Values become lived experience through the social events, common meals, and service activities provided by volunteers and co-op members (e.g., help with transportation, technology coaching, grocery shopping, and hot meal delivery).

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Lived experience, simulation in games, and sharing of stories help develop and sustain community. Jointly envisioning our preferred futures helps forge the path to get there and creates the memories that will sustain community. It builds resilience and creates the flexibility that is needed to adapt to changes and challenges experienced by the community (members) on their journey.

Sustainable community development requires participatory and cooperative leadership that maintains the excitement for sustainable implementation and includes the flexibility for adaptations in the future. While still rare in comparison to the predominant top-heavy leadership models, alternative concepts that are more aligned with cooperative approaches and values do exist.

The communal and futures-oriented model of leadership, which I had proposed as a concept in September 2020<sup>12</sup>, has helped develop the cooperative practice of KCN Seniors Co-op. The following lists the attitudes, skills, and behaviours required by the model and describes how they are implemented in our co-op, including the remaining challenges:

- **Imagine the future, act globally, consider the local; identify and orient towards values shared by all stakeholders.**

Imagining a different future for themselves and for their communities was the trigger for starting KCN Seniors Co-op and it is the core of its further development. Local needs and the connection to provincial, national, and international organizations informed the purpose and mission of the co-op. Collaboratively stakeholders identified the shared and foundational values. The cooperative model and values are part of the co-op's DNA. They also strongly align with core elements of leadership and community development for the future<sup>13</sup>. The power of and passion for imagination and values-orientation must be maintained by the cooperative over the continuous changes to its membership and stakeholder base.

- **Empathize with and consider on all levels and from all perspectives; shared decision-making, problem-solving, leadership across human and non-human systems; focus on relationships and relational aspects.**

Cooperative governance and consent-oriented decision-making, as implemented in KCN Seniors Co-op, focuses on relations and relationship-building among members and with other stakeholders. Using a dedicated IT-platform to administer and to support the human relations and service processes allowed to create the first steps of an integrated leadership system freeing up the human actors to focus on relationship-building. Mastering the challenge to maintain these systems from an ethical and people-centred perspective will remain an ongoing task and responsibility.

- **Imagine and consider non-linear developments and co-existence of often paradoxical phenomena.**

The co-creation of cooperative organizations like KCN Seniors Co-op evolves in cycles (two-dimensional) or even spirals (three-dimensional): While the first phase from inception to

incorporation completes the first cycle (spiralling upwards to a higher level), new members coming on board and infusing new ideas and solutions to the cooperative will restart the cycle of communal and cooperative development. The membership-driven leadership processes of a cooperative must acknowledge and incorporate that in their decision-making. To nurture itself, to remain sustainable, and to grow organically, the community needs to hold and harvest the ever-present paradoxes of past and future, up and down, back and forth.

• **Leadership as risky choreographic artistry.**

Cooperative decision-making models like the consent-oriented rules of procedure that are part of KCN Seniors Co-op's bylaws constantly challenge traditional and often simplistic leadership approaches (e.g., top-down, majority rules, etc.). Members often change (leadership) roles to maintain the cooperative processes, they intentionally and openly remain vulnerable to enable consent-oriented decision-making, and—like trapeze artists—they swing back and forth, hold and let go, and pause and take the leap to support each other and the community. That remains risky and is only sustainable with practice and with maintaining the communal network that needs to be able to hold the occasional fall.

• **Open minds by disrupting the “traditional” while creating and integrating the unexpected.**

KCN Seniors Co-op has disrupted the traditional top-down service delivery model by having members take ownership of their needs and by co-creating and co-delivering the services they need to age well at home. The co-op already had to face and work through unforeseen challenges like bureaucratic obstacles and individual hesitations. Without doubt, KCN Seniors Co-op will have to spiral through recurring cycles of resistance and renewal.

• **Move, shake, and shape.**

KCN Seniors Co-op moves, shakes, and shapes the communities it is part of and connected with while at the same time being moved, shaken, and shaped by members, other stakeholders, and the communities and ecosystems surrounding the co-op.

• **Dance the dance of followership.**

Members of our cooperative find themselves moving back and forth between different roles (e.g., elected board members and voting members, committee lead and committee members,

event coordinators and event participants, etc.). As such, many continuously step in and out of the role of followership and leadership almost like in an improv dance. Many of us must learn and develop the courage to do so, over and over again.

• **Multi-level and multi-dimensional follower- and leadership.**

Cooperatives are connected across space (e.g., through their national and international association with each other and through direct cooperation between like-minded cooperatives across regional or even national boundaries) and across time (e.g., through the history and future developments of the cooperative movement both locally and globally). Members of KCN Seniors Co-op, play different and often changing roles within the different nodes and connections of these networks. For example, as cofounder of KCN Seniors Co-op I also am a member of and play different roles at different levels of other cooperative organizations in the region (e.g., investor in Killick Ecovillage Co-op's development company, board member of Sunrise Funeral Co-op, delegate at the NL Federation of Cooperatives, member of Atlantic Edge Credit Union). Similarly, we are affected by—and in turn influence—the history and traditions of local and regional co-ops. We follow the lead of the international co-op alliance and help forge the regional, national, and international co-op identity.

• **Oscillating between various modes of participation.**

Depending on the governance roles we play within our cooperatives and cooperative networks, we quickly and constantly move back and forth between being in the lead (e.g., as board or even executive members, as committee chairs, or as coordinator or facilitator of initiatives or events) and following the lead of others. The democratic structure of our cooperatives, the one-member-one-vote principle, and the orientation towards decision-making by consent ensure that all voices are heard and that all members count equally. This back and forth can and will be exhausting at times. Only if all of us step in and out at times, as much as we can, is this model sustainable.

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**I**n conclusion, the cooperative model and approaches as implemented in an existing co-op demonstrate many if not all



*KCN Seniors Co-op  
Public Workshop,  
April 28, 2024.*

Photos courtesy of Thomas Mengel



KCN Seniors Co-op Computer Service for member, July 10, 2024.



KCN Seniors Co-op Common Meal, July 27, 2024.

the skills, attitudes, and behaviours required by a communal and futures-oriented leadership model. Our values, principles, and processes constantly remind us—as we do remind each other—of the importance of challenging the status quo of the dominant leadership structures and decision-making processes. Continuing the cooperative path will help us consolidate and further develop the future as described in Restakis' vision of a humanized economy with all of us as “fellow travellers on a common road to building a better society for all”<sup>14</sup>. Together, we can prioritize reciprocal relationships and relational services over profitable commodities, cooperative service delivery in local communities over market-driven solutions for the masses, and establish “social care...[as] shared outcome between care giver and care receiver”<sup>15</sup>. As a result, our “co-operatives expand democratic space”<sup>16</sup>, they help bring to bear the “profound joy of collective effort”<sup>17</sup>, and they “institutionalize reciprocity”<sup>18</sup>. As members of our cooperatives and of the ecosystems we are part of, we hold each other responsible for living up to our own values and principles, we support each other in our daily work of co-creating the future we want and the organizations we need, and we demonstrate empathy and solidarity in helping each other back up when we falter and fail. 🐦

Thomas Mengel is a leadership scholar and practitioner, adult educator, social entrepreneur, writer, historian, futurist, and computer scientist. In 2023 Thomas retired from the University of New Brunswick (Fredericton, Canada) and moved to Pouch Cove, Newfoundland and Labrador. He cofounded the Killick Coast North Seniors Co-operative. He also serves on the board of the Pouch Cove Heritage Society Inc. and the Sunrise Funeral Co-operative. If he is not volunteering, reading, or writing, he can be found hiking or biking the East Coast Trail or the Coastal backroads on the Avalon Peninsula or exploring the rest of Newfoundland and Labrador. More about Thomas can be found on his website at [www.thomasmengel.com](http://www.thomasmengel.com).

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