

Co-operative research organises for sustainability transition

In his much-discussed keynote at a conference in Berlin titled “Cooperatives and the Transformation of Business and Society”, Brett Fairbairn, the President of Thompson Rivers University in Canada, confronted the international audience with thought-provoking hypotheses about the roles of cooperatives for achieving sustainability:

In light of looming environmental and political hazards, he expects rapid changes in social economic and cultural contexts. He predicts that new types of co-operatives will emerge to deal with “cracks” in the economy and society. Drawing analogies to the roles of cooperatives in the past, the Canadian Scholar claimed that Cooperatives would be the “places where citizens learn to live with new limitations, reconciling issues of justice and productivity”. However, in order to be able to playing their roles in key areas like energy, food, mobility, health, education or the wider digital economy, Fairbairn reminded us that cooperatives have to rely on the presence of robust political environments and well trained cooperative leaders.

Michael Lee Cook, a much renowned expert in cooperative leadership from the University of Missouri, USA, presented a modern concept for cooperative leadership: Because co-operatives are multiple-good producing organisations, they are relatively difficult to lead. The world’s most successful leaders of cooperatives share the talents to “work through people”, thereby balancing their goal-orientedness as managers with the need to win support through cooperative intrafirm relationships.

Jan Jonker, expert for the study of alternative business models at the Nijmegen School of Management drew a line between new types of business models that would lead the sustainability transformation and the cooperative idea. Mainly three ideas lead the sustainability transformation of modern economies: The search for more inclusive governance of the use of resources and energy with new technologies. The increase of use efficiencies with sharing concepts and the application of circular economy concepts in integrating value chains and a widening of the concept of value creation beyond the ubiquitous concept of monetarization. These ideas will profoundly restructure the way our societies and economies work in the future. Cooperatives business models are inclusive and principled by socially oriented values, do incorporate collective ownership and use, and target value chain integration. As such, they are ideal platforms for promoting the ideas of sustainability transition.

At the three days event at Humboldt-University Berlin, 172 participants from 42 countries discussed the roles of cooperatives for transformation towards more sustainable businesses and societies. In closing the event, Markus Hanisch, the Director of the Berlin Institute for Cooperative Studies looked ahead. He predicted that “Modern Cooperative Studies” would consist of a combination of the key elements of the Berlin conference: A historically informed assessment of the future roles of cooperative organizations, a better understanding of the role of cooperative leadership and the integration of alternative business models in modern concepts of cooperative organization.

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