

CO-OPERATIVE-LED SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESSING THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Co-operative Alternatives, September 2020

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The global Covid-19 pandemic has not only called attention to the social impacts of GDP measured economic growth, it has also revived concerns for its impact on our environment. As fossil fuel industries and use were temporarily put to a halt, greenhouse gas emissions have decreased by unprecedented levels. Now a consensus is growing to “Build Back Better”[1] after the pandemic. In fact, a return to business as usual would imply temperatures rising over 3°C[2], causing heightened environmental degradation and greater instability to contend with in the future. In light of those challenges, the economic policy direction post Covid-19 will have to comply with environmental commitments (such as those in the Paris 2015 Climate Agreement), laying the foundations for an ecologically sustainable and climate-resilient economy. Arguably, green and inclusive recovery programmes provide higher benefits than traditional fiscal stimulus[3] and could pave the way for a Just Transition.

Before the pandemic, the former Northern Ireland Assembly had signalled a shift towards putting a greater emphasis on environmental sustainability, recognising quality of life as a measure for prosperity. More recently, the *New Decade New Approach* that marked the return of the Assembly reaffirmed Northern Ireland’s commitment to building environmental resilience. Northern Ireland’s responsibility towards tackling the climate crisis is bound by the United Kingdom’s commitment to international agreements, specifying for instance a reduction of 57% of greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 baseline levels by 2030 and a target of net zero emissions by 2050. For Northern Ireland, this means reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 35% in contribution to those agreements, a reduction that has so far been challenging[4].

At local government level, councils have taken steps towards embedding climate resilience into their local development strategies. In Belfast, climate emergency was declared in 2019. More recently, the Resilience Strategy[5] was published to embed in Belfast city council’s policy direction the need to build resilience i.e. to foster the city’s ability to withstand economic, social and environmental shocks. The strategy identifies Belfast’s main vulnerabilities including the capacity to recover from economic and financial shocks, population change, segregation, housing supply, mental health and Brexit. The Resilience Strategy also aims to tackle the city’s lack of preparedness in the face of climate change, considering its carbon dependency, its infrastructure in dire need of adaptive investment and the rising risks of flooding and extreme weather. Incidentally, there is growing awareness that the cost of disaster recovery far surpasses that of preventing climate breakdown (arguably almost nine times higher according to the World Economic Forum 2019 Global Risks Report[6]). In light of climate breakdown being one of Belfast’s residents main worries, the strategy signals an increased interest for a transition towards a more sustainable, inclusive and ecologically resilient economy.

Yet, making cities and rural communities climate-resilient will take a lot more than planting trees and retrofitting houses. Beyond investment in infrastructure, what is needed is “investment in people”[7] and communities. The transition away from fossil-fuel and carbon dependent economies will require a focus on inclusivity in which the creation of decent employment (i.e. Living Wage, secure and democratic employment) is central. Economic status remains the main determinant to one’s ability to cope with the impact of climate breakdown and economic shocks. Hence, any green transition will need to be a fair transition, one that tackles enduring socio-economic inequalities. Moreover, resilience will need to be built from the ground up, involving the participation of communities in the process. Local economic and environmental strategies need to consider fostering the development of a vibrant and inclusive economy, one that produces egalitarian economic outcomes and sustainable practices. In short, a green and just recovery is not a “return to normal” or “greening” the economic status quo. What Belfast and communities elsewhere need is a new economic model that delivers job-focused recovery rather than growth-focused recovery.

There is no denying that the focus on local economic development should not distract from the need to change policy direction at macro-economic level (whether it involves considering public bailouts with conditions around environmental commitments, public ownership of fossil fuel industries, national investment schemes, etc)[8]. When 100 companies account for 71% of global emissions, changes in individual behaviour, while important, are radically insufficient to the scale of the challenge. But what this further highlights is that to decarbonise, we must democratise[9].

Because our economies are not only extractive in natural resources, they are also wealth extractive, building back better requires a shift towards sharing wealth more equitably through community ownership and control. Co-ownership and democratic control over assets, capital and labour become key elements to drive the decarbonisation of the economy. We argue here that co-operatives, by giving communities a stake in shaping the economic decisions that affect them, play an invaluable role in such a transition. A key reason for this is that the benefits of a decarbonised, regenerative, and more localised economy need to be experienced by citizens to build legitimacy on the ground for such a transition.

Co-operatives are democratic businesses, owned and controlled by their members (workers, consumers, service-users, producers). They operate on broad-based ownership and follow internationally shared principles that embed concerns for the wider community and redistributive practices in their business model[10]. They are driven by ethos of solidarity and mutual aid, not competition. They can play a fundamental role in fostering a vibrant and diversified local economy where the local community is the main beneficiary and strengthening citizens’ democratic participation in local development. As well as a track record of being economically more resilient, more efficient and happier businesses, co-operatives place the common good above profit[11]. This means that they tend to produce more equitable outcomes and promote ethical practices, making them well-suited to tackling climate breakdown at community level.

A DECARBONISED AND DEMOCRATISED ECONOMY

CO-OPERATIVES AND GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

Traditionally, investments in green construction, infrastructure and natural capital (trees, forests, coastal ecosystems, etc) have proven to deliver high returns. Often being labour-intensive, they create employment and cut the cost of the transition away from fossil fuel and carbon-intensive economies in the long run[12]. Green infrastructure projects such as retrofitting houses, expanding green spaces, restoring wetlands or natural areas, can foster community cohesion and improve physical and mental wellbeing. Those projects can also be tied into creating secure and fair employment for local residents, in particular through co-operatives, social and other community businesses.

The Belfast Resilience Strategy, for instance, acknowledges the role that local businesses can play to build resilience and aims to support the development of a collaborative ecosystem with those businesses. This can be openly extended to co-operatives with the recognition of both their social and environmental value. Since co-operatives employ people locally, they are more likely to favour inclusive, sustainable and ethical business practices and to protect the environment they live in. Moreover, co-operatives in the green sector can boost opportunities for employment in deprived areas as evidence from existing worker co-operatives in Northern Ireland shows how they help facilitate the reinsertion of marginalised individuals into the economy. Co-operatives offer a chance for people who face multiple barriers to employment to take part in the revitalisation of their own areas, while sharing the economic rewards equitably[13]. In other words, co-operatives provide solutions to addressing the climate crisis while also fostering an attractive and realistic vision for a people-centred economy.

Local government can identify tendering opportunities for existing or new co-operatives where gaps in the local supply market are identified. Local authorities social and environmental value procurement policies, as detailed in the Inclusive Growth Strategy for Belfast[14], should be harnessed to foster the creation of co-operatives to that end. Moreover, the Belfast Resilience Strategy highlights that “Belfast City Council will explore the development of a major programme of training and skills for a generation of professionals to lead our transition to an inclusive low-carbon economy”[15]. However, the re-training and skilling-up of workers is not sufficient in itself. A long-term strategy to sustain newly formed businesses and co-operatives need to be put in place and local economic development must aim to the creation of a fair local market.

Case Study: North Coast Future Proof Co-operative Limited

North Coast Future Proof co-operative was set up as a multi-stakeholder co-operative in 2013. The members included contractors, employees and consumers and its purpose was to renovate and insulate houses to save energy and reduce fuel poverty. Set up in the midst of discussions around a green new deal for Northern Ireland, there was hope at the time that significant investment would go into home improvement. In its initial stages, the co-operative spent considerable time and resources to skill-up and train its employees in green technologies and materials. The co-operative also showcased its work in a Ballycastle retrofitted home. This provided an innovative and good example of the energy savings achieved through local dwellings. Lack of progress on a green new deal resulted in the home improvement programme being downgraded to partial grants for boiler replacement. This made work for the co-operative difficult and led to its closure in 2017[16].

CO-OPERATIVES AND COMMUNITY LAND TRUST

Because green infrastructure projects have associated health as well as economic benefits, they can be a catalyst for regeneration but also for gentrification, an unintended adverse impact to the local community. As the quality of air improves, parks and greenways provide space for families and/or for physical activity, the value of homes increases, revitalised neighbourhoods become more desirable to higher income households and investors. As a result, low-income residents tend to be priced out of the area. While green infrastructure co-operatives ensure that the employment and wealth generated stays in the community, they cannot on their own prevent displacement, especially in deprived neighbourhoods. Examples of green infrastructure projects through worker co-operatives and social enterprises in America put at the forefront the need for affordable housing and community land ownership[17]. In light of land value being particularly competitive locally, the need to ensure that land and housing remains affordable is paramount. Across the UK, the existence of Community Land Trusts, often set up as a co-operative or community benefit society, would ensure the benefits of revitalisation are shared by residents in perpetuity. Community Land Trusts are non-profit entities recognised in UK law that guard community ownership against speculative and inappropriate development, and make sure accommodation remains affordable to current residents and future generations.

The commitment to a bottom-up approach to regeneration through community enterprises can ensure that the use of land benefits local residents rather than private developers. Whilst the Belfast Resilience Strategy notes that such a goal is already embedded in the Draft Local Development Plan, evidence of existing regeneration projects (for example Tribeca or Hillview) shows how local council still privileges commercial/real estate interests over communities' wellbeing and local employment, despite an often poor track record on inclusivity and environmental sustainability[18]. The recognition in law of Community Land Trusts in Northern Ireland would ensure that asset transfer to democratic co-operatives becomes a feasible alternative.

CO-OPERATIVES AND RENEWABLE ENERGY

Developing renewable energy takes a centre stage in the Belfast Resilience Strategy. In 2018, 38.6% of all energy was from renewable sources[19]. Northern Ireland has exceeded its renewable electricity target of 40%, it has produced almost 47% in the last 12 months[20]. A shift to renewable energies presents multiple advantages. Globally, it is acknowledged that investment in renewable energy as part of recovery plans produces higher economic benefits[21]. In the UK, it is estimated that 1.33 million jobs could be created if all the primary energy provision was from renewables[22]. In Belfast alone, such a shift would result in a yearly £9 million cut in fuel cost for the city, £46 million saved on energy bills by households and a considerable fall in carbon emissions beyond set targets[23].

Case study: Northern Ireland Community Energy Co-operative (NICE)

Northern Ireland Community Energy Co-operative was created in 2015 and is co-operatively-owned. NICE has 110 members and its main purpose is to generate renewable energy and provide green technological solutions. NICE currently manages solar panel installations on 18 local community centres and social enterprises across Northern Ireland. The solar panels not only generate clean and renewable energy for the sites but also help to considerably reduce energy bills – on average each site has benefited from a 60% reduction in energy costs. The installations were entirely funded by two community share offers raising locally over £211,000. NICE also has a community fund for future projects and provides a modest financial return to its members [24].



Co-operative-owned renewable energy would contribute to building both economic and environmental resilience from the ground up so that access to resources is democratised and wealth shared equitably instead of being extracted by corporations. Indeed, out of corporations' hands, investment in energy co-operatives is retained locally .

As part of its Energy Strategy, which recognises the opportunity offered by green energy in terms of economic recovery post-Covid-19 as well as addressing fuel poverty[25], the Department for the Economy should support the development of co-operative owned energy. Access to investment should be eased, for example by local authorities investing directly in community shares, or investment through the local pension fund (NILGOSC). Direct supply of community-owned energy to consumers should also be piloted[26].

PROMOTING WORKER BUYOUTS TO SAVE JOBS

With the IMF predicting an economic recession in carbon-intensive industries such as retail, aviation and construction[27], supporting worker buyouts not only saves jobs, but sustainable, green and socially useful production possibilities can be prioritised, following the example of the Lucas Plan. The Lucas Plan refers to efforts in the 1970s by workers in an aerospace company to try and save their jobs as well as shift production away from harmful products and instead develop socially-useful technologies[28]. Worker buyouts can also save valuable jobs in the face of succession challenges faced by family-owned businesses.

Local councils, in conjunction with co-operative development organisations, such as Co-operative Alternatives, should consider developing a policy on worker buyouts to deal with redundancies and company closures as well as raise awareness of existing employee takeovers. Strategies around employee takeovers should also be embedded with re-skilling and re-training schemes to transition away from fossil fuel-based industries.

RURAL COMMUNITIES AND CO-OPERATIVE FARMING

Discussions around resilience too often focus on cities. However, it is not only fossil fuel industries that are at stake but also carbon intensive sectors. In Northern Ireland, agriculture accounts for the one of the biggest shares of carbon emissions, 30% compared to 10% in the rest of the UK[29].

Climate breakdown poses significant risks to Northern Irish soils, natural resources, marine ecosystems and wildlife. The impact on farming and fisheries could be disastrous for the local economy considering that pro-rata, twice as many people are employed in agriculture in comparison to Great Britain. Yet Northern Irish farms are dependent on European subsidies to survive[30]. In fact, they are comparatively small, and only provide part-time employment for nearly half of farmers[31]. Research on agriculture in Ireland shows that it is one of the most unequal sectors in terms of income[32].

The current agricultural system and food production is unequal and unsustainable. The push towards an industrialised agriculture that favours quantity over quality, exports over localised supply chain, and global competition over sustainability is simply leaving farming communities



Case Study: Jubilee Farm

Jubilee Farm is the first community-owned farm in Northern Ireland. Set up in 2017 near Larne as a Community Benefit Society, Jubilee Farm has developed three strands of activities: A Community Supported Agriculture scheme produces free range meat and seasonal chemical-free vegetables; care farming sessions to groups of individuals such as asylum seekers whose wellbeing can benefit from working with animals on the farm; and an education and development of conservation agriculture programme. Jubilee Farm embodies a vision for agriculture that is at the polar opposite of the current industrialised agricultural system. It shows how community agriculture can be both people-centred and respectful of the environment[33].

behind. In this model, farmers are pushed to intensify production as they struggle to make a living, worsened by the impact of a cheap food policy and commercial interests that capture the economic benefits elsewhere in the supply chain (for example supermarkets, or on inputs to improve productivity like machinery and pesticides). On the other hand, the impacts are also detrimental for our environment, other species, and our health and wellbeing[34].

It is acknowledged that to build back better will require farmers and rural communities to lead the way to sustainable development. Traditionally, agricultural co-operatives and co-operative fisheries have played an important role in producers regaining some control over the supply chain, sharing costs to improve productivity and livelihoods. And Northern Ireland counts some of the most thriving agricultural co-operatives in UK[35]. Agricultural co-operatives also embed concerns for the wider community into their model and play a crucial role in maintaining the social fabric of rural communities. For instance, Northern Counties Co-operative in Swatragh provides farmers with a place to sell their livestock, foster their collective bargaining power (ex: with abattoirs) and access information and training. But beyond that, the co-operative provides living wage employment for 40 people in an area where jobs are scarce and invests into local projects to nurture a buoyant rural community.

There seems to be an untapped opportunity in helping the agricultural co-operative sector take ownership of the transition towards ecologically resilient and sustainable agriculture. New models of farming are emerging, promoted for example by the Nature Friendly Farming Network that identifies how food can be produced in a way that is respectful of the environment (conservation agriculture, no tillage, decreased reliance on chemicals to see return of habitat, wildlife, insects) or community supported agriculture [36]. Those models highlight the financial benefits of producing less but producing better, reducing dependency on chemicals and associated costs. What they also show is that the role of farmers in environmental stewardship needs to be nurtured, with subsidies that rewards farmers for sequestering carbon, producing organic and healthy food, conserving biodiversity while also enhancing their livelihood.

Addressing the climate crisis will require involving rural communities in building a just transition from the ground up, in particular considering that they will be disproportionately affected by the impact of environmental degradation and increased likelihood of extreme weather. In Northern Ireland, the Rural Needs Act (2016) is a unique legislation that compels policymakers and public bodies to have due regard to rural communities' needs[37]. Rural communities face a variety of challenges, from lack of employment opportunities, lack of connectivity, isolation to limited access to public services. Co-operatives can help to overcome some of those barriers[38].

CO-OPERATING FOR A MORE DEMOCRATIC AND ETHICAL ECONOMY

Fostering the creation of co-operatives in green infrastructure projects, renewable energies, sustainable farming can help Northern Ireland meet its objectives on climate and economic resilience. More generally, supporting the development of co-operatives can drive sustainability in all sectors of the economy. In the wake of the pandemic, Co-operatives UK claimed that co-operatives were the “rebuilders” of the future[39]. In fact, mutual aid has been a mitigating feature of the global pandemic and co-operatives have demonstrated in the face of the health crisis that they were driven by ethical concerns and solidarity rather than profit. For example, Northern Ireland Community Energy Co-operative (NICE) provided a moratorium to the community centres powered by its renewable energy. The Belfast Food Co-op described below raised money during the pandemic to include healthy, nutritious and organic products in community food parcels. Community-led solutions are central to addressing the climate emergency and rebuilding our economy post-Covid-19 as communities take ownership of transforming the way they work, they consume, they produce and they live. There are emerging opportunities in a range of sectors for community and worker co-operatives, in particular sustainable food, circular economy, artisanal products or even digital-creative sectors[40].

In particular, the pandemic has stressed our vulnerability to global supply chains in goods that are essential to our survival, such as food. As shelves in supermarkets started emptying, with the global food chain unable to function, people have returned to shopping more locally and ethically. This shift can be harnessed to reconnect consumers with producers, price with value. As well as improving resilience, buying local has positive effects on the environment. Community, consumer, producer, worker co-operatives can play a fundamental role in driving environmental consciousness and ethical consumption, while making sure that producers' livelihoods are sustained[41]. In other words, co-operatives fulfil our vision of an economy driven by ethical practices, concern for the environment, solidarity and community empowerment.



Case Study: Belfast Food Co-op

The Belfast Food Co-op was created in the midst of the pandemic with the aim to build a viable alternative offering affordable, low waste, ethically sourced, eco-friendly, organic products. The co-operative operates from a monthly pop-up stand in the premises of the Loveworks Co-operative. It also operates an online shop through the Open Food Network which provides a platform for food producer to sell directly and receive a fair income for their product and works towards building a better food system[42].

SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CO-OPERATIVE ECONOMY

Co-operatives play a role in reducing both environmental harm and inequalities. However, their capacity for social and environmental value needs to be nurtured. It is at present hindered by a lack of awareness of the co-operative model from government, local political parties and politicians, council officers, business developers and enterprise agencies, banks and other investors. It is also hampered by registration costs that are significantly higher than other organisations. It is undeniable that the barriers to their development need to be addressed if co-operatives are to benefit from a level playing field.

To encourage the growth of existing co-operatives and the formation of new ones, a more congenial environment was needed in Northern Ireland (see our previous brief *Belfast Inclusive Growth Strategy: A Co-operative Approach*). Evidence from thriving co-operative economies across the world shows the importance of this “network effect” of tailored advice, benevolent legislations and bespoke financial instruments[43]. This means that local authorities and enterprise agencies need to increase their advice and support for co-operative businesses [44], and in turn, that co-operatives are better equipped to integrate environmental credentials into their economic activity.

We also reiterate that the development of co-operatives should be embedded into a wider Community Wealth Building approach. Community Wealth Building[45] is a local economic strategy developed by councils to help retain wealth locally. The approach uses anchor institutions, such as colleges, universities, hospitals, who have significant wealth and power to shift their spending to small family and community businesses, cooperatives and social enterprises. While Community Wealth Building is usually associated with local social procurement, it contends that councils and anchor institutions need to go beyond social value indicators to consider zero-carbon procurement strategies. Withdrawal of local pension fund investment from fossil fuels and carbon-intensive industries is also part of this approach[46]. Community Wealth Building also entails the democratisation and relocalisation of the economy in which co-operatives play a critical role, embedding reducing carbon footprint with creating good and secure employment. It paves the way for councils supporting communities to become active stakeholders rather than passive consumers of a green transition and argues for the development of a thriving local economy with broad-based forms of ownership and control (council, community, employees). While the Belfast Resilience Strategy mentions building community wealth[47], the focus remains on fostering Belfast’s position as a globally competitive city in line with the Belfast Agenda[48], an approach that is incompatible with delivering ecological and climate resilience and unlikely to tackle structural and enduring socio-economic inequalities within the city.

As well as the recommendations made in our previous policy brief to support the development of the co-operative sector in Northern Ireland, here are specific recommendations towards helping co-operatives contribute to the transition to a low-carbon and inclusive economy.

SKILLS AND CO-OPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

The Department for Employment and Learning and local councils should further develop or utilise existing employability schemes (like the Employment Academies in Belfast) to foster re-skilling for workers buying out their companies, for communities setting up co-operatives in green infrastructure projects and to help communities set up community-owned energy projects. To foster education on co-operatives, councils and government departments should engage with co-operative development bodies, FE&HE colleges and universities across Northern Ireland to seek their co-operation in developing courses that helps existing or new co-operatives during the economic transition and recovery.

BUSINESS SUPPORT FOR CO-OPERATIVES

For Invest NI and the Department for the Economy, the focus remains on export-oriented growth and scaling up businesses to be globally competitive. With 89.2% of businesses in Northern Ireland having less than nine employees[49], such an approach is neither realistic, nor sustainable. In fact, it is incompatible with building resilience. Invest NI and the Department for the Economy should support a specialised co-operative development agency alongside the existing enterprise agencies so that tailored co-operative business support and financial assistance can be offered.

FINANCE AND INVESTMENT IN CO-OPERATIVES

Financial instruments should include investing directly in co-operatives via community shares and loan stocks. The Local Government Pension Scheme for Northern Ireland (NILGOSC) should also disinvest from extractive and fossil fuel-based industries and reallocate its funds to supporting community-owned energy or green infrastructure projects. Beside direct public investment, the creation of a regional mutual bank is to be envisaged, especially considering the barriers co-operatives face to accessing traditional finance.

ENDNOTES:

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