

# A SLICE of Cooperation

*The time is ripe for cross-sector collaborative projects*

BY WEBSTER WALKER



**S**LICE: Strengthening Local Independent Co-ops Everywhere, is an annual conference and organizing project in the Puget Sound region of Washington State. The SLICE vision of an expanding cooperative economy, one that feeds its own growth while promoting ecological sustainability and social justice, has resonated inside and outside our region's co-op sector.

Since 2009, SLICE has engaged cooperators in the Pacific Northwest with several key related ideas:

- Recognize the power of cooperation and the strength of the existing cooperative economy.
- Envision and work to grow a co-op economy that meets human needs across the board.
- Advocate a cooperative movement in which co-ops commit resources to grow the co-op economy.
- Inspire a cooperative model in which co-ops account for their ecological and social impacts.

Why SLICE? Don't underestimate the value of

an evocative acronym! SLICE is sharp, cutting to the heart of the matter; at the same time it is crisp like a sweet, fresh apple. The acronym reveals its meaning when you break it down:

- **Strengthening** an economy that works for people and the earth;
- **Local and Independent** businesses that are accountable to the communities in which they are embedded;
- **Co-ops** that build community assets instead of extracting wealth from communities; and
- Spreading the power of cooperation and the benefits of the cooperative business model **Everywhere** that people live and work.

## A brief history

The inaugural conference in 2009 drew 100 attendees to study cooperation as a working model of economic and social accountability. Organizers emphasized audience participation, inviting experienced cooperators and co-op developers to engage the people in the room with the power of cooperation already at work in their lives, and to consider practical ways to

expand that power.

Two hundred people came out for SLICE 2010, including a preconference gathering of cooperative leaders to consider options for launching a new regional co-op development fund. This led to a survey of our regional cooperative economy carried out by the NW Cooperative Development Center. Results showed wide support among survey respondents for the idea of a new regional development fund and for concrete social and ecological commitments by co-ops.

SLICE 2011 dropped the standard conference format and attracted 75 participants for a professionally facilitated, day-long visioning and project-generating session, "Invigorating the Regional Cooperative Economy." SLICE veterans and core organizers are sifting the results of the survey and the visioning session to focus energy on key projects to spur integrated regional development of cooperative enterprise ([www.slice.coop](http://www.slice.coop)).

## Why food co-ops?

Why is a natural-foods consumer co-op supporting a cross-sector cooperative economy project? This is not unique to Central Co-op. Wheatsville Co-op has been instrumental in launching the Austin Cooperative Think Tank to promote the co-op economy in its region ([www.thinktank.coop](http://www.thinktank.coop)); La Montañita in New Mexico has numerous collaborative projects, including a new development fund ([www.lamontanita.coop](http://www.lamontanita.coop)); Weavers Way in Philadelphia has helped launch the new cross-sector Philadelphia Area Cooperative Alliance ([www.philadelphia.coop](http://www.philadelphia.coop)); and numerous other projects are underway or in development with leadership from food co-ops.

The time is ripe for cross-sector collaborative projects to create win-win-win outcomes for co-ops, the cooperative movement, and the community at large. Food co-ops are poised at the nexus of cooperative values, successful enterprise, and innovation to be leaders in these ventures.

2012 is IYC, the United Nations' International Year of Cooperatives. The National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA) has chosen Seattle as host city for the NCBA conference in

October. Rather than compete for conference oxygen in our hometown, SLICE and many of its partners have joined the NCBA conference planning committee. SLICE hopes to engage the national community in strategic conversations, including the ripe opportunity and need for co-ops to adopt social and ecological accounting, and options for a co-op development arm.

Rather than hold a separate conference, SLICE will host a reception the same week. The SLICE reception will serve as a bridge between the NCBA gathering and the immediately following Regional Cooperative Food Systems conference, hosted by NW Cooperative Development Center, Mission Mountain Cooperative Development Center, and the Alaska Cooperative Program.

Across the world, regional cooperative economies play a major role in providing sustainable economic development that is accountable to people and communities. Renowned examples include the Emilia-Romagne region in Northern Italy; the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation in the Basque region of Spain; and Quebec Province in Canada, where Quebec City will host the International Summit of Cooperatives immediately following the Seattle NCBA conference.

In each of these regions, the co-op sector is a major player and driving force behind economic development. Can such a thing happen in the USA? 2012 IYC is a great opportunity to deepen the conversation and to look seriously

at launching an astonishing period of growth, success, and leadership for U.S. cooperatives.

### Collaborating to grow a cooperative economy

SLICE is designed as a break-even project and, with the support of its collaborators, has approached that goal in its three years of operation.

SLICE has been built through a broad network, and immense thanks are due to these co-op innovators:

- **Central Co-op** as underwriter, providing staff time and a fiscal home for SLICE;
- **Seattle Metropolitan Credit Union** (organizer of Co-Opalooza events) as marquee sponsor;
- **Seattle Good Business Network** (Business Alliance for Living Local Economies) as organizing partner;
- **PCC Natural Markets** (largest co-op grocer in the U.S.) as lead catering partner;
- **Equal Exchange** (instigator of the P6 cooperative economy project) as stalwart participant and caffeinator;
- **Full Sail** (worker-owned craft brewery out of Hood River, Ore.) as foremost spreader of good cheer; and
- **NW Cooperative Development Center** as the main source of talent for educational programming, and lead partner on the regional cooperative economy survey. ■

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