

The Ambiguous Position of Cooperatives vis-à-vis the Issue of "Difference"

by

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Abstract

The common meaning of "difference" when referred to cooperatives is what is supposed to distinguish them from non-cooperative organizations and to enable them to assert their distinctiveness in their surrounding context. Examination of past and present experiences, however, shows that the cooperative difference has been challenged from both without and within the cooperative camp. The paper examines the ambiguous position of cooperatives vis-à-vis capitalism, the thesis of "no-difference", the defensive position and the recent efforts to sustain their particularity. As high levels of economic activity tend to increase the distance between the association and the enterprise aspects of the cooperative, it ensues that pursuance of difference is helped by a state of low economic involvement (e.g. , "social cooperatives") and, conversely, is hampered by a state of high economic involvement and risk, as is the case with production- mainly agricultural- cooperatives under strong market competition. Here ambiguities persist as to whether the emphasis should be on strengthening the economic or the social component of the cooperative.