

AUGUST 2022

COMMON SHARE FOOD COOPERATIVE CBPR RESEARCH

MODELING FOOD COOPERATIVES RESEARCH TEAM

Theo Eagle, Leah Cohen, Sofia Meadows-Muriel, Gabriel Futterman,
Alexeya O'Brien



Listed below are the 17 worker-owned, hybrid, and a few consumer-owned food cooperatives who exemplify innovative cooperative values essential to forging a larger solidarity economy. To examine specific details about the cooperatives, see our [spreadsheet](#):

Rainbow Grocery: Worker-owned

**People's Food Cooperative:
Member-owned with distinct
practices**

Dorchester Food Cooperative: Hybrid

**Seattle Central Co-op: "Solidarity
Cooperative"**

**Park Slope Food Coop:
Member-owned with distinctive
practices**

Weaver Street Market: Hybrid

**Queen Mother's Market Cooperative:
Worker-owned**

Mandela Grocery: Worker-owned

**Detroit People's Food Cooperative:
Member-owned with distinctive
practices**

Other Avenues: Worker-owned

**Ujama Cooperative: Sister of
Mandela**

Marsh Cooperative: Hybrid

Glut Cooperative: Worker-owned

**Olympia Food Coop: Member-owned
with member-worker program**

Line Foods: Worker-owned

Kingston Food Coop: Hybrid

Deep Grocery Coop: Worker-owned

Findings

I. Introduction

A. Common Share Overview

1. Common Share Food Cooperative seeks to provide the Amherst community access to diverse and nutritious local foods while also being environmentally conscious, supporting local farmers, and providing job security and benefits to workers.
2. Common Share is working to build community with local farmers, producers, artists, BIPOC folks, houseless people, and any others who are seeking an alternative to their usual grocery stores.
3. Common Share is enforcing a hybrid model in order to promote an inclusive community and allow for consumers as well as workers to have a voice in their operations.
4. Common Share is nearing the 1000 member mark, and is searching for a location to begin construction of the physical store.

B. Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to assess the qualities and challenges of worker-owned and hybrid food cooperatives in order to inform Common Share Food Cooperative's actions as it progresses as a hybrid cooperative.
2. Of the 17 food cooperatives in the United States that were examined, 6 are hybrid, and 7 are worker-owned, while 4 are member-owned with unique governance and practices. The size of the hybrid food cooperatives ranges from around 150 people

involved to over 20,000 consumer-owners and 226 worker-owners (Weaver St. Market, the largest hybrid cooperative in the country). The size of the worker-owned food cooperatives range from eight worker-owners to over 250 worker-owners. The cooperatives examined were established as early as 1969 and as late as 2020.

3. This report will advance the goals of Common Share in that it will aid their efforts to establish a hybrid food cooperative in Amherst and help them better understand the operations of food cooperatives.

C. Overview of report topics

1. This report consists of six sections: Introduction, Building and Serving Community, Governance Structures, Distinctive Practices, Deconstructing Hierarchy, and Conclusion and Acknowledgements. The report will ultimately inform Common Share of the different qualities and aspects of food cooperatives across different locations and demographics so that they can use this information to inform their actions in actualizing their own cooperative in Amherst.

II. Building and serving community → Situating Common Share within the larger Solidarity Economy Network

A. Co-op partners and mutual aid partnerships

1. The food cooperatives examined locate themselves within a larger network of efforts and initiatives that build and serve their communities. Many of the cooperatives have CSA, or Community-Supported Agriculture, programs that partner with local farms to connect producers with consumers and shorten the supply chain. Many of the cooperatives also have systems in place so that people can round up their purchases and donate the change to organizations promoting racial equity and food security.

Dorchester Food Cooperative is actively seeking out BIPOC-owned and operated architecture and construction companies for the production of the physical store. People's Food Cooperative has a community fridge and pantry outside of their store to further support community members who are experiencing food insecurity. Rainbow Food Cooperative donates their food surplus and provides discounts for seniors, people with HIV, people on EBT, and participates in local mutual aid.

2. Most cooperatives examined follow the seven cooperative principles, which are voluntary and open membership; democratic member control; member economic participation; autonomy and independence; education, training, and information; cooperation among cooperatives; and concern for community.

<https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity>

III. Gov. Structures

A. Membership

1. Membership practices differed between the cooperatives examined, but many employed a system very similar to Common Share. A large number of the food cooperatives examined utilize a sliding scale, payment installments, and/or some sort of additional fund for people who cannot pay the original cost of membership. For workers to become worker-owners, with many of the cooperatives, a time commitment and/or a payment are necessary.

B. Governance

1. Many of the cooperatives examined utilize a board of directors as their form of governance. Almost all of the food cooperatives examined, both hybrid and worker-owned, have some variation of a

board of directors. Many of the cooperatives also utilize a general manager.

2. For the cooperatives that already have an operational store, many utilize a general manager to oversee day-to-day operations. It is interesting to note that Dorchester Food Cooperative is waiting until they have hired worker-owners to make any structural decisions regarding their governance.

IV. Distinctive Cooperative Practices

A. Volunteering → varying degrees of volunteer-participation models

1. At the Park Slope Food Coop in Brooklyn, New York, each member is responsible for 13 work shifts per year in order to maintain their member-owner status. Other co-ops have less structured volunteer work models, but none are as extensive as Park Slopes’.
2. Olympia Food Co-op has a unique 3-step working member program that could serve as a model for Common Share to implement a comprehensive member volunteer program.

B. Online presence

1. Seattle Central, Mandela, and Weaver St Co-ops are among those with an online ordering service and curbside pickup. It will be interesting to see how other food co-ops adopt these hybrid shopping measures.
2. The Deep food Co-op opening in East Oakland has a growing library of resources on food apartheid on their website. Other, more radical food co-ops, also post such resources for their members to engage with.

3. Many co-ops have begun hosting online seminars to connect community members with larger social justice movements around food. For instance, Kingston Food Co-op hosted a keynote address and Q+A with Leah Penniman, author of “Farming While Black” and founder of Soul Fire Farm.

C. Third Space Use

1. Common Share plans to implement a third space for organizing and events. They also plan to build a commercial kitchen in their space to host cooking classes and provide resources for those seeking to affordably produce value-added products.
2. People’s Food Coop Farmer’s Market is “more than just a food market. It is a community gathering space where people come to enjoy live music, educational events and cooking demos, learn more about community organizations, and spend time with their friends & neighbors.”
3. Every other Sunday at Mandela Grocery, worker owners use the store itself as a “third space” of sorts, sharing recipes and making food for over fifty of Oakland’s houseless residents. These bi-weekly have been named “Sunday Service,” and they are funded through a “physical karma jar” where people donate money to pay for the meals.

D. Unique/specific practices/strong suites

1. Dorchester will build community housing in the residential space above their storefront.
2. People’s Food Co-op has a unique “Change for Change” program: shoppers at People’s Food Co-op in Kalamazoo can choose to round

up to the nearest dollar. These funds go towards supporting better wages for PFC staff, as well as supporting the recently established sister co-op, the Detroit Food Co-op to create a more localized food system and a broader solidarity economy.

3. Rainbow Grocery prioritizes waste reduction: they operate with 100% renewable energy through CleanPowerSF, they work with FoodNotBombs to distribute surplus food, and they don't lock their dumpsters.

V. Examples of Deconstructing Hierarchy and White Supremacy in Cooperative Spaces

A. Shared power and collective decision making

1. At Rainbow Grocery, there is no General Manager. Instead there is a collection of semi-autonomous, non-hierarchical departments which are democratically self managed. The departments have their own respective policies and are in charge of their own operations, which are all overseen by a board of directors and steering committee, both composed of worker owners and elected members of the general body.

B. Anti-racism and Social Justice

1. Rainbow Grocery's → The Uprising Committee:
<https://rainbow.coop/community/black-lives-matter-now-and-forever/>
 - a) "The Uprising Committee's mission is to educate our workers and surrounding community about the issues directly affecting the advancement and self-determination of Black, Indigenous and People of Color communities

locally and globally as well as organizing to disrupt these inequities.”

2. Anti-racism Transformation Team:

<https://www.pfckalamazoo.coop/artt>

- a) “Establishes accountability to communities of color both individually and systemically”

C. Theoretical commentary to uplift the integral role of food cooperatives grocery in assembling a solidarity economy.

1. Mutual aid is central to establishing solidarity economies, and it is especially important to acknowledge the role of mutual aid and cooperative ownership and power as they relate to food.

- a) Theo Eagle suggests that food systems might be at the center of an ontological politics of possibility, moving food production, exchange, consumption away from market imperatives and towards collective care and well-being: “Kali Akuno also spoke to the politicization of mutual aid, saying that “We can work on politicizing [mutual aid] and then linking it with the work around food sovereignty that’s already happening, been emerging and deepening in a lot of our communities over the past fifteen or twenty yeas.”
- b) Sofia Meadows writes, “Co-ops are meant to be a practice of economic democracy that can survive and prosper even under catastrophic conditions since it is a business engagement that is also an organized way of community interconnectivity and holds room to practice a “self help ideology.”

- c) Alexeya O'Brien posits that if we think of solidarity economy as building an assemblage of different practices, forms of care, and helping us reconceptualize our relations to people, land, the environment, and non-human others, mutual aid is one of the most important practices there is.
 - d) In a larger conversation regarding the transition towards solidarity, Leah Cohen writes, "By extricating ourselves from the narrow perspective that capitalism is the only way the world can be organized, we can begin to see ourselves as part of a world that is slowly emerging out of the despair and desolation of capitalism and rejecting its individualism and constant competition."
 - e) Gabriel Futterman succinctly outlines the core components of a solidarity economy, many of which are embodied by the cooperatives investigated in this report: Solidarity economy is a multiplicity of alternatives engaged in the creation of assemblages centering solidarity, reciprocity, connection, and interdependence, that takes both an ontological and material approach.
2. Listed below are a number of the critical thinkers and organizers who have guided our conversations and actions around forging a larger solidarity economy network within cooperative food spaces:
- a) [Kali Akuno](#) → Co-Founder/co-director of Cooperation Jackson and co-author of "[Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy, Socialism and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi.](#)"
 - b) Boone Shear → Professor of "Building Solidarity Economies" and author of "Toward an Ontological Politics of

Collaborative Entanglement,” among other formative [texts related to solidarity economies](#).

- c) Alexis Pauline-Gumbs → “Alexis Pauline Gumbs is a Queer Black Troublemaker and Black Feminist Love Evangelist and an aspirational cousin to all sentient beings. Her work in this lifetime is to facilitate infinite, unstoppable ancestral love in practice.” (<https://www.alexispauline.com/about>) We engaged frequently with her highly renowned text entitled *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*
- d) [Penn Loh](#) → Penn Loh is Senior Lecturer and Director of the Master of Public Policy Program and Community Practice at Tufts University's Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning. Loh's work “Rethinking Marxism: Beyond Post-Capitalist Economy Towards a Pluriversal Politics of Transformation in Massachusetts” grounded our work in larger solidarity economy efforts in Massachusetts.
- e) [Ethan Miller](#) → co-founder of the US solidarity economy network. Miller's essay entitled “[Solidarity Economy: Key Concepts and Issues](#)” served as an initial theoretical grounding in solidarity economy core values.
- f) [Janelle Cornwell](#) → Feminist economist and geographer at UMass. Cornwell is the author of “[Worker Co-operatives and Spaces of Possibility: An Investigation of Subject Space at Collective Copies](#).” This piece contains an in-depth investigation into the emergence and sustainability of successful non-capitalist, cooperative work environments.
- g) David Graeber → Anthropologist and anarchist-activist. His analysis of “little c” or “[everyday](#)” [communism](#) helped frame

our larger conversation about totalizing versus diverse assembled realities

- h) [“Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha](#) → “Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha is a queer disabled femme writer, organizer, performance artist and educator of Burgher/Tamil Sri Lankan and Irish/Roma ascent”
(<https://brownstargirl.org/>) Her essay “We were maybe not going to save the world, but we were going to save each other: How Disabled Mutual Aid Is Different Than Abled Mutual Aid” shed light on the overlooked exclusion of disabled folks within mutual aid practices.
- i) John Law → Professor of Sociology at The Open University in the ESRC Center for Research on Socio-Cultural Change. Law explores the notion of a [“One World World,”](#) to unpack the falsely totalizing nature of capitalist modernity.

VI. Conclusion, Recommendations, and Acknowledgements

A. After having researched these fifteen unique food co-ops and their unique components, we are eager to suggest the implementation of a few specific programs and practices that we think will be ultimately crucial to the success of Common Share.

1. Amherst specific goals, aspirations, and next steps

- a) Organizational membership → We believe that organizational memberships for organizations such as earth foods and people’s market would forge strong ties between committed students who would otherwise forgo individual membership and community members.

b) Legacy membership → We are hoping that Common Share can implement a legacy membership program in which students can “pass down” their membership to incoming underclassmen when they graduate, which could increase student member retention and create a more established community of Common Share members.

2. Unique potential at UMass

a) Common Share Residential Academic Programs and/or Registered Student Organizations → In order to continue this kind of student research and engagement for Common Share, we suggest the implementation of an official student-led and/or academic Common Share Food Co-op organization. There seems to be a growing population of incoming students who are passionate about issues surrounding food access and sustainability. What if there was a tangible way for them to become involved in a local project that seeks to tactfully address these issues in the creation of a local Amherst food cooperative?

B. Finally, We want to first thank Boone along with the rest of the Building Solidarity Economies course for their support and collaboration over the course of this past semester. We benefited greatly from the close proximity of other Community Based Participatory Research projects investigating other cooperative business models. We are excited to see where our projects can come together to fit into a larger, more formal, solidarity economy database. We also would like to thank Chris Dilly of People's Food Coop, Leslie Leyba of Rainbow Grocery, and Jenny and Robin from Dorchester Food Coop for their time and thoughtfulness in our interviews together.



Appendix

[Spreadsheet](#)

[Profile: Dorchester Food Cooperative \(Boston, MA\)](#)

[Profile: Rainbow Grocery \(San Francisco, CA\)](#)

[Profile: People's Food Cooperative \(Kalamazoo, MI\)](#)

Mini Profile: Park Slope Food Cooperative (Brooklyn, NY)