

The Cheeseboard Collective

COOP CARD*

Location: Berkeley, California

Year of foundation: 1971

N° of members: 65

Sector: Food cooperative

Key themes: Decent work, self-management, horizontal governance, community development



CALIFORNIA, US

CONTEXT

The Cheeseboard collective cooperative is located in Berkeley, California. In the 1960s, Berkeley was a well-known place for the implementation of alternative forms of enterprises such as cooperatives. While many other cooperatives of the Bay Area do not exist anymore, the Cheese Board Collective is still existing and implementing the ideals coming from the 1960s**.

These ideals are still relevant, especially in a society characterised by global inequalities and uncertainty. In fact, in 2014, research by Bloomberg ranked Berkeley as among the top ten cities in the United States with the worst income inequality.

**Gupta, C. (2014) The co-operative model as 'living experiment in democracy', Journal of Co-operative Organization and Management, 2, 98-107

AUTHORS

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*Information collected during a fieldwork carried out in May-June 2019.

COOP STORY

In 1967, Elizabeth and Sahag opened a small cheese shop in Vine street. Three years later, in 1971, the Cheese Board Collective became a worker-owned cooperative. Together, members own and manage a neighborhood bakery, a cheeseboard, an espresso bar, and a pizzeria.

The cooperative is based on the concept of “equal pay for equal work”, meaning that members’ pay is not based on seniority or hierarchical positions, but on the basis of equality on an honorary basis. Moreover, the Cheeseboard governance structure is fully horizontal and all decisions undertaken by the members are voted and agreed by all of them. In order to preserve the democratic process and guarantee members’ participation, the cooperative is supported by a professional facilitator who attends cooperative meetings.

Another interesting aspect related to the governance of the Cheeseboard Collective is that the jobs are rotated. This means that cooperative members have the opportunity to change jobs frequently.

Inspired by the Cheeseboard Collective, other cooperatives have been set up belonging to the Arizmendi Association of cooperatives. Between the dilemma of becoming bigger, with the risk of losing part of its identity, and staying small and marginal, the cooperative has found a third way: to franchise the Cheeseboard Collective by replicating their model.



HOW HAS THE COOPERATIVE CHANGED MEMBERS’ LIVES?

- **Working conditions:** Members receive benefits, such as pension and health insurance. These are benefits that are not common in the food industry;
- **Democratic governance:** Members participate in the governance of the cooperative. They have a say and the possibility to contribute to improving the business with their own ideas, creativity and commitment;
- **Working environment:** Members work in a place that cares for workers’ wellbeing and where authoritarian attitudes are not permitted;
- **Economic empowerment:** Members are economically empowered and have decent work conditions.

SELECTED QUOTE

"I want to show more and more people the advantages of working cooperatively rather than competitively. Whether we will be successful in the end nobody knows."

Michael McGee – cooperative member



KEY LEARNING POINTS

- Business models run without hierarchy and through egalitarian principles are possible, even in countries where capitalism is seen as something irreversible.

When a cooperative becomes larger, it becomes harder to maintain fluid democratic processes. This cooperative, however, has found an innovative solution by supporting other cooperative initiatives instead of becoming bigger, itself.
- Self - managed worker - owned cooperatives, with a totally flat governance structure are possible. Challenges in decision-making processes can be overcome by hiring a professional facilitator who helps members to make the best decisions for the group.

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