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Cooperative Principles: Our Framework for a Democratic Economy

By Jeff Jaeger and Ron Gaydos

This is the first article in a series of seven that will present the fundamental cooperative principles. The Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in Great Britain codified these principles in 1844. Each of them plays an important part in a successful cooperative.

We're going to tell you where these principles came from, how they continue into current cooperative culture, and why they're important. But first, here are all seven:

1. Voluntary and Open Membership
2. Democratic Member Control
3. Members' Economic Participation
4. Autonomy and Independence
5. Education, Training and Information
6. Cooperation among Cooperatives
7. Concern for Community

Principle number one: Voluntary and Open Membership

Imagine what work was like in 1800's Great Britain. Feudalism was giving way to industrialization. The impacts of the industrial revolution roared across society, but were hardest on people forced off of the communally used farmlands during the Enclosure. Having nowhere to go but to the enclosed farms, mines, or factories, those who had to become wage earners were not guaranteed a living. Even skilled workers were forced into poverty.

In Rochdale in Lancashire, a group of 28 striking workers, about half of whom were displaced weavers, founded The Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers. They started a small store at 31 Toad Lane to provide basic foods the members needed at an affordable price. Anyone could buy into the store by paying one British pound. It didn't matter what your job was or who you worked for. Within three months the store was selling a wide range of food and household items.



The Rochdale Society answered an increasingly competitive and impersonal economy with an open organization for mutual benefit. The general idea of an open and voluntary cooperative started to catch on, and in ten years there were nearly 1,000 cooperatives of various kinds throughout Great Britain. Rochdale still does business today as part of the Co-operative Group based in Manchester, England.

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The First Principle continued into the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor, a blend of a union and a network of cooperatives in the eastern US, which established foundries and manufacturing plants in the 1860's into the 1880's. The Knights of Labor welcomed women and African Americans into its membership of worker-owners.

Around the world, as well as in Pittsburgh, cooperatives still honor the principle of open and voluntary membership. The East End Food Coop began in 1972 as a food-buying club – membership cost a dollar – and has evolved into a consumer co-op with over 12,000 members. Member ownership and participation in the co-op's leadership is open to anyone who chooses to be a member. East End's Board of Directors election is going on now and will conclude on October 9. The business operates on the recognition that it needs the support of its members and customers.

Pittsburgh has many other cooperatives whose members adhere to the First Principle. The

Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers of Pittsburgh Cooperative (BUGS FPC) is open to any African American who upholds cooperative principles. The newly formed Allegheny Solar Cooperative is a member owned solar energy installer about to make member shares in its solar installations open to anyone. Work Hard Pittsburgh is converting from a closely-held ownership to a cooperative open to anyone interested in jointly owning and governing a co-working space in Pittsburgh's Allentown neighborhood.

The Ujamaa Collective, dedicated to developing cooperative economics for Pittsburgh's Black communities, works to help Black women in particular develop self-sufficiency through creative entrepreneurship by working together in their boutique, farm, and marketplace where women create and sell their wares and share expertise with their neighbors and fellow members.

Many workers today question job security and democracy at their workplaces. Most workers spend about half of their waking hours in a closed, authoritarian environment. Wealth and income inequality, and job downgrading to lower-wage or part-time status, affect more people every year.

This is therefore a good time to revisit a business model with open and voluntary membership. The cooperative model is shaped by a group of people who are looking out for each other and the community around them. The local community gains strength and resilience from the willingness of people to participate in, and become members of, a cooperative. We're stronger together!

See more at the New People News at <https://newpeoplenewspaper.com/2016/10/05/cooperative-principles-framework-for-a-democratic-economy/>

Jeff Jaeger is a member of the Steel City Soils Cooperative and a graduate of Slippery Rock University's Master of Sustainability program. Ron Gaydos is a consultant in inclusive economic development, entrepreneurship, and organizational strategy, and a member of the Thomas Merton Center's New Economy Campaign. Jeff and Ron are Co-Founders of the Pittsburgh Chamber of Cooperatives. (www.PittsburghChamber.coop)



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