

Developing a successful social economy

Consultation Document January 2004

Overall, UAOS would like to commend the document and support the recommendations for action.

Co-operatives are an integral part of the social economy, as business models with both social and economic objectives and benefits. As the principal development and representative body for agri-rural co-operatives in Northern Ireland, UAOS believes in the value of co-operation to meet the overall aim of developing a successful social economy.

Objective 1

Increase awareness of sector and establish its value to the local economy

UAOS fully supports Objective 1 as a starting point.

UAOS agrees that a UK wide Mapping and Scoping study will be of benefit to deliver key data on the size, scale and value of the sector to the NI economy. Similar research done elsewhere should be considered

UAOS is currently undertaking baseline research concerning the agri-rural co-operative sector in Northern Ireland and will be happy to share findings and outcomes with interested parties.

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Objective 2

Develop the sector and increase its business strength

UAOS fully supports Objective 2 as a starting point.

In light of the large number of co-operatives, collaboratives, organisations and networks being set up, UAOS believes that the aims of Objective 2 should be clearly defined to avoid duplication. In the co-operative sector, UAOS is already working to bring co-operatives from a range of sectors together, through the Northern Ireland Co-operative Forum, to develop the co-operative sector as a whole, thus increasing its business strength.

UAOS would hope that specific support will be targeted towards agri-rural co-operatives and organisations, which to date have been severely under-funded, unfairly so in light of the large contribution which agriculture makes to Northern Ireland's economy. Furthermore, UAOS would hope that resources would be targeted towards social economy organisations that are sustainable and will bring about benefit to the local communities in which they are based over the long term.

As the principal development and representative body for agri-rural co-operatives in Northern Ireland, UAOS is a source of business advice and support within this specific social economy sector, and would hope that government strategy will further support and endorse this. UAOS would like to work in partnership with other organisations in order to meet the objective of developing the sector and increasing the business strength of agri-rural co-operatives.

UAOS endorses the need for an assessment of business training needs and fully supports initiatives to address the skills deficiencies across the social economy sector. UAOS is currently identifying

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training needs specific to the agri-rural co-operative sector as part of its baseline assessment, and UAOS looks forward to sharing these results with interested parties.

UAOS believes that the co-ordination of training and dissemination of information should make use of existing structures. For example, recent research has shown that the enhancement of people's lives through the availability of learning and developing new skills is a significant aspect of the co-operative contribution to addressing disadvantage (TSN research – Co-operative Enterprises and Social Disadvantage in Northern Ireland, Nov 2001). It is essential that identified training needs be met in the agri-rural sector, especially in light of the current climate of change. An overall commitment to lifelong learning should be fostered and new and innovative ways of learning should be identified, with particular emphasis on ICT and broadband services.

UAOS endorses the need for an appropriate and accessible financial framework for social economy enterprises, including agri-rural co-operatives, at all stages of development. UAOS has concerns that without adequate support during the initial start-up phase and for development, the sector will suffer. Indeed, within the agri-rural sector, this need for support has been recognised in other parts of the UK with government support targeted towards agri-rural co-operative development. UAOS would hope that any resources, financial or otherwise, are clearly directed towards identified areas of need and would support the work of existing organisations with the same aim of developing the sector and increasing its business strength.

UAOS endorses the need for support to raise both awareness and capability levels of social economy enterprises. It is hoped that the agri-rural sector will be recognised in any pilot programmes undertaken in relation to support services. Furthermore it is hoped that future development programmes will take on board the myriad of organisations that can be included as

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social enterprises, and that partnerships will be developed to utilise the knowledge and experience of existing support organisations.

Objective 3

Create a supportive, enabling environment

UAOS fully agrees that there is a need for a review of the legislation in order to make the legislation more adaptive and suitable to organisations within the sector. UAOS is already involved in the consultative process for the review of credit union and I&P legislation. UAOS believes that there is a need for an easily accessible and approachable advisory office to provide support and advice on the prevailing legislation. Furthermore, UAOS believes that promotion and education is of prime importance in order to demystify the legal framework of social economy organisations, and reduce confusion with regard to choosing an appropriate legal structure. Any legislative models developed should be workable and understandable, and able to compete with other legal entities.

UAOS is pleased to be part of the social economy network and will continue to represent the interests and views of the agri-rural co-operative sector.

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