

"To Be Happy, to Achieve Solidarity"

The roots of the new Cuban co-op revolution

BY GAIL GRAHAM AND REBECCA TORPIE

A lot has changed in Cuba since the July 2014 visit by U.S. cooperators, reported in these pages by Stuart Reid (CG#175, Nov.–Dec. 2014). A few of us couldn't resist jumping on a recent opportunity to explore the new Cuban cooperative initiative. So, in February 2015, we flew from Cancun to Havana with three other curious, cooperatively inclined Americans for a bucket-list adventure tailored to the social economy and agronomy geek.

We were part of a group of 18 from St. Mary's University in Nova Scotia, which for several years has been instrumental in assisting Cuban government and academic leaders with their country's cooperative economy "experiment." Also on the journey were trailblazers in cooperative accounting, management and development, ethics, and organizational psychology. Other U.S. cooperators with us were Dan Arnett, general manager of Seattle's Central Co-op; Brenda Pfahnl, a loan officer and the director of sustainable food systems financing at Northcountry Cooperative Development Fund (NCDF); and Margaret Lund, former NCDF executive director and now cooperative consultant. Group tours plus presentations by Cuban and Canadian key players on the past and future development of cooperatives, along with daily mojitos and a night with the Buena Vista Social Club, made for eight very busy days.

This trip provided a fascinating, firsthand glimpse of 40 years of societal groundwork that has been laid for Cuba's current initiative to form cooperatives. Even though the undemocratic policies that are creating service sector co-ops—70 percent of the new co-ops have been created from the top down—are an uncomfortable aspect of the plan to some of us, there are solid, cooperatively principled roots embedded in the Cuban farming culture, which we believe can help make this transition relatively smooth.

Farms: the original Cuban cooperatives

After the 1959 revolution, the government appropriated and parceled out large portions of countryside to peasants. The agrarian reform did not just deed land; it ensured groups received financing, market access, price support, technical assistance, and a law to protect it all. These groups of new farmers started pooling resources of land, machinery, and administration to maximize food production. Today, the 5,500 agricultural co-ops account for 70–80 percent of food production in Cuba.

This didn't happen overnight. In 1961, the grassroots Asociación Nacional de Agricultores Pequeños: ANAP (Association of Small Farmers) was formed. ANAP's objectives were to foster solidarity among farmers and provide resources for agricultural education. ANAP continues to have a leading influence in Cuba's agricultural development.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought on Cuba's "Special Period," marked by the abrupt end of heavily subsidized sugar exports and

oil imports. The Cuban economy buckled almost immediately. It was a bleak time for the Cuban people, with a loss of 85 percent of its foreign trade combined with an isolating U.S. embargo: 18-hour blackouts, water use only allowed every three days, and a scarcity of food.

With Cuba's Soviet "sugar daddy" now broke, Castro tasked ANAP to explore alternative ways of maintaining food production within the country. Monoculture farm cooperatives had grown rapidly in the 1980s, and agricultural techniques were largely conventional.

Under siege, with a hungry but well-educated population (Cuba has a 90 percent literacy rate), the country went back to its "peasant roots" by putting resources into simple, sustainable methods of farming that didn't rely on imported chemicals, fuel, and machinery. Crop diversification away from large-scale sugar cane production toward dinner-table consumables became a priority. ANAP's great achievement during the Special Period was in pioneering agro-ecology techniques, training growers, and contracting with the country's scientific research centers.

Today, Cuba is a model for innovative, eco-friendly, organic farming practices. Alamar Organipónico, a 25-acre urban farm cooperative in Havana, uses sustainable and thrifty methods to produce a variety of crops as well as value-added products, and it serves as a training hub for the Ministry of Agriculture. Alamar, founded in 1997, fertilizes with compost, raises its own insects for pest control, and uses a variety of innovative organic farming methods. No pesticides? Necessity breeds ingenuity at Alamar. Plaques of different colors attract different pests—smear them with sticky substances, and you've beat the bugs.

Thanks to ANAP and its close relationship with the state, Cuba's farm cooperative culture has grown to be highly functional and complex. ANAP has also been instrumental in leading efforts to train and provide resources to the new generation of nonagricultural co-ops.

The state holds farming in high esteem as a necessity for food sovereignty and to help preserve the socialist nature of the culture. "Our objective is food security and a decent life... to be happy, to achieve solidarity," said Mavis Alvarez, a Cuban agricultural engineer and educator who consults with small farmers and cooperatives. Peasants benefited the most, socially, from the revolution, and 50 years later, they still feel a commitment to an important collective mission: to feed the Cuban people.

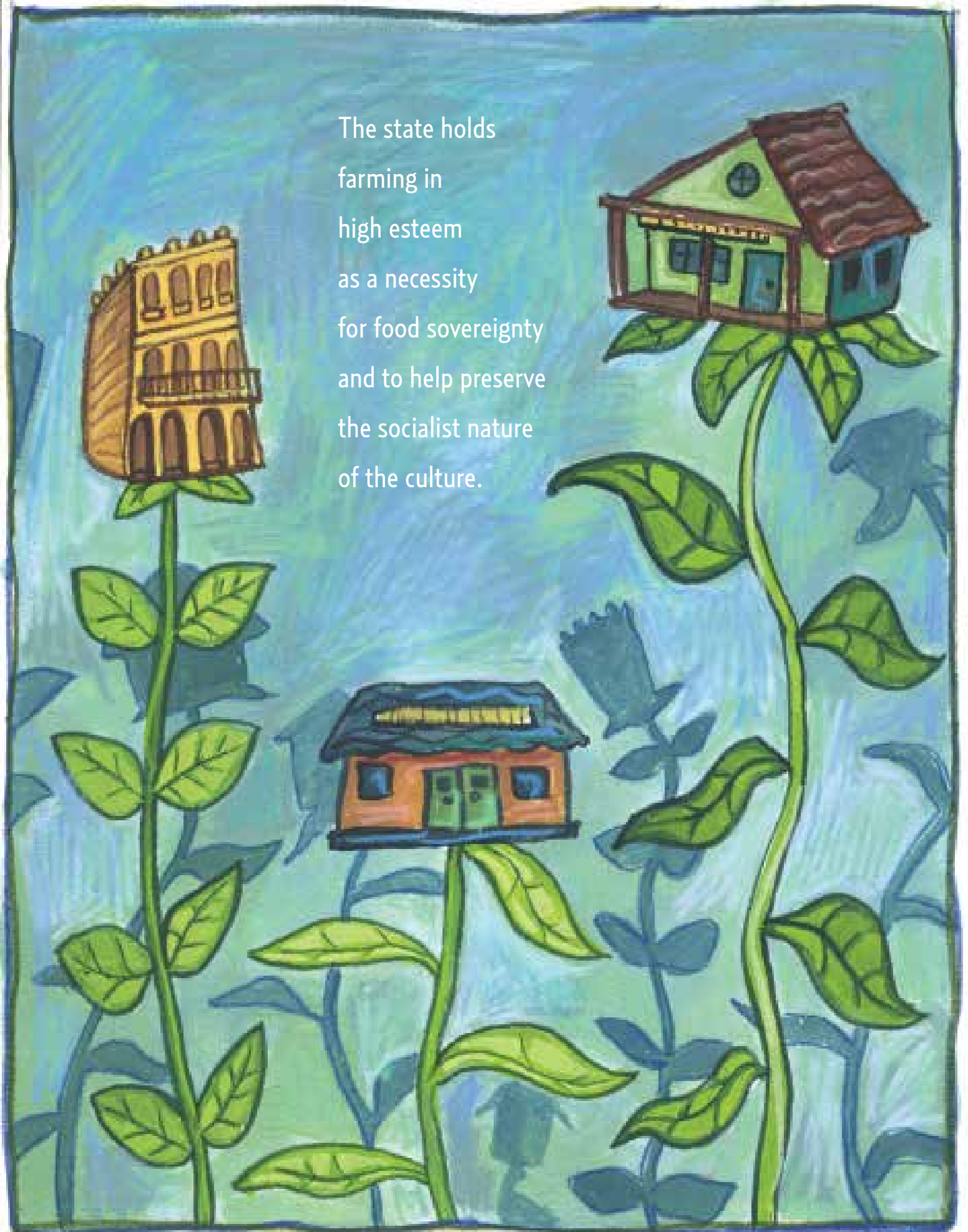
The next generation of cooperatives

The Ministry of Domestic Trade has a goal to turn 10,000 state-run service establishments into cooperatives. That includes restaurants, construction companies, taxi services, plumbing businesses, and beauty salons, to name a few.

Everywhere we visited, we heard that quality control and worker pay have increased across the board and that the cooperative model has ▸

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fostered a sense of teamwork, ownership, and engagement.

But the lack of managerial experience is a serious challenge for this new breed of co-op. Few Cuban workers in the services sector have accounting, record-keeping, cost-control, or human-resources skills—all areas previously handled by the state. Fortunately, the farm co-ops are there to lend a hand. ANAP and Canadian and Cuban academics are stepping up to teach basic business skills as well as cooperative values.

The new business model itself continues to adapt as cooperators take cues from their more sophisticated and well-established farm co-ops. Many boards have designated “professional members” who are skilled in finance or business and are sought out by a nomination committee. Some boards have an “ideological organizer,” whose responsibilities ride a line between human resources and event planning. General assemblies meet monthly; various committees provide written reports on any aspect of the business deemed necessary; and all members vote on the issues in front of them.

Profits are generally divided into several accounts, from capital investments to the oft-seen “sociocultural fund”: money set aside for workers or community members with personal or financial problems. Sick and vacation time is given to all, based on an average of what everybody in the co-op makes, and various methods of profit-sharing are common.

Values as strength

The principles of non-concentration of land-holding and social equity remain important to the nation’s wellbeing. The “cooptivists” we visited with truly felt an obligation to each other and to their communities. A strong spirit of solidarity is embedded in the Cuban culture. It didn’t feel like blind loyalty to the state, but rather the common experience of working together for everyone’s survival.

“A sense of the collective must be practiced, and that is our task,” said Jesus Cruz, professor of economics at the University of Havana. Canadian cooperators are helping with this challenge. St. Mary’s presented the Co-op Index, an assessment tool that measures motivators of cooperative principles in worker co-ops and is being used to help determine success in the broadest fashion. In theory, the values-driven data will help gauge levels of cooperative culture in a workplace, what makes it tick, and what support it needs to succeed. (See sidebar on Co-op Index.)

Takeaways (besides the bottle of Havana Club)

So, what lessons can U.S. food co-ops learn ▷

Co-op Index—Values as Strength

The Co-op Index comprises 172 descriptive statements that demonstrate how closely worker-members’ perceptions align with the co-op’s actual application of cooperative values. The approach is based on some fundamentals of participation theory:

- the health of the co-op is reflected in members’ feelings about it;
- everyone has the capacity to become a better person and can participate in creating an effective values-driven cooperative; and
- responsibility for making positive change lies within all levels of the cooperative.

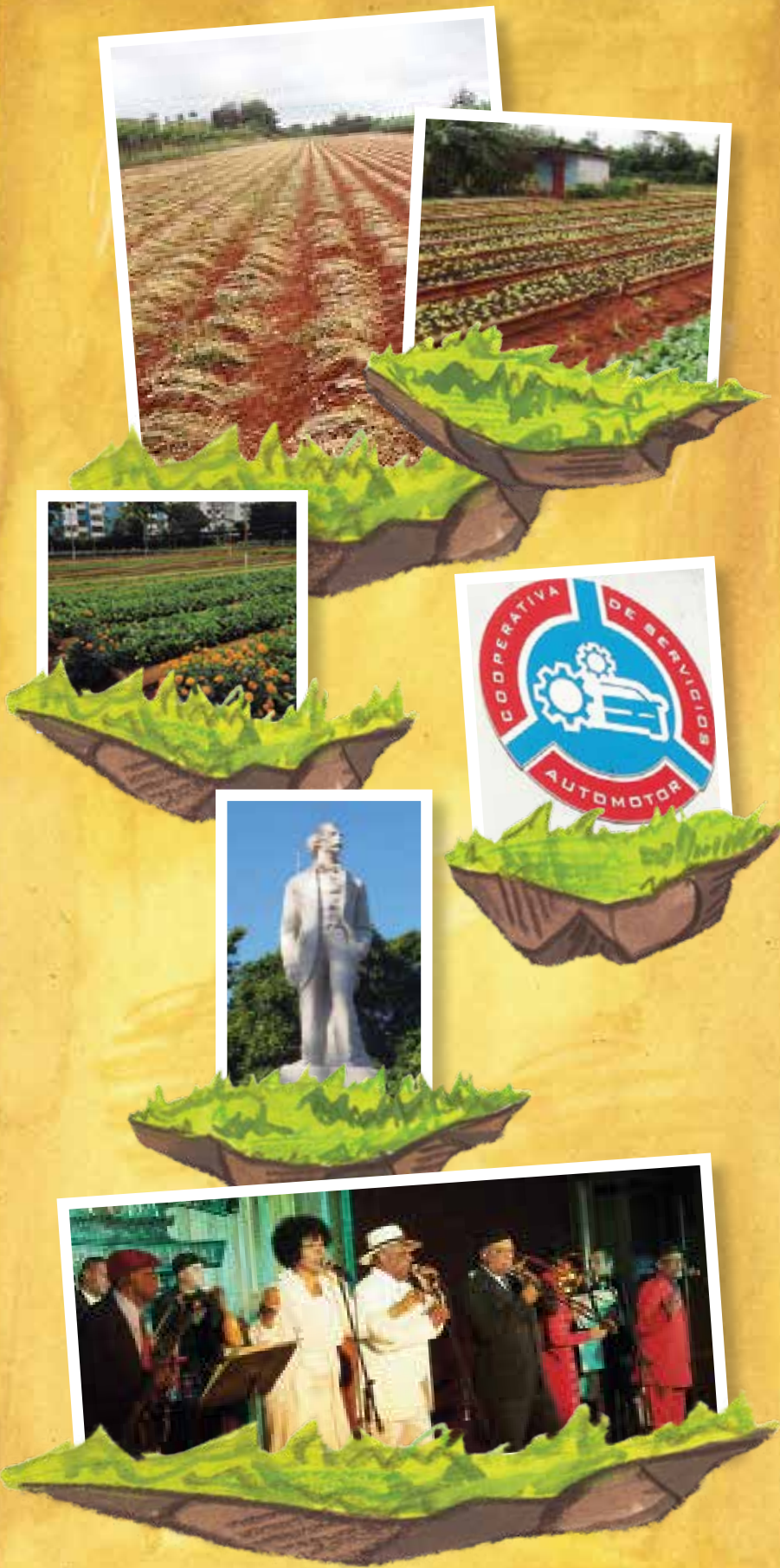
The issues measured in the Index span the gamut from payment solidarity (how close the gap is between the highest-and lowest-paid workers) to concern for the environment and social transformation. Understanding worker perceptions helps identify issues within a particular department or location that can then be addressed with specificity, and with the metrics to back up the need for change. Eighty of these statements provide a metric for a co-op’s Organizational Maturity Index (OMI); a well-functioning co-op scores between 75%–85% on the OMI. It’s a reflective process that gives co-ops a standard against which to assess themselves.

The Co-op Index is based on the idea that cooperatives are supposed to give workers the opportunity to make their workplaces better, which in turn, enhances their own potential as human beings—inside and outside of their co-op. This call to action for the common good is vital to the life of the cooperative. “The Co-op Index integrates things that are important to many, many people. It is important because it forces them to look at their co-op as a whole as they have never done before,” said fellow traveler Ryszard Stocki, an organizational psychologist and visiting fellow at St. Mary’s who is working on the Index. “Using this tool over and over again can transform you. It can change your mind over time.”

—Rebecca Torpie

Photos: Page 26 (clockwise from upper right): Rebecca Torpie, Judy Haiven, Gail Graham*; Alamar welcome; market vendor; construction cart; likeness of revolutionary hero Cienfuegos;

a classic hotel front. Page 28 (from top): Alamar Cooperative garlic harvest, productive rows, and adjacent housing; auto services co-op logo; Jose Marti statue; Buena Vista Social Club*.



from our Cuban neighbors?

First, we need to make the cooperative model dazzle—it's essential to our success.

Think about your co-op: could it use a jolt of energy? Reinvigorating the culture with the excitement of something new, of possibilities, can keep co-op staff plugged into our cooperative values. With competition bearing down, we need to take the time to make sure that staff is positive, proactive, and engaged; that staff believe they're making a change in the world.

In a way, it's about going back to our own "peasant roots" of respecting and highlighting core cooperative principles at the personal level, while continuing to innovate and differentiate in marketing and membership recruitment and

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education. Making investments in educating staff on the cooperative business model is crucial, but so is making sure that they have the resources to impart what they've learned in ways that engage co-op members.

Second, the Cubans learned how to roll with the punches in order to survive. They had no choice but to adjust their activities as resources disappeared. This is a great lesson for our food co-ops: we must constantly examine how the world is affecting us and how we are affecting our members. We've seen the consequences of staying stuck in time—stagnation can ring the death knell.

Third, managers should make sure that staff members truly understand the food system and, ideally, instill in staff the desire to change that system for the better. There is an ingrained respect for agriculture's role in the hearts—and mouths—of our people. Co-op staff are the conduit: they live our values and connect us with our members and help us make everyday decisions based on those values. That's the way we change the world.

Cuba is a country that is trying to find its own way. It keeps surprising us with its experiments to create a socialist utopia, now with a strong cooperative path that can provide an example to the world of how to create a people-centered economy. That optimism is the ultimate gift we can bring back to our own co-ops. □