

The Cooperative and Solidarity Economy in Ireland

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April 2022

This short article is written to accompany an English language presentation as part of *Setmana del País convidat 2022*¹ at the University of Girona. It is intended as a brief introduction to the cooperative and solidarity economy in Ireland. To be clear from the outset, I am an active member of the SolidNetwork which I write about in this article.

Cooperatives in Ireland

There is a long tradition of cooperatives in Ireland, in both the north and the south. Here I focus on cooperatives in the Republic of Ireland. In the early 20th century there was a flourishing of cooperatives, particularly rural dairy cooperatives owned and operated by small farmers. The success of this movement saw that agricultural cooperatives in particular were considered important to rural economic development and were supported by the newly independent Irish state. Over the past century these cooperatives consolidated and developed into some of the most successful of export oriented Irish businesses with globally recognised brands². Another cooperative success story is Ireland's credit union movement. Credit unions are not for profit community owned financial institutions which today can be found in almost every town and village in Ireland. They offer a range of financial services for their members including current and savings accounts and low interest loans.

Cooperative innovation in Ireland has been led from the grassroots. Rural communities have adopted the cooperative model to support local economic development. The East Clare Community Co-op³ has been involved in the development of a café, community gardens, and offers training and family support services. Cooperators and communities are also responding to social and ecological challenges. The Irish language speaking community of the Aran Islands are working towards energy independence from fossil fuels and are pioneers in the development of cooperative and community owned energy⁴. Along with others, such as Energy Community Tipperary Co-operative, they have been involved in Ireland's first community owned energy provider⁵. Ireland in 2022 has also been in a decade long rental and housing crisis compounded by successive governments' emphasis on market led solutions and a hesitance to regulate rents or to build social housing. Cooperators have been vocal advocates of affordable cooperative housing solutions⁶.

Activists and social movements have also been cooperative pioneers in Ireland. The Quay Co-op⁷ is a vegetarian restaurant and an organic and whole-foods shop in Cork. It started in the early 1980s by activists involved in the LGBTQ and environmental movements. It is one of the longest running examples of a worker's cooperative in the Republic of Ireland. The Dublin Food Co-op⁸ a long running consumer cooperative also started in the 1980s as a buying group led by activists from the anti-nuclear movement. Over the past two decades, green and environmental activists have also been active in establishing Ireland's first eco-village in Cloughjordan which has become a hub of cooperative and community led ecological projects. It should be clear from this brief summary that

1 <https://esdeveniments.udg.edu/76989/programme/setmana-del-pais-convidat-2022-irlanda.html>

2 <http://icos.ie/about/history/>

3 <https://www.eastclarecoop.com/about>

4 <https://www.aranislandsenergycoop.ie/>

5 <https://communitypower.ie/>

6 <https://cooperativehousing.ie/> <https://www.ocualann.ie/>

7 <https://quaycoop.com/about/>

8 <https://dublinfood.coop/co-op/story/>

cooperators and cooperatives have been leaders in adapting to a changing social landscape and developing a range of community led solutions.

Established in the 19th century by Horace Plunkett, ICOS⁹ (The Irish Co-operative Organisation Society) is the national body for cooperatives. While things are slowly changing, it has been criticised for not sufficiently representing the diversity of cooperatives in Ireland. This is usually attributed to the dominance of the commercial agri-cooperatives that have the resources and capacity to lobby and advocate for their sectoral interests. Government policy has tended to reflect these interests. Though a recent consultation is promising¹⁰ there has been little or no change to policy relating to cooperatives since before the founding of the state. By comparison the development of cooperatives in Northern Ireland has benefited from more supportive policy in the UK. The Irish state provides supports dedicated for development of certain sectors, in agriculture, housing and energy but these are not aimed at cooperatives in particular. There is ample development supports for businesses, start-ups and social enterprise that are also well represented at a national level. The Irish state offers little in terms of supports for training, financing and development that is suitable to meet the growing needs of the diversity of cooperatives that exist in the country. The lack of investment and institutional support is a source of frustration for many. Indeed community led initiatives and enterprises for lack of support or guidance often end up adopting the legal form of a limited company where a cooperative model of ownership would be more appropriate. The Irish state as a result lags behind other European states in supporting cooperative innovation.

Solidarity Economy in Ireland

Despite these challenges there continues to be a growing public interest in the cooperative model and the development of cooperative solutions that address social needs across sectors. The lack of an obvious institutional reference or institutional supports for cooperatives in general is a challenge for those interested in starting and running cooperatives. Experience, knowledge and guidance on how to start and run a cooperative is not readily available. Those that do manage to successfully establish a cooperative for the most part learn to do so informally with the support and good will of other cooperators who voluntarily share their experience or through their own efforts with trial and error. The situation is precarious and getting support when it is needed depends very much on people's availability and on 'who you know'. The problem is that those new to cooperatives usually struggle to get advice and legal support.

Over the past decade during meetings at cooperative events cooperators have engaged in discussions on these various challenges. In January 2020 a group of cooperators and cooperatively minded activists, from north and south, held a meeting at the Unite the Union building in Dublin and agreed to forming a network. The group met regularly online throughout the pandemic to debate and discuss what form this network should take, using digital tools such as Loomio for communications and democratic decision making processes. The group received support from the UK worker cooperative solidarity fund, SolidFund¹¹. This helped the group to organise a process to develop a shared vision for the network which is embodied in the network charter¹² and governing document¹³. Towards the end of 2020 the group voted on a name and in January 2021 *SolidNetwork* was launched and membership was opened to the public.

SolidNetwork is a network for the Co-operative and Solidarity Economy in Ireland. Its membership includes cooperators and activists from both Northern Ireland and the Republic of

9 <http://icos.ie/find-your-co-op/>

10 <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/b3e24-public-consultation-on-proposed-legislation-regarding-co-operative-societies/>

11 <https://solidfund.coop/>

12 <https://www.solidnetwork.ie/networkcharter>

13 <https://www.solidnetwork.ie/governingdocument>

Ireland who share expertise and experience with the goal of strengthening cooperation across the island. SolidNetwork builds on the experience of members who were involved in previous efforts to start an Irish worker cooperators network. There is a growing diversity of producer, consumer and multi-stakeholder cooperatives on the island of Ireland and while co-operation is at the heart of this network members debated the need for an inclusive vision. There was a sense that a lot of projects and organisations that are not cooperatives in the legal sense shared commitments to many, if not all, of the cooperative values¹⁴. Members are also involved in many local associations, arts and cultural groups, agro-ecological initiatives, urban and community gardens, anti-racist, feminist and LGBTQ groups, unions, not-for-profits, NGOs, many of whom share the networks commitments to a more democratic and ecological vision for the island of Ireland. With the goal of promoting the values of cooperation in general it was agreed that membership should be inclusive and not limited to cooperatives alone. This is one of the reasons why the network identified with the vision of solidarity economy.

A year and a half after its launch, SolidNetwork has about 32 individual members and includes artists, designers, architects, ecologists, lawyers, software developers, academics, union organisers, social entrepreneurs, many of whom are also cooperators. The network is not in receipt of philanthropic or government funding but has a small budget funded by members contributions¹⁵. Activities and administration are to date organised on a voluntary basis. In 2021 SolidNetwork joined RIPESS Europe¹⁶, the European network for social and solidarity economy. SolidNetwork members collaborate on a range of activities, this includes organising communities of practice that are open to the public to share knowledge, experience and expertise. Members are involved in a range of activities across the island of Ireland working to promote and strengthen a cooperative and democratic social vision.

The author

Kevin Flanagan is a researcher, educator, artist and activist interested in the relationships between social movements, transformative economic practices and grassroots social innovation. He holds a Masters Degree in Fine Art from the University of Ulster, Belfast. He has PhD in Anthropology from Maynooth University, Ireland and successfully defended his doctoral thesis in January 2022. His thesis, 'Commoning the City' examined municipal public policies for participatory and economic democracy in Barcelona, aimed at strengthening the cooperative and solidarity economy, and urban and digital commons in the city. He has taught introductory courses to anthropology at Maynooth University and political science at the University of Girona.

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

15 <https://opencollective.com/solidnetwork>

16 <https://ripest.eu/en/>