

Some Thoughts on How to “Fix” the “Problem” of Women’s Under Representation in Co-operative Governance

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Most extant treatments

- Identify representational imbalances based on numerical tallies.
- Discuss the imbalances against an ideal democratic model.
- Fail to define the concept of democracy or specify its parameters.
- Treat the democratic process as neutral, unbiased, open to all members.

As a result,

- Authors treat the minority group (women) as the source of the problem of under representation.
- So, solutions inevitably aim to “fix” women in some aspect so they may participate fully.
- For example, supply extra training, provide childcare, pair new recruits with experienced directors. . .

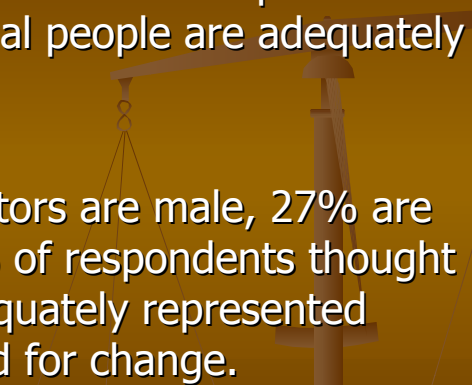
What if women aren't the problem?

- Two important elements often are ignored:
 - The attitudes of the existing elite leaders
 - The point and process of co-operative democracy

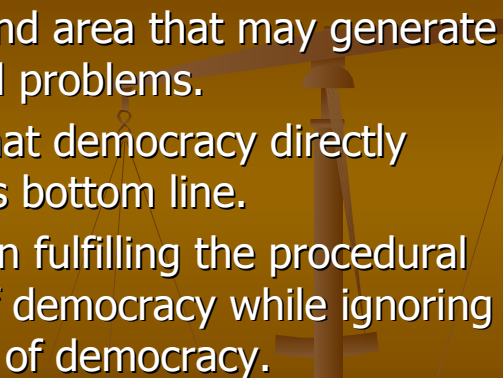
1. Attitudes of the Existing Elite Leaders

- Co-ops with severe representational distortions probably also suffer from antithetical elite attitudes.
- These attitudes may well be latent, and require careful investigation to be fully revealed.

- Leadership and Diversity Summary of Research Findings (2004), by C. de Clercy and Lou Hammond Ketilson.
- We report large disparities between the actual level of diversity in credit union leadership and how elites perceive groups to be represented.
- For example, 55% of all CU directors are over 50 years of age. Yet, 80% of respondents say this group's level of representation is fine, or needs to be increased!

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- Only 2% of CU directors identify as Aboriginal; yet 52% of our respondents thought Aboriginal people are adequately represented.
 - 73% of CU directors are male, 27% are female. Yet 40% of respondents thought this balance adequately represented women– no need for change.

2. The Point of Co-op Democracy

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- This is the second area that may generate representational problems.
 - People forget that democracy directly affects a co-op's bottom line.
 - Leaders focus on fulfilling the procedural requirements of democracy while ignoring the larger point of democracy.

An example:

- A CU with 50,000 members has only 300 people turn up to vote at AGMs. 200 of these are also employees.
- The Board pays tellers to sign up voters.
- At the next AGM, 3,000 people vote.
- The new directors are 2 people of a 7 person ballot whose names are at the top of the ballot.
- Representation does not change.
- The Board is happy, very satisfied that democracy has been enhanced.

Democracy is not static

- Question: Can we have a democratic co-op without elections? If members can't vote, can this still be considered a co-op?
- The process of elections is not synonymous with democracy. Elections in and of themselves do not ensure that democracy is alive and well.

Conclusion

- In cases of deep representational imbalance, the “problem” group actually may be a symptom of dysfunction in elites attitudes or democratic process.
- Co-op educators can inform discussions about correcting such imbalances through leading co-operators to “look at the big picture”– examine the co-op’s leadership and democratic structure, as well as its under represented groups