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Co-operatives and public health: health-promoting spaces for change

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Summary

'Health' is about being able to realise aspirations, satisfy needs, and cope with what is happening in our lives and environment: it is about our 'capabilities for everyday living' (WHO, 1986). Co-operatives can be enabling spaces for people to develop important capabilities to be healthy within our economy. This is about health promotion.

Spaces for promoting health and wellbeing: Co-operatives (including, for example, worker food co-ops, community organising co-ops, housing co-ops, credit unions) can enable people to build healthy capabilities, particularly empowering people:

- to exert agency and control over their living environment (workplace, housing, supply chains, finances, local areas) and how things are run (e.g. rules, how resources are invested), which can create the conditions for people to access a more equal income and social status, and afford necessities in life (food, housing, finance)

Different types of co-ops can also create conditions for people:

- to develop meaningful social connections
- to belong and live towards other people
- to address environmental issues (such as climate change)
- to develop attachments to nature

Societal constraints: Co-operatives exist and are confined within the mainstream political, social, and economic contexts around them. These shape and limit how co-ops can create healthy spaces, with issues around how they are valued in policy. There can also be issues of power and potential exclusions within co-ops - which reflect societal inequalities - but the grounding of co-ops in democratic values, equality, and concern for community helps 'design out' inequality.

Policy Recommendations

Co-operatives could be better understood and more supported, enabled by local, regional and national policy actors to benefit public health and the economy. This includes through:

- supporting, partnering with, or entering procurement contracts with co-operatives for food, housing, credit unions or other essentials in life
- clarifying and simplifying legal frameworks for co-operative structures, reducing the barrier to entry for co-operatives to engage in the economy
- including co-operatives in consultation about health-economy strategies and measures, given their capacity for building health and wellbeing within the economy

Methods

A mixed qualitative programme of research - Made in Common (madeincommon.com) involving: 22 interviews with people connected to food or housing cooperatives, 3 site visits to co-ops, a sense-making workshop with housing co-op members, zine-making with food co-op members - all in England between March - July 2024, ongoing documentary analysis, and zine-

making with people connected to credit unions, which is ongoing.

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