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Echoes of Co-operatives from the North —the Breakthrough of the Finnish Cooperative Movement—

Ecos de las cooperativas del Norte —el avance del movimiento cooperativo finlandés—

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Ecos de las cooperativas del Norte —el avance del movimiento cooperativo finlandés—

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Contents: 1. Foreword.—2. Echoes of co-operatives from afar.—3. A social and economic movement ignited by political forces.—4. Hannes Gebhard - father of Finnish co-operatives and of their organization, the Pellervo Society.—5. Co-operative loan funds established.—6. From an innovation to an integral part of society.—7. Summary, thoughts and conclusions.—References.

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She believes in giving back and as such has held positions of trust on the board and the presidency at Cooperatives Europe, the European regional organization of the Intenacional Coopeat ve Allance (ICA), on the Board of Pellervo Coop Center and she is a vice-president of the Board of Pohjois-Karjalan Osuuskauppa, a regional consumer co-operative that is part of S-Group. She portrays herself as "a co-operative enthusiastic".

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His special interest is the cooperative business model.

Abstract: This article describes the breakthrough of the Finnish cooperative movement as part of the larger societal upheaval of the early 20th century. While the breakthrough of the movement may have come late in Finland, it has left an indelible imprint on Finnish society.

The DNA of the Finnish cooperative movement has a hefty dose of international genes, particularly from the UK, Germany, Ireland and Denmark, which was adapted to the Finnish reality. This article discusses what led to the international business model innovation gaining a foothold in a remote and sparsely populated northern country relying predominantly on agricultural production, and what the ramifications of this development were.

In this theoretical article, we have used an explanatory historical research method in order to understand what has happened, why it happened and what resulted from it.

From the European perspective, Finland was a remote, cold forested land, slow to embrace agricultural and industrial progress. Moreover, delayed land reforms increased social pressures. While the basic motives behind the cooperative movement were economic and social, the actualisation of the movement was triggered by Finland's relationship with the Russian central power reaching a crisis point.

The spread of the cooperative movement cannot be explained solely on the social and political pull factor. It also required a strong figurehead and a group of committed people taking an active initiative serving as a catalyst to direct the change.

The past number of decades have demonstrated the practical power of the ideology as Finnish co-operative enterprises have managed to create a credible alternative to other types of business, create healthy competition and provide benefits and services for their members. Cooperatives have been characterized to have a dual nature, which means that although cooperatives have competitive and profitable business operations, simultaneously they have social aims and they have also achieved wider social change. The co-operative movement, which came into existence more than a century ago in Finland, has had a significant impact on the development of Finnish society by pioneering equality and democracy, two values that have since then been universally adopted. Today, in relative terms, Finland is probably the most co-operative country in the world.

Keywords: co-operative, cooperative movement, innovation gaining, societal upheaval, dual nature, Finland.

Resumen: Este artículo describe el avance del movimiento cooperativo finlandés como parte de la agitación social más amplia de principios del siglo XX.

Si bien el avance del movimiento puede haber llegado tarde en Finlandia, ha dejado una huella indeleble en la sociedad finlandesa.

El ADN del movimiento cooperativo finlandés tiene una fuerte dosis de genes internacionales, particularmente del Reino Unido, Alemania, Irlanda y Dinamarca, que se adaptaron a la realidad finlandesa. Este artículo analiza qué llevó a que la innovación del modelo de negocios internacional se afianzara en un país del norte remoto y escasamente poblado que depende predominantemente de la producción agrícola, y cuáles fueron las ramificaciones de este desarrollo.

En este artículo teórico hemos utilizado un método de investigación histórica explicativa para comprender qué sucedió, por qué sucedió y qué resultó de ello.

Desde la perspectiva europea, Finlandia era una tierra remota, fría y boscosa, lenta para abrazar el progreso agrícola e industrial. Además, las reformas agrarias retrasadas aumentaron las presiones sociales. Si bien los motivos básicos detrás del movimiento cooperativo fueron económicos y sociales, la actualización del movimiento fue provocada por el hecho de que la relación de Finlandia con el poder central ruso alcanzó un punto crítico.

La expansión del movimiento cooperativo no puede explicarse únicamente por el factor de atracción social y política. También requirió una figura fuerte y un grupo de personas comprometidas que tomaran una iniciativa activa y actuaran como catalizador para dirigir el cambio.

Las últimas décadas han demostrado el poder práctico de la ideología, ya que las empresas cooperativas finlandesas han logrado crear una alternativa creíble a otros tipos de negocios, crear una competencia sana y brindar beneficios y servicios a sus miembros. Las cooperativas se han caracterizado por tener una naturaleza dual, lo que significa que si bien las cooperativas tienen operaciones comerciales competitivas y rentables, simultáneamente tienen objetivos sociales y también han logrado un cambio social más amplio. El movimiento cooperativo, que nació hace más de un siglo en Finlandia, ha tenido un impacto significativo en el desarrollo de la sociedad finlandesa al ser pionero en la igualdad y la democracia, dos valores que desde entonces han sido adoptados universalmente. Hoy en día, en términos relativos, Finlandia es probablemente el país más cooperativo del mundo.

Palabras clave: cooperativa, movimiento cooperativo, adquisición de innovación, agitación social, naturaleza dual, Finlandia.

1. **Foreword**

The late 19th and early 20th were a period of seismic economic, social and political change in Finland. Social structures were shifting. Civic society independent of the state was organising itself. The economic, social and political power structures which had been created for a completely different world order of the past were either disintegrating, adapting to the new era or crumbling under increasing pressures (Alapuro & Stenius 1989, 50-51).

This article describes the breakthrough of the Finnish cooperative movement as part of the larger societal upheaval of the early 20th century. While the breakthrough of the movement may have come late in Finland, it has left an indelible imprint on Finnish society. This article discusses what led to the international business model innovation gaining a foothold in a remote and sparsely populated northern country relying predominantly on agricultural production and what the ramifications of this development were.

The spread of a movement such as the cooperative movement cannot be explained solely by the social pull factor. In addition, it required a strong figurehead and a group of committed people to take an active initiative and to serve as a catalyst to direct the change. One such figurehead was Dr Hannes Gebhard, the most prominent and internationally known Finnish proponent of the cooperative movement. He was the "father" or, in less ecclesiastic terms, the main ideologue and organiser of the movement in Finland, the likes of whom had emerged in several other countries to lead the movement in its early stages. This article will show how the movement was set in motion in a highly organised and centrally controlled manner by its Helsinki-based leadership. The early efforts of the movement laid foundations for an enduring and solid business model that has prevailed ever since (Alanen 1964, 199-238; Simonen 1949, 32-45; Kuisma 1999, 10-21). However, it is important to recognize that the Finnish cooperative movement gained momentum decades later than the sister movements in Western Europe and other Nordic countries. Therefore, Finns' cooperative activists could draw from and share the experiences of their Nordic and European peers and, indeed, they actively did so through excursions, writings, lectures and public speeches. The DNA of the Finnish cooperative movement has a hefty dose of international genes, particularly from the UK, Germany, Ireland and Denmark, which were adapted to the Finnish reality.

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2. **Echoes of co-operatives from afar**

The earliest recorded manifestations of co-operatives in Finland —meaning pre-cooperatives, or co-operation in the spirit of co-operatives, before any legislation on co-operatives was enacted— appeared in the 16th century when people voluntarily and without any compensation participated in field labour, arranged festivities and rites or procured food (Alanen 1964, 203; Laakkonen & Laurinkari 1995, 1; Kallinen 1953, 9). There were also "workers' unions" among neighbors to provide aid during the busy seasons. In the open-field system society, the necessity to carry out field operations at the same time forced village societies to perform all of their most important soil cultivation and harvesting tasks together. Other known forms of homespun co-operatives include different kinds of forms of joining forces such as mill consortiums, boat consortiums, weirs and seine consortiums and co-operative sawmills. (Alanen 1964, 203).

The roots of organised co-operatives lie in industrialising 19th century Europe. In the mid-19th century, the press started to pay attention to co-operatives also in Finland: "trading organisations and co-operatives based on allotments" were reported. Unlike many Finns may believe, the start of the co-operative movement in our country was very slow (Laakkonen & Laurinkari 1995 71). The uneducated general public deemed the ideology a novelty and there were no people among the few and faltering supporters of the co-operative ideology who could have convinced the general public of the significance of the movement.

Some people did understand the significance of the ideology before others, though. One indication of this is that a petition on legislation for co-operative businesses was submitted to the Finnish Parliament already in 1891 and again in 1894. The petitions were met with little response, however, as the initiatives were rather scattered. At that time, people did not understand that the co-operative movement was a complete ideology with clear-cut goals and viable ideas of how to reach them (Huttunen 1990, 9-14; Simonen 1949, 61-62).

The co-operative movement began to spread in earnest once a man who had strongly felt for the plight of the dispossessed for a long time took the helm (Alanen 1964, 208-209). Hannes Gebhard, that we will discuss in more detail later, became the passionate ideological leader of the co-operative movement, and he continued to promote the ideology all through his life with his wife, Hedvig Gebhard, at his side. Their efforts and their tireless actions in the field of

social economy would leave a deep and active mark in Finnish history.

While the basic motives behind the cooperative movement were economic and social, the actualisation of the movement was triggered by Finland's relationship with the Russian central power reaching a crisis point. The State of Finland began taking shape in 1809, when Russia conquered the Eastern oversees provinces of Sweden during the Napoleonic Wars and formed the Grand Duchy of Finland from the areas populated by Finns. The border province was given extensive autonomy as part of the vast Russian Empire. The Grand Duke of Finland was the Russian Czar. Prior to Russian rule, Finland had been part of the Kingdom of Sweden for 700 years, which had resulted in a close linguistic and cultural bond with Sweden and, with that, a Swedish-speaking ruling class.

This political development is an essential framework within which the birth of the cooperative movement in Finland is to be examined. Finland's position as part of the Russian Empire proved a relatively benign and stable arrangement until the 1890s. The situation changed with the Russian central government tightening its grip of the Western borderlands of the empire. The shift in the central government's approach reflected growing Russian chauvinism and European power politics as Russia saw the balance of power in Europe tilt in Germany's favour and to Russia's detriment following the unification of Germany in 18701 (Polvinen 1984, 52-57). Russia's tightening grip of Finland was perceived as a threat across social classes and it led to forceful reactions. Finns were keen to emphasise their national unity for which the cooperative movement offered a useful tool. While the underlying reasons for the birth of the cooperative movement in Finland were economic and social, the wider political crisis was the decisive trigger in its timing.

The political deadlock was ultimately deep. In the turmoil of the First World War, Finland became independent in 1917. It can be argued that the economic vitality, collaboration and solidarity inspired by the cooperative movement may have helped pave the way for Finland's independence. At the very least, alongside civic participation it had taught Finns to take charge of their own lives. It helped people to evolve from mere subjects into citizens with better intellectual and material resources than ever before to take the helm of the state. Finland gaining independence was an episode in the larger continuum that resulted in the fall of the great European monarchies in Austria, Germany and Russia. This, in turn, opened the doors for a number of new nation states to emerge.

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3. **A social and economic movement ignited by political forces**

The ideological engine driving the evolution of the Finnish cooperative movement was Pellervo Society, the Confederation of Finnish Co-operatives, which was established in 1899. The story of co-operatives in Finland is considered to have officially started when the Pellervo Society was established (Alanen 1964, 203, 216). A key element in the history of the movement was also the first act on co-operative undertakings of 1901, which was actively promoted by Pellervo and provided the legal framework for the movement. While the cooperative business model had been adopted to some degree and in certain business formats before this and the rudiments of the cooperative model were also present in many traditional local partnerships in rural communities, it is widely agreed that the beginnings of the Finnish cooperative movement can quite accurately be dated to the establishment of Pellervo Society (Simonen 1949, 20-61).

The birth of the cooperative movement took place in Finland later compared to some Western European countries, which had undergone the structural shift in society earlier than Finland (Gebhard 1902a, 2). In historical analysis, however, we can see that once the change happened, it did so with great determination and dynamism at a time when sweeping changes took place in society at large. The development of the Finnish cooperative movement is most integrally linked with the introduction of machines in the wake of industrialisation, the rise of the monetary system, nascent consumerism, the modernisation of agricultural production, industrialisation, modern capitalism, urbanisation, gentrification, and a gradual growth of affluence. Moreover, the Machine Age led to people demanding more meaningful participation in the society they lived in and democracy in all the senses of the word and, eventually, to the first concrete steps towards adopting these practices.

From the European perspective, Finland was a remote, cold forested land slow to embrace agricultural and industrial progress. By the end of the 19th century, the population had not yet reached three million. Finland was a predominantly agrarian society: 80 per cent of the population lived off agriculture. Delayed land reforms increased social pressures. The drawbacks in land ownership and the position of tenant farmers and agricultural workers were in urgent need of redressing. Industry was slowly developing driven by the forest industry in which Finland had certain natural advantages. Other sectors of industry were also progressing not least because of the easy access to the Russian markets. Finland's position as a gateway to Russia had attracted

foreign intellectual and financial capital. Industrial development picked up pace in the late 1800s and the rising industrial proletariat was trying hard to find its place in society, with part of the population opting for the route of radicalisation while awaiting reforms.

The modernisation of society and social pressures created momentum for new ideological forces in the 19th century. The abolishment of class privileges and the freedom of commerce enshrined in legislation in 1879 were necessary steps to enable growth. Liberal economic thinking had landed in Finland more than a century earlier, but it was not until the 19th century that it was fully adopted in the wider development of society (Aaltonen 1953, 23-35; Simonen 1949, 7-18).

The new type of association of people under various popular movements was a factor in change. The traditional authorities were shaken. Finland, after having been part of Sweden and under the Swedish speaking upper class for centuries, was now autonomous part of Russian imperium. Between Swedish and Russian culture, Finland and Finnish-speaking identity developed in accordance with general pan-European nationalist trends. Former subjects of the crown were quickly growing up into citizens who wanted to take control of their own fate. Moreover, nationalism played a significant ideological role in the late 19th century in Finland. The Finnish language, education and culture were promoted and hailed as equal to the Swedish-language culture. The majority of the people, nearly 90 percent, were Finnish-speaking. The goals of Finnish nationalism, also known as the Fennoman movement, were to increase the power and presence of the Finnish-speaking population in the economic life of the country. This required capital to be brought under the control of the new, rising social groups (Henttinen 1999, 69; Blomstedt 1989, 39-40; Lyytinen 1991, 17-22). Although the cooperative movement provided leverage for Finnish nationalism, this did not preclude the Swedish-speaking population from embracing the movement. The idea of cooperativism permeated both language groups. Moreover, the leaders of the cooperative movement came from the Swedish-speaking, often bilingual educated classes and they wanted to develop and strengthen the entire nation without looking at the language (Wallén 1999, 5-12).

The social demographics of the cooperative movement spanned farmers and workers as well as the educated classes who were all becoming socially increasingly aware. The decisive factor in the development was that the liberal educated classes joined the movement and even took leadership in pushing social reform, not least because in that way social pressures could be channeled into peaceful reform. Finland was a relatively centrally governed country at that time. It is

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highly unlikely that without the support of members of the educated middle class, who had connections to the powerful echelons of society, the lower classes would have been able to bring about major change (Henttinen 1999, 70-80). To build a more nuanced picture, it is also necessary to understand that the cooperative movement was a significant tool for the economic advancement of the emerging social groups. In the wake of growing political awakening also came the organisation of workers and the rise of the trade unions. This political awakening also involved the promotion of learning, a process that was further boosted by the cooperative ideology, the principle of which was that people could assume the responsibility for their own affairs instead of being dependent on and at the mercy of others (Rinne 1944, 25-26; Alanen 1964, 382-387, 447-450; Gebhard 1902b, 2; Kallinen 1953, 17).

4. **Hannes Gebhard - father of Finnish co-operatives and of their organization, the Pellervo Society**

The leading figure in importing the co-operative innovation into Finland was Hannes Gebhard, a doctor of economic history from the University of Helsinki whose special interest was in national economics. His wife Hedvig Gebhard was also among the early champions of the Finnish cooperative movement. Their travels in Western Europe combined with their intellectually dynamic and productive relationship resulted in the development of thought that appealed to increasingly wide circles and eventually the entire Finnish nation.

Hannes Gebhard became interested in the study of the co-operative ideology after he heard professor Sering's lecture on the significance of co-operatives in the winter of 1894 in Berlin. When he returned to Finland, he looked at everything through wholly new eyes. At that time, practically all of Finland was countryside and the life in Finnish villages was drowsy. People were slowly waking up, though, and in retrospect, the situation was favourable towards the impending change. Gebhard recognised the drawbacks of the prevailing agricultural practices and understood that the political situation was highly volatile. He took it as his calling to raise Finnish farmers from their poverty and make them strong. His chosen tool was the co-operative movement (Gebhard 1902a; Alanen 1964, 143, 449; Simonen 1949, 38-44; Henttinen 1999, 38).

Agriculture in Finland at that time was in the grips of exhaustion bordering on despair. Crops were stunted, as the old natural fields and

marshlands had ceased to provide sufficient yields. Trade on credit was blooming, which made the circumstances of the already poor nation even more dismal; Gebhard noted that the country's credit system was also a complete mess. There were many problems with the marketing of products and the distribution of consumer goods as well (Alanen 1964, 200-201, 203).

This strengthened Gebhard's aspiration to provide the people with practical means of co-operation to tackle financial and social disadvantages, such as debt, inequality, increased wealth differences, poverty and unemployment (Gebhard 1902a; Gebhard 1902b, 1-2; Holyoake 1926; Hansmann 1999; Spear 2000; Inkinen & Karjalainen 2012). Furthermore, emerging questions of nationality and language were also quickly gaining momentum in Finland in the late 19th century as the fear of losing Finland's national culture gained a foothold in the nation. Gebhard was convinced that co-operative movement would be an efficient tool to fight the "Russification", the very extensive Russian political and cultural influence in Finland, which was considered very problematic for the Finnish development and which threatened the autonomy of Finland. Gebhard felt that rescuing the patronised nation had to start from the bottom up, which meant that co-operation among farmers was the rock upon which major social improvements and maybe even future autonomy should be based and build upon. He was of the opinion that the co-operative movement was the means to unite the nation and provide it with a staunch backbone (Alanen 1964, 210, 447; Kuisma 1999, 10-17; Laakkonen & Laurinkari 1995, 71-84).

The land issue, which was deeply heartfelt issue for Gebhard that he had already written about in his doctoral thesis and that he vigorously set out to correct, manifested itself in two different forms: a means to find land for the landless people and the tenancy of crofters, which was characterised by many glaring disadvantages, also had to be improved. The latter issue was the key issue, because the Governor-General used the theme as a lever and as a means of propaganda during the period of Russian oppression to Finnish society to alleviate the opposition to Russia and slow down the spreading of the nationalist ideology. Gebhard deemed the crofter issue a severe national threat. At the turn of the 20th century, the landless population in Finland was growing and the slowly starting industry could not provide for these people. Gebhard realised that this was an alarming social phenomenon that had to be addressed. When trying to find a solution, Gebhard used England as his example, because the legislation there had greatly limited the contractual freedom of private people in order to protect

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the rights and liberty of the more disadvantaged contracting party (Alanen 1964, 143, 146, 158-159, 180, 384, 441).

Did the seeds sown by Gebhard sprout easily? No, quite to the contrary: people were indifferent and uncertain. The turning point took place in 1899 when the Pellervo Society was established to assist spreading the co-operative movement in Finland (Myllärniemi 1952, 94). The thought came up during a conversation between Gebhard and a primary school inspector, Mikael Soininen, on a snowy day in February on the shore of Lehijärvi lake in Hattula, which is located near to Hämeenlinna, about 100 kilometers from Helsinki. They determined that progress of the movement would require the establishment of an organisation. Some of the society's duties were to protect Finnish culture and to raise the ethical and spiritual standards of the disadvantaged. The main duties of the Pellervo Society were to provide advice about the establishment of new co-operatives and their finances, as well as to protect the best interests of the co-operative movement. Later on, the Pellervo Society also published a large number of ideological books, instructions on the rules of co-operatives and fairly practical guidebooks, many of them customised for co-operatives in different industries (Pohls 1999, 443-445; Alanen 1964, 222, 228, 314, 449).

Gebhard's dream was for the organisation to start by people in different locations joining forces. For the local co-operatives to succeed, they would then have to create central organisations that would cover the entire country, and which would in turn become strong financial institutions that would affect the local co-operatives. The strength of the co-operative movement lies in people and their co-operation; no state authority can disrupt that. According to Gebhard, the movement's roots would attach to the people so strongly that they could not be detached: instead, they would only attach more firmly. Furthermore, he firmly believed that most of the population would be won over by the movement (Alanen 1964, 214-216, 447). How right Gebhard was when making these forecasts!

After the establishment of the Pellervo Society, Gebhard appealed to the country's intelligentsia, asking them to join him in spreading the co-operative ideology and supporting it. He was met with a favourable reception, because the Russian oppression, that we described earlier, was tightening its grip. The Russification measures of Governor-General Bobrikov culminated in the publication of the February Manifesto on 15 February 1899. It led the autonomy of Finland to hang in the balance: a merger with Russia seemed imminent. This encouraged Gebhard to work even harder, as he believed that the co-operative movement would

strengthen the national front against these coercive measures (Alanen 1964, 213, 222).

The politically aware intelligentsia woke up to the reality of the situation and the new society elicited a response not only among them, but also among secondary school graduates and the youth association movement. The strong position of co-operatives in modern-day Finland is probably partially due to the fact that the budding co-operative movement in Finland was supported by highly competent and influential people, including Members of Parliament, representatives of estates, teachers, priests, secondary school graduates, large-scale farmers, alongside with the small farmers, crofters and craftsmen, which was not the case in other countries. The first Pellervo Days that were held in late 1900 at the Ylioppilastalo student house in Helsinki with around 600 guests were one of the tangible indications of this. Members of Parliament, representatives of estates, craftsmen, teachers, priests, secondary school graduates, large-scale farmers, as well as small farmers and crofters were all among the guests (Alanen 1964, 221, 226, 229, 271).

In 1902, Gebhard was able to persuade the clergy to support the establishment of co-operatives in their parishes: he deduced that even though the priests were educated people, they would have many interests in common with the peasantry. Even more important initiators of the co-operative movement than the clergy were elementary school teachers. Hannes Gebhard also turned to writers and got students to spread the co-operative ideology by getting more readers for the newly established Pellervo magazine. Gebhard's wife Hedvig tirelessly promoted spreading of the ideology among women (Mäkinen 2006, 15, 98-103; Huuhka 1977, 63-74).

Around the time the Pellervo Society was established, Gebhard also started to push the establishment of a co-operatives act in Finland. He deemed a law absolutely necessary for the co-operatives to succeed. One could even say that the law created the foundation for the final breakthrough of the co-operative movement in Finland. The Co-operatives Act was unanimously approved by the Parliament in 1900, partially due to Gebhard's excellent knowledge of co-operatives, which he had obtained by travelling abroad. The Tsar of Russia ratified the Co-operatives Act in St. Petersburg on 10 July 1901, and it entered into force on 1 September 1901 (Alanen 1964, 217, 219). The law granted all the members of a co-operative, both male and female, equal voting rights. The principle of "one member, one vote", which had been considered radical, was applied. One should note that the same principle was not applied to national elections until in 1906. Fundamentally,

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the cooperative movement was —as enshrined in its original values— a movement based on the equality between human beings. From this it followed that one of its aims was also to improve the status of women. The cooperative movement has been at the vanguard of promoting gender equality and, today, Finland is one of the most progressive countries in equality between men and women. The cooperative ideology is deeply rooted in a concept of human being that gradually in the course of the 20th century spread through society at large.

The power of the educated elite active in Pellervo Society extended far and wide in society. They had a particularly strong influence on the new unicameral parliament and government as of 1907. Many of the Pellervo activists were civil servants, academics, MPs and senators (Alanen 1964, 401-407).

In sum, one can argue that the strong influence of the Pellervo elite is also reflected in the fact that the introduction of the cooperative movement itself into Finnish society was very centrally guided. Pellervo Society built the space for the cooperative idea in the society and the people were ready to follow. We can say that cooperatives were born in Finland from the top down. This was particularly evident in the creation of cooperative funds, which we will discuss next.

5. **Co-operative loan funds established**

Co-operative loan funds or local lending businesses were also very important issues for Gebhard. He was aware of the fact that the co-operative movement was in dire need of capital, but obtaining capital was a challenging task for small farmers. Due to the lack of capital, small farmers were forced to buy goods on credit, and the credit system was wrought with problems and misuse, such as usury (Myllärniemi 1952, 17). Gebhard's favourable impression of co-operative loan funds was based on funds operating in Germany in compliance with the Raiffeisen principles (Simonen 1949, 36-37). The German loan funds had been able to eradicate usury in a very short period of time, and they had supported and assisted large-scale co-operation between farmers in the sales of agricultural products and accessories. Gebhard hoped that this would also happen in Finland: the establishment of co-operative loan funds would put an end to the unsound credit system and its devastating consequences (Alanen 1964, 350, 352-353, 363-364).

Even though there was an obvious need for co-operative loan funds, the time was not auspicious for their establishment in the fi-

nancial and political respect. The country had already experienced poor years, but it was faced with the worst crop failure in 35 years in 1902. A strong justification was needed to obtain state subsidies. On the other hand, farmers in particular —whose living conditions the co-operative movement aimed to improve— needed help, which is why it was a good time to establish the co-operative loan funds. Political crises —The February Manifesto and the period of oppression— cast a shadow on the attempt, because they clearly lessened any spirit of enterprise (Alanen 1964, 354). Furthermore, General-Governor Bobrikov was opposed to the establishment of co-operative loan funds, because he suspected that they would be used for political purposes, for sedition against Russia. Gebhard was finally able to convince Bobrikov that crofters and the landless would be unable to purchase land without a reorganisation of the credit system and that a central loan fund that would enable co-operative operations in general would be purely financial in nature (Alanen 1964, 356-357).

Finland needed a central loan fund more than other countries and therefore established the Osuuskassojen Keskuslainarahasto Osakeyhtiö [the Central Lending Fund of the Cooperative Credit Societies in the form of a stock company] (OKO) in 1902. This and fiscal policy issues caused the original nature of the Finnish co-operative loan funds. OKO was unique in the world because it was established before any local co-operative loan funds had been established in the country. Its capital was raised from members of the upper classes of society who could afford to invest capital in the company. OKO proved to be a highly feasible tool for driving economic policies by creating a channel for state subsidies and through which the state could direct funds to cooperative banks and onwards to farmers to incentivise development in agricultural production and methods. This and the limitations of the co-operative loan fund movement were mostly due to the circumstances. OKO had to be established first, because the limitations posed by the Co-operatives Act would otherwise have made the operation of the loan funds impossible: they would not have been able to start their operations without the central loan fund (Kuusterä 2002, 15; Alanen 1964, 354, 371).

The loan funds reduced the credit trade and mitigated its consequences, and farmers were able to promote their production with the help of the loans. Furthermore, the moral and social significance of the loan funds proved so substantial that the loan funds were soon called "educational institutes for peasants" where the actions of borrowers were monitored in a fatherly manner and guidance was offered

Deusto Estudios Cooperativos
ISSN: 2255-3444 • ISSN-e: 2255-3452, Núm. 23 (2023), Bilbao, pp. 35-57
doi: https://doi.org/10.18543/dec.2884 • https://dec.revistas.deusto.es

to train future loan fund managers and workers' representatives. This way, the co-operative movement took care of its education commitment (Alanen 1964, 280, 352, 363, 372).

OKO's duties were expanded after Finland became independent: it started to fund state resettlement activities. A law dubbed "Lex Kallio" was enacted in 1922. It gave crofters, who were previously able to claim their lands, the right to obtain more land to make their small farms more viable. The law also offered the landless population the opportunity to obtain farming land under reasonable terms and conditions. A large number of new small farms were established in Finland due to Lex Kallio, and this had many effects, such as the increased need for credit. The state became a shareholder of OKO after the enactment of Lex Kallio (Alanen 1964, 368).

Gebhard did not want the co-operative loan funds to become more like banks, because he did not feel that the people were ready for an expanded system of money transactions (Alanen 1964, 366). The development was slow but sure, however - co-operative loan funds were the most important credit institution group by the 1930s, and their significance in the rebuilding of Finland and in the support offered to evacuees after the first world war ja the second world war was great. In the 1950s, the co-operative loan funds started to focus on the migration from the countryside to urban areas and their market share increased as they offered funding for the homes of city dwellers. The co-operative loan funds were changed to co-operative banks in 1970, and the OP Group is currently Finland's largest banking group. The Finnish co-operative banks were pioneers of digitalisation in Finland and even globally. They were the first bank to open an online banking service, in 1996. Their story as a whole is remarkable. For example, the combined share of cooperative banks' in deposits was more than 40 percent in the year 2021. They have over two million member-owners, while there are approximately 5.5 million inhabitants in Finland today (Osuustoiminta OT. Vuosikirja 2022).

6. **From an innovation to an integral part of society**

In the above we have described the breakthrough of the cooperative movement in Finnish society through the contributions of Dr Gebhard, Pellervo Society and the structuring of cooperative funding. We have tried to describe the determination and dedication with which the founders of the movement took to their cause. Apart from the loans provided by local cooperative banks, similar headway was

made in other fields as well. The aim of the legislation and value base behind the cooperative movement as well as the Pellervo guidebooks and instructions and the work of its advisers was to make the public embrace the obligation that came with the benefits of the movement: to act with diligence, honesty and patience. The public welcomed this ethos.

Various cooperative activities emerged around agricultural production. Dairy cooperatives linked the small butter producers of Finland to the global dairy markets. Meat, egg, cattle breeding, harvesting and forestry and many other cooperatives were established.

And even if the focus of Pellervo Society was mainly on the rural communities and agriculture, the cooperative idea was equally popular among urban consumers. The grocery and retail cooperatives grew into a powerful player in the market as the labour movement also adopted the cooperative model and became organised around cooperatives in urban centres. Workers also established work and housing cooperatives, although some of these endeavours proved to be unsuccessful. The efforts are nonetheless a clear indication of how the cooperative business model was felt to be emancipatory and empowering and to bring hope to all layers of society.

Later, private entrepreneurs began subscribing to the cooperative model to increase their own market potential. This development further expanded the sectors of society affected by the cooperative model. Mutual insurers, the roots of which go back to mediaeval royal decrees, were also drawn into the cooperative movement to a large extent.

The profound impact of the cooperative movement became gradually so apparent in Finland that some even predicted that Finnish economic life would become completely cooperative based (Liakka, 1938, 29). This was not to be the case. The limits of the feasibility and productivity of the cooperative business model were reached after the Second World War at the latest. Competitive businesses, which were quick to capitalise on the effects of urbanisation, gentrification and the increasing wealth of the population and to adapt their business models to suit these trends started regaining foothold in the 1960s. The cooperative movement having established itself as one building block of our diverse market economy eventually faced a period of deep crisis owing to its inability to keep up with the changing demands of modern society. However, the movement has since regrouped and entered a new period of growth from the 1990s onwards with the reinvention of its core value of producing sustainable benefits for its members.

Deusto Estudios Cooperativos
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doi: https://doi.org/10.18543/dec.2884 • https://dec.revistas.deusto.es

7. **Summary, thoughts and conclusions**

The life's work of Hannes Gebhard, the founder of Finland's co-operative movement, is without parallel. Early on, he realised the ideological and practical relevance of co-operatives and was also well aware of their potential. In Gebhard's life, visions alternated with periods of hard work. Working tirelessly and supported by his wife, he created Finland's co-operative movement, overcame the many obstacles in his way, and, acting with uncompromising determination, put the Finnish nation on a path towards a high degree of security and social equality.

The history of Finland's co-operative movement clearly shows that co-operatives are not only a matter of making money. In fact, by virtue of their origins, co-operatives can be considered a social, economic and cultural movement and they thus have been characterized to have a dual nature (Draheim 1952; Puusa, Mönkkönen & Varis 2013; Puusa, Hokkila & Varis 2016; Puusa & Saastamoinen 2022; Novkovic, Puusa & Miner 2022). Their aim is to ensure healthy and competitive business operations but also to achieve wider social change as did happen in Finland. The co-operative movement is founded on democracy and joining forces, which in turn strengthen the feeling of inclusion through empowerment, self-help and responsibility. In co-operative activities, people with similar needs work together in order to achieve something that individuals or smaller groups are not capable of achieving (Spear 2000; Inkinen & Karjalainen 2012, 125). The success of a co-operative depends on the joint efforts of its membership, a group of ordinary citizens.

According to public opinion surveys, Finns recognise the cooperative business model as part of the Finnish business environment and household economics on the macro level, but less so on the micro level. Finns perceive the cooperative business model as the most popular economic system and ideology. (Kantar TNS Osuustoimintatutkimus 2017, 2022; Haavisto 2020).

The objectives of the co-operative movement, which for Gebhard were particularly important as tools for improving the lives of smallholders and tenant farmers, centred around lower prices and security of supply. He also wanted to tackle problems associated with risk allocation and prevent credit sales on unreasonable terms (Holyoake 1926; Hansmann 1999; Spear 2000; Nilsson 2001; Inkinen & Karjalainen 2012). In fact, both in Finland and in other countries, co-operatives managed to challenge people's views of honest trading practices (Inkinen & Karjalainen 2012; Keskisarja 2015, 435). From the perspective

of business and trade, the principle of fairness, fair pricing, and a new way of sharing profits have always been associated with the co-operative ideology. Co-operatives also provided an entirely new ownership model, which differs significantly from capital-based ownership.

The co-operative movement, which came into existence more than a century ago, has had a significant impact on the development of Finnish society by pioneering equality and democracy, two values that have since then been universally adopted (Inkinen & Karjalainen 2012). The cooperative movement increased active participation and inclusion and spread a more prosperous standard of living to a wide circle of citizens. Cooperatives also increased the strength of the national economy by expanding the production base. The co-operative movement introduced reforms in Finnish agriculture and it also played an important role in the process of integrating the countryside into the industrially oriented market economy. Co-operatives have also made a significant contribution to the development of food industry and retail trade (Alanen 1964; Skurnik 2002). For example, the quality of milk improved significantly with the help of new milk processing methods and scientific inventions. Consumer co-operatives in turn contributed to the improvement of the overall trading practices, reduced prices and increased quality control.

In addition to strengthening traditional rural industries, co-operatives have also served as a basis for many of the best-known Finnish companies (including those with international operations). Examples of successful co-operatives include the OP Financial Group, which has its origins in credit unions, the successful retail operations of the S Group, the innovations produced by Valio and the growth of Metsäliitto into Europe's biggest forest co-operative. All these operators have humble origins, have been tirelessly developed with a long-term perspective and have become success stories and market leaders in Finland. These enterprises and many others show the power of cooperation and joint ownership in Finland.

The past decades have demonstrated the practical power of the ideology as co-operative enterprises have managed to create a credible alternative to other types of business, create healthy competition and provide benefits and services for their members. In fact, nowhere is the socioeconomic role of co-operatives more important than in Finland. In relative terms, Finland is one of the most co-operative country in the world and has the world's largest co-operative sector when consideration is given to the combined turnover, membership and employment impact of co-operatives in relation to the size of the country (Inkinen & Karjalainen 2012; Pellervo Society 2012). In Finland, membership in a

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co-operative is also the most popular form of ownership. In a country of approximately 5.5 million, co-operatives and mutual insurance companies boast approximately 7,5 million members (owners). Finnish co-operatives provide employment for more than 100,000 people. It is estimated that there are about 4,000 co-operatives in Finland and they can be found in nearly every sector. Their combined turnover is estimated 35 billion euros. The cooperative movement has seen a revival in Finland since the 1980s. Approximately 50-270 cooperatives are established each year. The highest number of new cooperatives, 250 in one year, was established in the 1990s soon after a severe recession in Finland. In 2021, a year marked by the global COVID-19 pandemic, 78 co-operatives were registered. In the first year of the pandemic, in 2020, the number of new cooperatives was 92 and in 2022 the number was 48. Co-operatives are a form of low-threshold entrepreneurship (Pättiniemi 2006, 17-18; Puusa, Hokkila & Varis 2016; Puusa & Hokkila 2019; Osuustoiminta OT. Vuosikirja 2022, 2023). They are associated with security and flexibility as well as lower risks than joint-stock companies and other types of business, and for this reason co-operatives are seen as an attractive form of entrepreneurship, especially among young people (Puusa & Hokkila 2014; Puusa & Hokkila 2015; Puusa *et al.* 2016; Puusa & Hokkila 2019).

The figures show the enormous importance of co-operatives to the Finnish economy. During the past decades, the stabilising economic impact of co-operatives has become clear when the effects and scale of the banking crisis, covid pandemic etc. are examined. Both the practice and research findings clearly show that co-operative banks have been a stabilising force in the latest turbulent, even chaotic, banking crisis, the impacts of which are still being felt today (Birchall, Hammond & Ketilson 2009; Birchall 2013).

Though impressive, the research findings also show that Finns know little about co-operative entrepreneurship, and especially among the young, there is a worrying lack of information about the subject (Puusa, Mönkkönen & Varis 2013; Puusa & Hokkila 2014; Puusa & Hokkila 2015; Henry 2015; Macpherson 2015; Köppä 2015; Puusa, Hokkila & Varis 2016). For most people, ownership means private ownership and the basic assumption is that the purpose of entrepreneurship is to maximise shareholders' profits (Hahnel 2005; Fontrodona & Sison, 2006; Puusa *et al.* 2013; Puusa & Hokkila 2015). As a result, co-operatives are also erroneously grouped together with better-known types of business (joint-stock and listed companies), in which the operating principles and practices are, however, significantly different from those applied in co-operatives.

The flame of the co-operative movement must be kept alive in both speeches and in practical work. The co-operative ideology has a broad appeal. Its values and principles are in accordance with people's ideas of fairness. It combines an entrepreneurial spirit with love for one's neighbor and its objectives resonate among all people irrespective of their social status or position. In the Finnish co-operative movement this became clear early on as co-operatives also relied on intellectuals and other educated people so that they could help those that were not able to help themselves. In the ensuing decades, the co-operative movement has helped to transform a poor, small and obedient people into enlightened and active citizens of a welfare state.

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