University of California Santa Barbara

BLUM CENTER

ON POVERTY, INEQUALITY, AND DEMOCRACY

Central Coast

Cooperative Economics Workshop Report

Comprehensive Analysis and Recommendations for a Central Coast Regional Approach to Cooperatives

May 30th, 2025



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The May 30th Central Coast Cooperative Economics Workshop brought together researchers, practitioners, community organizers, and advocates to tackle persistent regional inequalities through cooperative approaches. Emerging from months of consultations, this strategic gathering addresses a critical need for identifying regional economic development ideas that move beyond traditional strategies that prioritize corporate ownership models. Throughout the workshop we explored how worker and community centered cooperatives could generate quality jobs and create sustainable economies for our region's multiracial working-class communities.

WORKSHOP SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTEXT

The workshop addressed deepening inequities on the Central Coast that affect the tri-county region's multiracial working-class communities through occupational segregation, a destabilizing housing crisis, and barriers to traditional economic opportunities. Workshop participants represented diverse perspectives, including farmworker organizing groups like Ventures, CAUSE, Project MILPA, and MICOP, academic institutions including UCSB's Blum Center on Poverty, Inequality, & Democracy and the Community Labor Center, researchers from UC Santa Barbara, UC Davis and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, labor unions such as the Central Coast Labor Council, established cooperatives like the Santa Barbara Student Housing Cooperative and Isla Vista Food Cooperative, policy advocates, and other community development practitioners.

Rather than treating cooperatives as niche alternatives, the workshop participants positioned them as practical responses to documented market failures. Participants consistently emphasized that the existing regional economy functions as designed—-to generate and reproduce inequality, exploitation, and precarity for marginalized workers and communities. The discussion revealed strong appreciation of cooperatives as both survival tools for immediate community needs and vehicles for broader community transformation.

MAJOR WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

Comprehensive Barrier Analysis: Participants identified specific challenges preventing cooperative development here on the Central Coast, including knowledge gaps among target communities and professional service providers, capital constraints with scale mismatches between startup needs and available funding, federal policy changes excluding undocumented workers from SBA programs, and cultural and linguistic barriers in existing training materials and approaches.

Cooperative Policies & Practices: The workshop produced robust discussion of needed policy changes at state, federal, and local levels; infrastructure requirements including regional investment funds, shared facilities, and technical assistance networks; network support for cooperatives over traditional businesses; and research priorities for documentation, risk assessment tools, and impact measurement.

Cross-Sector Integration Vision: Rather than focusing on individual cooperative success, participants articulated a desire for an interconnected cooperative ecosystem where housing, agriculture, healthcare, food retail, and worker cooperatives support each other through purchasing relationships, shared resources, and coordinated development strategies.

Participant Commitments: Multiple organizations and individuals committed to specific next steps including resource sharing, research partnerships, communication network establishment, and follow-up convenings with sector-specific focus areas.

WORKSHOP OVERVIEW



The workshop was structured around ***five*** *key questions that guided discussion and analysis:*

CORE QUESTIONS ADDRESSED

1

Why Cooperatives?

The opening discussion established that the Central Coast's regional economy functions as designed—to generate and reproduce inequality. Participants explored cooperatives as both survival tools for communities facing rising housing and living costs and as vehicles for broader economic transformation.

What Are the Barriers?

2

Participants examined an array of challenges including knowledge gaps about getting started, capital constraints and difficulties in funding cooperative enterprise, policy barriers, and cultural/language barriers that prevent cooperative development. The State of California and regional counties can also do more to develop support for cooperative approaches.

3

How Do We Build an Ecosystem?

Strategic discussion of needed policy changes, infrastructure development, research priorities, and support systems to enable successful cooperative development for both new/starting cooperatives and cooperatives that have matured.

CORE QUESTIONS ADDRESSED

4

What Are the Current Sector-Specific Opportunities?

Discussion of cooperative potential across housing, agriculture, healthcare, worker enterprises, and food retail sectors. These areas share a concern about rising living costs and access to quality jobs.

Where Do We Go From Here?

5

Efforts to identify next steps, commitments, and timeline for advancing cooperative development through collaborative action.

PARTICIPANT REPRESENTATION

The workshop brought together a diverse coalition including:

- **Farmworker organizing groups** CAUSE, Project MILPA, MICOP, Ventures
- **Academic institutions** UCSB Blum Center, UCSB Community Labor Center, UC Davis CED Lab, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo
- **Labor unions** Central Coast Labor Council, UDW
- **Established cooperatives** Santa Barbara Student Housing Cooperative, Isla Vista Food Cooperative,
- **Policy advocates, researchers, and community development practitioners**
- **Community-based organizations serving immigrant and undocumented populations**

MAJOR THEMES



EQUITY AND JUSTICE

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY

CULTURAL COMPETENCY

POLICY AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKs

CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

SUCCESS STORIES AND INNOVATION

EQUITY AND JUSTICE



Participants consistently framed cooperatives as tools for addressing systemic inequities affecting BIPOC, immigrant, and undocumented working-class communities. This theme strongly emerged throughout the workshop discussions.

"Current economic systems are designed to produce inequality, and cooperatives offer a way to build a system that does not."

Maria Cadenas, *Ventures*

CORE DECLARATIONS

Economic Justice: Cooperatives as worker and community-centered alternatives that better distribute resources and provide community autonomy.

Workplace Justice: Addressing wage theft, unsafe conditions, harassment, and discrimination

Food Justice: Creating alternatives to corporate agricultural monopolies

Environmental Justice: Sustainable farming practices through cooperative models

Racial Justice: Specific focus on Latino-led cooperative initiatives and combating racial and class biases in business succession

The workshop highlighted the potential cooperatives offer for addressing workplace exploitation, housing insecurity, and barriers tied to immigration status



Kashia Arnold, Alice O'Connor, *UCSB Blum Center*

The Blum Center Director Alice O'Connor and Assistant Director Kashia Arnold discussed how transformative change is needed for addressing persistent regional inequities.

CENTRAL COAST SECTOR APPLICATIONS

Agriculture:
Prioritizing land use as a shared resource for small producers

Energy:
Emphasis on community choice for energy sources & prioritizing sustainability and renewable energy

Healthcare:
Addressing workforce exploitation in home care & employment opportunities for an immigrant work force

Housing:
Creating accessible and lower cost housing

Worker Cooperatives:
Ensuring that the benefits of labor go directly to workers

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Community empowerment consistently emerged as a shared goal across sessions. Participants underscored the importance of bottom-up, community-driven solutions, with the workshop itself growing out of extensive local engagement and consultations.



"Living in the coop isn't just an opportunity to have affordable housing... it's actually an opportunity to develop your leadership, your skills and lifelong networks friendships that last forever."

Marcelino Sepuvelda, *SBSHC*

CORE DECLARATIONS

Farmworker Leadership: Looking to Comite MILPA as a model of worker-led advocacy and cooperative development.

Student Leadership Development: Building democratic practices and economic self-determination through housing and food cooperatives.

Peer Learning Networks: Expanding technical assistance and knowledge-sharing to strengthen community capacity.

Resource Sharing: Leveraging collective infrastructure and funding to sustain cooperative ecosystems.

Labor Solidarity: considering how union and cooperative movements can advance worker power and shared ownership.

ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY

Democratic ownership and shared governance were identified as foundational principles throughout the workshop. Participants emphasized worker ownership, collective decision-making, and accountability as both the philosophical foundation and the practical strategy for building equitable and resilient cooperative systems.



"What we need is the very work that we do right now, just bringing all these voices together to network, to share resources. We just need to come together and make it happen."

Neal Singh, ***Isla Vista Food Cooperative***

CORE DECLARATIONS

Worker Ownership: Ensuring that workers directly benefit from the value of their labor

Democratic Governance: Centering workers and/or communities in the decision-making process as a core component of cooperative organization.

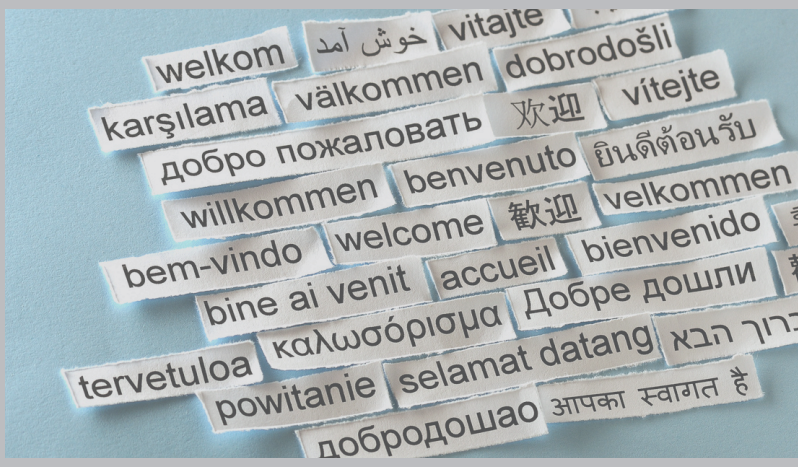
Anti-Extractive Models: Designing ownership structures that minimize profit extraction and prioritize community reinvestment.

Leadership and Governance Training: Building member capacity for effective participation and transparent management.

Economic Autonomy: Creating insulation from outside investor pressures to maintain mission alignment and local control.

CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Participants emphasized that cultural and linguistic barriers simultaneously constrain and enrich cooperative development. Rather than viewing language and education gaps as deficits, discussions centered on leveraging cultural strengths, indigenous knowledge, and multilingualism as assets for inclusive cooperative ecosystems.



"There's . . . ancestral wisdom within our community. They've been doing this for 1000s of years. They've been cultivating, they've been harvesting."

Claudia Quezada, Líderes Campesinas

CORE DECLARATIONS

Language Access: Barriers for immigrant and Indigenous communities with limited English proficiency or literacy

Educational Equity: Cooperative training materials often written at college-level reading requirements

Culturally Relevant Support: Need for technical assistance reflecting diverse cultural contexts and lived experiences

Adult and Non-Traditional Learning: Recognition of experiential, collective, and oral knowledge as valid educational foundations

Cultural Strengths: Emphasis on existing collective survival strategies and community-based cooperation traditions

POLICY AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Participants underscored the need for enabling legal and policy environments that recognize cooperatives as legitimate, community-rooted enterprises. Discussions highlighted both systemic barriers within current frameworks and opportunities for creative, equity-driven legal innovation.



"There are layers of cooperatives that can work together and support each other, and that's really a place where each person can step in with their speciality and and support, like the overall change in a structure."

Lisa Oglesby, *Isla Vista Food Cooperative*

CORE DECLARATIONS

Regulatory Gaps: Existing legislation often excludes or inadequately supports cooperative models

Professional Education: Limited cooperative literacy among bankers, lawyers, and accountants

Creative Legal Mechanisms: Exploration of Joint Powers Authorities, ESOPs, and benefit corporations as adaptable models

Policy Reform Advocacy: Calls for state and federal action to modernize cooperative law and expand access to financing

Capital Access Barriers: Legal and structural challenges to cooperative conversion and lending

CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

Participants emphasized that no single sector can advance cooperative development alone. Effective cooperative ecosystems depend on sustained collaboration among universities, community organizations, labor groups, agricultural stakeholders, government entities, and financial institutions to share resources, knowledge, and capacity.



"Cooperatives and also cooperative ecosystems can be connected to the existing infrastructure. A major component is understanding what's out there in this space and how we can use what already exists instead of starting from scratch."

Keith Taylor, ***UC Davis***

CORE DECLARATIONS

Cross-Sector Partnerships: Multi-stakeholder workshop model linking academia, communities, and policymakers

Network Building: Creation of associations and cooperative alliances to achieve economies of scale

Technical Assistance Collaboration: Shared service models for cooperative training and business support

Joint Investment: Resource pooling and co-financing strategies for collective growth

Research Integration: Academic–community partnerships for applied research and evidence-based practice

SUCCESS STORIES AND INNOVATION

Participants highlighted both established cooperative successes and emerging innovations as critical reference points for strengthening a potential Central Coast's cooperative ecosystem. These examples serve as proof of concept, ideas, and practical guidance for designing new models adapted to regional needs and opportunities.



"I recognize that there is the lack of interest and engagement from especially the younger generation. It's really important for us to get involved with the other generations who are going to be starting clubs in the near future.

Jacob Onia, *SBSHC*

CENTRAL COAST COOPERATIVES

Housing: Santa Barbara Student Housing Cooperative and Cabrillo Village farmworker cooperative provide affordable housing

Agriculture: Comite MILPA is working to support farmland accessibility to farmworkers through a Community Land Trust

Home Care Cooperatives: The UDW is working to implement a worker-owned home care cooperative for immigrants and service an aging population in place

Food: The Isla Vista Food Cooperative is the oldest student-run cooperative one the West Coast

Community Choice Aggregation

The Central Coast already supports Community Choice Aggregation for renewable energy procurement. The area's rural electric cooperative infrastructure and strong environmental values provide a foundation for expanding democratic energy governance.

DETAILED WORKSHOP CONTENT



OPENING DISCUSSION: "WHY COOPERATIVES?"

BARRIERS TO COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

ECOSYSTEM DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS

OPENING DISCUSSION: "WHY COOPERATIVES?"

Participants opened with in-depth discussion about current economic systems functioning precisely as designed—to produce inequality, exploitation, and precarity for workers. This framing positioned cooperatives not as idealistic alternatives but as practical responses to documented systemic failures. The discussion revealed *three primary* perspectives on cooperative relevance:

Community-Rooted Practitioners emphasized cooperatives as survival tools addressing daily challenges including wage theft, unsafe working conditions, housing insecurity, and barriers tied to immigration status, literacy, and banking access. These participants stressed that worker-owned models ensure labor benefits accrue directly to workers themselves, reducing exploitation while creating more meaningful economic and social pathways.

Research and Policy Advocates focused on systemic awareness gaps within U.S. economic development frameworks that overwhelmingly prioritize corporate attraction while overlooking worker-owned cooperatives despite their successful operation at scale in sectors like purchasing and utilities. They argued for intentional inclusion of cooperatives in policy and institutional design to strengthen regional economies.

Cultural and Philanthropic Voices framed cooperatives as responses to late-stage capitalism failures and a hyper-individualist cultural ethos, emphasizing the need for new narratives about governance, ownership, and cultural survival while expanding philanthropic priorities beyond individual projects to collective governance structures.



OPENING DISCUSSION: "WHY COOPERATIVES?"

Shared Experiences Driving Cooperative Interest

Workplace Exploitation: Farmworkers and service-sector workers consistently described unsafe and degrading conditions including discrimination, harassment, and health risk exposure without labor autonomy. Cooperatives offer pathways to safer, more dignified workplaces where conditions decisions are made collectively.

Entrepreneurship Barriers: Traditional entrepreneurial pathways were described as inaccessible due to structural barriers—language differences, literacy gaps, banking and credit access limitations, and restricted social and cultural capital. Business development resources typically assume advanced literacy and institutional system familiarity, excluding many from participation.

Cultural Preparedness for Cooperation: Immigrant and indigenous communities maintain traditions of collectivism, mutual aid, and cooperative survival, making cooperation not foreign but natural extensions of existing community support systems. This cultural grounding creates strong resonance for cooperative models as both feasible and desirable.

Informal Entrepreneurial Experience: Many farmworkers and community members already engage in small-scale or family-based entrepreneurial activities—farming, childcare, homecare, landscaping—but lack resources, training, and institutional support to expand beyond subsistence levels. Cooperatives provide pathways to pool skills, assets, and capital for sustainable and scalable development.

Learning and Empowerment Processes: Cooperative exploration was consistently described as creating spaces for community education, leadership development, and governance training beyond business building. Organizations like MICOP provide platforms where farmworkers and marginalized community members collectively build skills needed for leadership, policy decision-making, and cooperative enterprise management.

Common Themes Across Participant Perspectives

Democratic Ownership as Dignity and Justice Pathway: Cooperatives ensure workers have direct control over labor benefits, fostering autonomy, reducing exploitation, and embedding dignity and justice in economic participation.

Collective Models Address Individual Advancement Barriers: Structural barriers to individual entrepreneurship—limited capital, banking, training, and institutional network access—make cooperative ownership more realistic and sustainable for marginalized workers.

Scaling Through Association and Networks: While individual small cooperatives are vulnerable, purchasing cooperatives, credit unions, and electric cooperatives demonstrate association power for achieving economies of scale, expanding capacity, and strengthening resilience.

Cultural and Historical Continuity: Cooperative models align with immigrant and indigenous collective survival, mutual aid, and interdependence traditions, providing culturally resonant frameworks for building economic alternatives.

Justice Beyond Economics: Cooperatives serve as vehicles for food justice, environmental justice, workplace justice, and community self-determination, representing ways to reclaim autonomy and create liberatory spaces beyond corporate agriculture and service industries.

BARRIERS TO COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Participants emphasized that systemic barriers—including ***knowledge gaps, limited access to capital, restrictive policies,*** and ***coordination challenges***—impede cooperative development, highlighting cooperatives as practical tools for building community capacity, retaining local wealth, and democratizing economic power.

Knowledge Gaps and Access to Expertise

Business Management Skills Disconnect: While workers possess deep technical knowledge and expertise in their fields, they consistently pointed to an urgent need for training in business operations, financial management, and marketing. As participants noted, "people know how to do the work, but they don't know the whole business side of it - the financial part, the marketing part." This gap creates dependency on external consultants or prevents cooperative development entirely.

Professional Services Knowledge Deficit: A critical barrier identified was that attorneys, CPAs, and bookkeepers lack understanding of cooperative structures and shared ownership models, making them unable to provide effective advice or counsel. This creates circular problems where cooperatives cannot access professional services needed for establishment and operation while professionals cannot gain experience with cooperative structures.

Cultural and Philanthropic Voices framed cooperatives as responses to late-stage capitalism failures and hyper-individualist cultural ethos, emphasizing needs for shifting political narratives about governance, ownership, and cultural survival while expanding philanthropic priorities beyond individual projects to collective governance structures.



BARRIERS TO COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Capital Constraints and Financial Access Challenges

Scale Mismatch in Funding: Most startup cooperatives need $50,000-$100,000 but aren't "investment ready" for larger funding sources typically starting at millions. One participant noted investor response to a $1.5 million ask: "That's it? Can you increase that?" This scale mismatch leaves cooperatives in a funding desert where they're too large for microlending but too small for institutional investment.

Documentation Requirements and Exclusion: Federal lending rule changes now require all business owners to be documented, systematically excluding undocumented workers from SBA programs regardless of business structure. This policy change particularly impacts agriculture and home care sectors where significant portions of the workforce lack documentation status.

Risk Assessment and Banking Challenges: Traditional banks don't understand how to evaluate shared ownership structures, making loan approval difficult even for viable cooperative businesses. Existing risk assessment frameworks assume individual ownership and personal collateral, creating systematic barriers for cooperative structures.

Low-Margin Enterprise Challenges: Most cooperatives being developed are service-based with low barriers to entry but also low returns, making them unattractive to conventional investors seeking high returns. This creates funding gaps where cooperatives can demonstrate viability and community benefit but cannot attract capital focused primarily on profit maximization.

Policy and Regulatory Barriers

Federal Restrictions and Documentation: Changes to federal lending practices requiring documentation status verification exclude significant portions of target demographics, particularly in agriculture and home care sectors where undocumented workers comprise substantial portions of the workforce.

Limited State Recognition and Support: California lacks comprehensive policies recognizing cooperative-specific needs or providing targeted support for cooperative start-ups. While the 2015 California Worker Cooperative Act was recognized as a positive development, participants noted it was insufficient for addressing development barriers.

Philanthropic Limitations: Philanthropic organizations typically prioritize direct services, education, and arts over economic development, which is often viewed as outside charitable missions. This creates funding gaps where cooperatives address social determinants of health and economic dignity but cannot access philanthropic capital focused on traditional charity models.

Investment Regulation Constraints: Current Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) laws require retirement fund investments to prioritize profit over values alignment, preventing teachers and other workers from investing in local cooperatives even when they support missions and want to build local wealth. This prevents cooperatives from accessing significant pools of capital that could support development while providing competitive returns.

BARRIERS TO COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Organizing and Coordination Challenges

Multi-Sector Coordination Gaps: Different cooperative sectors (agriculture, housing, healthcare, food retail) face similar challenges but often work in isolation, missing opportunities for shared learning and resource pooling. This fragmentation limits resilience during economic downturns and prevents economies of scale in policy advocacy and resource development.

Language and Cultural Diversity: Target communities include diverse immigrant populations with varying language needs, cultural backgrounds, and levels of formal education. Effective cooperative development requires cultural competency across multiple communities rather than one-size-fits-all approaches.

Geographic Dispersion: The southern Central Coast covers three counties with differing urban/rural economic conditions, regulatory environments, and resource availability. Coordinating across this geographic diversity requires significant resources and sophisticated communication strategies.

Market Access Control: Large corporations monopolize distribution channels, for example, agricultural cooling facilities, which can limit smaller cooperatives' market access at fair and competitive prices. Líderes Campesinas documented how corporations exploit small farmers through price manipulation and quality disputes, creating systematic barriers to cooperative viability.

ECOSYSTEM DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

Participants emphasized that advancing cooperative development requires coordinated state, federal, and local policies supporting inclusive lending, equitable agricultural land access, and cooperative-friendly zoning and procurement, alongside regional investment funds, cooperative credit systems, shared facilities, mentorship networks, and research partnerships that strengthen governance, assess risk, and build an evidence base for sustained growth and advocacy.

Policy Change Priorities

State-Level Policy Needs: Participants identified the California Community Reinvestment Act as an example of how to ensure lending institutions serve cooperative development needs, state banking services accessible to undocumented residents for personal and business banking, and Cooperative Resource Center or US Department of Agriculture initiatives on increasing equity within its farm loan programs to centralize support and advocacy efforts. The California Agricultural Land Equity Task Force is also developing policies to address agricultural land inequity in California.

Federal Policy Reform: Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) law modifications allowing retirement investments in local cooperative projects aligned with investor values, restoration of inclusive lending practices that don't exclude undocumented entrepreneurs, and federal recognition of cooperative-specific capital access needs.

Local Policy Integration: Zoning and development policies supporting cooperative housing models or community land trusts, procurement policies favoring cooperative businesses in government contracting, and integration with affordable housing policy initiatives to leverage existing public investment.



ECOSYSTEM DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS

Infrastructure Development Requirements

Financial Infrastructure Needs: Regional investment funds (estimated need: $26 million for North Central Coast) to support multiple small cooperatives, Credit Union Service Organizations (CUSOs) providing higher-risk lending outside traditional credit union restrictions, and purchasing cooperatives providing economies of scale and market access.

Technical Assistance Networks: On-the-job training programs not requiring classroom attendance, cooperative-literate professional services (legal, accounting, business development), and mentorship programs connecting new cooperatives with established ones for knowledge transfer and ongoing support.

Physical Infrastructure: Shared facilities for small cooperatives (processing, storage, meeting spaces), technology platforms for cooperative networking and resource sharing, and regional coordination centers providing administrative and technical support services.

Research and Knowledge-Building Priorities

Documentation and Process Development: Comprehensive guides and standardized templates for cooperative governance, financial management, and operational procedures addressing institutional continuity challenges and reducing startup barriers.

Academic Partnership Opportunities: Universities partnering with cooperatives to provide research support, document processes, create case studies, and develop culturally appropriate curricula for workshops, training, and new member onboarding while building academic knowledge base.

Risk Assessment Tool Development: Cooperative-specific risk assessment frameworks that traditional lenders can understand and use, making cooperatives more accessible to conventional financing while maintaining cooperative principles and governance structures.

Impact Measurement and Documentation: Research demonstrating cooperative effectiveness compared to traditional businesses to counter negative perceptions, support policy advocacy, and provide evidence base for expanded cooperative development investment.

SECTOR-SPECIFIC ANALYSIS



HOUSING COOPERATIVES

AGRICULTURE COOPERATIVES

HEALTHCARE COOPERATIVES

WORKER COOPERATIVES

FOOD RETAIL AND DISTRIBUTION

INNOVATION AND HYBRID MODELS



Santa Barbara Student Housing Cooperative (SBSHC)

HOUSING COOPERATIVES

Santa Barbara Student Housing Cooperative Model: Provides affordable housing for students through nonprofit incorporation that is managed through cooperative operations, which is considered a successful hybrid structure. Democratic governance develops leadership skills while keeping housing outside market speculation and maintaining rates below low-income housing scale.

- **Workforce Housing Opportunities:** Significant need exists given the lack of affordable housing on the Central Coast that impacts workers in agriculture, healthcare, and service sectors. Asset-based lending against existing housing stock could leverage current assets for cooperative development. Community Land Trusts and the idea of converting existing mobile home parks to a cooperative ownership structure were also briefly introduced.

- **Policy Integration Potential:** Partnerships with California affordable housing agencies for bond offerings and integration with broader affordable housing policy initiatives could leverage existing public investment for cooperative development.

SCALING STRATEGIES

Replicating hybrid nonprofit/cooperative model across multiple properties, developing regional housing cooperative networks for shared resources and expertise, and creating pathways for renters to develop ownership stakes over time.



Photo credit: Miguel Hernandez, MICOP

AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES

Worker-Owned Farm Development: The Mixteco Indígena Community Organizing Project (MICOP) is working with five farmworkers on cooperative development and faces challenges around acquiring business knowledge specific to the Central Coast including economic factors, market access, and capital constraints. Their efforts seek to build on existing technical expertise while addressing business management gaps through collective learning and external support.

- **Distribution Cooperative Opportunities:** There is a need to end corporate monopoly on cooling and distribution infrastructure that exploits small farmers through price manipulation and quality disputes. Creating farmer-owned distribution facilities could provide fair pricing and quality assessment while keeping value within farming communities.

- **Cultural Knowledge Integration:** Recognition that immigrant farmworkers often possess extensive knowledge of sustainable farming practices that could be preserved and leveraged through cooperative models, creating environmental and cultural benefits alongside economic development.

MARKET ACCESS INNOVATION

Development of cooperative-owned processing facilities, direct marketing networks, and value-added product development to capture more of the food dollar within farming communities rather than extracting value to corporate intermediaries.



HEALTHCARE COOPERATIVES

Home Care Cooperative Development: United Domestic Workers (UDW) partnership developing worker-owned home care cooperatives addresses both workforce issues (accessible for immigrant and undocumented workers) and consumer needs (people unable to afford nursing homes but wanting to age in place).

- **Market Growth Opportunity:** Growing demand as population ages, existing nursing home industry understaffed and underfunded, and Medicare/Medicaid cuts creating service gaps that cooperative models could address while providing dignified work and affordable care.

- **Integration Potential:** Combining home care cooperatives with worker/resident-owned retirement communities could create sustainable ecosystems where assets remain within cooperative networks rather than being extracted by hedge funds and private equity.

POLICY LEVERAGE

Integration with healthcare policy initiatives, Medicaid waiver programs, and aging services could provide public funding support for cooperative development while improving care quality and reducing costs.



WORKER COOPERATIVES

Business Succession Opportunities: The Central Coast has an aging population of small business owners. There are concerns that these owners are more likely to sell to white buyers due to racial and class preferences and biases, requiring proactive preparation from communities of color for acquisition opportunities.

- **Ownership Support Strategies:** Investment in worker management and ownership education before succession opportunities arise, development of cooperative conversion templates and financing structures, and creation of intermediary organizations supporting business transition processes.

- **Electric Cooperative Learning:** Electric cooperatives covering 56% of American land mass demonstrate successful cooperative scaling and financing through bond offerings and shared infrastructure development, providing models for other sectors to adapt and provide financial tools.

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE INTEGRATION

Development of cooperative-literate legal, accounting, and business development services to support conversions while creating professional service cooperative opportunities.

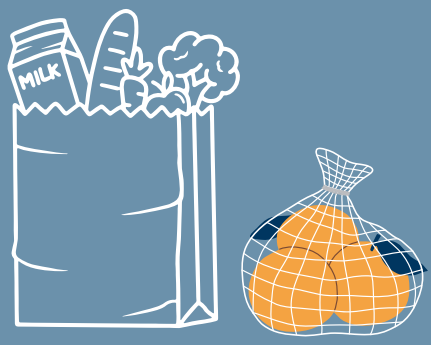


Isla Vista Food Co-op

FOOD RETAIL AND DISTRIBUTION

Consumer Cooperative Potential: Isla Vista Food Cooperative communicated the value of the National Cooperative Grocers membership for purchasing power and operational support. Purchasing cooperatives provide legitimacy and economies of scale essential for competitive operations and can step in during times of economic downturn.

Community Resilience Function:
Food cooperatives serve as community anchors during economic disruption, maintain affordable pricing outside market speculation, and provide community gathering spaces that strengthen social cohesion.



SUPPLY CHAIN INTEGRATION

Regional investment fund connecting cooperatives across entire food system from production to retail, creating mutual support networks and keeping more food dollars within local communities.



INNOVATION AND HYBRID MODELS

Multi-Stakeholder Cooperative Models: Combining worker and consumer ownership in healthcare cooperatives, integrating Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOP) structures with platform cooperative governance, and developing hybrid nonprofit/cooperative structures like Santa Barbara Student Housing Cooperative.

- **Community Choice Aggregation Adaptation:** Using Community Choice Aggregation models for cooperative-adjacent energy and broadband development, particularly in rural areas already served by electric cooperatives with existing infrastructure and member relationships.

- **Fiscal Sponsorship Innovation:** Developing fiscal sponsorship programs for non-501(c)(3) cooperatives to access philanthropic funding while maintaining cooperative governance and ownership structures.

ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIP MODELS

University partnerships for documentation and dissemination, student research through small grants programs, and ongoing technical assistance relationships that build academic knowledge while supporting cooperative development.

IMPLEMENTATION IDEAS



SHORT-TERM AND MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS

LONG-TERM TRANSFORMATION

SHORT-TERM AND MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

Communication Network Establishment:

Creating a listserv or platform for ongoing resource sharing and coordination among participants, enabling continued collaboration and information exchange beyond workshop.

Resource Documentation and Sharing:

Ventures committed to sharing operational templates and employee manual as open-source tools, providing practical resources for cooperative development while reducing startup barriers.



Case Study Development:

The UCSB Blum Center small grants program supporting faculty and student research on successful cooperatives, creating accessible documentation of models and lessons learned for broader application.

Follow-Up Convening Planning:

Organizing sector-specific meetings to develop detailed action plans, identify specific collaboration opportunities, and maintain momentum from initial workshop.

MEDIUM-TERM DEVELOPMENT

Cooperative Resource Center Framework

Defining structure and functions for a Central Coast Cooperative Resource Center or Collective, identifying funding sources, and establishing partnerships among universities, community organizations, and existing cooperatives.

Educational Programming Launch

Designing "Co-op 101" training programs focusing on basic governance and management skills before advancing to complex models, emphasizing practical implementation over theoretical frameworks while addressing cultural and linguistic accessibility needs.

Professional Service Development

Training attorneys, accountants, and other professionals in cooperative structures, developing cooperative-specific service offerings, and creating referral networks for cooperative development support.

Policy Advocacy Coordination

Developing unified policy agenda, coordinating advocacy efforts across organizations, and building relationships with policymakers at local, state, and federal levels.

LONG-TERM TRANSFORMATION

Regional Investment Fund Implementation

Establishing a fund for Central Coast cooperative development, creating lending criteria that balance viability with cooperative principles, and developing ongoing funding strategies.



Integrated Cooperative Ecosystem:

Connecting cooperatives across sectors through purchasing relationships, shared resources, and coordinated development strategies, creating resilient local economy anchored in cooperative principles.

Model Replication and Scaling:

Documenting successful approaches for replication in regions, developing training and technical assistance capacity for broader application, and building national networks for resource sharing and policy advocacy.

Policy Environment Transformation:

Achieving state and federal policy changes that prioritize the support of cooperative development, creating a favorable regulatory environment, and integrating cooperative development into mainstream economic development strategies.

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

01

Balancing Idealism with Pragmatism

Participants emphasized the importance of understanding existing financial and regulatory systems while working to change them, building cooperative sophistication gradually rather than expecting immediate complexity, and creating support systems that sustain cooperatives through leadership transitions and market challenges. As one participant noted: "understand the rules, even if we don't like them."

02

Cultural Competency and Accessibility

Successful cooperative development requires reframing benefits in terms of autonomy and empowerment rather than ideological appeals, addressing generational disconnects where younger people may support cooperative values but resist traditional cooperative language and structures, and developing educational approaches that validate adult learning experiences and cultural knowledge.

03

Economic Viability and Investment Readiness

Given the challenges in helping lending organizations understand the ownership and collective arrangements cooperative models represent, it is important to have a clear sense of funding needs, objectives, and implemention strategies as part of a broader strategy for implementing a new cooperative or expanding an existing one. Communicating readiness for investment can potentially reduce known barriers.

04

Regional Integration and Coordination

Success requires multi-sector coordination breaking down silos currently existing between agriculture, housing, healthcare, and other cooperative sectors; unified representation to investors and policymakers rather than individual approaches; and development of shared infrastructure reducing individual cooperative costs while building collective strength.

CONCLUSION AND VISION FOR TRANSFORMATION

The Central Coast Cooperative Economics Workshop demonstrated a nuanced understanding of cooperative development as both a practical economic strategy and a transformative social movement. Participants looked beyond individual cooperative success with a preference for comprehensive regional economic transformation. This transformation would come from an interconnected cooperative ecosystem that addresses shared and intersecting challenges—from individual economic security to systemic inequality—while building on existing cultural strengths and community assets.

The analysis reveals cooperative development as requiring simultaneous attention to equity principles, community capacity building, policy advocacy, and cross-sector partnership development. Rather than utopian alternatives, cooperatives emerge as practical, culturally grounded responses to documented failures in current economic systems that systematically produce inequality and exploitation.

The vision articulated positions the Central Coast as a potential model region for cooperative economic development, building on existing strengths including established cooperatives, strong community organizations, academic partnerships, and cultural traditions of mutual aid and collective survival. Through coordinated effort across multiple sectors and stakeholder groups, cooperative development could address persistent regional inequities while creating resilient, community-controlled economic alternatives that keep wealth within communities and prioritize people over profit extraction.