

Case study: Arctic Co-operatives Limited

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Introduction

The Canadian Arctic is home to one of the most effective cooperative networks in the world focused on serving remote and low-resource communities. Arctic Co-operatives Limited is a federation owned and controlled by 32 independent multi-purpose cooperative stores located in Nunavut, Northwest Territories and Yukon, Canada. Collectively, its members represent over 20,000 households scattered across a region of 3.9 million square kilometers (1.5 million square miles). Their service area stretches from Old Crow, Yukon on the Alaskan border on the west to the hamlet of Qikiqtarjuaq, less than 1,000 km from Greenland on the east and from Grise Fiord, Nunavut only 800 km from the North Pole to the tiny community of Sanikiluaq on Flaherty Island in the vast Hudson Bay.



The cooperative traces its roots to the late 1950's, when changes in government health and education services began arriving in the Arctic, and people who had primarily been living a nomadic lifestyle began to settle in small hamlets and other communities where such services were offered.

The history of Arctic Co-operatives shows an early attention to both economic development goals (job creation, income augmentation) coupled with enhancements to service delivery in the form of better access to retail products, communications, freight delivery and other vital services. The original purpose of the first cooperative effort was to act as a collaborative agent for the marketing of authentic Inuit art and artisanal products. Fur harvesting and fisheries were also early cooperative ventures. The Canadian Arctic Producers, the first federated co-op, was established in the mid-1960's and focused on art. The Canadian Arctic Co-operative Federation, a service and support organization for a network of autonomous and independent grocery and general merchandise stores across the region, followed in 1972. The two federations merged in 1981 to form Arctic Co-operatives.

Inuit arts are still part of the Arctic Co-operatives trade, but now represent only a small share of volume. In contrast, the retail and service portion of the business has greatly expanded over the past 30 years, and now includes fuel, cable TV and hospitality services in addition to grocery and general merchandise. Revenues are over \$250 million CAD (2020) with patronage returned to member communities of \$10.8 million that year. Economic development is still an important part of the Arctic Co-operatives promise to members as well. Arctic Co-operative's successful network of stores and allied businesses today represent a significant source of local jobs, employing over 900 people in the Arctic and an additional 250 in the home office and subsidiaries. After the government, Arctic Co-operatives is the major employer of Inuit, Dene and First Nation people in the North of Canada.

Member and stakeholder participation

The Arctic Co-operative mission is to “be the vehicle for service to, and co-operation among the multi-purpose co-operative businesses in Canada's North”. This broad statement accurately captures the breadth of Arctic Co-operatives' ideals and activities, but perhaps understates the

logistical challenge that meeting this mission entails on an everyday basis—serving a range of distinct and different enterprises scattered across a vast terrain.

Arctic Co-operatives is a federation of 32 local consumer-owned cooperatives, each of which is an independent entity. Member store range in sales from \$40 million to less than \$1 million CAD annually. The largest member in terms of sales volume, the Yellowknife Direct Charge Co-op, is located in a city of 20,000. Most member communities are much smaller, however. Several have fewer than 200 residents and about half are located above the Arctic Circle, far from any large population centers. Only a few are reachable by road in the winter.

The Arctic is a region of rich cultural diversity. The cooperative's service area crosses the political boundaries of the Canadian territories of Nunavut, Yukon and Northwest Territories, home to a combination of Inuit, Dene and Enoch peoples. There are twelve official languages spoken in the region, and many more dialects. Each community has its own customs and culture, related to, but also distinct from its neighbors.

Member cooperatives adapt in different ways to serve the needs of their unique communities. All of the member stores provide the basics of grocery and general merchandise items. Beyond that, Arctic Co-operatives supports members in hosting a number of other business lines. Common additional services include petroleum, cable TV and hotels. Outfitting, freight hauling, crafts, local transportation and property rentals are other offerings. In smaller communities, the local co-ops also frequently serve as post office, financial institution, coffee shop, and ticket agency.

Effectively supporting such a diverse array of business enterprises and communities in a manner that keeps each local co-op member engaged and well-served requires that Arctic Co-operatives adopt both a tone and a practice of keeping the member constantly in mind. The co-op frequently describes itself as a “service and support” federation, and that is exactly what they try and do—every day, and in multiple ways. The array of services provided to members by Arctic Cooperatives is exceedingly robust. In addition to joint purchasing and delivery of groceries and other merchandise, the co-op provides accounting, tax planning, payroll and benefits management as well as feasibility studies for new lines of business, and planning, financing, design and project management for those undertaken. The central body also offers expansion and development expertise as needed for members stores, and has funded its own development arm to provide regular financing for each store's Annual Resupply purchases which arrive once a

year via Sealift or ice road. The development fund will also give interim loans for capital expansion purchases until local bank takeout financing can be arranged. Other offerings include point of sale software and hardware for inventory control and financial reporting, help with grant writing and bidding contracts and, when needed, media relations and public affairs.

Co-op leaders understand that in a very small community, it is often necessary for both business viability and simple community service reasons to have a number of enterprises going at once. Different groups of people within the community have different kinds of needs, and some much-needed business activities are not financially viable unless they can be combined and share overhead with other more self-supporting ventures. There simply aren't enough customers to specialize much. Being able to run multiple concurrent business enterprises with the backing and industry expertise that Arctic Co-operatives provides, can make all the difference for a local co-op between overall profitability (and therefore, continued existence) or not.

But doing so can be a big challenge for Arctic Co-operatives. Every member's business and contribution is unique and important. Yet the greatest savings and efficiencies can be had when commonalities can be found. With such different operations, it is difficult sometimes to gain those efficiencies. The answer comes not in crafting 32 different solutions, but in finding common solutions that might make sense for 32 different reasons. CEO Rod Wilson explains:

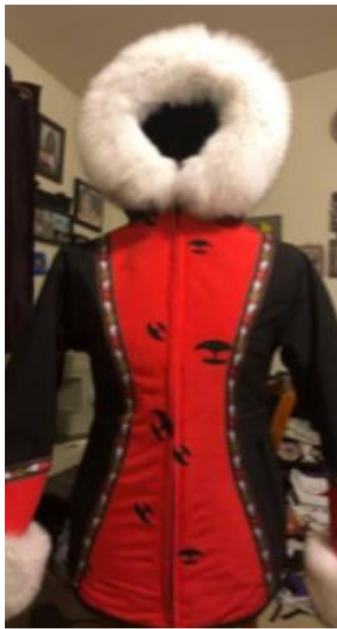
“As a service federation, trying to support 32 autonomous entities that do things 32 different ways would be extremely, extremely challenging. Just from an effectiveness and certainly from an efficiency perspective. Our foundational approach is that when we are bringing ideas or common approaches to 32 different operations, we try to build a process of helping the co-ops see the options, see the value, and then we present it in such a way . . . that it is their decision. It is important that we get input . . . always from a mix of the cooperatives so that building buy-in and commitment to support a common approach works.”

***“Centralize for efficiency,
localize for effectiveness”***

There are times when one approach may not work for everyone, and the Co-op will have to come up with different models or approaches until they have something that works for the majority. But the discussion always begins with respect for local autonomy, and that is clearly part of the Arctic Cooperatives ethos. *“Centralize for efficiency, localize for effectiveness”* is how they put it into words, and it is a moniker to help staff and leaders at co-op

headquarters in faraway Winnipeg better understand when their efforts are helping local Arctic people to do their job better, and when they should perhaps step back, so as not to undercut local autonomy. “Our stores are independent and autonomous” is something that is frequently heard around the home office. This phrase helps Arctic Co-operative employees who do not live and work in the Arctic to remind themselves and each other that, however inconvenient in the moment, this concept is a central part of the ethos and power of cooperation.

“one of the real key focuses that we’ve had within the organization is to help our support team here in Winnipeg, understand as best we can the role that we play” says CEO Wilson. “And the way that we do that is to put the focus on service and support for membership, not control, but service and support, which leads naturally and somewhat organically to a dialogue around the autonomy and independence of our membership.”



Of course, any tension that may exist between the needs of individual members and the needs of the cooperative as a whole does not mean it is a zero-sum game—when one gains the other must necessarily lose. The real power of an effective and member-focused service and support cooperative like Arctic Co-ops is when they are able to create win-win situations, and use the common buying power of the whole

in a way that actually supports and augments individual member identity. A recent example is coat fabric. In the Arctic, outerwear has great cultural significance, and many Arctic women sew outdoor clothing for their families themselves. Ordering such fabric in bulk is one of the basic products that an Arctic Co-operatives member might provide. But instead of ordering commonly available fabric in dull colors or with generic snowflakes or Disney characters on it, the merchandizing division instead found attractive outerwear fabric with a design incorporating the ulu knife—a traditional knife with a semi-circular blade that has been used by Arctic women for

thousands of years. Small efforts like this make a big difference to customers, and are one example of the many ways that Arctic Co-operatives staff take an inclusive lens to their work.

“If we look after our employees, we will do better for our membership, and membership is what we are focused on”

Stakeholder participation at Arctic Co-operatives is not limited to member co-ops. The home office in Winnipeg has been recognized for five years in a row as one of Manitoba’s top employers, an achievement that the organization views as a natural extension of its member-centric orientation. “if we look after our employees, we will do better for our membership, and membership is what we are focused on” noted Mary Nirlungayuk, VP for Corporate Services and the staff liaison to the Board.

The concept of service and support also extends to members of their members. This link to the local community is directly reflected in the services offered by the Co-op. In a partnership with First Nations Bank, for example (where the Co-op is also a shareholder), Arctic Cooperatives offers financial literacy training for local people. Co-op stores also commonly act by necessity as a local financial services provider if there is no bank or credit union in town; and the partnership with First Nations Bank has helped expand the number of actual bank branches in the region. These are the kinds of ideas and projects that stem from people who are in daily acquaintance with the needs of their neighbors.

Organizational structure and governance system

A member-centric approach to governance is clearly apparent at Arctic Co-operatives both in terms of the specific and robust structures that underlie the organization’s governance, and the way in which these structures are used in practice.

At the center of the governance system is the Annual General Meeting, or AGM. This is held in Winnipeg each Spring, and involves an entire week of gatherings for training, reporting, strategy discussions, decision-making and socializing. The week starts with a two-day board meeting with both education and strategy sessions. This is followed by a one-day regional meeting for members, then the two days of AGM. Each of the 32 members is entitled to send two voting delegates from their board to the annual meeting. These are important positions, and Arctic Co-operatives provides guidance to member co-ops to help them select representatives with a

strategic understanding and strong relationships in the community. One delegate is generally the Chair of the Board of the local co-op; the second may be the Vice President, but also could be a new board member, or an emerging local cooperative leader. Many members deliberately rotate this second delegate position to ensure that more board members have a sound understanding of their service and support federation. Sitting Arctic Co-operatives board members are not permitted to be delegates, so all delegates represent new voices to the discussion.

In addition to financial reports, resolutions, and updates on the strategic plan, board elections are part of the agenda. One director is elected by members in each of seven districts for a total of seven board positions. The largest store—whose purchases are significantly greater by volume than that of other members—is a district unto itself and always has a board representative. Five other districts are roughly based on regional boundaries, while district seven is an at-large position voted on by all the Nunavut members. To facilitate full discussion, simultaneous translation is offered in Inuktitut, one of the principal Inuit languages widely understood.

Board meetings are held quarterly, three in Winnipeg and one in a member community. In addition to meetings of the board, Arctic Co-operatives also facilitates regular regional meetings, so members with similar issues can meet and discuss with their peers. Typically, two per year are held by phone or video, with one meeting in person. Recently, to help strengthen governance at the local level, the Co-op has also started facilitating regular meetings of the Presidents of its member co-op boards.

Communication can be challenging in the Arctic, but the co-op does its best to ensure that interaction and exchange between and within the membership is regular and reciprocal. When the pandemic struck, Arctic Co-operatives made sure that each member co-op had all the tools needed including computers, cameras, mics and headsets so local leaders could fully participate in all meetings. Staff and board also travel to the communities whenever possible. While weather and schedules do not always permit it, the practice is for Arctic Co-operatives to send at least one board and one staff representative to attend the AGMs of their member co-ops, and sometimes more. Taking a trip to one of the remote member communities is also part of the new staff orientation for many staff leaders at the Co-op. Having an understanding of what it is like to live and work in the North is vital for every team member.

Certainly, many strong cooperatives use the tools of regular meetings and information exchange to underpin their efforts at member-centric governance. Two other practices at Arctic Co-operatives are perhaps less common, but are also central elements of their approach: The first of these is the special role of Vice President for Corporate Services Mary Nirlungayuk, a person of indigenous heritage who actually grew up in the Arctic. Lots of larger co-ops have a board secretary role for staff, but in many instances this position is primarily administrative. At other cooperatives, this role may be viewed as of more strategic importance (as it is at Arctic Co-operatives) but does not encompass the same ties to the community. At Arctic Co-operatives, the board liaison role is elevated to a VP level position and is seen as one of equal strategic importance to other senior VP positions in areas such as operations or human resources. At the same time, however, it also functions a direct link between indigenous community members in remote and isolated hamlets and the highest echelons of the cooperative. Any member can call and consult with Ms. Nirlungayuk on any matter at any time, and importantly—they can do so in their own native language of Inuktitut, which is Ms. Nirlungayuk’s native language as well. Elevating such a position elevates the Arctic community perspective and allows it to reach the top, unfiltered by European language and nuance. It means that at Arctic Co-operatives, the members really are at the heart and the center of the cooperative.

Ms. Nirlungayuk’s work encompasses not only responsibilities such as new board member orientation; she is also a key participant in virtually every important meeting or communication with a member. Some of these calls are with General Managers, but Ms. Nirlungayuk also goes out of her way to call each Board President for a personal chat at least once a year.

“Communication is not just through the general managers” she notes. “Communication is also through the boards of directors because at the end of the day, regardless of what we decide, the member board of directors is the ultimate decision maker on behalf of that co-op location.”

With 30 years’ experience in the cooperative system, Ms. Nirlungayuk is exceptionally well-qualified for her role as the key liaison for Arctic Co-operatives’ community-based cooperative members. She also brings a unique personal perspective not only as a native of the Arctic, but as the daughter of an early Arctic Co-operatives leader. “I remember being a child and my Dad would go on a trip and would come back so excited . . .” she remembers. “He was part of the co-op system that started the federation and he would go to the AGMs and come back with ideas

and solutions” for the local co-op and community. With Ms. Nirlungayuk, Arctic Co-operative member co-ops have a knowledgeable, trusted and accessible ally, with a direct link to the cooperative top management.

The second governance innovation that supports a particularly member-centric approach is the way that Arctic Co-operatives conceives of and structures the role of regional District Support Advisor (DSA). It is very common for wholesale companies to have some kind of regional service representative position, a person who visits a store regularly and offers advice on product and merchandising. The District Support Advisor is this, and much much more. Arctic Co-operatives envision the DSA position as one whose job it is to support each member cooperative in a comprehensive way, which means providing individual, direct and practical assistance for member cooperatives in both operational and governance issues.

Most DSA candidates come with technical expertise in one or more important business lines. As a DSA at Arctic Co-operatives, they are expected to learn the additional technical skills they need to support the full line of member business enterprises (freight, cable and hospitality, for example, in addition to grocery and general merchandise) and they are also expected to be able to demonstrate basic expertise in cooperative governance. The DSA position is seen as a core support position for *both* management and the board of local co-ops. Arctic Co-operatives puts a great deal of training resources into the role to equip each DSA to work effectively with both board and management as a trusted confidant of both.

District Service Advisors work on a regional basis, so they are a consistent presence for each member co-op. There are seven DSAs in the organization, each working with 4-5 member co-ops which are grouped together based on trade and delivery routes (so resemble, but are not exactly contiguous with the seven governance districts). All DSAs report to a common supervisor, and form a common work team within the organization. Importantly, while much of each DSAs time is spent in the field, they also all meet together for an entire week each quarter to share best practices, participate in training, and work out common ways to align their stores to be even more strategic and effective as a group.

In terms of governance support, DSAs assist boards in conducting the annual performance review of the General Manager, and guide them in setting goals for the coming year. DSAs also go over financial reports to help local board members who are not familiar with financial

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statements to understand their co-op’s performance and be more effective directors. They will almost always attend all of the AGMs of the members in their region, offering further guidance as needed. This practice of assigning the dual responsibility of supporting both board and management to a single staff position is not commonly seen, but in many ways it is emblematic of the Arctic Co-operative approach. Everyone at the co-op is

clear about understanding the ways in which operations and governance are different; yet there is a common view of mission and member service that align them. An effective board supports effective management, and vice versa. It is a more sophisticated and nuanced view of this core relationship than many organizations present. It is also clearly part of the reason that Arctic Co-operatives has been so successful at serving such a varied and challenging market.

Participatory process

As in many successful cooperatives, the participatory process for members at Arctic Cooperatives has both formal and informal channels.

On an informal basis, communication between all 32 members and Arctic Co-operatives staff is by design frequent and focused on both opportunity development and problem-solving. As important as the frequency of communication however, is the tone. “We strive to have a good tone and a good demeanor around questions” in the organization and in the boardroom, says CEO Rod Wilson. Staff work hard to provide information and context for the board members to understand their thought process, but they don’t dictate the decision. Big issues such as major investments in new technology or partnerships with other organizations would typically be brought to the board two or three times as discussion items before a decision would be asked for. “And it’s not just the CEO” who has this approach notes Wilson. “We have our management team and different business unit leaders present to the board. So, part is exposure, part is relationship building, part is transparency. . . it’s important that the board has comfort with the entire leadership team”. The Co-op’s values of shared information, transparency and relationships help to further the culture of trust that co-op leaders have been cultivating for 50 years.

To promote clearer articulation of shared goals and measures, in 2019 the Co-op adopted a balanced scorecard approach to regularly report on a range of strategic objectives involving not only financial goals, but also goals and measures around personnel development (People), member engagement (Market) and the social well-being of underlying communities. People goals for example, include being in the top 25% of all Canadian employers as measured by a standard, third party survey, an achievement the Co-op has met for the last two years in a row. A second people goal is to maintain a set amount of spending per person on education and training. While in many conventional companies' employee training and education might be the first thing to be cut in a downturn, at Arctic Co-operatives, it isn't; managers have to find a different way to balance their budgets, and they do. Despite the enormous challenges of the pandemic for example, Arctic Co-operatives was able to meet all of their financial targets for 2020 without any negative effect on staff.

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Members of the co-op through their board representatives and delegates to the AGM have a direct role in setting the balanced scorecard social targets for the coming year, which currently focus on the issue of food security. The benchmark target is to spend a minimum of 1% of net surplus either in cash or in kind on the alleviation of food insecurity in the Arctic, in addition to other regular charitable donations and sponsorships. Such beneficial practices toward employees and the community of course existed before the balanced scorecard was adopted, but they didn't necessarily have targets attached. Now the balanced scorecard measures are pursued rigorously, and reported on regularly to the board. “We really talk at every board meeting about the strategic direction that we’re taking. We touch upon our vision and our missions” says Board President Mark Needham. “Particularly, we talk about the values and how those values can be translated into actual strategies . . . each of the vice presidents are accountable for one of them, and each of the vice presidents report on them.”

A major way for representatives of member cooperatives who are not on the board to influence the strategic direction of the cooperative is through a robust resolutions process at every AGM. Discussion of possible member resolutions start at the regional meetings in January. During these discussions, peers consider possible resolutions, and encourage those with a suggestion for one to hone their idea to make sure it is the kind of proposal that would be appropriate for a resolution—an idea of some strategic significance that affects many member co-ops, not just one. Possible resolutions are further considered at the in-person regional meetings held just before the AGM, and proposals are then forwarded to the resolutions committee made up of 4 regional delegates and 3 staff members. The committee looks at such issues as legality and wording, and may suggest amendments to the proposers, or seek to reconcile similar ideas put forward by multiple regions. Ideas that make it through the committee are then taken to the membership meeting as a whole. Seldom fewer than a dozen proposals are made, and sometimes as many as 25. Resolutions may be as simple as asking for a support letter to government on an issue affecting several communities, or they may involve a more complicated operational change. Resolutions that are approved by the membership are made part of the record of the meeting, and staff will then report on progress at subsequent board meetings and the next AGM.

It should not be surprising that education plays a big role at such a participatory organization as Arctic Co-operatives. “We see education at the board level as being critical for the long-term structure and success” says CEO Wilson. “. . . (it is) not without challenges, but we try to focus on the approach that the opportunity for education is at every intersection with board members and the membership themselves.”

Education is not just for boards and members. Staff at Arctic Co-operatives, too, soon learn that it is a place where continual learning is expected. Anyone in the co-ops who is working at a General Manager or supervisory role receives training on budgeting and finance, but also Cooperative Identity. Staff at the head office in Winnipeg get a cultural introduction to the Arctic and its peoples, and many have the opportunity to travel to communities to see them first hand. Those working directly in the communities, including General Managers and District Service Advisors, need to be equipped to work cohesively with a community-based board in a remote community. “If we had one thing that’s a difference between the co-op being successful or not, it is having a manager there that understands how to run the business and understands doing

business in the North” Says Board President Needham. Arctic communities are diverse, so it is not realistic for every GM candidate to be knowledgeable in a particular culture or language. “They don’t have to be an expert in a specific culture” coming in, says Needham. “they just have to be really empathic and understanding of whatever culture is there . . . They just have to be able to understand and fit in, and want to be part of the community”.

“In this way, the remarkable diversity of Arctic Co-operative’s membership is really a strength, because no one can know everything, and everyone has something to learn”

To be successful in almost any role at Arctic Co-operatives, requires that an individual not just be competent in their technical responsibilities, but also understand cooperative identity and governance and appreciate the nuances of working in and with Indigenous communities. Very few people come with all three areas of expertise, so everyone in the organization gets training and support. In this way, the remarkable diversity of Arctic Co-operative’s membership is really a strength, because no one can know

everything, and everyone has something to learn. “What we do is make sure there is a commonality of understanding that everybody is different” says Board President Needham. That, combined with a tone of inquiry and a disciplined pursuit of shared goals and understanding across the organization, makes the member participation process at Arctic Co-operatives both rich and meaningful.

Participation in broader democracy is one of the proudest achievements of the cooperative system.

Local leadership development is a substantial and consequential by-product of the cooperative’s approach to education. It is estimated that the co-op has trained over 2,000 people in their role as directors. Particularly in the early years of the co-op in the 1960’s and 1970’s when the

government and the Canadian cooperative movement were intensively involved in training, many of the recipients later went on to important roles as elected representatives in the House of Commons, and ultimately the legislature of the new territory of Nunavut.¹ Participation in broader democracy is one of the proudest achievements of the cooperative system.

¹ See Ketilson, Lou Hammond and Ian MacPherson. “Aboriginal Co-operatives in Canada”, Center for the Study of Cooperatives, University of Saskatchewan, March 2001.

Arctic Co-operatives continues its tradition of training a diverse array of new local leaders. Over half of the board members of member cooperatives, for example, are now women. It is an achievement that Arctic Co-operatives leaders note they cannot take credit for directly, but is one of which they are undoubtedly proud nonetheless. Women have always been important leaders in the Arctic, and the democratic cooperative structure is one more way that this leadership is recognized and cultivated.

Evolution and change

Arctic Co-operatives is a dynamic enterprise, continually reaching for new ways to enhance services, alleviate risk or otherwise increase the wellbeing of member stores and their communities.

When the federation of community-owned stores was first formed 50 years ago, simply establishing an infrastructure for food distribution across the Arctic was challenge enough. Members soon found that it was difficult to finance the large annual purchases of merchandise they needed to make. In response, Arctic Co-operatives formed their own development arm, Arctic Cooperatives Development Fund (ACDF) in 1986. Beginning with \$10 million of government funds, the ACDF has grown to \$50 million CAD, and now provides \$25 million CAD per year in re-supply financing. Funds are also available to enhance facilities or purchase equipment, and ACDF is a major source of funding for new business ventures by member co-ops, such as the recent growth in hotels and other tourist industry ventures.

Uncomfortable with their dependence on a shipping service owned by a competitor to bring goods to their stores, in 2000 Arctic Cooperatives linked with another company to create a new transportation and supply service, Nunavut Sealink and Supply, Inc. or NSSI. Later, several Inuit regional development corporations joined as significant shareholders in the company as well, so now NSSI is majority Inuit-owned, with the Co-op as its biggest customer and largest shareholder. Working collaboratively with others in the region to create their own independent transportation service was another step in securing the position of Arctic Co-operatives and their members in a marketplace where cooperatives are scarce and not always well-understood.

Partnering with other cooperatives has also been a consistent strategy that Arctic Co-operatives has used to help maintain its cooperative focus. Because Arctic Co-operatives is a member of the

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much larger Federated Co-operatives Limited, for example, a small store on the Arctic Circle is not only part of Arctic Cooperatives \$250 million of buying power, but also part of Federated’s billion dollar buying power. Not only does this volume yield better prices for Arctic Coop members, but importantly, it also gives them access to a patronage stream not just from their Arctic Co-operative ownership stake, but from Federated as well.

In addition to the Federated wholesale network, Arctic Cooperatives is also part of The Co-operators Group Limited, a Canadian diversified cooperative insurance company with assets of over \$45 billion CAD. This integration into the larger cooperative infrastructure in Canada provides further stability and cost advantages.

Rather than pulling away from its cooperative identity as it has grown, Arctic Co-operatives under the leadership team of Wilson, Nirlungayuk and their colleagues, has taken steps to further enhance internal understanding of their cooperative identity and improve both structures and practice of member engagement. Cooperative education outcomes have been added to the balanced scorecard, for example, meaning performance is formally linked to the success of learning. “We’ve highlighted that it is important to us and I think that’s really changed the mindset . . .” says Vice President for Human Resources Ed Keddy. “Learning is not an afterthought or expense, it’s an investment, right?”

Looking ahead – future prospects

Arctic Co-operatives has always faced a demanding market environment, and the future is no different. It’s difficult to satisfy every member’s need, yet every single member is important to the ability of the group to deliver on its promise. Seeking out synergies and encouraging efficiencies is all the more challenging as consumers expectations become more and more sophisticated. The emergence of Amazon has significantly impacted the buying habits of many individuals, and sales that used to go to local merchants by default now need to be actively pursued.

Arctic Co-operatives is betting that its future is best secured not just by being a better business, but by being a better cooperative. Fifty years of continuous improvement in service and support says that they are on the right track.

Author Biography

Margaret Lund is an independent consultant specializing in the areas of community development finance, shared ownership strategies, program evaluation and strategic enterprise development. Her client list includes dozens of nonprofits, cooperatives and community development organizations. With a focus on democratic ownership, she works across cooperative sectors including credit unions, healthcare, sustainable food systems, and consumer, housing and worker co-ops. Prior to launching her consulting practice in 2008, Ms. Lund spent 15 years as the Executive Director a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) specializing in cooperatives and other community-owned enterprises.

Margaret is a past member of the board of the National Cooperative Business Association (US apex organization) and has served on numerous other boards including HealthPartners, the largest consumer-governed healthcare organization in the U.S. She holds a Masters' of Science. in Industrial and Labor Relations from Cornell University. Ms. Lund can be reached at mlund95@gmail.com.