

### A MODEL FOR DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING: THE CASE OF WORKER CO-OPERATIVES

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#### ABSTRACT

Based on research in worker co-operatives in the UK this paper analyses some of the problems that democratic or self-managed enterprises face concerning decision-making. It is argued that many of these problems arise because too simple a model of decision-making is adopted within the enterprise. The paper presents a more complex model which can be used to plan decision-making structures and processes within the self-managed enterprise so that some of these problems may be lessened or overcome.

#### INTRODUCTION

Historically there has been a good deal of pessimism about the possibility of maintaining democratic forms of organisation. Weber (1968) argued that bureaucratic forms of organisation would be more efficient, and that it would be difficult for elected representatives to exercise much power over the bureaucracies they were supposed to control. Michels (1949) concluded that all democratic organisations would be subject to the 'iron law of oligarchy' and become dominated by elite groups. More recently these pessimistic theories have begun to be challenged, see for example Abrahamsson (1977). Empirical studies have suggested that under certain conditions democracy can be maintained (Bernstein 1976; Rothschild-Whitt 1976). However, it is also true that studies have repeatedly shown that there are problems in reconciling the goals of efficiency and democracy in self-managed enterprises in both capitalist and socialist countries (Meister 1974, 1984; Shirom 1972; Adizes 1971; Rus 1972).

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Our own interest in this issue began accidentally when the Co-operatives Research Unit (CRU) undertook a study of job satisfaction in worker co-operatives (Paton 1979). These case studies also revealed that co-operatives that had been converted from private companies were experiencing problems developing structures that were both efficient and democratic. As a result attention was focused on developing a normative model of decision-making that could help co-operatives like these in designing their structures (Paton 1979b). The model was used to develop an educational game for members of co-operatives and as an analytical tool that could be used in analysing co-operative structures. The model was further elaborated in two action research projects (Cornforth 1981; Thomas 1982). (More details of the uses of the model are given towards the end of this paper.)

This paper explores some of the reasons why worker co-operatives experience problems in reconciling business and democratic objectives. It is suggested that many problems arise, first, because members of co-operatives often adopt too simple and rigid a set of ideas about how to make decisions; and, second, because members have different expectations about how much they should be involved in decision-making. Based on this analysis a more complex model is presented for deciding how different types of decisions should be dealt with in a co-operative.

Unlike many rational decision-making models our model assumes that conflict is both inevitable and legitimate within the enterprise, and that not all members of the co-operative will be equally interested in all issues. The model is not intended to be the solution to the problem of reconciling business and democratic objectives in itself but it is hoped that it will raise a variety of issues which need to be taken into account when members are deciding the decision-making structure and processes for their co-operative. In particular the model inevitably suffers from many of the usual weaknesses of rational decision-making models. It assumes that all decisions can be actually defined and identified. It ignores some of the informal influences that often shape and influence the decision-making process. However, we do believe that by making the decision-making process more explicit it will form a basis for enabling members to clarify and possibly resolve their different expectations.

Although the model that we present was developed for worker co-operatives we feel that it is based on principles that are equally applicable to other types of organisation with a strong commitment to democratic goals and self-management. For example, we have been able to use a similar model in advising voluntary organisations that were trying to develop a democratic structure.

## THE PROBLEM

A workers' co-operative is a business owned and controlled by those who work in it. Working in the co-operative gives the right to membership and thus to an equal share in the ownership of the co-operative; ultimate control rests in the hands of this membership on the basis of one person one vote (Wright 1979). These are, however,

formal provisos which do not necessarily mean that democratic control will be widely practised within the co-operative (see for example Paton 1979; Hammer and Stern 1979, Eccles 1981). They need imply nothing more than a weak board of worker representatives and a traditional management structure. We are concerned here with co-operatives that have an active commitment to democratic control, but are too large to achieve this simply by group working and collective decision-making. The basic problem of decision-making in these co-operatives takes a particular form because they are simultaneously business organisations and democratic organisations.

There are all sorts of reasons why the most directly democratic version of co-operation has limitations. There is generally thought to be a conflict between *effectiveness* as a business or industrial organization and certain forms of *participation*. This can be seen simply in terms of the effects of meetings on losing production time; or in the necessity for division of labour and the danger of allowing non-experts to make decisions; or in terms of difficulties in relating to outsiders who expect to speak to someone of similar position (and rank) as themselves. At the same time, consultation (if not fuller participation) and job enlargement are increasingly recognised as necessary for effective decision-making in conventional organizations.

Besides the effect of participation on the performance of the co-operative, many problems arise because members have different interpretations of what ownership, equality and democracy mean. Consequently members are likely to have different expectations regarding how the co-operative should be organised. For instance workers in a company that has been converted to a co-operative by its original owner may expect collective control over all sorts of decisions, whereas the owner may have meant to give away only the right for each worker to benefit in the profits of the enterprise. Paton (1979) showed that in certain co-operatives of this type, workers were less satisfied with their jobs than the national average despite not wishing to leave. This was explained because on the one hand they had expectations for a greater say in decision-making than they in fact enjoyed whereas on the other hand their working conditions and pay were as good if not better than in other local firms.

If members of co-operatives have widely different expectations of the way in which decisions should be made and over the degree of control they should have, conflict and frustration will be inevitable (Cornforth 1981; Eccles 1981; Tynan 1980; Tynan and Thomas 1984).

#### COMMON PERCEPTIONS OF HOW ORGANISATIONS AND IN PARTICULAR CO-OPERATIVES SHOULD BE ORGANISED

The way in which a co-operative is organised will depend in part on the mental models of organisation that members bring with them to the co-operative. It is our experience that people tend to hold rather simple views (at least consciously) about what organisations are or should be, based on these models, and that it is against these ideal models that organisations are judged. For example, the hierarchical

model of a *rational bureaucratic* organisation (Weber 1986) is extremely powerful not only as a theoretical 'ideal type' but also in people's minds. Many people feel there is something wrong unless a job description can be written without having any particular individual in mind; or if it is not clear that one job holder responds to just one superior; or if rules cannot be applied impartially and impersonally. This is the dominant model that has been applied to business organisations.

There are alternative models which people apply to co-operatives and which have arisen in other social contexts. One is a *representational democratic* model — which is thought 'proper' for sports clubs, charities, and local authorities, too. Here committees (and sometimes officers) are elected by members and are serviced by appointed officials and employees (who are likely to be organized in a bureaucratic hierarchy). This model includes rules for committee procedure (which are often thought to be ordained as if by natural law!) as well as the possibility of working by delegation to sub-committees. This model applies at board/shareholder level to conventional companies, and one model of a co-operative simply substitutes the workforce for the shareholders.

In this model the Board is supposed to be responsible for deciding the policy of the co-operative, and the management is responsible for implementing this policy and is accountable to the Board. However, as has been pointed out in the literature on conventional companies the managerial hierarchy occupies a very powerful position in such structures (see Galbraith 1973:60). Management's role of formulating and implementing policy, and control over information, can severely constrain the power of the elected Board of worker members to direct affairs. As a result many co-operatives find this structure is insufficient to meet members' expectations for influencing decision-making.

The other powerful model applied to co-operatives is that of a '*collective*'. Here the general meeting is the centrally important body and the source of authority; decisions are by 'consensus' rather than by voting on propositions; there is (at least informally) recognition of complete equality between members; as much as possible is done by informal agreement. Decisions are implemented through delegation to individuals or sub-groups and there are no formal managerial positions. This is the model for an informal task group and an ideal for those who wish to be totally non-hierarchical and anti-bureaucratic. However, even in small groups not all decisions can be taken collectively, and this model becomes more impractical as co-operatives grow in size (Abell 1982).

Each of these models has associated with it a particular type of decision-making mechanism that is seen as 'correct'. In the rational bureaucratic model, different decisions are allocated to various levels in the hierarchy, those affecting the whole organisation being taken at the top of the hierarchy, while those affecting only a sub-unit are taken by the head of that sub-unit. In a representative democracy, major (policy) decisions are taken by the elected committee and

execution is left to the appointed officials or managers. In a collective all important decisions are taken by the collective as a whole. However, in practice an organization's decision-making will not run simply and uniformly, and will only approximate, imperfectly, to the 'ideal' type. Although this would appear to be inevitable it is often viewed as inconsistent or mistaken or an admission of failure by organisation members.

### OUR APPROACH TO CO-OPERATIVE DECISION-MAKING

Our approach has been to develop a more complex model of decision-making which tries to match the type of decision-making to the nature of the decision and particular organisational circumstances. Even though more complex than the models described above it is doubtful whether the model could (or should) be followed precisely in practice. Nevertheless, it does highlight a number of factors that have proved important in attempts to develop democratic control and consequently need to be taken into account when deciding how to make decisions.

This model is similar in form and intent to the normative model developed by Vroom and Yetton (1973), in that "it purports to specify a set of rules that *should* be used in determining the form and amount of participation... in different classes of situations" (Vroom and Yetton 1973, p. 11). However, Vroom and Yetton's model was developed for participation by 'subordinates' in a rational bureaucratic hierarchy. Dachler and Wilpert (1978:16) advocate extending this type of analysis to situations in which formally managers and workers have equal power, and our model attempts to do this. As the co-operatives we designed the model for have a management structure as well as some form of democratic structure we will call them 'dual control' co-operatives.

For these co-operatives none of the three ideal types of organisation is appropriate. The rational bureaucratic model clearly does not match with democratic control. For reasons of efficiency, size or differences in expertise, the collective model of organisation is not appropriate; but a greater degree of direct participation may be required than given by the representational democratic model. The model suggests a way of deciding when to use each of the main types of decision-making process and their variants.

### BASIC ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND OUR APPROACH

There are several assumptions on which the model is based. These are derived from our observations at several different co-operatives but are not purely 'objective' — they embody certain prejudices and value judgements on our part. The assumptions and associated deductions are listed below in two groups: I Contingency; II Conflict.

IA In a co-operative it is desirable to look for maximum feasible participation at all levels within commercial constraints (e. g. recognis-

ing urgent decisions and/or those requiring particular expertise). How this is actually operationalised may be contentious.

*IB* It is pointless and mistaken to expect full participation on issues which are not perceived to be important and/or where individuals do not feel their contributions will be taken into account (Bernstein 1976:110).

*IC* Hence different decisions require *different degrees or modes of participation*.

*ID* Thus a range of decision-making structures and participative mechanisms is needed, depending on the issue to be decided.

*IIA* Co-operation does not mean conflict is avoidable or unnecessary. On the contrary, conflict is inevitable and regarding conflict as taboo is likely to be extremely destructive of co-operative working (see for example Mansbridge 1980).

*IIB* Some conflicts may be due to misunderstandings, poor communication or differences in expectations of co-operation. These can be minimised by clear agreement on who takes which decisions, by what mechanisms, and how their authority is derived.

*IIC* Some conflicts may derive from 'conflicts of interest', for example, 'interests of members versus interests of management'. These need not be distinct group (the conflict could be within one person who takes on both roles) — but such conflicts are very real and mechanisms to deal with them must be built in. These 'real' conflicts limit the extent to which 'clear agreement' can be reached.

*IID* The basis for assessing degree of participation and classifying types of participation is derived from the member-management split.

## THE DECISION ALLOCATION MODEL

The model developed is *not* a structural model. It describes a process for allocating different decisions needing to be taken or issues to be settled to different procedures for taking decisions.

It is important to realise that this is not meant to be a *complete* model in the sense that it might embrace all aspects of participative working in a co-operative. For example, authors such as Bernstein (1976), Rotschild-Whitt (1979) and Cornforth (1985) suggest a number of conditions and practices that would be required to sustain organisational democracy, including certain guaranteed rights for workers, external links with other organisations and movements that share similar values and alternative patterns of growth. Such practices would be *in addition to* mechanisms for participating in decisions day by day.

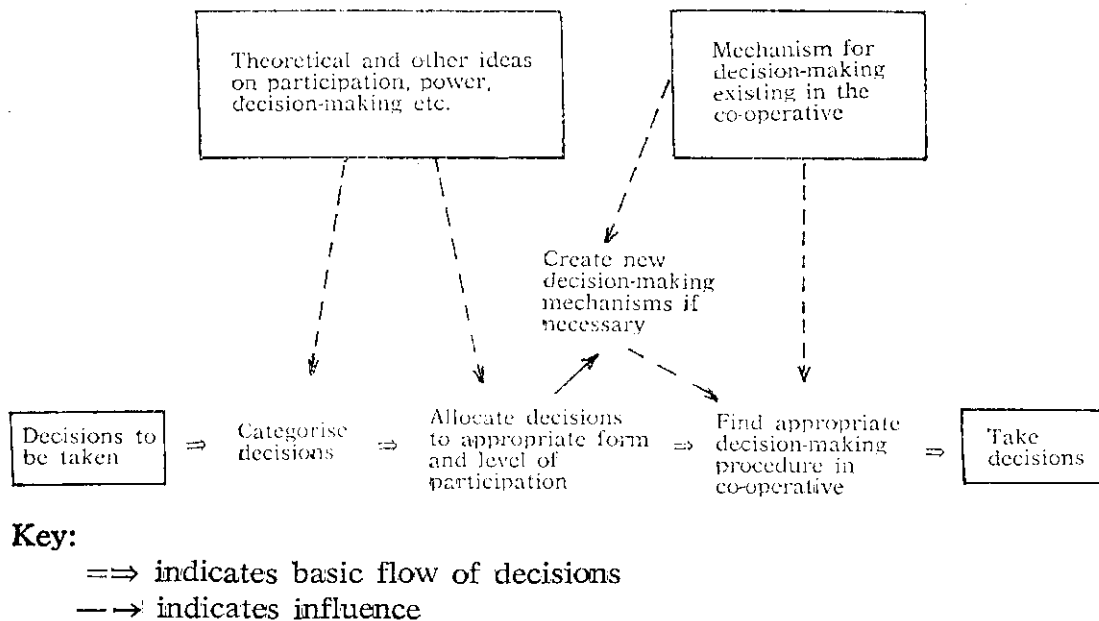
The main components of the model and their relationships are shown in Figure 1. Figure 2 shows in more detail how decisions are allocated to the different main types of decision-making process by answering a series of questions. (This figure draws heavily on Paton 1979b.)

Essentially the model consists of a means of classifying decisions and a set of rules for allocating different decisions to different decision-making procedures via some theoretical ideas on degree and mode of

participation which assume two sides, i. e. that management and ordinary members may have different interests.

In the next two sections the major components of the model are examined. First we discuss the main forms participatory decision-making may take and how this might relate to the practice of decision-making in co-operatives. Then we describe the main criteria that we suggest should be taken into account, or questions that need to be asked, in order to find the most appropriate form of participation for the decisions concerned.

Figure 1. *Structure of the Decision Allocation Model*



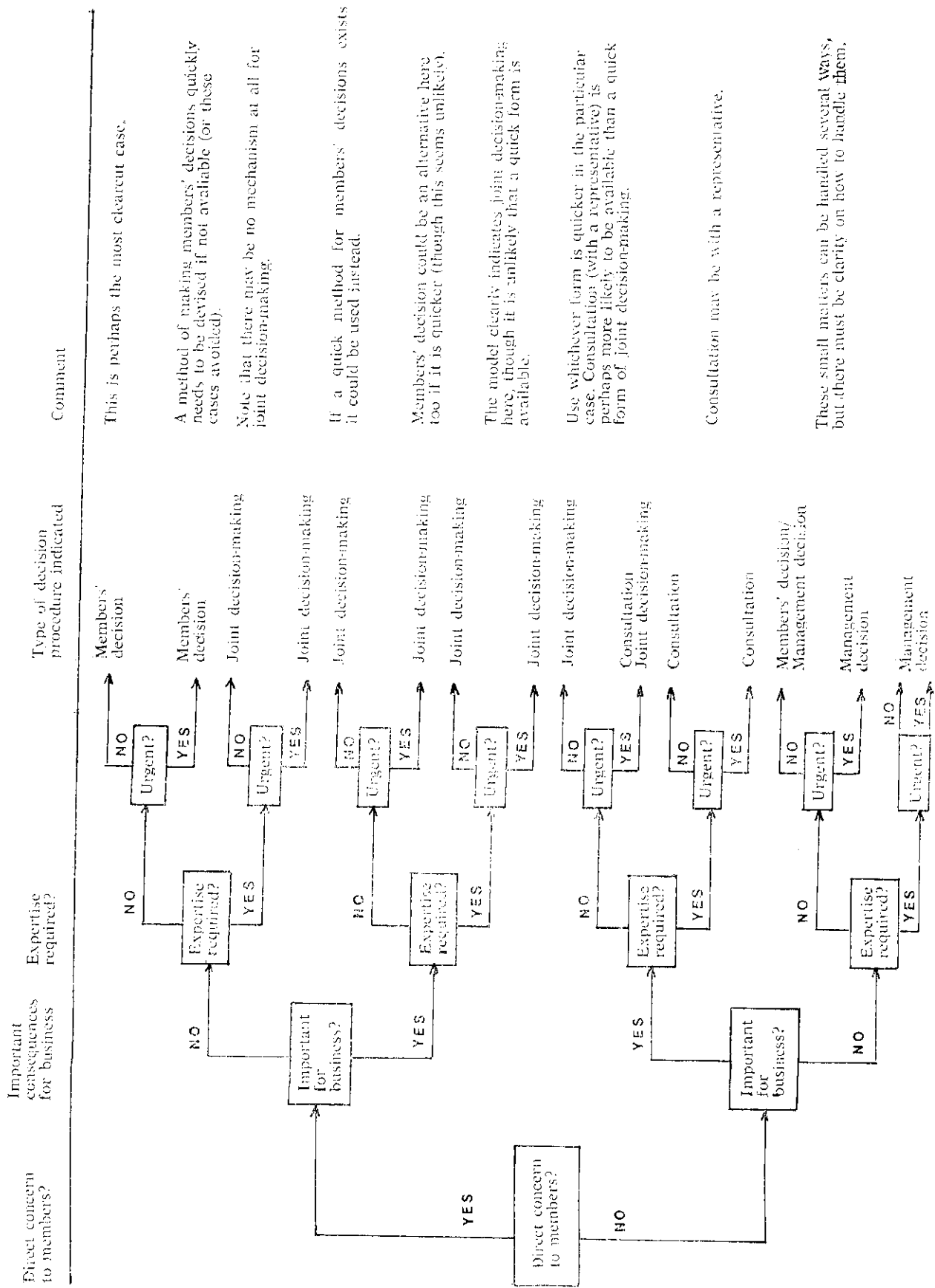
### DECISION-MAKING PROCEDURES

The main types of decision-making process are considered to be (in order of increasing participation): management decision, consultation, joint decision-making, member's decision. (1)

A co-operative will have its own existing mechanisms for decision-making, which may include a version of one of these main types, or may include several variations. These variations will be mainly to do with the limits placed on the procedure by the person or parties who have the 'normal' authority for initiating the process. Such variations and their relationship with co-operative decision-making are discussed in more detail below for each of the four main types.

<sup>1</sup> These types correspond roughly to Vroom and Yetton's (1973) 'autocratic consultative', 'group' and 'delegative' decision-making, except that Vroom and Yetton consider delegation only to an individual subordinate. For a discussion of this type of classification and its relationships to the wider literature on participation see Dachler and Wilpert (1978:14). Bernstein (1976) uses a similar classification as a way of measuring the degree of control by the workforce in a range of cases of attempted workplace democratization including worker co-operatives.

Figure 2: Allocation of Decisions to One of the Four Main Decision-Making Processes





### *Management decision*

This is the main form of decision-making we are used to in conventional companies, where it is management's role and prerogative to be decision-taker. Management decision may vary on a scale from the situation where no information is given by management to the members to the situation where full information and reporting are given by management at each stage in the decision-making process (Vroom and Yetton 1973; Dachler and Wilpert 1978). If members of a co-operative are to be encouraged to participate in decision-making, or if they are to be able to hold management accountable, then it would seem that all but the most routine decisions should be accompanied by reporting to the membership. The main advantages of this form of decision-making are its speed and the fact that it utilizes management expertise.

### *Consultation*

In this case the 'normal authority' for making decisions sounds out those that will be affected by it, but the 'normal authority' still has the final say on the matter. (The 'normal authority' in a conventional company will normally be a manager. This may be the case in a co-operative, but it might also be a representative or committee.) Consultation may vary from allowing comment on a small aspect of a decision to a major involvement in shaping the decision.

If the members' inputs to the consultation process are consistently ignored it will become devalued in their eyes (Bernstein 1976). There is also the danger that even when they do influence the decision-making process they may not realise that they have done, because it is often difficult to see how the process has been influenced. This was the case in one co-operative studied by Paton (1979) where the management used an informal and discreet process of consultation, which led to the process being devalued.

The main advantage of consultation is that members' opinions are considered whilst still leaving the decision to those with most expertise.

### *Joint decision-making*

Joint decision-making assumes two (or possibly more) sides are involved in the process. For a decision to be taken both management and members — or their representatives — must agree; that is, either side may employ a veto on the decision.

Joint decision-making varies according to which party may propose issues to be decided. This may be regarded as a management prerogative or be open to either party. Clearly if management retains this prerogative then they also retain much of the power.

Joint decision-making involves members, or their representatives, directly in the decision-making process and is consequently likely to lead to decisions that are more generally accepted — unless the representatives are 'out of touch'. On the other hand, it may be more time consuming than consultation or management decision, particularly if there is conflict over the decision.

In practice it may be difficult for some co-operatives to employ joint decision-making that embodies the notion of two sides, because co-operative ideals are often interpreted to imply everyone working together on the same side. A number of advocates of co-operation endorse this unitary view of worker co-operatives (see for example Oakeshott 1978; Jay 1980). This may not only mean the idea of a veto is unacceptable, but also make the process of forming a separate workforce or members' view extremely difficult. For example, to meet without managers present, so as to formulate alternatives, prior to a joint meeting, may be criticised as provocative and divisive (Cornforth and Paton 1981).

### *Members' Decision*

In this case the decision is made directly by members of the co-operative or their representatives, with managers having no more say than anyone else. This is often regarded as the ideal form of participation. However, it may not be practical if issues are urgent, require expertise or are of little interest to members. It is often assumed that the amount of member participation increases as one moves from management to members' decision making. However, it is not obvious that members' influence over decisions will increase likewise. This depends not only on the form of decision-making but on the respective attitudes, capacities and power of the parties involved in the decision-making process (Walker 1970; Mulder 1971, 1977). One extreme manifestation of power over others would be to be able to control the others' information inputs, expectations and world-view sufficiently that one could delegate decisions with no danger of an outcome contrary to one's own interests. (2)

This highlights an inevitable weakness of the model: that no decision-making structure or process can in itself guarantee a greater equality of influence between parties involved in the process. This will also depend on the power and motivations of each party. There must be a genuine commitment to power sharing and mutual influence by potentially powerful groups, such as management.

## THE QUESTIONS USED TO CATEGORISE AND ALLOCATE DECISIONS

Our experience suggests that there are at least five important questions which must be asked in order to guide what means of participation should be employed to make decisions (see also Figure 2). These questions are:

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<sup>2</sup> Lukes (1974), Elliot (1980) discuss these manipulative aspects of power in some detail. Mulder (1971, 1977) has shown how increased participation may lead to an increase in the power of managers over workers, when the differences in expertise between the two parties are large. In this case managers were more readily able to use their expert power to impose their decision on the workers.

1) Does the decision directly affect any major concerns of members? Examples of this would include matters concerning pay, hours of work, the nature and control of members' work. If the answer is *yes* then members should be extensively involved in the decision, and consequently joint decision-making or members' decision should be employed.

2) Does the decision affect one group of members or all members? If the decision were to affect one group then it should be taken at the group level; if it were to affect all members then it should be taken at the company level. A decision concerning the type of new machinery for a particular process in a factory may for instance only affect one group of production workers, whereas the prior decision to buy new machinery might affect all of them. (N. B. This question does not appear on Figure 2 as it is independent of the other questions and affects only the *level* at which the decision should be taken.)

3) Is the decision likely to have important consequences for the development of the company? Questions of business policy, or choices concerning the social and economic objectives of the co-operative are of this sort. If the answer to this question is *yes* then both member involvement and good use of expertise are called for, and consequently some form of joint decision-making or consultation.

4) Does the decision require management expertise for its comprehension and execution? Decisions concerning pricing, investment, diversification etc. are likely to be of this sort. If the answer is *yes*, then this would indicate that it would be difficult for members to have a say and it should perhaps be a management decision. This does not mean that members should not be informed of how the decision was made in order to build up their experience and expertise. If this is done they will also be in a better position to hold management accountable for their decisions (though Mulder (1971) has argued that members may be able to retain more power by not participating in decisions where the expertise gap between them and management is high).

5) Is the decision urgent? Urgent decisions do crop up in business; for instance, an immediate decision might have to be made concerning a purchase or a sale. If this is the case it is obviously difficult to involve members in the process, although it may be possible to consult with representatives. Full reporting back by management can improve accountability further, and it may be possible to set policy guidelines to limit the number of such cases, and to ensure that management are working within an agreed framework.

In this model a difficulty arises when there are *yes* answers to either of questions 1) and 3) and either of questions 4) and 5). This would imply that the decision should involve members but that it will be extremely difficult to involve them effectively. Each co-operative will have to come to its own conclusions about such decisions.

Equally in practice few decisions are clear cut; it is often difficult to know in advance what the consequences of a decision will be. There would appear to be no way around this. However, we are convinced that asking these questions will avoid some of the pitfalls that *dog* decision-making in co-operatives.

## WHO DECIDES ABOUT ISSUES CONCERNING PARTICIPATION?

The model does not itself contain any explicit feedback and control element. Hence decisions *about* decisions and participation are only dealt with implicitly by the model. For instance: who formulates what is or is not an issue in the first place? Who does the allocating of decisions and by what authority? Who judges whether decisions have been allocated properly? Who decides whether participation has been effective?

Interestingly, decisions about participation processes can often provide the area of biggest gap between the model and what actually goes on in practice. They are often management decisions when joint decision-making or members' decision would be indicated by our model. This could be because members actually believe such decisions to be unimportant and of no concern, or it may be because many such decisions are not seen as decisions. For instance it may be overlooked that what appears on the agenda for a meeting often already involves important decisions. One possibility is that it is through the control of agendas and through controlling the forms of participation in the co-operative that management may retain control. The literature on power emphasises how important these aspects of control are in the exercise of power in organisations (Bachrach and Baratz 1963; Lukes 1974; Walsh et al 1981).

One approach to resolve this problem is for the co-operative to appoint an 'ombudsman', 'advocate' or 'commonwealth secretary', whose role is to oversee the democratic processes. However, an immediate problem is to ensure that this person is accountable to the membership as a whole rather than to the management. Another suggestion has been to introduce a member council that would be an opposition to a management board. However, no amount of structures can prevent those with most information and expertise controlling agendas and limiting courses of action if they so desire.

## USE OF THE MODEL

So far the model has been used in two ways. It has been used as a diagnostic and design tool by members of the Co-operatives Research Unit during interventions in co-operative and other organisations, and also as the basis for educational games and activities for members of co-operatives.<sup>(3)</sup>

In one case members of the Unit were invited into a co-operative in order to examine the decision-making structure. The Chairman of the co-operative felt that guidelines were needed as to which decisions should be taken centrally and which at group level, and how far ap-

<sup>3</sup> 'How do we settle this one?' A co-operative game available from the Co-operatives Research Unit, Open University, Milton Keynes, UK. See also exercises in P944 *Co-operative Working*, a set of learning materials for co-operators and potential co-operators, available from Learning Materials Service, The Open University, PO Box 188, Milton Keynes MK7 6DH, UK.

pointed managers, in each group and at the centre, could go before having to bring matters to the democratic structures of group or general meetings. In this case the model was compared with the actual decision-making practices in order to highlight discrepancies. On this basis recommendations were made as to how current practices might be changed: for example, appointing a 'commonwealth secretary'; separating the role of elected representatives from that of appointed managers; instituting at least a rudimentary form of joint decision-making (Thomas, 1982).

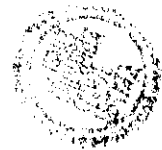
The educational game has been used with members or potential members of co-operatives to explore how they think decisions should be made in a co-operative. Members are presented with a range of hypothetical decisions and asked to decide first individually then as a group how they should be taken. The model is presented as one possible way of making these decision allocations.

Perhaps the main use for such a model will be as a design aid for co-operatives and other democratic organisations in the process of designing or redesigning their decision-making structures. This certainly occurred in another case with a voluntary organisation. It was important to emphasise that the model should not be regarded as *the* way of doing things. However, asking the questions, and trying to use the model, again led to some useful ideas for changing structures and procedures.

The model introduces the ideas that some conflict may be inevitable and that different procedures may be appropriate for different types of decision. It also raises the important question of who decides how decisions are decided. These notions may have previously been 'taboo' in a co-operative culture, so that the model has a very useful role in making assumptions explicit and in forming a basis for members to clarify and possibly resolve their different expectations.

*Received: 06. 04. 1987*

*Revised: 19. 10. 1987*



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