Co-operatives Research Group

The University of Sydney Business School

About the project

Overview

The project, which is funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Program (DP170100573) and the Co-operative Research Group at the University of Sydney Business School, aims to investigate the development of co-operatives in Australia and provide other researchers with a tool to investigate the co-operative sector in interactive and visual ways. The Atlas has also received funding from the Business Council of Co-operatives and Mutuals.

Chief Investigators

The three Chief Investigators are Associate Professor Nikola Balnave (Macquarie University), Professor Olivera Marjanovic (UTS) and Emeritus Professor Greg Patmore (The University of Sydney).

Aims

Specifically, the project aims to:

- Develop an online visual database of co-operatives, the Visual Atlas of Australian Co-operatives History Project (VAACHP), that enables its users to explore co-operative development both over space and time in a visual and highly interactive way.
- Fill major gaps in the existing literature on co-operatives in Australia by undertaking detailed case studies of co-operatives.
- Develop a theoretical framework based on the atlas/database that attempts to explain the growth, decline and revival of co-operatives in Australia since their first appearance in the 1820s.

The project focuses on all forms of co-operatives in Australia including retail co-operatives, agricultural co-operatives and financial co-operatives, such as credit unions, and co-operative building societies. It also includes co-operative federations and auxiliary organisations such as co-operative women’s guilds.

The project draws upon a range of data sources. It is the first to use the National Library Trove newspaper database to develop a long-term picture of the development of a business model, particularly for the nineteenth century. The general data relating to the development of Australia co-operatives is obtained from a variety of sources including the limited surviving records of various state and national bodies relating to the movement. This material can be found at the National Library in Canberra, Mitchell Library in Sydney, the Newcastle University Archives, the Battye Library in Perth. This material is supplemented by public sources such as newspapers, particularly at community level, published co-operative histories, parliamentary papers and debates, and material sent to the various Registrars of Co-operative Societies. While the research primarily focuses on Australian sources, it also examines the records of the English Co-
operative Wholesale Society (CWS) in Manchester for obtaining further information on nineteenth century Australian co-operatives. One significant English source, The Co-operator, published reports and correspondence relating to Australian co-operatives and the CWS developed a commercial relationship with Australian co-operatives, both as an importer of agricultural goods and an exporter of consumer goods. The CWS also established for varying periods, manufacturing facilities and an office in Sydney. CWS officials visited Australia on several occasions. At least one Australian consumer co-operative, the Adelaide Co-operative, affiliated with the CWS.

Another dimension of the project is a series of case studies to allow greater insights into the growth and decline of co-operatives. These case studies involve an examination of the records of the co-operative, such as reports, minutes and publications, from their formation. There are co-operatives with considerable surviving records that have operated for long periods. One of the earliest examples was the Adelaide Co-operative, which operated from 1868 until 1962. There is also a major credit union archive in Sydney with the records of a significant number of organisations. Oral histories of participants in these organisations supplement the written records. The project aims to have at least twelve detailed long term case studies with coverage of significant regions for co-operative activity such as the Riverina, the Hunter Valley, the North Coast of NSW, the Queensland Darling Downs and the WA wheat belt.

The data collected is organised on a Visual Historical Atlas of Australian Co-operatives. As of April 2021 (Version 22) it currently has the historical data of 5,109 co-operatives at 2,304 locations plus additional data for many more currently being processed. Major types of co-operatives included 1,309 agricultural co-operatives, 1,086 financial co-operatives, 1,076 community co-operatives, such as registered clubs and 689 consumer co-operatives. The Visual Atlas is implemented using a state-of-the-art data visualisation software called Tableau. The main data inputted include location, date of operation, type of co-operative, membership, employment and finances. The financial data includes assets, turnover, liabilities and surpluses/losses. Locations include, for example, branch stores and produce handling facilities. The information is inputted from data sets, such as Trove and Registrars reports, that examine co-operatives over long periods, rather than short term data that may cover only one or two years. The data highlights trends and allow patterns of growth and decline to be visible with only a small proportion of the population of co-operatives. As more data is inputted in the Atlas these patterns will become clearer. The Atlas currently contains data up to the present and it is planned to make this a permanent resource for co-operatives and the public. It enables the analysis and visualisation of data by the researchers to develop explanation for changes in size of the co-operative movement over time and space. The Atlas can locate co-operatives on the basis of ABS suburbs, ABS regions and federal electorates over time. Researchers can use the Atlas to highlight where co-operatives are concentrated geographically, provide estimates the average life span of co-operatives and examine issues such as demutualisation over time and space. The attached graphs from the current version of the VAACHP, which is constantly expanding as new data is added, highlight co-operative numbers over time, their average life span, agricultural co-operatives, indigenous co-operatives and selected locational data.

**Funding opportunities**

We are interested in attracting sponsors for the project, particularly after the ARC funding ends in 2019. We also would like to hear from co-operatives interested in having their historical data included in the Atlas. Funding would be through the University of Sydney and if you or your organisation are interested, please contact Emeritus Professor Greg Patmore at greg.patmore@sydney.edu.au.
Figure 1 – Australian Co-operatives 1827-2021

(Source: VAACHP Version 22.0, April 2021)
Figure 2 – Average Life Span of Australian Co-operatives 1827-2021 - Aggregate, State and Territory (Source – VAACHP Version 22.0, April 2021)
Figure 3 – Agricultural Co-operatives 1868-2021
(Source – VAACHP Version 22.0, April 2021)

Figure 4 – Indigenous Co-operatives 1919-2021
(Source – VAACHP Version 22.0, April 2021)
Figure 5 – Top 10 Locations 1827-2021
(Source – VAACHP Version 22.0, April 2021)

Figure 6 – Top 10 Regions 1827-2021
(Source – VAACHP Version 22.0, April 2021)
Figure 7 – Sydney 1833-2021
(Source – VAACHP Version 22.0, April 2021)

Figure 8 – Toowoomba City 1876-2021
(Source – VAACHP Version 22.0, April 2021)