

TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE MIND?

Transforming meetings into get-togethers...

CECOSESOLA

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Introduction

Fifty community organizations, with a membership of more than 20,000 associates from low income sectors, are currently integrated in Cecosesola (organism of cooperative integration). Through this network, after a process of more than 40 years, we carry out a wide variety of activities such as agricultural and small scale agro industrial production, funeral, transportation and health services, savings and loan, mutual support funds, and food and household appliances distribution.

Our main purpose centers around the development of an educational process based on a permanent analysis and reflection about our daily life experiences. A process which is lived more intensively by approximately 1,000 associate workers who participate permanently in our activities, but which in one way or another, touches thousands who come into contact with the network through the different services we offer.

We operate the largest funeral service in the region. Our growing health network sees about 150,000 patients a year in six different cooperative health centers. We've generated a community network for the production and distribution of food which extends across five states, being the largest non-governmental food retail system in the entire Venezuelan Midwest Region. Thanks to our own system of internal, jointly binding, mutual financial support, we are financing almost all of our activities using criteria that have emerged from the process itself. All of our profits are reinvested in expanding our current social services or in creating new ones, including a recently inaugurated 3 million dollar hospital.

Our food retail network sells more than 70 million dollars a year at prices 30% below the market. Our health system's prices are 60% below other private alternatives. Funeral services are offered at half the market price.

Perhaps, at a first glance, the experience catches one's attention due to the youth of most of the participants, the integration of genders and generations, the relative effectiveness with which we do most of our activities, and the sheer volume of our operations after having gone through a deep economic crisis in the 80's, when Cecosesola accumulated losses equivalent to thirty times its capital.

At a second glance, most are attracted by our open and flexible way of organizing. There are no chains of command; everyone has the opportunity to participate directly, without intermediaries; tasks are rotated among members and decisions are consensual.

In fact, the Special Law for Cooperative Associations, approved in 2001, allowed our organizational experience to be reflected in the statutes of Cecosesola and many of the integrated organizations. In Cecosesola, according to our statutes, there is no board of directors or hierarchical ranks. All the more than 20,000 associates can participate at any moment with the same rights. Our decisions are subject to reconsideration in case that someone, present or absent at the time the decision is made, expresses disagreement.

However, it is not always evident that behind the surprising financial recovery of Cecosesola, the operational results of the network, and the organizational practice that has evolved, lays a profound educational process nurtured by our daily experiences. An educational process that goes far beyond the mere efficient production of goods and

services since its essence lies in our personal transformation; in the fulfillment of our potentialities in a framework of collective effort.

A fundamental element that has come out from this transforming process is the emergence of an ever-changing organization, whose **only** formal organizational structure is a series of flexible “meetings” that are open to all of those who wish to participate, without distinction. Gatherings which do not follow any preplanned design, which are created or eliminated depending on the needs of the moment and whose characteristics and contents tend to be very different from those accustomed in the public or private sectors, or even in the rest of the cooperative movement.

In fact, due to their apparent informality, our “meetings” may seem inefficient and a waste of time.

However, the quality, variety and expansion of our activities, their impressive economic results, as well as the social wellbeing they generate, have induced a deeper search into the process that has facilitated a permanent transformation in the characteristics and reasons of our gatherings.

What are meetings?

In general, in the economic sector as well as in most other institutions, a meeting is expected to contain certain minimum standards. For example, it must have a pre-established number of participants and clear objectives and the discussion must be centered on topics that have been previously agreed upon. Unless we are talking about a very small group, a moderator is chosen to coordinate the discussion and to direct the group in making decisions whenever it is necessary. Decisions are made by voting or asking each participant for his/her opinion. Finally, agreements are legitimized by unanimity, or by a determined or simple majority.

Those used to this routine, may consider our meetings characteristics strange, taking into account the size of our organization (more than 20,000 members and 1,000 associate workers), the variety of our economic activities, annual gross sales above U.S. \$ 75 million, and our important social welfare contributions. They would probably think that an organization with these characteristics could not function relying an important part of its organizational practice on such gatherings.

Over time, meetings in Cecosesola have become get-togethers, open to whoever wants to participate, with an attendance that in occasions exceeds 200 participants. During these encounters, there are no moderators coordinating the discussions and the agenda is proposed spontaneously, at any moment by any participant. We often jump among topics that are not related at all, without reaching any conclusions. Most of the time, there is no urge to reach a final agreement and to external observers it is hard to recognize when a decision is made, since there is no voting and it is not necessary to listen to everyone’s opinion to reach a conclusion.

It gets even stranger when the observer finds out that these “meetings” are the only formal organizational event in Cecosesola. In our cooperative organism, there is no board of directors or chain of command. Associate workers rotate among the tasks that are

necessary for the functioning of the organization (including purchases, sales, accounting and maintenance). Tasks do not imply a hierarchical relationship. There is no supervisor.

What is an organization?

The conventional organization

Within the parameters of Western Culture, and especially when considering economic institutions, an organization exists when there is a chain of command and responsibilities are allocated to each member according to their rank. All of this is usually described on an organization chart.

Those located on top of the chart require a more global vision. This goes along with a broad participation in far reaching decisions, accompanied by the corresponding responsibilities, increased power and higher personal wages. As we move down the organization chart, the vision gets narrower and decisions are limited to concrete aspects. Responsibilities, as well as wages, are progressively reduced. There may be differences from one organization to another in relation to the degree of hierarchy, but the basic structure remains the same.

If we move horizontally on the organization chart, once again we find separations. In this case, the functions and specific attributions are clearly defined from one area of responsibility to another, creating barriers that make communication a knotty and difficult process.

In short, we are in the presence of a hierarchical and particularistic way of organizing, where control is exercised through “power-over” ⁽¹⁾ others, which encourages individualistic behavior, and where promotion to higher levels means more power and wealth. A way of organizing that may seem totally logical and rational because it responds to the basic emotions of our culture, such as individualistic desires of appropriation and/or accumulation of wealth and power, distrust in others and the tendency towards competition and allotment. Notwithstanding, from a different perspective, it seems to be nonsensical. Why should we establish separations and hierarchies in order to organize ourselves? If organizing aspires to be an integrating process, how can we intend to build it based on separations and divisions? Couldn't organizing be a much simpler process, a simple integration of wills fed by mutual trust, that finds order by being true to the organization's history and purpose?⁽²⁾

Organizing in Cecosesola

In Cecosesola, a transformation in the participant's emotions, new ways of organizing and changes in the characteristics of our meetings have been emerging simultaneously, constituting three intimately linked elements that are part of one sole cultural transformation process.⁽³⁾

¹ Holloway, John, *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*, Pluto Press, 2002.

² Wheatly M and Rogers M., *A Simpler Way*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, USA, 1996.

³ Cecosesola, *Construyendo aquí y ahora el mundo que queremos*, Digesa Lara, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, 2007.

With time we have come to understand organizing as an integrating process that emerges as we share responsibilities, build collective criteria, expand multi-dimensional behavior, deepen our communication, promote networks of trust and solidarity, and enhance our personal and organizational transformation.

Feeding this transformation process we find -not without setbacks- ways to confront new challenges and obstacles. However, at the beginning, the reality of Cecosesola was quite different.

The beginning

At first, the organizational structure of Cecosesola, as well as the characteristics of our meetings, was similar to those of any other economic organization. At that time we were dedicated basically to administering a funeral service and, to a lesser extent, to “teaching” cooperative education.

After five years of operation, we had some twelve workers, including drivers, helpers, secretaries, a cashier and an accountant, who were supervised by a manager. It was a typical relation of dependency: the workers’ responsibilities were limited to fulfilling their assigned tasks within their work schedule; they neither participated in decision making processes nor took part in meetings.

The manager reported to an Administrative Council, made up of five representatives from our affiliated organizations, who distributed their responsibilities as President, Vice-president, Secretary, Treasurer and a utility. There was also an Audit Council; a sort of “watchdog,” as it was said in the cooperative lingo of the time. The members of the Audit Council could not participate in administrative or economic decisions since, as the old saying goes, “one cannot be a referee and a player at the same time”. For the same reason, workers could not opt to be members of the Administrative or Audit Councils, or vote in Cecosesola’s assemblies.

The Administrative Council had a closed-door weekly session to discuss mostly about administrative and economic matters. Once a year this Council would present the economic balance to an assembly made up of representatives of the affiliated organizations. Here again priority was given to the same administrative issues as well as to a power struggle over the control of Cecosesola.

The assembly had to be called by an authorized body, following a very strict legal procedure. An established quorum, as well as a prior agenda determined by the Administrative Council was required. This agenda could only be changed at the beginning of the meeting with the approval of 80% of those present. Also, a moderator was elected in order to guide the meeting according to the established parliamentary rules.

In short, Cecosesola had an organization in line with the dominant culture: hierarchical and particularistic. This promoted the appropriation of power, accompanied by the corresponding struggles to obtain it.

In accordance to the tendency to separate, workers and members of the councils referred to each other as “them.” The same way of relating was evident within each of the affiliated organizations, and among these organizations and Cecosesola.

This tertiary conception also prevailed in education. Far from being seen as a process created by all the participants, it was perceived as a unidirectional process, as an act of imparting knowledge. According to this conception, cooperative education consisted in teaching skills in accounting, legal aspects, moderating meetings, and public speaking among others, as well as in memorizing the seven cooperative principles. Thus, it became necessary for Cecosesola to have numerous promoters in charge of imparting knowledge. The problems confronted by the affiliates were often blamed on the deficiencies in the education provided by Cecosesola.

Currently, these organizational and educational practices and concepts still persist in some of the first organizations affiliated to Cecosesola. However, in Cecosesola and in many of our affiliates, we have transcended, at different rhythms, many of the organizational and educational concepts that marked our beginnings.

Fishing together

Together with the prevailing hierarchical and particularistic organizational practice and the tertiary educational conception, a movement arose inside Cecosesola in the early 70’s questioning this orientation. These two conceptions confronted each other regarding what each considered the essence of the cooperative movement.

One conceived cooperatives as an archipelago of economic businesses, whose primary goal was centered on creating economic wellbeing for its associates, without taking the rest of the community much into account. Emphasis was put on reaching economic efficiency for the benefit of its associates. In this line of thought, the organizational practice that existed and the educational concept of imparting knowledge were perceived as logical and natural at that time.

The other conception perceived the cooperative movement as an organization that generated social commitment and personal transformation. This transformation was encouraged by promoting a work environment based on equity, mutual support and sharing. Here, economic activity is no longer the central pursuit and becomes rather the context where an educational process based on daily activities flourishes, involving the participation of all.

From our current perspective, it seems that we were making an effort to leave behind the duality between “giving the fish to the people” or “teaching them how to fish” (without recognizing that at a given moment either of these two alternatives may be valid) to put emphasis on “fishing together.” Therefore, the promotion of a widespread participation of all the members of the organization was fundamental.

For the last four decades we have been making efforts to deepen the experience of fishing together, embracing a process of cultural transformation which implies a simultaneous organizational transformation and, therefore, a profound change in the reasons behind our meetings and their characteristics. However, at the beginning we thought that everything

would be easier. We were not aware of the difficulties that our deep cultural trends would generate.

The first steps

In the early 70's, the discussion of Cecosesola's statutes offered the opportunity to question the prevalent concepts of the time, permitting important changes in our by-laws. Among these, Cecosesola's objectives were enhanced making emphasis on social commitment. Workers were given the right to choose delegates who had voting power in the annual assembly and could become members of the Administrative Council. Also, Cecosesola's activities were decentralized by creating departments, which had an assembly and councils of their own.

Nevertheless, and although worker participation was enhanced, the organizational structure remained the same, presided by an Administrative Council with the corresponding councils and managers in each department.

In June of 1974, a newly elected Administrative Council, along with other cooperators willing to get involved in a participative process, began to explore other ways to broaden participation.

The meetings of the Administrative Council became open spaces. Our affiliates were grouped according to their geographic location in order to have periodic meetings between the members of the council and delegates from the affiliated organizations. In these gatherings the activities and situation of Cecosesola and its members were analyzed and future activities were planned. Meetings with workers were stimulated.

However, these initial changes were more in formality than in essence. Many cooperators, used to traditional forms of organizing, put on a strong resistance. In addition, those who wanted to promote a profound participative process had not gone through the life experience needed to know which steps to follow.

For example, the area of funeral services, in which all of the cooperatives affiliated to Cecosesola participated, continued to function until the early 80's with departmental councils, a manager, a marked separation among ranks, and little worker participation.

However, in 1976, when Cecosesola took on the responsibility of administrating a major part of the public bus service of the city of Barquisimeto, we faced the opportunity to begin an unprecedented organizational process whose current characteristics surpass the most optimistic expectations that we had at that time.

On assuming the responsibility of a bus community service which in a short time was operating 127 buses and had incorporated more than 300 workers, we found ourselves in a totally different dynamic and rhythm than the accustomed cooperative routine of the time. For the first time, Cecosesola was giving a service without preferential treatment to its own associates. In fact, for some cooperators, this went against cooperative principles. Also, for the first time, we had a considerable number of full-time workers; opening up the opportunity to enhance, in a much larger scale, an organizational and personal transformation process based on experience shared in daily activities.

As opposed to the funeral service area, the representatives from the cooperative associations integrated to the bus service activity were sympathetic towards the promotion of a socially committed cooperative movement. Thus, there was no resistance from the department's affiliates, which could have curtailed the possibilities of finding new ways of organizing.

From the beginning we dedicated our efforts to promoting participation of both, workers and users, in the administration of the bus service. The concept of social property was present.

We carried out popular assemblies in neighborhoods in which we analyzed the bus service's quality and, together with the participants, made the corresponding decisions. Information was shared on the buses while they were in service. Community ties were enhanced which was manifested in frequent and massive demonstrations demanding subsidies from the State in order to avoid tariff hikes. Direct participation of the workers in the management of the service was encouraged. A group formed by council members and other cooperators promoted workers assemblies in which decisions were made collectively. During the first months we worked without any supervision.

However, shortly we were forced to change the rhythm of the process. In general, the trust and openness necessary to promote participation were understood as weaknesses of the organization that facilitated ways for obtaining personal benefits. For many, participation was just an opportunity to demand privileges. For example, one of the first petitions made by the workers was to triple salaries without having any concern for the resulting economic losses.

At the time, we were very far from understanding, deeply and collectively, that every opportunity to participate also brings with it greater responsibilities. In retrospect, we had not taken into account our cultural moment, that was made manifest in the desires and aspirations of a numerous group of workers who were massively incorporated without an adequate induction process.

It took a few months for anarchy to reach such levels that we had to slow down the pace. Bus route coordinators were necessary and a general coordinator was named for a few months. However, in the administration area and workshops, teams continued working without the need of supervisors.

In the following years, the role of route coordinator became progressively unnecessary due to the insistence in periodic worker meetings according to each area of activity.

In these meetings, most of the topics discussed were very concrete, and decisions were made mainly regarding administrative and economic aspects. Broader decisions were made in the annual assembly or, as needed, by an informal team made up of workers, council members and other cooperators that accompanied the educational process. Although in the work area meetings, cases related to personal behaviors were sometimes discussed, the reflections made about our ways of relating to one another did not have the frequency or the depth they have today. Certain divergent behaviors were tolerated,

giving time for the educational process to advance, so that such conduct could be confronted by most workers.

A breaking point

The year 1980 marked a fundamental breaking point in our transformation process, generating changes in the reasons behind our meetings and their characteristics. In March of that year, in response to our massive manifestations in favor of a subsidy for the cooperative transportation system, the local government seized our infrastructure and buses, with the intention of turning them over to those of our workers that supported the seizure. For a period of four and a half months we were left without our primary working tool, while we had to sustain the families of the 128 workers that stayed loyal to the organization. The economic losses reflected an unsustainable reality. For any business it would have been an insurmountable situation, and a cause to shut down operations immediately. The government had circled Cecosesola with political, economic and communicational barriers. During the first months of the seizure, we did not even have access to the media. ⁽⁴⁾

The only resource available to survive and overcome the barriers was the strong sense of solidarity that emerged from the cooperators that remained loyal to the organization. At the moment of the seizure, and blinded by the government's offer, a considerable number of workers left Cecosesola. Thus, most of the workers, with emotions oriented towards obtaining immediate personal benefits without assuming responsibilities, left the organization. Their exit helped to enhance the participation of those that remained.

During those four and a half months we had daily open meetings where we shared information, analyzed the current situation, and made decisions that were executed with ample participation.

One example was the decision of more than 130 cooperators to march to Caracas (about a 300 miles walk) pressuring the government to hand back our buses and infrastructure. During the march, on arrival at any city, we would split up into commissions to visit the local networks and regional authorities. Once we arrived to Caracas, we were received by the members of the Deputy Chamber, who agreed to hold a hearing with the State Governor regarding the seizure of our properties.

Waiting for the hearing, most of us stayed in our country's capital, meeting every day and keeping the pressure on the media. This effort included sweeping various public squares. In addition, by distributing ourselves into commissions, we kept politicians and national authorities informed of our situation.

A group returned to Barquisimeto in order to gather convincing evidence favoring our case, with the intention of presenting it at the hearing.

As we say in our book "Searching for an harmonious living-together"

⁴ Cecosesola, *Buscando una convivencia armónica*, Barquisimeto, Venezuela. 2003.

We had a great advantage unperceived by those that wanted to destroy our transportation system: without buses to keep us busy we could meet on a daily basis, evaluate ourselves and reflect. Thus, the “difficulties” that showed up and the “errors” that we committed became opportunities to meet and reflect, to communicate with one another, to create trustful relationships, and to build identity. (5)

Thus, during that period that we subsisted at the edge of a cliff, we were also going through more open and flexible meetings, an experience that facilitated the emergence of a collective and supportive energy that allowed us to overcome an apparently irreversible political decision.

Here we are referring to that energy that emerges from a process in which hierarchies progressively disappear, information is shared, trusting relationships are created and our identity is deepened. A collective energy that becomes manifest as a non violent force when defending our organizational integrity. A constructive energy that feeds the same process that generated it, not to be exhibited or violent because it is not power to be imposed.

An energy that we know exists because we experience it on a daily basis when we confront any challenge, obstacle or setback, and that disappears when someone tries to use it for personal or group interests, because it is a collective energy that responds to a different logic. An energy that fades away if we try to encase it within the patriarchal logic of accumulating power, because when we try to accumulate solidarity, like money in a bank, we destroy its essence; like the horizon, which exists as we see it and enjoy it, but fades away if we try to touch it.

On the contrary, solidarity is multiplied when we use it generously, becoming a powerful transforming energy. (6)

From our current perspective, the experience lived during the bus seizure deepened our conviction that other ways of organizing and meeting were possible.

Reflecting creates experience

Once we recovered our buses and infrastructure, we were left facing a severe economic setback that prevailed until the end of the 80`s. During the seizure, the government had devastated and destroyed 70% of our buses fleet (7). On top of that, the Municipal Chamber did not only deny any form of transportation subsidy, it also refused to authorize a fare increase that would correspond with the operational costs. The crisis in the cooperative transportation service even threatened to drag down our funeral service. Completely bankrupt and overwhelmed by debts, we searched for the possibility of finding an economic activity that would enable us to overcome this situation and thus guarantee the continuance of the educational process we had initiated.

⁵ Cecosesola, *Buscando una convivencia armónica*, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, 2003.

⁶ Cecosesola, *Buscando una convivencia armónica*, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, 2003.

⁷ *Ibíd.*

The depth of the economic crisis was compensated by the possibilities that opened up. Not only the workers who supported the seizure left the organization, but also many of the cooperators that did not sympathize with the educational process that had begun in Cecosesola, disaffiliated their cooperatives and created their own funeral service. More important, many of us, who remained in Cecosesola, after going through the transportation service experience, have continuously reflected about its implications. Thus, this experience became very enriching, transforming the content of our meetings.

A change in the reasons and characteristics of our meetings is linked to a process of personal and organizational transformation, in a cyclical relationship of permanent feedback. Essentially, it is a complex process of cultural transformation which concerns many intimately interrelated elements. There is no lineal cause-effect relationship here. There is no list of steps to follow. There is no moment or place in which a change is decreed. ⁽⁸⁾

Therefore, we do not have a recipe to guide our actions. We must jump in and get involved, finding paths through a process of trial and error, of action-reflection-action; paths in which we often encounter situations of frustration or disappointment; encounters which invite us to reflect, opening up the possibility to further enhance our personal and organizational transformation.

The pressure we went through in the sordid struggle to control Cecosesola, the disappointment caused by the looting attitude of many of the bus service workers, the frustration due to the passivity of some participants, the feeling of abandonment, impotence, and injustice that we experienced during the seizure, were all painful experiences that permanently feed our reflections and thus become marvelous transforming opportunities.

Thus, the process, through which we have continuously transformed the reasons and characteristics of our meetings, has been a many times painful experience of permanent reflection, finding our way as we go.

For example, with time, it became evident that, in the confrontations that emerged from the struggle to obtain a subsidy for our transportation system, we were functioning under a permanent contradiction. On one hand, we were making an effort to eliminate dominant hierarchical relations inside the transportation activity and, on the other hand, we were feeding a permanent confrontation with city authorities, turning Cecosesola into an instance of local power. At the same time, to put the topping on the cake, we were immersed in an internal sordid struggle over the control of Cecosesola.

Finding ourselves in permanent competition, we were trapped in a hierarchical, accumulative, and isolationist logic. Just the structure we were trying to transcend in our transformational process.

These reflections, among others, have deepened with time and continue to bring about changes in the ways we relate with each other.

⁸ Cecosesola, *Construyendo aquí y ahora el mundo que queremos*, Digesa Lara, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, 2007.

Changes are accelerated

After the recovery of the buses, the assemblies of Cecosesola were no longer sceneries for power struggles. Voting disappeared progressively and made way for an open participation on equal grounds regardless of who had voting rights. Thus, with time, assemblies took on characteristics of informal get-togethers without moderators. However, due to legal obligations that were in place until 2002, it was necessary to maintain the requirements of a quorum and a previously elaborated agenda.

The attributions of the Administrative Council were progressively delegated to the members of each area of activity so that by the 90's its existence became a mere formality. After the approval of the new Special Law for Cooperative Associations (2001), the Administrative Council and other departmental councils were eliminated from our statutes since they had become totally unnecessary.

After the recovery of our buses, there were also winds of change in our funeral service. Changes were hastened by both, the absence of the cooperators that did not favor the participative process, and the incorporation of new workers in this area, including some who came from the cooperative transportation experience.

By the mid-80's, the position of manager had been eliminated in the funeral service, workers had agreed on an equal salary for all, and the division of labor was eliminated since all workers felt able and willing to take on any task. Although the departmental council members named by the assembly stayed in place and continued with their functions according to our statutes, workers gradually took on an active participation in the council's meetings until these became (not without opposition) joint meetings, where workers and council members participated on equal grounds. In 2002, the department's council was eliminated with the modification of our statutes according to the new Cooperative Law. It was a non-traumatic process helped by the fact that workers had been gradually assuming greater responsibilities.

During the 80's and 90's a Regional Education Council, whose meetings were open to all, kept track of the educational process that had been emerging from our daily activities. The promoters that "imparted" education disappeared. Progressively, educational needs were tackled "fishing together": a learning and personal transformation process that emerges from the different groups that constitute our organization, as we share and mutually support each other.

Meanwhile, at the beginning of the 80's, the survival of the transportation service -and thus of Cecosesola- was at stake due to a deteriorating economic situation with no solution in sight. Due to the growing lack of revenue, buses were stockpiled, using their spare parts to keep running those that were still working. It became necessary to lay many workers off without having the resources to cover their severance pay. However, the harmony and trust solidified during the time of the seizure kept us afloat, feeding our desire and hope to find a way out.

In the transportation service, council members were elected only to formally comply with the statutes of the time. Decisions were made in meetings that were open to all the workers of the area.

However, difficulties that hampered the possibilities to deepen the educational process appeared. The need to offer a good transportation service every day of the week reduced meeting attendance. The fact that all drivers spent the entire day on a bus, isolated from other co-workers, impeded the continuous contact that was necessary to spur reflections. We searched desperately for another activity capable of generating the huge income necessary to allow us to pay our debts and thus guaranteeing the continuance of the educational process, that had begun with the arrival of the buses and that was enhanced during the period of the seizure. We tried, fruitlessly, to offer different services, such as selling tires and a car wash.

By the end of 1983, without knowing it, we started to find a way out through what is known today as the Family Food Fairs Program. In November of that year we started with a Food Fair in “El Triunfo” Cooperative. In March of 1984 it occurred to us to carry out a mobile Food Fair by taking the seats off a bus and filling it with vegetables worth U.S. \$ 500, amount that was left from the tire sales.

We never thought that this new activity would, in a short time, grow enough to permit us to incorporate most of the workers of the cooperative transportation service and thus allowing us to continue with the educational process. What’s more, we would have never imagined that this activity would go far beyond solving our critical economic situation.

Notwithstanding, we were convinced from the beginning that the Food Fairs had certain very special characteristics that would allow us to amplify and accelerate our educational process. As opposed to passenger transportation, work in the Food Fairs was carried out together, in one place, increasing the possibilities of getting to know each other through our daily activities. Unlike the transportation service, carried out on a daily basis, the Food Fairs were open to the public only on weekends, giving us plenty of time for meetings with ample attendance. The simplicity of most tasks and the equal salaries made job rotation easy. A permanent market allowed the integration of both agricultural and food processing community groups. In addition, from the beginning, we foresaw and planned the incorporation of other community organizations in the selling of food products.

The cooperative movement in Cecosesola had found its path again. Not without setbacks, we began a phase of continuous personal and organizational transformation, accompanied by profound changes in the reasons behind our meetings and their characteristics.

Finding spaces for reflection and analysis

From the beginning, the only formal organizational structures in Cecosesola’s Food Fairs were the weekly work meeting and a Departmental Administrative Council which existed only for legal reasons and did not assume any responsibilities. There was no supervision. The coordination of activities laid fundamentally in our periodic meetings open to all.

When we began the first mobile Food Fairs, it was easy to schedule daily sales in order to hold meetings on Mondays. These meetings centered on administrative tasks and not so much on reflections and analysis. However, perhaps the time available, the size of the

group (around 12 persons), and the characteristics of the workers, allowed for a harmonic working environment, similar to the one we experienced during the bus seizure.

This situation changed shortly. The economic crisis that existed in the cooperative transportation service forced us to quickly expand our activities in order to incorporate most of its workers. During 1985, we began what are known today as the Food Fairs of Ruiz Pineda, Los Horcones, and El Centro. In addition, we moved the mobile Food Fairs to a daily activity, serving other neighborhoods located in Barquisimeto and other nearby cities.

Due to this sudden surge, certain obstacles, similar to those faced in the transportation service, began to appear. Because of time restrictions, it became very difficult to hold effective meetings. Usually, we would meet at the end of each Food Fair, when we were all exhausted. Many topics were not discussed thoroughly or were not even mentioned at all. The mobile Food Fairs ended up in hands of four or five workers without having an adequate collective follow up.

This situation worsened with the accelerated growth of the Food Fairs after 1988. In only three years the number of workers tripled without having a proper induction process for the newcomers.

In the early 90's, due to the progressive elimination of the mobile Fairs, we went back to the Monday meetings, where all the members of each Fair assisted. Nevertheless, by that time, we had lost the capacity to confront collectively many of the situations that emerged during that period.

Since 1988, we began to face serious behavioral problems that involved individuals taking advantage of the collective effort. Although our meetings were the only available place to confront these situations, its participants were often not capable of dealing adequately with certain critical circumstances. Many abstained from expressing their point of view, afraid of physical retaliation or in order to maintain friendship.

In many cases, we had to deal with situations quickly and effectively, since they jeopardized Cecosola's economic survival. We were dealing with behavioral attitudes that could spread quickly, attitudes that were sometimes difficult to pin down since they came from our very entrenched cultural trends.

At first, these delicate behavioral problems were tackled by a relatively small group of workers, who had acquired a strong identity with the process and had the moral authority gained through their performance in the transportation service.

As time went on and the process deepened, a larger group of workers were willing to confront these situations. By the mid-90's, in every Food Fair there was a discipline committee with rotating membership that took on these cases.

We were aware that, when dealing with such behavioral trends, the reflection that came out of them was more important than the final decision itself. Therefore, every situation was submitted for the consideration and reflection of everyone in meetings. When, due to limitations in the capabilities of the group, a decision was made outside a meeting, the

reflection would then include an analysis of the reasons why such an action had to be taken.

At that time, we were not aware, as we are today, of the entrenched cultural trends standing behind the attitude for wanting to obtain personal benefits from any opportunity, without taking much into account the damage done to others. This individualistic behavior generated deep wounds in most of the members of the organization. We often asked ourselves: what goes through the mind of a fellow worker that takes unscrupulous advantage of a collective effort, knowing that we all earn the same income, that no one is getting rich from it, and being aware of the precarious economic situation of Cecosesola?

Contending with this pain, we were challenged by the temptation of responding with resentment or distrust, and, thus, falling into the mechanical implantation of bureaucratic devices that would supposedly stop these behavioral trends. Control devices that would not tackle the causes, but would instead create separations and feed distrustful relations.

From the beginning, it has been important not to be overtaken by pain, turning it, instead, into a source of reflection, making every situation a wonderful opportunity to reflect and feed our process of personal and organizational transformation, enhancing our collective capacity.

Thus, we have come to know each other as persons, as a group, and as a society. We have come to understand that attitudes such as covering up for others' lack of responsibility and individualistic behaviors, all sprout from the same cultural roots, and are therefore present in each and every one of us in this society⁹). We have progressively faced the social pressures that shape certain behaviors and learned how we, often unconsciously, become transmitters of these cultural tendencies. We learned to identify certain expressions through which our society models our behavior such as, "don't be an asshole," "brown-noser," "don't be a bad friend," "don't rat on me," "he who messes with his family goes broke," "don't give me anything, just set me up in a place where I can take advantage of", among many others.

At the beginning, it was not easy for us to talk about our attitudes in open meetings and perhaps due to this, we did not have the tools necessary to facilitate a deep analysis. At first, we tended to "evaluate" ourselves passing down judgments, classifying our behaviors as "good" or "bad". However, although these tendencies occasionally reappear, we have been making serious efforts to feed our personal and organizational transformation by avoiding value judgments and encouraging relationships of mutual respect.

By the end of the 90's, discipline committees were no longer necessary. Spontaneity progressively blossomed as we deepened relations of trust, communion and identity.

Thus, little by little, without foreseeing it, the reasons behind our meetings and their characteristics have gone through a continuous transformation.

⁹ Cecosesola, *Construyendo aquí y ahora el mundo que queremos*, Digesa Lara, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, 2007.

Administrative tasks continue to be treated with the importance they deserve, but we have gradually put the accent on reflecting about the ways we relate with each other and about the relationships that exist between our process and our national and global realities.

In response to the need of promoting further reflections, with the turn of the century, we created a new meeting space - named "cooperative action" - which is open to all. In these weekly get-togethers we give priority to reflection and analysis, not only about what happens to us in our daily activities, but also about any issue of national or international interest. The accent is placed in the issue's relationship with our own experience.

Changes spread

Simultaneously with the transformations occurring in Cecosesola's ways of organizing, new community groups joined the organization. In addition, important organizational changes became progressively manifest in many of our older affiliated cooperatives.

The Food Fair Program quickly drew in more than 25 associations. Some of them distribute their associates' agricultural production through the Food Fairs, others produce processed foods or household goods, and others were created for the distribution of food in their communities. These organizations, of small membership (between 5 and 25 associates), began their activities without having to adopt the initial hierarchical organizational model of Cecosesola and its founding cooperatives. Therefore, they chose, without traumas, simpler organizational ways, similar to the ones emerging in our organism of cooperative integration.

The only organizational structure in most of these associations is a weekly meeting in which all their members participate. In a few of them, complying with their statutes, an administrative council exists, but with very limited attributions, since the weekly meeting constitutes the center of their organization.

Also many, but not all, of the older service cooperatives of large membership (more than 1,000 associates) experienced important transformations, enhancing participation at their own pace.

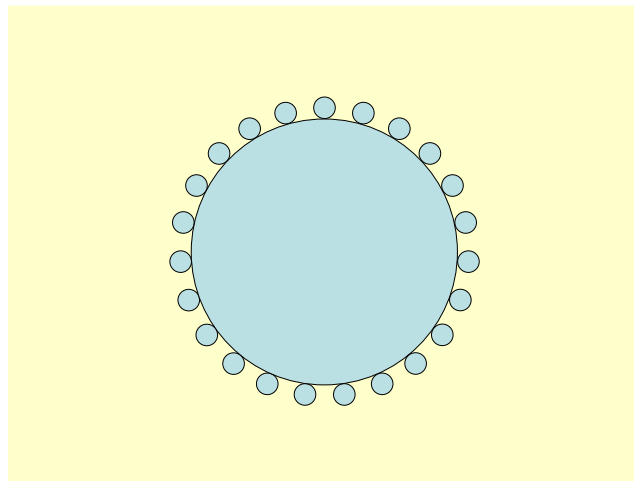
Some of these cooperatives started holding their own assemblies in smaller groups and at the same time adopted open weekly meetings as a routine, incorporating the participation of all workers. The attributions of the existing councils were progressively eliminated.

Once the Special Law of Cooperative Associations of 2001 was approved, many of these cooperatives proceeded to eliminate their hierarchical structure, leaving, as in Cecosesola, periodic gatherings as their only formal organizational instance. In others, although councils of some sort continue to exist, they have been gradually taking fewer responsibilities, yielding up their attributes to open meetings.

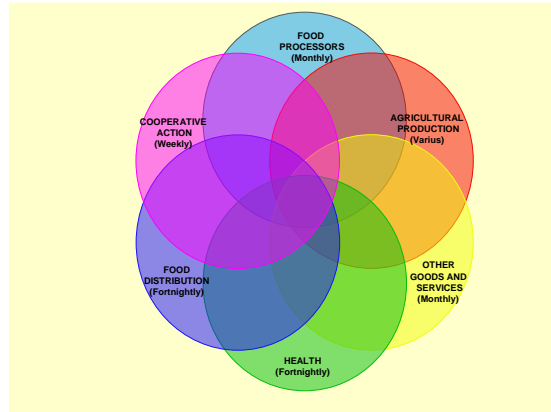
From the 90's onwards, numerous periodic meeting spaces were created in Cecosesola in order to enhance the joint participation of workers and the integrated organizations' members. These spaces transcended the statutes of the time, which only contemplated annual departmental assemblies for each of the funeral, educational and Food Fair areas, and one annual general assembly.

Currently, there are six joint meeting areas that deal with daily activities: agricultural production, food retail distribution, food processors, health, cooperative action and other goods & services. In addition, less frequently, there are meetings of mutual support, gatherings for sharing experiences, and the general assemblies of Cecosesola (membership meetings). These three encounters deal with more global aspects, therefore, all members of the organization tend to participate in them, regardless of their specific area of activity.

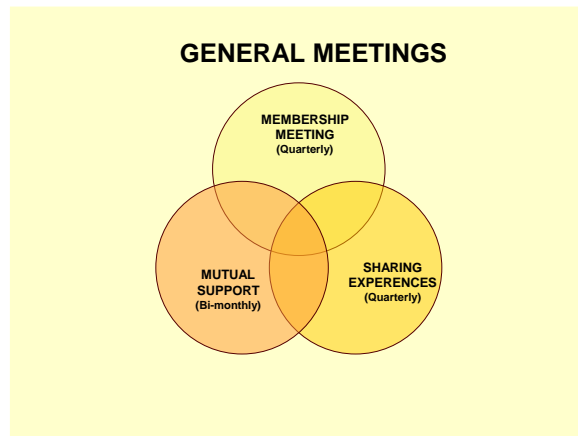
Graphically, we could represent with small circles the weekly meetings that we have in each of Cecosesola's Food Fairs, in the funeral service or in the integrated organizations.



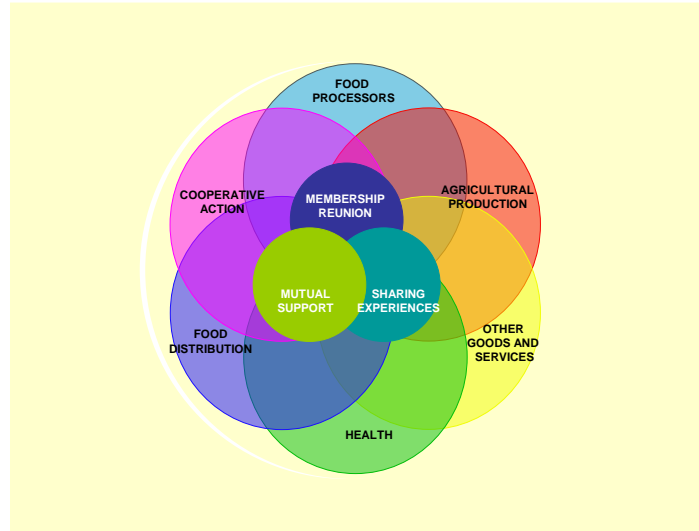
Also, the members of these areas or associations meet jointly in frequent and periodic meetings relating to daily activities.



Not as frequently, we also have joint meetings that tend to deal with the organization as a whole.



Globally, the following graph represents an approximation of our currently joint meetings.



At this moment, we are speaking of about 300 annual joint meetings, apart from those that are held weekly in each area of Cecosesola and its integrated associations. But this is not a static situation. We are in a fluid and flexible process in which a meeting might be created to respond to a new activity while others could disappear when they are no longer necessary.

Also, the established meetings often give birth to others. For example, initially the encounters of producers and Food Fairs were held every three months, centering on crop planning and price fixing but, with time, additional gatherings among the producers of each geographic location became necessary. More recently, quarterly meetings - named “big meetings” - were created to deepen our relationships through sharing and reflecting. In addition, at any moment, a particular gathering could be called by any area of activity to deliberate on any inconvenience that may have come up in our daily relations.

Even within one specific area, and due to a high rotation of participants, the members who attend meetings change permanently, “breathing life into” each gathering. Also, as the graphics show, due to the rotation of members, meetings are intertwined. In each of them, there are numerous participants that have taken part in other gatherings and have information to be shared. Thus, from meeting to meeting, topics of discussion and conclusions flow freely. Information is constantly exchanged to feed the emergence of flexible, collective criteria that set ground for sharing responsibilities in the decision making process.

From meetings to get-togethers

Summing up, a deep transformation of the reasons behind our meetings and their characteristics has been taking place during four decades in Cecosesola.

At first, we were guided by the established pattern found in most organizations: an annual assembly and an administrative council made up of representatives from the integrated organizations, without worker participation. Meetings were guided by a moderator and an

agenda was previously agreed upon. Decision making was the main reason for their existence, and most agreements required a voting procedure under a predetermined quorum. Those absent or in disagreement could not call for rectification unless they had the right to participate and vote in the following meeting.

Thus, our gatherings became sceneries of power struggles for controlling Cecosesola; a way of meeting that seemed totally logical and normal at that given moment, since it responded to certain characteristics of our cultural trend such as lack of trust among members, alienation and the apparent need for hierarchical structures.

During our initial attempts to enhance participation in Cecosesola, changes turned out to be more about form than content. We created departmental assemblies and councils, allowing the participation of worker representatives. However, the basic hierarchical structure remained. The funeral service continued to have its manager. Councils presided the organization. The general assembly continued to be the highest authority, functioning under its traditional formality and allowing for the struggle over the control of Cecosesola. The primary reason for meeting continued to be decision making by majority. In other words, our gatherings remained spaces in which the possibilities to participate were totally structured and previously defined.

From our current perspective, it seems evident that the cooperative transportation experience marked a turning point in our process, accelerating our organizational transformation and promoting deep changes in the reasons behind our meetings and their characteristics.

Formalities that restricted open and direct participation without intermediaries were gradually eliminated. At the same time, our gatherings took on new characteristics and contents, many of which we could not have imagined when we were taking our initial steps. As time went on, those first meetings that were full of restrictions have become open spaces for gathering and participation; get-togethers which do not have a defined structure or follow any prior planning process; get-togethers open to anybody who wants to get involved, and whose characteristics and contents are always evolving.

Although all our meetings deal with concrete aspects, behind all of our gatherings lays the intention to live together in harmony, solidarity and respect.

Decision making is no longer the main reason for gathering. Focus is put on information exchange, the creation of bonds of solidarity and trust, internalizing a holistic vision, and reflecting. The accent is put on our personal and organizational transformation.

Our get-togethers, thus, have become opportunities to co-exist in an ever expanding us that has no limits and that implies internalizing shared criteria; flexible criteria that are modified consensually as our reality changes and as we transform ourselves through reflecting; criteria that, once shared, encourage everyone's involvement in the decision making process.

There are no longer administrative councils, managers or supervisors to lean on or to pass on the responsibility associated with decision making, thus, transcending the traditional

hierarchical structure that confines the possibilities of personal and organizational transformations.

For the same reason, it is important that our get-togethers do not replace the role of managers or supervisors because, again, we will be curtailing our personal and organizational development. Although we continue to make decisions when we gather, our intention is to stimulate decision making at any moment, by any one, or by any group, basing decisions on collective criteria and taking on the corresponding responsibilities. The participants are entirely responsible for the decisions in which they participate, including, in some cases, covering the resulting economic costs.

We intend to generate involvement by progressively sharing the collective criteria that emerge consensually from our get-togethers. Thus, having these criteria and the necessary information in mind, any person, group or gathering can and must make the corresponding decision and, on assuming his/her or their responsibilities, have the opportunity to become holistic and ethical persons, fostering an individual and organizational transformation.

We can deduce then, that for us, consensus differs from unanimity. Unanimity requires the presence of all the members of a group or organization. It is equivalent to a voting process in which everyone agrees.

In our case, a decision is consensual when it responds to the criteria we share at a given moment, independent from whether the decision is made by an individual, an informal group, or in a gathering. Therefore, there are no definitive resolutions unless time impedes rectification. All are open to reconsideration at any moment if someone does not agree and/or considers that individualistic criteria prevailed. In all cases, those responsible for a decision assume the consequences.

This way of making decisions evidently tends to create disorderly and messy situations that on occasions can result in important economic losses. In fact, it cannot be implemented by decree. On the contrary, it emerges from, and at the same time feeds, a process of personal and organizational transformation; that is, cultural transformation.

Notwithstanding, as the process deepens, economic losses are fully compensated by the flexibility and dynamism that appears as we free ourselves from the cultural bonds that restrict the development of our capabilities and creative potential.

Today we are no longer consumed by the sordid struggle over Cecosola's control. Our possibilities of becoming holistic and ethical persons are not trapped by hierarchical relationships, or by a maze of parliamentary rules that attempt to regulate the involvement of people; rules which are usually based on lack of trust, and wind up mutilating the possibility of a deeply shared participation.

With time, representation has been replaced by a responsible, direct, and daily participation. Meetings have become spaces open to all who wish to take part, without limitations about who they are or where they come from. There are no restrictions on the topics for discussion. There is no voting process. Decisions, based on collective criteria, are made by any member or in any gathering. Quorum has become obsolete.

Is all of this just crazy? Perhaps, but we know from our own experience that a rich process flows as we deepen a co-existence based on respect and solidarity, as we set free those energies that are trapped in the web of those rigid organizational structures induced by our cultural traditions.

Thus, the collective and supportive force that became so evident with the seizure of our buses continues to emerge. **An energy that cannot be seen or touched but that we know exists because we experience it when we confront any challenge, obstacle or setback.**

Where are we heading?

Changes in the reasons behind our meetings and their characteristics are intertwined with a process of personal and organizational transformation; that is, a process of cultural transformation based on reflecting. Thus, depending on the cultural moment of each group, gatherings take on different dynamics and contents.

Therefore, we are not suggesting a particular or “correct” way to hold meetings that could be copied by any organization. In our case, the contents and characteristics of the way we gather have been effective and adequate as they have emerged from a transforming process, which meetings themselves helped to deepen, and whose starting point has been our existing cultural trends.

At the beginning, when we dreamed of a participative Cecosesola, we could have never imagined that one day we would become an organization of the current size, without a chain of command, and with an organizational structure based only on get-togethers whose main reason for existence was not decision making. At that time it could not have crossed our minds that decisions, regardless of their importance, could be consensually made by any member of the organization or during any of our gatherings, being subject of reconsideration when they did not respond to collective criteria.

Our experience at that moment did not allow us to foresee what today seems so simple and possible.

Perhaps, the key element that could partially explain the path taken, may be found in the fact that the process has flowed without establishing limits, without a previous design, without a final goal to be reached, but with an ever present intention -at first not very clear or shared by most, but deepened and profusely spread with time: the desire to co-exist here and now in respectful and sharing relationships, with the ample participation of all.

If we stay true to this intention, without setting insurmountable obstacles, the future will surely bring new surprises.

Every day our personal conversations play a more important role in feeding and, at the same time, enriching our get-togethers.

Will there be a day in which we will be so interconnected that these get-togethers, as we conceive them today, will no longer be necessary?

Are we becoming some sort of collective mind?

Let's see what the sunrise brings...