

Designing a recycling cooperative

This document, written by Demet Dinler, describes the six workshops that could be used for a longer and more in-depth learning activity related to recycling cooperatives and alternative economic forms.

Objective of the Project:

Designing, implementing and sustaining a transformative project to build a local alternative economy to tackle inequalities of class, gender and race and turn it into a broader social movement.

Setting:

An urban working class neighbourhood in a Global South country where most people from different ethnic groups do informal, low-pay work including waste picking.

WORKSHOP 1

Objective:

To build a recycling cooperative where individual waste pickers will no longer sell their waste to middlemen but rather will bring, sort and sell waste to their cooperative, which will directly sell to recycling plants.

Challenges to address:

- There are middlemen in the community and large wholesalers working with recycling plants. The cooperative will be a challenge to these vested interests. They want to stop you from building the cooperative. You will need to face their resistance.
- The dump sites and urban spaces where scavengers work are divided along ethnic cleavages; some groups have access to low-quality waste and get paid less. You will need to change this.
- Most women are responsible for domestic work and are not allowed to get paid work. You are expected to make them more involved.
- You do not have logistics and resources to start the cooperative. You will need to identify community leaders, resource persons, public authorities, local banks, NGOs, donors.

Tasks:

1. Write a list of general principles and rules to govern the cooperative.
2. Hold and facilitate meetings to discuss a plan for a fair division of labour to allocate bin spaces to waste pickers from different ethnic groups.
3. Set a list of price for types of recyclable commodities and make a decision about how waste pickers will be paid.

4. Make a three-year financial and work plan (including credit re-payment) to make the cooperative generate sustainable income for all waste pickers and surplus to make further investments.
5. Arrange house visits to talk to families to increase women's involvement in the cooperative.
6. Choose the best possible financial supporters and justify your case for the credit you claim: In what ways will this project be useful to reduce poverty and inequalities?

WORKSHOP 2

Objective:

To sustain the cooperative in the mid-term by solving a set of problems.

Challenges to address:

- A world economic crisis hit the recycling sector. The demand for recyclable commodities declined, the price of some of them fell drastically. You will need to identify coping strategies.
- Some waste pickers sell some of their waste directly to recycling plants or middlemen when they need immediate additional cash. You will need to find a solution to this problem.
- There are new comers to the cooperative, but they do not look like sharing the same values as the initial participants. Individuals blame, gossip about each other. You will need to rectify this divisive work environment.
- A middleman, who is a leading member of one of the ethnic groups in the neighbourhood, brought together a group of waste pickers and set up a rival cooperative. He offers advance money and higher prices to waste pickers who will join him at the beginning but is likely to exploit them in the near future. Some waste pickers in your cooperative are attracted by the idea.

Tasks:

1. Make a list of all possible economic coping strategies and ways to diversify income by using available skills and resources.
2. Facilitate a) informal meetings with groups of new and old members to understand sources of problems b) an open meeting where everybody discusses problems and set some rules to settle disputes.
3. Think about a ritual to reinforce the bonds between cooperative members.
4. Find ways to avoid the shift from your cooperative to the middleman's one.
5. Think about a solution to solve the problem of childcare for your women members.

WORKSHOP 3

Objective:

To expand the cooperative, make new investments, open a recycling plant and increase the number of cooperative members.

Tasks:

1. Make a financial plan to buy press machines for a recycling plant.
2. A new group of migrant workers came from rural areas, make a plan to make them involved in the cooperative.
3. Hire people with new skills required for your plant – environmental engineers, technical officers, accountants...etc. and hold meetings which discuss the operations and future strategies of the plant.
4. Build networks with paper, metal and plastic factories who will become your customers.
5. Some young waste collectors want to have opportunities for new types of work, some old waste collectors are too old to continue physical work. Develop strategies to offer less heavy work or a retirement scheme for ageing workers, to offer training possibilities for young workers.

WORKSHOP 4

Objective:

To use the cooperative networks and space as a means to address broader inequalities of gender, reproductive health, sexuality.

Challenges to address:

- Many women in the neighbourhood are forced to sex-selective abortion.
- There is no public place of socialisation for the youth, so most romantic relations (both heterosexual and queer) happen in clandestine and unsafe places.

Tasks:

1. Work with health clinics and religious institutions to raise awareness about sex-selective abortion.
2. Re-organise the cooperative space in the weekends to enable people to socialise, perform their desires: You can create a dancing floor, organise a festival.
3. Work with school teachers for a training programme on reproductive health rights.

WORKSHOP 5

Objective:

To design and build a regional recycling auction to influence the price of recyclable commodities.

Challenges to address:

- The price of imported waste paper declined due to large stocks of waste paper coming from Western countries. So many factories buy imported waste paper rather than domestic paper.
- Although you overcame the crisis, you want to be prepared for future crises, when your domestic currency loses its value against international currencies.
- It is difficult to maintain stability with price fluctuations.

Tasks:

1. Design the rules of the auction and price formation mechanism.
2. Design a parallel auction where a complementary currency called WASTE COIN will be used. Set the value of the WASTE COIN and its spheres of use.
3. Identify strategies to attract paper, plastic and metal factory owners to come and use the auction.
4. Build a logistics cooperative with the cooperation of truck drivers who will achieve fast and reliable delivery of waste to paper, plastic and metal factories.

WORKSHOP 6

Objective:

To build a network of inter-dependent cooperatives working in different sectors around common principles and values, which will also defend a general national campaign to influence general elections.

Tasks:

1. Engage with cooperatives working in various areas and develop strategies for mutual economic collaborations.
2. Design a set of rules and principles to apply to this network while working together.
3. As a network identify a set of proposals to defend for macroeconomic policies to be implemented by the state, to be used at the next general elections.
4. Make a call to communities to build cooperatives on the basis of their available skills and resources and offer learning sources. Appoint experienced individuals to go and train new participants.