

Agriculture and Co-operativism, a Persistent Duality: The Case of Denmark

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Abstract

Co-operative organising and thinking has been one of the essential features of Danish society since the end of the 19th century. It gained important influence at the political level and influenced the social model of the country. It was one of the organisational and cultural backbones of the success of farmers from medium sized and small farms as exporters of agricultural products, and thus contributed substantially to providing the economic basis for the industrialisation of the country. Until 1960, more than half of the foreign currency arriving into the country came from exports of agricultural products, elaborated and commercialised through co-operatively owned structures. Agriculture is still an important export sector and most of Danish agro-industry is driven by farmer-owned producer cooperatives. The paper argues that co-operativism in Danish agriculture represents both continuity and strong changes from the start of the movement as the economic branch of a comprehensive social and political movement to the large agro-industrial enterprises of today, and that co-operativism still is a necessary tool for both large-scale production and for innovation within the agro-industrial sector. After a short description of the role of co-operative thinking and organising in the Danish context historically, the paper presents a statistical overview of the current position of co-operative societies in Danish agriculture on the background of the structural changes that have occurred in primary agriculture and agro-industry during the last generation and a half. The following section presents elements of the historical conditions and experiences of co-operativism that have paved the way for the characteristics of the current relation between agriculture and co-operativism. Finally, challenges to this relation are discussed in the context of market trends within the established sectors and new areas of agricultural activities – using the example of organic production.