

The Future of Cooperative Development

Summary Report: Ideas, Priorities, and Collective Action

Over the second half of 2025, the National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA CLUSA), Cooperative Development Foundation (CDF), CooperationWorks! (CW!), US Federation of Worker Cooperatives (USFWC), Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC), and Montana Cooperative Development Center (MCDC) gathered input from cooperative developers across the country through surveys, focus groups, staff and leadership calls, and in-person conversations reflecting on the current moment and sharing ideas about a path forward. These conversations were grounded in a common reality: significant funding uncertainty, rapid shifts in the federal landscape, and real strain on organizations and individuals. At the same time, they surfaced strong alignment around the need for deeper collaboration, long-term vision, and collective action.

Core Themes from Early Brainstorming

Across the early phases of this project, several consistent needs and ideas emerged:

- **Stabilizing and diversifying funding** for cooperative development through joint proposals, private philanthropy, state and local funding, and earned revenue strategies such as fee-for-service.
- **Reducing duplication and isolation** by improving coordination, referrals, and peer connections among cooperative developers.
- **Strengthening collective voice and visibility**, particularly through shared storytelling, data, and advocacy that position cooperatives as solutions to pressing economic and community challenges.
- **Supporting cooperative developers themselves**, including peer connection, professional development, mentorship, and mutual aid during a time of uncertainty.

Alongside near-term strategies, many participants called for thinking on a **decade-long horizon**, urging the field to move beyond reactive responses and toward structural solutions that could fundamentally strengthen the cooperative development ecosystem.

Long-Term Priorities Affirmed at IMPACT

At the October 2025 IMPACT conference, these ideas were refined into four interrelated areas for future collective action. Participants affirmed that progress in any one area depends on movement in the others.

1. Rethinking Funding for Cooperative Development

The field identified the need for a sector-wide, blended funding approach that moves beyond small, competitive federal programs toward larger-scale, more stable capital. Ideas included joint fundraising vehicles, co-op sector self-financing, shared services to reduce costs, and pilot geographies to demonstrate what is possible at scale.

2. Collaborative Communications and Narrative

Participants emphasized the importance of aligning how the field talks about cooperative development—especially to funders and policymakers. This includes shared data and storytelling assets, clearer problem-solving frames, and concepts like “Co-op City/State” designations to increase visibility and legitimacy with new audiences.

3. Collaborative Policy Development

There was strong interest in coordinating policy work across sectors and geographies to advance model local, state, and federal policies that generate sustained public investment in cooperative development. Proposed strategies included leveraging national associations of state and local governments, building a shared policy repository, and investing in advocacy training and infrastructure.

4. Connecting Cooperatives by Expertise and Region

Participants stressed the need to move beyond static mapping toward a living, usable system that helps cooperatives and developers quickly find the right technical assistance, peers, or partners. A shared directory, regular peer-learning, and clearer articulation of organizational roles were seen as foundational steps.

Cross-Cutting Insights

Several insights cut across all discussions:

- **Data and storytelling are foundational** to funding, communications, and policy—but must be tailored to different audiences.
- **Pilot efforts matter:** demonstrating success in specific places can unlock broader investment and replication.
- **Cooperation beats competition:** participants consistently named the need to reduce competition within the cooperative community and align efforts for greater collective impact.

Looking Ahead

While challenging, this moment is also an opening to reimagine cooperative development in ways that are more resilient, collaborative, and aligned with cooperative values over the long term.

The IMPACT conversations did not aim to finalize solutions, but rather to clarify direction and identify shared work worth continuing together. Participants expressed a strong desire to move from idea generation to **collective action planning**, with clear roles, timelines, and opportunities for broader field engagement. The partners who kicked off this effort – NCBA CLUSA, CDF, CW!, USFWC, FSC and MCDC – have formed a steering committee to shepherd this work forward, engage other interested collaborators, and ensure connections across the four strategic approaches.

For more information or to get involved, contact Julie Bosland, Cooperative Development Foundation (jbosland@cdf.coop) or Cristine Nardi (cnardi@ncba.coop).