

Hola Gustavo, ¡gracias por el envío del material!

Siento que con lo que puedo contribuir son, más que observaciones, preguntas si tal o cual expresión pudiera resultar un poco más esclarecedora, porque mi manejo del inglés ha devenido rudimentario por falta de práctica; las sugerencias que hago junto con la expresión a la cual se refieren las voy a poner en color rojo y entre paréntesis) para destacarlas. En las últimas páginas no es que me quedé dormido, ¡pero las sentí más fluidas y con nada que sugerir.

**Saludos
Jorge**

TOWARDS A COLLECTIVE MIND?

Transforming meetings into get-togethers.....

Introduction

After a process of more than 40 years, 60 community organizations **totaling (adding up)** more than 20,000 associates are presently **integrated (sharing their processes)** in Cecosesola (Organism of Cooperative Integration). Through this network we carry out a wide variety of activities such as agricultural and small scale agroindustrial production, funeral, transportation and health services, savings and loan, mutual help funds and food and household appliances distribution.

We're talking about an organization whose main purpose centers around the development of an educational process based on a permanent analysis and systematization of our daily life experiences. A process which is lived more intensely by the approximately 1,000 associates who participate permanently in our daily 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 **receives (sees about)** 150,000 patients a year in six **different (cooperative run) community** health centers. We've generated a community network for the production and distribution of food which extends across five states, making it the largest non-governmental food retail system in the entire Venezuelan Midwest Region. **Through (Thanks to)** our own **(financial) system (of internal jointly binding, mutual financial support)** we are financing almost all of our activities with criteria that have emerged from the process.

Perhaps at first glance the experience catches your 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 grave economic crisis in the 80's when Cecosesola accumulated losses equal to thirty times its capital.

What also grabs your attention is our open and flexible way of organizing ourselves without chains of command, with the opportunity for everyone to participate directly, without intermediaries, **(with)** the rotation of tasks and **(processes of)** consensual decision making.

In fact, the Special Law for Cooperative Associations approved in 2001 permitted our organizational experience to be recorded in the statutes of Cecosesola and many of the other integrated organizations. In Cecosesola according to our statutes, there is no board of directors or hierarchical ranks. All 20,000 of the organization's members can participate at any moment with the same rights. Decisions are consensual and subject to reconsideration at any moment in case that someone present or absent at the time of the decision expresses disagreement.

Notwithstanding, often, it isn't evident that behind the surprising financial recovery of Cecosesola, the operational results of the network and the organizational practice that have evolved, lays a profound educational process **based on (nurtured by)** our daily experiences. An educational process that **transcends (goes far beyond)** the mere efficient production of goods and services since **the accent is (its essentials are)** placed on our personal transformation and the development of all our potentialities in the framework of a collective effort.

A fundamental element that has come out of this transforming process is the emergence of an ever-changing organization whose **only** formal organizational structure is a series of flexible “meetings”, which are open to all of those who wish to participate, without distinction. We are talking about gatherings which do not follow any preplanned design, which are created or disappear depending on the **(process)** needs of the **(at this very)** 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 **(on national level)**.

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

However, the quality, variety and growth of the services that we produce, the social wellbeing that has emerged and the impressive economic results that most of our activities show, induce a deeper search into the process that has facilitated the emergence of the constantly changing characteristics of our present gatherings.

What are meetings?

In general, in our culture, especially in the economic sector but as well as in most of other institutions, it is expected that a meeting must comply **(match) (with)** certain minimum standards. For example, it must have a pre-established number of participants, it must have clear objectives and the discussion must be centered on topics that have been agreed upon before the beginning of the session. Unless we are talking about a very small group, a moderator is chosen to coordinate the discussion and to direct the meeting towards decision making whenever it is necessary. Decisions are made by way of voting or asking each participant for **their (her/his)** opinion. **In the end (Finally)**, the agreements are legitimized by unanimity, or a determined or simple majority.

Those used to this routine, may consider strange our meeting's characteristics considering the size of our organization (around 20,000 members and 1,000 associate workers), the variety of economic activities, annual gross sales that come close to \$100 million and our important social welfare contributions. They would probably think that an organization with these characteristics **could not (cannot)** function basing an important part of its organizational practice on gatherings like ours.

In Cecosesola, over time, meetings have become get-togethers open to whomever wants to participate and with an attendance that in occasions exceeds 200 participants. During these encounters, there is no **(personalized) moderation (appointed to one or two persons)**

and during the deliberations the agenda is proposed spontaneously and at any moment by anyone in attendance. Often, we jump from one topic to another without any relationship between them, and sometimes even 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 reached since there is no voting and it isn't necessary to hear 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. The tasks necessary for the functioning of the organization (including purchases, sales, accounting and maintenance) are rotated among all of the associate workers, and don't 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 is present when there is a chain of command and responsibilities are specified and distributed to each member according to their rank. All of this is described on an organization chart.

For those located on the top of the chart a more global vision is necessary, as well as a broader participation in far reaching decisions, and, of course, the corresponding responsibilities. All of this goes along with increased power and higher personal wages. As we move down the organization chart, the vision gets narrower, the decisions are limited to concrete aspects and the responsibilities are reduced **as well as salaries (and wages become lower and lower)**. 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 between one area of responsibility and another, creating barriers that **impede communication (convert communication into a knotty and difficult item to manage)**.

In short, it is a **hierarchical** way of organizing where control is exercised through a "power over" ⁽¹⁾ and it is **particularistic (that is: not shared, detained in individualistic and separated way)**, with multiple vertical and horizontal separations. A structure that facilitates the access to power and wealth as one is promoted to higher levels. A way of organizing that may seem totally logical and rational because it responds to basic motor emotions of our culture such as individual aspirations and desires of appropriation and/or accumulation of wealth and power, the distrust in others and the inclination towards competition and allotment. Notwithstanding, from a different perspective, it could seem nonsensical. How is it that in order to organize ourselves we have to establish separations and hierarchies? If organizing aspires to be an integrating process: how is it that we intend to build it on a foundation of separations and divisions?

Couldn't organizing be a much simpler process, a simple integration of wills that feeds on mutual trust and that finds order being true to its history and purpose?(²)

(¹)Holloway, John, Cambiar el mundo sin tomar el poder, Editora Herramientas, Argentina, 2002

(²)Wheatly M and.Rogers M., A simpler way, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, USA, 1996

°Organizing in Cecosesola

In Cecosesola, simultaneously with a transformation in our personal emotions, new ways of organizing have been emerging as well as changes in the characteristics of our meetings, **constituting (producing)** three intimately linked elements that are part of one sole cultural transformation process.(³)

With time we **have come (are succeeding to)** to understand organizing as an integrating process that emerges as we share responsibilities, build collective criteria, expand multi-dimensional behavior, deepen our communication, build networks of trust, progressively find production relationships in solidarity as well as our personal and organizational transformation.

Feeding this transforming process we find-not without setbacks- ways of facing challenges and obstacles. However, at the beginning, the reality of Cecosesola was **very (quite)** different.

The beginning

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

After five years, we had some twelve workers, including drivers, helpers, secretaries, a cashier and an accountant, who were supervised by a manager. It was a typical dependant relation: the workers' responsibilities were limited to fulfilling their assigned tasks within their work schedule, without participating in decision making nor taking part in meetings.

The manager reported to a five member Administrative Council, made up of representatives of our integrated organizations and who distributed their responsibilities as President, Vice-president, Secretary, Treasurer and a Utility. An Overseer Council served as a “watchdog,” as was said in the cooperative lingo of the time. The members of the Overseer Council could not involve themselves in administrative or economic decisions since according to the old saying “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 the Overseer Councils nor could they vote in Cecosesola's Assemblies.

The Administrative Council had a weekly closed-door session **in** which mostly administrative and economic topics were discussed (**in**). Once a year the Administrative Council would present the state of the finances to an assembly made up of **representatives** of the affiliated organizations. Here again priority was given to the same topics as well as to a power struggle for the control of Cecosesola.

⁽³⁾Cecosesola, Construyendo aquí y ahora el mundo que queremos, Digesa Lara, Barquisimeto, Ven, 2007

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

In short, an organization in line with the dominant culture: hierarchical and particularistic, lending itself to the appropriation and the corresponding struggle for power.

In accordance with the tendency to separate, internal relationships were expressed in terms of the third person. Workers and members of the councils related to each other as “them.” The same relationship was evident within each of the integrated organizations as well as between these organizations and Cecosesola.

This tertiary conception also prevailed in education. Education, far from being seen as a process created by all of the participants, was seen as having only one direction, as an act of imparting knowledge. According to this conception, cooperative education consisted in teaching skills in accounting, legal aspects, moderating reunions, and public speaking among others, as well as in memorizing the seven cooperative principles. Thus Cecosesola was obligated to have numerous promoters in charge of **imparting (impart and “deposit”)** education. The problems that appeared in the affiliates were often blamed on faults in the education **imparted (provided)** by Cecosesola.

Presently, these organizational practices and concepts still persist in some of the organizations affiliated to Cecosesola in the early years. However, in general, in Cecosesola and in many of our integrated organizations, we have transcended, at different rhythms, the organizational and educational concepts that marked our beginnings.

Fishing together

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

One conceived cooperativism as an archipelago of economic businesses whose primary goal centered on creating economic wellbeing for its associates without taking much into account the rest of the community. The emphasis **was (put)** on reaching an economic efficiency for the benefit of its associates. In this line of thought, the organizational practice that existed in the cooperative movement at that time was perceived as logical and natural as well as the concept of education as **imparting** knowledge.

Another line of thought emphasized a vision of the cooperative movement as a popular organization that generates social commitment and personal transformation. A transformation that finds support in the new relationships that **emerges (emerge: depende si se refiere a transformación o relaciones)** from a cooperative work based on equality, mutual support and sharing. Within this conception, **economics is no longer the central activity** and becomes rather the context in which an educational process based on our daily activities flourishes.

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

For the last four decades we have been making efforts to go deeper into living the experience of fishing together, encountering a process of cultural transformation which implies a simultaneous organizational transformation and therefore, a profound change in the reasons and the characteristics of our meetings. However, at the beginning we thought that everything would be easier. We weren't aware of the difficulties that the depth and the characteristics of our own cultural moment would generate.

The first steps

In the early 70's, the discussion of Cecosesola's statutes **opened (offered)** the opportunity to question the prevalent concepts of the time and thus important changes were introduced. Among those, Cecosesola's objectives were enhanced making emphasis on social commitment. Workers were given the rights to choose delegates with voting power in the annual assembly and to participate as members of the Administrative Council. Cecosesola's activities were decentralized into departments, each with its own assembly and councils.

Nevertheless, although worker participation was enhanced, the organizational structure remained the same, presided by an Administrative Council with councils (**“executive committee's”**) 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 ways towards a broader 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 integrated organizations. In these meetings the activities and situation of Cecosesola and its affiliates was analyzed as well as the planning of future activities. Meetings with the workers were stimulated.

However, initially, the changes were more (of) (omitir) form than substance. Many cooperators, marked by 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 what (which) steps to follow.

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

However, in 1976, when Cecosesola took on a major part of the public bus service in Barquisimeto, we were presented (faced) with the opportunity to begin an unprecedented organizational process whose current characteristics surpasses the most optimistic expectations that we had at that time.

On assuming the responsibility of a 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 dynamics and rhythm than the accustomed cooperative routine of the time. For the first time, Cecosesola was producing a service without preferential treatment for 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 (daily) experiences (lived together in every-day-life).

Contrary to the Funeral Services department, the representatives of the cooperative associations integrated in this activity were sympathetic towards the promotion of a socially committed cooperative movement. Thus, there was no resistance from within that impeded (detained) finding new ways of organizing.

From the beginning we dedicated our efforts to promote the participation in the administration of the service of both workers and users of the buses. The concept of social property was present. We realized popular assemblies in the neighborhoods in which we analyzed the quality of the bus service and together with the participants made the corresponding decisions. Information was shared inside the buses when they were in service. Community ties were enhanced which was manifest in frequent and massive demonstrations demanding subsidies from the State in order to avoid tariff hikes.

We actively promoted the direct participation of the workers in the management of the service. A group formed by council members and other cooperators promoted assemblies of all (the) workers where we debated and took decisions. During the first months we worked without any supervision.

However, shortly we had to change the rhythm of the process. In general, the trust and openness to induce participation were understood as a weakness of the organization which facilitated ways for obtaining personal benefits. For many, participation was just an opportunity to demand privileges. For example, among the first petitions made was to triple salaries without any concern for the resulting economic losses.

We were very far from understanding deeply and collectively that every opportunity to participate brings responsibilities (with it). In retrospect, we had not taken into account our cultural moment, the desires and aspirations of a numerous group of workers massively incorporated without an adequate induction process.

A few months later, anarchy reached such levels that we had to slow down the pace. A coordinator was named for every bus route as well as a general coordinator that lasted only a few months. However, in the office areas and workshops, teamwork continued without the need of supervisors.

In the following years, the role of route coordinator progressively disappeared with the continuous 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 that effected Cecosesola as a whole were taken in the annual assembly or, as needed, by an informal team made up of workers, council members and other cooperators that were accompanying the educational process. Although the work area meetings sometimes approached cases related with personal behaviors, the reflections made about our ways of relating to one another did not have the frequency or the depth that they have today. Certain **devious (turn-away)** behaviors were tolerated giving time for the educational process to advance, so that these could be assumed by all the workers.

A breaking point

The year 1980 marked a fundamental breaking point in our transformation process, generating changes in the characteristics and reasons of our meetings

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 the Cecosesola workers that supported the seizure. For a period of five and a half months we were left without our primary working tool and with the commitment to support the families of 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, we didn't even have access to the media.⁽⁴⁾

The only resource available to survive and overcome the barriers was the strong sense of solidarity that emanated from the group of cooperativists that remained loyal to the organization.

⁽⁴⁾Cecosesola, Buscando una convivencia harmonica, Barquisimeto, Ven. 2003

At the moment of the seizure, a considerable number of workers left Cecosesola, blinded by the government's offer. Thus, most of the workers with emotions oriented toward obtaining immediate personal **gains (advantages)** without assuming responsibilities left the organization. Their exit facilitated amplifying the participation of those that remained in decision making as well as in daily activities.

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

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

Meanwhile, most of us stayed in Caracas, meeting on a daily basis and keeping the pressure on the media. This effort included sweeping various public squares. In addition, distributing ourselves in commissions, we kept politicians as well as national authorities informed on our situation.

One group returned to Barquisimeto in order to prepare convincing evidence favoring our cause with the intention of presenting it in the hearing.

As we say in our book "Searching for an harmonious **co-existence**" (**living-together**)

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, those five and a half months subsisting at the edge of a cliff, were at the same time an experience of open and flexible ways of meeting, organizing and carrying out our activities. An experience that facilitated the emergence of a collective and supportive force that was capable to reverse an apparently irreversible political decision.

Here we are referring to that collective energy that emerges from a process in which, progressively, hierarchies disappear, information is shared, trusting relationships are created and our identity is deepened. A force applied without violence in order to defend our organizational integrity. A constructive force that feeds the same process that generated it. A force, not to be exhibited, that is not violent because it is not a power to be imposed.

(⁵) Cecosesola, Buscando una convivencia harmónica, Barquisimeto, Ven, 2003

A collective energy that we know exists because we experience it on a daily basis when we confront any “challenge”, “obstacle” or “setback”. A force, 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. A force diluted if we try to encase it within the patriarchal logic of accumulation of power, because when we try to accumulate solidarity, like money in a bank, we destroy its essence. Like the horizon, which exists and we see and enjoy, but if we try to touch it, disappears.

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

From our current perspective, the experience lived during the seizure deepened our conviction that another way of organizing and meeting was possible.

Reflection creates experience

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

The depth of the economic crises was compensated by the possibilities that it opened up. With the seizure, not only did the workers who supported the seizure leave the organization. Also many of the cooperators, that didn't sympathize with the educational process begun in Cecosesola, disaffiliated their cooperatives and created their own funeral service. More important, many of those of us who remained in Cecosesola had lived through the bus service experience. Since then we have continuously reflected about its implications, including the relations that had existed between those that left the organization and those that stayed. Thus, the bus service experience became a very enriching, transforming the content of our meetings.

A change in the characteristics of and reasons for 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 in which many intimately interrelated elements come into play. There is no (lineal) cause-effect (lineal) relationship here. There is no list of steps to follow. There is no moment or place in which a change is decreed. ⁽⁸⁾

⁽⁶⁾ Cecosesola, Buscando una convivencia harmónica, Barquisimeto, Ven, 2003

⁽⁷⁾ Cecosesola, Construyendo aquí y ahora el mundo que queremos, Digesa Lara, Barquisimeto, Ven, 2007

⁽⁸⁾ Cecosesola, Construyendo aquí y ahora el mundo que queremos, Digesa Lara, Barquisimeto, Ven, 2007

Therefore, we don't have a **recipe (receipt)** on hand to guide our actions. One must jump **into (the cold water)** and **find (out how to swim)**; paths through a process of trial and error, of action-reflection-action, paths in which one often encounters situations of frustration or disappointment, encounters which invite us to reflect, opening up the possibility to reinforce our personal and organizational transformation.

The pressure that we lived through in the struggle for the control of Cecosesola, the disappointment of the looting attitude of many of the transportation workers, the frustration due to the passivity of some, the feeling of abandonment, defenseless and injustice that we experienced during the seizure, were all painful experiences that **have given us (we converted into)** (the) opportunities to transform ourselves as they feed our reflections.

Thus the process through which we have continued to transform the reasons and the characteristic of our meetings has been a process of permanent reflection about situations, many times painful, perhaps inevitable, in that coming and going of finding our way as we **go (walk)**.

For example, with time, it became evident to us that, in the confrontations that resulted 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 inside the transportation activity to eliminate dominant hierarchical relations and on the other hand, we were feeding a permanent confrontation with city authorities, turning Cecosesola into a reference of local power. And at the same time, to put the topping on the cake, we were immersed in an internal struggle for the control of Cecosesola.

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

These reflections, among others, have deepened with time and continue to bring about changes in our ways of relating to each other.

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 a personalized moderation. However, due to legal requirements that were in place until 2002, at first, it was necessary to maintain the requirements of a quorum and a previously elaborated agenda.

Also, progressively the attributions of the Administrative Council were delegated to the members of each area of activity so that by the 90's its existence became a mere formality. With 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.

In our funeral service, after the recovery of our buses there **were (blew)** also winds of change. Changes hastened by the absence of the cooperators that did not favor the participative process as well as due to the incorporation of new workers in this area, including some who came from the cooperative transportation experience.

By the mid-80's, the figure of manager had been eliminated in the funeral service, the workers had agreed on an equal salary for all and the division of labo(u)r 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, the service's workers gradually took on an active participation in the council's meetings until these became (not without some opposition) joint meetings where workers and council members participated on equal grounds. The collective responsibility that the workers of the area assumed allowed (**¿for?**) the **untraumatic (non-traumatic)** elimination of the departmental council with the modification of our statutes according to the new Cooperative Law.

During the 80's and 90's a Regional Education Council whose meetings were open to all kept track of an educational process based on our daily activities. The promoters that "imparted" education disappeared. Progressively, educational needs were tackled "fishing together": a learning and personal transformation process based on sharing and mutual support between the different groups that constitute the organization.

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 income, the buses were being stockpiled, using their spare parts to keep the ones that were still working in service. It became necessary to lay off many workers without having the resources to cover their severance pay. However, the harmony and trust that had solidified during the time of the seizure kept us afloat, feeding our desire and hope to find a way out.

In the transportation activity the council members were elected only to comply (**formally**) with the statutes of the time. Decisions were made in meetings open to all the workers of the area.

However, it was **difficult (quite demanding)** to keep deepening the educational process. The need to lend a good transportation service every day of the week reduced **the attendance (to it)**. The fact that most of the workers labored in the street, far from the rest of their companions, did not permit the necessary daily contacts that feed reflections.

We searched desperately for another activity big enough to permit us to pay our debts and continue deepening the educational process that began with the arrival of the buses and which had experienced a boost during the period of the seizure. We tried, fruitlessly, with the sale of tires as well as with a car wash.

It was not until the end of 1983 that, without knowing it at the time, 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 the Vegetable Fair in the El Triunfo Cooperative. In March of 1984 it occurred to us to take the seats off a bus and fill it with U.S. \$ 500 worth of vegetables bought with the money that remained from the tire sales.

We never imagined that this new activity would, in a short time, grow enough to incorporate most of the workers that were in the Cooperative Transportation Service, giving continuity to the educational process. What's more, it couldn't have crossed our minds that this activity would go way beyond solving our critical economic situation.

Notwithstanding, from the beginning we were convinced that the Food Fairs had certain very special characteristics that allowed us to amplify and accelerate our educational process. In contrast to the passenger transportation activity, the work in the Food Fairs was done together, in one place, increasing the possibilities of getting to know each other in our daily experiences. Also, unlike in passenger transportation, concentrating sales on weekends permitted us to have plenty of time for meetings with the attendance of all.

The simplicity of most of the tasks in the Food Fairs, as well as the equal salaries, made job rotation easy. Also, the security of a market allowed for the incorporation of both agricultural and food processing community groups. In addition, from the beginning, we foresaw and planned for the incorporation of other community organizations in the selling of food products.

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

Finding spaces for reflection and analysis

From the beginning the only formal organizational structure in Cecosesola's Food Fairs was the weekly work meeting. A Departmental Administrative Council existed only for legal reasons without assuming responsibilities. There was no supervision. The coordination of activities lay fundamentally in our periodic meetings.

When we began the first mobile food fairs, it was easy to schedule daily sales in order to realize meetings on Mondays. These meetings centered on administrative tasks and not so much on reflection and analysis. However, perhaps the time available, the size of the group (around 12 people) and the characteristics of those present allowed for a harmonic working environment, similar to the one we experienced during the 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 spread the mobile food fairs as a daily activity, serving other neighborhoods located in Barquisimeto and other nearby cities.

Due to this sudden surge, it was not long before certain obstacles appeared, similar to those faced in the transportation service. It became very difficult to find the opportunities and the time to have 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 not at all. The mobile food fairs ended up in the hands of four or five workers without an adequate collective follow up.

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

In the early '90, due to the progressive elimination of the mobile fairs, we went back to our Monday meetings with the participation of all the members of each fair. Nevertheless, at that time we didn't have the capacity to collectively confront many situations that appeared.

After 1988, we began to face serious behavioral problems, involving individuals taking advantage of a collective effort. Although the meetings were the only place available to confront these situations, often its participants were not capable to deal adequately with some critical cases. Many abstained from expressing their point of view, afraid of physical retaliation or in order to maintain friendships.

In many cases, we were faced with situations that had to be dealt with quickly and effectively since they jeopardized the possibility of Cecosesola's economic survival. We were dealing with behavioral attitudes that could spread and become generalized within the group, attitudes that were sometimes difficult to pin down because they came from entrenched cultural trends.

At first, these delicate behavioral problems were tackled by a relatively small group of workers who had acquired a strong identity and commitment with the organization and a moral authority gained in the Transportation Service.

As time went on and the process deepened, a larger group of workers were willing to face these problems. By the mid-90's, in every food fair there was a discipline committee, of variable membership, that took on these situations.

From the beginning there was the understanding that, whenever a problem of this nature came up, what was most important was not the final decision, but the deep reflection that came out of it. Therefore, every case was submitted to the consideration and reflection of everyone in meetings. In those cases when, due to limitations in the capabilities of the group, a decision was made outside the meeting, the reflection would then include an analysis of the reasons why such an action had to be taken.

In that time we were not aware, as we are today, of the entrenched cultural trends behind the tendency to take personal benefit of any opportunity without taking much into account the damage done to others. Therefore, this individualistic behavior generated deep wounds in most of the members of the organization. We often asked ourselves: what goes on in 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 knowing the precarious economic situation of Cecosesola?

Facing this pain, we had to avoid creating personal barriers and responding with resentment or distrust. We had to avoid falling into the mechanical implantation of bureaucratic controls with the supposed objective of impeding that these situations continue. Controls that don't tackle the causes create separations and feed distrustful relations.

Since the beginning, it has been important for us not to allow us to be overtaken by pain and turn it, instead, into a source of reflection. Therefore, every situation that comes by becomes a wonderful opportunity to reflect and feed our process of personal and organizational transformation, enhancing our collective capacity.

Thus, we got to know each other as persons, as a group and as a society. We began to understand that leveling, covering up for others and individualistic behavior sprout from the same cultural roots and therefore are present in each and every one of us in this society. (9) We progressively faced the social pressures that shape certain behaviors and learned how we, often unconsciously, become transmitters of these cultural tendencies. We started to identify certain expressions through which our society models our behavior: "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, just put me where I can take," among many others.

At the beginning, it wasn't easy for us to talk about our attitudes in an open meeting and perhaps due to this, we didn't have the tools at the time to facilitate a deep analysis. At first, we tended to "evaluate" ourselves, to classify our behaviors as "good" or "bad," in short, to pass judgment. However, with time, though these tendencies occasionally reappear, we have been making serious efforts to deepen our reflections in mutual

respect, avoiding value judgments, feeding our personal and organizational transformation.

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

Thus, little by little, without decreeing or planning it, the reasons and the characteristics of our meetings have been going through a continuous transformation.

Administrative tasks continue to be treated with the importance they deserve, but gradually we have been putting the accent on reflecting about our ways of relating to each other and about the relationship that exist between our process and our country's and planet's reality.

Responding to this need, with the turn of the century, we created a new meeting space called "cooperative action" which is opened to all. In these weekly get-togethers we give priority to reflection and analysis, not only about what happens to us in our daily tasks, but also about any topic of national or international interest, making emphasis in its relationship with our experience.

Changes spread

Simultaneously with the transformations occurring in Cecosesola's activities, 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 attracted more than 25 associations. Some channel the agricultural production from its associates to the food fairs and others produce processed goods or 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 hierarchical organizational model that marked the first years of Cecosesola and its founding cooperatives. Therefore, they chose, without traumas, simple organizational ways, similar to the ones that were emerging in our integrationist organism.

Most of these associations instituted the weekly meeting of all their members as their only organizational structure. In a few, due to legal reasons, an administrative council exist, but with very limited responsibilities since the weekly meeting open to all constitutes the center of their organization.

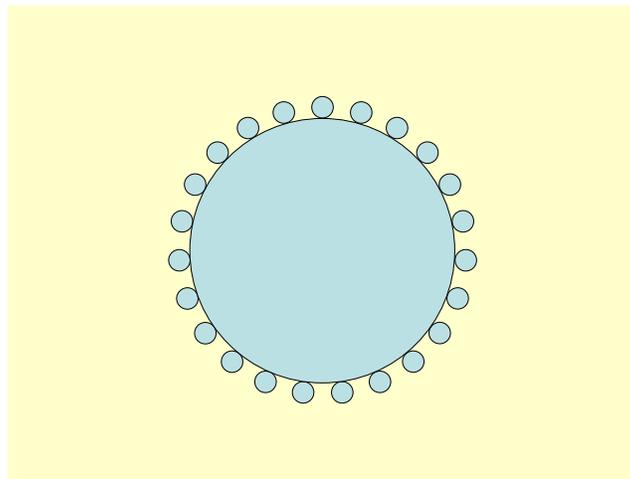
Also in many, but not all, of the older cooperatives of large membership (more than 1000 associates) important transformations emerged at the particular pace of each organization, enhancing participation.

Some zoned their assemblies in smaller groups at the same time that they adopted open weekly meetings, incorporating the participation of all of the 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, the periodic meetings as their only formal organizational instance. In others, although councils of some sort survive, these gradually assume fewer responsibilities, yielding their attributes to open meetings.

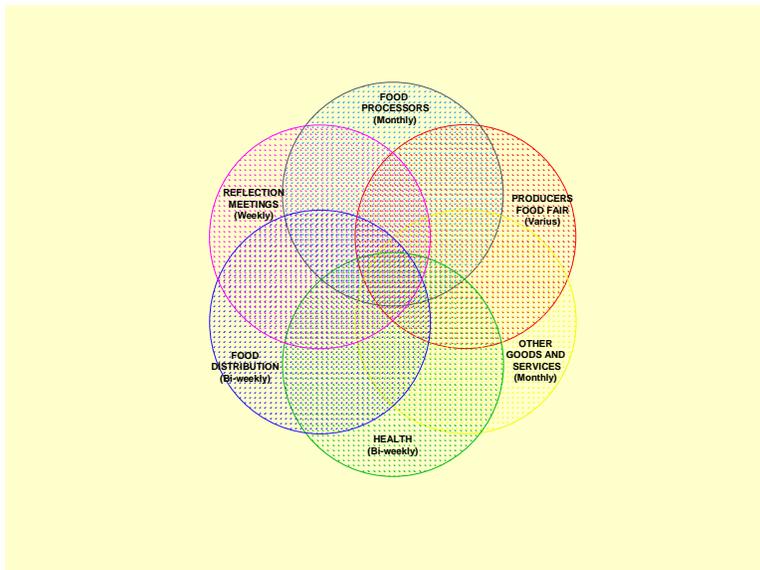
At the same time, from the 90's on, in Cecosesola, numerous periodic meeting spaces were created in order to enhance the joint participation of workers and members of the integrated organizations. These spaces transcended the statutes of the time which only contemplated annual departmental assemblies of the funeral, educational and food fair activities as well as for one annual general assembly.

At the moment, there are six joint meeting areas that facilitate participation in daily activities: producers-food fairs, food distribution, food processors (UPC), health, reflection meetings, and other goods and services. In addition, less frequently, there are meetings of mutual aid, gatherings for sharing experiences, and the general assemblies of Cecosesola. In contrast to the other meetings, these three don't deal with daily activities. Therefore, all of the members of the organization tend to participate in them regardless of their specific sphere of action.

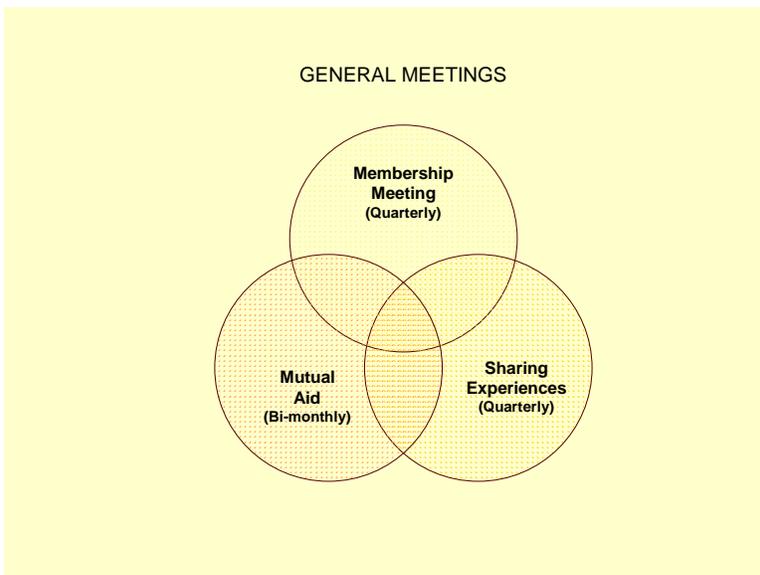
Graphically, we could represent with small circles the weekly meetings that we have in each of Cecosesola's food fairs, in the funeral service or in the integrated organizations.



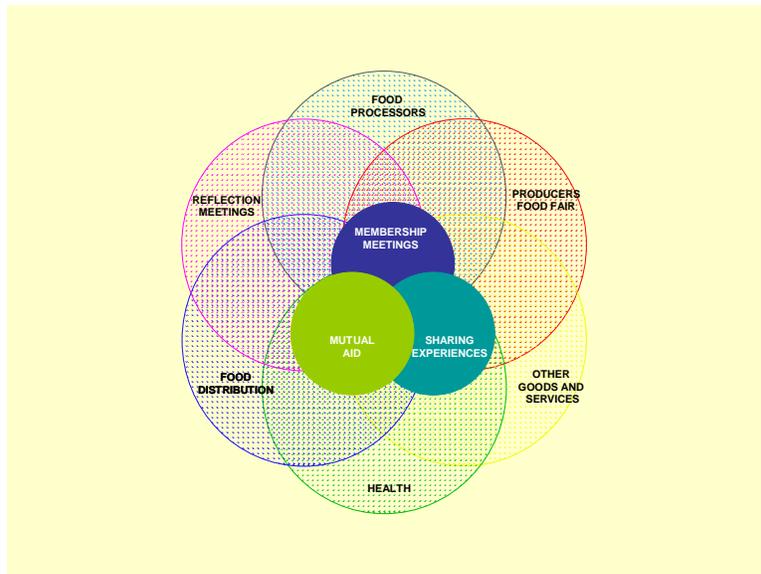
Also, the members of these areas or associations meet in frequent and periodic meetings relating to daily activities.



Just as, with less frequency, we have meetings that tend to deal with the organization as a whole.



Globally, the following graph represents an approximation of the current state of our meetings.



At this moment (2008) we are speaking of about 300 annual joint meetings, apart from those that are held weekly in each area of Cecosesola and in the 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 or need or one could disappear when it is no longer necessary.

Also, the established meetings often give birth to others. For example, initially the meetings of producers and food fairs were held every three months, centering on crop planning and price fixing but, with time, additional meetings among the producers of each geographic location became necessary. More recently quarterly meetings- dubbed “big meetings”- were created responding to the need to deepen our relationships through sharing and reflection. In addition, at any moment, as in any other activity, a particular gathering could be called to deliberate on inconveniences that pop up in our daily relations.

From one meeting and another, even within one specific area, there is an important variation of its members due to a high rotation of its participants. That allows us to “breathe life into” each gathering through a permanent renovation of its composition.

Also, as the graphics show, due to the rotation of participants, the meetings are intertwined. In each, there is usually someone taking part that has participated in other gatherings and has information on what was discussed. Thus, from meeting to meeting, topics of discussion and conclusions flow freely, a constant flow of information that feeds the internalization of flexible collective criteria that facilitate the sharing of responsibility in decision making.

From meetings to get-togethers

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

At first, we were guided by the established pattern in most organizations: an annual assembly and an administrative council made up of **representatives** of the integrated organizations, without worker participation. Meetings were guided by a moderator and an agenda previously agreed upon by the administrative council. Decision making was their main reason of existence and these were made by voting and became valid and definitive once they were approved by the required quorum. Those absent or in disagreement didn't have the right to demand rectification unless they had voice or the right to vote in the next meeting. Thus, our meetings became sceneries for staging struggles for the control of Cecosesola, meetings with certain characteristics that, at that given moment, seemed totally logical and normal, since they responded to the lack of trust, the separations and the hierarchical structure that are intrinsic to our cultural formation.

During our initial attempts to enhance participation in Cecosesola, changes turned out to be more about form than content. We broadened participation by creating departmental assemblies and councils, allowing the participation of **worker representatives**. However, the basic hierarchical structure remained. The funeral service continued with its manager. Councils presided the organization. The general assembly continued being the highest authority, functioning under its traditional formality and serving as a stage for the struggle to control Cecosesola. The primary reason for meeting continued to be decision making by majority. In other words, our meetings remained as spaces where participation was 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 giving way to the beginning of deep changes in the characteristics and reasons of our meetings.

Formalities that restricted open and direct participation without intermediaries were gradually eliminated. At the same time, our meetings took on new characteristics and contents, many of which we couldn't have imagined when we were taking our initial steps. As time went on, those first meetings that were impregnated with restrictions have become open spaces for gathering and participation, get-togethers which do not have a defined structure nor follow any prior planning, get-togethers whose characteristics and contents are always evolving and are open to all.

While each of these spaces takes on concrete aspects according to their corresponding area of activity, in the background of all our gatherings lays the intention to live together in harmony, solidarity and respect.

Decision making is no longer the main reason for meeting. The focus is on the exchange of information, reflection, creating bonds of solidarity and trust and internalizing a holistic vision. In short, the focus is on our personal and organizational transformation.

Our get-togethers thus become opportunities to co-exist in an ever expanding **us** that has no limits and that implies internalizing shared criteria, flexible criteria that change consensually as our reality changes and as we transform through our reflection, criteria that, once shared, facilitate the involvement of everyone in decision making.

There are no longer administrative councils, managers or supervisors to “lean on” and avoid taking responsibility for a decision, thus reducing the possibilities of a transformational process.

For the same reason, we must be careful that our get-togethers don’t take the place of managers or supervisors because, again, we will be curtailing our personal and organizational development. Although we continue to make decisions when we gather, the intention in daily activities is to stimulate decision making by any one or by any group, basing decisions on the collective criteria of the moment and taking on the corresponding responsibilities. Likewise, the participants in a given session are entirely responsible for the decisions taken, including, in some cases, covering the resulting economic costs.

The idea is to get all of us involved, progressively sharing the collective criteria that emerge consensually from our get-togethers. Thus, having these criteria in mind and the information necessary, **any** person, group or gathering **can** and **must** take the corresponding decision and, on assuming their responsibilities, open up the opportunities for an integral and ethical becoming, in other words, for a personal and an organizational transformation.

From the above we can connote that for us consensus is very different from the concept of unanimity. Unanimity requires the presence of all the member of a group or organization. It is equivalent to a voting process where 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 was taken by an individual, an informal group, or by a gathering. Therefore, there are no definitive resolutions unless time impedes rectification since all of them are open to reconsideration in **any** moment, in **any** gathering if someone is not in agreement and/or considers that individual criteria prevailed. In all cases, those responsible for a decision assume its consequences.

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

Notwithstanding, as the process deepens, any economic loss is more than compensated by the flexibility and dynamism that becomes evident in the organization 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 a sordid struggle to control Cecosesola. Our possibilities of becoming are not trapped by hierarchical relationships or by a web of parliamentary rules that attempt to regulate participation, rules based on lack of trust that wind up mutilating any possibility of an open and deep involvement.

With time, representation has been replaced by responsible, direct, and daily participation. Meetings have become spaces open to all those 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 taken on by any member or in any gathering. Quorum has become obsolete.

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

Thus the collective and supportive force that became evident with the seizure of our buses has continued to emerge. **A force that cannot be seen or touched but that we know that exist because we experience it when we confront any “challenge,” “obstacle” or “setback.”**

Where are we going?

The changes in the characteristics of and the reasons for meetings are intertwined with a process of personal and organizational transformation, in short, a process of cultural transformation based on reflecting. Thus, depending on the cultural moment of each group, meetings take on different dynamics and content.

Therefore, it is not about decreeing a determined or “correct” way to have meetings, which can be copied by any organization. Instead, the new contents and characteristics of meetings become effective and adequate as they evolve from a transforming process that the meetings themselves help to deepen and whose starting point is the cultural moment present among the members of a particular organization.

At the beginning when we dreamed of a participative Cecosesola, we never imagined that one day we would form part of an organization with our current size, without a chain of command, and with an organizational structure based only on get-togethers whose main reason for existence is not decision making. We also could have never thought 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 do 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 that could explain, in part, the path taken may be found in 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-that has been deepened and profusely spread with time: **the desire to co-exist here and now in a respectful and sharing relationship, in 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 feeding on 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 wait for what the daybreak brings.....