Co-operatives - a new/old way of doing things in small towns – *Stories, Practice & Possibilities*

September 2026, Longreach Region..



- Peter Westoby
- Lives on Jinibara Country, Maleny
- English migrant/Scottish roots
- Loves good coffee, book shops and bushwalking
- Curator of Pete’s podcast in community development
- Director Community Praxis Cooperative (a 30-year-old non-profit workers co-op)
- Business Council of Co-ops & Mutuals

Maleny, where I live....a co-op town





Rachael and I work in Nepal each year…

Co-ops thrive there…along with participatory learning







Co-ops thrive when…

- People have a **shared problem** that they want to solve co-operatively
- They want to **cooperate** (not easy hey). It's all about what I call the "social soil" (turning trust and relationship into cooperation)
- Are **aware a legal structure** exists that supports social benefits and and economic enterprise
- They want to **maintain ownership and control** of the venture as members

- Consumer co-ops
- Producer co-ops
- Worker co-ops
- Financial co-ops
- Care co-ops (new wave of co-ops)

But co-ops have a long history – 1844 Rochdale Co-op (Manchester)

Rochdale Pioneers Museum



- **Toad Lane Store** … to pool the meagre resources of working-class weavers to buy affordable basic foods and household goods, such as flour, sugar, butter, and oatmeal, and sell them directly to members at fair prices
- (to bypass high prices and poor-quality goods charged by local profiteering merchants)
- **Sharing Profits …** Returning surplus profits back to member-customers based on the amount of goods they purchased, rather than enriching outside investors.
- **Establishing Ethical Principles …**Pioneering democratic member control ("one member, one vote"), and open, non-discriminatory membership.
- **Community Building and Education:** Using a portion of their profits to fund social, educational, and economic improvements for working-class families.

Co-operatives and mutuals are member-owned businesses formed to benefit the people who use them or work in them, rather than external shareholder value.



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Co-ops work well in First Nations communities



Established in 1974 in Bowen, Girudala is a proud Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Organisation. We deliver culturally informed housing, health, aged care and community services for Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander peoples across the Whitsunday region.

For more than 50 years, our members, Elders and families have guided our work. Together, we walk alongside community with care, respect and cultural integrity, strengthening housing, health, wellbeing and connection.

MARLINJA COMMUNITY MICROGRID

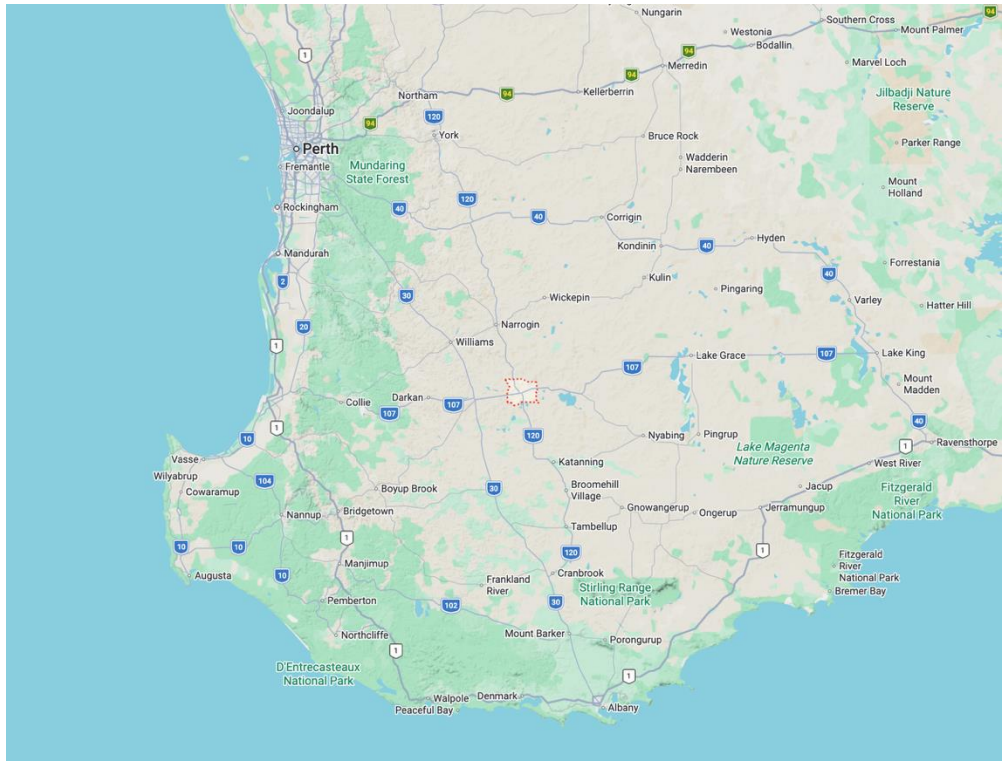


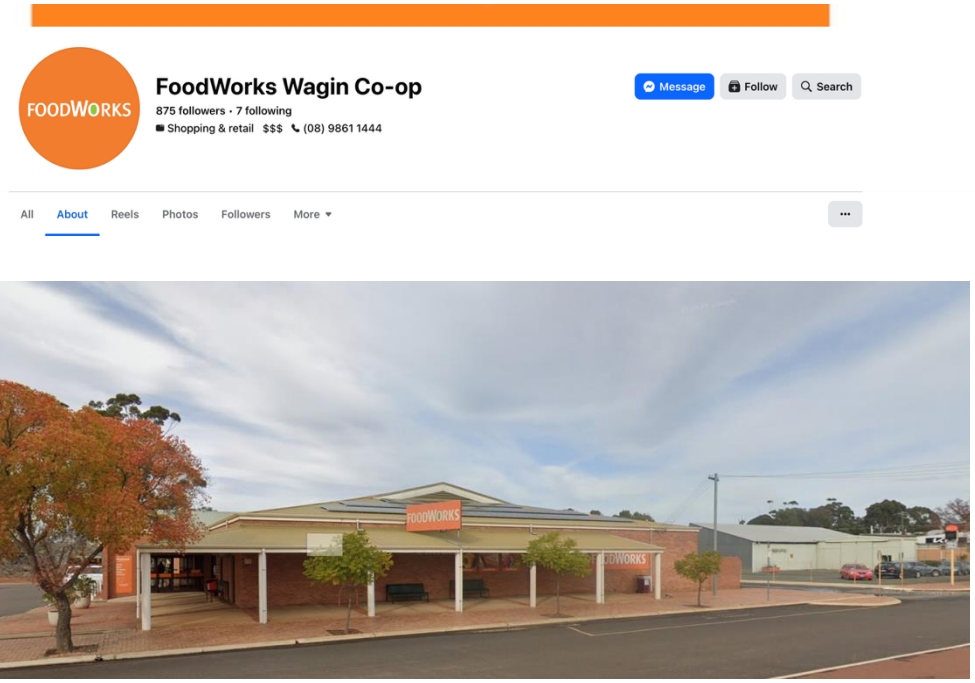
RUNNING WATER

Community Press

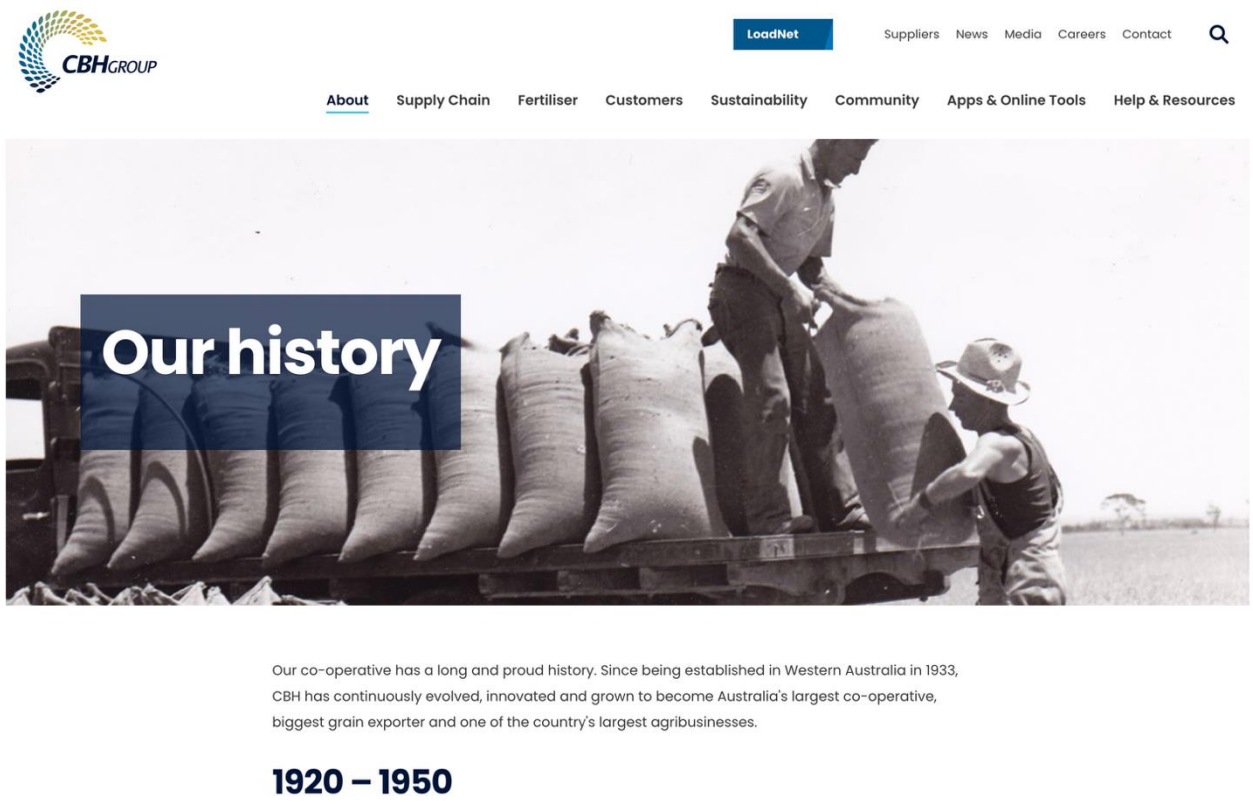
Story #1: Wagin, Wheatbelt, WA

3 examples: a consumer, producer and care cooperative...

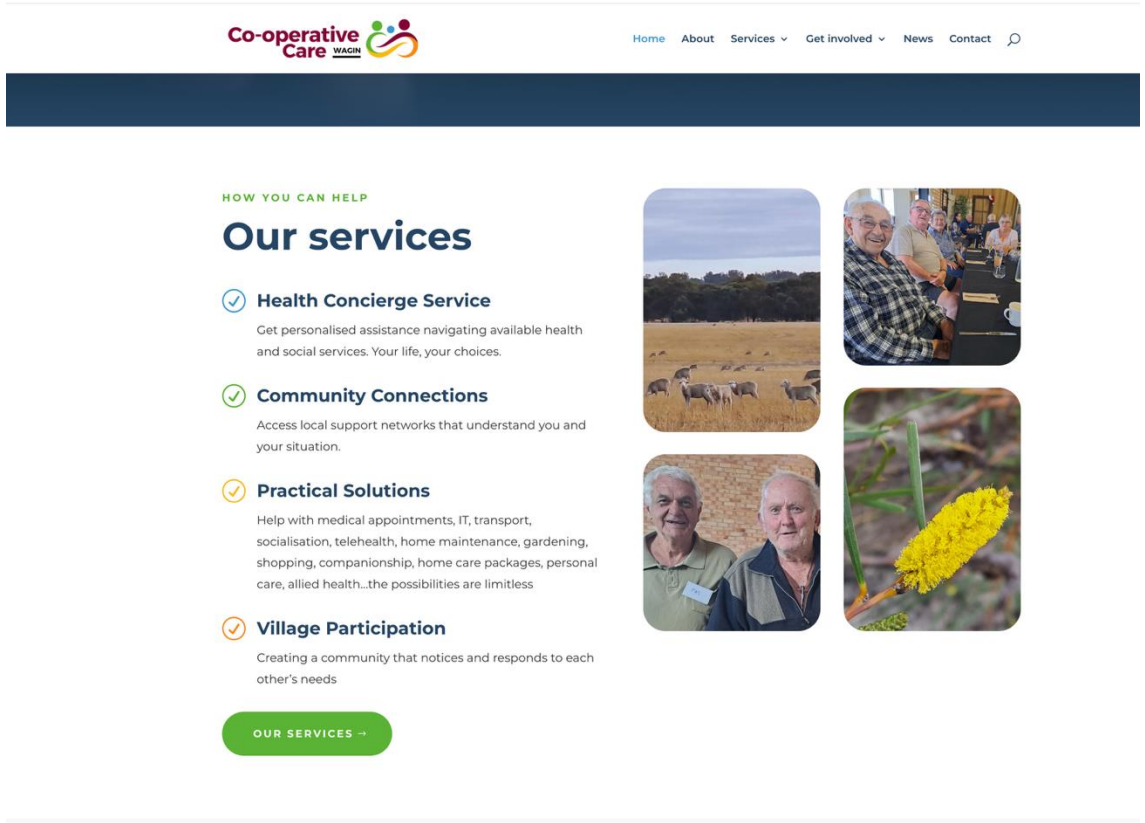




CBH Group (Cooperative Group Handling) – Wheatbelt co-op



- Co-operative Bulk Handling (CBH) was founded during the Great Depression through the realisation that a cheap and efficient bulk handling system would reduce growers' costs and strengthen the struggling wheat industry.
- Now turns over $5.2 billion annually
- 3500 member growers





Co-operative Care Wagin

- Registered in 2025, focus on social, health and aged care in the town, so people can ‘stay-in-place’
- Significantly, it’s community owned and won’t pick up and leave if not enough profit
- It’s been hard work… built on Rural Aid/PKs Community Building Program…

Story #2: Nundah Community Enterprises Co-operative (Nundah Co-op)

A worker-owned co-operative focused on providing meaningful employment and training for people with a disability.

The members of Nundah co-op are its workers – about 50 people

A blended workforce building education and capacity building into the job

Multiple revenue streams – hospitality and maintenance, about $3 million/year



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"...Seeing someone before they start work in the co-op, you can see the body language is saying 'I'm not valuable, I'm not worthwhile', and then after they've done some shifts in the café or in the parks, they're walking around and feeling a sense of pride about themselves..."

Richard Warner
Coordinator, Nundah Community Enterprises Cooperative



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The Nundah story – key elements

The origins

- A community worker listening to the 6 stories of people with intellectual disabilities
- The failure of the service-system churn
- The coming together of those 6 + a few able folk, and experimenting with local small business activities (started informally)

The keys

- Hanging in there for those first three years, like any small business
- An anchor contract on year 2, (BCC and social procurement of local council parks maintenance)
- The Culture: ‘we make coffee to keep people employed’ (not, ‘we employ people to make coffee).
- Quality – still matters the most…

Stories… 2026… hot off the press….
#3 – Lockington, Victoria – the now ‘familiar’ **pub story**

The cooperative management model requires residents to buy into a share of the business, for instance, in lots of $5,000.



Lockington Community Hotel Co-operative chair Terry Malone says the volunteer-based model of the pub gives residents social licence. *(ABC Central Victoria: Tyrone Dalton)*

"We knew that that co-op model was for us," Mr Malone said.

"The community are behind it.

"The good part of it is, the money stays in the town, a lot of it does, and people feel ownership of the hotel and it is part of the town now.

> **"And if we had lost this hotel, the town would die."**

The Lockington pub now has 96 shareholders with a capital of $600,000.

When Terry Malone learnt management at his local watering hole was about to call last drinks forever, he knew something had to be done. It was a matter of saving the pub to save the town.

"We had a dying hotel," Mr Malone said.

"It was going to close. It had closed twice before and wasn't good for the town. And it was going to happen again.

"So a few of us were wondering what we could do about it. No-one really wanted to own a hotel outright.

> **"So we got our heads together and we decided that we would buy it."**

Key points:

- In a community of 400, 300 shareholders have taken over Colbinabbin's general store
- It's a year since the Lockington community bought the hamlet's "dying" pub
- Newstead is awaiting a planning permit to build a community solar farm

Mr Malone now chairs the Lockington Community Hotel Cooperative, which yesterday celebrated its first anniversary owning and running the pub in the northern Victorian town, population 800.

Lockington, 200 kilometres north of Melbourne, is the latest in a string of communities in regional Victoria forming cooperatives to buy into businesses and keep much-needed services — pubs, stores and post offices — open to keep towns alive.

Colbinabbin (near Lockinton) – cooperating to keep the **local store**

Locals take over general store

Following their success, the Lockington co-op helped the nearby town of Colbinabbin take over the struggling general store.



The Colbinabbin General Store has been taken over by a community co-operative made up of residents from across the farming district. *(ABC Central Victoria: Tyrone Dalton)*

The tiny town of about 300 people formed a cooperative to keep the store running when it came close to closing.

Bridgewater.... Co-operating to keep the local **post-office**

Co-op runs town post office

The community of Bridgewater, just outside of Bendigo, earlier this month celebrated the one-year anniversary of taking over the town's post office.

Melina Morrison is the chief executive officer at the Business Council of cooperatives and Mutuals and said regional communities are under pressure to to find a model that works for small business.

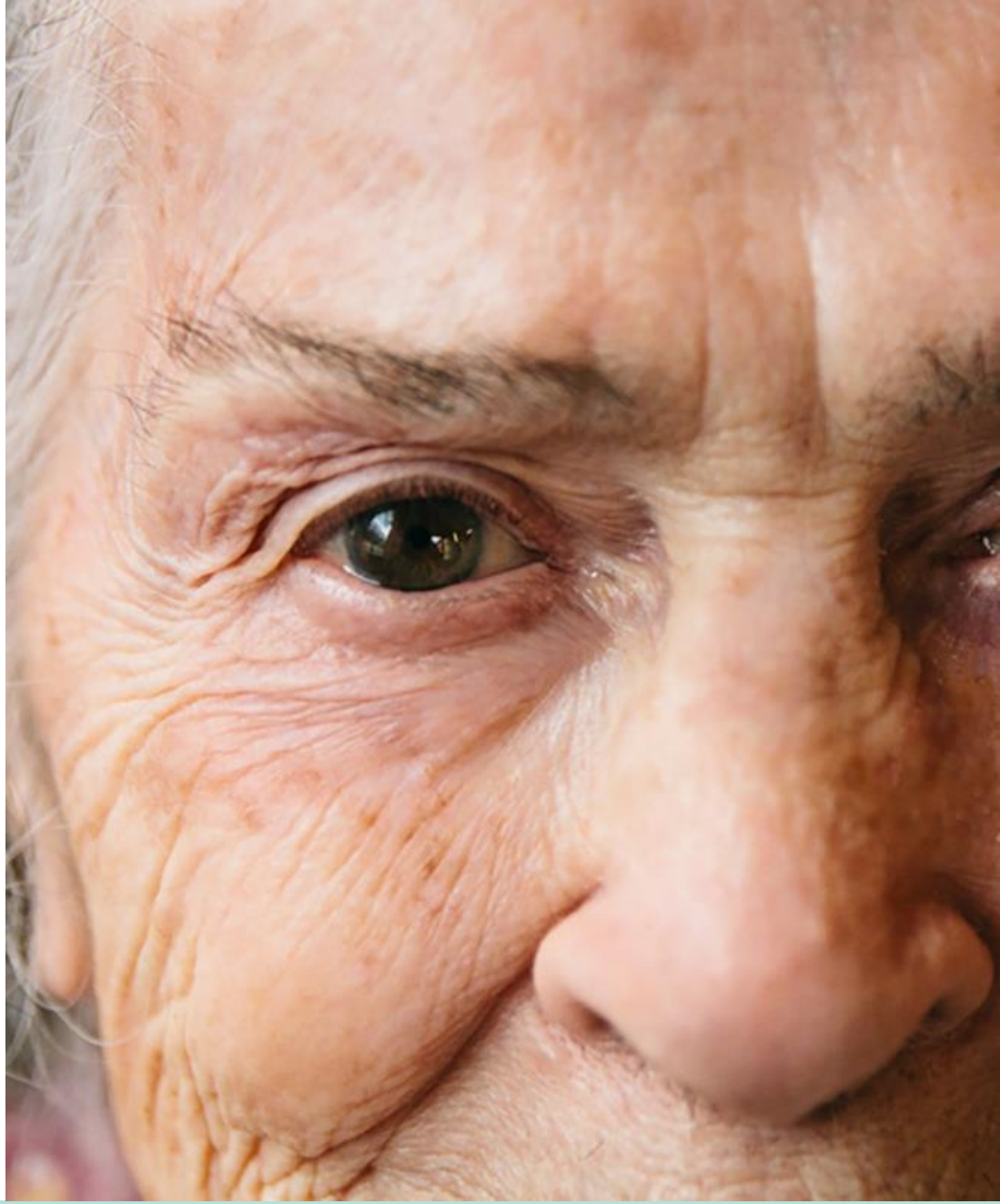
"They [cooperatives] reinvest 100 per cent of the profits back into the local economy, because that's where the owners are," she said.

> **"The costs have brought down because they cut out the middle guy; they become the price makers, not the price takers."**

How do they operate?

Co-operatives and mutuals are designed around seven international principles:

- Voluntary and Open Membership
- Democratic Member Control
- Member Economic Participation
- Autonomy and Independence
- Education, Training and Information
- Cooperation among Cooperatives
- Concern for Community



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What we know about co-operatives and mutual enterprises (CMEs)

Eight in 10 Australians are members of at least one co-operative or mutually owned organisation.

- 1,848 active co-ops and mutuals in Australia
- They directly employ 76,000 people in Australia
- Their combined turnover is $37.76 billion (excl. Super funds)
- For every $1 spent in a co-op, 76 cents is reinvested in the local community
- 2025 was International Year of Co-operatives (focus on care)
- A network of 100 co-ops and mutuals active in all parts of the Australian economy



Co-ops and mutuals can have different types of members:

- individuals
- businesses
- producers
- policy holders
- roadside assistance members
- employees or employee owned enterprises
- super funds

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A final plug

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