



# BRITISH COLUMBIA AGRICULTURE AND FOOD CO-OPERATIVE SURVEY, 2019

## Summary of Survey Findings

### Report Prepared by:

Institute for Sustainable Food Systems, Kwantlen Polytechnic University

### Prepared for:

The BC Ministry of Agriculture



Institute for Sustainable Food Systems



BRITISH  
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Institute for Sustainable Food Systems

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British Columbia Agriculture and Food Co-operatives Survey 2019.

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## Executive Summary

In the agriculture and food sector, co-operatives (co-ops) are not a new idea. Agrarian societies employed the model to allow people to work together towards common goals, and sustainable livelihoods as farmers. Today, agriculture and food co-ops are common around the world to support farming, fishing, food processing, marketing, land acquisition and access, food retail, food security and agricultural service and supplies delivery.

This report presents findings from the 2019 British Columbia (BC) Agriculture and Food Co-operative Survey. As of April 2019, 72 agriculture and food co-ops were operating in BC. Survey invitations were distributed to 66 co-ops, representing a diversity of co-op sizes, where contact information was ascertainable. Thirty-three co-ops participated in the survey, of which 29 co-ops (88%) stated that they only operate within BC. Respondents were a mix of new and established co-ops, with the majority in operation for less than 10 years. They represented active memberships ranging from 3 to 110,000 members. Those with more than 1,000 members operate their own retail stores. Twenty out of 30 co-ops answered that they have paid employees. Among the 20 co-ops with paid employees, 18 co-ops (90%) have less than 50 full time equivalent (FTE) employees. Twenty-four out of 26 (92%) co-ops earned net profits of \$50,000 or less in 2018.

Agriculture and food co-ops face a number of challenges that affect their ability to operate and deliver goods and services to members and consumers. Challenges identified by survey respondents related to three broad categories:

- Membership, management, and human resources
- Resources, infrastructure, and capital
- External factors and stressors

Recruiting members is the most common challenge facing co-ops (14 out of 29 respondents, 48%). Main barriers to recruiting new members include limited time available for recruitment activities, difficulties recruiting farmers as members, and a lack of understanding of co-op operations and structures among prospective and existing members.

One of the major challenges for co-ops across all sectors is access to capital and financing with 12 out of 29 co-ops (41%) mentioning access to capital as a challenge. Co-ops struggle to access capital from traditional financial institutions, government grants, and private investment.

Finally, BC agriculture and food co-ops also face external challenges. Thirteen out of 29 co-ops (45%) cited competition from other businesses as a challenge they face. Other external factors and stressors raised in the survey are the structures of finance regulations and taxation for co-ops in BC, and lack of understanding of the co-op model among funders, government agencies and the general public.

# AGRICULTURE AND FOOD CO-OPERATIVES:

## 2019 Survey Snapshot

# 72

**Agriculture and food co-ops in BC in 2019**

# 66

co-ops have available contact information and are represented on the map in Figure 1.

# 33

co-ops participated in the online survey (Note: not all respondents answered all survey questions, therefore for some questions the response rate was less than 33).

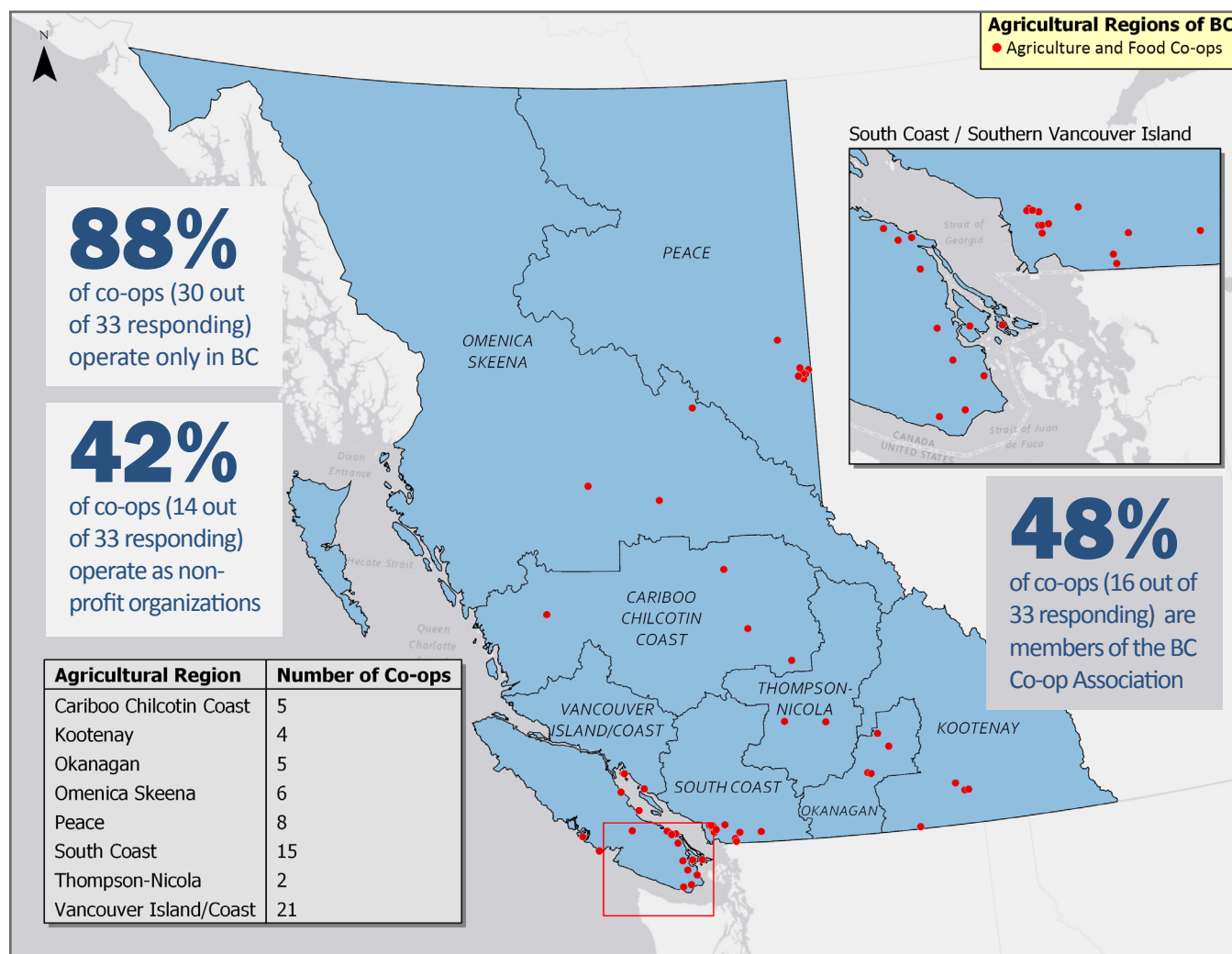


Figure 1: Map of 66 agriculture and food co-ops with known locations in British Columbia, 2019

# 48%

of co-ops (16 of 33 responding) grow, process, and/or market products produced by their members.

### Other functions of agriculture and food co-ops responding to the survey include:

- providing farming supplies and business supports to their members
- providing employment for their members
- providing access to land for their members
- selling agriculture and food products to their members
- providing services to communities such as farming education and workshops, enhancing community food security, and providing public market space.

## YEARS IN OPERATION

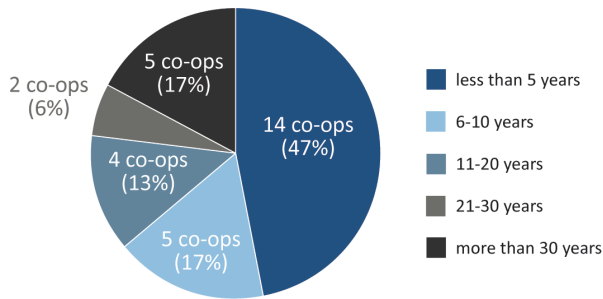


Figure 2: Years in operation for BC agriculture and food co-ops

# 62%

of co-ops (18 of 29 responding)

incorporated within the last 10 years (after 2009)

**\$** Agriculture and Food Co-op Financing

# 54%

of co-ops (13 of 24 responding)

were approved for external financing from credit unions

## PROFITS & REVENUE FOR 2018

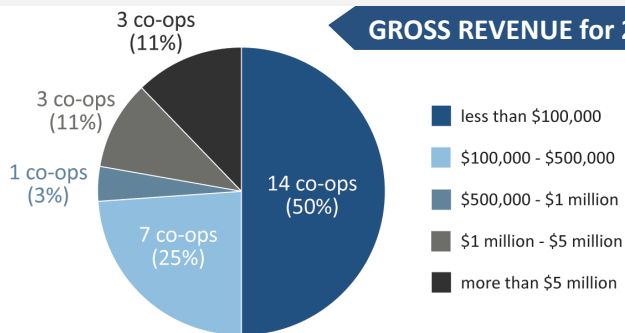


Figure 3: Gross revenue for BC agriculture and food co-ops in 2018

# 92%

of co-ops (24 of 26 responding)

reported less than \$50,000 in **NET REVENUE** for 2018

# 13%

of co-ops (3 of 24 responding)

received financing from traditional financial institutions (i.e. domestic charter banks)



# 81%

of co-ops (26 out of 31 responding)

sell agri-food products and related supplies

Most common marketing channels are: retail stores, farmers' markets, restaurants, farm gate sale and online platforms

Main sources of co-ops' revenue are: selling goods and services, grants, and fundraising

## CO-OP MEMBERSHIP

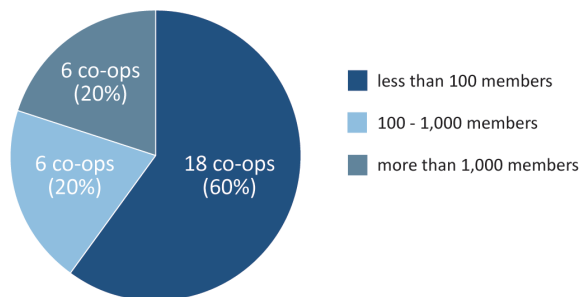


Figure 4: Membership in BC agriculture and food co-ops

# 21%

of co-ops (6 of 29 responding) have over 1,000 members - all these co-ops operate retail stores.

## EMPLOYMENT

# 67%

of co-ops (20 out of 30 responding)

had paid employees involved in co-op operations.

# 12

co-ops

had less than 5 full time equivalent employees.

# 6

co-ops

had between 6 - 50 full time equivalent employees.

# 2

co-ops

had between 51 - 500 full time equivalent employees.

# 10

co-ops

had no employees.



# 1. Introduction

This report presents findings from the British Columbia (BC) Agriculture and Food Co-operative Survey 2019. The project builds upon three previous studies: Co-operatives in Canada in 2015 (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2015), BC Co-operative Sector Labour Market Environmental Scan (FERENCE & Company Consulting Ltd., 2016), and BC Ministry of Agriculture Tools and Resources Recommendations to Assist Agricultural Co-operatives (Stott & Van Seters, 2018). The survey aimed to provide an industry profile of co-operatives (co-ops) in the agriculture and food sector, and to present the co-ops' perspectives on challenges and support needed to make co-ops a viable and attractive model in the BC food system. The results fill a significant data gap related to the types and impact of agriculture and food co-operatives in BC. This information will help the provincial government, and provincial and national co-operative organizations provide support for new and established agriculture and food co-ops in BC.

## 1.1. Background

In British Columbia, the co-operative legislation passed in 1896 provided a legal framework to incorporate, and manage co-operative businesses and organizations. The dairy and fruit tree sectors established the first agricultural producer co-ops to establish shortly after this. Later, co-ops were incorporated in other agricultural sectors such as the Interior Vegetable Marketing Agency Co-op And the BC Livestock producers (Emmanuel, 2007). Consumer co-ops also emerged in the province, often from informal food buying clubs, including the Kootenay Co-op, and the East End Co-op, both still in operation.

Today, agricultural co-operatives are mechanisms for the regionalization of food systems. Their contributions to the agriculture and food sector in supporting smaller producers and processors, new farmers, and other marginalized groups (Koguashvili, 2016; Hale & Carolan, 2017). There is evidence that the internal and organizational structures of agriculture and food co-ops have changed in recent decades to better meet the needs of contemporary producers and consumers (Emmanuel, 2007; Fulton, 2013). Considering these changes and the potential for co-ops to support the development of local and regional food systems, there is a need to better understand co-operatives in the current food system context, identify their challenges and bring forth information to help government, and other agencies support growth and development of agriculture and food co-ops in BC.



## 1.2. Research questions

This study collected information about co-ops in the agriculture and food sector in BC. The primary research questions framing the study were:

1. How many and what types of agriculture and food co-operatives operate in BC?
2. What are the economic activities of agriculture and food co-operatives in BC?
3. What are current challenges facing agriculture and food co-operatives in BC?
4. What types of support can be provided to better ensure the continued operation of co-operatives in the agriculture and food sector in BC?

## 1.3. Study scope

The agriculture and food co-ops included in the database were exclusively incorporated as co-ops and were in operation as of April 2019. Partnerships, unincorporated groups, or other types of corporations and non-profit associations were excluded.

For the purpose of this study, an agriculture and food co-operative refers to a co-op whose operation is related to the production, sale, or distribution of agricultural products, and services. Brewing, as well as coffee and tea co-ops, were excluded from this study as they are classified within the beverage manufacturing sector. Co-ops that operate branches in BC but are headquartered outside the province were included in the study, but with a focus only on operations within BC.

## 2. Literature Review

Early agricultural co-ops began as a critical support for producers, often operating at a small or mid-scale, and relying on co-operative infrastructure to bring their harvest to market (Emmanuel, 2007). Agrarian societies employed the co-op model to allow people to work together towards common goals, and sustainable livelihoods as farmers.

In the modern food system, agriculture and food co-ops have evolved to meet the needs of diverse food system actors and increase their members' collective competitiveness while maintaining the scale of operation commensurate with their community and sustainability focused business goals. Co-ops can support members to; purchase farmland, access new or larger markets, increase purchasing power, deal with competition, and manage risk (Briscoe & Ward, 2000; Ortmann & King, 2007; Boland, 2011; Koguashvili, 2016; Hooks, 2017). As a result, agriculture and food co-ops have had a significant impact on the development of local/regional food systems and economies through more equitable distribution of economic clout.

### 2.1. Common challenges faced by agriculture and food co-ops

Recent studies of co-operative business models identify a number of common challenges that significantly impact their viability, and success (Emmanuel, 2007; Koguashvili, 2016). There are three overarching themes of common challenges: (1) membership, management and human resources, (2) resources, infrastructure and capital, and (3) external factors and stressors.

**Membership, management and human resources:** For co-operative enterprises, members are essential for operations, capital investments, and participation in decision-making (Bijman, 2016; Osterberg & Nilsson, 2009). However, co-operatives face challenges related to member recruitment and participation that may stem from a lack of understanding of a member's role in the co-op, or of the co-op model more generally (Emmanuel, 2007). Membership issues may also arise after a co-op is established and the member group or co-op board becomes more diverse, which may introduce new, and possibly divergent visions for the co-op (Fulton, 2013). Unlike traditional business models, co-ops rely on a high degree of social capital, and if this breaks down it can seriously challenge the integrity of the business (Nilsson, Svendsen, & Svendsen, 2012).





In addition to membership challenges, additional human resource challenges, such as high management turnover and changes in management strategies over time, can impact long term viability of co-ops. Because co-ops operate through an organizational structure that relies on consensus decision making, there may also be challenges at the board level when people are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with these processes (Emmanuel, 2007).

**Resources, infrastructure, and access to capital:** Co-operatives usually arise in response to a certain set of social and economic conditions (Emmanuel, 2007; Boland, 2011; Fulton, 2013). However, in order to remain viable, they must change and adapt to new contexts. Co-ops may face challenges as they develop or grow based on a lack of precedent examples and the lack of supporting resources and materials about starting and managing co-op businesses (Emmanuel, 2007). Increasingly, co-ops in all sectors are adopting new business models and face significant challenges as they navigate uncharted territory. Co-ops also face significant challenges related to financing, and often struggle to access traditional capital (from banks and government programs) that may be available to other business types.

Koguashvili (2016) cited an extended “start-up” phase, and a lack of collateral necessary to access bank credit, as common characteristics of co-ops in the Republic of Georgia. These characteristics makes it inherently difficult for co-ops to obtain financing. The author also notes that banks that do finance co-ops often favour those with a smaller number of members – which may disenfranchise mid to large-scale co-ops. In some cases, co-ops may try to diversify, or grow membership in order to increase their access to resources – however, this may further complicate the decision-making processes, and increase internal conflict (Hale, 2017).

**External factors and stressors:** External stressors may make it challenging to develop or grow co-op businesses. Legislation and regulation designed to formalize co-op operations may in some cases constrain operations or make it difficult to access financing (Emmanuel, 2007). Additional challenges come from the competition co-ops face, both from large international competitors and from other co-ops (Emmanuel, 2007; Fulton, 2013). Contextual challenges such as an aging membership base, socio-economic change, and environmental change could also cause significant stress for co-op operations.

In a survey completed in 2019 by the Centre for the Study of Cooperatives, respondents from across Canada identified the lack of understanding of the co-operative model among the general public as the sector’s biggest challenge. This same survey also recognized other external factors as having significant impacts on development of the co-op sector (Centre for the Study of Cooperatives, 2019). This study suggests that co-ops may be more susceptible to external stressors than other business types (Centre for the Study of Cooperatives, 2019).

## 2.2. Challenges specific to agriculture and food co-ops

In addition to the challenges that commonly affect co-ops in general, there are challenges that are specific to those operating in the agriculture and food sector. Many of these co-ops face challenges related to their participation in the increasingly capital intensive, globally influenced, and industrialized food system, such as; increased competition from large international enterprises (Boland, 2011), increased cost of production, and vertical and horizontal integration across the sector (Fulton, 2013).

In the U.S and Europe where there is significant co-op activity, co-ops are supported by national agriculture specific networks that promote the growth and development of agricultural co-ops (Fox et.al., 2009). However, despite a growing number of co-ops in the sector, no such infrastructure has been established in Canada. In Canada, with the exception of Quebec where significant progress has been made to support agriculture and food co-ops, a lack of national or provincial agriculture specific co-op organization can be a barrier to advancement in the sector (Fox, Guennette, & Gracie, 2009; Rowe, Peredo, Sullivan, & Restakis, 2018).

## 3. Data Collection

### 3.1. Compilation of agriculture and food co-operative database

According to BC Registries and Online Services, there were 643 co-operatives in BC as of February 2019. Agriculture and food co-ops were identified from this list based on information available online. Additional online searches and consultation with co-op experts found that 11 of these agriculture and food co-ops had since ceased operations. For the purpose of this study, these co-ops were excluded from the database, and not invited to participate in the survey.

Some of the co-ops did not have an online presence nor contact information so it was not possible to ascertain whether or not they were agriculture and food co-ops or whether they were still in operation. Therefore, these co-ops were not included into the database.

This study resulted in the development of a database of 72 active agriculture and food co-ops operating in British Columbia as of April 2019. [Table 1](#) presents the total number of co-ops identified through this process.

*Table 1: Number of active agriculture and food co-ops in BC as of April 2019*

	Number of Co-ops
Identified as agriculture and food co-ops with contact information	66
Identified as agriculture and food co-ops with no contact information	6
<b>Total number of agriculture and food co-ops</b>	<b>72</b>

### 3.2. Online survey

The primary purpose of the survey was to gather information that would provide a profile of the agriculture and food co-op sector in BC. The survey was designed through collaboration between the Institute for Sustainable Food Systems (ISFS) and Ministry of Agriculture staff. Three co-op experts reviewed and validated survey questions before two co-ops tested the survey. The final version of the survey is in the Appendix.

The online survey platform used was Survey Monkey™. The survey required approximately 30 minutes to complete. It allowed respondents to save their answers and revisit the survey at different times. The online survey was open from March 5th, 2019 to April 30th, 2019.

*Table 2: Online survey response rate*

	Number of Co-ops	Percentage
Co-ops that completed the survey	30	45%
Co-ops that partially completed the survey	3	5%
Co-ops that declined to complete the survey	4	6%
Co-ops that did not respond to emails and phone calls	29	44%
<b>Total number of agriculture and food co-ops</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>100%</b>



Based on the database presented in the previous section, the research team sent survey invitations to 66 co-ops via email, phone and/or social media. Despite available contact information and repeated attempts to connect, 29 co-ops did not respond to the survey request. [Table 2](#) summarizes participation in the online survey.

### 3.3. In-depth interviews

At the conclusion of the online survey, respondents could indicate their willingness to participate in an optional in-depth interview. The purpose of the in-depth interviews was to gather additional information on specific challenges co-ops face, and the needs and supports that co-ops would like to receive. There was a total of 14 phone interviews conducted during March 11th, 2019 to April 16th, 2019.

## 4. Survey Results

### 4.1 Types of agriculture and food co-ops

Responses from the survey revealed a diverse range of co-ops operating in the agriculture and food sector in BC. Survey respondents self-identified from a list of predetermined co-op types choosing all descriptions that reflected their functions. The research team developed these descriptions through a literature review and consultation with experts ([Table 3](#)). Five of the co-ops identifying as an “other co-op” described themselves as community service co-ops.

Of the 33 responding co-ops, 14 (42%) identified as non-profit organizations, and 58% did not. While all the surveyed co-ops conducted their operations in BC, 4 (12%) also engaged in activities outside of the province. When answering questions related to operations and financing, survey respondents limited their answers only to BC operations. Sixteen out of 33 co-ops (48%) indicated that they were members of the BC Co-operative Association, 52% were not.

*Table 3: Types of agriculture and food co-ops in BC as self-described by survey participants*

	Number of Co-ops
A co-op that grows, processes, and/or markets products produced by its members	16
A co-op that supplies products or services necessary for their member’s professional activities	8
A co-op that is entirely owned by its members/customers who buy goods or services from their co-operative	9
A co-op that provides employment for its members. The employees are the members and the owners of the enterprise	5
A co-op wherein a group of farmers and/or community members own land together, and cooperatively manage its resources	3
Other co-op (i.e. service co-op, community service co-op etc.)	14

*Note: 33 co-ops answered this question. Co-ops may have selected more than one co-op type so the number of co-ops identifying is greater than the number of responding co-ops.*

Co-ops responding to the survey were a mix of new and established co-ops, with the majority in operation for less than 10 years (18 of 29 co-ops, 62%). Six co-ops had been in operation for between 11 and 30 years, and 5 co-ops have been in operation for over 30 years ([Figure 5](#)).

The agriculture and food co-ops responding to the survey represented diverse interests from across the food value chain including primary production, processing, and distribution, with many of them focused on supporting the viability of the local and regional food sector in BC. In BC, co-ops are active in the following agriculture and food sectors:

- Crop and livestock farming
- Fishing
- Food processing
- Marketing
- Land acquisition and access
- Food retail
- Food security
- Agricultural services and supplies

Twenty-two out of 30 responding co-ops (73%) indicated that they collaborate with other co-ops in a variety of ways. The most common was through the sharing of information and experience with other co-ops (i.e. mentoring, networking). Other collaborations noted include buying and selling from co-ops (including insurance, and financial services), receiving and giving donations, bulk purchasing, and supporting co-op development ([Figure 6](#)).

### Years in Operation of BC Agriculture and Food Co-ops

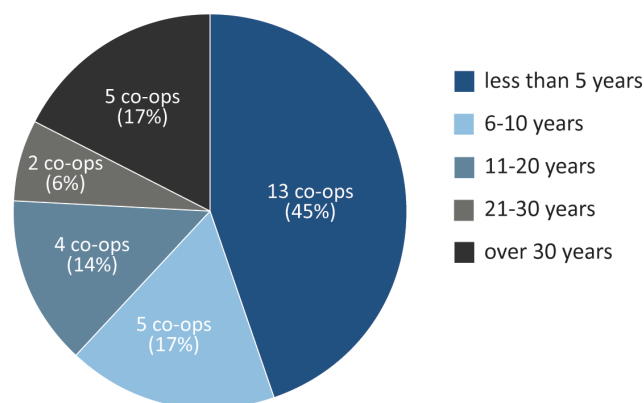


Figure 5: Years in operation of BC agriculture and food co-ops (29 co-ops responded to this question).

### Type of Collaboration Between BC Agriculture and Food Co-ops

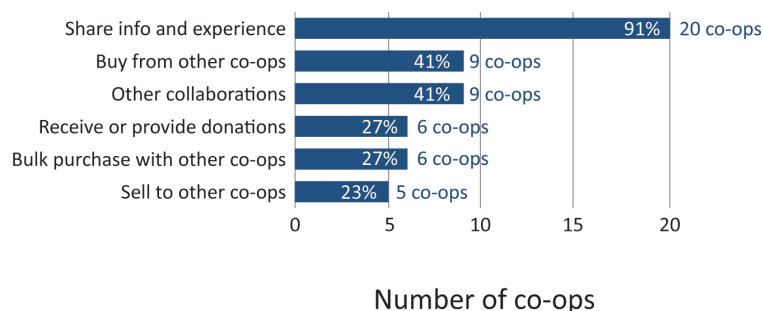


Figure 6: Types of collaboration between BC agriculture and food co-ops (22 co-ops responded to this question).

## 4.2. Membership

Survey respondents represented a diversity of co-op sizes with membership ranging from 3 to 110,000 members<sup>1</sup>. Of 29 co-ops responding, 10 were small (less than 20 members), 7 were mid-sized (21-100 members), 6 were large (101-500 members), and 6 were very large (more than 500 members). All 6 very large co-ops operate their own retail stores and had over 1,000 members.

Membership in agriculture and food co-ops was diverse, and included; individuals (farmers, consumers etc.), farm businesses, food processors, as well as non-profit organizations (Figure 7). Membership also included representation from targeted and underrepresented groups (as described by the BC Ministry of Agriculture). Twenty-five out of 31 responding co-ops (81%) had members that identify as women, and 22 (71%) had members that are identified as new entrant farmers. Additionally, 15 co-ops (48%) had members who identify as Indigenous peoples, 12 (39%) had members who identify as persons with disabilities, and another 12 (39%) had youth members (Figure 8). Two co-ops (6%) did not have members from any of these groups, and 3 (10%) were unsure.

Active participation of members in co-op operations ranges from 100% to less than 10%. However, it was clear from survey responses that the definition of active participation varies substantially depending on the type of co-op. Member engagement included; investing, participating in everyday operations and co-op management, purchasing products and services from the co-op, selling products and services to the co-op, as well as volunteering and working for the co-op.

Type of Members in BC Agriculture and Food Co-ops

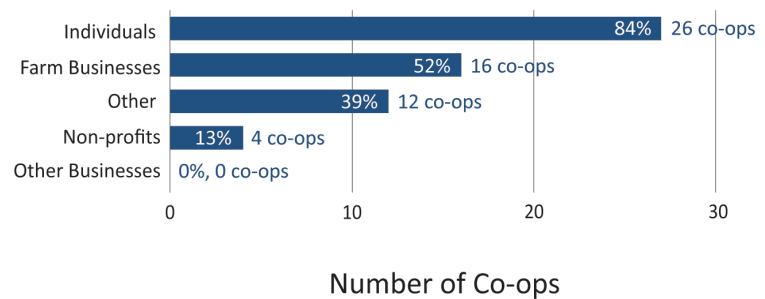


Figure 7: Type of members in BC agriculture and food co-ops (31 co-ops responded to this question).

BC Agriculture and Food Co-ops with Members from Targeted and Underrepresented Groups

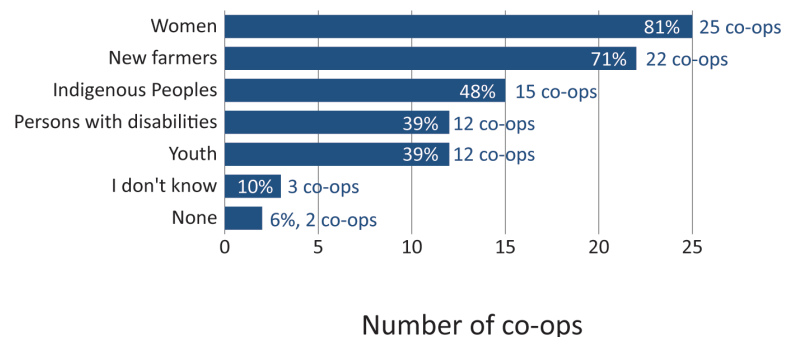


Figure 8: BC agriculture and food co-ops with members from targeted and underrepresented groups (31 co-ops responded to this question).

<sup>1</sup> Two responding co-ops with 20,000 and 110,000 members operate food retail stores and gas stations.

### 4.3. Employment

Co-ops contribute to local economies by providing employment. Twenty of 30 responding co-ops had paid employees (67%). The number of full-time equivalent (FTE) employees at these co-ops ranged from 0.5 FTE to 400 FTE employees.

Among the 20 co-ops with paid employees, 12 (60%) had less than 5 FTE employees, 6 (30%) had between 6 and 50 FTE employees and 2 (10%) had more than 51-100 FTE employees ([Figure 9](#)).

Eighteen of 26 co-ops responding (70%) spent less than \$50,000 on employee salaries in 2018. Two co-ops spent between \$400,000 and \$499,999, and one spent over \$1,000,000.

### 4.4. Marketing

Of the 31 co-ops responding, 25 (81%) indicated that they sell products as part of their co-op operations. Sixteen sell through retail stores. Additional sales channels included; farmer's markets (12 co-ops), restaurants (6 co-ops), farm gate sales (6 co-ops), online stores (5 co-ops), Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) (4 co-ops) and wholesale distributors (3 co-ops) ([Figure 10](#)). "Other" marketing channels used by co-ops included special events, specially designed online platforms and specialized marketing channels, such as government cannabis retail outlets.

Number of Employees in BC Agriculture and Food Co-ops

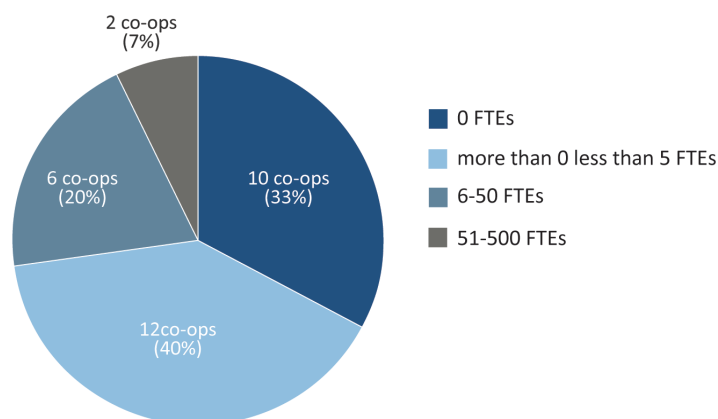


Figure 9: Number of employees in BC agriculture and food co-ops (30 co-ops responded to this question).

Marketing Channels for BC Agriculture and Food Co-ops

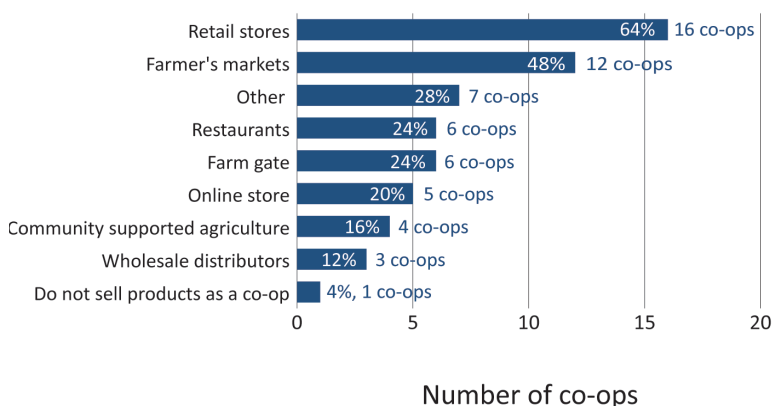


Figure 10: Marketing channels for BC agriculture and food co-ops (25 co-ops responded to this question).

## 4.5. Financial Activities and Financing

Eleven out of 27 responding co-ops<sup>2</sup> (41%) reported less than \$50,000 in gross revenue for 2018. Ten co-ops reported gross revenue between \$50,000 and \$500,000 for the same year, and 5 reported gross revenues over \$1 million (Figure 11). Thirteen of 26 co-ops (50%) indicated annual operating expenses below \$50,000. Five co-ops had operating expenses between \$100,000 and \$750,000, and 4 co-ops had operating expenses over \$1 million (Figure 12).

Twenty-four of 26 responding co-ops (92%) indicated their co-op generated less than \$50,000 in net profits for 2018. One co-op earned net profits between \$100,000 and \$250,000, and another co-op reported over \$5 million in net profits (Figure 13).

Of the 21 responding co-ops the total sum of member share equity was reported to be over \$20 million.

Agriculture and food co-ops responding to the survey generated revenue from a variety of sources. Forty-two percent of total revenue was derived from selling members products, 25% came from selling goods and services to members, 14% came from grants, 5% came from fundraising, and 1% each from membership fees, and tourism (Figure 14). “Other revenue” (making up 13% of total revenue for reporting co-ops) came from selling products to non-members, land leases with farmers, and loan interest.

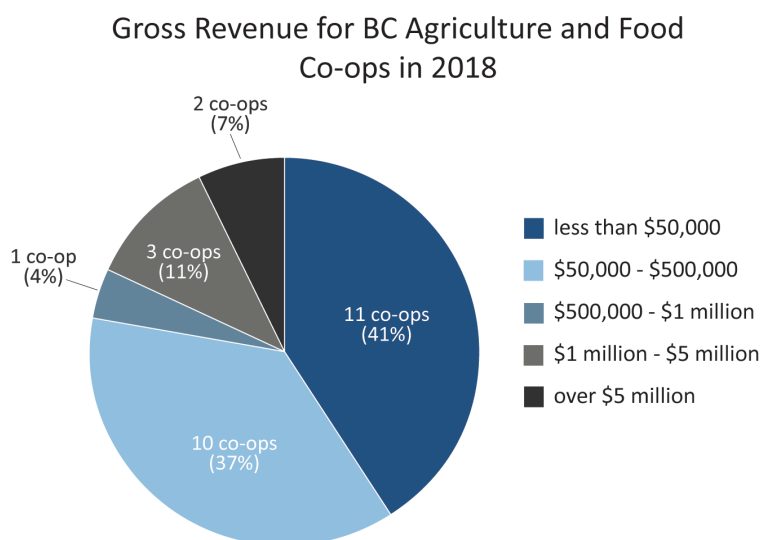


Figure 11: Gross revenue for BC agriculture and food co-ops in 2018 (27 co-ops responded to this question).

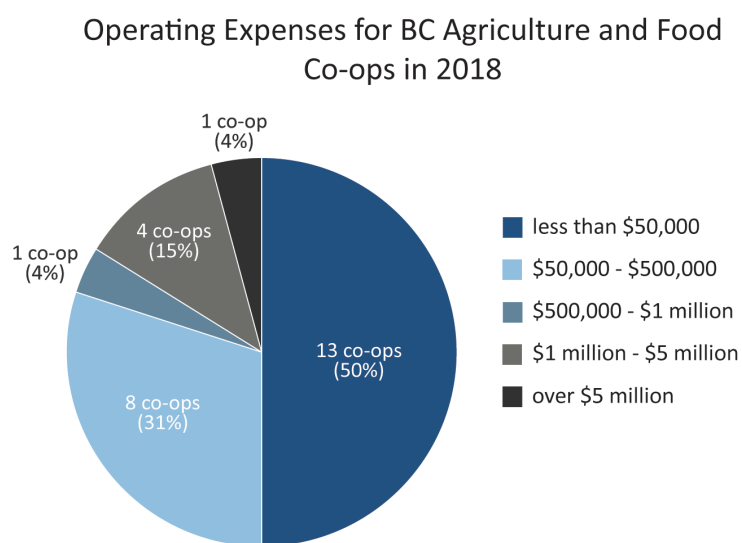


Figure 12: Operating expenses for BC agriculture and food co-ops in 2018 (26 co-ops responded to this question).

<sup>2</sup> The financial activities responses for two co-ops that operate both retail stores and gas stations were excluded because it was not possible to extract the sales of food and agricultural products from the sales of gas.



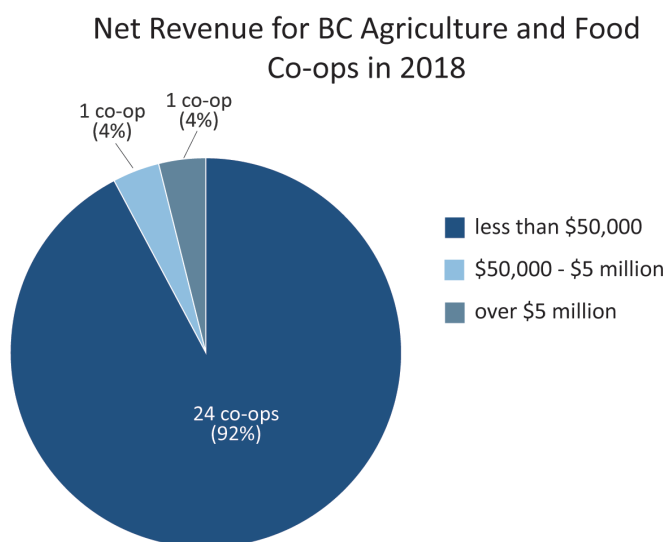


Figure 13: Net revenue for BC agriculture and food co-ops in 2018 (26 co-ops responded to this question).

#### Sources of Revenue for BC Agriculture and Food Co-ops

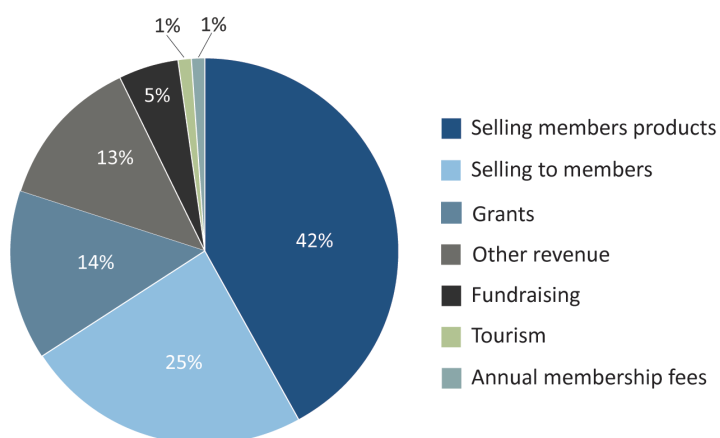


Figure 14: Sources of revenue for BC agriculture and food co-ops presented as percentage of total co-op revenue reported by survey respondents (25 co-ops responded to this question).

Access to sufficient financing is often cited as a significant challenge for co-ops that can impact the success and growth of co-op enterprises (Emmanuel, 2007; Otterman, 2007; Koguashvili, 2016). Fifteen of 25 responding co-ops (60%) indicated that they received financing in the form of grants from non-government organizations, and 10 (40%) received financing from government grants and contributions (i.e. subsidies). Co-ops also reported financing from credit cards and term loans (6 co-ops each), as well as from a line of credit and co-op surplus (6 co-ops each). A smaller number of co-ops received financing through purchasing on credit (3 co-ops), a lease (2 co-ops), and a mortgage (2 co-ops) (Figure 15).

The most common source for external co-op funding was credit unions, with 13 of 24 responding co-ops (54%) accessing funding from such institutions. Three co-ops accessed financing from traditional financial institutions (i.e. domestic chartered banks). Other financing came from government institutions (8 co-ops), non-government institutions (5 co-ops), other businesses (4 co-ops), and Farm Credit Canada (1 co-op) (Figure 16). Other sources of co-op financing included member loans.

### Sources of External Co-op Financing for BC Agriculture and Food Co-ops

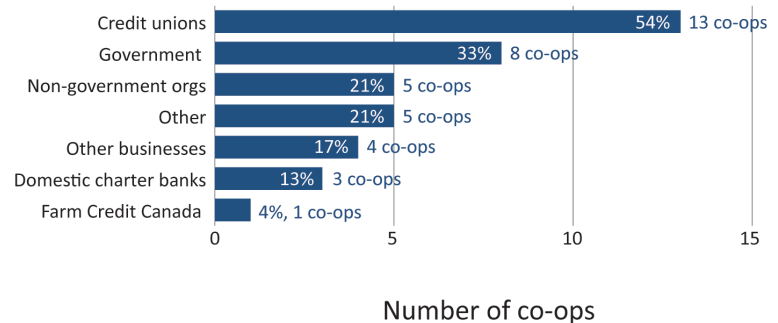


Figure 15: Sources of external financing for BC agriculture and food co-ops (24 co-ops responded to this question).

### Types of Financing for BC Agriculture and Food Co-ops

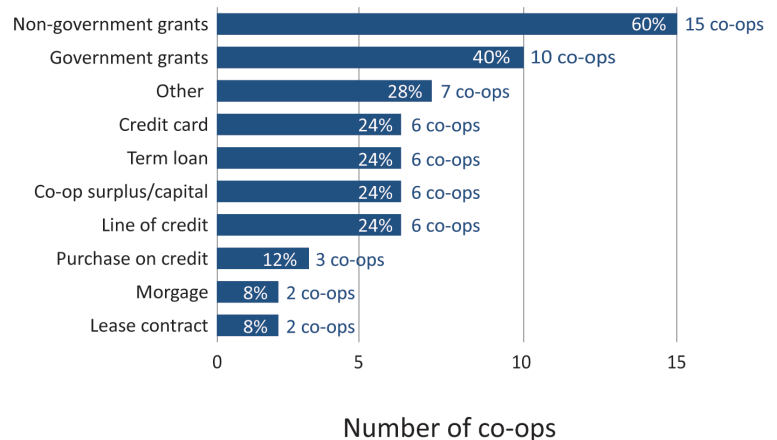
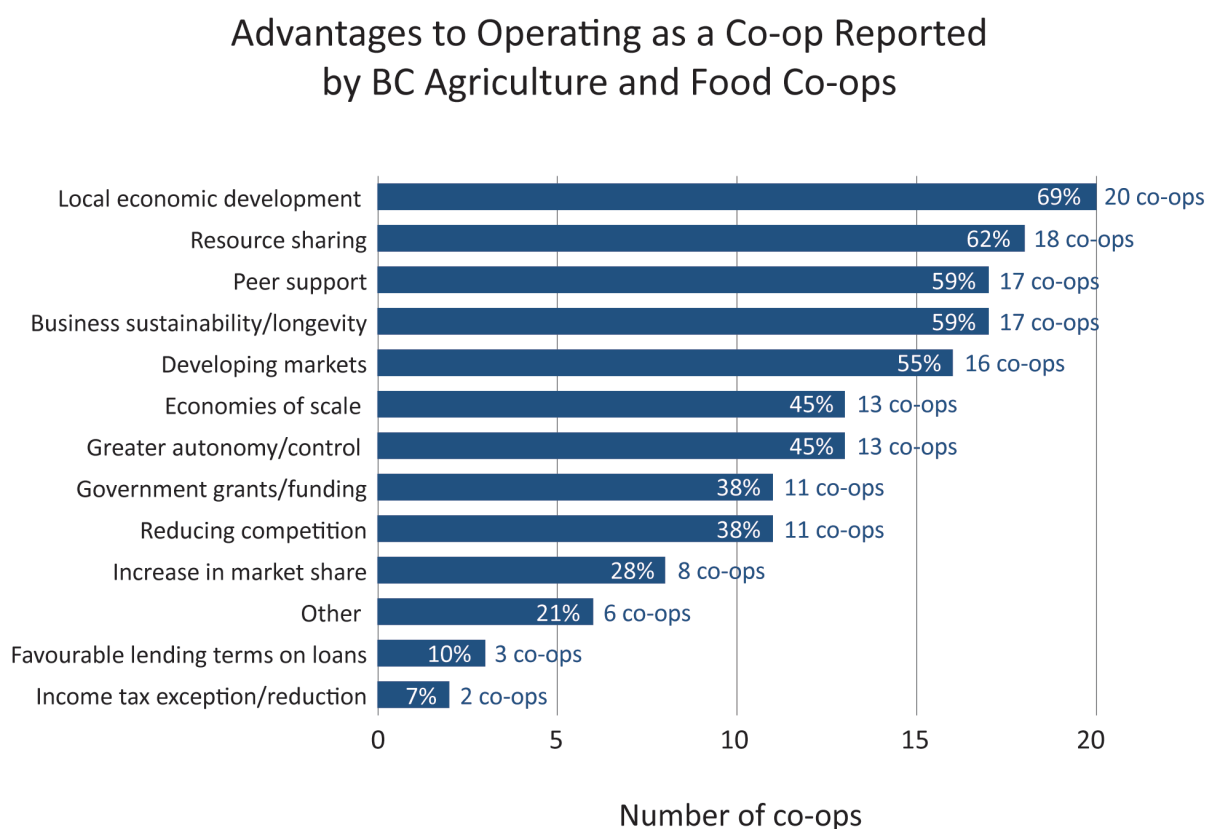


Figure 16: Type of financing for BC agriculture and food co-ops (25 co-ops responded to this question).

## 4.6. Advantages for agriculture and food co-ops

Survey respondents recognized a number of advantages to operating as a co-op in the agriculture and food sector ([Figure 17](#)). The most common advantage reported by 20 out of 29 co-ops (69%) was the potential for local economic development. This was followed by resource sharing, peer support, business sustainability and longevity. Other advantages commonly cited by respondents included: development of markets, economies of scale, greater autonomy, access to government funding, reducing competition and increased market share. Additional comments made under the “other” category cited the potential for community building, and support and opportunities for including a broad base of member supporters in the enterprise, and in food system activities.



*Figure 17: Advantages to operating a co-op reported by BC agriculture and food co-ops (29 co-ops responded to this question).*

## 4.7. Common challenges of agriculture and food co-ops

In BC, continued support of the agriculture and food co-op sector will require co-ops themselves, as well as government, financial institutions, and other agencies, to clearly understand the challenges facing the sector. As part of the survey, respondents selected from a list of common co-op challenges developed through the examination of co-op literature in the agriculture and food sector, and across other industry sectors (Figure 18). Additionally, in-depth interviews provided details about the specific challenges that co-ops face in the agriculture and food sector.

The challenges identified by survey respondents are consistent with the broad themes identified in our review of the literature, 1) membership, management and human resources; 2) resources, infrastructure, and capital; and 3) external factors and stressors.

### 4.7.1 Membership, management and human resources challenges

Membership, management and human resource challenges can have a significant impact on a co-ops ability to function. Common challenges include recruiting new members, reduced member participation, conflicting ideals and values among members, and difficulties hiring and retaining staff.

#### Recruiting new members

Recruiting members was the most common challenge facing co-ops cited by 14 out of 29 co-ops (48%). When operating a co-op, there may be limited time available for the recruitment of new members, especially during the start-up phase. Like any business, co-ops have to acquire financing, grow and reach out to new markets, as well as manage day to day operations – these activities can take up a significant amount of time, leaving little time to



Figure 18: Challenges to operating a co-op reported by BC agriculture and food co-ops (29 co-ops responded to this question).

recruit members and manage new relationships.

Co-ops operating in the agriculture and food sector can face additional challenges in recruiting farmers as members. It can be challenging to recruit farmers to join co-ops, and for them to participate actively as members, or board members, because they are increasingly busy managing their own businesses. One co-op interviewed reported that they struggle to recruit new farmers in particular and as a result, the needs of these new farmers may not be reflected in decision making, which means that it may be harder to retain them as members.

Although agriculture and food co-ops are not a new idea, co-ops also have difficulty recruiting and retaining members because of a lack of understanding of the co-op model and the level of engagement and collaboration that may be required, or the benefits of being a co-op member. Co-ops emerge to help meet a specific need for potential members. Those who become co-op members to meet a specific need may have little knowledge of, or interest in, engaging in co-operative activities.

### Reduced member participation

Eleven out of 29 co-ops (38%) responding to the survey faced a problematic decline in member participation. For co-ops that rely on farmers as members, the lack of membership activity and engagement can be related to the aging and declining farming population in the province, and the intensification of individual farming operations. According to the Government of British Columbia (2017), farm operators in BC declined by 20% from 1996 to 2016 (from 32,950 farm operators in 1996 to 26,430 in 2016). Moreover, the average age of a farm operator increased from age 49 to 56 during the same time (Government of British Columbia, 2017). Increased competition in the agriculture and food sector also means that people have more choice and if they do not recognize the additional benefits of co-op memberships, they may choose not to retain it.

### Conflicting ideals and values among members

Co-ops rely extensively on social capital (e.g. networks, relationships, trust) and human resources to be successful. The diminishment of either could lead to serious problems for the co-op (Nilsson et. al., 2012). Thirteen out of 29 co-ops (45%) surveyed reported conflicting ideals and values as a challenge they face. Co-ops suggested that there is potential for conflicts to arise between members, as well as between members and management, as co-op operations diversify and change in order to adapt to new conditions. One co-op interviewed described how long standing members may not support business decisions that shift the co-op away from its original purpose or function, even if it is necessary for the viability of the business.

### Difficulties hiring staff and retaining staff

Co-ops may also face challenges in finding and retaining staff due to a lack of funding or the inability to provide stable year-round employment. The challenge to provide stable well-paying jobs could be a factor contributing to high staff turnover, which was a challenge cited by 12 out of 29 (41%) online survey respondents.

***“We have members, who see what we are trying to do with diversifying the business, and they think we should just do the one thing that benefits them and their business, but they don’t understand that is not a viable business model.”***

**– Interviewee #2  
(Peace Region)**

***“[The] Life using volunteers is coming to an end. Can we hire? Or will we close down”***

**– Interviewee #8  
(Okanagan Region)**



Two defunct co-ops<sup>3</sup> interviewed mentioned their inability to hire staff as one of the main reasons their co-op closed down. One co-op operating in the agricultural service sector noted that they also struggle to find staff with the technical skills and background in agriculture to work for the co-op.

For co-ops making small profit margins, hiring a staff member can be a significant financial burden and can be a decisive factor on whether the co-op can continue to operate. Co-ops that depend solely on volunteers to operate find that they cannot continuously rely on volunteers exclusively, because volunteers “burn out”.

#### 4.7.2. Resources, infrastructure and capital challenges

Like other businesses, co-ops face challenges related to accessing startup and expansion capital. These challenges can be in forms of appropriate advice, resources, infrastructure and capital. In the survey, 12 of 29 responding co-ops (41%) reported access to capital as a challenge. In-depth interviews revealed specific challenges related to acquiring financing from traditional financial institutions and government grant programs. Ten co-ops (34%) cited access to experts and technical assistance as a challenge and 8 co-ops (28%) mentioned that access to technology is a challenge they face. Additionally, 6 co-ops (21%) suggested that access to co-op specific support materials is a challenge.

##### Access to capital

Three out of 24 co-ops (13%) surveyed accessed capital and financing from traditional financial institutions (i.e. domestic chartered banks). According to survey results, co-ops more commonly accessed funding from credit unions, government agencies, non-government organizations, and other businesses. Co-ops are unique from other businesses because they often operate to advance community focused values, and aim to address community needs as opposed to being purely profit driven. When accessing financing through traditional financial institutions, co-ops may struggle to meet the financial threshold requirements of funders. Most often, they may not demonstrate to lenders that they have sufficient revenue or collateral to qualify for loans, and/or lines of credit. When co-ops do qualify for loans, they may be charged a high interest rate or not provided what they actually need to support their long-term business development and capacity building.

##### Limited access to government grants

According to this survey, 8 out of 24 responding co-ops (33%) accessed government grants at some point in the development of their co-op. Some co-ops may be eligible for government grants

***“We are looking to expand our facility, but it’s hard to get financing from banks because they look at our bottom line and the business doesn’t look profitable – because we are reinvesting so much of our revenue into our business.”***

***– Interviewee #2  
(Peace Region)***

***“We were encouraged to apply for a government grant that supported technological advancement in the agriculture sector – but were denied because the grant was only available to non-profits. This was a waste of time for us. There are not many grants for co-ops operating for-profit businesses.”***

***– Interviewee #2  
(Peace Region)***

<sup>3</sup> These two defunct co-ops were not included in our co-op database

but may lack capacity to access the funding due to limited time and expertise to put together successful grant application. Co-ops operating as for-profit businesses are often not eligible for existing government grants.

For all co-ops, applying for funds is a time-consuming process which may require technical skills that co-ops do not have, or require reporting on information that is difficult for co-ops to obtain in the correct format. Government grant rejections are frequent for small scale co-ops and co-ops that do not fit into the delineated application criteria.

Government agencies recognize the potential for co-ops to build, and support local economies, address social issues in communities, and provide meaningful employment. However, this recognition does not always translate into funding and resource allocation for co-ops that is commensurate with the broad social and economic benefits they can provide. Increasing support for co-ops at all levels of government, and translating that support to funding, and resource programming for co-ops could have a significant impact on the growth of the co-op sector.

#### Difficulty in attracting private investors

Unlike private businesses, co-ops confer equal voting rights (one member, one vote). This means that investors cannot acquire majority control in the co-op decision making process regardless of their investment amount. This may make it harder to attract investors for a co-op start-up as the lack of control may discourage traditional investors.

#### Access to experts and support resource materials

Ten out of 29 co-ops (34%) responding to the online survey faced challenges associated with building the business because of a lack of expertise and access to technical assistance from experts. Experts may provide legal advice, support co-ops in accessing financing, and assist with conflict resolution and human resources etc. There may be a few experts who understand the needs of co-ops or insufficient networks connecting co-ops with the appropriate supports.

Six co-ops (21%) cited limited access to support resource materials as a challenge they face. Resource materials include legal and regulatory frameworks about co-op operations, as well as established protocols for board meetings and consensus decision making. With few precedent examples or co-op business resources available, co-ops often reinvent the wheel when it comes to managing their business. Co-ops can spend significant time and money figuring things out, when these resources could be better utilized in growing the business and advancing co-op values.

#### 4.7.3. External factors and stressors

External factors and stressors are those that effect the operations and growth of co-ops, but may not emanate from individual co-ops themselves. Addressing these challenges requires co-ops to work together, advocating to government and other agencies in support of co-op development and operation in BC.

***“Starting a co-op is even harder than starting a small business... For people who want to invest money it can be hard because they don’t have any control.”***

**– Interviewee #4  
(Kootenay Region)**

***“There is no rule book – it costs money to sort out challenges in the business that come from not knowing how to set things up.”***

**– Interviewee #3  
(Cariboo Chilcotin Coast Region)**

***“There is no way to be a good co-op and an aggressive corporate citizen at the same time.”***

**– Interviewee #3  
(Cariboo Chilcotin Coast Region)**

### Competition from other businesses

Thirteen out of 29 (45%) co-ops responding to the survey indicated competition from other businesses as a challenge they face. Competition is increasing from national and international agriculture and food businesses operating under traditional corporate structures. One co-op interviewed suggested that diversification of their businesses was a strategy to remain competitive, but also resulted in increased competition as they diversify into new sectors or offer new products and services. It is challenging for co-ops to run a competitive, viable business, while staying true to the social values (such as equality, equity and solidarity) inherent in co-ops.

### A lack of understanding of the co-op model among funders, government agencies and the general public

Three co-ops who selected the “other” challenges category mentioned the lack of understanding of co-op models as a challenge. There is a lack of recognition of co-ops as a viable business model which is apparent by how often cooperatives are missing as a business type descriptor option on various application forms issued by the government, financial institutes and other businesses. Misunderstandings about the benefits and function of co-ops can negatively impact membership recruitment, access to capital and funding from various entities that may not recognize the potential of co-ops in the agriculture and food sector.



### Financial regulations and taxation

The BC Co-operatives Act limits monetary contributions from members to \$5,000, and caps the member investors at 150 (BC Chamber of Commerce, 2017). This regulation means that in order to generate significant capital during the startup phase, co-ops must engage a large number of investor-members, each with a relatively low investment contribution. This is intended to limit investment risk but has become a barrier for co-op development in the province. The BC Co-op Association is currently lobbying the provincial government on behalf of BC co-ops to increase the member share equity to \$10,000 per member and membership cap to 200 (BC Co-op Association, 2019).

According to the two land co-ops that were interviewed, the BC securities commission law can be a major barrier for land co-ops who must raise significant funds from members in order to purchase land in BC. Additionally, potential land donations to a land co-op for farming uses is subject to capital gains tax<sup>4</sup>- as farming is considered a profit-making activity by the government.

<sup>4</sup> If land is given as a gift to a non-charitable organization, it is considered as selling at its fair market value. This amount is subject to the capital gains tax on the year that the gift is given. (Canada Revenue Agency, 2019).

## 4.8. Recommendations to Address Challenges

The recommendations outlined in this report summarize suggestions from co-op stakeholders made through the survey on how their challenges might be addressed (Figure 19). Respondents selected from a list of potential recommendations from common co-op development policies and supports gleaned from the literature.

When asked how co-ops in the agriculture and food sector could be better supported, respondents recognized greater access to funding as a key support. Co-op funding should support capital and infrastructure investments (cited by 17 out of 26 co-ops, 65%), and staffing (cited by 13 out of 26 co-ops, 50%).

Technical assistance was indicated as another key support needed, with 13 out of 26 co-ops (50%) identifying technical support for feasibility studies and market research a priority. Additionally, 10 co-ops out of 26 co-ops (38%) cited technical assistance for public relations and online presence. Providing additional supports and resources to co-op associations was another a priority (cited by 12 out of 26 co-ops, 46%). Co-op associations may serve as a valuable resource supporting co-ops to access technical assistance and other essential business development support.

Three out of 26 co-ops (12%) identified amendments to co-op regulations and legislation as a recommended support and 12 out of 26 co-ops (46%) cited the need to amend tax regulations so that those who donate to co-op development can receive tax credits. Ten out of 26 co-ops (38%) recognized government procurement of co-op goods and services as a key support. By prioritizing the purchase of co-op goods and services, governments can not only acknowledge the local economic contribution of co-ops, but the social, environmental and community development benefits as well.

### Recommendations to Address Challenges Reported by BC Agriculture and Food Co-ops

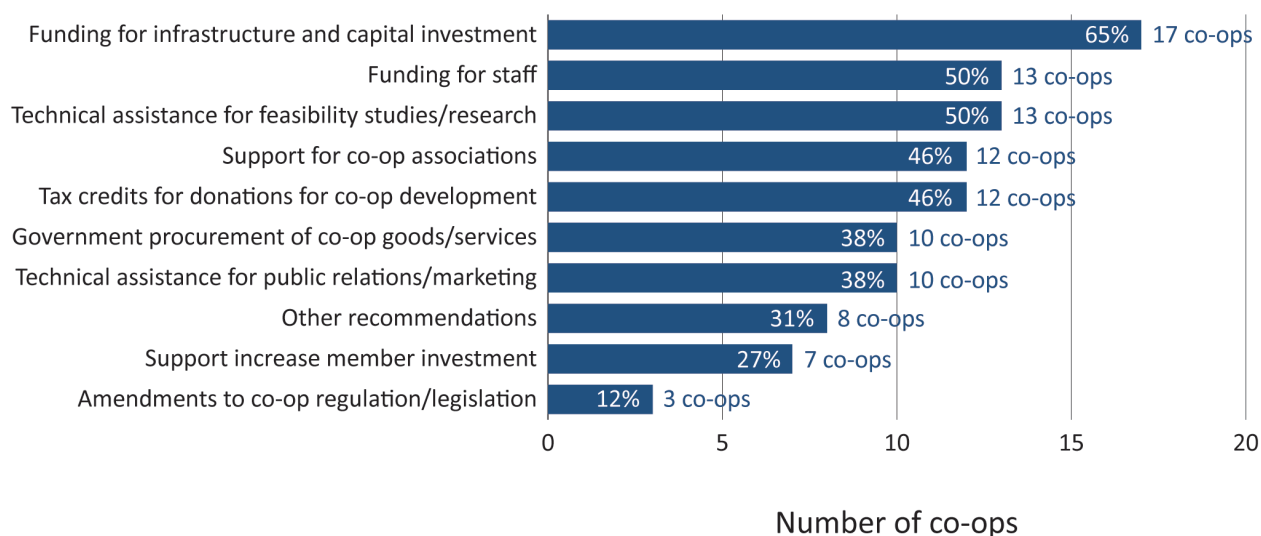


Figure 19: Recommendations for addressing challenges of operating a co-op reported by BC agriculture and food co-ops (26 co-ops responded to this question).



## 5. Conclusion

This study contributes to the limited literature available on the agriculture and food co-op sector in British Columbia. Information from BC Registries and Online Services, and a thorough literature and web search identified 72 agriculture and food co-ops operating across the province. The compilation of this database and direct engagement with the co-ops themselves is a significant step towards identifying the type of co-ops and their activities in the sector.

As of April 2019, 66 out of the 72 co-ops had an online presence and available contact information. All 66 co-ops were contacted, out of which 33 co-ops participated in an online survey (50% response rate) and 14 agreed to in-depth interviews. The focus of this study was to better understand the characteristics of the co-ops in the agriculture and food sector, as well as the challenges they face.

Data collected through the online survey, and in-depth interviews revealed a great diversity of co-op operations in the agriculture and food sector, with activity across the food value chain. Although these co-ops are diverse in their operations and scale, this study identified a number of common challenges that are restricting the growth and development of co-ops in the sector. Through the survey and in-depth interviews the co-ops also highlighted recommendations that may help to address some of the challenges impacting the sector.

The information brought forth by this survey can be used to understand the co-ops' perspectives on challenges and support needed for the establishment and sustained function of co-ops in BC's agriculture and food sector.





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