

Cooperative Model Brings People Together



Both photos courtesy Los de Mora Local Growers' Cooperative



► The value opportunities

In Mora, New Mexico, approaching challenges cooperatively has created benefits and opportunities for this small, rural community (pop. 686 in the town of Mora, and 4,881 in Mora County). Most residents are low income, and many are also of Native American or Spanish descent. The local nonprofit Collaborative Visions, along with county commissioners, business owners, and a network of committed and connected community members work together toward a future that improves economic opportunity, quality of life, and environmental preservation, providing a base to retain or welcome back young adults and to integrate newer residents.

In 2005, a small group of farmers received a grant from Heifer International to revive agriculture in the community. Black Angus heifers, along with training on care, breeding, and management, were introduced to families who formed the Sangre de Cristo Livestock Association to pool resources in managing their new line of business.

The trend of agricultural cooperative formation has continued, when the Los de Mora Local Growers' Cooperative formed in 2012 as a collective of farmers primarily growing produce. With the addition of infrastructure such as hoop houses and high tunnels at members' farms, the growing season has been extended, and area farmers are able to meet more demand and increase their sales. Training in Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) allowed farmers to become GAP certified, and many have also become certified Animal Welfare Approved, a sustainable farming certification that some co-op members have sought for their eggs and meat. Training has also led Los de Mora members to take up beekeeping and sell local honey, as well as raising chickens and selling eggs. Over 30 families have participated in trainings and production of products with members of Los de Mora.

Fourteen area small water and/or sewer systems associations in the region face shared challenges including aging infrastructure, aging volunteer board members, and lack of

economies of scale to be financially sustainable. Regulations governing drinking water systems have become more complex over the years in order to improve safety and environmental outcomes, but they are difficult to comply with for older systems with a small customer base. These water systems have joined together (not interconnected) in a cooperative alliance, similar to the agricultural co-ops, in order to pool resources. The rural drinking water associations can share services including billing, meter reading, water testing, and compliance, either as full members accessing all services or purchase services a la carte as needed.

Similar to many other rural regions of the country, Mora is served by a rural electric cooperative, the Mora-San Miguel Electric Cooperative, which is a key partner in the local economy. The electric co-op is part of the national network of Touchstone Energy Cooperatives. Area stakeholders are exploring whether, in the future, the electric co-op's Mora office might be located with a grocery store to include produce grown by Los de Mora Local Growers' Cooperative and other local products.

The co-ops have different member bases and purposes, but their structures share some similarities. Governance occurs by the owner-members in a transparent way, so that local individuals maintain influence in the decisions and operations of the cooperatives. Not all of Mora's co-ops have staff, but some have volunteers coordinating certain aspects of alliance management.

Collaborative Visions Co-founder Anita LaRan says, "The valuable thing about working cooperatively is that it allows members not only to get experience by helping each other out,

but to build community, and to have opportunities to share services and training.”

► The demand

All of these cooperative models have a core source of demand for their products and services that is local, with increasing demand from outside the community. Los de Mora Local Growers’ Cooperative maintains a market in town that serves local demand, with limited hours, and the community hopes to develop a grocery store in the future. Locally produced foods are also sold at Cid’s Food Market in Taos and the Dixon Cooperative Market in Dixon, NM. Highlands University in Las Vegas, New Mexico has expressed interest in sourcing local foods from the cooperatives in Mora, so this additional institutional demand partner is ready to buy as farmers consider scaling up. The livestock and growers’ cooperatives receive frequent calls from buyers interested in food produced within the region.

Utilities such as electricity and water were developed to serve primarily local residents and businesses, but tourism is a growing area of interest in the community, so the community infrastructure is supporting demand from visitors as well. LaRan describes, “We are providing training for people that might be interested in converting a room in their home or a cabin on their property for an Airbnb. Five people have already set up their rental. They are really excited about it because they have been fully booked and can’t keep up with demand.”

► Putting it together: Bringing the past and the future together

Resource-sharing has its roots in Mora’s history, although LaRan notes that the sense of community that leads to working together has changed over



Courtesy Los de Mora Local Growers’ Cooperative

time, decreasing and increasing with changes in social ties that are partly tied to migration. Originally known as the settlement of San Antonio and Santa Gertrudes, it was established around 1835 by 76 families from Las Trampas, Embudo, and Picuris, New Mexico. Residents worked together to build acequias, a commonly held and operated irrigation water system, and used a land tenure pattern under Spanish and New Mexican law that allowed for some lands to be held in common and established a plaza as shared space in the community’s center.

Going forward, the Mora Valley Tourism Cooperative has been formed around tourism, to bring together partners for trainings such as hosting short-term rentals in homes and cabins. In 2014, Mora received designation for its Arts and Cultural Compound from the New Mexico Arts and Cultural Districts initiative, a state-level partnership comprising New Mexico MainStreet and Department of Cultural Affairs (including New Mexico Arts, Historic Preservation, and Tourism divisions). The process to apply and receive designation was initiated and supported by the Mora County Commission and Collaborative Visions. The Arts and Cultural Compound includes the Mora Valley Spinning Mill, formed in 1998 as a weaving training initiative to process locally produced



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alpaca wool and add value through the arts and now including a gallery of fiber and visual arts. Santa Gertrudes church and grounds, including several historic buildings are also within the geographic area designated as the Arts and Cultural Compound. The tourism cooperative and Arts and Cultural Compound share a website, www.ourmora.org, that highlights community information and amenities such as dining, activities, and services.

Development of lodging facilities, such as short-term rentals including Airbnb and similar websites, are important to increasing the potential for tourism revenue. Economic

development partners are also reaching out to hunting guides to gauge their interest in expanding their businesses to offer more outdoor recreation activities, such as fishing, hiking, or bird-watching guides that capture other segments of the tourist market. At the same time, historic preservation is a key ingredient. Several towns in the area have rehabilitated their historic Spanish Missions, churches that serve as an anchor in the community. Local historic preservation groups are in the process of purchasing other properties and obtaining funding to stabilize and rehabilitate other historic buildings and sites.

Also, a cooperative model and potential products and market opportunities are being explored for woody biomass. Many wood harvesters are already operating in the community, and new markets for underutilized assets such as small-diameter wood could provide new income for those local businesses.

As all of these businesses in different sectors develop, local leaders are aware that there may be a need in the future to form a management co-op. In that scenario, local businesses could share services and human resource assets such as a skilled financial professional, marketing director to develop transactional relationships at a larger scale, or other professional needs unlikely to be paid positions within individual small businesses.

Value chains such as these do not self-organize around market opportunities. Behind the success of the various value chains in Mora is the nonprofit Collaborative Visions and its board of directors. Collaborative Visions is the main link connecting all the value chains to economic development in the whole region.

LaRan notes that it is important for the community that the efforts and skills of people who have moved to Mora recently are integrated into economic development efforts, but

that those efforts benefit long-term residents as well as newcomers.

► Funding the value chains

Grants and contracts have provided important funding for key pieces of the work going on in Mora. Heifer International provided support to farmers through the Sangre de Cristo Livestock Growers Association to obtain Black Angus cattle and begin beef production as a new line of business. USDA funding has supported the development of hoop houses and high tunnels to extend the growing season for produce growers. USDA and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) grants have funded capacity-building work including training and economic development coaching. USDA and U.S. Economic Development Administration funds supported the development of the Mora Valley Spinning Mill. An assessment and cultural plan was conducted by the New Mexico Arts and Cultural Districts, outlining strategies and potential projects to enhance the community for visitors and locals.

Philanthropic support from the McCune Charitable Foundation in Santa Fe has been critical to supporting the work of Collaborative Visions to bring partners together and work toward common goals. Funding from the Rural Community Assistance Corporation's Loan Fund also helped Collaborative Visions be the coordinator of the different value chains.

AmeriCorps VISTA Volunteers have provided additional staffing to assist with community

and economic development efforts, including a VISTA position now that is shared between the Mora County Economic Development Corporation and Mora Arts and Cultural Compound. Goodwill Industries has been a partner providing employment for adults 55 and older, and Home Education Livelihood Program (HELP) New Mexico, a social service agency providing job placement and training as well as other services, has also helped to place individuals seeking work in supporting positions in Mora. Residents in the community also provide a significant amount of volunteer labor. This is a tremendous asset in a small community, although managing volunteers to spread the workload and avoid overburdening individuals remains a challenge.

Revenue generated from co-op memberships covers certain expenses. For example, Los de Mora Local Growers' Cooperative memberships cover some of the direct costs including delivery expenses and utilities at the co-op's facility. In the future, as new market opportunities may offer a larger scale, and the co-op may need a paid staff member to increase capacity beyond the volunteers currently providing assistance.



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the **wealthworks** inventory

- ▶ **Individual capital:** Business owners are increasing their skills through training such as GAP certification, AWA certification, improved efficiency, safety practices, entrepreneurship, and other business skill development.
- ▶ **Intellectual capital:** Local knowledge includes cooperative formation and governance, which has proven to be an asset in inclusive economic development. Training from higher education partners including New Mexico State University and Highlands University as well as from the Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC) increases the knowledge and capacity of local business owners.
- ▶ **Social capital:** Close community ties are evident in many ways, from the help farmers have offered each other to construct hoop houses, and short-term rental operators willing to share their successes and lessons learned, to the social network analysis conducted through the arts and cultural assessment. A group of volunteers writes a local newspaper that keeps growing in quality and number of pages, and they are working on making it available in digital form in the coming months.
- ▶ **Natural capital:** The Mora area has access to a range of ecosystems, higher elevations used for wood gathering and grazing, and lower elevations used for agriculture, processing, and other development. The water alliance helps small drinking water associations to stay in compliance with environmental and other regulations while maintaining and securing adequate and safe water sources.
- ▶ **Built capital:** Acequias remain in use today for irrigation systems, while new infrastructure such as hoop houses and high tunnels support more intensive agriculture. The Mora Arts and Cultural Compound serves as an important built asset.
- ▶ **Political capital:** County commissioners are supportive of asset-based community economic development efforts occurring through the cooperatives and other local institutions. Assistance is provided at the regional level through the North Central New Mexico Economic Development District, including applying for AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer positions. Training from state and federal agency partners increases local capacity related to agriculture and environmental management.
- ▶ **Financial capital:** Increased agricultural sales and overnight tourism increase the financial success of local households and businesses.
- ▶ **Cultural capital:** Historic properties such as the St. Vrain Mill, St. Gertrude's church and buildings, and other missions and Spanish colonial architecture have been or are in the process of being preserved for future use. Annual festivals and the revival of Mora's theatre has brought the community closer with the participation of many families.
- ▶ **Local ownership and control:** The tendency of community members to pursue new opportunities through cooperatives ensures that local residents and business owners have a voice in important decisions affecting the community.
- ▶ **Better livelihoods:** Meeting local and external demand in the agriculture, arts, and tourism sectors provides new earning potential, including for the community's lower income residents.

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Personal communication with Anita LaRan, Blanca Surgeon, Scott Beckmann, and Eric Ghahate.



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