

After a first article about [Zero Waste with No Waste NOLA](#), this new “Deux évades are meeting” leads you to Los Angeles to see [SoLA Food Co-op](#), an alternative to supermarkets.

Feeding ourselves is an essential point of our consumption. Unfortunately, in our western society, this primary need became easier and harder at the same time. The supermarket is now a central place and, sometimes, the only one to give food access. However, **the products’ quality**, as well as **social practices and human resources** which are applied, are often criticized.

And you will ask: “How to escape them?”



An alternative emerged in the U.S.A.: Food Coop!

Are you familiar with this? We were not, before we met Monique. The volunteer for SoLA Food Co-op in L.A. answered **ALL** our questions!

A What?

Behind this name hides a simple principle: bring back citizens’ power of decision on the shelves! The system works like a cooperative. And as every coop, it needs people to develop itself. At SoLA Food Co-op, *“you pay \$200 US for a lifetime membership per household.”* What does this imply?

- **First of all**, you can choose that the store sells.
- **Secondly**, members-owners elect the board, but also can have an impact on how the co-op is run.
- **Thirdly**, they benefit of exclusive discounts and also of profit sharing dividends at the end of the year.
- **Fourthly**, some coop asks a volunteer participation from members of 4h a month, approximately.

And that is not all! As Monique said to us, by taking part in this project *“you are also offering the benefit to community members that are not buying membership to access healthier food.”* **Yes, Food cooperatives are open to everyone.** So even, people who can’t pay \$200 US for membership can benefit from it

implantation in the neighborhood. And this is a good thing according to SoLA's volunteer.

How is born SoLA Food Co-op?



"The seed of the idea was born in 2011." Monique told us that the founder, **Bahni Turpin**, arrived in the neighborhood some times before. After she found out that there were not so many places to shop here, **someone suggested she opens a supermarket.** And she discovered the cooperative's model. *"She realized she could inspire the people in the community to actually co-own a supermarket with her."*

Why in South L.A.?

"Our neighborhood is often called a food desert. Where there is not enough food per every person." The few stores in South L.A. are little convenient store, selling low quality and unhealthy products, like 7eleven. The access to good food is a real problem here. *"So SOLA Food Coop is thriving to bring healthy food in the community, to people who can't leave the community."* This neighborhood is also known to be **one of the poorest in L.A.** (with a majority of brown and black people), a lot of people can't go to better supermarkets. Public transportation is difficult in this area and few of them have a car.

"Our goal is not to make a huge profit. We really want the community to benefit from healthy food."

A Community With Bad Health

Healthy food. These two words were recurrent in our interview with SoLA Food Co-op. We could think that it is due to a trend. Actually, it comes from a tragic observation. A lot of inhabitants of South L.A. are suffering from coronary heart diseases and diabetes¹. These pathologies are often due to a poor diet. Yet, **Bahni and her team want to change** this by bringing a better food access to this community.

"We envision the supermarket to have the fruit and vegetable section, the bulk goods section (nuts, rice, beans, ...) but also cereals and cheeses, like the full-service grocery store." Monique went further and explained to us that they created partnership with local farmers and artisans to supply the Co-op. *"So the idea is to keep our money inside the community."* And it will be done by allowing

¹ Coronary heart diseases: 178 per 100,000 in South L.A. against 131 per 100,000 in South Bay / Diabetes : 11% of adults in South L.A. have been diagnosed with diabetes. Sources : [City of Los Angeles - Health Atlas 2013](#). Figure 16, pg 57 et figure 18, pg 59

people to buy inside the neighborhood and farmers/artisans to sell their goods.
The beautiful basis of circular economy.

How is the project going?

Members and volunteers: the base of every cooperative

SoLA Food Co-op reunites almost **200 members owners** now (September 2017). It is great, but Monique told us they need more to open the space they envision. "Our goal is to gather 1000 members from the community to allow us to build the supermarket." However, it can be less if they start with a smaller space, waiting to have more funds in the future to extend.

In the U.S.A., **it takes 2 to 5 years to open co-op supermarkets.** It is hard work due to the need to being supported by the local community, so by sufficient numbers of members owners, to have a loan from banks and at the end open a store.

Fortunately, **Bahni can count on about thirty of motivated volunteers!**

Including about 10 engaged on a regular basis and help set up events. Their common goal is to help SoLA Food Co-op being known from most of the community.



What are their missions?

The events help explain to people from the neighborhood the interest of being part of a co-op supermarket. "*We can order them in two classes: the highlight of local artisans and farmers and education to food.*" For the first one, their partners come (a person who makes homemade granola, someone who cooks vegan food, etc.) to present them to the community. The seconds aim to sensitize people to the impact of food on their health. **All these workshops are creating a cohesion spirit between the project and the community.**

The Issues

It is hard for people to envision something that's not physical. They tell us, "Where is it?" and our answer is "It is coming! As soon as you become part of it!"



It is the biggest problem which these projects are confronted to. The major part of their work is done before the opening of the store. Indeed, they need members to open their doors. Unfortunately, as Monique told us, it is hard because "*the inhabitants might feel worried, or like it is a risk.*" **So it is important to find the right word.** Especially in this community, where people are not used to possess (nor a car, or a house) so a supermarket might seem a huge mountain. It is why the volunteers care a lot about meeting the inhabitants directly, through events, to reassure them!


The idea seduce you, but there is no Food Co-op in your town?

Why not create you own? It is possible. :)

Soon on our blog : Fix It Clinic, a solution to planned obsolescence.

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