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Taking A New Look
At The News

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Editorial

Make co-operatives part of EAC agenda

LAST week a retired don and former head of Moshi University College of Co-operatives and Business Studies, Prof Suleiman Chambo made what we strongly believe are pertinent proposals on how Tanzania and other East African Community countries could enhance co-operative skills as a tool for people's economic empowerment.

Firstly, he called upon the government to incorporate co-operative education in the curricula of all schools in the country to prepare the nation's youths for co-operative self-employment.

The don likened training in co-operative skills at the university level to 'training old dogs new tricks'- too wasted to serve any purpose.

Secondly, he urged EAC countries - Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi - to consider having the co-operatives as one of their agenda if they are to command the regional market.

We are inclined to fully back the proposals bearing in mind the history of the co-operative movement in Tanzania and our experience in the shaping of the sub-regional integration process.

Tanzania's co-operatives have a long and proud history. The movement was particularly strong in the first decade of

independence. Since then, however, the outlook has been less positive.

For a time, co-operatives became a tool for top-down governmental policies and were effectively integrated into state structures. When trade liberalization was introduced in the 1990s, the cooperative movement became unresponsive to its members' needs and was therefore, unprepared for competition from the private sector.

The turning point came in 2000, when a special Commission was established by then-Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa to investigate what could be done to rejuvenate the country's co-operative sector. The Commission was blunt in its critique of the movement, which it said suffered from a lack of capital; unwieldy structures; problems with poor leadership, misappropriation and theft.

While the country is currently implementing the Co-operative Reform and Modernisation Programme, expected to run up to 2015, the twists and turns in the history of the co-operative movement serves one lesson: We have not given serious attention to the question of imparting co-operative skills to people who can make a difference.

We have treated co-operatives as any other business and forgot that it has its distinct characteristics as a business organisation owned and operated by a group of individuals for their mutual benefit, people who believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.

We thus support Prof Chambo's proposal that such noble ideals must be inculcated in the youth from early school life by making entrepreneurial and co-operative skills part of the school curricula.

This, we believe, will enable Tanzanian children who have not been privileged to secure white collar jobs to engage in small scale business activities and build a strong business base with which they can sail safely in regional and international markets.

It is no secret that Tanzanian businessmen, traders and entrepreneurs have not done very well in regional and international arena because they have been acting as lone rangers.

It's time to change the strategy and form co-operative entities that would make an impact. This should go hand in hand with making co-operatives an EAC agenda.