

How cooperatives work for women workers - Voices from the movement

There is no doubt that in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, cooperatives can and do work for working women in terms of economic, social and political empowerment. At the same time, it is widely recognized that cooperatives, and society at large, cannot do without the contributions of women if equitable and sustainable social and economic development is to be attained and maintained.

On the occasion of International Women's Day 2010, representatives of the cooperative movement from the African and international level - Stefania Marcone, Chairperson of the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) Gender Equality Committee, Ardelline Masinde, Programme Officer Adequate Housing and Gender Equality of the Swedish Cooperative Centre (SCC), Stephen Musinguzi, HIV/AIDS and Gender Workplace Committee Chairperson of the Uganda Cooperative Alliance (UCA) and Agnes Namuhisa, Director for Cooperative Development of Tanzania Federation of Cooperatives (TFC) - share their views on why cooperatives work for working women, what some of the hurdles to be overcome for gender-equitable participation in the movement are, and what their respective organizations are doing in this field.

How do cooperatives work for working women?

S. Marcone: Our experience worldwide shows that through cooperatives, millions of women have been able to change their lives, improving their living conditions and those of their families and communities - they have found through the cooperative enterprise a route towards self-empowerment and development that worked for them. In fact, both in the Southern and in the

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Northern hemispheres, cooperatives provide a tool of women's empowerment, allowing them to be significant in society and economy. Cooperatives provide women with employment opportunities all over the world, and this means decent work opportunities, not just jobs. Moreover they promote women's capabilities and capacity building through training and leadership programmes, and thereby contribute to foster women's advancement and access to tangible and intangible assets. In fact, in many developing countries, cooperatives enable women to have access to property and key productive factors and, generally speaking, to expand their basic capabilities, such as being adequately nourished, sheltered, educated and so on. In industrialized countries, cooperatives contribute effectively to enabling working women to have access to policies that allow them to reconcile work and family responsibilities. Furthermore, cooperatives, as democratic form of business, foster women's participation in decision-making processes. Of course the situation and needs are different in areas around the

world but as a common feature we can say that cooperatives can be and already are a form of enterprise which meets the needs of women. This is why millions of women have chosen this form of business.

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A. Masinde: Generally cooperatives have contributed to improve livelihoods for women and have served as an avenue in which women have exercised their right to participation. Membership comes with other rights and obligations. It gives one the opportunity to access services such training, education and information, dividends, to vote, to make decisions, to run for leadership positions, etc. It also gives one access to services, credit and to other products that

the cooperative may provide.

A. Namuhisa: In Tanzania, both employed and self employed Women are well represented in Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies. Through their SACCOS women can access fund/capital for conducting other income generating activities and hence increase their income and support their families

S. Musinguzi: Cooperatives can work for working women by providing equal opportunities to participate in decision making at all levels, especially those that directly affect their lives; equal access to and control of resources and benefits of development; ensuring that both women and men have the necessary capacities to participate and contribute fully in development initiatives; addressing all forms of discrimination, subordination, violation and exploitation on the basis of sex and age; and through the empowerment of women and men, not just through practical needs but also higher levels of strategic interests including full participation and control.

What are some of the hurdles that would need to be overcome for the full potential of cooperatives for women empowerment to be realized?

A. Masinde: It is not a secret that women contribute over 90% of the labour in the cooperatives but do not receive a proportionate share of benefits. Women have triple roles in the society which make it difficult to participate in cooperative affairs due to their overwhelming responsibilities and workload they face at home. Additionally, in a typically African setting women are members by virtue of representing their husband. The qualification of membership combined with prevailing inheritance and succession practice make it difficult for women to independently join the coop. Furthermore, decision making structures are dominated by men; even when women have membership they tend not to participate in decision making structures because of traditional beliefs and cultural stereotypes. Patriarchy is therefore a major factor that has to be addressed in order to overcome some of the existing stereotypes about the position of women in society. Another



Ardelline Masinde, Programme Officer
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area that would need to be looked at is the bylaws that govern the cooperatives to ensure that there are no prohibitive laws to participation of women.

S. Musinguzi: The largest number of the world's poor are women, in spite of the fact that women are to a great extent economically active and work longer days than men as the main food producers in the families. In Uganda for example, women in general carry out the majority of all agricultural work. Discrimination of women is largely due to the prevailing patriarchal structure, and results in women's knowledge, competence and abilities not being utilised to full potential. Whereas women's contributions to the global economy are growing rapidly, women's labour remains undervalued and under-counted in national accounts; and data disaggregated by gender are still poorly developed.

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A. Namuhisa: Key obstacles and hurdles to be addressed are many and include land ownership and inheritance, cultural constraints, the lack of awareness that women can become members, women's workload, and the tarnished image of cooperatives in the past. As for cooperative law and policy, it can also be a hurdle: for instance in accordance to previous Cooperative Acts, the condition for membership which required a member to be one occupying land was mostly misinterpreted to mean that only men are entitled to cooperative membership. However, to a large extent the current law affords equal opportunities for men and women and stipulates that " Cooperative are voluntary organizations open to all persons able to use the serviceswithout gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination".

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S. Marcone: First of all, cooperatives, as grass-roots organisations are linked to the specific contexts where they operate and, as we know, all over the world, hurdles continue to exist which prevent the full potential of women empowerment. In this international context,



Stefania Marcone, Chairperson ICA Gender Equality Committee

cooperatives represent an important actor which has the flexibility to adapting to changing conditions. Of course, we do still have a number of problems to tackle in order to enable women to benefit from the full potential that the cooperative model of enterprise presents. For instance, too often women are underrepresented in decision-making positions, and in many countries there are constraints to women's membership in cooperatives due for example to the link between ownership of property or head of household status required for membership. These issues need to be addressed taking a multilevel and multifaceted approach. At the national and local level – the first level -

policies and programmes that create an enabling environment to foster women participation need to be put in place. These need to involve state actors, local cooperative organisations,

civil society and all the different stakeholders. At the same time at the regional and international levels, regional and international actors and institutions must be involved. Both these levels mean that organisations like ICA, UN Agencies, like ILO, can play a significant role in supporting locally self-decided process of women's empowerment and gender equality.

What activities to further women empowerment in and through the cooperative movement is your organization undertaking?

A. Namuhisa: As the umbrella organization of cooperative movement in Tanzania, the Tanzania Federation of Cooperatives' responsibility is to address obstacles to women's equitable participation. A priority action should be to first adopt the ICA Gender Strategy Framework, and then to develop a Cooperative gender policy as well as cooperative movement interventions along a country plan to promote gender equality which is aligned with the national Gender Policy.



Agnes Namuhisa, Director for Cooperative Development, TFC

A. Masinde: SCC has been working with mainstreaming; we have been focusing on all women in cooperatives. This could be an interesting area to look into further by way of in-depth study. We already have had one study done by the Canadian Cooperative Association on legal barriers to women participation in agricultural marketing coops in 2007; the scope could be expanded on. SCC also has plans to work and lobby around prohibitive regulatory frameworks. These are some of the areas that we have working on so that participation of women in not hindered.



Stephen Musinguzi, UCA HIV/AIDS & Gender workplace committee chairperson

S. Musinguzi: The Uganda Cooperative Alliance (UCA) is aiming to contribute to better livelihoods for both men and women through policies and programs that give due attention to gender issues. In order to achieve this, it has undertaken a number of measures, including the design of a Gender Policy which was approved by the board in 2005, the provision of training on gender equality to staff, the introduction of a requirement that a third of the participants in any training or any other capacity building activity must be women as a way of encouraging the involvement of both women and men in its activities, and of an eligibility criterion that a third of the board members of participating primary cooperatives must be women in order to promote women leadership.

S. Marccone: The International Co-operative Alliance has always been particularly concerned about gender equality in cooperatives. The ICA Women's Committee was founded in 1965. It was replaced with the Gender Equality Committee (GEC), a forum for discussion and promotion of equality between women and men, in 2000, when the ICA General Assembly approved the ICA Gender Strategy, which represented a crucial step in cooperative movement's path towards gender equality. Over the last 10 years, in different areas of the world, women cooperators have created regional Gender Equality Committees, which have implemented a significant amount of work for the advancement of women, including carrying out projects and programmes for empowering women co-operators, thus increasing significantly women's

participation and leadership in their respective cooperative movements. Looking at the future, we are conscious that much work still remains to be done; the decision of UN to proclaim 2012 as International Year of Cooperatives, represents for all us a crucial opportunity to reflect on the results attained and on what is still missing. As cooperatives work for women in all countries of the world, and as women hugely contribute to the economic and social performances and success of cooperatives, we must make it our responsibility to more fully recognize the contribution that women cooperators make in creating a sustainable and equitable world for all.

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