

# COOPERATIVE AS A MODEL OF POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY: STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVENESS IN UGANDA

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper presents findings of a study whose objectives are to explore the history and current activities and challenges of the co-operative movement in Uganda as one of the development options for poverty alleviation; and to examine strategies for making it an effective model of poverty alleviation in this 21st Century. Poverty in Uganda is a reality, with Uganda now categorized among the least developed of the developing countries.*

*This is an exploratory research using qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis. It is a desk review of existent literature and related documents and interviews of key persons in co-operative and finance-related institutions in Uganda. The paper establishes that the co-operative movement, from colonial times to date, has undergone a lot of challenges, both emanating from the cooperatives themselves and those from its contexts. It also establishes that despite many interventions to alleviate poverty by government, especially in the last 20 years, poverty still bites a very significant proportion of the population, mainly due to inappropriate model of intervention.*

*The paper agrees that Uganda government's current promotion of co-operatives is an indication of how it believes in its importance as a complementary development model. The paper argues that for co-operatives to effectively fight poverty amidst the challenges and meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, policy innovations should include, firstly, action by the government to provide support and conducive legal environment for the operation of co-operatives and, secondly, reforms within the societies themselves to enable them overcome internal and external forces. The paper also concludes that though the role of government and cooperatives are significant in the fight against poverty, the Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the private sectors should equally be engaged in this struggle if meaningful development is to be realized and poverty in particular, fought.*

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## INTRODUCTION

This research was undertaken to explore the role of co-operatives in poverty alleviation in Uganda today. The antecedent of the co-operative movement and the activities to the present day, including the challenges has been examined. The paper is divided into five sections: The introduction and background, theoretical and practical experience, the antecedent and challenges up to 1980; 1980s to the present day; and lastly the strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century is emphasized because it is during this period that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) targets are expected to be met and Uganda hopes to eradicate poverty and improve living conditions for all Ugandans (Uganda APRM, 2009).

Between 1998 and 2008, poverty eradication was the core objective of Uganda's development strategy (Republic of Uganda, 2000). The aim was to reduce poverty levels from 44 percent in 1997 to below 10 percent in 2017 (Manyire, 2009) and to meet the MDGs by 2015. Over the last decade therefore, Uganda's development strategy was implemented within the framework of the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP). The PEAP was developed in 1997, revised in 1999/2000 and in 2003/4 as a comprehensive national policy framework, which guided national planning. Since eighty five percent of Uganda's estimated population of 31 million lives in the rural areas where they depend mainly on agriculture for their livelihood, agriculture on average accounts for about 20.9 percent of the GDP<sup>1</sup>, the government believes the agricultural sector is in a stronger position for spearheading the transformation. A major intervention therefore, among others, to operationalise PEAP was PMA (Plan for Modernization of Agriculture) through many intervention areas one of which is the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) (Republic of Uganda, 2004). Other integrated interventions specific to some vulnerable communities include NURP (Northern Uganda Rehabilitation Program), NUSAF (Northern Uganda Social Action Fund), KALIP (Karamoja Livelihoods Program); ALREP (Agricultural Livelihoods Rehabilitation Project) and RALNUC (Restoration of Agricultural Livelihoods for Northern Uganda Component). In addition, in 2006, a government funded national program, commonly known as Bona Bagaggawale<sup>2</sup> was initiated by President Yoweri Museveni as a core of the sub-county based economic development strategy.

Due to the interventions above, since 1990s, real growth is estimated to have averaged 6 percent per annum (Uganda APRM, 2009). Despite tremendous economic growth

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<sup>1</sup> Background to the budget 2008/9 read during the Financial Year ending June 2008

<sup>2</sup> A vernacular term which means "prosperity for all" in English

rates realized in the last eighteen years (1990-2008), Uganda still finds herself in a situation where poverty is pervasive in most sections of the society. Up to 20 percent of Ugandans are still living in chronic poverty (Uganda APRM, 2009). The most recent statistics by UNESCO show that of the 31 million Ugandans, 5 million are malnourished, with a mortality rate of over 137 children out of every 1,000 dying before their fifth birthday, while 76 out of every 1,000 die before their first birthday. The country also has a total of 4.8 million secondary school enrolment per year only, with an adult literacy rate of 66.8 percent. The same report names Uganda among the least developed of developing countries, with a three year average estimate of gross national income per capita threshold of US\$905 out of a threshold of US\$1,086 for graduation from LDC status (Kulabako, 2009). Although Uganda has made progress in reducing poverty, the Government acknowledges that there is general evidence of inequality beyond incomes as this statement attests: "Despite the government's efforts, there are widening inequalities with regard to access to quality social services between the rich and the poor, between regions, between rural and urban areas and between social groups. More interestingly, some segments of the population seem not to have benefited much from the mainstream development programs/interventions"<sup>3</sup>. Why has fighting poverty been unsuccessful?

### **Problem statement**

Due to the public concern about the poverty situation in the country, the researcher carried out a pilot survey in 2008 with 46 master's degree students enrolled in the prestigious Social Sector Planning and Management program at Makerere University where the researcher teaches. The students were from different backgrounds characterized by age, sex, place of birth in Uganda, political affiliation and work experience. When asked to rank at least four major obstacles to the effective fight against poverty in Uganda, a common pattern emerged as follows: up to 83 percent of the respondents reported inappropriate intervention of top-bottom approach to development; 75 percent mentioned corruption by the implementers; 70 percent mentioned poor prioritization of the budget by government; 67 percent mentioned dependency on foreign markets/foreigners; and 67 percent mentioned internal conflict and disharmony. When asked which of the bottom-up approaches would be most suitable for Uganda, 80 percent mentioned the co-operative movement and justified this by saying that it puts the interest of the community at the centre

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<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, "Inequality beyond income in Uganda: Does it call for more public response?" Discussion Paper 14

of development because it operates on the basis of values and principles that leave members in control of their destiny. To the respondents, the top-bottom approach is considered non-participatory, based on incorrect and inadequate information, leaves gaps for manipulation and thus could be used to exploit the intended beneficiaries. The research thus proceeded to examine the role of co-operatives in the development process, also being motivated by two issues; firstly there is little macro data on co-operatives in Uganda (Tayebwa, 2009) and secondly, many countries, for example Israel, has eliminated poverty using this bottom-up co-operative development model (Tayebwa, 2009).

Key objectives of the research:

- i. To examine the antecedent, activities and challenges of co-operatives in Uganda to the present day;
- ii. To identify strategies to enable the co-operative movement to become an effective development model for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## **METHODS**

This was an exploratory research using qualitative approaches and predominantly a desk analysis also involving interview of 9 key people (KII) in the co-operative fraternity, namely the Ministry of Tourism, Trade and Industry where the Minister and the Commissioner for Cooperatives were interviewed; the Project Manager, the Manager, Agribusiness Unit, both of Uganda Co-operative Alliance (UCA); a senior statistician with Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS); Governor, Bank of Uganda and a senior Banking Officer (Foreign); Manager and Secretary, Uganda Co-operative Society and Credit Union (UCSCU); and three focus group discussions with Namukora Co-operative Savings and Credit Limited. The last were three groups of 10 each- male, female and youth. The Namukora Co-operative was purposively selected because it is an active society and operates in one of the most poverty stricken parts of Uganda, the north. It was thought that by selecting this society, better views and experience of primary co-operatives could be obtained. The disaggregating by gender and youth groups was intended to tap the different experiences of each category that would otherwise not be obtained if they were interviewed together. The views obtained during the pilot survey were considered reliable since the KIIs were considered most informed on this sector, and from different background which represented different segments of Uganda's population.

## **Theoretical Basis of Co-operative Movement and some Practical Experience**

The International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) defines a co-operative as, “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.”<sup>4</sup> The principles of co-operation are open membership, democratic control of members, relative equality of share capital, and return to members proportionate to business done through co-operatives (Crawford et al., 1981). A well managed co-operative is expected to reward virtue and repudiate greed, avarice and exploitation.

The co-operative movement in Uganda operates on the western model birthed mainly as an alternative to the full-blooded emergence of the capitalist era (Crawford, et al., 1981). To this author, its application as a model of development is premised mainly on five development theories: modernisation, dependency, neo-liberalism, populist and globalisation.

Firstly, many theorists, including Hyden (1980; 1983), have argued that the peasant’s mode of production prevails in Africa with small independent units of production with no structurally enforced co-operatives and little exchange between the various units of production. To Hyden (1980; 1983), these characteristics are some of the root causes of underdevelopment which must be addressed, if progress is to take place. Given this modernisation perspective, it is pertinent to point out that the peasants’ question occupies a special place in the existing theories of development in developing countries. All the modernisation theories emphasize transforming the peasant economy with institutional management, such as the co-operative movement, if these states are to enter the ranks of modern societies. Secondly, the co-operative movement identifies with the dependency (dependentistas) theory (Haines, 2000) in which the Third World economies are heavily dependent on the First World not only for markets but also for policies, for all their products, both industrial and agricultural, with a high level of inequality between the centre and the periphery. This dependency exists not only in national systems but also in the pattern of economic relations between hegemonic powers and their clients (Black, 1991). To break this inequality cord, one needs a critical organised mass, thus the inevitability of a co-operative movement. Thirdly, the author considers a co-operative movement as a reaction to neo-liberalism which has

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ica.coop/la-ica/> . Accessed on 29-12-2009

over time witnessed a decline in the influence of Keynesian economics and the paring down of the welfare state, coupled with the resurgence of neoclassical economics and new right social theory which stresses the role of the market (Haines, 2000). As neo-liberalism or market liberalism, characterised by market competition, has become the dominant view of development today, it is only prudent that the poor organise themselves in order to effectively compete in all their business activities. Fourthly, the co-operative movement owes a lot to the populist perspective on development (Allen and Thomas, 1992; Galli, 1992; Korten, 1990). Because co-operatives are community-based, membership-driven and emphasize people as agents of their own development, these fit them within this theory. Lastly, from the globalisation perspective, the co-operative movement today has borrowed heavily. For example, all their principles are universally applicable whenever the movement is operating. Their development roadmaps are firmly guided by the global political, economic and cultural processes and ideals. With the unevenness of the impact of globalisation, together with providing new opportunities and constraints for local development, and by bringing in the fundamental problem of increasing inequality at the local level due to unequal power relations (Berner and Conyers, 1998), it is only an organised community, in the form of a co-operative, that can be an effective engine for poverty alleviation.

Generally, co-operative advocates agree that human development is obstructed by three sets of problems: a) Concentration of power within government and large private sector firms; b) Bureaucracies which tend to evoke narrow economic and technical criteria and procedures as a basis for their decisions and general operations; c) Exclusion mechanisms which work through the state and market and thus marginalise the vast majority of poor people from political and economic life. Co-operatives attempt to address these obstacles. Practically, co-operatives and poverty reduction are inseparable as evidence in Tanzania, Sri Lanka (Birchall and Simmons, 2009) and Malaysia reveals. Tayebwa (2009) gives some of the experiences thus: In Kenya, co-operative societies are a source of 45 percent of GDP and 31 percent of national savings and deposits, 90 percent of pyrethrum and 95 percent of cotton. In Brazil, co-operatives produce 72 percent of wheat, 44 percent of barley, 43 percent of soy, 39 percent of milk, 38 percent of cotton, 21 percent of coffee and 16 percent of maize. In Norway dairy co-operatives produce 99 percent of milk and 76 percent of timber. Globally co-operatives provide 100 million jobs, 20 percent more than multinational enterprises. In Switzerland, cooperatives are the largest employer. In France 21,000 co-operatives employ 700,000 people. In Italy 70,400 co-operatives societies employ 1 million people.

Together with the above, it can be concluded that the co-operative movement is a better development model because it provides solution to all causes of poverty, by creating employment in diverse activities, being spread in both rural and urban, with no discrimination for membership, survives across generations and provides education to members (Tayebwa, 2009).

### **Co-operative Movement in Uganda: A Review of the Antecedent up to 1980**

The co-operative movement in Uganda resulted from a protracted historical struggle by Uganda farmers against exploitation by foreign commercial firms that dominated commercial agriculture during the colonial era. In the early 1910s, African co-operative groups were vexed by the obvious collusion between alien commercial entrepreneurs and the colonial state that resulted in banning Africans' participation in the more lucrative business of processing and marketing export crops. Their struggle was successful and African farmers organised into co-operative societies and were permitted by the colonial administration to engage in commercial cropping operations.<sup>5</sup> The first co-operative to be formed was Kinakulya in 1913 (Tayebwa, 2009).

Nevertheless, the 1946 Co-operative Societies Ordinance gave the Registrar of Co-operatives excessive powers to control and regulate co-operative societies. The African co-operative groups resented this interference in their internal affairs, and organised to demonstrate their grievances. By the early 1950s, they had succeeded in having this Ordinance repealed, which reduced the power of the Registrar of Co-operatives and helped to gain the participation of Africans in processing and marketing cotton.<sup>6</sup> Despite this success in improving their external environment, weaknesses in the internal capacity continued to undermine the effectiveness of co-operative societies. "Vested interests working inside and outside these societies were undermining the values and principles of co-operatives," were some of the weaknesses reported by a UCA official.

The government introduced a new Co-operative Societies Act in 1970 ostensibly to control such devious acts. In reality, however, co-operative societies were once again placed firmly under the control of a government ministry. State functionaries became

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<sup>5</sup> Uganda District Information Portal, "Reviving Co-operatives in Uganda", Accessed at <http://www.dip.go.ug/english/co-operatives/> on 06/02/ 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Uganda District Information Portal, "Reviving Co-operatives in Uganda", Accessed at <http://www.dip.go.ug/english/co-operatives/> on 06/02/ 2009.

a new cadre of vested interest groups that was interested more in their own personal welfare than in the welfare of members or the health of the organization.<sup>7</sup> Member participation in the affairs of the co-operatives simply provided a façade behind which co-operatives leaders, staff of the government's co-operative department, and union officials pursued their personal interests, unhindered by compulsions of equity or empowerment. Consequently, many members abandoned societies, in which they had lost faith.<sup>8</sup> The period 1971-1981 is known as the era of co-operative decline in Uganda. The major drawback, according to a UCA official, was, "the expulsion of Asians by Amin in 90 days which led to economic upheavals of the 70s." The Amin era (1971-1979) was characterised by trade malpractices – magendo – such as overcharging and creating artificial shortages, amongst other malpractices, which led to the decline in the coffee and cotton trade (Kyamulesire, 1988).

### *The death of co-operatives*

The introduction of a liberalised macro-economic environment in 1987 presented both an opportunity and a threat to the UCA. The liberalised market was supposed to bring more players scampering after farmers' produce, offering them higher prices (Muhwezi-Bonge, 2009). Unfortunately, "the forces of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation created a climate where the weak were increasingly marginalized," said a UCA official. Under the free market mechanisms, there was very little the government could do to control the constant price fluctuations due to forces of demand and supply and a number of other factors, such as weather and consumption trends. However, liberalised economic rules provided an opportunity for the more capable district unions to participate in export marketing, thereby generating additional financial benefits for the primary co-operative societies and for individual farmers.<sup>9</sup>

UCA adopted a series of measures to deal with the obstacles created by liberalisation, by, among others, encouraging district unions to allow some of their affiliated primary co-operative societies to trade directly with non-co-operative buyers of processed coffee. To further strengthen internal capabilities among its member societies, UCA organised a series of delegate conferences at which primary society members

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<sup>7</sup> Uganda District Information Portal, "Reviving Co-operatives in Uganda", Accessed at <http://www.dip.go.ug/english/co-operatives/> on 06/02/ 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Uganda District Information Portal, "Reviving Co-operatives in Uganda", Accessed at <http://www.dip.go.ug/english/co-operatives/> on 06/02/ 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Uganda District Information Portal, "Reviving Co-operatives in Uganda", Accessed at <http://www.dip.go.ug/english/co-operatives/> on 06/02/ 2009.



questioned district- and federation-level officials and demanded justification for the actions taken by these officials. Despite these initiatives, major challenges remained. Most significantly, power continued to remain in the hands of those who themselves were not producers. In this way, societies remained vulnerable to capture by vested interests.<sup>10</sup>

Over the years, government interference, mismanagement, fraud, and pressure from the donors combined to discredit the co-operative movement (Muhwezi-Bonge, 2009). Co-operatives were finally disbanded in the mid-1990s on the advice of the World Bank. Some of the country's most promising co-operatives, such as West Acholi Co-operative Union and Lango Co-operative Union, collapsed. Despite all odds, "Nyakatonzi in Kasese district has remained the most active," said a UCA official.

It can be observed that the history and challenges of the co-operative movement in Uganda up to 1980 are not very different from other counterparts in the developing countries such as Sri Lanka (Ebert, 1994; Jaraweera, 1990) and Tanzania (Banturaki, 2000). In these states, the co-operative movement was a colonial creation, initiated by native farmers as production and sales societies to compete against the dominant white community and had restrictive Acts to control their activities.

## **Co-operatives Activities and Challenges in the Fight Against Poverty-1980s to Present Day**

### ***Poverty scenario in Uganda***

Over the last two decades, the government of Uganda, supported by partner- donors, civil society, and private sector, has contributed to the change in overcoming decades of, amongst other development challenges, mass poverty. Major advances (cf. Omona, 2008; GoU, 2007; UNDP, 2008b; UNDP, 2007) have been made over the past decade in the national economic and welfare indices thus:

- Inflation brought under control at 4.8 percent per annum and private investment in real terms as a percentage of GDP rising from 9.1 percent in 1991 to 15.6 percent in 2003.
- With the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997, gross primary school enrolment rose from 2.5 million pupils to 7.5 million in 2005; the national literacy rate increased from 61.8 percent in 1996 to 70 percent in 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Uganda District Information Portal, "Reviving Co-operatives in Uganda", Accessed at <http://www.dip.go.ug/english/co-operatives/> on 06/02/ 2009.

- Out Patient Department (OPD) attendance improved from a baseline rate of 0.40 visits/person/year in 1992 to 0.72 visits/person/year in 2002.
- The percentage of people with access to safe water increased from about 20 percent in 1991 to 55 percent in 2002. Rural access to safe water is presently reported at 61.3 percent in the wet seasons and 52 percent in dry seasons.
- HIV/AIDS prevalence has declined from 30 percent in 1988 to 6.4 percent in 2005.

The current government has achieved much in the fight against poverty, with per capita income rising from 246 dollars in 1986 to 440 dollars in 2009 and income poverty dropping from 56 percent in 1992 to 31 percent in 2006 (The New Vision, June 2009; UNDP, 2007; Uganda APRM, 2009). Other indicators of development include, liberalising politics<sup>11</sup> and the economy, decentralisation of the government and civil service reforms (Uganda APRM, 2009; Oguttu and Ofondo, 2009; PEAP, 2004).

Though the achievements are impressive, most welfare indices are poor in the Northern part of Uganda because of conflict and weak state institutions. For example, income poverty has not declined as compared to other regions of the country. The proportion of poor people who are unable to meet their basic needs declined modestly from 72 percent in 1992 to 60 percent in 1997 and has since remained high at 64 percent in 2002. As already mentioned, a significant proportion of Ugandans are still facing in chronic poverty. It is because of these disturbing poverty statistics that the author thinks co-operatives could complement other stakeholders in the development process.

### ***Co-operatives, Poverty Alleviation and Challenges Today***

According to an official with UCA, Uganda now has 10,715 co-operatives out of which 2,800 are Saving and Credit Co-operatives (SACCOs). The Uganda government is again looking to the co-operative model to improve farmers' incomes. "The current government, through its ambitious Bona Bagaggawale programme, encourages subsistence farmers to set up SACCOs to attract funding from the government's prosperity-for-all-programme. The government has so far committed 20 billion Uganda shillings (US\$10million) to the programme," said a senior statistician with

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<sup>11</sup> Thirty-three political parties have registered since the multiparty political dispensation was introduced when a majority voted in favour of it as opposed to the "one-party" system in a national referendum in July 2005.

UBOS. This was launched in 2007<sup>12</sup> with the aim of enabling every household in Uganda to meet its basic needs and afford basic goods and services for material and social comfort and to earn an income of at least 20,000,000 Uganda shillings per year (US\$10,000). In this regard, a UCA official said, “UCA is training small farmers to organise themselves into groups with a collective voice.” The Minister of Trade, Tourism and Industry said, “the government is committed to helping co-operatives grow so that Ugandans can work together in undertaking income generating activities.” Though the minister talks of commitment, “This is mainly lip-service because little budget is apportioned to the co-operative department compared to other departments,” said a staff from the department. This is a common view amongst other key informants.

The UCA is implementing various co-operatives-based projects that are leading to unprecedented co-operative revival and to poverty reduction. An example is agro-based project which has three components: a) Empowering Farmers through Agribusiness and Financial Services (EFTAF); b) Youth Economic Empowerment through Co-operatives (YEECO) and Integrated Finance and Agricultural Initiative (IFAPI).<sup>13</sup>

The EFTAF<sup>14</sup> is a three-year project that started in 2007 and funded by the Swedish Co-operative Centre (SCC), the Royal Norwegian Society for Development (Norges-Vel) and UCA. The project focuses on increasing agricultural production and productivity, establishing viable and sustainable marketing systems, establishing strong and viable rural producer organisations, and establishing safe, sound and sustainable SACCOs. Since the project’s inception, major achievements have been realized thus:

*During the last year, 25,000 farmers participated in a number of seminars and workshops intended to equip them with the needed skills for increased production and productivity in enterprises such as bee-keeping and honey processing, fish farming, upland rice, beans, bananas, coffee, dairy farming, beef farming, pineapples, sunflowers, maize and hot pepper. (UCA official)*

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<sup>12</sup> Uganda District Information Portal, “Reviving Co-operatives in Uganda”, Accessed at <http://www.dip.go.ug/english/co-operatives/> on 06/02/ 2009.

<sup>13</sup> UCA Agribusiness Unit (ABU) Annual Report for 2007/8

<sup>14</sup> UCA Agribusiness Unit (ABU) Annual Report for 2007/8

The workshops/seminars included tips on the criteria for selecting a particular enterprise such as relative profitability, market availability, and risks involved.

The Youth Economic Empowerment through Co-operative Project<sup>15</sup> is a four-year project supported by the Swedish Co-operative Centre (SCC) and UCA. The project aims at contributing to poverty reduction and improving livelihoods of the youth through sustainable community-based co-operatives. According to the UCA official, “by the end of 2008 the project was working with 59 co-operatives/groups across the country through providing technical and entrepreneurial skills, and creating employment opportunities by mobilising youth to engage in income-generating activities such as crop production, brick-making, knitting and weaving, retail trading, boda-boda<sup>16</sup> and carpentry.” With support from the staff of the UCA Micro-finance Unit, the youth continued to be sensitised to the need to continue strengthening the saving culture through promotion of SACCOs and pro-SACCO groups. Members of youth co-operatives were also encouraged to join existing micro-finance institutions where they existed in close proximity. A total of 530 youth, of whom 254 were females, opened accounts for the first time in existing financial institutions within their communities during the year. Moreover, HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns were integrated in all youth project activities. The project collaborates with a number of HIV/AIDS service providers that have been instrumental in providing training and other HIV/AIDS specialised services, such as Voluntary Counseling and Testing services and condoms distribution. Drama and video are some of the strategies used in the awareness campaigns as they have proven to be youth-friendly. Though the youth programs looks impressive, much of the co-operative services are still not accessible to all the youth across the country because of limited coverage. Give that Ugandans’ median age is 15 years<sup>17</sup>; the youth therefore constitute the bulk of the population and should be taken seriously in the development process. The case of Tanzania and Sri Lanka where through SACCOs, youth societies are set up to develop their skills and encourage them to save and support their educational endeavors (Birchall and Simmons, 2009), should provide the inspiration.

The Integrated Finance and Agricultural Production Initiative Project is supported by the Canadian Co-operative Association (CCA) and UCA. It aims at improving the livelihood of producers in parts of Nebbi, Arua, Koboko and Apac districts through an integrated approach. According to a UCA source, the overall goal of the project

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<sup>15</sup> UCA Agribusiness Unit (ABU) Annual Report for 2007/8

<sup>16</sup> Local name for a motorcycle used by youth for carrying passengers over a short distance at a fee.

<sup>17</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uganda>. Accessed on 29-12/2009

is to contribute towards the national efforts at rural poverty alleviation while the purpose is to provide a holistic suite of community-controlled services that improve people's wellbeing by increasing food production and income as well as providing financial services. Apart from agricultural input supply, other activities under this project include agricultural extension services and commodity marketing services, amongst other services.

According to the key informants and the Namokora Focus Groups, these are the summary of challenges facing the co-operative movement today: a) Internal-Poor evaluation of performance and lack of clear criteria for evaluation; poor human resource management; poor leadership and leadership styles; increasing marginalisation of women and youth in most societies. (b) Contextual factors: Poor governance at macro-level; insufficient commitment of government to the cooperatives' affairs; inequality of income and opportunities within the economy and lastly, the global financial crunch. Not surprisingly, these are also some of the problems facing cooperatives elsewhere (Birchall and Simmons, 2009); especially in developing countries.

According to Bank of Uganda and UBOS officials, the recent global financial crunch had the most profound impact on co-operative activities in recent years. "This marked an apparent twist in the global macroeconomic stability and resulted in the current volatile macroeconomic environment," said the Governor, Bank of Uganda. According to Bank of Uganda and UBOS officials, the crisis has had challenges for Uganda's economy, especially in four ways.<sup>18</sup> First, export demand for Uganda's goods fell on the world market and commodity prices also plummeted. Second, there was reduced private capital inflow over the last financial year as investors became more cautious. Third, economic growth prospects slowed down throughout the region and stagnated globally. Fourth, there were reduced remittances from Ugandans abroad. For example, The New Vision (June 2009) reports that remittances fell by 47 percent to US\$267.3m in July-December compared to the same period in 2007/8. According to a Bank of Uganda source, the remittances from Ugandans working abroad dropped by more than 56 percent from US\$800m (1.6 trillion shillings) to US\$350m (735 billion shillings) in the first quarter of the year (Also Among, 2009). In her budget speech for 2009/10 the Minister of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, said remittances for the whole of 2008/9 stood at 413.87 million shillings, a 24 percent decrease from

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<sup>18</sup> Budget speech on June 11 2009 for Financial Year 2009/10 by Minister of Finance, Planning and Economic Development. Also available The New Vision, Friday June 12 2009, pp 1-3.

the 546.36 million in 2007/8. According to the UBOS official, the above trends had a serious impact on the economy. Although agricultural sector performance grew by 2.6 percent in the financial year 2008/9 compared to 1.3 percent in the financial year 2007/8, this was mainly due to an increase of 2.9 percent in food crop yields which were mainly domestically consumed. Most producers were unwilling to commit themselves to production of crops that would not earn much on the world market. The economy is projected to grow by 6 percent in the financial year 2009/10 – lower than the average growth rate of 9.5 percent in the last three years. It can be observed that the global crisis is worsening the plight of the co-operatives, which are already struggling to survive. Such a globally generated problem should also make Uganda pursue some inward looking development strategies so as not to be too dependent on external systems. It should also be noted that the global credit crunch is a testimony of the effect of globalization and dependency models of development earlier mentioned. Though it is true that much the global financial crunch posed a serious challenge, we should not forget other macro-level vices such as endemic corruption, weak political will and poor governance which are crippling the growth of cooperatives.

## **Strategies for effectiveness and research limitations**

### ***By Government***

To mitigate the severe future effect of such a recent financial crunch on the economy which directly affected the co-operatives, the government needs to constantly review its macro-economic and sectoral policies. Though it is true the market-based, private sector led economic growth strategy that the government has pursued toward poverty eradication has largely succeeded in reversing the macro-economic disequilibria that the economy suffered between the 1970s and the 1980s (Uganda APRM, 2009); much needs to be done to reduce excessive dependency on foreign markets, donors and foreign nationals. Liberalizing to nationals as a matter of priority, broadening tax base and capturing the informal sector are some of the in-ward looking strategies that can be used to bring macro economic stability. In addition, the government needs to refocus its trade policies to tap the market within the East Africa Community, with a population of 127,139,000<sup>19</sup>; and the 19 member COMESA<sup>20</sup> countries, with a population of 406,102,471. The marketing boards for coffee and lint that were liquidated during the macro economic reforms of the 1980s need to be restored to the co-operatives to boost the domestic market and strengthen the co-operatives.

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<sup>19</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East\\_Africa\\_Federation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Africa_Federation). Accessed on 29-12-2009

<sup>20</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COMESA>. Accessed on 29-12-2009

Government intervention should be a key in the co-operative activities as this to a great extent determines the identity and the future of the co-operatives. Government can intervene in two ways: direct financial support and creating an enabling law. “Government financial support is inevitable to ensure the suitability of the economy,” a Bank of Uganda official said. Government support is particularly vital in fragile societies such as in northern and eastern Uganda for building family structures, social networks and social capital that may be necessary for the co-operatives to thrive. The features of social organisation such as trust, norms and networks can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions (Putnam, 1993, UNDP, 2008a). “The government needs to formulate favourable policies and regulations to guide the affairs of co-operatives,” said the Minister of Tourism, Trade and Industry. In Malaysia for example, the Co-operative Societies Act 1993, the Co-operative Societies Regulations 1995, the Registrar General’s Circulars and Co-operative by-laws are some of the pillars that make co-operatives strong (Kamaludin, 2009). Uganda could emulate this. The Commissioner of Co-operatives said, “the existing policy is weak on accountability, leadership and governance”. He said the draft policy would soon be tabled before cabinet. He continued, “initially anybody would assume a post of leadership and head any co-operative without being scrutinised but we now want to study individuals and know that they patronise with society.” All these are attempts to ensure that co-operatives are manned by competent personnel, are accountable and are generally properly managed. However, the author believes that it is one thing to have a well laid down policy framework and yet another altogether to have it implemented. Sasikumar<sup>21</sup> examined the identity of co-operatives in India with a stakeholder perspective and established that the effectiveness, long run performance and the cooperative identity with government are related. So, the synergy between co-operatives and government is crucial.

Though the Ugandan economy has been growing at a much higher average since the 1980s, government must ensure that there is a re-distribution of the growth benefits. For example, the latest UNDP (2008b) report shows that the poorest 10 percent of the population only have a share of 2.3 percent of the national income whereas the richest 10 percent have a share of 37.7 percent, with a Gini index of upto 45.7. “The inequality is not merely that of income but also exists in other aspects of well-being such as education, health, water, land, credit, among other services,” reported the

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<sup>21</sup> “Conceptual Paper to Examine the Impact of Government Intervention on organisational Identity of Cooperatives in Selected States in India”, by Sasikumar, M.V. in Malaysian Journal of Cooperative Management, Vol.4. Accessed at <http://www.mkm.edu.my> on 08/08/09.

UBOS source. Though the economy has been growing reasonably fast since 1999, the trickle-down process has not worked, inequality in rural-urban development has deepened over time and the crop-farm sector has systematically lagged behind (Sewanyana et al., 2004; Government of Uganda, 2008). As already noted, the northern and north eastern parts of the country are economically marginalised and have the lowest development indices in the country (Government of Uganda, 2007). When a journalist asked the outgoing American ambassador to Uganda, S. A. Browning, to comment on the situation in the north where people have been living in the internally displaced people's camps owing to the more than 20 years of the Kony insurgency, he said, "It's so dehumanising and unhealthy to depend on handouts. I think it is my biggest disappointment" (Kikonyogo, 2009). These regions need affirmative action in development terms. Though such actions have been expressed through NUSAF and NURP, they have proved "insufficient and politically and technically ineffective in addressing the glaring level of inequality," said a male member of one of the FGD groups. Most Ugandans would agree with this view.

To the author, good governance should be an obligation, and not an option. Good governance is Pillar Four of PEAP. Despite the achievements already mentioned, there are governance issues that need to be urgently addressed. "Corruption is particularly a major problem that affects the effective service delivery," reported a youth member of the FGD. No wonder, the recent global corruption barometer report that was released places Uganda in third position (Transparency International, 2009; Mukasa et al., 2009). The APRM report also indicates that issues that need to be addressed include the omnipotent powers of the president over the rubberstamp parliament, army representation in parliament, the militarisation of politics, the continued rigging of elections, and the creation of many non-viable districts for capturing votes, and poor social services. "The creation of new districts for political votes without proper oversight and resource support appear not to be adding any value to the development effort," opined one of the members of male FGD group. At independence, Uganda had 17 districts; this became 39 at the time the NRM constitution was promulgated in 1995. By 30 June 2009 there were 83 districts, with 14 more proposed for creation, giving a total of 97 by 2010 if parliament approves them (Gyezaho, 2009). "This trend is worrying. Soon every village will become a district!" a youth member of the FGD quipped. To the author, this trend is even against the spirit of pan-Africanism and regional integration. As the Governor of Bank of Uganda said, "the need for critical monitoring of microeconomic indicators by Bank of Uganda, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, UBOS, National Planning Authority to mention but a few for regular economic and financial sector review and oversight..." should be pursued to constitute the component of good governance.



The author however believes that for the government to improve on the governance related issues, the citizens must take this as their primary responsibility to hold the government accountable; and other stakeholders such as members of APRM, EAC (East Africa Community), donors and the UN must condemn and not tolerate poor governance.

### ***By Cooperatives***

For it to weather the storm of poverty and remain effective as a model for poverty alleviation in this century, the co-operatives in Uganda should begin to seriously evaluate their performance on key indicators such as economic performance, member benefits in terms of dividends, social benefit and patronage. These indicators have been used to evaluate the performance of 20 big and 20 small co-operatives in Malaysia<sup>22</sup> and have proven to be credible measures of co-operative performance.

The significance of effective human resource management has been proven to enhance co-operative effectiveness in many studies and should not be underrated in Uganda's co-operative reform process either. For example, Jimmy<sup>23</sup> (2006) found out that effective co-operative need membership that understand the need for investment in its human capital, management, board, staff, members and other significant polices. Members must also be aware of issues concerning the successful delivery of their specific social and economic needs. Jimmy found that if properly applied and managed, human resource management strategies will provide a better fit in a membership-based organization and could provide co-operatives with a genuine competitive advantage. Sushila<sup>24</sup> (2008) also carried out a survey among clerical employees in 140 service-based co-operatives in West Malaysia on a sample of 516 respondents, using the structural equation modeling technique, to determine the relationship between human resource management practices, organizational commitment, and supervisory commitment and employee performance. One of the key findings was that human resource management practices, specifically training and development;

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<sup>22</sup> "Performance Management: An evaluation of Co-operative performance in Malaysia," by Indar Kaur, in Malaysian Journal of Co-operative Management, Vol.2. Accessed at <http://www.mkm.edu.my> on 12/08/2009

<sup>23</sup> "Human Resource Management and Member Relations in Co-operatives," by Jimmy Chai Chua Tei in Malaysian Journal of Cooperative Management, Vol.2. Accessed at <http://www.mkm.edu.my> on 12/08/2009

<sup>24</sup> "Influence of Human Resource Management Practices on Employee Performance in Cooperatives: The Mediating role of organizational and supervisory commitment," by Sushila Devi Rajaratnam, in Malaysian Journal of Co-operative Management, Vol.4. Accessed at <http://www.mkm.edu.my> on 13/08/2009

performance appraisal, rewards and communication and participation, showed significant direct positive relationship with employee performance. In Malaysia, the development of human resource is a key thrust in the 9<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) and the government has been supportive of the human resource development in the co-operative sector (Kamaludin, 2009). Eulogio<sup>25</sup> (2007) also established that Co-operativism in the Philippines is developing into institutional viability and that this should be enhanced by creating a pool of manpower with appropriate education and training on co-operatives to serve as the backbone of the development process. However, Jamilah<sup>26</sup> (2008) carried out a further stakeholder analysis on a total of 393 Board members from 131 selected co-operatives across 11 divisions in Sarawak in Malaysia and established that factors which determine the future prospects of co-operatives are not only training and education of members and board members but also members support and also acquiring external financing. Though the Chairman of Uganda Co-operative Savings and Credit Union (UCSCU) rightly observed that, “as a technical organisation our services will continue to be providing training to SACCO members, Committees/Boards and employees,” the author suggests that human resource management must generally be treated as a priority at all the co-operative levels—primary, secondary and national.

One critical issue to be addressed by the co-operatives in Uganda for it to effectively fight poverty is the management styles. Leaders of different co-operatives must be in a position to practice various kinds of styles that suite the environment in order to achieve the organizational mission and strategic goals. Yusman<sup>27</sup> (2006) carried out a study on management styles of co-operative managers by adopting the theoretical framework of spectral management type theory which has eight management styles, namely: Innovative style, Developmental style, Analytical style, Enterprising style, Change style, People Style, Action style and Adoptive style. One of the findings was that strong co-operatives were found to be well cultured in innovative management style. Leaders of Ugandan co-operative societies therefore need to improve on their innovative and strategic capabilities in order to steer their societies to greater heights.

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<sup>25</sup> “Agricultural Credit and Cooperative Institute in the Philippines,” by Eulogio T. Castillo, in *Malaysian Journal of Cooperative Management*, Vol.3. Accessed at <http://www.mkm.edu.my> on 13/08/2009.

<sup>26</sup> “Co-operatives in Sarawak: Present Capacity and Future Prospects,” by Jamilah Din, in *Malaysian Journal of Co-operative Management*, Vol.3.

<sup>27</sup> “Management styles of Co-operative Managers in Malaysian,” by Yusman Yacob, in *Malaysian Journal of Cooperative Management*, Vol.3. Accessed at <http://www.mkm.edu.my> on 13/08/2009

Uganda co-operatives should begin to involve women and youth seriously in all their endeavors. The current level of involvement leaves a lot to be desired. "Gender issues in Uganda need to be addressed if the co-operative movement is to be a force to be reckoned with in the development process," a woman in the FGD emphasised. Uganda's latest world gender-related development index is ranked number 133 compared with the world's worst- Sierra Leone which is ranked number 157 (UNDP, 2008b). The core components of poverty, i.e. capability, opportunity, security, and employment, differ significantly along gender lines (Lawson, 2003). As Kerr (2006) rightly puts it, the issues of women's rights in development, especially regarding access to the basic ingredients of survival such as land, water, shelter, clean environment and bio-diversity, should be progressively mainstreamed into development agendas. Weak women's involvement appears to be a general problem facing co-operatives elsewhere. For example, in a study to explore the participation of women in selected co-operatives in Peninsular Malaysia<sup>28</sup> and determine the variations of their participation across selected demographic variables, it was found that participation of women in the co-operative movement is still considered to be unsatisfactory. Women members constitute only 34 percent of the total membership of co-operatives in the country out of a total of 27, 664. Board members are dominated by men- up to 90.7 percent out of 24,992 compared to 10 percent women (2,672). Yet research elsewhere has shown that such gender inequality inhibits growth and slows down poverty reduction efforts (Ssewanyana and Okidi 2007; Mpuga and Canagarajah, 2004). Ugandan co-operatives have to take up this gender dimension more seriously. The youth too, being the majority of Uganda population, should be involved in the development process through skills training and knowledge development. This is already happening in Sri Lanka and Tanzania (Birchall and Simmons, 2009).

It should however be noted that the government and co-operative synergy alone can not effectively lead to poverty alleviation and meeting the MDGs. This is an enormous task that should include the NGOs and the private sector at the local, national and international levels.

Despite the recommendations, this research has three limitations: Firstly, it broadly covered the vast terrain of co-operative movement in Uganda, hence all the details that should have been included in this sector was not examined. In future, more research

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<sup>28</sup> "Participation of Women in Selected Co-operatives in Malaysia," by Hayati Md, Sellah and Ismail Rejab in *Malaysian Journal of Cooperative*

needs to be done in specific sectors of the co-operatives namely- the marketing, producers, consumers, financial, service and workers as none of these has gained any significant visibility in the co-operative body of literature in Uganda today. Secondly, the research did not include a broader research design to include the quantitative aspect. In this way, the richness of the co-operative movement in Uganda could have been missed out. Future research should consider this aspect and with a bigger sample of respondents. Thirdly, the research was unable to precisely find out the contribution of the co-operatives in poverty alleviation against other stakeholders such as government, private sector and NGOs. A different form of study, using regression analysis is recommended in this regard. Despite these limitations, the author believes that the study has added to the existing limited body of knowledge on co-operatives in Uganda and provided the stakeholders with the necessary up-to-date information to inform policy development in this sector that should effectively lead to the meeting of the poverty eradication challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the co-operative movement in Uganda has come a long way and the way has not been smooth but the future is bright. From early constraints created by the colonists to the recent global financial crisis, there have been many challenges to poverty alleviation and meeting the MDGs. It is unfortunate that a significant proportion of Ugandan population still live in absolute poverty and the current interventions have failed to effectively tackle this because of the top-down approaches that take little care of the needs of the majority poor. The current government effort to embrace co-operatives is commendable though much needs to be done. A co-operative movement, as the evidence from other countries both developed and underdeveloped indicates, is an effective model for poverty alleviation because its values and principles are populist and pro-poor people. The experiences of Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Israel amongst other countries, though not perfect, should provide sufficient inspiration on this model of development. If Uganda is to pull out of poverty, the government should strengthen the co-operatives and create a conducive environment for it to thrive by tackling the legal, institutional and governance challenges. The government should specifically be committed to providing financial support to co-operatives and creating a policy environment that enhance their activities. Other issues such as the redistribution of growth benefits within the economy and good governance are challenges that the government needs to address to provide a fertile ground for the co-operatives to thrive on. The co-operatives themselves have to play an active role in addressing internal weaknesses. In particular, the co-operatives should frequently evaluate their performances to provide basis

for planning and reforms; address issues of human resource capacity at all levels; adopt management styles that are participatory and involve women and youth in as many activities as possible because these constitute the majority of the marginalised. Because the issue of poverty is complex, it should be noted that co-operatives and government alone are insufficient armaments for the fight against it—thus calling for the contribution of the private sector and NGOs in the development equation if poverty is to be defeated. It can also be concluded that other countries, especially developing countries that have a lot in common with Uganda and are facing the challenges of poverty alleviation, could find some of these recommendations relevant for strengthening their cooperative movements.

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## AUTHOR'S BACKGROUND

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