

COOPERATIVES AND POLICY ADVOCACY IN EASTERN AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

It is now widely accepted that a cooperative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise. Being a business model, a cooperative is based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, cooperative members believe in the ethical ideals of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. It is these values and ethical ideals that have led to the formulation and revision of the principles upon which cooperatives operate. The last revision of the principles of cooperatives was in 1995 during the Centenary celebrations of the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) when the ICA adopted the seven universal principles of voluntary and open membership; democratic member control; member-economic participation; autonomy and independence; education, training and information; co-operation among cooperatives; and concern for community.

Though cooperatives are identified to be autonomous and independent organizations that seek to advance or protect the interests of their members through business enterprises, they operate in a political environment under the confines of the state. The state, depending on the nature of its political system, may create an environment that is not conducive for existence of the cooperative or the operation of cooperative business. This reality may push the cooperative to secure its existence, for the sake of promoting the interests of the members, by engaging the state in policy dialogue to create an enabling environment. Indeed, it is partly in recognition of the significance of policy lobbying and advocacy that the cooperative movement in some countries in Eastern Africa has created structures for this purpose, consisting of cooperative apex organizations and/or confederations.

A combination of four of the principles of cooperatives, namely democratic member control; autonomy and independence; cooperation among cooperatives; and concern for the community make these organizations suitable for engaging the state through policy advocacy to protect the interests of their members. The facts that cooperatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, and are led by elected representatives who are accountable to the membership; give cooperative leaders the authority and locus to speak on behalf of the members. The autonomy and independence that enables cooperatives to work with other organizations, including the state, on their own terms should be another asset in policy advocacy. This particularly the case because it effectively shields cooperatives from partisan state politics, thereby making them ideal for articulating the common interests of members and the wider community without fear or favour. Then the principle of cooperation among cooperatives that encourages cooperatives to support each other to enhance service provision should build their solidarity and strengthen their voice in articulating their interests in policy debates. Finally, the drive to work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies and projects

approved by their members as affirmed by the principle of concern for the community should make public policy debate the arena through which cooperatives seek to realize their goals.

Nevertheless, despite the suitability of the cooperative organization for policy advocacy and existence of advocacy structures in Eastern Africa, the voice of cooperatives in national public policy debates has been very weak, if not absent. This raises the question as to why this has been the case, given the centrality of public policy in the success of cooperative enterprises. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to attempt an explanation for the absence of cooperatives from national public policy discussions with a view to suggesting ways for strengthening the voice of cooperatives in this regard. The starting point in this exercise is to outline the structures for cooperative representation and policy advocacy in Eastern Africa.

COOPERATIVE ORGANIZATION FOR POLICY ADVOCACY IN EASTERN AFRICA

There was path dependency in cooperative development in most of the African countries. The colonial powers imposed on Africa their home country's models of cooperatives, which influenced the structural organization of the cooperative movement across the continent. In East Africa, as was the case in their other territories, the British introduced a vertical and hierarchical cooperative 'movement' that was based on a unified cooperative law derived from the British Industrial and Provident Society law and the Raiffeisen cooperative banking model. The end result was what Develtere (2008) described as the "unified model" of cooperative organization. They set up an elaborate three- or four-tier hierarchical structure of primary societies, cooperative unions, district and provincial unions, and national federations as prescribed by a cooperative law (Birchall and Simmons, 2010: 470). Of these four tiers, policy advocacy was assigned to the apex level of the hierarchy, with the cooperative apex organizations or federations being expected to play the role of policy lobbying and advocacy in each country.

In Rwanda and Burundi, cooperative development was modeled on the Belgian tradition. The Belgian model was based on a very liberal cooperative legislation in their home country that allowed the formation of public cooperative companies that were a hybrid of municipal and cooperative enterprises (Birchall and Simmons, 2010: 471). The result was the adoption of the "social movement model" of cooperative organization that was a loose coalition of private enterprises, workers' unions and farmers' movements (Develtere, 2008). The initial resultant structure was a loose horizontal network of partners in a business venture. However, after the Second World War, they began to develop more along the British-Indian system, creating special cooperative departments and introducing large agricultural cooperatives. As in the French colonies, government cooperative departments were paternalistic, top-down structures with provincial governors fixing the prices that cooperatives would pay their members for produce; appointing education committees and advisors; and district commissioners appointing cooperative management committees (Muenkner and Shah 1993).

Despite this rigid administrative structure, cooperative organization remained a loose coalition of private enterprises, workers' unions and farmers' organizations. Consequently, cooperatives in Rwanda and Burundi were more-or-less horizontally integrated, taking a "movement" structure that left cooperatives without an overall representative. The Rwandan cooperative movement is also characterized by the predominance of informal groups with a cooperative purpose, that is to say entities that have not yet met all the requirements for recognition as cooperative societies. With such informality and loose integration, the creation of cooperative federations to represent cooperative interests in these countries is, therefore, a recent development. By 2008, there were only two federations in Rwanda: the Federation of Cooperative Unions in Tea Sector (FERWACOTHE) and the Federation of Cooperative Unions in the Rice Sector (FUCORIRWA), with none of them claiming to speak for the entire cooperative movement, leave alone all cooperatives in the same sector (Mukarugwiza, 2010).

The exception to this path dependency rule in Eastern Africa is Ethiopia that survived the Italian attempt to colonize it and went on to develop initial cooperatives on the basis of the indigenous traditional institutions. However, interactions with other countries over time have resulted into the importation of other models of cooperative organization into Ethiopia. It is in this regard that vertical and horizontal integration of cooperatives in Ethiopia is a fairly recent development. The organization of cooperative unions in Ethiopia along the British model is just about over a decade old while cooperative federations are just being organized (Lema, 2008: 140-41). In the absence of an apex cooperative organization, which is expected to be a confederation (Emana, 2009: 12), the government created the Federal Cooperative Agency (FCA) to promote cooperative development and also represent the interests of cooperatives. As would be expected of a government agency, especially of a less democratic regime, FCA has adopted a top-down approach in handling cooperative policy. This has left little room for cooperative presence in policy lobbying and advocacy in Ethiopia (Lema, 2008: 148-49).

Whereas primary cooperative societies at the first level of organization; cooperative unions at the second level; and cooperative federations at the level of organization, operating at the regional government level, are functional, cooperatives in Ethiopia are poorly networked both locally and internationally. Knowledge sharing between representative bodies rarely occurs, and the same pattern is observed amongst primary cooperatives. Even the existing cooperative unions hardly come together to voice the needs of their constituency (Emana, 2009: 14). It is expected that the cooperative confederation, once established, will be the mouth-piece for cooperatives, participate in policy dialogue and represent cooperatives in national and international forums. It will not be involved in usual cooperative business activities (Emana, 2009: 12).

The implication of this analysis is that Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania have had the longest experience with cooperative organization for representation and policy advocacy in Eastern Africa. But what has been the result of their relatively longer periods of attempts at policy lobbying and advocacy in the region?

Kenya: From Kenya National Federation of Cooperatives (KNFC) to Cooperative Alliance of Kenya (CAK)

For many years, the Kenya National Federation of Cooperatives was the apex cooperative organization in Kenya; drawing its membership from National Cooperative Organizations (NACOs) and Cooperative Unions. Though KNFC was formed in 1964 to promote cooperative development by serving as the spokesman of the movement on all matters of policy and legislation, poor management over the years saw it deviate from its core business into other activities like auditing, education and training as well as research and consultancy that were already being performed by some of its members. The liberalization of the cooperative sector worsened matters for the falling giant as corruption and ethnicity became the main driving forces in the election of the board of directors and appointment of chief executives. With a high turnover of staff partly due to these vices, many cooperatives opted out of KNFC, leaving it with a paltry membership relative to the past. Many cooperatives regarded it as a competitor and a liability and, therefore, a burden to their dwindling resources. By the year 2005, its membership had shrunk from over 8,000 to just over 600. The institution was bankrupt that it could not pay its workers. Property and printing equipment worth millions of shillings had been vandalized and others stolen. The organization had even failed to pay its membership fees to the International Cooperative Alliance, meaning that it had failed to represent the cooperative movement in Kenya at the international level.

Indeed, KNFC had largely become ineffective in representing the cooperative movement even in the national policy and legislative processes. It failed, for example, to effectively participate and influence changes to the 1997 Cooperative Societies Act that produced the Cooperative Societies (Amendment) Act, 2004. It was after the amended Act had been enacted that it started mobilizing donor support to hold consultations on the implications of the Act – too late in the day. Perhaps this also explains the absence of cooperatives in national development debates. The apex organization, thus, lacked the clout to influence policy and legislative debates in the country to improve the visibility of the cooperative movement.

In the circumstances, some NACOs and Cooperative Unions became more effective speakers and representatives of the cooperative sector than KNFC. For instance, the Kenya Union of Savings and Credit Cooperatives (KUSCCO) came out as the mouth-piece of SACCOs in Kenya. It was vocal in opposing the retrenchment of employees as that would affect the membership of SACCOs. Even more significantly, KUSCCO was behind the formulation of the SACCO Act that was eventually enacted in 2008. The National Union of Housing Cooperatives (NACHU) had also become an active representative of housing cooperatives in the country. However, the cooperative unions in the agricultural sector were not as active as KUSCCO; neither did they have the same capacity and competencies to persuade, lobby and advocate for their respective sectors like KUSCCO was doing. Perhaps this was due to the fact that cooperatives in this sector

did not consider giving voice and representation of their members a priority in their activities, the point to which we shall return later.

This turn of events led the Minister for Cooperative Development and Marketing to intervene and dissolve KNFC's Board of Directors and replaced it with an interim one in May 2005, following an inquiry that implicated the executive director in corruption and gross mismanagement of the organization. Nevertheless, even this intervention did not help much as KNFC remained a very weak organization. It did not have a stable source of income as it was dependent on the little rental income from the first floor of its small two-storey building. It is the donations from National Cooperative Organizations (NACOs) like KUSCCO, the Cooperative Insurance Company of Kenya (CIC) and the Cooperative Bank that kept it going. For instance, the Cooperative Bank seconded its staff with a salary to serve as the Chief Executive Officer under the Interim Board of Directors from 2005.

The Interim Board of Directors that was appointed by the Minister in May 2005 immediately embarked on the noble course of revitalizing the organization by drawing up a restructuring strategy for the organization. With the support of the NACOs, the Board started implementing the strategy in 2007 by holding provincial consultative meetings on how to revive the organization, which culminated in the National Cooperative Leaders Conference in November of the same year that endorsed a new governance structure, Revised By-Laws (2008) and a new funding strategy. The revised By-Laws propose a governance structure consisting of a secretariat composed of the Executive Director and four heads of sections; a technical committee comprising of the Chief Executive Officers of NACOs; the General Assembly as the supreme authority consisting of 75 elected delegates; and the National Governing Council as the executive authority comprising of 8 Chairmen of NACOs, 7 elected regional representatives, the Commissioner for Cooperative Development and the Executive Director. The By-Laws also addressed strengthening of the financial capacity of the apex by proposing a graduated scale of annual contribution by members based on annual turnover. In addition to these contributions, cooperatives would also pay an annual membership fee and buy shares

These new changes to the structure seemed to enhance members' democratic control and ownership of the apex organization that was lacking, and the funding strategy would have also strengthened its financial capacity to carry out its activities. Indeed, the conclusion of the election of seven regional representatives to the National Governing Council in accordance with the new governance structure in November 2008 reportedly rekindled the interest of many cooperatives in KNFC and the movement was increasingly taking ownership of the organization through a commitment to fund its operations. The revitalization programme charted a new direction for the organization restricting its activities to the core objective for which it was formed, namely to be the mouth piece of the cooperative movement in Kenya through advocacy, lobbying, collaboration and networking.

However, the revitalization of KNFC immediately attracted the attention of its debtors, who started to obtain court orders to freeze its bank accounts and auction the organization's assets. When it became apparent that the debts of KNFC were overwhelming and they were dragging back the development of the cooperative, the movement opted to liquidate KNFC and form a new apex cooperative federation called the Cooperative Alliance of Kenya (CAK) in December 2009. Thus, in Kenya, a malfunctioning and ineffective apex organization was abandoned and in its place, a new one formed to play lobbying and advocacy roles for the cooperative movement; thanks to the new spirit of solidarity in the face of neo-liberalism.

The Cooperative Alliance of Kenya was established with the promise of accelerated institutional capacity building to enable it address wealth creation and poverty alleviation by: promoting and developing cooperatives with special emphasis on youth participation in cooperative enterprises; facilitating e-service and Information and Communication Technology systems; identifying possible development partners for members; promoting value addition initiatives; supporting cooperative investment initiatives; and providing leadership as well as representing the cooperative movement in key national, regional and international bodies. It endeavored to promote cooperative development, to unite the cooperative movement and to represent the cooperative interests on all matters of policy and legal framework and to be the spokesperson of the cooperative movement in Kenya.

Whereas CAK has set its key mandate to be lobbying and advocacy for a favorable and enabling policy and legal environment for cooperative development in Kenya, it proposes to carry out other functions that may, like its predecessor, compromise its role in national policy debates. For instance, CAK intends to spearhead the revival of agricultural production of cotton, fish and aquaculture, apiculture, dairy/livestock, coffee, horticulture, cashew nuts, and macadamia nuts among others, by providing support services. Such support services shall be and not limited to sourcing donor funds for farmer empowerment through Cooperative Projects to undertake procurement and distribution of farm inputs; bulk handling of grain and fertilizers; value addition and supply chain management; ware housing receipt system; marketing of produce through e-service; promoting exchange programme locally, regionally and internationally; and enhancing food security through micro-irrigation for small holder farmers (CAK, 2012). Some of these business ventures are already being undertaken by some of CAK's members and its involvement in them is likely to set it into a competition with such members.

Be that as it may, CAK is currently in its nascent stages to fully implement its activities and it is still not visible in national policy debates. Consequently, cooperatives are not being featured in national policy debates on development, especially those that don't directly touch on their business ventures in the country.

Uganda: The Role of the Uganda Cooperative Alliance

Uganda Co-operative Alliance (UCA) was formed by cooperative unions and registered in 1961 as the apex body of the cooperative movement in Uganda. It was formed for purposes of promoting, advocating and building capacities of all types of cooperatives in the country. Consequently, at its inception, UCA had three main mandates, namely to: carry out advocacy and representation of the Ugandan cooperatives at both national and international levels; provide education and training to the cooperative movement; and mobilize resources for the development of the cooperative movement.

These roles saw UCA specialize in lobbying and advocacy for the cooperative movement in Uganda; capacity building at individual level through education and training of members and leaders of cooperatives; capacity building at institutional level aimed at formation/strengthening of cooperatives to enable them provide financial services in rural areas, supply farm inputs, and process and market members' produce; mobilizing and guiding people to start different types of cooperatives in the country; and building cooperative capacity to enable them govern, manage and operate their businesses as sustainable organizations.

However, the independent government would soon give UCA a monopolistic position in the marketing of cash crops in order to control foreign exchange inflows into the country. This monopolistic position in agriculture was enhanced by making UCA a conduit for delivering subsidized agricultural services and farm inputs to peasant farmers. In addition, the Government started funding the operations of cash crop marketing cooperatives through crop finance schemes (cash crop export advances for cooperatives) that were also channeled through UCA. All these measures led the Government not only to control the leadership and management of UCA and other cooperatives, but also swayed UCA away from its immediate mandate of policy lobbying and advocacy for the cooperative movement.

The civil war that visited the country from 1971 to the 1980s worsened matters for the proper functioning of UCA as a policy advocacy instrument for the cooperative movement in Uganda. When peace was restored in the country in the mid 1980s, the neo-liberal wave conditioned the new Government to adopt Structural Adjustment Programmes that saw UCA lose its monopolistic position in agricultural marketing. The liberalization of the economy opened up the marketing of agricultural marketing to the private sector, thereby subjecting cooperatives to the competitive environment they were not used to. Furthermore, Government subsidies and financial schemes that support cooperative management were withdrawn. Subsequently, many cooperatives lost their businesses and most of them collapsed. UCA lost its privileged position as the mouthpiece of cooperatives, given that its members had either collapsed or switched allegiance to the market.

In the mid 1990s, UCA that had survived the economic hardships of market liberalization embarked on the process of reviving cooperatives in Uganda. Having lost its prestige as a monopoly in agricultural marketing and also as the supreme apex organization, UCA radically changed to become a training catalyst to assist cooperatives re-organize their businesses and their structure. It started off the rejuvenation of the cooperative movement as a relatively small member-based organization that was concerned more with the business side of its members than policy advocacy and representation. In any case, Section 28 of the Cooperative Societies Act of 1991 had already altered the role of UCA from lobbying and advocacy to advising the Government by providing that it shall:

- “a) Consider and make recommendations to Government on matters of policy relating to the cooperative movement;
- b) Make representation to the Government as it may think fit in relation to any matter affecting registered cooperative societies in general or any particular registered society which such societies generally or any such society may request the Board to bring to the notice of Government; and
- c) Carry out any other duty assigned to it under the provision of this statute.” (Kyazze, 2010: 10).

This effectively confined UCA to advising the Government on cooperative policy rather than advocating for policies that may not be directly linked to cooperatives. Accordingly, in 2005, UCA revised its By-laws to include objectives of being an advisor to government on cooperative policy issues and to be in consultation with the registrar or any other authority on matters affecting the cooperative movement (Kyazze, 2010: 10). Whereas this redefined role could have given UCA a chance to influence cooperative policy, it muted the organization from engaging the Government on any other public policy. Indeed, since then, UCA has not been visible for lobbying and advocating for public policy, but rejuvenating the cooperative movement through several donor-supported projects like Promoting Area Cooperative Enterprises Program (PACE); Integrated Finance and Agricultural Production Initiative (IFAPI); Youth Economic Empowerment through Cooperatives (YEECO); Community Empowerment through Cooperative Financial Services (CECFIS); Credit Union Development in Uganda (CUDIWU); the Agri-business Development Programme; and Farmers Empowerment through Agricultural Services, among others.

In pursuit of donor funds to implement such projects, UCA has sometimes ended up competing with its members rather than representing them and advocating for their interests. For instance, UCA has had wrangles with cooperative unions and collective societies under the umbrella of Uganda National and District Unions Association, mainly over access to donor funds. The unions have felt that UCA engages in activities that they should be undertaking as members of UCA. The best example was in 2009 when UCA applied for funding from the Microfinance Support Center, a government-owned company that handles rural microfinance, to implement a

project called “Empowering Farmers through an Integrated Marketing System”. In its orchestrated attempt to revive cooperatives in order to bolster the agricultural industry by allowing farmers to pool products to sell in bulk, the Ugandan government allotted USD 16 million for cooperative societies in its 2008/2009 budget. Subsequently, Uganda Cooperative Alliance — whose members, by law, are secondary cooperative societies — embarked on recruiting new but arguably illegal members among primary societies, with whom it preferred to implement the Ush32 billion (\$16 million) programme. The secondary cooperatives took the Alliance to court over the matter and applied for the money directly from the government through a business proposal they claimed would get the movement back on its feet since they were expecting the money to be a loan and not a grant as UCA had proposed. They further argued that the activities that UCA was proposing to undertake, such as providing storage facilities, delivering produce to warehouses, providing market information, and selling produce in bulk, were activities typically undertaken by the unions themselves (Malingha-Doya, 2009). This feud between UCA and its members prompted the State Minister for Micro Finance to advise the two parties that: “If you do not end the wrangles, no financier nor government would give you money. We need to see willingness in organizing yourselves more than when you are presenting proposals and demands” (Thangada, 2009).

This case suggests that UCA could be wrangling with members over access to donor funding rather than representing and advocating for the interests of the very members. The effect of such a scenario would be to weaken the voice of the cooperative movement in national policy advocacy.

Tanzania: The Role of Tanzania Federation of Cooperatives

Tanzania Federation of Cooperatives (TFC) is the umbrella organization of the cooperative movement in Tanzania mainland. It was registered on December 8th, 1994 to replace the Cooperative Union of Tanzania (CUT) that was formed in 1961. This replacement was necessitated by the adoption of the new policy and enactment of the Cooperative Societies Act of 1991, which sought to end the political association of the cooperative movement as a mass organization of the ruling party. It was the drive to have an independent cooperative body so as to promote the autonomy of cooperatives, which would be re-emphasized by the Cooperative Societies Act of 2003, that necessitated the formation of TFC. Though TFC was founded by just eight members consisting of one national cooperative apex (the Tanzania Tobacco Cooperative Apex-TTCA), two specialized cooperative unions (the Savings and Credit Cooperative Union League of Tanzania – SCULT and Tanzania Industrial Cooperative Union- TICU) and six Cooperative Unions, it currently has 24 members drawn from primary societies, cooperative unions, and apex cooperative organizations.

The fundamental objective of TFC is to unite, organize and centralize all the members of the cooperative movement in Tanzania, and to act as the national umbrella of the members in dialogue with the government and other bodies on the formulation and oversight of policies and programs related to the development of cooperatives in the country. This overall goal has been amplified into several specific objectives that includes promoting the prosperity of cooperative societies affiliated to it in accordance with the ICA Cooperative Principles; uniting all registered cooperative organizations; collecting, analyzing and disseminating information and statistics relating to or of particular relevance to cooperative societies' operations; initiating participatory education and training programs amongst its members; representing members in national and international for a; giving publicity of all cooperative activities in the country; conducting research and consultancy for member cooperatives in the area of making, business development and financing; arranging for the audit and supervision of member societies; and coordinating national cooperative development plans for members.

This list of objectives is indeed long and one of the immediate consequences is that the organization is likely to lose sight of the most important role of a cooperative federation, which is representation and policy advocacy. Indeed, it is observable from the list that this objective is actually stashed away somewhere in the middle; implying that it may not be a priority. It is not surprising that reports from the field indicate that farmers no longer consider the Tanzania Federation of Cooperatives to provide reliable advocacy (Lema and Kapange, 2006). Instead, they seek representation and policy advocacy services from MVITA (Mtandao wa Vikundi vya Wakulima Tanzania, Kiswahili for the National Network of Farmers' Groups in Tanzania), a national farmers' organization that brings together small holder farmers from all regions of Tanzania in order to have a common voice to defend economic, social, cultural and political interests of smallholder farmers (Kaburire and Ruvuga, 2006).

As farmers seek advocacy services elsewhere, so do the savings and credit cooperatives (SACCOs). These organizations turn to their own Savings and Credit Cooperative Union League of Tanzania (SCULT) for representation and advocacy rather than TFC that is intended to play that role. Indeed, some commentators have observed that one of the weaknesses of TFC is its distance from cooperators, who accuse it of not consulting them on their interests for representation. Similarly, there seems to be a failure on the part of the confederation to respond to the needs of the unions and federations that deal directly with cooperative members (Maghimbi, 2010: 16). Such complaints from its members may suggest that TFC does not adequately represent members' interests.

Despite the conspicuous absence of TFC in national policy debates that do not directly involve cooperatives, it has been active in discussions of cooperative development policy. It effectively makes assessments of cooperative policy and legislation and has been producing simple versions (layperson's guides) of key cooperative documents, such as the Cooperative Development Policy

and the Cooperative Societies Act for rank and file cooperative members to understand. Even more significantly, TFC, along with other cooperative stakeholders, was instrumental in advocating for the Cooperative Reform and Modernization Programme, 2005-2015 (CRMP), which is the framework for implementing the 2003 Cooperative Development Policy in Tanzania (Maghimbi, 2010: 16). Nevertheless, there have been concerns about the capacity of TFC to drive forward the reforms intended in CRMP. It has been described as a ‘hanging structure’ because most of the apex bodies that would be members have collapsed. Of the four apexes in the coffee, cotton, cereals and tobacco sectors, only the tobacco one remains (Birchall and Simmons, 2010: 493).

THE STATE OF COOPERATIVE POLICY ADVOCACY IN EASTERN AFRICA

Cooperative enterprises in Eastern Africa are spread in a variety of sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing, mining, finance and commercial services. These sectors are regulated by several policies and legislations, all of which have implications for the success of cooperative enterprises. For instance, in the agricultural sector, the policies and regulations for growing and marketing cash crops like coffee, cotton and tea significantly determine the establishment and success of cooperative ventures. In the financial sector, banking regulations have constrained the growth of financial cooperatives in the region as evidenced by the fall of the Cooperative Bank in Uganda and the hurdles that the Cooperative Bank in Kenya has had to jump to remain in business. The implication is that the policy environment that affects cooperative enterprises is much broader than cooperative policy. This requires that cooperatives lobby and advocate for, not just favourable cooperative policy, but broader enabling policies at the national level that have a bearing on their business. This requires the cooperative movement to have an agency that can authoritatively voice its concerns at the national level.

The foregoing review, however, shows that cooperative advocacy mechanisms have not been established in some of the countries. Ethiopia, Rwanda and Burundi have not created cooperative confederations or apex organizations to represent, lobby and advocate for the interests of the cooperative movement. In the absence of a cooperative mouthpiece, cooperative unions in these countries have taken to separately defending the immediate interests of their members. For instance, in Rwanda, FERWACOTHE lobbies and advocates for better prices of tea paid to its members and has been advocating for farmers to be given the first priority to buy shares in tea factories that are privatized (Mukarugwiza, 2010). In Ethiopia, Oromia Coffee Farmers Cooperative Union is contented with advocating for an enabling environment for marketing coffee outside Ethiopia. The problem with this disparate approach to policy advocacy is that it leaves the cooperative movement without a unified voice to effectively advocate for policy issues of common concern.

Though some structures for cooperative representation and policy advocacy have been created in other countries, the efforts of these organizations have been narrowly focused on cooperative policy and legislation. The policy advocacy work of KNFC, CAK, UCA and TFC has been to influence, if not merely advice, the government's policy towards cooperative development. Upon enactment of cooperative policy, these organizations have undertaken to propagate the policy among the members, with some of them translating cooperative legislation and policy into accessible language by ordinary members. Whereas members of cooperatives need to understand the laws and policies that regulate their organizations, this narrow focus on the immediate environment of cooperatives has left the cooperative movement outside the purview of broader national policy debates; thereby denying cooperatives the national visibility.

The ineffectiveness of cooperatives in policy advocacy at the national level has not been just due to their narrow focus on cooperative policy, but also due to their lack of capacity to engage in public policy advocacy. Virtually all umbrella cooperative organizations that exist in Eastern Africa do not have a stable financial base that is sustained by members' contributions. Some of them largely rely on donor support to carry out their activities, despite the obvious adverse implications for sustainability. Besides the inadequate financial resources, these organizations also lack human resources to effectively operate at the national level. This does not just refer to the number of staff, but also the skills of the staff. Policy advocacy involves communication, bargaining and negotiation, yet doubts have been expressed as to whether staff in these organizations has the capacity to do these (Birchall and Simmons, 2010: 493).

One of the advantages of cooperatives in their economic activities is said to be their ability to mobilize individuals to aggregate their purchases/sales in order to increase their bargaining power. Thus, the economic power of cooperatives lies in numbers rather than capital. This economic sense should be applied to the political side of cooperatives, which is policy advocacy. For them to be able to penetrate the national policy circle and not only be visible, but influential; cooperatives need to marshal their members behind their national apex organizations.

However, this political unity of members is still lacking and part of the problem is that the national apex organizations have been taking on activities already being carried out by their members. This has quite often resulted into a competition between the members and the umbrella organization as illustrated by the feud between UCA and the cooperative unions. Indeed, it is this kind of competition that partly contributed to the collapse of KNFC in Kenya. This competition has scuttled the national unity of cooperatives, with adverse consequences for the power of the cooperative movement in national policy advocacy. Given that the apex organizations tend to engage in competing activities with their members in order to raise funds to support their operations, the cooperative movement needs to design a funding mechanism for the apex organization so that the latter can concentrate on policy advocacy work alone.

CONCLUSION

Like any other organization, cooperatives are significantly affected by the environment in which they find themselves and public policy is a major segment of that environment. Since public policy is made by the state, cooperatives can best secure an enabling policy environment by engaging the state in policy debates. Despite the suitability of the cooperative organization for policy advocacy and the existence of advocacy structures in Eastern Africa, the voice of cooperatives in national public policy debates has been very weak, if not absent. It has been the purpose in this paper to attempt an explanation for the absence of cooperatives from national public policy discussions with a view to suggesting ways for strengthening the voice of cooperatives in national policy debates.

The discussion has shown that though all cooperative movements in all East African countries are being restructured with provisions for confederations or apex cooperative organizations to play representation and advocacy roles, some countries have not established these organizations. In such countries, cooperatives have operated without representation and a mouthpiece in national policy debates. In other countries, however, these organs for cooperative representation and policy advocacy exist, but they have performed poorly in national policy debates due to their ineffectiveness. The ineffectiveness of the representation and advocacy organizations has been attributed to their narrow focus on cooperative development policy and not the broader public policy that would make them visible; lack of capacity to engage in public policy advocacy; the deviation from the central role of representation and advocacy to compete with their members in carrying out economic activities; and the lack of power as a result of their inability to marshal members' support.

In view of these findings, we are tempted to make at least three suggestions to improve the voice and representation of cooperatives. First, it is desirable for the cooperative movement in each country to be represented at the national level by a functioning cooperative confederation or apex organization. The sole purpose of the organization should be representation and policy advocacy, so as to avoid conflicts with members over activities. Such conflicts have tended to reduce members' unity and support to deny the apex organization the power it requires to advance its policy agenda. The confinement of the apex organization's activities to representation and advocacy may also help to broaden the policy scope of the apex organization to go beyond cooperative development policy.

Second, to improve the voice of the cooperative movement at the national level, there is need to build the capacity of the confederation or apex/umbrella organization. These organizations require financial and human resources to effectively play their roles. Sustainable support towards this should not come from the state or donors, but from the cooperative movement itself. This can initially be done by establishing a funding mechanism by the members and setting up proper

governance structures that are accountable to the members. This arrangement should result into members demanding for services from the organization in return for the financial contributions that they make.

Third, it should be recalled that the power of cooperatives lie in the number of their members rather than the financial capital that members can make. Consequently, the apex organizations need to marshal the support of all members in the cooperative movement. Since cooperatives are open and voluntary organizations, the easiest way to achieve this is to allow the bottom-up self-organization of primary cooperatives, cooperative unions and cooperative federations in accordance with their business interests. The higher level cooperative organizations should be able to establish the national apex/umbrella cooperative organization. The point is to avoid imposing cooperative federations on members, for this has not worked before.

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