



WAYS IN WHICH WOMEN CAN LEAD AND SUCCEED IN COOPERATIVES

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The question of gender diversity is encouragingly on course in the cooperative movement and agricultural industry in Uganda. This is largely because women continue to provide a large proportion of the labour in the agriculture sector.

Yet, much as cooperatives in the agriculture sector potentially empower women economically to enhance their incomes as well as boost their

collective bargaining power, women represent only one (1) in five (5) positions of the leadership in the cooperative movement. This is based on a 2015 report by the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives.

Unexploited potential

The Ministry stated that the potential of the cooperative enterprises in fostering development is yet to be harnessed owing to internal problems related

to governance and leadership, poor capitalisation, inadequate knowledge, and management.

More female farmers are marginalised with respect to participating in and benefiting from cooperative groups compared to men. Women represent only 35% of cooperative membership and even fewer are found in management positions, although there is a growing interest by government and stakeholders in supporting women in cooperatives dealing in agriculture and cooperative union development.

Cooperative societies provide an institutional framework through which basic human needs can be met besides their significant contribution to poverty eradication and employment, thus ensuring environmental sustainability and mainstreaming gender.

The empowerment of women in leadership in cooperatives is crucial for the realisation of the benefits that accrue from cooperatives. The inclusion of women is, thus, key to creating well-targeted policies that will help farmers and the cooperatives increase not only their relevance but also their productivity for greater benefits.

In Uganda, women form the backbone of most cooperative societies because they provide most of the agricultural labour. At Bugisu Cooperative Union, the biggest cooperative that deals in coffee in the country, women are taking up leadership roles. For example, women have taken up positions at the union and affiliated societies to work as accountants, administrators, as well as section

and zonal heads. Nandala Mafabi, the Union's Chairperson, said that since the union's policies were revised eight years ago to realise gender parity, the number of women has almost doubled from 23% to 43% and women shareholding has increased from 10% in 2010 to 20% in 2018.

Women make up 35% of staffing at Bugisu Cooperative Union, which has 278 societies with an average of 600,000 members. Of the four zones that the union has, 50% of the 80 delegates representing the zones at the union's council are women.

Promoting women's leadership

"Women are more development-oriented, and at Bugisu Cooperative Union, we have encouraged many of them into leadership. Today some organisations demand to buy from us, specifically coffee from women farmers, as a way of directly boosting them," Nandala said.

Ms Anja Defeijter, a Dutch agronomist and director of House of Seeds Uganda, says that for sustainable agricultural development through cooperatives to be translated into food and nutrition security, active engagement of women in the policy-making processes is required so that "their varying needs and priorities are appropriately targeted."

She emphasizes the need to recognise the role of women in cooperatives and get them to move beyond production for subsistence to leadership and higher-value market-oriented production.

The activities of women in cooperatives should be reviewed to examine women's involvement and participation in order to indicate the extent to which women are integrated into or bypassed by government interventions, she said.

Women should be treated as resourceful persons and equal partners with men in development. Policies that regulate the sector should provide women members in cooperatives with the opportunity to participate in decision-making. Women's participation will directly ensure women's voice besides challenging the status quo.

At the same time, interventions and policies that are already in place should be enforced to address constraints to women's participation in cooperatives. The constraints are socio-cultural, economic and political restrictions.

Government and financial institutions should guarantee women's access to and control over resources such as credit, education, training, production inputs and marketing. There is need for tangible support and commitment by the state and cooperatives to support organisations to integrate engendered, policies, regulations, practices and services.

Renewed approaches

To catalyse the creation of a definitive fact base on women's advancement in leadership roles within cooperatives, there is need for a collaborative initiative that examines the gender gap in cooperatives and looks at what can be done to close it.

According to the Ministry of Trade, and Cooperatives, deliberate gender-sensitive policies have been developed in all types of cooperatives. For example, there has to be a woman and a youth on the governing committees.

These new policies adopted by cooperatives are enabling women to access products and services, and also to improve on their businesses and entrepreneurial skills and knowledge.

Recently in a statement, Ms Amelia Kyambadde, the Trade, Industry and Cooperatives Minister, observed that cooperatives are an ideal instrument in a new approach to poverty reduction through the participation and inclusion of women. "Through women inclusion into the local development initiatives, cooperative members learn from one another, innovate together and, by increasing control over livelihoods, build up the sense of dignity, self-esteem and freedom from servitude," she said.

Kyambadde acknowledged that the challenges of globalisation require strong local communities, strong local leadership and strong local solutions, and cooperatives have key organisational frameworks for building new business models to combat social exclusion and poverty. The government emphasizes a rights-based approach to the development of the cooperative movement in Uganda, including gender equity.

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