

Agricultural co-ops have potential to build climate change resilience

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Livestock searching for pasture at Ohio village in Garissa County.
Evans Habil | Nation Media Group



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While on a trip to western Kenya recently, I had the now rare experience of seeing a flock of migratory birds, over Nakuru, making their way to breeding sites in the northern hemisphere. In my childhood, the sighting of the birds in late December to early January would trigger farm activities on our family land for the planting season. It worked like clockwork! Not any more, courtesy of climate change.

The climate is rapidly changing, as underscored at last November's COP26 meeting in Glasgow, Scotland. Climate change has induced various risks and transformed their nature and extent.

The world is at its hottest, leading to rising sea levels, receding snow caps on mountains, unpredictable rainfall patterns, which are expanding the ecological range of disease vectors and diseases that cause poor farm level outputs and increase post-harvest losses.

Among the critical issues is reduction of agricultural systems, greenhouse gas emissions and developing counter-balancing sustainable alternatives to manage climate change.

Agricultural cooperative enterprises can promote local prevention and adaptation by advocating alternative production practices that leave a reduced carbon footprint. In line with Cooperative Principle #5—Education, Training and Information—cooperatives could roll out programmes to teach farmers novel climate-smart strategies.

Although there cannot be a one-approach-fits-all strategy, area-specific approaches can cumulatively ameliorate negative climate change effects.

Agricultural cooperatives can facilitate members, through access to human and financial resources, to manage climate risks and moderate climate change.

At a June 2 meeting convened by the UN General Assembly in Stockholm, International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) Director-General Bruno Roelants told delegates cooperatives can raise awareness of the importance of reducing their carbon footprints.

This can be achieved through adherence to environmental standards and promoting local production and marketing; provision of mutual insurance for crops; supporting diversification of crops; and improving watershed management.

Contribute to mitigation

Cooperatives can contribute to mitigation, especially in the renewable energy, forestry and agroforestry sectors. Mr Roelants observed that “the cooperative movement is a sustainable entrepreneurial model, so governments should strongly and explicitly promote it by providing an appropriate legal and policy framework”.

The African Development Bank (AfDB) has in place the Africa Climate Change Fund to support African countries to strengthen their climate resilience and transition to low-carbon and green growth.

By close of 2021, AfDB had mobilised \$24.64 million (Sh2.9 billion) for tackling climate change on the continent. But action must start with farmers, supported by the cooperative movement, led by the Cooperative Alliance of Kenya.

They can tap into this fund to address challenges with water systems, building resilient communities in marginal areas, changing farming practices by integrating crop-livestock-forest systems, rehabilitating degraded pastures, putting in place agro-forestry systems and pursuing sustainable forestry.

In the arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs), for example, cooperatives can engage farmers and pastoralists and county governments to build resilience of communities. Particularly, counties must ensure policies focusing on climate change, grazing and range-land management are developed to cushion communities from climate variability and change.

Using an integrated approach could diversify opportunities, improve community response and ensure better chances for faster recovery. Cooperatives can learn from the tried indigenous knowledge and approaches that pastoralists have relied on to manage local resource exploitation, improve on them and then recycle them for the benefit of farmers.

Agricultural cooperatives should lead in protecting farmers and farms with a more resilient and sustainable agribusiness model.

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