

Use school-based co-ops to recruit the next generation of cooperators

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Pupils at Ithenguri Primary School in Nyeri County learn how to make a kitchen garden during the launch of the School Nutrition Gardens project by Nestlé Kenya on September 25, 2019.

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The average age of the agricultural cooperative member, now 61, has gradually increased over the years. Coupled with rising rural-to-urban migration, the resultant imbalance is a harbinger of food scarcity in the not-so-distant future. That should worry planners.

Yet, the solution to an ageing membership lies in our primary and secondary schools, for this is where early values are ingrained. If we could inject the spirit of cooperativism at this level and then provide the right nurturing environment, our work should be halfway done.

The government can partner with the cooperative movement to deliver parts of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) using the cooperative model at the school level. It would help to trigger the next generation of cooperators into greater involvement in cooperatives, including agricultural ones.

This approach has worked elsewhere.

In Malaysia, for instance, since 1968, the Education Ministry has required the establishment of school-based cooperatives to nurture future cooperators. Students aged 12-18 are actively engaged in cooperative activities and seminars and, for their involvement in the co-curriculum in schools, earn a 10 per cent merit.

The school community buy food and stationery at affordable prices from student-run cooperatives. With over 2,430 of them and 1.6 million members, the school cooperatives provide services and develop students' entrepreneurial skills.

4,000 teachers

In Brazil, the National Service of Cooperative Learning trains 4,000 teachers in the cooperative business model yearly, who pass on the information to 100,000 students. The organisation works with 14-24-year-olds trained by cooperatives employees.

And, in Africa, the Junior Achievement Eswatini runs a financial literacy programme. Students learn about cooperative values, principles and management before getting to run financial cooperatives themselves.

School-based cooperatives could become centres for developing the knowledge and skills of the student cooperators and provide employment opportunities. CBC could provide the missing link between cooperatives and schools as it seeks to provide skills for the learner to do things; it is learner-centred.

Changing needs

A CBC approach is adaptive to the changing needs of students, teachers and society. Cooperative education and training are aligned to the seven core competencies identified by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development: Communication and collaboration; critical thinking and problem-solving; creativity and imagination; citizenship; self-efficacy; digital literacy; and learning to learn.

Besides providing avenues for success in the CBC programme, establishing a school-based cooperative has direct opportunities for the students, staff and local communities.

First, it creates conditions for collaborative learning, through which learners at various performance levels work together toward a common goal. Collaborative learning fosters positive interdependence, individual accountability and interpersonal skills.

Secondly, it will equip members with entrepreneurial skills to be applied in productive activities, strengthening the economy and the local communities. They could run, for example, as consumer cooperatives through the school cafeteria or stationery store.

Good governance

Thirdly, it will inculcate the principles of good governance and democratic practice at the formative stage of students. It will instil values of accountability among the students and help to build democratic practices through participation, with elections during the AGMs, hence a responsible citizenry.

Fourth, it will boost members' and communities' well-being. Following Principle No. 7 "Concern for the community", it could use a portion of its surplus to sponsor school activities, and pay for or support needy members. Fifth, it will encourage cooperation and teamwork among students, who will build useful networks to draw upon in tackling challenges.

Lastly, and important for the movement, school-based cooperatives will help to recruit and train a new generation of members.

Learning by doing is a great way to build students' interest in [agricultural] cooperatives. Thus, CBC could be an avenue for channelling the youth in cooperatives in school.

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