

# Service cooperatives aren't alien to Africa; they have long history here

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A group of women pick cotton in a field in Mali, West Africa. Cooperative labour parties were *formed usually by women to organise households into forms of group labour for mutual support in tasks.* File | AFP



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## What you need to know:

- The groups facilitated economic participation, marshalling collective labour force for farming activities.

- They freely organised themselves in terms of when, where and how they worked. Consensus was a guiding principle.

What does *egesangio* or *risaga*, *saga*, *gîtatî* or *ngwataniro*, *mwethya*, *obulala* and *kibakenge* have in common? They are forerunners of modern-day service cooperatives and were common in almost all African communities.

According to Mildred Ayuma — who researched and defended a thesis on this — *egesangio* (community groups) were forms of cooperative labour parties formed usually by women to organise households into forms of group labour for mutual support in tasks such as weeding and harvesting on a rotational basis.

Members can address their needs, attain bargaining power and share the benefits. The forerunner cooperatives may not have exhibited the features of modern ones but had the basic characteristics.

A cooperative is an independent voluntary association to address common socioeconomic and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned democratically controlled enterprise. They are based on six values: Self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity.

They are governed by seven principles. These include voluntary and open membership without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination; democratic member control through which policies are set and decisions made; and member economic participation through equitable contribution and control of capital.

## **‘Common bond’ criteria**

Others are autonomy and independence with control exercised by the members; education, training, and information to empower members, elected representatives, managers, and employees to contribute effectively to the development of their cooperative; cooperation among cooperatives through which the movement is strengthened for the benefit of members; and concern for community.

The *egesangio* type exhibits at least five of the seven principles. First, they are based on voluntary and open association of those who meet the ‘common bond’ criteria. The service provided was segmented; among the Abagusii, while the men cleared the land, the women tilled, planted, weeded and harvested. The men helped with the ‘heavier’ tasks.

Secondly, the groups facilitated economic participation, marshalling collective labour force for farming activities. The produce enabled exchange of commodities through barter trade, contributing to economic egalitarianism by discouraging wealth accumulation.

Thirdly, the groups were autonomous and independent. They freely organised themselves in terms of when, where and how they worked. Consensus was a guiding principle.

## **Supported community members**

Fourth, cooperation among cooperatives is a key aspect of these forerunner cooperatives, which is best exemplified among pastoral communities. To increase their 'fire power', several warrior groups would form a formidable force to collectively protect stock and ensure access to pasture and water for the livestock. Among the Akamba, several mwethya groups would collaborate in support of bereaved family through supply of, for instance, firewood.

Lastly, in terms of concern for the community, these groups supported community members who had a problem or were celebrating the important rite of passage occasions. Among the Abaluhya, groups would support house construction in case a community member lost a house to a calamity.

These forerunner cooperatives, although fluid in their style and character, guaranteed support to members and the community. They allowed farming activities to be done expeditiously.

Further, they provided an opportunity for members to build and cement social capital. They also contributed to increased food production and reduced post-harvest losses, improving food security. Overall, they brought about social cohesion.

Thus, the cooperative concept is not alien to Africa. These forerunner groups would have developed in variety and complexity through assimilation of value-adding practices over time. Modern-day service cooperatives can take a leaf from them.

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