

# Towards Genuine Cooperatives

*Prerequisites for Cooperative  
Success or Criteria for Genuine  
Cooperative Societies*

*Karl Fogelstrom*



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## Principles of Cooperation

1. Membership of a cooperative society should be voluntary and available without artificial restriction or any social, racial or religious discrimination, to all persons who can make use of its services and are willing to accept the responsibilities of membership.
2. Cooperative societies are democratic organisations. Their affairs should be administered by persons elected or appointed in a manner agreed by the members and accountable to them. Members of primary societies should enjoy equal rights of voting (one member, one vote) and participation in decisions affecting their societies. In other than primary societies the administration should be conducted on a democratic basis in a suitable form.
3. Share capital should only receive a strictly limited rate of interest, if any.
4. Economic results arising out of the operations of a society belong to the members of that society distributed in such a manner as would avoid one member's expense of others. **29**

This may be done by decision of members as follows :

- a. By provision for development of the business of the cooperative;
  - b. By provision of common services; or
  - c. By distribution among the members in proportion to their transactions with the society.
5. All cooperative societies should make provision for the education of their members, officers and employees and of the general public, in the principles and techniques of cooperation, both economic and democratic.
  6. All cooperative organisations, in order to best serve the interests of their members and their communities should actively cooperate in every practical way with other cooperatives at local, national and international levels.
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## **Towards Genuine Cooperatives**

- Prerequisites for Cooperative Success or  
Criteria for Genuine Cooperative Societies

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## Foreword

The present form of Cooperative Movement is a product of people's initiative to tackle their economic problems during and after the industrial revolution in Europe. Though instances can be found where in some cases governments did provide financial support and assistance and others acting against the cooperatives, by and large, the role of government in Europe had been of either indifference, or at the most, benevolent onlooker.

On the other hand in most developing countries in Asia the initiative for cooperative development came from governments and people's initiative was looked with suspicion by the imperialist governments. They tried to ensure that the cooperatives did not end up in the hands of people who were not of their liking or had any links with the national freedom movements. This changed the basic character of cooperatives in most developing countries and this tendency of trying to have control on the cooperatives continued even after the independence. The argument extended has been that if the governments provide financial support to cooperatives then they want to have a say in their management too. However, it is being realized and accepted more and more that the government support and assistance should not result in the change of basic character of cooperatives to the extent that they become pseudo-cooperatives. This was clearly expressed in the Cooperative Ministers' Conference in Sydney, February 1990 and reiterated by the recent Cooperative Ministers' Conference in Jakarta in February 1992. However, the real challenge to all is how to implement what is accepted by all. What are then the factors and requisites which make the cooperatives successful and ensure their genuine character.

Mr. Karl Fogelstrom has long experience of working in Scandinavian countries and also in various developing countries. He has been our Senior Development Advisor in the ICA Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific for the last three years and thus has been able to look and study the cooperatives practically in all the countries of this Region closely. He has tried to express his ideas in his recent paper entitled "Prerequisites for Cooperative Success or Criteria for Genuine Cooperative Societies". I find this paper very relevant and highly stimulating on the subject of making cooperatives genuine and successful. The ICA ROAP, therefore, decided to publish his paper for a wider circulation among our cooperative friends in the Movement and Government. I do hope this will be of interest to all.

**G.K. Sharma**  
ICA Regional Director

Bonow House, New Delhi  
16th March 1992

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## CONTENTS

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Foreword				
The Basic Components	...	...	...	01
- Awareness	...	...	...	03
- Basic Knowledge and Understanding	...	...	...	04
- Honesty and Integrity	...	...	...	05
- Honest and Competent Staff	...	...	...	06
- Viability	...	...	...	07
- Market	...	...	...	08
- Legislation	...	...	...	10
Some Issues	...	...	...	11
Declaration of Cooperative Ministers' Conference, Sydney. 1990	...	...	...	13
Recommendations of Cooperative Ministers' Conference, Jakarta. 1992 - Some Excerpts	...	...	...	14
Cooperative Values	...	...	...	16

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# Towards Genuine Cooperatives

## Prerequisites for Cooperative Success or Criteria for Genuine Cooperative Societies

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*In this article the writer presents a number of factors or prerequisites considered essential for the success of a cooperative society. In the view of the writer a large number of cooperatives in developing countries do not meet the requirements that would characterize a genuine cooperative society. Most cooperatives are government-initiated and should rightly be labelled "pseudo" cooperatives as they do not fulfill the criteria for a genuine cooperative society.*

*Still government has a positive role to play in supporting and promoting cooperative development in the same way as government support and encouragement is important for the development of other types of economic enterprises.*

*The writer states that there are definite limits to what can be achieved by "engineering" genuine cooperative development. Government need to take cognizance of the true nature of a cooperative society and revise its policies accordingly.*

*Finally the writer points out that there is an increasing realization among politicians and government officials that government-initiated cooperative societies need to be transformed into independent and member-led cooperatives.*

### **The Basic Components**

For a primary society to succeed not only one but several requirements must be satisfied in order to create a situation conducive to the formation and growth of a viable cooperative society:

1. *Awareness*, realization, felt-need among the prospective members/beneficiaries of the services of a primary cooperative society as a means of improving their economic position.
2. Basic *knowledge* of the Cooperative Principles and a basic understanding of the "mechanics" of operating a cooperative society among the members and leaders.
3. *Honest* local leaders with unblemished integrity possessing the necessary knowledge and understanding of the Cooperative Principles.
4. *Honest* and *competent* staff, adequately remunerated, to run the day-to-day business of the cooperative society.
5. Adequate base/volume or potential within the area of operation to sustain *viable* business operations and to provide economic incentives to the members.
6. The existence of and access to a functioning *market* and marketing structure.
7. Cooperative legislation recognizing the Cooperative Principles as defined by the ICA allowing the cooperatives to function as *independent, democratic* and member-led cooperative business organisations.

The key words are :

awareness;  
knowledge;  
honesty;  
competence;  
viability;  
market;  
democracy; and  
independence.

When analyzing the success or failures of primary cooperative societies much will be explained by the relative presence or absence of one or several of the above mentioned factors.



Let us take a closer look at these factors:

## **Awareness**

Ideally the formation of a primary cooperative society should be based upon the realization among a group of people that they would be able to improve their economic position if they joined together and formed a cooperative society to render services to themselves. Services which they would not have access to if they continued to act on their own.

The group of people would need to be fairly homogeneous, having similar needs and problems and living in the same economic and social environment. The homogeneousness is a prerequisite for the success of a cooperative society only as regards the economic situation and needs of the members in relation to the services the cooperative would provide in order to address those needs.

The members need to be in a position to analyse their own situation and to formulate the problems facing them. They would also need to have knowledge about various alternatives and possibilities to address their problems in order to improve their economic situation. The decision to join a cooperative society should be a conscious and voluntary decision.

So when stating that "awareness" is one absolute criterion for the sustained success of a primary cooperative society one should realise that the creation of "cooperative awareness" is a demanding and complex process. Especially in a situation where the concept of "Cooperation" is something new and alien to the community in question.

When analyzing the position of primary cooperatives in developing countries the absence of "awareness" is but one of the reasons for an often discouraging record regarding the primary cooperatives. The introduction of cooperatives has, almost without exceptions, been initiated by governments who have either overlooked and/or been ignorant about the fact that a successful cooperative presupposes cooperative awareness among the members. On the other hand where primary cooperatives have

been successful there has also been a high degree of cooperative awareness.

## **Basic Knowledge and Understanding**

Translated into terms of cooperative development strategy this implies clearly that the general members must have or must be able to acquire basic understanding and knowledge about the cooperatives as a means of improving their economic situation. Without this no cooperative awareness will be created and the prospects for success will be dim. Thus member education programmes and generally measures to secure active member participation are fundamental and indeed decisive for the evolvment of successful primary cooperatives.

In a broader sense the general level of education, literacy rate etc. will, to a large extent, determine whether a primary cooperative society will succeed or not. A predominantly illiterate membership would have great difficulties to acquire the necessary knowledge and understanding to monitor and control the operations of their society. It is very difficult, not to say impossible, in this type of situation as described above to have successful cooperative societies; i.e. genuine societies. Artificial or pseudo-cooperatives, where the members have a peripheral role and where government officers are in full command do, of course, exist.

To successfully run a cooperative society requires considerable knowledge and understanding of both the Cooperative Principles and the "mechanics" of operating a cooperative society. While the members need to have at least elementary knowledge it is imperative that the leaders have a deeper understanding of Cooperative Principles and practices.

The control function of the members is very crucial for keeping the operations of a cooperative society on the right track. There are examples in abundance of cooperative societies with predominantly illiterate and ignorant members where cooperative leaders and

sometimes government officers have exploited the society for their own benefits. This type of exploitation is much less likely to develop in a situation where members are literate and enlightened.

## Honesty and Integrity

It is sometimes argued that "honesty" is something relative - relative to the likelihood of being caught or apprehended. An "honest" society is often a society with a high degree of social control. Clearly the same goes for a cooperative society - it is very difficult for cooperative leaders to fiddle around with money, goods etc. if the members are alert, well-informed and knowledgeable.

While social control and "member control" are important factors in the creation of a generally conducive environment for successful cooperatives, it is not enough to guarantee success. For a cooperative society to be successful, the cooperative leaders, in addition to being knowledgeable, must also be persons of honesty, integrity and vision.

When reading cooperative history the role of certain key persons is being regarded as crucial for the success of many cooperative organisations. These personalities were dedicated and committed to the idea of Cooperation. In many European countries primary school teachers were instrumental in forming primary cooperative societies. Governments were never directly involved. They only provided the legal framework within which the role of the government was confined to registration and liquidation of cooperatives.

There are in all likelihood potential cooperative leaders in virtually every local community. In order to utilize this potential it is necessary that these key persons are exposed to the idea of Cooperation. In a developing country situation this can be achieved through systematic efforts by existing cooperative organisations as also by the authorities. Information, education, training and

practical exposure would be the principal means to develop cooperative leaders without whom no cooperative will grow and prosper.

## **Honest and Competent Staff**

A primary cooperative society is a rather complex type of organisation. It is a commercial business organisation supposed to carry out its business operations as efficiently as any other type of business organisation. In addition to this, and this is where the unique character of a cooperative comes in, it is a democratic institution where each member and owner has one vote. The members are both owners and beneficiaries. They elect the office-bearers who, in turn, are accountable to the members.

As soon as the volume of the business operations grows the need for skilled staff to run the day-to-day operations arises. The committee of the society has to employ staff. In the initial stages of the development the business operations are often carried out by committee members and ordinary members. This is possible only as long as the business volume is low and the income of the cooperative society is not big enough to employ professional personnel.

It goes without saying that the quality of the staff is a key factor for the success of a cooperative society. The criteria for employment of staff in a cooperative society are the same as in any other type of business organisation i.e., the personnel to be employed should be honest and possess the necessary competence for the particular position in question.

There are many examples where cooperative societies have failed because of either incompetent or dishonest staff, sometimes both. The committees of cooperative societies are often unwilling to pay the staff salaries at prevailing market rates. As a result the quality of the staff suffers. This is, in fact, one of the most serious shortcomings in the cooperative sector in many developing

countries. It is a misconception to believe that salaried staff, professionals, can be paid less in cooperatives than corresponding staff in other business sectors. Unfortunately this delusion is stubbornly lingering on in the cooperatives. The remedy in this case also is to educate the committees, to make them realise that they will not be able to achieve the goals set up for the cooperative society unless they are prepared to employ competent staff and pay them according to the prevailing market rates.

It is difficult to find out in advance whether a certain person is honest or not. The only way to do it is to be very careful and thorough when screening the candidates. We have earlier suggested that the occurrence of dishonesty is closely related to the control and monitoring mechanisms applied in a cooperative society. The more lax the control systems are the more likely is the occurrence of fraud, misappropriation, theft etc. The committee of the cooperative society has a very important responsibility in controlling the top management personnel.

The control and monitoring mechanisms discussed above must be in place in all cooperative societies, regardless of the size of the societies. There are no shortcuts to success. The committees must employ competent staff, pay them adequately and control and monitor the operations of the cooperative society properly.

## Viability

One of the most basic criteria for the success of a cooperative society is its economic viability. A cooperative is a business organisation that will exist only as long as it generates a surplus. The smaller the volume the cooperative handles the more difficult it is to become viable. It is futile to form a cooperative society with an area of operation where there is not even a potential to reach a sufficient volume needed to secure viability. This is of course to say the obvious.

In a situation where cooperative societies have evolved in a

“natural” and spontaneous manner and been formed at local initiative this prerequisite for success, i.e. sufficient volume, has been met. If not, the cooperative society would not have survived. What is described here is development starting from “down-under” and is the opposite to the “top-down” approach.

The vast majority of cooperative societies in the developing countries have come into existence at the initiative of the governments. This is often referred to as “top-down” approach. The governments have shown great faith in Cooperation as a principal means for development - especially rural development. The establishment of new cooperative societies have very often been carried out along administrative lines and, sometimes in one-party states, along political party lines. As a result of this bureaucratic approach to cooperative development one sometimes finds a pattern of one cooperative society per village, or sub-district, or district etc. depending on the administrative structure in the country in question. The structure is implemented all over, as a blanket recommendation, regardless of the often great variations in geography, climate and composition of population etc. that may exist. Furthermore radical changes in the cooperative structure are carried out, sometimes only to be changed again after a short period of time, on the directive of the government. Again the top-down approach.

The members and owners of the cooperative societies are not consulted.

These often frequent changes in government policies vis-a-vis cooperatives and consequently lack of consistency do not contribute to the creation of an environment conducive to achieving viability.

## **Market**

The importance of the existence of and access to a functioning market and marketing structure can hardly be overestimated. Clearly the success or failure of cooperative societies depend on

how and on what conditions they can market their commodities or services. Even if all other basic prerequisites for the success are in place the cooperative society may still fail because of unsatisfactory marketing conditions.

Secondary and tertiary level cooperative organisations have often been formed to cater for the marketing needs of primary cooperative societies. Likewise processing, packaging and manufacturing industries both on primary but usually on secondary level have been established in order to facilitate the marketing of members produce. In fact the most successful cooperative structures have developed a high degree of vertical integration where the value addition is retained within the cooperative sphere strengthening the cooperatives and ultimately benefitting the members.

There are numerous aspects affecting the opportunities for a cooperative society to market its commodities or services. In respect of rural cooperatives the position of the infrastructure is often crucial. The condition of the roads, the communications network etc. may determine whether society can profitably market its commodities. Here both central and local governments have important responsibilities to develop an infrastructure conducive to economic development.

In many developing countries governments are actively supporting and facilitating the marketing function of cooperatives. Cooperatives may be granted exclusive rights or monopoly to market certain produce, guaranteed minimum price, subsidized transport, financial support to build processing plants etc.

This type of support is welcome. The cooperative sector should, in fact, receive government support and encouragement on the same basis and conditions as other economic enterprises. Cooperatives should similarly not be subject to more control or supervision by government than what is the case for other economic organisations. Government should be "organisation-form" neutral.

## Legislation

In many developing countries the present cooperative legislation has been inherited from the previous colonial authorities. This is the case especially in territories formerly held by the British. The colonial authorities drew up a cooperative law for India in the beginning of this century, a law which later became a model for other British colonies. This legislation and the administrative machinery that accompanied it is paternalistic and based on the untrue assumption that the indigenous population would not be able to run cooperatives by themselves. The approach was typically top-down and as a consequence the members tended to regard the cooperatives as government institutions. There are, however, a good number of examples where genuine member-initiated cooperatives were formed and managed successfully. These examples amply prove that the colonial powers were wrong in assuming that indigenous people would not be able to form and run cooperatives independently.

The motives for the colonial authorities to establish cooperatives were basically to get access to agricultural produce for consumption and export and to bring predominantly subsistence farmers into the monetary economy. The so-called "hut-tax" in East Africa also served this purpose - to force the rural population to earn cash, either by marketing their produce for cash or to sell their labour to expatriate plantation owners.

This is now all history but the fact remains that after winning independence many governments continued to adopt the paternalistic attitude of the colonial authorities - knowingly or unknowingly.

Governments at the time of independence and still today regard cooperatives and especially rural cooperatives as a means of furthering and speeding up rural development. The cooperative legislation inherited from the colonial authorities was in all essential aspects taken over by the new governments and the control machinery was reinforced. High hopes and ambitions were placed in cooperatives as an effective means of furthering development.



In retrospect one could say that there was an unrealistic and sometimes romantic belief that "once we have the cooperatives all problems will be solved" or "cooperatives are not one way, they are the only way". The truth is that these type of proclamations, however well-intended, may do more harm than good to the cooperative cause as they raise unrealistic expectations.

Numerous new cooperative societies were formed in the decade(s) immediately following independence, but more often than not, in a hasty and not so well prepared manner. As a consequence many of these newly-established cooperatives either collapsed or became dormant because they were ill-conceived as the basic prerequisites for success were not there. Cooperatives and Cooperation received a bad image as a result of this rush to form cooperative societies and in many cases this image problem lingers on.

The whole underlying assumption of the cooperative legislation seemed to be ; as all prerequisites for success are not in place the government has to step in and do what members and their elected leaders would normally do. This is fundamentally wrong. One cannot expect an independent and economically viable Cooperative Movement to develop and prosper with that type of perspective. There are definite limits to what one can achieve by "engineering" cooperative development. The result, as we can see it today, is, in many instances, pseudo-cooperative structures - initiated, controlled and run by government officials or appointees.

To develop an independent, democratic and economically viable Cooperative Movement in a country, the government must take cognizance of the true nature of a cooperative society and revise the legislation accordingly. The sooner this is done, the better it would be.

## **Some Issues**

The cooperative scenario described above may perhaps give the reader the impression that most cooperative societies and structures in developing countries are not real cooperatives. What

appears obvious is that changes in policies and approaches towards cooperative development are necessary. Equally important is that the true nature of a cooperative society is being discussed and understood by the key actors, be they politicians, government officers, cooperative officials or representatives of international organisations.

In the Asia-Pacific Region this discussion has been going on for some years now. Two Cooperative Ministers' Conferences have been held; in Sydney, Australia in 1990 and in Jakarta, Indonesia in February 1992. A series of National Workshops have been held to discuss the cooperative situation in five countries so far. Concrete changes have been made in the cooperative legislation and other policies regarding the cooperatives in a number of countries resulting in more independence for the cooperatives and less government control. The process towards transforming government-initiated and controlled cooperatives into independent member-led cooperatives is well under way in many countries.

This process should continue and accelerate.

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## **Declaration of the Cooperative Ministers' Conference held in Sydney (Australia) in February 1990**

The Conference declares the following :-

**Noting** : the constructive development role played by the cooperatives and their healthy and wholesome impact on the communities as a whole in the Asian and the Pacific countries;

**Recognizing** : the vast potential of Cooperation as a self-help and mutual-aid movement in transforming economic and social condition of the people for a better and happier society based on democratic and moral values, social justice and peace;

**Accepting** : the suitability and essentiality of cooperatives as one of the most appropriate agencies for accelerating economic development and social advancement, and in meeting the aspirations of the peoples;

**Taking into Account** : government assistance as an important factor in the development of cooperatives;

**Affirms** : governments' continuing support :

- i. to cooperatives to grow as a vital instrument of socio-economic change through developmental plans and programmes based on self-help and mutual-aid.
- ii. to facilitate their development and functioning of cooperatives in accordance with the ICA Cooperative Principles.

and further

**Requests** : the national governments to take necessary steps for the implementation of recommendations of the Conference; and

**Appreciating** : the activities and contribution of the ICA in assisting the governments and cooperatives;

**Solicits** : further continuance of the ICA assistance in all possible ways in the growth of genuine and strong cooperatives;

to be known as "Sydney Cooperative Ministers' Conference Declaration 1990".

## **Recommendations of Cooperative Ministers' Conference Jakarta (Indonesia) : 18-21 February 1992 - Some excerpts**

### **Role of the Government**

05. Governments' collaboration in cooperative development is vital to strengthen cooperative values in several ways, particularly providing appropriate cooperative legislation and administrative policies.

06. The cooperative values need to be safeguarded while extending government financial and other assistance to the cooperatives.

09. The Conference recognised the role of the government in the creation of a conducive environment for the implementation of various programmes allowing cooperatives to diversify so as to achieve the projected objectives and goals. The Conference recommended the following measures in this regard :-

9.1 to support the publicity campaigns undertaken by cooperatives to develop understanding about cooperative values, socio-economic objectives and competitive strength in the cooperatives.

9.2 continuing dialogue with the cooperatives to secure support and reaffirm faith of the executive heads of the government in the potentials of cooperatives.

9.3 to encourage extensive mass media coverage of the role played by cooperatives in the socio-economic development for the purpose of educating the general public as to the potential of cooperatives.

11. The Conference felt that to ensure greater functional efficiency, it was essential to promote professional management in cooperatives. It recommended that adequate measures should be taken by the Movement with the support of the government to strengthen human resource development.

14. The Conference further recommended that de-regulation also be extended to cooperatives.

16. The Conference acknowledged that planning should be the primary responsibility of each cooperative. The government's technical and other assistance be made available as required.

### **Role of Cooperatives**

17. Cooperatives have to play a conscious role in the propagation, promotion and strengthening of values. It is an important responsibility of each cooperative

to educate its members about the concept and essentiality of cooperative values. The working of cooperatives ought to reflect the values. The bye-laws should specifically provide for value-oriented operations of cooperatives. The education and training courses for various categories of office-bearers and employees include discussion on cooperative values.

18. Cooperative values need to be safeguarded and maintained while accepting government financial and other assistance.

19. Cooperatives need to undertake education, publicity and intensive campaigning to educate the members and general public about the socio-economic objectives of cooperatives.

20. The projection and realization of long-term objective depend to a great extent upon the performance of promotional unions or federations within the cooperative structure itself. The conference noted that these were weak organizationally, financially, and professionally. In many cases they depended upon government financing. The conference recommended that due support be given to make them strong.

30. The Conference took note of the steps taken by the various governments to amend their cooperative legislation, keeping in view the spirit of Sydney Recommendation. The Conference recommended that needed legislative changes be carried out expeditiously.

31. The Conference took note of a weak condition of many primary cooperative societies and recognizing that primaries being the base of the entire cooperative structure, the Conference recommended that adequate measures be taken to strengthen them.

## Cooperative Values

- \* Self-help values (activity, creativity, responsibility, independence, "do-it yourself")
- \* Mutual-help values (cooperation, unity, collective action, solidarity, peace)
- \* Non-profit interest values (resource conservation, elimination of profit as a driving force, social responsibility, utilitarian goals, "not profiting from others work")
- \* Democratic values (equality, participation, equity)
- \* Voluntary-effort values (commitments, creative power, independence, pluralism)
- \* Universal values (global perspective, openness)
- \* Educational values (knowledge, understanding, insight, etc.)
- \* Purposeful values (benefit to members, etc.)

The **International Cooperative Alliance** is one of the oldest non-governmental international organisations. It is a worldwide confederation of cooperative organisations of all types. Founded in London on 18th August 1895, the ICA has affiliates in 77 countries with 195 national and ten international level cooperative organisations as members serving over 648 million individual members at the primary level. The ICA is the only international organisation entirely and exclusively dedicated to the promotion of Cooperation in all parts of the world. The ICA holds Consultative Status of Category-I in the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UN/ECOSOC).

Besides the head office in Geneva, Switzerland, there are four regional offices viz. the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific in New Delhi, India (established in 1960); the Regional Office for East, Central and Southern Africa at Moshi, Tanzania (established in 1968); the Regional Office for West Africa at Abidjan, Ivory Coast (established in 1979) and the Regional Office for Central America and the Caribbeans at San Jose, Costa Rica (established in 1989).

The ICA Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (ICA ROAP) serves 54 national level organisations from 19 countries, representing nearly 440 million individual cooperators. These countries are : Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, China, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Democratic Republic of Korea, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, USSR and Vietnam.

Main activities of the ROAP include coordination of cooperative development efforts within the region and promotion of exchanges and experiences; project identification, formulation and evaluation; promotion of establishment and development of national cooperative apex organisations; and organisation of seminars and conferences on specific subjects including support for programmes aiming at the involvement of women and youth in cooperative activities.

Finances are derived from member subscriptions, own funds and assistance from donors for various activities carried out by the ICA.



*We are exploited by middlemen. As our resources are limited, we are compelled to sell at very low prices.*

Source : Cartoon by T. Samuel from "A People's Programme - Community Development in Cartoons", Government of India, February 1965.

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