

## Chapter 2

# Contextualising the Cooperative Movement in Africa

Andrew Emmanuel Okem and Anne Stanton

**Abstract** This chapter undertakes a review of the evolution of cooperatives in Africa. The review notes that the cooperative form of organisation in Africa has its link to pre-colonial Africa although the modern form of internationally recognised cooperative organisations were introduced by the colonial powers. The chapter also notes that although the rationale that underpins the adoption of cooperatives in Africa is similar to those recognised internationally; this has not been the case in the implementation of cooperatives on the continent. The review provides critical insights into factors that affect cooperatives and note how these can be adopted to enhance the success of cooperatives in contemporary Africa. The chapter concludes by noting that despite challenges faced by cooperatives, they could be instrumental in addressing multiple challenges including poverty, unemployment and hopelessness experienced by many across Africa.

**Keywords** Africa • Collective activities • Cooperative • Poverty • State control

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A.E. Okem (✉)

School of Built Environment and Development Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal,  
Durban, South Africa

e-mail: andokem@gmail.com; okem@ukzn.ac.za

A. Stanton

School of Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg,  
South Africa

e-mail: stanton@ukzn.ac.za

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## 2.1 Introduction and Chapter Overview

The overriding objective of this chapter is to present an overview of the evolution of the cooperative movement in Africa. The chapter shows that cooperatives in Africa, despite their geographical and historical disparities, share some common fundamental and defining characteristics. This chapter begins by providing a brief overview of the origin of the cooperative movement. This is followed by an examination of cooperatives in Africa in four historical moments: pre-colonial Africa, Colonial Africa, Post-colonial Africa and the era following the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). This historicity provides an understanding of the evolution of cooperatives and how history shapes current practices in relation to the development of cooperatives on the continent. Additionally, lessons could be learnt from the various eras about factors that facilitate the development of cooperatives and those that inhibited their growth. Such lessons could be invaluable in supporting the growth and development of cooperatives in Africa.

## 2.2 The Origin of the Cooperative Movement

A review of the history of organised cooperatives shows that there have been various attempts at the formation of cooperative societies. Such attempts include the Shore Porters Society established in Aberdeen in 1498 and the Fenwick Weavers Society established in 1761 in Scotland (Mazzarol 2009). However, the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers (henceforth the Rochdale Society), formed in 1844, is often seen as the starting point of present day cooperatives (Mazzarol 2009; Satgar 2011; Towsey 2010). The Rochdale Society emerged during the industrial revolution in England (Mazzarol 2009; Satgar 2007a; University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives 2012). The emergence of modern cooperatives at this historical juncture has been construed as a reaction to the harsh socio-economic conditions triggered by the imperatives of the industrial revolution (Ajayi 2012; De Peuter and Dyer-Witthford 2010; Diamantopoulos 2012; Hannan 2014).

During the industrial revolution, skilled artisans, as well as unskilled labourers, lost their jobs as production became increasingly mechanised. In addition, the concentration of capital in the hands of a few industrialists resulted in the pauperisation of many smallholder farmers and artisans who were unable to compete in the industrial age (Jarka et al. 2003; Tchami 2007). These individuals had no organisations to defend them against the exploitation of the capitalist system. These factors, among others, constituted the “macro level factors” which precipitated the “wide-spread proletarianisation in Europe during the 19th and early 20th century” in both rural areas and urban centres (Jarka et al. 2003, p. 242). Against this backdrop, it has been argued that cooperatives emerged as a collective response by the poor towards adapting to and mitigating the imperatives of the industrial

revolution (International Cooperative Alliance 2010). By merging their resources, members of cooperatives leveraged scale economics.

From the foregoing, it is apparent that the disadvantaged position of small-scale producers, coupled with the loss of employment by factory workers were key factors that stimulated the formation of cooperatives. According to the Cooperative Development Institute (Cooperative Development Institute 2011), the cooperative model of economic organisation was seen as the only viable means to protect the collective interests of the poor and vulnerable. Similarly, Jarka et al. (2003, p. 242) argue that as a “counter-reaction to capitalistic exploitation”, cooperatives brought together disadvantaged peasants who pooled their resources to increase their bargaining power. In the same vein, De Peuter and Dyer-Witthoford (2010) note that cooperatives emerged in the late 19th century in opposition to the exploitative capitalist system.

Robert Owen has been credited as an influential thinker whose ideas were at the forefront of advancing the cooperative movement (Ajayi 2012; Satgar 2007a). His thinking was informed by the desire to form a utopian society premised on egalitarianism (Mazzarol 2009). This ideological standpoint facilitated the rapid growth of the cooperative movement in 19th century Europe. The Rochdale Society, which first started out by operating small consumer stores through which members bought basic supplies such as flour and sugar, expanded into other sectors such as housing and finance (Zeuli and Cropp 2004). Since their emergence, cooperatives have played an important role in improving the socio-economic status of people around the world.

## 2.3 Epochs in the Evolution of Cooperatives in Africa

In Africa, the cooperative movement has evolved over the years. Historically, the evolution of cooperatives on the continent can be placed into four historical periods: pre-colonial Africa, colonial Africa, post-colonial Africa and the era of liberal capitalism. Each era will be presented in the following sub-sections.

### 2.3.1 *Cooperatives in Pre-colonial Africa*

The first epoch of cooperatives coincides with pre-colonial Africa during which cooperatives were based on an ideology of self-help. In pre-colonial Africa, the attainment of collective goals was at the forefront of communal activities in recognition of the interdependence of persons in society. The idea of interconnectedness in African society is expressed in Mbiti’s maxim “I am because we are. And since we are therefore, I am” (Mbiti 1969, p. 145). This maxim implies that cooperation is an inevitable reality in African societies since each individual sees and realises him/herself through others. Seen from this perspective, cooperation

could be construed as a necessary component of African life. Through cooperation, members of pre-colonial African societies shared scarce resources and were able to provide some form of insurance for themselves. This form, although different from cooperatives as per the definition, are underpinned by similar principles and values.

Cooperatives in pre-colonial Africa took many forms including collective management of farm holdings as well as grazing fields. Some elements of pre-colonial forms of cooperatives are evident in Africa today and are manifested in various forms of communal and collective activities. Braverman et al. (1991) have noted some examples of these traditional practices including:

[...]rotating savings and credit associations (also known as “tontines” or “esusu” in West Africa) that include an element of mutual social assistance in addition to the savings and credit aspect; burial societies, which can be considered as a form of micro-insurance; and mutual work-sharing schemes for large, labour-intensive ventures such as house construction, land clearing or crop harvesting.

Despite the predominance of cooperatives introduced in Africa by the colonial powers, pre-colonial forms continue to persist. For example, a vestige of pre-colonial forms of cooperatives can be found among the Idoma people of central Nigeria in a traditional saving practice known as *otataje* (Ayodele and Arogundade 2014; Iganiga 2008) [a local collective saving society] and collective farming practices called *oluma*. *Oluma* is a practice whereby people organise themselves into groups such as clans or age grades and take turns to work in each other’s fields. Through this practice, farmers are able to own and manage large farm holdings beyond what they would be able to manage individually. In addition to working on farms collectively, *oluma* also provides various forms of social support for members in the ebbs and flow of life such as childbirth or loss of a family member. In this way, *oluma* aims to meet both members’ economic and social needs. This demonstrates that this traditional practice, although not formally recognised as cooperatives, imbibes values similar to those of formally recognised cooperatives.

### 2.3.2 Cooperatives in Colonial Africa

The second era in the evolution of cooperatives in Africa coincides with the colonial era. This era was characterised by the introduction of present day cooperatives (Braverman et al. 1991). The driving force for cooperatives during this period was the advancement of the economic interests of colonial powers and cooperative was the exclusive preserve of colonial powers (Nyagah 2012). In colonial Africa, colonial powers tailored cooperatives primarily towards the production of cash crops for their home countries at the expense of subsistence produce (Satgar 2007b; Wanyama 2009). For this reason, the structure and form of support given to cooperatives in colonial Africa encouraged the production of cash crops such as tea, cocoa, coffee and cotton for export.

White owned cooperatives in colonial Africa were heavily subsidised by the then governments (Van Niekerk 1998). The subsidies granted to cooperatives served two main functions. Firstly, they ensured that cooperatives had a monopolistic control over the sector in which they operated. Secondly, they encouraged the settlement of Europeans in the colonies thus strengthening the grip of colonial powers over these colonies (Wanyama 2009). In British colonies, for instance, the British government supported the development of cooperatives among white settlers to generate income for administering the colonies and to provide raw materials for its burgeoning industries. The establishment and expansion of cooperatives in colonial Kenya aimed to benefit white settlers and the Great Britain (Gyllström 1991; Muthuma 2011; Nyagah 2012). The Kenyan scenario demonstrates that the establishment of cooperatives was solely for the benefits of British settlers and the advancement of the economic interest of the British Crown (Nyagah 2012). Effectively, the cooperative movement in colonial Africa were not bottom-up organisations established to meet members' collective interests. In light of the foregoing, Develtere et al. (2008, p. 11) observe that cooperative in colonial Africa

was not seen as an independent socio-economic movement based on self-managed cooperative enterprises. Cooperatives and the cooperative sector as a whole were treated as instruments for propagating public economic and social policy. In the same vein, members joined cooperatives as matter of public policy rather than the result of voluntary individual motivation. Members belonged to a cooperative either to avoid problems with colonial authorities or to get access to certain services like marketing their produce through the only available channel. They did not regard themselves as the owners of the cooperatives. Consequently, the seeds for a system of cooperatives without co-operators were sown

Although the foregoing paints a general picture of cooperatives in Africa, it is important to note that the colonial approach to cooperatives was not homogeneous. Given the different colonial systems that were operational in Africa, the nature and structure of cooperatives differed across the continent (Develtere et al. 2008). The approach to colonialism adopted by the different colonist influenced the approach to cooperatives. For instance, the social economic model was predominant in French colonial territories while the British adopted a unified approach to cooperatives. In Portuguese colonies, the producer model was implemented in contrast to the social movement model in Belgian colonies. Countries such as Egypt, South Africa, and Ethiopia adopted an indigenous model in the implementation of cooperatives (Develtere et al. 2008).

### ***2.3.3 Cooperatives in Post-colonial Africa***

The end of colonialism brought about different social and political imperatives, which led to the third phase in the evolution of cooperatives in Africa. During this period, leaders of newly independent African countries saw cooperatives as a means of improving social cohesion and fast-tracking economic development in their respective countries (Getnet and Anullo 2012). From this ideological standpoint,

cooperatives in post-colonial Africa were seen as extensions of the state (Satgar 2007a). In this respect, the notion of cooperatives promoted by first generation African leaders was similar to those of the colonial era. First generation African leaders made no attempts at changing the organisational forms of cooperatives.

During the third phase of the evolution of cooperatives in Africa, states were actively involved in supporting the development of cooperatives (Satgar 2007b). Seen as extensions of the state, cooperatives were not perceived as independent and self-organising enterprises aimed at improving members' collective interests. Rather, they were subjected to the control of state institutions. In Kenya, for instance, The Co-operative Societies' Act (CAP 490 of 1966) placed the cooperative movement firmly under government control. Massive financial injection into the country's cooperative sector and the establishment of a Cooperative Department to facilitate and manage the development of cooperatives were all directed towards government control of cooperatives. Because of the emphasis on agricultural cooperatives during this period, government policy also translated into the rolling out of extensive agricultural extension services.

A common approach to cooperatives in post-colonial Africa was that they were conceived as a paradigm for the advancement of states' policies—particularly in the area of local economic development (Hartley and Johnson 2014). For instance, the socialist policy of Julius Nyerere's Regime in Tanzania effectively placed cooperatives under state control. According to Wanyama (2012), Nyerere saw cooperatives as an ideal tool for the implementation of his *Ujamaa* policy. Consequently, government support of cooperatives was essentially dependent on cooperatives' ability to implement government's theory of change<sup>1</sup> (Satgar and Williams 2008). In doing this, government eroded the autonomy of cooperatives. In addition, the actions of cooperatives were no longer geared towards achieving members' interests; rather they aimed primarily to attain governments' vision for cooperatives.

In Ethiopia, which did not experience institutionalised colonialism, the pattern of the cooperative movement during this period was similar to that of most African countries. The military rule from 1975 to 1991 provided extensive institutional support which led to the proliferation of cooperatives. These cooperatives were not underpinned by the passion to address members' collective needs. Rather, they were collective responses to government financial incentives. Consequently, the end of the military rule and associated finance support of the sector resulted in the collapse of most cooperatives which relied on government support for their existence (Japan Association for International Collaboration of Agriculture and Forestry 2008). The collapse of most cooperatives at the end of military rule demonstrated that most cooperatives established during the military regime were not underpinned by the principles and values of the cooperative movement.

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<sup>1</sup>In the development field, a theory of change refers to the methodology used to bring about change. The theory, which often emphasises the value of participation, links the causal pathways that must be followed in order to achieve certain predetermined outcomes. According to Vogel (2012: 9), theory of change is underpinned by "evaluation and informed social action".

State control of cooperatives had detrimental effects on the growth of cooperatives across the continent. Among other things, the state-led approach to the development of cooperatives was characterised by a series of abuses of the cooperative model. Such abuses include undermining the autonomy of cooperatives, creating a strong patronage system that made cooperatives dependent on the state, absence of democratic member control as well as overbearing government bureaucracies (Satgar and Williams 2008). The foregoing is contrary to the internationally recognised principles and values of the cooperative movement (International Cooperative Alliance 1995).

In post-colonial Africa, cooperatives did not subscribe to principles such as member economic participation or concern for community. Seen as extensions of the state, members of cooperatives had little incentive to work towards the promotion and sustainability of cooperatives. Cooperatives in this period relied on government for funds, governance, marketing, and training. Extensive reliance on state resources meant that the failure of state institutions often had a direct bearing on the failure of cooperatives since they were intrinsically linked to state bureaucracies most of which were plagued by inefficiencies and maladministration (Wanyama et al. 2009). Herein lies the paradox of cooperatives in Africa. While cooperatives espouse the value of independence, they often rely on the state for their continued existence. This reliance entails the creation of state support institutions for cooperatives. In this scenario, the distinction between what constitutes state control and state support is often blurred.

### ***2.3.4 Cooperatives in Liberal Economic System in Africa***

The link between the failure of state institutions and the failure of cooperatives has been identified as one of the motivating factors for disengaging cooperatives from the state in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Wanyama et al. 2009). Thinking about making cooperatives independent of the state was informed by the conviction that they are more successful if they operate independently of government institutions (Wanyama et al. 2009; Zeuli and Cropp 2004). Additionally, delinking cooperatives from the state reflects a commitment to institutionalising the principles and values of the cooperative movement.

The push for the independence of cooperatives in Africa re-emphasised the values of cooperation in the pre-colonial era when it was underpinned by the value of self-help in the absence of formal state support. However, this value gave way to state control during the colonial era. From pre-colonial Africa to this period, cooperatives have progressed from self-help to state control, and to state reliance. Despite these changes, the objective remained that of social and economic development even though the nature thereof was different at different times (subsistence in the pre-colonial era, extractive in colonial times for the benefit of colonisers, and state-centred after independence for the benefit of state leaders).

The call for independent, people-centred cooperatives in the late 1980s and early 1990s was about enabling cooperatives to realise the values of their existence. According to Berolsky (2000) and William (2003), such thinking fits into the broader policy intervention of the Bretton Woods Institutions in the form of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the 1990s. The SAPs advocated a capable state in place of a large and bloated state. In addition, it encouraged the implementation of a *laissez-faire* capitalist system in which the state has limited participation in the economic sphere. The implementation of neo-liberal economic policy led to the rapid privatisation of state-owned enterprises, deregulation of various sectors of the economy and minimal state intervention in the economic sphere (Berolsky 2000). Liberalisation, occasioned by the implementation of the SAPs, resulted in the removal of government subsidies. In addition, it led to the end of price control as well as the drastic restructuring of public service to reduce bloated bureaucracy. Drastically reducing the size of bureaucracies correspondingly reduced government support structures for cooperatives.

The socio-economic imperatives of the SAPs were a stimulus for the emergence of the fourth era of the evolution of cooperatives in Africa. What was apparent during this era was less state interference in the activities of cooperatives. This period was characterised by the formulation and implementation of policies that saw cooperatives as a movement independent of government institutions (Wanyama et al. 2009). In addition, the role of members in advancing the success of cooperatives was emphasised over that of the state. Rather than being seen as extensions of the state, cooperatives are seen as “democratically and professionally managed, self-controlled and self-reliant” organisations (Wanyama et al. 2009, p. VI).

Although making cooperatives independent of the state was seen as a positive initiative as far as the development of the cooperative movement was concerned, cooperatives in many African countries performed poorly during this period (Ajayi 2012; Hartley and Johnson 2014). For instance, a study by Wanyama et al. (2009) found that economic liberalisation had a considerable negative impact on cooperatives because cooperatives, for many years, relied heavily on state institutions and were ill-prepared for the new economic climate brought about by the SAPs. An outcome of these changes was the collapse of cooperatives that could not function in the absence of privileges and support they previously enjoyed. In East Africa for example, liberalisation of the coffee market resulted in the entrance of multinational corporations into the domestic market. These corporations significantly weakened the market share of cooperatives in the coffee sector (Ponte 2002). Despite this, Wanyama et al. (2009) argue that the economic reality brought about by the SAPs was a positive development for cooperatives on the continent because it resulted in the elimination of ineffective cooperatives that relied solely on state subsidies for survival. It has also led to the emergence of new institutional cooperative models that provide market support for local cooperatives in countries such as Ethiopia & Kenya (Kodama 2007).

Apart from attempting to eliminate ‘wasteful government expenditures’ (one of the underlying philosophies of the SAPs), liberalisation also ensured that cooperatives were pressured into finding innovative ways to adapt to the new economic



climate. In addition, it created a condition in which the formation of cooperatives was no longer hinged on the prospect of accessing government support in the form of subsidies and grants.<sup>2</sup> Rather, cooperatives were seen as organisations for advancing members' social and economic interests (Wanyama et al. 2009). Furthermore, Satgar and Williams (2008) argue that the success of cooperatives in Africa, following the introduction of the neo-liberal policy, was underpinned by peoples' passion for the cooperative movement. Consequently, this era played an invaluable role in ensuring that cooperatives in Africa embody the principles and values of the cooperative movement. Government approach to cooperatives, following the implementation of SAPs, continue to underline government relation with cooperatives across Africa. However, the extent to which cooperatives operate independently of government interference differs across countries.

## **2.4 Lessons for the Review of the History of Cooperatives in Africa**

The historicity of cooperatives as outlined above provides an understanding of the evolution of cooperatives in Africa and how history shapes current practices in relation to the development of cooperatives on the continent. Additionally, the review provides lessons about factors that facilitate the development of cooperatives and those that inhibit their growth in a given era. An important lesson derived from this review is that cooperatives thrive when they operate as independent institutions focused on improving members' socio-economic conditions. In addition, the review showed that over-reliance on the state could result in a weak cooperative sector since their performance is linked with that of supporting government institution(s). Thus, it is argued that although government support can facilitate the growth of cooperatives (often seen in terms of the number of registered cooperatives), government support should be limited to the creation of an enabling environment that will facilitate their growth. In doing this, cooperatives are positioned to contribute to poverty alleviation, employment creation, economic development, and people's empowerment.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

The overriding objective of this chapter was to present an overview of the evolution of the cooperative movement in Africa. The chapter began by examining the emergence of cooperatives. The chapter noted that although modern cooperatives

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<sup>2</sup>In countries such as South Africa and Nigeria, government grants continues to be the main source of revenue for cooperatives despite the prevalent view that this approach is detrimental to the success of cooperatives.

were introduced during colonialism, cooperatives in Africa predate the colonial era. Pre-colonial forms of cooperative can still be found today despite the predominance of those introduced in the colonial era. From the historical overview of the evolution of cooperatives in Africa, the chapter established that cooperatives are more successful in contexts where they are bottom-up organisations that operate independently of government interference. This is evident in the failure of cooperatives in post-colonial Africa when cooperatives were adopted as tools for the implementation of the socialist ideals of many African leaders. Reflecting on the negative impact of this approach during this period, Restakis (2010, 53) notes that

...co-operatives became the instrument of choice to implement state policies for production and economic development. Voluntary cooperation was replaced by mandated co-operation. And so it came about that centralized socialism became far more damaging to the integrity of the co-op idea and the realization of its potential than capitalism itself. To this day co-operatives in many of these countries signify little more in the minds of the populace than instruments of state coercion. It is a tragedy of economic and human misuse whose negative effects are still being felt.

For this reason, the role of government should pertain only to the creation of conditions for the emergence and growth of cooperatives.

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