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## Negotiating two seemingly contradictory understandings of co-operatives

Joel Matthews

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In *EDN* 127 (<http://www.echocommunity.org/resources/2a790434-ad5e-4f56-9b7d-e96680401f0e>), Dick Tinsley (</resources/5f40ecd2-0a9a-4358-a77e-48246bf262f7>) and David Headley (</resources/4efc35a9-e4f5-4007-951d-e079847a894f>) appear to offer somewhat contradictory visions regarding the value of farmers' co-operatives. When such contradictory advice appears, it often points to an area of underappreciated complexity. Thus, rather than throw our hands up in frustration, we should take the time to understand. In fact, this is a good time to acknowledge that intervening in a community is complex and potentially risky (for the end users). We must tread carefully when we propose changing others' lives.

Actually, the problem faced here is exacerbated by the tendency of western-educated thinkers (most of us who read *EDN*) to rely too heavily on models. Models assist analysis of complex situations by presenting a simplified picture of reality, for example by reducing the number of variables that impact any particular outcome. Models can be very powerful, but their champions tend to want to universalize their applicability.

Let's take another look at the two perspectives on co-operatives. David Headley has collected some positive experiences regarding the utility of farmers' co-operatives; these should not be discounted. However, it would be a mistake to universalize these positive experiences in order to recommend co-operatives for all farmers. Dick Tinsley rightly points out the tendency to dismiss negative aspects of co-operatives in order to promote the model. Tinsley also suggests conducting a detailed analysis of indigenous practices for comparison with the proposed model (the co-operative). This is certainly a valid suggestion, but unless there is a functioning co-operative already operating nearby in a similar cultural and economic environment, it would be like comparing apples and oranges: comparing data collected from an existing indigenous system to the imagined data of the proposed non-existing system. This would leave too much room for interpretation based on the particular bias of the researcher. But there is another problem with such analysis; it tends to focus on researchers' conclusions rather than the farmers' conclusions.

My experience working and researching among West African smallholders suggests that not enough attention is paid to pre-existing institutions and systems. In many cases, development facilitators enter a community without sufficient

knowledge of the existing practices and preferences. No doubt, the smallholders in question already utilize the services of private business men and women to carry out practices that the co-operative will assume. Thus, the business owners will very likely resist the formation of a co-operative. But more importantly, we must ask if the farmers already cooperate on a small scale, such as pooling money to purchase bulk fertilizer and then dividing it among themselves. If the farmers that live and work together are not cooperating on this level, then large-scale cooperation may have insurmountable problems. I discovered that many rural communities suffer from low levels of mutual trust that hamper the potential for cooperation. In such communities, even if a co-operative were established, it would disintegrate once support was withdrawn by the agency.

In addition, development facilitators often erroneously assume that communities exist as a cohesive and cooperating whole. In fact, many rural Hausa villages, for example, exist as a collection of competing sub-communities composed of multiple men's and women's groups. In such a context it is a mistake to offer a single village co-operative, because the village is not a single entity. Men's groups differ in terms of relative power and access to resources, and of course they tend to dominate women's groups. Thus, a single co-operative will probably benefit the strongest men's group to the exclusion of others. In this case it may be advisable to work with each sub-group individually. On the other hand, there may be a significant difference between the ability of some groups to work together for a common goal. I have found that women's groups often have a much higher level of trust among members than do comparable men's groups, and many women's groups already operate savings co-operatives. In these cases, it may be advisable to facilitate farmers' co-operatives among women's pre-existing groups, and not try to include other men and women that do not share a high level of interpersonal trust.

This complexity may be sobering, especially for Americans who want to quickly fix things and move on. However, reality is always more complex than the models we create. Rather than being discouraged by such complexity, we can see it as a call for deeper understanding of the communities where we intervene. This requires a heavy time commitment, a humility that acknowledges our ignorance, and a willingness to work with farmers to create the world they envision. This is far preferable to working for our vision of the world, and in the end far more sustainable. Christians, of all people, should recognize that God deliberately created a diverse world. Cultural differences are an expression of God's multifaceted glory, and should be celebrated rather than homogenized. If this is true, then we will want to work with each community seeking to understand their peculiar vision of the world and helping to bring that about. This is a slow and complex process, but I believe that God asks nothing less of Christian community development workers.