

THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR: A PARTNER IN COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

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Cooperatives, since their early beginnings in the middle of the 19th century, have shown conclusively that they can improve the living standards of the people, and at the same time teach their members the importance of group action and group responsibility, and the significance of democracy. Inspired by the success of the 28 flannel weavers of Rochdale in 1844, the cooperative movement, with its ideals and time-tested principles, has spread to almost all parts of the world. The many millions of people now reaping the benefits from cooperatives, not only in the more affluent but also in the less developed countries, have made their leaders look into the methods and means of strengthening these institutions as instruments for social and economic progress.

The cooperative idea is not new in our country. There were many laws passed to set the legal framework for its development. But the cooperative movement in this country has been a heart-breaking struggle against great odds. Today, we have yet to meet people who can honestly say that they are completely satisfied with its results. From as early as 1907 to the present, the efforts of some dedicated leaders to establish a strong cooperative movement have been weakened by various problems. Among the problems mentioned were: the general indifference of the people to this new type of economic cooperation, the lack of capital, inexperience, bad faith on the part of some public officials, improper motivation, graft and corruption, political interference, lack of coordination among government agencies charged with the promotion and supervision of cooperatives, and ineffective dialogue between the government sector on one hand and the private sector on

the other.

In all those years, the frustrations caused by our failures have made many people believe that the cooperative movement can never have a chance in our country. This may be one of the reasons why we would rather use the term "Kilusang Bayan" rather than "cooperative" or "kooperatiba." This is quite unfortunate. But the truth, however, is that the cooperative movement has never really been tried in our country. Of course the records will show that we have so many credit unions, consumers' cooperatives, service cooperatives, Farmer's FACOMAS, and other types of cooperatives registered under the old laws, and a number of them are still operating, a handful quite successfully, but there never was, in the real sense, a cooperative movement to speak of.

The proclamation of the New Society has ushered in an intensified effort on the part of the government to transfuse new life and vigor to the cooperative movement. With the promulgation of Presidential Decree No. 175, entitled, "Strengthening the Cooperative Movement," on April 14, 1973, and the Letter of Implementation No. 23 on July 9, 1973, the new government program on cooperatives development got the green light.

Government effort alone, however, is not enough. Cooperative development must be a joint effort of the government and the private sector. Hence the need for mutual consultations. The private voluntary sector, more specifically, the cooperative sector, has its own vital role to play. From the experiences of many successful cooperatives in other parts of the world and from our own past failures in our country, we have learned that cooperatives are essentially a people's movement and that they can be truly significant and meaningful if they are organized

and built up out of the people's felt needs and interest, and if the cooperative movement as a whole derives its strength mainly from the people themselves.

This view has been repeatedly expressed in many workshops and seminars in which cooperative leaders from various primary cooperatives and federations have participated. They agree that the cooperative movement can make its due contribution to economic development without necessarily sacrificing its cooperative character as generally stated in formulas like:

- a) mutual self-help
- b) self-administration
- c) self-responsibility

or in a list of principles, still popularly known as the Rochdale Principles, and reformulated by the International Cooperative Alliance as:

- a) voluntary membership without artificial restrictions,
- b) democratic administration and control; and
- c) equitable distribution of economic returns arising out of their joint effort.

There is, however, the danger of going to the extreme of reducing cooperatives to a mere device to meet the requirements of national economic planning and in the interest of economic development without due regard to the fundamental objective of human development. Having this in mind, there seems to be a need of looking for a proper balance between the measures to attain business and economic efficiency and the measures to preserve the social and autonomous character of cooperatives.

There is general agreement that the government should support and guide the development of cooperatives, as called for by the present difficult and complex economic situation in which cooperative societies are to operate, and also because of the generally inadequate financial resources and lack of experience of the people intended to be benefited by the movement. Great care must be taken, however, so that such support is given or done in a way that does not stifle the development of initiative of the individual and

his interest in group action. Rather, it should be able to stimulate initiative and self-reliance and sustain the active participation of members in the activities of their cooperative. Experience has shown that a cooperative grows stronger when its members enjoy a sense of ownership and belonging, and have a feeling of pride that their association succeeded out of their own initiative and joint effort.

It is then needless to say that, in order to attain the real objectives of the cooperative movement, the leaders, both in the government and in the private sectors, including all those who take active part in the implementation of the cooperative development programs, should be thoroughly equipped with the knowledge of the fundamental cooperative principles, practices and philosophy, and should have the personal commitment to promote the two ideals of the cooperative movement. Moreover, there is a need to establish and maintain a favorable climate for the development of the spirit of volunteerism within the movement. Cooperatives, specially in their present stage of development, need to attract enough volunteers to supplement the assistance now being given through government personnel. Proper motivation would be necessary, but surely, we can think of countless ways to do this besides the usual offer of subsidies and other material incentives.

Before I close, I would like to pay tribute to the many dedicated leaders who have devoted their valuable time, effort and ability for the sake of the cooperative movement. We find them in primary cooperatives, in the federations and in other private associations. Many of them have not asked for monetary reward. They have set the example that we wish others will follow. Then and only then can we have a strong cooperative movement.

For us in the cooperative movement, what else can be a better motivation than love for one another? That is why in the cooperative movement — we share because we care!

Note

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