

What Kind of Research Information Do Co-Operative Decision Makers Require

By

Suleman A. Chambo

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1.0 Introduction

All stages of production transformation and distribution of goods or services between the original producers and final consumers such as storage, the transportation, the selling and buying, are activities which produce data. There is a minor distinction between data and information. Data are hard facts, figures or statements. Information is processed that is geared to convey meaning to a requirement of researchers, managers or decision makers. But data on its own may also give meaning and information on its own. It is however, important to note that data must be available for information to be generated.

Similarly, in co-operative business environment, there is production of data and information all the time. The data and information can be sectoral, such as agricultural, industrial or financial services, depending where such are located. Cooperative data can also be presented as part of a generalized national economic information system. Experience in developing countries, indicates that the presentation of co-operative data is diffused as part of the general sectors of the economy. It is also presented in a single paragraph in Economic survey reports giving indications that within the economic system in its generalized form, there is co-operative activity. This style of presentation obscures the presence of cooperative organizations.

In this presentation, we look at the need for explicit co-operative data and information, who are the decision makers in the co-operative system, what kind of information they require, future challenges of co-operative information systems and the way ahead.

2.0 Co-operative Data and Research Information

The availability of co-operative information, very much depends on systematic recording of co-operative data and making it available to the end users including decision makers. In many cases in developing countries, marginal collection of cooperative data in ministries dealing with co-operative development. The offices for official information are ill-funded and normally, diffused different specialised offices.

On the other hand, co-operative organizations themselves usually store very low quantities of business information, involving shares, number of members and production output figures or services given to members. Apart from the office of the accounts, co-operatives do not have competent desks or office architecture for cooperative information.

3.0 Who Are the Decision Makers in Co-operatives

In a co-operative organization, the members forming it are the shareholders and invest in it to attain economic and social objectives. They can form co-operatives in different activities such as agriculture, financial services, fisheries, mining and services. Looking at the co-operative principles that guide the performance of cooperative business, one sees how it is in itself an information driven organization. The principles of voluntary and open membership, democratic member control and member economic participation all demand that members join co-operative and control it using information as basic tool of management. The fourth principle of member autonomy and independence, is a special call for co-operators that they have to guard their organization against any foreign influence that may distort their internal trust they have created through the co-operative process. The fifth principal of education training and information is a demand for education for all members. Members also need skills and information to control their co-operative business.

Likewise, the sixth principle of co-operation among co-operatives gives the notion of co-operation among co-operatives nationally and internationally as source of solidarity and the performance of international co-operative development initiatives as well as a basis of international co-operative business strategy (Birchall and Ketilson: 2009). To carry out all these

ambitions, co-operative members need information. Likewise, the seventh principle of concern for the community calls for information exchange between the co-operative members and the immediate communities where they exist. It is therefore prudent to say that, the first decision makers demanding research information, are the members themselves as owners and shareholders.

The other decision makers needing research information are the leaders and employed staff. Likewise, leaders of the co-operative movement at the national and international levels of the movement, also require co-operative research information to articulate the strength of the movement and enable it lobby and advocate for a fair treatment of the co-operative movement worldwide. The government makes policies and laws on co-operatives hence need research information. They also need research information to develop more enabling tools of regulation. Finally, decision makers in the development partners also need research information to be able first to appreciate the impact of co-operative enterprise in development and poverty alleviation in particular.

4.0 What Kind of Research Information Do Co-operative Decision Makers Require

A study carried by the Co-operative College (Shilla and Chambo: 1989) tried to identify information requirement for decision making in Tanzania and concluded that at each level of co-operative organization, decision makers the emphasis of information requirement was different in terms of quantity and immediate use.

At the membership levels, information requirement centred around business performance, audit reports and financial information that would have given them a picture of how they were gaining from their co-operative business. Managers and leaders needed information that would give them answers of fulfilling their leadership obligations to their members. Information on general business performance, audit reports, dividend distribution, commodity prices and information on new government regulations on co-operatives. National co-operative federations would require information on membership, business performance, prices, bank interest rates, loan disbursement to the co-operative movement and the status of repayment of such loans. They would also like to know how such information can be used to influence policy and legislation at the national levels.

Government decision makers need co-operative research information because as policy makers, they would want to know the economic influence of co-operatives in the national economy and how national policy is influencing their performance with constraints and how policy can be

changed to have positive impact on co-operative development. Such information would include prices, business performance, membership, sectors where co-operatives were active, dormant co-operatives and national membership. Regulators are interested to evaluate the impact of regulatory tools in the business performance of co-operatives at the national levels and on issues like taxes and incentives.

Donor agencies require co-operative research information to evaluate the role of cooperatives in poverty alleviation and whether the assistance they provide will make a positive difference on co-operative performance.

5.0 Challenges in Co-operative Research Information Acquisition

The critical challenge of collecting co-operative information is fourfold: First is the absence of systematic documentation and storage of data resources. Not all co-operative organizations have a standard system of presentation and storage of co-operative data. Some co-operatives are using manual systems of documentation and storage. But some are using manual and electronic methods at the same time.

The second constraint is willingness by co-operative managers to pay attention to a systematic construction of co-operative data resources. It is very seldom for one to see information centres in co-operative organizations. Data is spread out in departments to the extent that when researchers want to collect any of such research data, they waste time to move from one department to another to collect bits of co-operative information required. There is need for the establishment of information centres where all cooperative data is systematically stored for any use.

Thirdly, the availability of co-operative data, is increasingly becoming a technical question. The use of ICT and the application of automated programs for data processing have become critically popular. However, many co-operatives still feel going ICT is costly in terms of training, hardware and a software acquisition. This attitude has caused delays in making co-operatives catch up with advancement in science and technology and affected their competitive performance.

The fourth area is a concern for both co-operative decision makers and researchers alike and is the lack of research tools and methods for tracking micro level impact of co-operatives to their members. Co-operative leaders generally give broad answers to questions which require specific

evidence on the economic impact of cooperatives on the membership. They provide answers such as improvement in housing, educational levels attained by children of their members and the like. But such broad reports are not backed by systematic evaluation reports based on research tools and methods.

Finally, is the lack of visibility of co-operative information in the structures of national economic statistics (Chambo, et al :2008). Co-operative data and statistics are diffused in the sectors where they are involved. But lack of this kind of desegregation makes it cumbersome for researchers and decision makers to appreciate the contribution of co-operatives in the national economy

5.0 The Way Ahead

Co-operatives are becoming internationalized but also becoming popular as the next outstanding business model. There is need to make full application of automated database approaches in co-operatives in co-operative management of data resources. The current CODAS project of ICA is important.

Secondly, there is need to disaggregate national data so that co-operative contribution features out in the national statistical data systems. This would motivate the co-operative sector and co-operative researchers to have a comprehensive overview of co-operative contribution to the national economy.

Thirdly, co-operatives especially at the primary and secondary levels, need special research tools and instruments to track down co-operative impact of its membership. This area will need concerted efforts by researchers to carry out design work on the development of appropriate research tools and methods for capturing economic and social impact of co-operative development in different communities.

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