

## **Transformative leadership and co-operatives: an undisputable connection**

A co-operative is defined as an autonomous association of persons—women and men—who have united voluntarily and pooled together their resources to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations. The co-op members do this through jointly owned and democratically controlled economic or business enterprises. The co-op movement encompasses all sectors of economic and social activity worldwide, built on slightly over a century of experience rooted on universally accepted co-op principles and values passed on and enhanced from generation to generation.

Co-ops now have about a billion members globally. Co-op enterprises in many forms secure the livelihood of about three billion people. Through the benefits gained from these enterprises, co-ops are able to address the social needs of their members and of the communities. But more than that, co-ops have also been providing innumerable services to their members. Where government cannot provide the basic necessities for a quality life that human beings need, the co-operatives are there to provide programs and activities required by the members, and their communities as a whole. In many instances also, government agencies and development institutions channel through co-ops their services to poor communities.

But alongside the gains of the co-op movement, issues have been raised about its capacity to adapt to the challenges or problems posed by the twenty-first century. These challenges come from factors that are both external and internal to the co-op movement. Some of the major challenges include the continuing globalization, increasing poverty, worsening food situation, rising terrorism and conflict, and continuing gender inequity and inequality. These challenges may seem to be over the top and out of reach of co-ops, but the reality is that they do have a strong influence on co-ops and their members, in the present times as well as the future if no concrete steps are taken now. Specific questions raised include:

- How do co-ops respond to the threats and opportunities of globalization that affect the lives of their members from the community to the national levels?
- Are co-ops able to empower and improve their members' lives through their products, services, and activities?
- Are there concrete programs and activities that co-ops provide so as to actualize one of the co-op principles, which is "concern for the community"? How do co-ops contribute to the reduction of poverty?
- How do co-ops practice democracy and equality in their decision-making and leadership processes? Do they give women and men equal and equitable access to leadership and decision-making?
- What type of leadership prevails in the co-ops?

The emergence of these questions validates the need for the development of more measures to ensure the fulfillment of co-op universal values and principles especially in poor and developing countries. These measures include the examination and reorientation of co-op policies, structures, programs, and services towards becoming more responsive to the social and economic issues and problems of women- and men-members as well as of the communities, and towards being sensitive to the distinctive needs and interests of women and men. The overarching goal or vision is to ensure that everyone would have access to a quality life—which is a long, healthy, and fulfilling life—and that women and men participate equally and equitably in decision-making and leadership in the co-op, as well as in their homes and communities.

Achieving this goal and developing the needed measures require an effective leadership style, which is "transformative leadership."

### **The framework of transformative leadership**

Transformative leadership is a new concept that has further enriched the vocabulary of leadership styles and has provided the co-op leader with another option on how to lead effectively in the context of the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Where there is transformative leadership, co-operatives play socially responsible roles, and live up to their values and principles. The basic framework for this kind of leadership is comprised of "DO-IF-GS":

- **Development-Oriented (DO):** It recognizes the dual roles and goals of the co-op: economic and social. It is therefore a business with social goals and social responsibility. A co-op should hence provide economic and social services to members to improve their lives as well as of their communities.
- **Issue-Focused (IF):** It recognizes the social and economic problems within and outside of the co-op, and responds to these with new and better products and services, and with other forms of action, such as advocacy, awareness-raising, and providing non-traditional types of services like day-care center, micro-finance, literacy classes, health and nutrition education.
- **Gender-Sensitive (GS):** It promotes gender equality and gender equity. Gender equality is the equal opportunity of women and men to participate in the leadership and decision-making process of the co-ops and of all institutions of society. Gender equity refers to the equitable benefits women and men get from having opportunities to participate in these process and institutions.

Transformative co-op leadership gives birth to transformative co-operatives, and transformative co-ops can also give birth to transformative co-op leadership. The two entities are not one and the same, yet the presence of one makes the presence of the other possible. The nature of one can also give light to the nature of the other. Their likeness and interconnection are undisputable, one being the reflection of the other.

### **Promoting transformative leadership**

The Asian Women in Co-operative Development Forum (AWCF), together with its member-organizations in five Asian countries, is leading the way in advocating for the adoption of transformative leadership in co-ops. Established in 1990, this resource center and advocacy body on gender and co-operatives in Asia had long implemented "women in leadership and decision-making" as one of its major programs. This is in recognition of the important and essential contribution to the co-op movement as members and leaders. It is also in recognition of the existing imbalance in representation and participation of women and men in leadership and decision-making in co-ops. AWCF's program on women leadership is also in line with its commitment to the implementation of the "Beijing Platform for Action," specifically its seventh area of concern, which is "Women in Power and Decision-Making."

With its focus on promoting transformative leadership in co-ops, AWCF emphasizes its belief in the co-operative organizations' best position to improve women's condition and status. The co-op has the structure and the best resources to bring about the empowerment of women.

AWCF concretizes its commitment to promoting transformative leadership by building the capacity and capability of co-op members and leaders. AWCF helps provide the knowledge and the tools that the members and the leaders need to be able to accept transformative leadership as a value, make it as their own, and, thus, gain the needed impetus to promote it and transform their co-ops into being DO-IF-GS organizations.

#### *A training manual*

In 2001, AWCF published one such tool, the "Trainer's Manual on Transformative Leadership Training for Co-operatives: Transformative Leadership, Transformative Co-

operatives." The Manual contains the basic knowledge and strategies in advocating transformative leadership, to help enhance the understanding of it and facilitate its application in co-ops. AWCF members and partner-organizations continue to use the Manual to develop more transformative co-op leaders, in the process even translating the Manual to different languages to maximize its use.

#### An assessment framework

In 2003, AWCF went another step in its advocacy by developing the framework and tools of a "Transformative Leadership Adoption Assessment." The Assessment provides a systematic process to assess a co-op's level of adoption of TL as it examines the extent to which its key characteristics (DO-IF-GS) are integrated in the key components of a co-op, that is: vision, mission, goals and types of policies; organizational structure; management systems; programs, projects, and services; and capacity and capability building mechanisms. The Assessment includes a total of 29 indicators for examination, and each indicator is described in five levels of development. The following are the outputs when the Assessment is utilized in a co-operative:

- Baseline information on the status of the key organizational components of a co-op, with regard to their development orientation, focus on issues and problems in and out of the co-op, and gender sensitivity. The information includes the representation and participation profile of women and men in the co-op;
- Baseline information on the general level of adoption of transformative leadership;
- Baseline information on the orientation, capacity and capability of the co-op leadership to direct and manage their co-op towards becoming transformative.

All the Assessment outputs will then be used to draw up appropriate recommendations on how to make the co-op leadership transformative.

Even with this Assessment framework on transformative leadership adoption, AWCF still acknowledges the presence of other organizational assessment instruments. In fact, AWCF sees this Assessment framework as an expansion of the Gender Audit Framework and complements the Social Audit Framework also used to assess co-operatives. AWCF also hypothesizes that the results of this Assessment will positively correlate with the results of the assessment of the economic development of co-ops.

#### A regional conference

Yet another major event in AWCF's advocacy of transformative leadership in co-ops happened on November 26-28, 2003 in Bangkok. This was the Regional Conference on "Transformative Leadership for Co-ops in Asia: Transforming Leadership, Transforming Co-ops, Transforming Society." The conference further promoted transformative leadership to many more organizations and development actors. Transformative leadership was examined more deeply in the conference, and resource speakers and participants from co-ops and various other development groups shared and learned about experiences, tools, practices, and mechanisms to transforming leadership, organizations, and communities.

#### Hard work needed

Advocating transformative leadership in co-ops and other community-based groups has many facets and many phases, and much of these require hard committed work. But the hope is that the results and benefits from having transformed leaders and transformed co-ops will speak for themselves and will further facilitate its application in co-ops, resulting in policies, structures, programs and services that are values-based and responsive to the particular needs of women and men members.