

Co-operative education: a view from the South Pacific

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Does international co-operative education and training require something other than a college at Stanford Hall? While the British Co-operative Movement ponders the fate of Stanford Hall, co-operators on the opposite side of the globe are agonizing over the future of their own co-op college, the co-operative Training Institute (CTI) of Fiji. Loosely modelled on Stanford Hall, CTI services the island nations of the Pacific. While the problems of South Seas islands might seem remote from the worries of wintry Britain, Many of the issues confronting the Fijians are acute versions of those faced by the British Movement. This article explores the question of the international relevance of a college at Stanford Hall by investigating some of the problems and alternatives confronting the Co-operative Training Institute of Fiji.

Doing business in the South Pacific

Outsiders usually think of the South Pacific as some kind of earthly paradise. The reality is surprisingly different. Many of the countries here are among the poorest in the world, and several area at the top of the birth-rate league, with population growth rates of over four per cent per annum. The island countries of the Pacific are difficult environments for businesses of any kind. Tiny, isolated markets scattered over vast areas of ocean present enormous challenges to the entrepreneur. Fiji earns substantial foreign exchange from tourism but, in most of the countries of the region, foreign exchange is earned from a small number of cash crops, most of which get rock-bottom prices on world markets. In many of these countries, the main sources of foreign exchange are aid and remittances (funds sent by relatives living overseas).

In spite of all the difficulties, co-operatives are the predominant form of indigenous-owned business in countries like Fiji, Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. This sounds impressive until you realise that the profitable heights of most of these economies, the fancy resorts, the big banks and major department stores, are dominated by foreign-based multinationals. Co-operatives occupy a small and shrinking corner of the rural economy.

The South Seas and Stanford Hall

Until very recently, the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA) attempted to shore up the ailing co-ops of the South Pacific by sending key individuals to the UK for a year's training at Stanford Hall. Stanford Hall graduates occupy key positions in many Ministries and Departments of Co-operatives. They are also the core faculty of Fiji's Co-operative Training Institute (CTI), a modest, down-market version of Stanford Hall, which aims to serve the co-ops of the region. CTI was founded in 1964 and is managed and financed by the government's Department of Co-operatives. It offers a range of short courses to co-op leaders and Department of Co-operatives employees. Thirty people can be accommodated on residential courses, and a mobile unit takes CTI's programmes into the countryside. An information unit produces and broadcasts weekly radio programmes in Fijian and Hindi.

While British ODA were sending co-op officials to East Keeke, the Israelis were shipping smaller numbers to their own co-op college, and the Canadians and the Catholic Church were sending others to the Coady Institute in Antigonish. One or two trainees even ended up in Marburg. In spite of all this globe-trotting, one glance at the generally lack-lustre co-ops in the Pacific is enough to raise serious questions about the appropriateness of the skills and knowledge picked up in the co-op colleges of the First World. In spite of the obvious affection Stanford Hall's graduates express for the College, there is little evidence that the training received there, or at any of the other international colleges, has had a significant impact on the performance of Pacific co-ops. Of course, this apparent lack of impact is not necessarily the fault of the Co-op College. It may also have much to do with factors like the selection and level of preparation of students, the enormity of the problems in the student's own country, the difficulty of applying lessons learned in the UK to very different environments, and the sheer inertia of the co-op systems back home and their inability to absorb new ideas and ways of doing things.

An important issue to be considered by co-operative educators in First World countries is the appropriateness of the co-operative models they promote. There is a danger that students will be taught to mimic foreign models without first analysing the urgent needs of their own communities. This would reinforce the mistakes that were made when co-ops were first launched in developing countries. Typically, co-ops were set up by development agencies and governments as tools to teach business skills and to make services available to rural people. In many cases, the people themselves did not really understand or want the new organisations foisted on them by well-meaning outsiders. Little attempt was made in the South

Pacific to help people adapt co-operative structures to their own immediate problems. Models were transplanted from overseas, with little awareness of local needs and of how co-ops could be adapted to meet them. Because the British had colonised much of the South Pacific, village co-op shops are still to be found all over the place, though their numbers are declining rapidly. They are there because the co-op shop was the only type of co-operative familiar to the British civil servants who were doing their best to develop the locals. These little shops have been of questionable value. Their main effect has been to adapt villagers to the cash economy and stimulate foreign imports, causing balance of payments problems and the neglect of healthier local food supplies.

Sending co-op leaders and government officials to Loughborough for a year's study in the old country may even have reinforced the tendency in this region to use co-operative models which are less appropriate to the important needs of their own rural communities. Learning about co-ops in other countries is not the same as learning how to adapt the co-operative idea to the urgent needs of one's own people.

The troubles of a small Co-operative college

Fiji's Co-operative Training Institute (CTI) was set up to multiply the impact of the lucky few who had been to Loughborough. Today, it faces a number of severe problems. It is largely financed by government through the Department of Co-operatives. And government, hard pressed to put its own house in order, has decided that Fiji's co-ops should assume full responsibility for CTI by the year 2000. But most of Fiji's co-ops are village shops on the British model and their profitability is declining at an alarming rate. Financing CTI at its present scale of operation would eat up the bulk of the movement's profits. As a result, CTI has been forced to review not only its own activities but also the problems of the movement as a whole. CTI's survival depends on the profitability of co-op societies. If CTI's training activities fail to boost the performance of co-ops, neither the college nor the movement will be around for long. So far, CTI's activities have not been notably successful at building profits and members' commitment. The vast bulk of its efforts and resources have been devoted to remedial tasks such as teaching book-keeping. But it is becoming increasingly obvious to everyone that keeping track of the cash is only one of the serious problems facing Fiji's co-ops.

Today, Fiji's villages are confronted with unfamiliar management problems and new business opportunities (such as forestry management, ecotourism, and fish processing and marketing), all of which lend themselves to co-operative solutions. The most significant training needs

identified by CTI are to help the movement move into these new industries which have growth potential, and to redesign co-op structures to do a better job of involving members and meeting their needs. Co-op structures have to be devised which not only fit the available business opportunities but also the local culture and traditional ways of doing things. Much of the land is owned and managed collectively, producing food for local consumption in almost cashless village economies. Traditional obligations within communal societies demand the sharing of surpluses with extended families and clans. All of this creates problems when it comes to providing consistent incentives to encourage work and investment. And when you consider that concepts like savings and profit are alien ideas to many of the peoples of the region, it is not surprising that business skills are in short supply.

CTI's new strategic plan recognises that instead of training secretaries to keep the books, CTI needs to lead a system-wide organisation and community development exercise, involving far more people than currently take part in its residential and outreach programmes. The new aim is to involve these people in the identification of unmet community needs which require new kinds of activities from existing or new kinds of co-operative.

Enter the Asia-Pacific Co-operative Training Centre

As the first step in this programme of community development, CTI has started upgrading the skills of its own staff and of co-op trainers from around the region. To achieve this, it did not apply to ODA for scholarships to send people to Loughborough for refresher courses. Instead, with the help of a small amount of funding from Australian Aid and the International Labour Organisation, it retained the Asia-Pacific Co-operative Training Centre of Australia to design and run a carefully tailored regional programme.

The result was a six week intensive course, broken into three segments of two weeks each, with intervening periods of six weeks during which projects were carried out in the participants' local work situation. The programme blended community development and training skills with a study of co-operative models of organisation, and their legal, financial and management implications. One important aim of the course was to equip Fiji's CTI with the skills needed to continue offering the course throughout the South Pacific. Next year, the course will again be taught by Asia-Pacific but with the help of CTI staff. The year after next, CTI staff will run the course with assistance from Asia-Pacific. After that, CTI is on its own. The ultimate long term aim of all of this is to build co-operative sectors in the Pacific as viable sources of economic and social self-help for their people (1).

Advantages of this approach when compared with sending people to Stanford Hall include the following:

1. The right people are trained. Trips to developed countries are so attractive that there is always the danger that the wrong people get sent for the wrong reasons. The experience of being in a developed country tends to outweigh the impact of what is learned on a training programme.
2. Cost-effectiveness. Each year, more people from more countries can be trained at a fraction of the cost of sending one participant to a residential programme in the UK.
3. Relevance. The course is tailored to the specific needs of the region's co-operatives. Local expertise is used as far as possible, and all training staff have considerable local knowledge. Every aspect of the programme is directly linked to the problems involve in building effective self-help organisations in the Pacific.
4. Link to the work situation. The fact that the programme is delivered in three separate segments ensures that there are more re-entry points to the work situation and that more of the course concepts are applied to local problems thourgh project work.
5. Active participation. The course is highly participative in design. Participants spend more time actually doing things than listening to teachers.
6. Networking. This is a strong point of any international programme, but should be even more useful in the context of a regional programme. Participants are more likely to stay in touch with colleagues from nearby countries than with participants form the other side of the globe.
7. Sustainability. The programme is designed in such a way that it builds the capacity of local institutions, with the result that the programme is more likely to continue even after external funding has dried up.

Management guru Charles Handy has argued that effective organisations of the future are likely to be structured on the model of the shamrock. A shamrock structure is highly cost-effective and has three distinct elements: a small central core of full-timers who are essential to the organisation's identity; and sub-contractors and temporary staff who do most of the organisation's operations work. Asia-Pacific is just such an organisation. It was formed in 1990 by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) and works with the apex bodies of the co-operative and credit union sectors

in Australia. As well as the South Pacific programme, it runs the Australian Certificate in Co-operative Management (which is recognised for MBA credits at a prominent Australian university), director training courses, and agri-business courses for leaders of Asian co-operatives, as well as acting as trainer and consultant to sector bodies and government departments.

It does all this without having to maintain a costly campus. Asia-Pacific does not have a campus of its own. It operates out of a small office with a full-time director and temporary trainers hired for specific programmes. Trainers may be drawn as needed from specific co-operatives, universities, UN agencies, non-governmental organisations, etc. Programmes and courses will be held in the location most convenient for the target group. As a result of this organisational strategy, Asia-Pacific's overheads are amazingly low. Its Director does not have to spend all his time worrying about how to pay for the upkeep of his real estates but can devote his energies instead to the problems of his clients and to finding the expertise most suited to their needs. Thanks to Asia-Pacific's organisational strategy, the co-operatives of the South Pacific will get an affordable and sustainable training programme tailored to their needs. The ironic feature of all of this is that Fiji's CTI seems to be determined to hang on to its expensive real estates. It remains to be seen if Fiji's co-ops can be turned around fast enough to shoulder the burden of all those buildings - their own mini-Stanford Hall.

Notes

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