

International Day of Co-operatives Promotes Fair Globalisation

Countries around the globe celebrated the 82nd International Day of Co-operatives on 3 July 2004. This year's theme was "Cooperatives for fair Globalisation: Creating Opportunities for All". Namibia was no exception and Agra joined forces with the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Rural development to acknowledge and celebrate the day with other co-operatives.

The activities for the day commenced early Saturday morning, with exhibitions being erected by various cooperatives on the parking area, opposite the Gustav Voigst Centre in the capital. The procession lead by Agra's truck, covered with banners from the participating co-operatives, departed at 10h00 from Government Office Park, all the way through Independence Avenue.

Speeches were delivered on behalf of the Minister of Agriculture, Water & Rural Development and the Secretary General of the United Nations.

In addressing the theme of the day, it was said the theme is very much appropriate for the Namibian situation and tallies well with the National Policy on Co-operative Development, which emphasises the adoption of cooperatives as vehicles for equitable economic development. Co-operatives provide an alternative for socio economic development especially focusing on the concept of self-help, democratic management and member participation, including concern for the community.

The attraction on co-operatives is that they are peoplecentred, managed and run for the benefit of their members. Their focus on member needs and interests, links to the theme of creating opportunities for all. The main reason for joining a co-operative should be to improve one's income base and thus living standard at household level. Co-operatives as a business form can assist in this regard and provide the opportunity to alleviate poverty, especially in rural areas.

Furthermore, the co-operative concept allows members to engage in economic activities, generating income for themselves. In this way, a difference could be made on the member's household level, thus improving his/her living standard. However, to have an impact at household level, co-operatives' economic activities should directly support the economic activities of its members. Therefore, co-operative activities should be relevant to its members' day-to-day economic needs. Additionally, the establishment and management of co-operatives should be driven by their members' interest and economic needs.

There are currently 114 registered co-operatives in Namibia with a total of approximately 21 117 individual members. The annual turnover of co-operatives is estimated to be about N\$340,371,144.00. Most of these co-operatives have been involved in the following kinds of economic activities:

- Farming input supplies
- Livestock marking
- Wood curving
- First level processing of indigenous fruits
- Production of horticultural produce
- Production of foundation seeds and certified seed multiplication

- Grain marketing and storage
- Small scale mining businesses
- Sewing and knitting
- Resettlements
- Saving and credit services for members

Many co-operatives are however still facing certain constraints in their development. Some of these include a poor understanding of the co-operative concept and principles among members and the general public; the slow rate at which economic activities are incorporated in co-operatives' operations; high dependency on external support (in kind or financial) and the lack of secured markets for the members' products. The biggest constraint remains to be the challenge of management - which sometimes manifests itself in founder member syndrome, where those who have found the co-operative are unwilling to relinquish their positions in the co-operative leadership.

The short term challenge for the co-operative movement in Namibia lies in increasing economic activities and enhancing member education so that a difference in their members' lives could take place - thus giving equal opportunities to co-operative members to participate in fair globalisation.

The message from the Secretary General stressed that co-operatives need to adapt to the new realities of the wider marketplace. These include aspects such as product diversity, offering high quality goods and services at competitive prices and making use of information technology. The development of international linkages among local co-operatives is also important for sharing business and financial information, and to broaden marketing opportunities. Where meaningful in a sector, mergers of co-operatives are advised to reduce cost, raise efficiencies and increase bargaining power.

The day was concluded with the announcement of the best Namibian Co-operative for the year 2004/2005. Omusati Regional farmers Co-operative received the trophy for their considerable improvement in development and in serving their members.

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