

FIHANKRA:

BUILDING A COOPERATIVE SOCIETY

From time immemorial, humans have sought to develop and sustain an economic/social system that would not only provide their community with a minimum of life's basic necessities, including food, clothing, shelter, and security, but could also provide them with access to a number of other "non-essential" products as well. In addition, this ideal system should also be capable of acknowledging any special gift of innovation and industry that they, as individuals, may contribute toward the harmonious development of society generally.

As could be expected a number of economic management systems evolved over time, each with its special character, and each having those who praised it and those who condemned it. Communalism, the name given to the first of these systems, developed in Africa-the cradle of civilization, and is characterized by small, mostly family units, pooling their material and human resources to ensure the survival of the unit and the security of its environment. In the communal system the exchange of goods and services is usually managed through bartering and profit is not the principal motivation for production. Moreover, the land, upon which members of the communal family work, is "community" property and each member has a right to its use and an obligation for its maintenance.

Diametrically at odds with communalism is the system of Capitalism. Classically, a key feature of the capitalist system is its insistence on the exclusive right of the individual and the corporate body, rather than the community, to the ownership of land and capital. Indeed, the perception that the capitalist system is innately unmoved by the plight of the community and that it relentlessly seeks to control the access to capital, exploits the working force, and is principally motivated by a "profit first, profit last" economic philosophy, is generally seen as its greatest shortcoming and the reason it is most often condemned by those who do so.

Cooperativeism

A third system of economic management is what we term cooperativeism. The advantages of cooperativeism and the reason it is extolled by some social scientists and non-professionals alike is that it is seen as incorporating the best features of the communal and capitalist models, but avoids the shortcomings of both. In a cooperative economic managed system, an unlimited number of persons voluntarily agree to join with others and become members of a "cooperative". The sole purpose of the cooperative is to promote the social and development needs of its members, their families and the community of which all are a part.

The first step in achieving its purpose requires that cooperatives encourage each of its members to study its aims and operations procedures. Cooperative members are also encouraged to actively participate in the regularly scheduled meetings of "their" cooperative to enable it to benefit from their rich experience and ideals.

As a result of cooperative meetings, during which members express their needs, many cooperatives eventually amend their original limited scope of interest, and in the case of cooperative credit unions, expand the areas for which they will make loans. This is especially true of cooperatives whose purpose is to directly impact on community-wide development. The greater the scope of responsiveness of the cooperative to the needs of its members the greater the impact of its community involvement and, by extension, the more important the cooperative becomes in the life of the community. At a point the cooperative has the potential of surpassing the responsiveness of singularly focused institutions in meeting the needs of its membership. It is at this juncture that the cooperative ceases to be merely a mechanism and becomes a society, and, it is in this context of referring to a number of persons committed and working to achieve a common purpose that we use the term society.

Purpose of Cooperative Societies

Cooperatives are specifically formed with the purpose of providing for the needs of its membership. And therefore, unlike the capitalist system of economic management, about which it is often said, owes the individual nothing, or the communal system, whose range of available products and method of distribution are inadequate for an ever-expanding community, the cooperative system owes its very existence to its membership and therefore owes its members everything. For in the cooperative system, the members themselves establish the criteria for responsiveness to one another's needs and, over time, develops the means to provide these needs.

Considering its more than ten years research experience in Ghana as a development oriented organization of descendants of Africa, Fihankra International has concluded that cooperativeism is the system best suited to achieve its aim of promoting the reintegration of Africa with its Diaspora. Accordingly, Fihankra is working to assist in building a cooperative society in Ye Fa Ogyamu, its Ghana headquarters, in which descendants of Africans born in the Diaspora will be fully reintegrated into the surrounding community areas. To be successful, this society must work toward developing increasing levels of harmony, not only with the neighboring communities, but with the environment as well; for only through the synergy of humans and nature will we discover the ways and means to improve the social and economic conditions of all.

While a cooperative society promotes united efforts when and where these will benefit the individual and the community, it does not, by extension, imply that all economic activity should become a joint effort. Indeed, cooperatives are most desirable and effective where and when they can provide products and services that would otherwise be more costly or unobtainable.

Accordingly, Fihankra's promotion of cooperativeism must not be viewed as idealism. For, although it strives to incorporate the best ideas of such great African patriots as the Honorable Marcus Garvey, Osagyefo Kwame Nkrumah, and Chancellor Williams, Fihankra is anchored in the practical reality of life in Africa during a period of assent from neo-colonial dominance.

Program Of Action Outline

In the current state of world affairs too little thought seems to be given to creative economic planning as a systemic foundation for sustainable development. In Africa, especially, “economic development” appears to be driven more by the funding source and directives of donors than by a local assessment of resources available from the community and the priority of needs that the community shares.

Having committed itself to the course of cooperative development, Fihankra seeks to play its part in reversing this trend by supplementing its already extensive research to enable it to develop a Program Of Action Outline based upon assessments of several economic ventures which, given the human and financial resources currently available, appear most viable. An example of this approach assumes the following:

- (1) findings confirm that a significant number of the residents within the area of Fihankra’s community development activities are engaged in either crafts or agricultural production;
- (2) local and international surveys indicate that there is a moderate to strong demand for these products;
- (3) studies reveal that the inputs required to undertake production within the identified areas are not financially prohibitive
- (4) initial assessments suggest that production and processing of items selected from these categories could be financially rewarding and therefore;
- (5) we conclude that: these, and the provision of related services and facilities for financing, storage, packaging and shipping, among others, could serve as a foundation for the establishment of a cooperative society.

After identifying, compiling, and confirming the listing of the products and services to be provided by the society, Fihankra’s next task is to encourage Diasporans, both in and outside the community, as well as local community and opinion leaders, to lend their support to this effort. The above assessment procedure will be repeated as many times as needed to incorporate the widening spheres of activity into which the cooperative chooses to venture. Accordingly, the promotion of cooperativeism must be added as an essential feature to Fihankra’s conceptualization of a model community for it provides an invaluable long-term management guide.

In the short and long-term, Fihankra is confident that the cooperative approach to community development will benefit the participants, the community at large, and equally important, we believe it will accomplish a great deal to help promote the aim of the reintegration of Africa with its Diaspora.

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