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Cooperative Platforms, A Path to Fairer Works, And the Future of Work; A Review of Literature

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Abstract: *The internet is reshaping modern lives in communication by creating consistent communication patterns globally beating aspects of time and space; exploring the potential of platform 'cooperativism' would be paramount to its success in Kenya. Coops provide a platform for entrepreneurship, savings, among others. The objective of this research work is to explore the potential of platform cooperativism in Kenya.*

Keywords: cooperative, platform, cooperativism, work, fair

INTRODUCTION

Few studies in Kenya have been conducted to assess uptake of ICTs by Cooperatives. From some these studies, Concerns have been raised over the low uptake and adoption of such technologies as a booster towards the digital economy being embraced across the globe thus creating a huge entrepreneurial gap among members of co-operatives (Bwisa, 2010). This has created a debate on what role the new media, can play in being a source of cooperative information especially among the youth (Okwany, 2010). Further, Emerging and new technologies and digital apps including platform cooperativism may not have had a way into the co-operative sector in Kenya. Whereas ICT remains a key component in all sectors of the economy and remains a key driver of businesses and enterprises in the digital world, its uptake among other sectors of the economy across Africa has had significant in positive growth of those sectors a case in point the banking sector and the mobile money transfer services like *Mpesa* in Kenya which is a recent development compared to the existence of the co-operative sector (FSD, 2015). This disparity is a case in point which requires address.

It is arguable that the extent to which platform cooperativism can change business operations and the bottom line in the co-operative sector in a year in Kenya and around the world is undisputed. Think about it; ten years ago, there were no smart phones. Three years ago, few people knew about the cloud computing. Last year, one could swipe a credit card without fear of being left vulnerable

if a transaction turns into fraud. Even, day-to-day business operating systems such as online accounting software are moving to the cloud; flexibility like this allows business owners to process invoices and manage cash flow on the go (FSD, 2015).

Tom Slee, a Canadian researcher, argues that inasmuch as demand and usage of new media remains high for efficiency and productivity, its uptake remains low in co-operative sectors in Africa where the youth who are synonymous with it, lack representation and their participation in cooperative ventures remain low (Tom, 2015). Therefore, then, on this basis there is need to provide information and new knowledge on where the co-operatives stand in terms of usage of new media technologies in their operations.

Platform Cooperativism

Best practices worldwide and technological advancements have pushed organizations to adopt ICTs in their operations especially communication within and without the organization. As a growing sector, the co-operatives are facing the wave of low-wage work hence the need to come up with solutions to these emerging challenges. The platform cooperativism is about the convergence of the 21st-century technologies and the rich, global heritage of cooperativism. This platform is comprised of online mediums that support production and sociality, digital labor brokerages, web-based marketplaces that are collectively owned and democratically governed, and all those initiatives that directly support the co-operative economic model (Scholz, *Et Al* 2017).
The platform cooperativism is set to radically prepare the social organization of emerging technologies among coops, which it aims to re-design with community wealth in mind (Scholz, *Et Al* 2017).

This Platform is a holistic model to deliver better outcomes than the corporate "sharing economy," which will fail the ecology, workers, and consumers over the long haul. The emerging experiments in the cooperative platform economy ought to be taken seriously, nurtured, and grown by communities and policymakers alike (Silberman, 2016). Cooperative researchers argue that radical democracy and the internet are not mutually exclusive; the internet became a tool for corporate extraction, and how to reverse the process. Combining the rich heritage of cooperatives with the promise of 21st-century technologies, the platform cooperativism is a call for a new kind of online economy, one free from the economics of monopoly, exploitation, and surveillance (Scholz, *Et Al* 2017).

The Future of Platform Cooperativism

The prospect of platform cooperativism is at once new and old among the cultures surrounding the Internet. Early software and hardware hackers employed certain cooperative-like practices as they assembled the rudiments of the personal computer and the means of networking them; as such they shared source code; they developed structures of democratic governance across great distances; they resisted corporate enclosure in the process (Scholz, *E*t *Al* 2017).

It is also arguable that the technological sophistication necessary to build online enterprises, in any case, has surely seemed prohibitive for many kinds of communities that might adopt cooperative strategies. However, recently the Internet could be considered an optional realm of activity; co-ops tend to appear when people have an unmet needs, not to furnish a mere accessory or curiosity (Scholz, *et Al* 2017). Evidently, it is becoming harder and harder, around the world, to secure a livelihood without taking part in the online economy. This has, forced the re-emergence, in the past few years, recognizable platform co-ops (Schneider, 2014).

Platform cooperativism can likewise be taken to mean a broad invitation to a fairer online economy through shared ownership and governance; platform co-ops, however, are strictly those platforms that are also bona-fide co-ops by widely agreed-on standards (Sutton *et al*., 2016). Platform cooperativism inclines towards a different approach, one in which the people contributing value co-own the platforms and help decide to what ends they operate.

This platform cooperativism seeks to add a more fairer and explicit economic layer to peer-production, prevent corporate value capture, and facilitate cooperation among cooperatives (Scholz T. *et al* 2017). Some of the more restrictive proposals could come at the cost of losing the broad user and contributor base that corporate adoption can offer (Sutton *et al*., 2016). Yet each of these experiments represents a plausible innovation in its own right as well as a constructive critique of the Free Software and open-source legacies.

In her abstract for the 2015 Platform Cooperativism conference, New York City Council member Maria del Carmen Arroyo wrote, 'Worker cooperatives offer a viable method to address the long-term challenge of reducing the number of chronically unemployed and underemployed residents and the number of workers trapped in low-paying jobs'. (Scholz, *et al* 2017).

A vibrant platform co-op sector will require a variety of financing mechanisms. An opportunity for platform co-op investment that often goes overlooked is the existing offline cooperative sector. While some large, well-capitalized co-ops have begun investing in platforms, they often face a learning curve in doing so. Just as the tech sector is still learning how to develop online co-ops, the cooperative sector must learn how to apply its financial resources and know-how online (Barnes, 2006).

Finally, an honest platform cooperativism should extend its gaze beyond the platform economy itself to its material substrates – in particular, the human conditions surrounding the mineral extraction and assembly of the hardware on which platforms depend (Barnes, 2006). This has been neglected territory for the emerging platform co-op ecosystem, which has remained software-oriented. But there are some promising points of departure to consider (Scholz, *Et Al* 2017).

Perhaps platform coops, by building other co-ops into their supply chains, can help set high standards for sourcing and labor (Baran, 2002).

ICTs and Co-operatives

The Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are defined as technologies that facilitate storage, retrieval, communication and the processing of information by electronic means, and include everything from: radio, satellite, television, telephones, computers, smart mobile/wireless phones, laptops, iPads, and the Internet. It is also acknowledged that the role of ICTs in improving efficiency in the cooperative movement is enormous. Also, on the other hand, the challenges and barriers brought by and associated with ICT implementation are also tithing in the Cooperative development hence hindering the uptake.

According to the UN international year of Cooperatives in June, 2012, it was postulated that, *"ICT's are transforming co-operatives by expanding the scope of potential networks and deepening existing networks through more consistent communication."*. The importance of building connections and communication among members and across organizations was stressed throughout the discussions by also highlighting the scale and uniqueness of cooperatives: *"Co-operatives are a clearly identifiable group with an existing community of over a billion people and growing. They have unifying cooperative principles such as democratic member control, cooperation among co-operatives and concern for community which shape cooperatives approach to their members, their business and their communities".*

The benefits of ICTs to cooperatives are numerous. Through fully utilizing ICTs, cooperatives can cultivate new markets by reaching out to different customer bases on the web, they can keep up-to-date with developments and new innovations and receive training remotely. ICTs can help transform the management of co-ops by improving management practices, financial information and reporting and records management as well as create an online presence. These improvements help increase efficiency and lower operating costs.

According to FAO in 2012, the Agricultural co-operatives are key to feeding the world. The agricultural cooperative community has grown to over 6000 members both in the private sector and civil society in more than 100 different countries. ICTs can change the way cooperatives work and bring vast benefits especially in agriculture. Cooperatives providing access to information such as crop cycles, localized weather reports, farming methods and local markets, available online or direct via text message, mobile money transfers, is just one example of how innovative ICT use can revolutionize the day-to-day functioning of cooperatives and benefit members.

For instance, in Kenya, an electronic money transfer system (dubbed "M-PESA") based on SMS messaging has changed the lives of millions of Kenyans including the rural poor. 'M-PESA' allows immediate payments for those who live in remote areas miles from conventional commercials

banks. The M-PESA system allows them to exchange e-money into cash and vice versa via M-PESA kiosks and deposit or withdraw bank notes when needed. M-PESA allows them to transfer money home or easily sell livestock without the risk of carrying cash over long distances and also reduces debts and delayed payments caused by promissory payments from customers.

Head of International Telecommunication Union Liaison office of UN during the International Year of Cooperatives in 2012 said that "The missing link between the developed and developing world is access to communication. ICT networks are a catalyst for the achievement of all three pillars of sustainability; social, economic and environmental and ICT infrastructure is taking on a utilitarian function on par with water, energy and transportation. 26% of all GDP growth in developing countries can be attributed to the internet. Mobile telephony is almost 100% so the divide now has shifted to access to the internet and access to mobile broadband because that's where the future is going to be".

Youth participation in co-operatives in Africa is also impeded by the limited use of technology, and business ideas involving ICT are being taken on by corporations and individual business people; a missed opportunity for the co-operative movement in Africa.

The extent with which ICT can change business operations and the bottom line in a year is undisputed. Think about it; ten years ago, there were no smart phones. Three years ago, few people knew about the cloud computing. Last year, one could swipe a credit card without fear of being left vulnerable if a transaction turns into fraud. Even, day-to-day business operating systems such as online accounting software, are moving to the cloud; flexibility like this allows business owners to process invoices and manage cash flow on the go.
Its clear ICT's are vital in the development of cooperatives but there are some challenges to be overcome, namely cost and infrastructure issues relating to access. Although access to telephone communications is now widely available all over the world, many rural communities still don't have reliable access to the internet and mobile broadband. In areas with little or no internet access, awareness of the benefits of ICT is also a challenge and getting smaller cooperatives to bridge the digital divide is important. We also have barriers caused by the lack or insufficient technical know-how on using the emerging technologies such as Twitter, Whatssup, Facebook, iPhones, Bluetooth among other innovations among the rural populations in Africa.

Co-operatives in Africa have big gaps in ICT uptake, yet technology helps in enhancing linkages, social capital and coordination of activities for common interests. In Africa, there is little data available in relation to the number of co-operatives embracing ICTs, the inherent opportunities and the challenges that go with this. Many co-operatives have no websites or social media pages, and have poor management of data for networking, marketing and for record purposes; for instance, a farming co-operative might have produce but lacks buyers because the products are not advertised.

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