

Challenging Barriers to Women’s Leadership in Cooperatives

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Cooperatives play a critical role in advancing socioeconomic development. They serve as a jointly owned, democratically-managed structure for people to work together toward common goals, and in doing so, they help reduce poverty levels and create jobs. In the world of cooperatives, the agriculture sector dominates: nearly one-third of the largest 300 cooperatives across the globe are centered on agriculture.¹ In a group, farmers have increased access to technologies and trainings that improve agricultural productivity, and increased access to markets where they can sell their products at competitive prices. When agricultural producers work together and individual farmers assist each other for the benefit of all, their strength in numbers leads to lower input prices and improved access to financial services.

“Through their distinctive focus on values, cooperatives have proven themselves as a resilient and viable business model that can prosper even during difficult times. This success has helped prevent many families and communities from sliding into poverty.”

- UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon speaking at the launch of International Year of Cooperatives in 2012

Numerous factors, including access to markets, access to productive inputs, and the quality of the products produced, play a role in determining an agricultural cooperative’s success. Alongside these contributors to success, the global evidence base suggests that gender-balanced leadership in cooperatives is a key determining factor in creating and maintaining a competitive advantage. Nonetheless, men still hold the vast majority of executive level positions within cooperatives worldwide. **How can we help change this status quo, and foster an environment where more women can apply their leadership skills to cooperatives?**

Why Women’s Leadership is Important

From the United States to many countries in Africa, **one of the most detrimental shortcomings of agricultural cooperatives is their general lack of women’s leadership.** The International Development division of Land O’Lakes, Inc. – a full-fledged development organization that currently works in 22 countries across Asia and Africa – has observed numerous barriers to women’s cooperative leadership. These barriers include limited literacy and numeracy skills, discomfort with public speaking, time constraints due to family obligations, and the general perception in many agricultural communities that leadership roles are for men. Despite the fact that women largely predominate in cooperative membership and meeting attendance, because of these obstacles, **cooperative leaders tend to be men.**

The extent of these impediments became all the more clear to [Land O’Lakes International Development](#) when it co-hosted the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded *Cooperative-to-Cooperative Learning Event* in Kenya in early 2012. Held in

¹ <http://vitalsigns.worldwatch.org/vs-trend/emerging-co-operatives>

partnership with [Cooperative Resources International \(CRI\)](#), this event provided a unique opportunity for managers and board members of dairy cooperatives to gather together with industry thought leaders. This collaborative environment provided a unique opportunity for participants to network and gain tools and tactics to increase their cooperatives' competitiveness, and learn how to enhance the socioeconomic benefits provided to cooperative members. The event included 43 people representing 28 cooperatives from 9 countries on 4 continents – but despite this diversity, only one woman participated. Since female cooperative leaders remain a rarity, cooperatives attending the event selected male candidates to participate. At the event, participants discussed probable causes for this unintentional gender disparity, and concluded that because the event was for cooperative leaders – not members – very few women were considered for participation.

A dearth of women's cooperative leadership persists domestically, as well. Anne Reynolds, Assistant Director of the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives, spoke at a Land O'Lakes *Women in Cooperative Leadership Forum* in August 2012. She discussed the most current findings from their cooperative-related research, noting that **less than 3 percent of United States-based agricultural cooperative board members and leaders are women**. Why is the extent of women's cooperative leadership important? Numerous private-sector studies show that gender-balanced leadership² creates a strong competitive advantage, including an 84 percent advantage for return on sales, a 60 percent advantage for return on invested capital, and a 46 percent advantage for return on equity.³ **When leadership bodies exclude women, competitiveness, product quality, productivity, and profits suffer.**

Unlocking Women's Leadership Potential

Land O'Lakes International Development projects from around the world provide additional evidence that women's leadership is critical to cooperative success. In Kenya, for example, [Mary Rono](#) started the Koitogos Dairy Dynamic group in 2009 with 15 members. In just over two years, she successfully grew the membership to 350 farmers – and did so in a community that typically shuns female leadership. International Development worked with Mary during the five-year USAID Kenya Dairy Sector Competitiveness Program (KDSCP) and demonstrated key tools to her that she applied to help build her cooperative. Mary became a role model for women dairy farmers around the world when she spoke at the [2011 World Food Prize](#), where she talked about how she is "creating a new trend in her community of women in leadership, and peacefully bringing the local leaders to understand the value of women leaders in agriculture."⁴ Mary's story is one of many that demonstrate women's abilities to effectively attract active cooperative members, and to encourage communities to rethink traditional gender norms.

² Gender-balanced leadership refers to 30% or more of board membership being composed of women

³ The Bottom Line: Corporate Performance and Women's Representation on Boards, 2004–2008 (*Nancy M. Carter, Ph.D., and Harvey M. Wagner, Ph.D., Catalyst 2011*) – updated 2012; Thematic Equity Report (*Mary Curtis, Credit Suisse Research Institute 2008*); Fulfilling the Promise: How More Women on Corporate Boards Would Make America and American Companies More Competitive (*Policy and Impact Committee, Committee for Economic Development 2012*)

⁴ <http://borlaug.tamu.edu/2011/10/14/world-food-prize-2011-day-two/>

Land O'Lakes believes that increasing the level of women's cooperative leadership is an important objective internationally and domestically, and is making strides in both arenas. In USAID's 2012 Kenya Gender Analysis and Action Plan report, Land O'Lakes International Development was commended for its high level of gender expertise and for having a Gender Policy, which goes beyond gender requirements set by USAID. As the report notes, Land O'Lakes demonstrates that "gender analysis and strategy development is integral to its work with or without donor funding." The report also commented on actions taken by International Development to empower women through producer cooperatives under KDSCP, a dairy development program that has helped establish and strengthen 135 cooperatives in Kenya. These actions include supporting poor and female-headed households through the addition of clauses to cooperative membership agreements that allow funds for shares to be raised over time; encouraging men to allow women to apply for women-friendly loans at lower interest rates; and paying women for their milk sales in-kind. These in-kind payments are often facilitated through a cooperative store, where school books, basic food items, seedlings, and other necessary inputs are available.

Land O'Lakes has taken similar measures to empower women in cooperatives in other countries. Land O'Lakes' Gender Task Force, a global collaborative body with representatives from all projects, regularly identifies and promotes measures that are proving most effective. These methods include holding trainings at times and locations that enable women to participate, and inviting two family members – rather than one – to attend. This act alone dramatically increases the likelihood that women will attend trainings, since husbands frequently invite their wives, and that they will later be consulted on agriculture and cooperative-related issues. Land O'Lakes also promotes women's ownership of agricultural assets, such as dairy cows and goats. **Measures like these are essential: with increased asset ownership and improved access to technical knowledge, women's leadership abilities surge, enhancing their likelihood to be elected to a cooperative leadership role.**

Globally, the call to action is clear: cooperative leaders and members must work to ensure that increasing women's cooperative leadership remains a primary objective, and one that is met with successful outcomes. As global markets for agricultural products continue to become increasingly competitive, the presence of gender-balanced leadership in cooperatives will prove to be essential for remaining relevant and ensuring future success.

About Land O'Lakes International Development

Since 1981, Land O'Lakes International Development has improved the quality of life for millions of people in 76 nations through more than 275 projects worldwide that are generating economic growth, improving health and nutrition, and alleviating poverty by facilitating market-driven business solutions. A business unit of Land O'Lakes, Inc. (www.landolakesinc.com) – a national, farmer-owned food and agricultural cooperative with annual sales of over \$14 billion – International Development's vision is to be a global leader in transforming lives by engaging in agriculture and enterprise partnerships that replace poverty with prosperity, and dependency with self-reliance.