

'Casualties Inevitable'

Consumer Co-operation in British Africa



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Cover image: Moshi consumer co-operative Tanzania (Source: Co-operative College Manchester)

On 1 February 1866, the UK newspaper *The Co-operator* reported on the progress of a co-operative set up in the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa, some 13 months earlier. The newspaper reported that those involved were 'endeavouring to make the principles of Co-operation more known' as well as trading in provisions. They had recently written to the north of England Co-operative Wholesale Society "to see if there would be any probability of dealing with them on a small scale advantageously."¹ Its members were, presumably, British settlers in the Cape Colony which was then part of the British Empire. The Cape co-operative was set up along the lines of the Rochdale Pioneers and had already received "copious information" from Mr Ashworth on all aspects of co-operation.² Unfortunately no further records of this society have been located as yet at the time of writing (2014). This is by far the earliest documented co-operative existing in Africa and notably this was a consumer society.

The colonial nature of this first co-operative in South Africa was to be replicated across Africa in the following decades as Africa was colonised by white settlers. In common with other regions in the developing world, co-operatives, if not a co-operative movement, arrived with the colonial powers. They have a long history in Africa, as elsewhere. In most countries, co-operatives did not disappear when states gained their independence and continued to play a central role in both rural and urban areas.

Today, an estimated 7 percent of the African population is a member of a co-operative and their numbers are currently increasing.³ Despite this, the role and presence of co-operatives is not always adequately reflected in contemporary studies of African development. Today, co-operatives are strongest in the agricultural and financial sectors and there are very few consumer co-operatives to be found. However, as we shall see, this state of affairs has not always been the case.

In several African countries, the first co-operatives were established over a hundred years ago.⁴ Yet remarkably, they remain largely unexplored by historians, with no substantive studies published either at the regional, national or local level. This is in sharp contrast to the recent revival of interest in African labour studies and history.⁵ Drawing on this context, this paper begins to piece together, for the first time, the beginnings of a narrative about the histories of consumer co-operation in Africa.

The central theme of this narrative is one of many failures and few successes. In particular, there is a focus on the failed attempts to set up co-operative stores on the Rochdale model in the British colonies during the 1950s and 1960s. However, there is also more to the narrative than this particular episode. Although the Rochdale standalone store model did not thrive in an African context, other types of other forms of consumer co-operation appear to have taken root. These include the many farmers' co-operatives which continued to run small stores selling variously farm inputs, household provisions and building materials. They still do so today. The case of Botswana is another example where co-operative stores were set up later in the 1970s and with more success.

Context: Researching co-operatives

As noted previously, the role of African co-operatives is not adequately reflected in the academic literature. To date, studies on all aspects of their historical development remain fragmented and we lack a coherent body of literature even on contemporary co-operatives.⁶ There are signs that this situation is now beginning to change. Rita Rhodes' recent study of the British colonial role in co-operative development marks an important departure.⁷ Some recent studies of the evolution of the post-war Labour government's colonial development policies have included a consideration of the role of co-operatives.⁸ In addition, Paaskesen has discussed the role of Nordic aid in Tanzania in supporting co-operative development there and the impact of President Nyere's ujaama co-operatives policy.⁹

Much more attention is needed, however, in order to re-situate co-operatives in the central role they deserve in relation to many aspects of African development. Co-operatives do not feature, for example, in the current debates between historians and contemporary development specialists in relation to the continuing problems of poverty and under development in Africa and their relationship to colonial legacies. This is despite an emerging consensus in development studies that 'institutions matter', as does the way in which a country's institutional inheritance continues to influence current underdevelopment.¹⁰ Several studies have asserted the long term impact of economic and social patterns established during the colonial period. Bowden and Mosley have argued that the impact of improvement in smallholder agricultural productivity in bringing down poverty was in large part due to the existence of assets established many decades ago and especially past investment in education.¹¹ As important colonial and African institutions, a better appreciation of co-operatives' role could make a valuable contribution to these debates.

Earlier discussions on development policies and practices do, however, feature co-operatives, especially during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. This is hardly surprising given that, even in the mid 1980s, over half of World Bank agricultural development programmes in Africa involved co-operatives.¹² The earlier literature includes several studies of co-operatives at country level, for example Young, Sherman and Rose's study of co-operatives in Ghana and Uganda published in 1982.¹³ Commentaries and reviews of the challenges facing co-operative development in Africa were also published in a number of co-operative movement publications and journals. Finally, another strand includes several guides to co-operative development written by British colonial civil servants, such as *Practical Co-operation* written in 1951 by W H K Campbell who was at one time Registrar of Co-operatives for Ceylon.¹⁴

Studies of African co-operative history have been greatly impeded by the absence of any dedicated co-operative archive collections in Africa. A recent survey of co-operative societies in Tanzania revealed the existence of many records housed in damaging and insecure environments within the co-operatives themselves.¹⁵ This study has primarily been based on the collections held at the UK National Co-operative Archive which contain a number of official and movement sources.¹⁶ Of special value has been the *Plunkett Agricultural Yearbook*, later named the *Yearbook of Co-operative Enterprise*, which contains an annual review of co-operative development in

Anglophone Africa. The country reports contain both statistics and reflections of authors who are, unfortunately, not credited. Inevitably, though the paper has attempted to be as comprehensive as possible, there has been a focus on Anglophone countries. Despite the limitations of the archival sources, enough material has been located to piece together the beginnings of an intriguing and important narrative around the ways in which consumer co-operation developed across Africa.

International influences and historical context: the colonial origins of co-operatives

For most of their history, co-operatives in Africa were rarely established as spontaneous self-help groups as was the case in most European countries.¹⁷ Instead they have been set up as the result of deliberate interventions by external agencies such as national governments, donor agencies such as the World Bank and the FAO and by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Oxfam and FarmAfrica.

The history of co-operatives in Africa therefore bears the imprint of their colonial origins. This legacy is still apparent today in co-operative laws, policies and cultures and remains evident in several ways. Firstly, the main sectors of operation and the main types of co-operative set up have remained broadly the same (with the exception of consumer co-operatives) in many countries – that is agricultural marketing and supply co-operatives.¹⁸ Only during the last two decades have different co-operative models taken root. This is most marked in the rapid growth of saving and credit co-operatives (SACCOs) across Africa. Also known as credit unions, SACCOs represent a new and dynamic co-operative sector in Anglophone and Francophone Africa alike. On a smaller scale, some new worker and housing co-operatives have emerged. There have even been a few new consumer co-operatives started.

Secondly, there has been a considerable degree of continuity in the legal and policy regimes for co-operatives. Set up in colonial times, these regimes were then adopted by newly independent states without much alteration. Several studies have identified four distinct colonial co-operative traditions in Africa attributed to the British, French, Belgian and Portuguese colonial regimes.¹⁹ In reality, the main divide lies between the British and French/Belgian traditions, though under both regimes co-operatives remained subject to close government control and supervision.

The most comprehensive round of co-operative legislation occurred in the years following the Second World War in the British colonies. Here, powers of supervision, audit and promotion were the responsibility of a dedicated government Department of Co-operatives headed by a registrar. The law allowed for direct intervention in the internal affairs of co-operatives if deemed necessary. Co-operative departments had the powers to appoint and remove co-operative management officials and to approve basic business decisions. There were often legal restrictions preventing co-operatives from accessing courts, making contracts or assuming debt without obtaining permission of the government.²⁰

The British co-operative policies were intended to establish co-operatives as stand-alone institutions “which, if successful would enhance development”.²¹ This has been characterised as the “unified model” and involved the following:

- Movement architecture in the form of a pyramid from primary to secondary co-operatives through to a single national apex body;
- A single law for all types of co-operatives with no specific legislation for consumer co-operative;
- A government co-operative department supervised by a Co-operative Registrar, responsible not only for inspection and audit but also promotion;
- Co-operatives set up primarily with a single purpose, typically agricultural commodity production for export markets.²²

Schwettmann also argues that at least theoretically the assistance provided by the British government was planned to be of a temporary nature with a long term aim of developing autonomous and economically viable co-operatives.²³ It should be noted that the African focus on the development of single purpose co-operatives, whether agricultural marketing or consumer, differed to the model used by the British in India. Here the focus was on the development of multi-purpose co-operatives with a strong emphasis on the provision of rural credit for farmers.

The key features of the French/Belgian colonial model rested on a broader based social economy and movement perspective in which co-operatives belonged to a wider family of related institutions such as mutuals, provident and insurance societies, associations. In this model:

- there was often no separate legal framework for co-operatives;
- co-operatives were tasked with a broader socio-economic development role and had semi-public status;
- they played a limited role in commodity marketing for export; instead there was a focus on agricultural development through local crops and also a welfare role;
- the co-operative system was much less extensive and typically less than 1 percent of the population was involved in co-operatives.

In French West Africa, for example, Native Provident Societies were formed as the main type of co-operative. These were set up at village level with tax and labour obligations. Membership of them was made compulsory and they had a limited economic role but a broader welfare role. This often resulted in a “general mistrust” of government aid and “specifically the application of co-operative methods”.²⁴ In French North Africa, co-operatives were introduced by French colonisers in early 1900s but until the early 1960s they were restricted to settlers’ agriculture. For

local inhabitants there were also Native Provident Societies with predetermined crop programmes and marketing monopolies.²⁵

Whilst the typology of co-operative models derived from the legacy of the four main colonial powers has provided a useful framework, perceptions of both colonial and post-colonial co-operatives within the development literature have remained largely one-dimensional and static. There has been little work done, for example, to understand processes of adjustment and absorption over time, differences between and within countries as well as the influence of non-governmental agencies.

Other interventions

One widely held view is that the co-operative movement had only a limited engagement in developing countries.²⁶ Rhodes, for example, argues that “the British Co-operative Movement showed little direct interest or enthusiasm” for British colonial co-operative development, preferring instead to express it through the International Co-operative Alliance.²⁷ In the pre-First World War period, the idea that co-operatives might assist imperial development agency functions came from influential figures such as Horace Plunkett and Earl Grey rather than from the formal co-operative movement.²⁸

There is evidence to suggest that the influence of the co-operative movement is deserving of far more scrutiny. Even a limited reading of *Co-operative News* for the decade of the 1950s throws up several examples of considerable grassroots interest in African co-operatives within the UK movement. There are several articles reporting on a number of well-attended meetings on African co-operatives, for example. John Stonehouse reported to the Women’s Co-operative Guild meeting in Sheffield in 1955 that, “We in our co-operative movement can do much to help these new co-operators [...] In the field of trade there is much that can be done. I was proud to be associated with the first importation into Uganda of the CWS goods.”²⁹

The role of the UK Co-operative College was also an influential one, which undoubtedly had an impact on the development of consumer co-operatives. Although international students had attended College programmes since the beginning, a new scheme was launched in 1947 which funded students from the colonies to attend residential courses. Co-operation Overseas was a nine month programme funded by the UK government. The curriculum included co-operative organisation, agricultural economics, legal issues and auditing. Studying in Britain also offered the opportunity to “examine British institutions and values”. Study visits were arranged for the overseas students to UK co-operatives including consumer ones. From 1982, shorter three month courses were offered on the management of consumer societies.³⁰

From the later 1940s to the 1980s, up to a third of the College’s student intake each year was from developing countries and many came from African countries. Students returned home to take up influential positions in the movement or in the government, often becoming co-operative registrars or commissioners. During the same period, several UK Co-operative College staff were seconded to assist the co-operative colleges then being set up in Africa.³¹

In addition, there was direct support for co-operatives in Africa from both the UK and the Scandinavian co-operative movements. This took the form of raising funds for co-operative development programmes which included consumer co-operatives. The Swedish Co-operative Centre (SCC) was formed in 1958 by the Swedish co-operative movement to support co-operatives in the developing world. In Tanzania, the Moshi consumer co-operative was established in 1965 with help from SCC and Swedish consumer co-operatives. Support included the provision of a truck, for example. The Moshi consumer co-operative still operates today.³²

The British movement also directly supported African co-operatives. In the 1960s, Oxfam and the UK co-operative movement launched a joint campaign to raise funds for a consumer co-operative development programme in Botswana. By 1970, the programme had reached its main goals with almost £30,000 raised from the movement though the partnership had not always run smoothly.³³ The support provided was not just financial as several development programmes for consumer co-operatives drew on the expertise of “coop veterans”: men with years of consumer co-operative experience in their own countries. Again the UK Co-operative College played a significant role here with the College Principal, Dr Marshall, working closely with the Colonial Office to recruit suitable candidates.³⁴

Secondly, international influences on co-operatives also occurred via the development programmes funded by international donors from the 1960s onwards. Multi-lateral UN agencies such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) were responsible for providing technical assistance programmes for co-operative development, such as training manuals and co-operative experts, as well as managing large scale projects. These involved consumer co-operative development: there was, for example, a large ILO/FAO programme to set up new consumer co-operatives in Botswana in the 1970s.³⁵ The World Bank also worked with co-operatives which were often seen as the vehicles for delivery of large scale projects and mass transfers of innovation.³⁶ An ILO report from 1964 reviews the role of co-operatives in development and discusses methods of promoting co-operation in terms of technical cooperation programmes and also policies.³⁷

Bilateral assistance programmes, especially from the Scandinavian countries, also included support for co-operative development in Africa. As has been noted earlier, there was a considerable amount of support for co-operative development in East Africa from the Nordic countries during the 1970s.³⁸ This included Scandinavian funding for the construction of Co-operative Colleges in Kenya and Tanzania whilst UK funds paid for the construction of the Ugandan college.³⁹

There is one further dimension to international influences on co-operative development and that is the engagement by European consumer co-operatives via their trading relationships. This, again, remains little explored. The role of the English Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) in sourcing products from Africa is mentioned in several mainstream histories but there is limited evidence of their suppliers and how many were of them were co-operatives. In 1913, for example, the CWS won a concession in Sierra Leone with the aim of producing copra and palm oil and copra and although this trade was interrupted by the First World War it continued to source products from region.⁴⁰

Alien institutions or hybrids?

One of the key debates within the co-operative movement and within development circles in the 1960s and 1970s was the extent to which co-operatives had adapted to local cultures and societies or remained as implanted “alien institutions”. There were a range of different views. There was a general agreement that co-operatives had been established as ‘new’ institutions under colonial regimes. Many single commodity agricultural co-operatives for commodities like coffee, sisal and cocoa had also been set up to build access to export markets where none existed before. This was clearly true for consumer co-operatives. The debate was over whether or not this had been a good step.⁴¹

In a consultation on co-operatives and poverty held in 1977 at the UK Co-operative College, the Canadian co-operative leader Alexander Laidlaw⁴² argued that co-operatives needed to be set up as new institutions rather than grafted onto pre-existing local forms of mutual assistance and co-operation. He stated that, “traditional and informal kinds of co-operation are not at all the same as formal co-operation [...] and the latter does not necessarily evolve from the former.”⁴³ There were dissenting views, notably from African academics such as the eminent Nigerian scholar and co-operator Professor Martin Ijere,⁴⁴ also writing in the 1970s. Ijere argued that:

all the literature on the subject tries to persuade us that the African credit and contribution societies, the mutual aid organisations, age grades and other clubs are pseudo-coops and not sufficiently organised and modernised as the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers type.⁴⁵

Ijere pointed out that these societies, which were around long before the pioneers, had continued to thrive “while one imported co-op after another fades away”. Instead, ways needed to be found to incorporate Nigerian co-operatives into what was existing already: “rather than set up rival organisations, the co-operative staff should enter the existing mutual aid societies and operate from there.”⁴⁶

The question of how long co-operatives remained as “alien institutions” is perhaps however equally important and certainly merits much more exploration. Today, there is an increasing emphasis on the emergence of hybrid and heterogeneous forms of institutions in the developing world. Several historians have emphasised the importance of institutional adaptation and accommodation over time by local people.⁴⁷ Research into such processes among co-operatives, as long-standing African institutions, promises to provide a valuable case study. It is hoped that this exploratory study of the evolution of consumer co-operation can provide a starting point for further research.

The following examples suggest that the further and more detailed studies of the evolution of co-operation in Africa would add much to our understanding of the histories of consumer co-operation. In Egypt, for example, co-operatives were adopted as part of national struggles from the 1920s onwards. In Ghana, there are early examples of indigenous cocoa co-operatives set up despite opposition from the British.⁴⁸ Perhaps the best known example is the case of the Chagga peoples of northern Tanzania who took the colonial government to court in the late 1930s to protect their co-operative, the Kilimanjaro Native Co-operative Union (KNCU), which had been

created by a “combined process of African initiative and British co-optation.”⁴⁹ Similar processes of conflict and accommodation were also found in the development of the nearby Bukoba Native Coffee Union, also in Tanzania.⁵⁰

Models of consumer co-operation

While the most common types of co-operative in Africa have been agricultural organisations specialising in production, inputs and marketing, a number of different forms of consumer co-operation have also developed. This is a necessarily schematic overview given the lack of historical studies of co-operatives, compiled from a number of contemporary and historical sources. It indicates however a wide range of models of consumer co-operation that have developed across Africa.

The models identified so far include:

1. The classic “Rochdale model” with standalone co-operative stores selling daily provisions where the customers are members and dividend is paid on purchases. Originally set up with a European membership, the model was rolled out during the 1950s throughout the UK colonies as part of the broader drive to establish co-operatives. Consumer co-operatives typically comprised about 10 percent of the overall number of co-operatives set up during this decade (see appendix 1). Overall, this type of consumer co-operative met with very limited long term success except for the case of Botswana.⁵¹
2. Consumer co-operatives which were set up to service specific workplaces and/or workforces. These could be on plantations or railways or in mining areas such as the copper belt in Zambia. They do not appear to have been any more sustainable in the long term but appear to have enjoyed longer periods of trading.⁵²
3. Consumer co-operative stores set up as part of public distribution systems in the centrally planned economies of countries such as Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Angola and Mozambique. They supplied basic commodities with prices subsidised by the government so that ‘membership’ was pretty much compulsory for all purchasers. This is similar to the way that consumer co-operatives operate in some states in India as part of the public distribution system.⁵³

A similar scheme for consumer co-operatives also operated in Mali. As Dembele and co-authors have noted:

Before the cereals market reforms of the 1980s, food policies in Mali were aimed at securing cheap cereal supplies to urban consumers (government employees, students, the military, etc.). To achieve this objective, the government fixed the prices of the major food crops both pan-seasonally and pan-territorially and required forced deliveries to the national grain board. The grain board in turn distributed the grain through urban consumer cooperatives.

Maize, millet, and sorghum had the same official prices regardless of consumers' preferences.⁵⁴

The advent of market liberalisation policies from the 1980s caused the collapse of this type of consumer co-operatives, though over 1,000 were still present in 2011. In the 1950s and 1960s they catered to the very poor since their prices were subsidised but today their prices are no longer cheaper than other retailers. They have been undergoing a modernisation programme and customer service has improved.⁵⁵

4. Retail buying societies where a number of stores – not necessarily co-operatives – come together to purchase goods jointly. These were promoted in West Africa during the 1950s and 1960s by the colonial governments. In Nigeria, this meant a top down approach to building a consumer co-operative movement and combining this with a wholesale supply business selling to private traders. Unsurprisingly, the Plunkett yearbook review of the movement in Nigeria in 1961 reported that this approach 'must still be watched with a degree of anxiety'.⁵⁶
5. Stores run by agricultural marketing co-operatives. Many rural co-operatives started a small shop selling food or building materials to meet the needs of their members. Ijere reported that this was a common trend for co-operatives in the 1970s:

All producer societies [...] especially in African rural areas, are developing a useful business in consumer goods of an essential nature such as agricultural implements; they do not seek to compete with the ordinary trader in such lines in piece goods and semi-luxuries.⁵⁷

Such initiatives also occur today, as in the case of the Mamsera Rural Co-operative in northern Tanzania. Apart from marketing its members' coffee the co-operative also operates two shops, one of which sells building supplies.⁵⁸ This was and remains common practice in many rural areas though unfortunately it is impossible to quantify the extent of it at the moment.⁵⁹

6. Stores operating as part of a multi-purpose co-operative. In some countries such as Nigeria, rural co-operatives were deliberately set up as "Multi-Purpose Co-operatives" in order to carry out a number of different activities which could include financial services. Ijere reported that:

The co-operative store is well organised, and has a capable manager as a salesman. It is housed in the building provided by the co-operative society. Goods are sold to members at moderate rate with limited margin or profit. [...] Non-co-operators are encouraged to buy from the store. ⁶⁰

Botswana provides a further example as there was a growth in the number and membership of multi-purpose co-operatives in the late 1980s. This was attributed to the fact that they could offer members banking facilities.⁶¹

7. Consumer co-operatives as a stage in development of rural co-operatives. Only a single case of this has been located and it is therefore impossible to assess how common a practice this was. An aid programme in Mali during the early 1980s was used to resource the setting up of shops which were owned and controlled by their members. The profit generated was then used for collective purposes such as school building and gradually these consumer co-operatives were turned into productive coops so that 36 had been established by the mid 1980s.⁶²

To fit these divergent types of consumer co-operation into a single framework is problematic. The following chronology is inevitably schematic in nature and masks considerable differences between and within countries. To supplement this broad chronology, it will be followed by country case studies to illustrate the diversity of experiences of consumer co-operation and point the way towards a rich field for further research.

Chronology

Period	Co-operative activities	Membership
1880s until the Second World War Early colonial period	Small number of consumer co-operative stores in several British colonies	Membership, benefits and control by white settlers
1946 – 1960s Late colonial regimes	Huge but short-lived growth of consumer stores across British colonies driven by government departments	White, Asian and African membership in mixed and separate societies
1960s – 1990 Newly independent countries	Decline of standalone consumer societies Emergence of different types of consumer co-operatives including state-run consumer co-operatives set up as part of socialist regimes Focus on agricultural co-operatives in most countries by governments and aid agencies	Part of state apparatus – no real members Rise of donor-led co-operative development projects including consumer co-operatives in Botswana
1990s – present	Liberalisation and structural adjustment programmes Decline in state control Reform and revival; growth of financial co-operatives	Decline of state run consumer co-operatives Some new consumer societies developing

Source: *Yearbook of Agricultural Co-operation*, published annually from 1927 to 1986 by the Plunkett Foundation for Co-operative Studies.

West Africa

Nigeria has a long co-operative history with its first consumer co-operative formed in 1930. In the immediate post-war period the colonial government made efforts to set up consumer societies. These were the focus of a special investigation in June 1952 when a mission appointed by the UK Secretary of State visited the country.

Their report has been published. It recognizes that there is no quick way of organizing consumers in a country where so many of them participate directly or indirectly in petty trade [...] many members of the consumer societies looked on them solely as an agency through which Government might distribute short supply goods. [...] Many members looked upon their society as a source of goods for resale rather than for their own consumption.”⁶³

Matters did not improve in Nigeria with a high rate of failure among consumer societies. Numbers peaked with 50 societies in 1954 but this had declined to 23 only five years later. By the early 1960s, it was reported that consumer co-operation was focussed on a central supply association with a membership of primary and secondary societies as well as private traders. Goods supplied included household provisions, hardware and petroleum products. This was, in effect, still building a co-operative movement from the top down and already by 1961 was being watched with a measure of anxiety.⁶⁴ Ijere, writing a decade or so later, reports that no separate consumer societies were in existence by 1973.⁶⁵

In Ghana, a similar top-down approach is evident. In 1948, the government sought to promote the rapid growth of new consumer societies by supporting the development of a new wholesale society which was to provide necessary supplies and managerial skill. With nine consumer societies registered in 1945, the number grew to 38 in 1953. This proved to be the high point with numbers diminishing after that. In their 1982 study of co-operatives in Ghana, Young, Sherman and Rose argue that consumer co-operatives failed within a few years of their being formed.⁶⁶

In both of these West African countries, one of the major impediments to the development of consumer co-operatives was the fact that there were strong pre-existing markets and retail systems that the nascent consumer societies were unable to compete with. The Plunkett Foundation's *Yearbook* reported that especially women were already small traders who, “display goods such as cigarettes, matches, etc., for sale outside their homes, while at the same time minding their households. No organised retailers with staff to pay can compete with these women at their own level.” The report went on, “[t]he average man or woman in Eastern Nigeria [is] more conscious of his or her opportunities as a trader than of his or her needs as a consumer.”⁶⁷

Southern Africa

By contrast the case of Botswana in the Southern Africa region reveals a very different story, uniquely one of the success of consumer societies. The first stage involved a consumer co-operative development programme during the 1960s in which was a joint initiative between the

UK co-operative movement and the development NGO Oxfam. The aim was to set up a consumer co-operative in each of the five largest towns and was in part funded by the UK co-operative movement with collections being made via “boxes on the counters of British co-ops”. The first store was opened in the capital, Gabarone.⁶⁸ The scheme had limited success and only three societies had survived when a second consumer co-operative development programme started a few years later, this time funded by the UN.

In his autobiography, Basil Loveridge recounts working in Botswana in the 1970s as a co-operative expert on the UN development programme.⁶⁹ Loveridge attributed the limited success of the earlier programme to the setting up of large consumer co-operatives as being too difficult a management challenge for their inexperienced members. To counter this, the team devised a two-fold development strategy: firstly, starting small and building the society slowly; and secondly, the integration of compulsory education and training programmes for both the members and managers of the new co-operatives. There was a dedicated consumer co-operative project team and a tight inspection and auditing regime also helped to keep the new co-operatives on track. This was enhanced by the continuing development of training provision for new staff who alternated between work placements in the field with periods in the national co-operative training centre. Eventually a comprehensive consumer co-operative training and development manual was developed.

The project ended in 1975 and 18 consumer societies had been set up. All of these were profitable and still functioning ten years later. Rural Botswana, with its widely dispersed communities, did not have the extensive and pre-existing trading and marketing networks that were characteristic of West Africa. These factors undoubtedly contributed to the success of the stores.⁷⁰ The numbers of consumer societies remained relatively static though the number of consumer shops increased in the 1980s as many multi-purpose co-operative societies also ran shops as part of the services they offered. Indeed, 20 consumer societies were still operational in 2008, though many were suffering from the competition from the arrival of large South African supermarket chains.

East Africa

In East Africa, the largest number of consumer societies was to be found in Zambia. In 1947, the new registrar of co-operatives was faced with what was to him an “unexpected demand” to set up consumer co-operatives for both Africans and Europeans. Some of the demand came from the mining areas where consumer societies might “act as brake on rising wages”.⁷¹ An officer was seconded there to assist in setting them up. Many societies were set up very rapidly and often proved too complex for members and staff to manage. Most African consumer societies in Zambia failed and by the mid 1950s it was reported that separate consumer societies were not viable except among Europeans. Even these were not exempt from financial and governance problems. In Zambia, as elsewhere, by the 1960s, it appears that rural producer co-operatives were “developing a useful business in consumer goods”, mainly in agricultural implements and other products that did not directly compete with the business of “ordinary traders”.⁷²

Uganda

In Uganda, the first consumer co-operative was registered in 1948 and their numbers grew slowly, reaching a total of 11 by 1954. Most struggled to survive. Four traders' supply co-operatives were set up but were de-registered by the Registrar in 1956 as they were considered as societies of middlemen, not "true co-operatives".⁷³ In 1965 the new independent government of Uganda developed plans to revive the consumer co-operative sector with an ambitious plan to set up a central wholesale society and societies in all towns and some rural areas. The plan was developed with the assistance of Israeli co-operative experts but the plan remained on paper and nothing was implemented. A further attempt to revitalise the co-operative sector was launched by the government in 1978, again with foreign assistance. The government was anxious to improve the distribution of basic commodities. New societies were formed, rising from 34 in 1978 to 225 in 1986. They did not prove successful and a decade later most of them were moribund.⁷⁴

Kenya

It was also found to be extremely difficult to establish successful consumer co-operatives in Kenya. As early as 1955, the commissioner decided to "cut out the dead wood" in consumer co-operatives, with the result that only 13 societies remained of which a further two were also likely to be liquidated.⁷⁵ The Nairobi Railway African Co-operative Store was one of the exceptions, operating well during the 1960s. Its membership was limited to railway staff and their families. It also employed an expatriate manager.⁷⁶

There was still some support in the Co-operative Ministry of the new independent government for consumer co-operative development and hopes of a positive impact from various training programmes then running.⁷⁷ Support from the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung of Germany for the Nairobi Wholesale Consumers Union in 1968 enabled it to provide services for 12 consumer societies in the city and achieve a record turnover in 1970. The Union still survives today. As in neighbouring countries, many contemporary reports refer to the development of marketing societies which also provide "consumer facilities largely on agricultural requisites".⁷⁸

Mauritius

Consumer co-operatives were developed in Mauritius following the country's independence in 1968. A national Federation was established in 1971 which acted as a wholesale society. The stores did well until the 1990s when large supermarkets entered the market place and the number of consumer stores fell from 95 in 1990 to 30 a decade later.⁷⁹

Inevitable casualties?

The arguments for more research into African co-operative history do not merit further rehearsal. The overall picture is clear: with the exception of Botswana and in comparison to other forms of co-operation, consumer co-operative stores based on the Rochdale model have remained weakly rooted in Africa. Agricultural co-operatives and, latterly, financial co-operatives have become embedded in many countries. The reasons for these different patterns of co-operative development still need much more exploration.

It is a question that has exercised the minds of many commentators within the movement though historians have paid it little attention. If anything, there has been a focus on the overall weaknesses of co-operative development rather than specifically that of consumer co-operatives. Agricultural co-operatives have also had high failure rates in most countries. Ijere notes that by 1977 over half the farmers' co-operatives formed since 1935 were moribund or had been liquidated.⁸⁰

During the period of co-operative development in the decades following the Second World War, several influential texts and commentators argued that consumer societies were inherently more difficult to develop than other types especially in rural areas. W H K Campbell argued that the higher percentage of consumer co-operative failures in both African and Asia were "inevitable casualties", as, "[i]n practice, this form of society, when attempted by people of limited education, accustomed all their lives to bad methods of buying has accounted for a very high percentage of failures."⁸¹ In the Plunkett Foundation's *Yearbooks of Agricultural Co-operation* the high level of failures was attributed to a variety of factors including the lack of capacity of board members, problems in maintaining stock levels and cash flow, the provision of credit and the lack of wholesale societies. Reports from Co-operative Registrars also can provide insights into contemporary perceptions of the reasons for the failure of consumer societies, as in this case by the Co-operative Registrar for Basutoland (Lesotho):

The business of shop keeping requires a special technique which the peasant committees have difficulty in acquiring. It involves careful costing and pricfixing, the judicious choice of stock, accurate book keeping and careful stock recording. Consumer co-operation is an urban rather than a rural phenomenon. ⁸²

No doubt all these factors played a role. In addition, in many countries, consumer stores struggled in the face of pre-existing market systems and traders. This was a big problem in West Africa where the long established role of women traders made it well nigh impossible for consumer co-operatives to compete on price.

The ILO's 1964 report on co-operatives in the developing world also commented on the reasons for the limited success of consumer cooperatives. This was attributed to a number of factors, including the existence of local economies self-sufficient in the basic foodstuffs that form the staple products of many consumer co-operatives elsewhere. Credit was also a problem with existing traders able to offer credit and farmers lacking cash for up to six months in a year.⁸³

A further reason may be found in the lack of effective education provision for most co-operatives. Most of the education and training provided was directed at staff and office bearers. Co-operative colleges played a role but provision remained largely residential and aimed at the literate elite. A T Loveridge argued that ordinary members learnt little about commerce or co-operation. In an echo of the situation today, the focus was on start-up and formation, not on "further instruction that needs to be given in the instruction of societies once they are accepted".⁸⁴ In addition, there were no serious donor-funded attempts at large scale co-operative education in Africa until the late 1980s when the Matcom programmes were developed by the ILO.⁸⁵

However, it is also true to say that while the standalone consumer store has not fared well in Africa, other forms of consumer co-operation remain present and are in some cases flourishing. Many agricultural co-operatives sold and continue to sell a range of products to their members such as farm inputs, building materials and provisions.

Furthermore, the consensus is now that the top-down and the state-controlled approach has had a detrimental effect on the development of all types of co-operatives.⁸⁶ The implementation of a better legal and policy environment has only occurred during the past decade or so. The reforms are based on a model of co-operatives as autonomous enterprises and with a 'hands-off' role for the state, as reflected in the ILO Recommendation on Promotion of Co-operatives.⁸⁷

The re-creation of co-operatives as private sector and largely autonomous enterprises is now gaining momentum across Africa, but at a very uneven pace. It offers the opportunity for the development of more diverse forms of co-operatives which can include consumer ones. In Cape Verde, for example, consumer co-operatives have developed since the 1980s and in Ethiopia consumer stores are currently being developed in and around Addis by a local credit union.⁸⁸ However, these are scattered stories and it is hard to imagine a bright future for new consumer co-operatives in many countries as space in the growing domestic consumer markets is being seized by large supermarket chains from South Africa and elsewhere. This may spell the end for the remaining consumer co-operative stores of Botswana and Mauritius.⁸⁹

The future of co-operation in Africa now looks more promising than it has done for many years. The role of consumer co-operation in the African co-operative renaissance remains unclear but, as this article suggests there is a long history, which, like other aspects of co-operation, is deserving of far more attention from historians.

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Appendix I: Consumer co-operative statistics

Consumer Co-operatives

	1945	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961
Northern Rhodesia		26	26	26	24	24	19	23	21	23	26	22	17
Nyasaland	0	37	40	29	26	16	13	13	12	12	11	8	9
Tanganyika	1	3	2	2	2	4	18	5	5	6	4	7	
Uganda	0	5	6	6	10	11	10	6	5	5	4	3	
Gold Coast	9	33	36	34	38	16	6						
Nigeria	7	38	36	25	39	50	41	33	37	30	23		
Sierra Leone	0	5	6	3	3	2	1	1	1	1	1		
Kenya			19	12	18	17	18	18	17	16	15	14	16
Zanzibar				0	2	2	2	2	2	18	19	20	19

Consumer co-operatives as a percentage of total number of co-operatives registered in the country

	1945 (%)	1950(%)	1951(%)	1952(%)	1953(%)	1954(%)	1955(%)	1956(%)	1957(%)	1958(%)	1959(%)	1960(%)	1961(%)
Northern Rhodesia	0	33	27	26	22	18	14	14	10	10	11	9	7
Nyasaland		53	51	41	37	24	17	16	14	14	13	10	11
Tanganyika	2	2	1	1	1	2	5	1	1	1	0	1	
Uganda		2	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	
Gold Coast	6	10	10	9	9	3	1						
Nigeria	4	6	10	2	2	3	2	2	2	1	1		
Sierra Leone		11	10		11	5	1	1	1	0	0		
Kenya			7	4	6	5	5	5	4	3	3	2	2
Zanzibar				0	10	10	10	6	5	31	28	26	23

Notes

The data for Nigeria are a little confused due to territorial changes. It started as "Nigeria" then from 1952 was sectioned into East, West and North. These statistics are lumped together in the above tables under "Nigeria". From 1957 the statistics for Nigeria also include figures for the "Nigeria Federation". In some years, "Nigeria South Cameroon" appears in the data, but in other years "South Cameroon" appears on its own. As this is inconsistent South Cameroon has not been included in the statistics for Nigeria.

Gold Coast became independent in 1957 and changed its name to Ghana. It was, however, not on the lists after 1955 (in the 1957 *Yearbook*), presumably because it was no longer a colony.

The dates are all around 2 years behind the date of the publication of the *Yearbook*, so the figures for 1956 give the co-operatives in 1954, etc.

Total Societies Registered

	1945	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961
Northern Rhodesia	8	78	97	99	109	133	140	161	201	227	245	239	228
Nyasaland	0	70	79	71	71	66	76	83	85	88	87	80	85
Tanganyika	52	127	138	152	198	243	333	410	474	546	1598	691	
Uganda	0	273	401	584	811	1036	1110	1268	1423	1549	1598	1638	
Gold Coast	144	317	346	370	445	474	443						
Nigeria	186	597	346	1228	1568	1810	1944	2017	2258	2426	2933		
Sierra Leone	0	45	59		28	40	67	67	169	229	275		
Kenya			257	291	298	329	333	389	466	512	576	625	650
Zanzibar				11	21	21	21	35	37	58	67	77	83