



# Co-operative Education in Malawi: An Interview with John Mulangeni

**Cilla Ross and Esther Gicheru**

This interview was conducted via Zoom with John Mulangeni, Executive Director of the Malawi Federation of Co-operatives (MAFECO), during our 2023 Co-operative Education Workshop. The aim of the workshop was to gather content for this special issue of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*. The interviewers were Cilla Ross, University of Nottingham, and Esther Gicheru, Co-operative University of Kenya. The interview was transcribed verbatim, with editing for style and clarity in print format.

We are delighted that John Mulangeni, Executive Director of MAFECO, is joining us today. Because we are so keen to think globally about co-operative education and co-operative learning, we couldn't think of anyone better than John, a pioneering co-operative educator, to be interviewed. The first question is, by way of an introduction, how did you get into co-operative education and why?

I was employed in government in the Ministry of Industry and Trade as an assistant co-operative auditor and that's how I got involved in co-operative education. In Malawi, co-operative history is divided into three stages: we have the colonial era, we have the post-independence era, and then we have the multiparty era. Not many co-operatives were being promoted in the beginning of the current period, but this changed, and the government realised that we needed to start promoting co-operatives and to start training our prospective members. We began to provide what we call co-operative member education where you try to expose the members to understand what a co-operative is, the principles, the values, the practices, and also the roles of a member, their responsibilities, and the business side of it. Slowly, we started developing some materials to train others.

Then I had the opportunity to go and attend a certificate course in co-operative management in Malaysia and I was identified by the ILO [International Labour Organization] as one of the twenty-first-century communicators there. We were exposed to training people using the various approaches that can help get people involved and make an impact, for example how to use stories in co-operative education, how to use games, and so forth. Eventually, the people at the Ministry felt that all new staff that were being employed had to be attached to me and I had to induct them on the various roles in the Ministry on co-operatives. However, at a certain point in time, I saw that there was still a gap so I went to study for a degree on co-operatives and microfinance, so that was how I became very much interested. I saw that there is a need to empower people with the right knowledge. If co-operatives are to be viable businesses, then we need to make sure that we give them the right information, but also

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 License, which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the Creative Commons website and the Journal of Co-operative Studies re-use guidelines.



train them to think and act as co-operators, because you know, a co-operative is a business and some people try to approach it like a company. But a co-operative is a unique business because it has its principles, values, and practices, so that is one of the things that I decided to make my contribution in, to make sure that people are able to know and embrace this culture of co-operatives.

You have talked about why you got interested in co-operative education, what does co-operative learning mean to you?

To me, co-operative learning can be looked at from two perspectives. It is learning where you try to gain new knowledge as an individual on how you can do things properly. But because co-operatives are focused on groups, it also gives you an opportunity to learn by practising on certain things — learning by doing. So from that angle, I see that it helps you to develop interdependence because in co-operatives you have to be working together. This is because there are certain skills that you don't have but others have, so you can learn from them. At the same time as an individual member in the co-operative, you have to recognise the role of accountability — your accountability to the co-operative. You also must make sure that you don't put your personal interest above the interest of the co-operative and the members. So all of this comes together as co-operative learning — learning individually and together to make the co-operative a success.

The next question is what is the situation of co-operative education in Malawi?

Co-operative education in Malawi faces a number of challenges. Unlike in other countries where you have a Co-operative College, in Malawi, we don't. We used to have a Co-operative College in the past during the colonial period, but during the post-independence era, the movement became more of a government institution. Of late, we've seen the advocacy and the promotion of co-operatives being enhanced through various projects that are being undertaken. As a result, we have recognised the need of having proper standardised co-operative learning materials. These are not accredited, but the various people who are tasked to use the materials and to train others are accredited.

Just recently, we have seen that universities like Malawi University, Assemblies of God, and Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources are trying to introduce co-operative learning. The challenge is that in Malawi, the popular co-operatives are the SACCOs [Savings and Credit Co-operatives] so for many agricultural co-operatives this is a new area and many of the co-operatives are in their very infant stage. For some of those working in co-operatives or who are employed by NGOs that work with co-operatives, they have to learn about co-operatives very quickly. In response, the Ministry and MAFECO have tried to develop materials which we would like to have accredited by a credible institution so that at least we can start using them. We hope that with the coming of these universities trying to develop various co-operative programmes from Certificate to Diploma to Degree level, then maybe in future we will have people who are knowledgeable and are able to work having been educated properly on co-operation through co-operative education.

Until then, it is still a tall order, but in MAFECO our small Skills Development Unit is doing all it can to make sure that we deliver training that gives people the knowledge to run their co-operatives.

Could you tell us more about the sort of co-operative education that you use within MAFECO?

Normally we target particular groups for our training and we take a number of approaches. There are times, depending on the topic we use, when we take a brainstorming approach where we ask people a question on an issue. They brainstorm and maybe they come up with solutions based on the issue at hand, but also there are times when we just take the question-and-answer approach or use group discussions following students looking at case studies. After they have looked at the case studies and reflected on the various possibilities and outcomes, they make presentations. We also use storytelling very widely. We tell various stories and that's another good approach because you tell a story that relates to what is happening in a particular community. People recognise the issue. You can take an example of a particular person and try to relate this to co-operative knowledge. We also use videos or draw things to try to communicate, to explain, and then there are times we have plays and games that we use, but there are also times we use notes if we need to. There are scenarios when you are teaching things like co-operative bookkeeping where you have a sort of technical approach using coaching. Then you have to take the learners through the process and keep supporting them to a certain point until you can see them being able to apply the knowledge and use the best practices. But when you are talking about problem solving or values within the co-operative you can use many other methods.

It's interesting to hear how you use this blend of approaches, from the participatory (learning by doing) with the more pragmatic and instructional. What is the main purpose of your programmes and who participates in the programmes that you run?

We want to build capacity, but we also want to create a positive image about co-operatives. Sometimes the view is quite negative, especially from how co-operatives were in the colonial era and the post-independence era. We want to encourage people and tell them that they should look at co-operatives from a positive angle and know that a co-operative is a reliable business model that has stood the test of time. So that's one thing.

Another purpose is that we want members to inculcate the principles, the values, and the practices of co-operatives as they undertake their business. So that's an area where we want to ensure that these people that we are educating, have embraced these things and know that this is what makes co-operatives unique from the other types of businesses or organisation.

The other purpose is to make sure that co-operatives are meeting their objectives. A co-operative must meet the desires and objectives of the members and be sustainable and viable. It is very important that members take responsibility. Sometimes in Malawi, co-operatives employ people and members relax, and they leave the whole management of their business in the hands of those that are employed, which is not an ideal situation. Members need to know that the co-operative is their enterprise. They need to own it. They need to patronise it, but also where there are problems, they should address them. When we are training leaders rather than members, we want them to understand the critical role that they have been entrusted with. We want to equip them with knowledge and to make sure that they are able to effectively deliver to their members and the co-operative. So those are the reasons why we make sure that we train people.

I note that when you were describing building the co-operative character, it is education that is going to encourage people to be active co-operators, ensuring accountability as well as business success. It's an age-old issue wherever it is across the globe, isn't it?

Our final question is about the lessons that the wider co-operative movement can learn from that work that you are doing in MAFEKO.

Our approach is that when you get into the community and start working with people, we try to tap into their existing knowledge. What is it that they know? You need to know this before you try to bring in any new approaches. Also the issue of co-operation has existed amongst people for a long period, especially in the African countries – it is part of their lives. History shows us that co-operation is not very new; it has been around forever, but in a very informal manner, not the legalised approach that we have now. So first, learn how people co-operate and try to learn from what people already know, and then from there build in the additional knowledge that you have and might be needed. So then you have the base of the indigenous knowledge. You can capitalise on this and you are also learning all the time from the people – what is it that works?

The other thing is that co-operative education in Malawi involves working with adults and in working with adults, there are times you need to bring on board cross cutting issues. These are issues that very much affect adults. For example, in co-operative education you can bring in issues about health. Sometimes they are concerned about crops, maybe there are issues to do with the diseases of animals that is affecting them? This is when it is really useful to learn from the indigenous remedies and indigenous knowledge say, and to bring all of that into education about co-operatives. It is so important to do this as it awakens people to participate. In the process you can find solutions from everyone learning together.

I will give you some other examples. Maybe when I'm teaching, people will be able to give me a remedy of how to get rid of bed bugs using the indigenous approach. If you take that knowledge to other places, it might be new and it is something people are very interested in if it is a problem for them. This engages them in education for their co-operative. Or there might be a community way of making fertiliser that is cheap and effective. Fertiliser is very expensive in Malawi, so if there is the indigenous knowledge to make cheap fertiliser, we can share it with others. Or we try to bring in issues that can sometimes help the community. We can ask how you can treat some simple disease. Maybe somebody is ill with diarrhoea and is in the field. What leaves are there that maybe they can chew? If there are no leaves, what is it that they can use immediately to address that emergency? Sometimes with women you are working with there might be problems of being anaemic because of issues of

menstruation. How would you bring in an element where you tell them there is something that can improve their blood levels. So, when you bring in issues like this, when it is something everyone knows about, you can get participation and then if you start with this, people do not forget the topic that follows. After that, you recap again and again.

I've already talked about uses of stories in co-operative learning. In Malawi, we have two approaches that we use. Sometimes we go to them, we go to the locality and see co-operators in their local context. And then there are times when they come to us. If you are taking them out of their community and maybe when you do this there are some challenges, we try to go to them and reach out to more people with co-operative knowledge and values. If it's for something like co-operative bookkeeping and accounting, we say, come to us. We find a place where we can go and train them. The main thing is to get them to participate and get interested and for us to build co-operative capacity. So those are the few lessons which I can share that people could learn from.

Thank you for sharing your experiences with us.

## **The Authors**

Cilla is ex Principal of the Co-operative College and has co-authored a number of publications with Malcolm Noble on co-operative higher education. Cilla sits on the advisory board of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* and is Honorary Professor of Co-operative Education at the University of Nottingham. Esther Gicheru is an Associate Professor of Co-operative Management and Organisation Transformation, currently serving as the Deputy Vice Chancellor at the Co-operative University of Kenya. She is an ex long-serving principal of the Co-operative College of Kenya.

## **The Interviewee**

John Mulangeni Nkosi is the Executive Director of the Malawi Federation of Co-operatives (MAFECO). MAFECO is the umbrella body for co-operatives in Malawi, providing "aid in teaching, regulating, and maintaining co-operatives across the nation" (MAFECO.org). John has worked for over 30 years in the Malawi co-operative movement, including in the Ministry of Trade and Industries. He is a committed co-operative educator, and expert in the co-operative economic sector.