**Communication Strategies for Popularising Cooperative Model amongst Youth in India; Brand-Building
Potentialities with Specific Reference to NCUI’s
Experience in School Education**

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**Introduction and Background**

 The ICA Blue-Print for Cooperative Decade talks of cooperatives being the preferred model by the people by 2020.Instead of brand with consumer perception, the Blue-Print talks of creating distinct ‘cooperative brand’ based on principles which can popularize the cooperative idea, and create its own value. The Blue-Print lays stress on building up cooperative message and securing the cooperative identity. It clearly points out that the youth may be attracted to the sector which is ethical and participatory, but whose message appears indistinct in a crowded field. The Blue-Print talks of effectively communicating those features of the cooperative sector to the people who feel drawn to them.

 India has a strong youth population, with more than 50 % of its population below the age of 25 and more than 65% below the age of 35.Every third person in an Indian city today is youth. By 2020, India is set to become the world’s youngest country with 64% of its population in the working age group. Based on this reality, my Paper is based on the rationale that if the cooperatives in India have to be the preferred model by 2020, they have to devise effective communication strategies based on powerful messages to attract the youth.

**Literature Review and Research Findings**

The field of research for communication strategies with a focus on youth component for cooperatives is not well developed in Asia-Pacific Region, as compared to the developed countries like US, Canada, UK where many research projects related to youth involvement in cooperatives have been initiated. Lack of first-hand research based on primary sources is a big hindering factor, due to which effective policy-perspectives on effective communications strategy for the cooperative sector related to youth does not emerge. Through there are many books, articles, case studies, internet resources, etc related to youth information/ participation/strategy in cooperatives, but concrete research/literary development related to youth as as far as communication strategy is concerned, is distinctly lacking. The merging of community-building and youth development has been at the core of recent youth engagement literature [Nitzberg, 2005; Kubisch, 2005, Cahnand Gray; Lynn, 2005; Brennan, Lesmeister, 2006]. However, the cooperative aspect is missing in this respect, as far as communicating the advantages of cooperatives to youth through effective community participation is concerned. Moreover, the youth engagement literature has a Western tilt, and there is no Asia-Pacific focus here.

 Research-based literature on youth engagement strategies on cooperatives has been lacking in the Asian-Pacific context. Due to the recent celebrations of International Year of Cooperatives, there was a definite momentum to communicate the strength of the cooperative sector to the youth. The publication of story books on cooperatives for school children in Singapore by Singapore National Cooperative Federation, and publication of a compilation of success stories on cooperatives from various sectoral areas, by National Cooperative Union of India, signified a definite paradigm shift. It is now hoped that more research-based literary development will take place in the near future.

 Viewed against this backdrop, my Paper is exploratory in character, as it deals in depth with an unexplored area of cooperative development, i.e., communication strategies for popularizing cooperative model amongst youth in India, with a prime focus on strategy formulation. Taking an over-view of the communication strategies for popularizing cooperative model of development amongst youth, the paper tries to find out whether cooperative messages have been well communicated to the school children, at practical, as well as conceptual level, based on NCUI’s experience in popularizing cooperative model amongst the school children, and to identify brand-building potentialities.

**Challenges Before Cooperative Movement in Youth Participation**

 The cooperative movement in India faces a big challenge to galvanise the youth so as to usher in new leadership which can give a real momentum to the growth of the cooperative movement in the country. The youth can play an important role in strengthening the cooperative movement in the following ways;

 ***Developing Creative Skills****-* The youth can provide creative skills for the growth of cooperative organization, as they are young and dynamic, burning with new ideas. A cooperative provides ideal training ground to develop the creativity of youth. Starting a cooperative, working in it and developing socio-economic activities all require creativity

 ***Innovation****-* Youth are innovative creatures. They like to experiment, and they do not like fixed ideas. While working in a cooperative, they can work for the welfare of the markets, community responsibility, and market dynamics, which all require innovation. So youth through their innovation develop the functional capabilities of a cooperative.

 ***Democratic Participation:*** Cooperatives are purely democratic organizations where everyone is free to contribute in his/her unique manner. Youth can play an important role in strengthening equality norms of a cooperative through non-discriminatory nature of a cooperative, if they are well sensitized to join a cooperative.

 **Entrepreneurial and Managerial Skills**

 Functioning of a cooperative needs effective leadership. This can be well reflected in sound entrepreneurial and managerial skills. Cooperatives promote good entrepreneurial ideas as well as ability to work for a social cause. If youth form cooperatives related to consumer goods, savings and other activities, then they can enhance their entrepreneurial and managerial skills.

**Decision Making**

 Developing the skills for decision making based on consensus is very important for effective functioning of cooperatives. The youth have the skills to develop consensus. This can easily materialize through strong functioning of a cooperative.

**Values and Principles**

 Cooperatives provide a unique blend of ethics and business. They encourage self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equity and solidarity. They believe in honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. The value orientation of cooperatives encourage youth to develop these values in a natural way. A cooperative can be strengthened in such a way through youth participation

 **Community Development**

 Education in schools must have a strong component on learning through community development. Cooperatives are community-based organizations. By participating in cooperative activities, students learn to contribute to socio-economic development of their communities. They become socially responsible in a true way, and strengthen the functioning of cooperatives.

 At present, youth are generally not attracted towards cooperatives either in terms of taking up a job or in terms of becoming an active member. Perhaps one reason for this could be lack of a definite Youth Cooperative Movement, although there are student cooperatives present in the country. Though there is a good chunk of members in the cooperatives in general, there is no evidence to show that the youth are choosing to be the members. The overall hypothesis may be that the youth are generally detached from the cooperatives and hence are losing an opportunity of democratic practice and participation in decision-making. On the other hand, the cooperatives which remain detached from the youth and are not making any conscious attempt to attract them are losing membership which may add vigour and dynamism to the movement. Youth apathy towards cooperatives is both a loss to the youth as well as the cooperative movement.

**Overview of Communication Strategies for Cooperatives in India**

 At present, the communication strategies for popularizing cooperative model amongst youth in India are very weak, unprofessional and devoid of clear-cut planning and based on ad-hoc policies. The cooperative awareness programmes for youth are very few, periodical, and there is no regular and systematic approach in this regard. On the occasion of major events like Cooperative Week, celebrations of International Year of Cooperatives last year, the awareness programmes are launched in order to have some semblance of connection with the youth, instead of a clear-cut strategy to target the youth in a missionary way through a well-devised ,and conceptualized approach. The awareness programmes take the form of essay, quiz, lectures on basics of cooperative movement, painting competition, etc. These are mostly organized at the State level by State Cooperative Unions/Federations. At the national level, the national cooperative federations have still not given due priority to youth-specific policies so as to bring the youth into the cooperative fold. Though there are sporadic youth programmes/ schemes, but the impact of them is still not noticeable, as the youth tend to identify only with Amul, which has effectively devised good business communication strategies to attract the youth by coming up with products which suit their taste. The successful cooperative business organizations have not been able to devise effective youth-centric policies, so that youth are aware of their products/business programmes .A cooperative business organisation which is successful, can easily communicate to the youth the advantages of cooperative form of business, as compared to commercial enterprises, only when the youth are encouraged to visit the organizations, and see their working from close angles. Lack of any serious initiatives in this direction has been a big handicap in youth not being attracted to successful cooperative business organizations. The promotional organizations which lay stress on education and training also don’t conduct specialized youth-centric cooperative sensitization programmes with focus on schools, colleges and universities. As a result, their training programmes don’t extend beyond the cooperative domain, at a time when youth from various educational streams need to be sensitized on basics of the cooperative movement.

 Communicating strategies for popularizing cooperative model amongst schools, colleges and university students in India are very weak. As a result, awareness level for cooperatives among these institutions is very less. The schools are the basic educational institutions, where the young minds can be sensitized with the democratic ideals of cooperate. However, it is very strange that Cooperation as a subject has still to make substantial forays into the school education system. The school syllabus, despite some stray references to cooperatives, totally ignores Cooperation as a subject. However, the fact remains that Cooperation as a specialized subject for school education has not emerged. There has not been effective lobbying, advocacy and strong networking with Ministry, CBSE, NCERT, so that school syllabus is changed to include Cooperation as a major subject. .At the college level, and university level, the subject of Cooperation is not given due attention. Though there are few universities offering Bachelors and Masters degree in Cooperation, but it is strange that Cooperation as a specialized subject has not been able to emerge, though subjects which are newer, and have less significance than cooperatives, get specialized priority as a part of syllabus in the colleges and universities. Cooperation as a managerial discipline has also not emerged which can attract the youth. There are very few institutions offering MBA in Cooperation. After 100 years of the cooperative movement in the country, only one cooperative university in Assam has been set up, which has still not started functioning in a full-fledged manner. All this shows that similar to school education, higher education in cooperatives is a neglected field. No doubt, youth in this scenario are detached from cooperatives. At practical level, due to low level of awareness for cooperatives amongst the schools, colleges and universities, and ineffective lobbying/advocacy for due primacy to cooperatives in the school education, there are very few cooperatives functioning successfully in the educational institutions in the country. Most of them are loose, dis-organised and limited to some parts of the country, particularly Southern India. The weak student cooperative movement in the country is a deeper reflection of weak communication strategy for popularizing cooperative model of development amongst the youth.

 At the policy level, the policy support for communicating cooperative model amongst the youth is non-existent. The National Youth Policy ignores the cooperative sector. The youth organizations ,like Nehru Yuva Kendra, don’t have cooperatives as a focal area of their operation. This situation is mainly because the cooperative sector is weak in its communication strategy to influence the government, ministry, youth bodies and other non-cooperative organizations. The media channels for popularizing cooperative model amongst the youth are not strong. The youth conferences/seminars/workshops with focus on ‘Youth and Cooperatives’ are very rare. As a result, the publicity of this important area is almost non-existent. The other events, like cooperative youth exhibitions, cultural/sports events are almost non-existent. The scholarships/incentives for youth promotion in cooperatives have not been initiated as yet, which is very strange. Youth magazines on cooperatives are not at all present, and youth research projects on primary sources are very few. The social media plank for communicating advantages/benefits of cooperatives to youth are still very weak. This is because the media/PR policies of cooperatives are not strong, and in many of the cases, the approach is un-professional.

**Experience of National Cooperative Union of India In Communicating Cooperative Model of Development Amongst Youth**

 National Cooperative Union of India being an apex organisation of the cooperative movement in the country in the recent years has taken definite initiatives to popularize cooperative model of development amongst the youth. National Council of Cooperative Training, a training unit of NCUI has taken a lead role in organizing Debating Competition on Cooperatives for the students of colleges and universities. When the youth are school children, then it is altogether a different approach as far as the subject of Cooperation is concerned. This approach is more needed, as schools are the foundation of the education system, where cooperatives need to make their presence felt. NCUI’s initiatives in popularising cooperative model amongst the school children during the last 5 years started through organising quiz, and debate competitions coinciding with the Cooperative Week celebrations which are organized from 14th-20th November, every year. The good response of the public schools towards these events showed that this concept has immense scope of development if it is taken seriously. The success of the debate competition, for example, showed that the school students were eager to know more about cooperatives by understanding its dimensions from close angles.

 Organisation of Sensitisation programmes for school children of public schools of Delhi was a major initiative in the which the leading public schools of Delhi took an active part in 2 hours programme, in which the school students were taught the basics of cooperative movement, principles, values, achievements, ways to form cooperatives, etc with good visuals. The programmes engaged the school students through group discussion, which encouraged them to involve in group activity, so that their understanding of cooperative issues improves through mutual discussions. The students came up with interesting questions on various issues of cooperatives, like their growth, problems, principles, importance in the national economy, etc. Their most important question posed was ‘How to from cooperatives in schools’. Some students showed eagerness to start consumer stores, environment clubs, music clubs based on cooperative concept. An analysis of the feed-back responses of the participants showed that they liked such type of programmes, which though are of short duration, but through creative presentation, engagement techniques, group action/activities, etc had made a definite impact on the students, so as to arouse their interest in cooperatives.

The sensitization programmes which were organized in the public schools comprised of students from affluent background, who, it was thought, may embark on a career in cooperatives ,because of their commercial orientation. So, it was thought that organizing sensitization programmes for Kendriya Vidyalaya schools in Delhi, which had primarily students from poor and middle classes, would be a more broad-based activity to attract the students towards the concept of cooperatives, which primarily appeals to the poor, down-trodden and middle sections of the society. Organising a workshop for the Principals and School teachers of Kendriya Vidyalaya schools of Delhi was an effective communications strategy to pave the ground for more concrete action in this regard. The successful organisation of this workshop was useful in two ways. Firstly, the Principals Workshop ,designed for the school leaders, sensitized the top school management on the importance of cooperatives, the need to inculcate the values of cooperatives in young minds, and also to give them exposure on the methods/ways to form cooperatives in the schools. Secondly, the School teachers’ Workshop sensitized the faculty staff of these schools to delve deeper into the subject of cooperatives, understand its wide depth/angle, and also apply the ways/methodologies to form cooperatives in the schools, so that students start their democratic enterprise in the schools.

Later, after the organisation of these workshops, 12 sensitisation programmes were organized in Kendriya Vidyalaya schools of South Delhi. The students showed lot of interest in these programmes, and they constantly asked from the faculty members on ways to form cooperatives in the schools. The feedback response of the students showed that they desired these type of programmes to be organized on a regular basis. The feedback response of the school faculty revolved around the need for concrete action in this field ie practical steps to form cooperatives in schools, by seeking NCUI’s expertise/help from cooperative organizations in this direction. At a practical level, NCUI helped in the setting up of a mock cooperative amongst the students of Chiranjeev public School, Gurgaon. The mock cooperative helped the students to become managers/leaders of consumer store based on cooperative principles, and this experience helped them to understand the benefits of working in cooperatives and the good opportunities which they provide as compared to the commercial enterprises. NCUI also took an opportunity to establish liason with Nehru Yuva Kendra, the apex body of youth in the country, which did not have youth programmes with focus on cooperatives. Realising the need to empower a huge network of youth clubs in the country under the aegis of Nehru Yuva Kendra, NCUI organized several sensitization programmes for youth clubs based in the rural areas of Delhi. These programmes had a good response, and the participants showed keenness to set up cooperatives in the rural areas where youth clubs were functioning. The programmes highlighted the need for a practical-orientation related to forming youth cooperatives in rural areas which could generate income for the poor in these areas.

 There are many challenges before NCUI in communicating the cooperative model amongst the youth..Firstly, the challenge is to undertake effective lobbying/advocacy with NCERT, CBSE, Ministry, etc so that school syllabus is revised, and a strong component on cooperatives is given prominence. NCUI had undertaken a study of NCERTT text-books of 10th-12 th standard of Economics, and Social Sciences..The Study revealed that the text-books had totally ignored the wide reach of the cooperative movement in the school syllabus. Secondly, the challenge is to organise sensitization programmes not only for public, Kendriya Vidyalaya schools, but also MCD, Navodaya schools, and government schools whose target group is poor and vulnerable sections of the society. The key issue is how to ensure that NCUI’s efforts in communicating cooperative model amongst the school children is implemented in other parts of the country, besides Delhi. Thirdly, the challenge is to network/collaborate with the wide network of youth organizations in the country in areas of cooperatives. Fourthly, the challenge is to set up some ideal ‘model’ students cooperatives in schools, colleges and universities of the country so that these cooperatives serve as good examples of replication by other educational institutions. Fifthly, the challenge is to produce school-friendly easy-to-understand literature for school students, and help them to gain some good insights on how to form cooperatives.

**Brand-Building and Role of Social Media**

 Effective communication strategy for popularizing cooperative model amongst the youth can build up a ‘cooperative youth brand’ which can strengthen the identity of the cooperative sector. This ‘brand value’ can help the cooperative model to be the preferred model by 2030 as mentioned in the ICA Blue-print for Cooperative Decade. The cooperative brand is based on the uniqueness of cooperative organizations, its distinctive advantage, and its wider community base. If youth linkages are established with this brand, then this brand can easily advocate that cooperatives are best suited for youth, and if the youth have a future, then it lies in cooperatives. Communication strategy for popularising cooperative model amongst the school children can be a very successful brand-building exercise. If the schools’ brand-value is recognized with cooperatives, then it will be a big achievement for the cooperative sector. The school children will then become the biggest ambassadors of the cooperatives in their long career. They will prefer not only to work for cooperatives, but also advocate for it at major forums. The leaders of tomorrow will be built upon cooperative school brand. The schools will produce the leaders who are well groomed in cooperative values. In short, the schools’ contribution in communicating cooperative advantages will be multi-faceted, in all directions and spheres. The cooperatives school brand will establish strong inter-linkages with the non-cooperative world, which will be useful in devising mutual synergies which will ultimately strengthen the cooperatives sector.

**Towards a Model-Building for Communicating Cooperative Model Amongst School Children**;

1] Research should be the top-priority in assessing the communication strategies for popularizing cooperative model of development amongst the youth, more particularly the school children. The research based field visits, surveys, and other forms of primary methodologies would show interesting results, and country-variations. ICA-AP should also formulate a Vision Paper 2020 for popularizing cooperative model amongst the school children.

2] Sensitisation programmes for cooperatives amongst the school children can be a best way to create cooperative awareness. Different types of schools in indifferent localities/areas catering to different target-groups must be covered in this approach. The duration, creative methods, engagement techniques, etc will be very important here as also the feed-back response of the participants. These programmes must be organized separately for faculty, principals and students. The parents should also be invited to these programmes so that the parents can understand the usefulness of cooperative concept for their children. The sensitization programmes should also be organized for the colleges, and university students, besides students from other educational/ professional institutions which are not associated with cooperatives.

3] Organising events like painting, debate, essay, quiz on cooperative themes for the school children can be a best way to instill cooperative knowledge amongst them. Cooperative exhibitions in the schools can be a good communications strategy to show-case the products, activities/programmes of cooperatives of different types.

4] Social entrepreneurship through cooperative model, as in Singapore, can be a good way to link social aspects of cooperatives with entrepreneurship. The school students would be interested to become social entrepreneurs through cooperatives, if they understand the benefits of association/organization of cooperatives. They will then be inspired and motivated to form cooperatives in their campuses.

5] Story-books on cooperatives for the school students, simple-to-understand practical guides to form cooperatives of different types, motivational literature on cooperative leaders, hand-books on career potentialities for cooperatives, etc can be a good communications strategy to sensitise the school children on cooperative issues.

6] All efforts should be made to ensure that Cooperatives as a distinct subject is given prominence in the school syllabus. For this, effective advocacy/lobbying with concerned departments/government ministries will be very important.

7] Social media strategy should be given due importance in communication strategy for popularising cooperative concept amongst the schools. Each country in the Region must establish must establish on-line networking with the schools who are interested in cooperatives, or who want to contribute to the cooperative concept. This on-line resource would act as a good knowledge-sharing platform on various issues of cooperatives amongst the school children. Creating facebook page, blogs, websites on this aspect would be a smart way to attract school students towards cooperatives.

8] Creating enabling legislation so as to promote setting up of cooperatives in schools without bureaucratic hassles should be given due importance. The successful working of cooperatives in the schools based on sound enterprise would help in building up the image of the cooperative sector.

 **Conclusion**

The implementation of ICA-Blue-Print for Cooperative Decade in true spirit can materialize only if the cooperative brand with a distinct identity is propagated amongst the youth, more particularly the school children, who can be the biggest advocates of cooperative ideology, at a time when the cooperatives need to make their presence felt in the highly competitive economic era. If effective communication strategies are devised for this, then the cooperative sector will definitely surge ahead.

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