

ABORIGINAL CO-OPERATIVES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Traditionally the Aborigines of Australia have led a communal life. It is estimated that there are around 258,000 Aborigines in Australia with 68,000 of these residing in New South Wales. The sponsors of co-operatives in New South Wales believed that co-operatives as enterprises would suit the Aboriginal way of life. The first formalized co-operative was registered under the 1923 Co-operation Act in June 1957.

Currently there are 27 Aboriginal co-operative societies on the register. Of these, two completely defunct.

There are now 23 co-operatives engaged in community services with the aim of improving the conditions of urban and rural living. More particularly, these co-operatives are engaged in the provision of housing, medical services, education, services for artists, welfare and charitable services including refuge centres and child minding services.

One society was formed for sugar cane farming and housing, but it is now engaged mainly in welfare and employment.

There is also a Fishermen's co-operative, formed to wholesale fish on behalf of fishermen on a commission basis and also to provide employment and training to the Aboriginal people.

Brief History

The Aborigines on New South Wales were first introduced to formal co-operatives by Father John Hope, an Anglican priest. His work led to the formation of the Australian Board of Missions Christian Community Limited. This society was later to be known as Tranby College, and was concerned with educating and training Aboriginal people to farm, manage and operate co-operatives in the years to follow.

Co-operatives for Aborigines had their early beginning in a committee formed in 1953 and made up of churchmen, co-operators and trade unionists. The Australian Board of Missions took an active interest in the teaching and training of Aborigines in their techniques of self help and community leadership. The work began on Cabbage Tree Island and shifted to other places. The techniques used were discussions at meetings and various visual aids. Early help was given by the University of New South Wales. With the nucleus of this Committee, the Co-operative for Aborigines was formed and registered in 1957 with the objective of providing adult education using an operative techniques and methods in the same was Father John Hope donated a residential building called "Tranby" to house the school.

Rev. Clint Alf became the first Head of Tranby College, and his uniting efforts and dedication to the cause of making the Aboriginal Community self-reliant contributed in no small measure to the growth of the college.

At the beginning in Tranby, training took the form of annual summer schools. The such co-operative summer school was held in 1958. At the opening of the sessions in 1960, the New South Wales State Minister responsible for co-operatives said "What is being attempted at Tranby must be regarded as being of utmost importance to our Aboriginal friends. It is estimated that more than 5,000 trainees have gone through Tranby so far. Past students include those from Papua New Guinea, New Hebrid Solomon Islands, Fiji Islands and North West Africa. Officers of the Registry of Co-operatives of New South Wales were also involved in the conduct of these sessions' at the early stages.

The second co-operative to be formed was the Numbahging Co-operative Society Ltd., which was designed to serve the needs of the Aborigines on Cabbage Tree Island. This co-operative is now known as the Bunjum Co-operative Society Ltd.

Formations

Sponsors of early co-operatives conceived of broad objectives such as 'the advancement of the Aboriginal Community' or 'the promotion of self-determination within the Aboriginal community'. Political aspirations have, in some cases, fused with co-operative objectives in the formation of co-operatives.

Government initiatives for the promotion of co-operatives, on a more positive basis, actually began in 1969, when the New South Wales State Department of Child and Social Welfare in Sydney wrote to the Registrar of Co-operatives informing him of the Minister's keenness to investigate the possibilities of establishing cooperatives for the Aboriginal people.

In February 1975, the Federal Government having recognized housing, employment, education and training as the most urgent needs of the Aborigines, sought to provide grants to housing societies established by Aborigines and Torres Straits Islanders to enable them to undertake programmes of building or purchasing houses to meet the needs of a group or community. Formations have also been sponsored by legal firms which believed that a

co-operative type structure would be more suited to Aboriginal enterprises.

Government Initiatives

In October, 1977 the premier of New South Wales sought to appoint an Aboriginal Community Officer to the Registry of Co-operatives to provide assistance in the development and management of Aboriginal co-operatives and to advise the Minister responsible for co-operatives. In his letter to Mr. S.D. Einfield, the Minister for Co-operatives, the premier wrote "From information available to me I understand that Aboriginal co-operative societies are sadly lacking administrative and technical expertise from within their own ranks and that these societies would undoubtedly benefit from more intensive assistance on such aspects of their operations". Consequently, Mrs. Joyce Clague, an Aboriginal person, was appointed to the position.

What Mrs. Clague in her report of 13 July 1981 succinctly summarizes Aboriginal co-operatives, even today;

"The goals of our co-operatives are focused in two main areas, building houses for our families and establishing enterprises which will give us jobs. Behind these goals are our objectives in improve the health, welfare and education of our people including education about how to manage our own co-operatives".

Registry of Co-operatives

In New South Wales the Registry of Co-operatives of the Government agency responsible for co-operatives. In the 1960s the attitude of the Registry was that any move to form co-operatives must have come as a spontaneous approach from the people who needed and desired the services that co-operatives could provide. Once they had their bona-fides by way of practical expressions of support, prospects of success and proper administrative arrangements, assistance was given to the sponsors in forming a society and getting it under way. The same circumstances applied to Aboriginal co-operatives. In recent times, however the role of the Registry has changed. There is a strong 'pro-active' development thrust which is as strong as its regulatory arm. Since 1989, advisory visits to selected Aboriginal co-operatives have taken place and links with other Government agencies for Aboriginal development and welfare have been established. There are three Aboriginal co-operatives under administration, closely supervised and monitored by the Registry.

Other Government Agencies.

There are two Government agencies, besides other mainstream agencies, involved in Aboriginal affairs and welfare. These are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission (ATSIC) at the Federal Government level and the Office of Aboriginal Affairs at the New South Wales State level.

The ATSIC also administers councils and associations established under the Councils and Associations Act, 1976. Councils and Associations have certain similarities to co-operative societies. Substantial funding is channelled through councils and associations for Aboriginal welfare schemes including health, housing, training etc. Co-

operatives are also recipients of such funding to be used in welfare schemes for Aboriginal persons. Associations and Councils are a credible alternative to co-operatives in recent times.

The Office of Aboriginal Affairs administers the Land Rights Act enacted in 1983. This Act facilitated the constitution of land councils, funded from a portion of the tax received by the New South Wales Government.

There are, in New South Wales, 115 local Land Councils and 13 Regional Land Councils, the umbrella organization of which is the New South Wales Land Council. Land Councils are controlled by Aboriginal people and can control and purchase land, manage enterprises, and provide employment, housing, education and training.

In recent times there has been close collaboration between land Councils and Aboriginal Co-operative societies in their operations and management, especially in the rural and urban areas.

Performance

Aboriginal co-operatives have not performed as well as has been expected. They are generally characterized by

1. Lack of management, financial and commercial skills;
2. Inadequate education and training to run co-operative enterprises;
3. Lack of good leadership within membership;
4. Diminishing participation by membership at general meetings also due power being concentrated in the capable few;
5. Cultural conflicts: the belief that financial accountability, accounting systems, decision-making by a Board instead of the entire community dominated by the elders, were alien to Aboriginal culture;
6. Inadequate or virtually no investment in equity capital by members;
7. Extensive trading losses;
8. Tribal factionalism surfacing in the case of co-operatives which have within their membership persons from more than one tribe.

Education and Training

Education and training are crucial area in the development of Aboriginal communities. It is widely believed that for Aboriginal education to be successful it should come from Aboriginal institutions and Aboriginal education. Tranby College, run by the Co-operative for Aboriginals Limited, provides a credible ideology which makes education of Aborigines possible but the emphasis has, over the time, shifted from conventional co-operative education to general education relevant to the needs of the wider Aboriginal community. Indeed, this includes the improving of skills in the management and running of enterprises. Besides Tranby College centred in Sydney, there are also other institutions at regional level, providing management and consultancy services to the Aboriginal co-ops and similar bodies.

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