

Establishing a sustainable eco-society and alleviating poverty.

I congratulate the organising committee of the eighth Eco Forum Global Conference for selecting a theme of 'Embracing a new era of Eco-civilisation.'

My experience in China is in rural community and economic development, including activity over three years from 2008 to 2010, in four areas of Guizhou Province. I will focus on the area of sustainable development and poverty reduction in agriculture and food production.

It is well known the effects that climate change is bringing to everywhere in the world, and it is everybody's responsibility to adopt new practices, at every level. Globally we understand the consequences, and locally we have no alternative but to meet the challenges.

Concepts of establishing an eco- society and poverty reduction can work together to re-establish harmony between man and nature.

Environmentally sound practices on the farm are more and more being demanded by the consumer, to give confidence that the food they are eating is safe. It is in this area that the foundation for 'green development with high priority of ecology' needs to be addressed.

Government policy addresses preservation of the environment, through policy such as protecting and increasing forest cover, and restricting the cultivation of steep slopes. Both policies diminish erosion.

Agriculture and food production is largely delivered by small holder farmers. As pressure increases to produce more to improve family income, a number of unsound practices have slowly emerged. It is more efficient to use new technologies, but many of these are now seen to have a negative effect on the environment, and on food safety.

However, it is not easy to encourage farming households to consider their small scale impact on an eco-society. They need to develop understanding, and they need assistance to adopt sound farming practices that can combine with opportunity for an increased income. With sound production systems, farmers can contribute to ecological sustainability, but it is also essential that in these approaches, poverty alleviation and household livelihoods needs to be considered.

How can we meet the needs of the small holder farmer? Much of Guizhou province is hilly land, and karst topography. Farming is generally in small scale, so how can smallholder households work together to achieve green production and improve their livelihoods?

A small holder farmer has very little opportunity alone. Climate change is outside his control, it is happening. Demand for safe food needs consumer confidence of the food they are purchasing.

One proven solution to achieving these goals is the cooperative (合作社) .

I would now like to briefly answer the question "What is a cooperative?" and then consider ways that the cooperative can contribute to establishment of an eco society while alleviating poverty.

Some definitions of a cooperative:

"A co-operative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise."

Alternatively, "A cooperative is a business, in which the shareholders are the members".

The values of a cooperative

Cooperatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. Cooperative members are encouraged to exhibit the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.

Considering these values of a cooperative illustrates the contribution the cooperative can make to society

Principles of cooperatives

1. Voluntary and open membership

Co-operatives are voluntary organisations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.

2. Democratic member control

Co-operatives are democratic organisations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership.

3. Members economic participation

Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-operative, and agree to how surpluses are distributed.

4. Autonomy and Independence

If they enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy.

5. Education, Training and Information

Cooperatives provide training to members, to establish transparency between members and leaders, through technology upskilling.

6. Co-operation among Co-operatives

Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.

7. Concern for Community

Cooperatives welcome weaker households in the community to participate and benefit from membership, leading to an increase in community harmony. An unexpected outcome from project evaluations has been from women who have stated that men's behavior has improved, with no gambling and less incidence of drunkenness required by coop members.

If these principles are understood and practiced, then it is very feasible that establishment of cooperatives allows smallholders to work together to achieve goals of environmentally and economic sustainability. Some key outcomes follow:

- Within a cooperative structure, environmentally sound production can be enhanced through coordinating agricultural technologies, especially in pest and disease control through collectively adopting green approaches.
- Strong consumer demand for safe food can be achieved through green accreditation, and establishing a green product brand that gives credibility and confidence to the consumer.
- By collective marketing through the cooperative, market access is broader because of the increase in scale of production.
- By working together, there is an increase in community harmony, and a reduction in individual farmers seeking competitive advantage in a small market.
- Farmer household income increases, and costs are reduced.

In summary, cooperatives facilitate green production, meet consumer demands of food safety, and improve rural community harmony and household income.

In this way, cooperatives are a sustainable tool that can make a strong contribution to embrace a new era of eco-civilisation.