



Eye-opening Experience

Once credit unionism gets in the blood, it creates a commitment to service that lasts a lifetime. That's something Barry Lennon discovered long before he was appointed WOCCU's senior vice president of technical services in February 2007.

It's not that Barry, who heads WOCCU's Washington, D.C. office, hadn't already made a significant commitment to public service. He started in 1969 as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala, then in 1972 went on to Mali, West Africa. He served more than five years there as a credit and management advisor to small rural cooperatives, financing farmers and small businesses.

"Those were eye-opening experiences, and they're where I first became enamored with the idea of member-owned financial cooperatives," Barry explained. "Some of the cooperatives we helped eventually failed, but many more turned into amazing success stories."

Those experiences fueled Barry's continued interest in international development, and in 1975 he moved to Volunteer Development Corps where he served as a regional director of marketing for five U.S. cooperative development organizations, including WOCCU, in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean.

In 1981, Lennon arrived in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, as a finance and cooperatives advisor with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). In 1986, he moved to Guatemala and continued working as a financial and cooperatives advisor with USAID, and in 1994, he returned to Washington as the senior financial advisor in USAID's Microenterprise Development Office, where he stayed until he joined WOCCU in February 2007.

During his 26 years with USAID, Barry's assignments took him to more than 80 countries where he helped design and develop micro and rural finance initiatives. He was involved in financing and evaluating more than a dozen different WOCCU programs, all good opportunities to learn first-hand about the true potential of the credit union approach in developing countries.


"High quality of service and a fair price is foremost in my mind," Barry said. "There is no reason poor and low-income



"High quality of service and a fair price is foremost in my mind," says WOCCU's Barry Lennon, shown here with the staff of Mlandizi Savings and Credit Co-operative in Tanzania.

households shouldn't have access to the same financial services as the middle class. The most frustrating thing about credit unions and other cooperatives is their democratic process. It takes so much longer to get things done, but it's that same democracy that makes credit unions so attractive."

Barry believes WOCCU's road ahead is paved with great potential. Applying technology solutions to the African credit unions shows some of the greatest promise, he added, and it's an initiative in which he is especially proud to be involved.

"If you believe poor people deserve access to affordable financial services, credit unions are the way to go," Barry said. "There's really nothing that compares to a well run credit union." 

JAMIE RAILE