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“Health Promotion and the WHO 3 by 5 Initiative Is there a role for NGOs?”

Statement by the International Co-operative Alliance Maria Elena Chavez Hertig, Deputy Director-General

Kofi Annan in his message for International Women’s Day which focused on HIV/AIDS said,

“Everywhere that the epidemic is taking a severe toll, there are heroic women’s groups and cooperatives doing remarkable work on prevention and care.”

This is a clear statement that NGOs, like the International Co-operative Alliance which I represent, are already making serious contributions to the fight against HIV/AIDS and have a role to play in the 3 by 5 initiative.

ICA unites, represents and serves co-operatives worldwide. With 230 national and international organizations in all sectors of activity from 100 countries, it alone represents 760 million individuals worldwide. Established in 1895, it was one of the first NGOs to be accorded consultative status with the United Nations in 1946.

Today, ICA is a vibrant organization that is working on issues that touch the co-operative movement, but as co-operatives are people’s enterprises with strong social commitments, they also address the larger issue of poverty, gender equality, environment, and health. In fact, one of the Co-operative Principles is care for community and thus co-operatives have a responsibility to address societal concerns including issues such as HIV/AIDS.

Through the efforts of its sectoral organization, the International Health Co-operative Organization, and the ICA Gender Equality Committee, HIV/AIDS is now also on the ICA’s agenda. In April 2004, the ICA Board adopted the ICA Strategy for Co-operatives Fighting HIV/AIDS. It aims to accelerate a response to the HIV/AIDS epidemics through strengthening prevention and impact mitigation. ICA is encouraging its membership to address HIV/AIDS as a health issue, but also as an economic and social issue.

From our perspective, we know that HIV/AIDS is negatively impacting the capacity of co-operatives to be economically and socially effective organisations, and thus to their ability to contribute to national development. Co-operatives as enterprises are being challenged as they cope with the financial and psychological consequences of the death and illness of their members, leaders, and employees. They must sustain absenteeism of their employees as they fall ill, care for the sick or attend funerals; accept low levels of participation in the governance of co-operatives as members and leaders deal with HIV/AIDS; and cope with the loss of skills and expertise. The consequences are lower productivity, loss of income with increased costs for healthcare, and thus reduced savings and investments both for the co-operative itself, and for individual members and employees as well as people in the communities in which co-operatives operate.

When co-operative struggle for survival, the impact on national and local economies is felt. Many people are not aware of the size and contribution that co-operatives make. In Kenya 20% of the population is a member of a co-operative, while in Argentina it is over 29%, 33% in Norway, 40% in

Canada and the United States. Co-operatives also provide over 100 million jobs around the world and in some countries and areas are among the largest employers as in Colombia where a national health co-operative is the 2nd largest employer at national level. They are also leaders in their sectors, for example, in Benin, a savings and credit co-operative federation has provided USD 16 million in rural loans in 2002 and in Kuwait co-operatives handle 80% of the retail trade business. And even in countries where resources are scarce, co-operatives have been building communities as demonstrated by the sustained investment made by co-operatives in Côte d'Ivoire which invested USD 26 million in 2002 for setting up schools, building rural roads and establishing maternal clinics.

HIV/AIDS will change these impressive contributions in a not so distant future if it remains unchecked.

The Co-operative Movement has the potential to reach a large section of society around the world and help stop the spread of HIV/AIDS as well as provide care and support to those already infected. The ICA through its member network has the capacity to reach over 760 million individuals. With significant membership in nearly 100 countries, ICA can undertake a more systematic programme to raise awareness encouraging co-operatives around the world to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic within their own organisations and the communities which they serve as well as provide access to affordable care and treatment.

Health co-operatives, represented in IHCO, are already pushing hard to have access to treatment for HIV/AIDS. Saludcoop of Colombia a major healthcare provider in that country is engaged to ensure that is able to provide access to antiretroviral treatment – access at affordable prices and in a manner that encourages HIV/AIDS patients to seek it out. In Africa, local health co-operatives could also be active, but only if treatment can be made affordable.

The ICA Strategy is broad in scope and flexible to enable co-operatives around the world to take action that is appropriate in their national, regional and local contexts. It looks at prevention, changing attitudes, education, as well as treatment and care. However, the Strategy also emphasizes that there are excellent models and resources that they can learn from; there are organisations with established programmes to which co-operatives can link. Partnership will be key to making an effective contribution to the fight against HIV/AIDS. ICA has made a political commitment to stop HIV/AIDS.

One recent example of a successful partnership between ICA and UNAIDS was the holding of a sensitization workshop for co-operative leaders and government officials in India. Not only did it create awareness, but partnerships have emerged where co-operatives will be working with the national programmes as well as with a series of local NGOs.

Again, as Kofi Annan said, “Everywhere that the epidemic is taking a severe toll, there are heroic women's groups and cooperatives doing remarkable work on prevention and care.” ICA is committed to seeking partners to expand the important work already being done, and initiate new programmes to tackle the HIV/AIDS pandemic. By bringing our large network working in local communities and the resources of the movement together with partner organisations and governments, we can make a difference in prevention and reaching the 3 by 5 initiative goal!