

ICA General Assembly

3 September 2003, Oslo (Norway)

Opening Ceremony – Address by the ICA President, Ivano Barberini

Mr. Kjell Magne Bondevik, Prime Minister of Norway, government officials, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

Firstly, dear Prime Minister, I would like to warmly thank you for joining us in this General Assembly. Your presence is a pleasure and an honour for us.

I also wish to thank the Norwegian Co-operators for setting up the framework and hosting the Assembly in this historical and beautiful city. I also thank our guests and guest speakers, the representatives of the associate co-operative organisations, and the staff of ICA for all their work in preparing this event.

Many thanks to Nobel Prize winner for medicine, Rita Levi Montalcini for her message to this Assembly, in which she acknowledges the essential role of the Co-operative movement to improve the quality of life of people, everywhere.

Here, in this beautiful country, co-operation has very old roots and it has grown hand in hand with democratic, economic and social development.

As the UN Secretary General underlines in his very important message, the Co-operative Movement- beginning its history 160 years ago, has become a reality widespread all over the world and in all economic sectors. Through difficult changes, oscillating between crises and growth, it has built a solid foundation, becoming a major player in the economy and society of the new century.

This can be seen in its growth in the last decade and in its development prospects for the near future.

Co-operation, by definition, is an undertaking together and on equal terms – a choice bringing together business and solidarity and therefore, useful and effective in our present situation, as was also the case at the beginning of the last century.

Often all this has been achieved contrary to the dominant economic culture and globalization processes, mainly characterized by a sort of “escape from responsibility”.

Differently to co-operative companies, the main players in the market globalization are free from the worries and responsibilities arising from being linked to a particular place or community. This, of course, gives them an undoubted competitive advantage.

Yet, at the same time, this lack of responsibility creates a widespread malaise which manifests itself in many forms, from protest to resignation. An economic development divorced from the ethic of responsibility cannot solve the problem of social exclusion, creating new inequalities in our societies.

To day, the word “poverty” reoccurs increasingly more often in economic and political debates, at all levels, nationally and internationally. In recent decades the world has experienced an economic

growth without precedence, but poverty and hunger still remain and have not been significantly reduced in any way.

Two economic historians, Rogers and Gibbins, wrote that “during the Medieval Ages, looking at the poorest of the poor, there did not exist the hopeless and grinding poverty and the chronic famine that now exists among large groups of the populations in today’s metropolises or in Africa”.

Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize Winner for Economics, wrote that there are dramatic deprivations in the world in which we live– mass poverty and hunger, basic unsatisfied needs, violations of basic rights and liberty, contempt for the active role of women, increasingly serious threats to the environment and economic and social sustainability in our way of living.

In one form or another, most of these deprivations can be found in both poor and rich countries.

Overcoming these problems is central to development. True economic development is much more than an increase in the GDP.

Development, Sen concludes, as freedom. The freedom to politically and socially participate, to exchange goods and words are the building blocks for development.

Therefore, many aspects of social and economic life are inter-related – freedom, security, peace, development, , reduction of poverty, education , democracy.

Peace has taken on a dramatic new importance. There are about 30 wars going on at the moment, all passed over by the media and, consequently, by public opinion.

We of course know that peace is never a reality at one time for all.

It must be built up day by day with the knowledge that it is even more complex than war, as it involves a society having a political and social order accepted by the majority as being just.

Co-operatives contribute in achieving this objective in different ways. Firstly, by creating a network of small and medium-sized companies where the members are owners and stakeholders, at the same time.

In general, the governments and organisations of a civil society appreciate the role co-operatives play and their peculiar contribution in economic development programs. This is important but not enough.

This recognition must be translated into clear and dynamic policies in order to ensure a favourable environment for the development of co-operative enterprises.

On the other hand, international institutions have recently assumed measures – UN Guidelines and ILO Recommendation n.193 - strongly supporting co-operative development. WE have to use them at the best.

However, despite this, we cannot say we have achieved a fully satisfying appreciation of the co-operative movement. There is still a lot to do.

In some countries, the attitude of governments is encouraging, but in others there is a move to reduce the role or independence of co-operatives.

Wherever this is happening, the International Co-operative Alliance is committed to giving a strong and definite support – defending the independence of co-operatives is, firstly, a battle for freedom and as such, a priority.

Co-operatives enterprises don't ask to enjoy a privilege.

The laws and the tools must simply respect the principle of equality –*the same conditions for the same subjects; different conditions for different subjects.*

In other words, co-operative legislation has to provide the necessary tools to co-operatives to compete in the global market, keeping steady their mutual identity and basic values.

It is also in the interests of the public institutions to allow the co-operative model to release all its best energies. Its vast and effective application can represent an important way to meet the challenge of an economic development linked to social progress.

A challenge that involves without distinction both the developed and developing countries.

The issues of productivity and economic competitiveness, organisational reforms, financial balances, work for the young and women and the aging population are among the most important on the agenda of the economically advanced countries.

In some countries in Latin America and Asia important social experiments are underway aimed at overcoming age-old crisis situations and defeating poverty.

These countries must be able to count on the support of the international institutions to put them on the path to a recovery linked to development. The success of these attempts are important for the economic and social future of the whole world.

In such a scenario big challenges and opportunities open up for the role and growth of the co-operative movement.

Its particular form of solidarity based on mutuality and self-determination is a positive way to contribute that the reduction in welfare occurring in all developed countries, does not drastically reduce levels of social protection but *should be* a means to create new jobs, a new opportunity for development and efficiency in fighting against social inequalities and poverty.

Based on knowing how to work together, a concept shared by many, is how co-operation best expresses its experiences, its energy and the culture of which it is the spokesperson.

The experiences of equal and fair trade, knowledge sharing, and technical assistance are “best practices” we need to deepen and expand.

They are useful contributions to co-operative companies starting-up, to their growth and their management.

Therefore, the co-operative system can contribute to a better balance between the north and south of our world.

It is important that the international co-operative movement has a special look at the African situation, strongly appealing to every possible initiative of solidarity and support from the international institutions.

In a present, difficult situation where the world appears more linked by risks rather than opportunities, Africa represents the extremes in conditions.

It is a continent devastated by civil wars, oppressed by a general indifference, by the recruitment of child soldiers, by the scourge of AIDS, by social degradation and by famine and thirst. In many countries, 50% of population has no access to clean water.

The African countries are the poorest in the world. Ethiopia and Burundi, for instance, have a GDP pro capita of \$107 per year: less than 30 cents per day!

It is a terrible picture in a tragic reality.

However, it is also a testimony to the problems that involve the whole world.

The conflict for the control of water even in a country like Uganda, where the Nile originates, shows us how important water is as the most strategic of the natural resources. It will be the reason for the wars of the future if the international community does not intervene in time, promoting co-operation between those peoples involved.

Yet, in this often passed over continent something is changing. In different countries important moves towards democratic development are underway. It is essential that they are encouraged and supported by international organisations and by public opinion.

Fighting poverty, to reduce and eventually eliminate it, firstly involves people becoming aware of their conditions and feeling that the future depends on them, themselves, and their governments.

However, in the case of Africa a support from abroad is essential. You cannot escape from a model of economic organisation based on subsistence without going through a complex process of learning. This must be facilitated by those who have the means, the knowledge and experience and also contributing the appropriate resources.

It must be based on medium to long term projects. This is the time necessary to set up internal systems making them able to manage small and medium sized enterprises, operate in the market, promote and carry out new innovations.

Co-operation has an important role in these processes. This same growth depends, to a major extent, on an actual demonstration that, thanks to the co-operatives, they can improve the quality of life and liberty for many people.

When we face these problems, looking at getting underway ongoing processes, two subjects inevitably come to the fore in playing a major role in every part of the world – women and young people.

In general, if we want to build a co-operative movement able to address 21st century society, we must make room for the new generation of co-operators, women and men, encouraging training and a sense of belonging, especially involving them in decision-making processes.

It is vital that we develop even more the rapport among generations of co-operators, based on a reciprocity of listening and respect.

However, knowledge and experiences acquired are essential but not enough. They must be united with an innovative spirit and the culture of the younger generations. This fusion could release a renewed energy and a better ability to act in a world where the global and local dimensions interact more and more. These are the premises for a new cycle of life for the co-operative movement.

Young people must follow this road together. For this reason, on many occasions there has arisen the need to enlarge and strengthen the network of young people, globally. It appears to be a viable and effective road for them to be more actively involved in ICA, with more visibility and possibility to participate in training of their strategic choices.

For this reason, the Board feels it important that a representative of the network, chosen by the young people themselves, will be permanently invited to all Board meetings.

Dear statespersons, ladies and gentlemen, co-operators and friends,

The prospects for economic development are founded on different aspects - cultural, social and political.

International policy has taken on a clear and shared commitment to reducing poverty in the world. However, present forecasts do not lead to optimism.

The objectives of sustainable, equal and democratic development and those stated in the UNO's "Millenium Development Goals" can only be achieved if they become an integrative part of the policies for economic growth and economic and commercial integration, and not an appendix entrusted to the social softeners.

The co-operative movement has many expectations placed on it, *more than it can do*.

Co-operation cannot solve the problems which have taken on an endemic feature. But it must be part of the solution as it has the values and useful experiences. They should be fully valued and exploited.

We have to link together vision and concreteness.

We must aim at a "fertile ground of utopias" and make it a reason for an ideal impetus, for arousing the interest and energy of many who, in this world, believe in the possibility of creating a better one.

This General Assembly should open up a way for a type of "global alliance against poverty" – a widespread campaign able to bring concretely together the co-operative organisations from the north and south of the world developing bilateral relations within a common project.

We are appealing to the governments of developed countries to support our campaign and I am sure that the Norwegian government, Mr. Prime Minister, which has a strong tradition in supporting social and economic development in the south, will be prominent amongst them.

The theme of this assembly which is economic, social and democratic development through co-operation is well placed to promote this work.

It is a difficult and complex path from which we cannot expect remarkable results in the short term. But what counts is to agree on determining a type of “chain reaction”, never-ending but changing.

Learning to see the world as it is and trying together to understand where it is going, is, however, a way not only to better define the roads to follow, but also to build an awareness of what we are, the potential and the viable synergies.

A movement united by grand values which respect cultural differences, promote active participation and the willingness to involve new members and participate in change. For this reason co-operation appears as the company model best suited to meeting the economic and social challenges of the 21st century, both regionally and globally.

In all this we have the “co-operative advantage” – an asset created by generations of co-operators, and to be passed on and improved upon, to future generations.

Of course, all of this is not happening spontaneously .

The door of the future is narrow. Entering it means that co-operatives must be able to face the challenges of global market, improving their image in each country and worldwide, fulfilling the dreams and meeting the needs of women and men looking at co-operative movement, full of hope and trust.

Fellows co-operators, I believe these are also the reasons we are committed to have a stronger ICA.

Thank to this commitment, this General Assembly signals an important step for the reorganisation and growth of the International Co-operative Alliance.

I am very proud to represent you as president of the ICA, which embodies these ideals and I have great pleasure in declaring our general assembly open.

Thank You.