

Opening address
by Ivano Barberini
President, International Co-operative Alliance (ICA)

Honourable Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Friends,

I would like, first of all, to express a warm welcome to ICA members participating in this ICA Extraordinary General Assembly,

I am very grateful to Giorgio Napolitano, President of the Italian Republic, for his attention to our work and for his warm message. It is an honour for co-operators and for the ICA.

A warm thank you to Rita Levi-Montalcini, Winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine, and still actively involved in scientific research and social activity. Her presence here is a sign of her respect for the social role played by the co-operative movement.

Mr Mayor of Rome and Mr....., a Minister of the Italian Government, we are grateful and honoured by your presence and we are looking forward to listening to your contributions.

Finally, on behalf of the Board, I'd like to express my sincere thanks to the Italian Co-operative Organizations for their hospitality and their commitment to making this Extraordinary General Assembly a success.

The relationship between the Italian Co-operative Movement and the International Co-operative Alliance dates back to the beginnings of ICA.

In 1894 the Italian Co-operative League proposed the celebration of an international co-operative day, and this was later adopted by ICA in 1923.
As well, the seventh congress of the ICA was held here in Italy in 1907.

In 1925, when the Italian Apex Co-operative Organizations were forced to dissolve under the Fascist regime, the International Co-operative Alliance strongly protested against the Italian Government for this action, which, moreover, marked the end of democracy and the beginning of the systematic destruction of the co-operative system in Italy.

Twenty years later, after World War II, the Italian Constitution recognized the social role of co-operation, thus, creating a positive environment for its development in all economic sectors. This acknowledgement represents one of the best examples in the world of an institutional commitment to co-operative development.

However, today, the general global situation is presenting a strong challenge to the competitiveness and identity of co-operative enterprises.

Everyday, neo-liberal globalisation is causing widespread insecurity and fear, changing the very basis of society, leading to the collapse of solidarity and undermining human relationships.

All this has increased the desire of people to live in a community, in order to defend themselves against the "others", or on the contrary, to better manage a growing multi-cultural society.

However, community does not simply mean territory. It should also be considered as a borderless system of relations, and common values and goals shared by individuals and organizations.

In this sense, the International Co-operative Alliance represents a large, open community focused on co-operative development and on a different kind of globalization. Worldwide, co-operatives are carrying out projects and activities aiming at fighting poverty and reducing ecological risks and social exclusion. These measures are essential for international peace and ensuring the future of humankind.

“Re-thinking” the role of the International Co-operative Alliance, by re-defining its mission, strategy and structure is aimed at improving the effectiveness of its role, actions and social visibility. This will keep it continuously in tune with the needs of co-operative enterprises at national, regional and global level.

As we all know, the survival and development of the co-operative enterprise depends on its ability to develop new strategies and to achieve a high level of loyalty among its stakeholders. Loyalty, based on ethics and integrity, leads to a strong co-operative identity that represents a sound competitive advantage.

We see that competition appears to be increasingly based on values and not only on prices. A balance between competition and co-operation is vital for a market to be able to create economic development alongside the change in social structures.

Thus, co-operative leaders have the difficult task of building new paradigms and introducing, at the right time, innovation, in order to guide the enterprises through the turbulence and dangers of our globalized economy.

It is a difficult role, which requires generosity in building effective teams and sound alliances, as well as courage in facing radical changes.

The search for entrepreneurial excellence must go hand in hand with effective and efficient mutualistic initiative.

The dual challenge, economic and cultural, also concerns our relations with the younger generation and their involvement in the co-operative movement. In general, young people are experiencing a sense of estrangement from the world they live in, particularly in developed countries. They are focused on the present, with neither memory of the past nor a sense of their future. The future, for them, is a threat rather than a promise.

Another important problem they face is the lack of economic autonomy. Fear of the future causes young people to lengthen their period of studies. Our experience has taught us that a true education is based on learning together with doing. In extreme situations, youngsters are even relegated to a worthlessness, without any opportunity to experience autonomy.

Here, the co-operative enterprise can help them to increase their self-confidence. We find in many countries positive examples, showing how co-ops can encourage young people to take the future into their own hands. This is based on experiences in innovation, able to contribute to a change in cultures and socio-economic situations. An example of this can be found in Southern Italy where social co-operatives created by young co-operators have set about managing property confiscated from the mafia. They produce high quality organic food bought, mainly, by the Italian Consumer Co-ops.

Before setting up the co-operatives, these young people were unemployed with no financial means. The co-operative movement stepped in to help them to start up and manage their business.

In doing this, these young co-operators have shown a spirit of sacrifice, skill, commitment and courage. Moreover, they have challenged the mafia placing their own lives at risk.

The sharing of fear has infused them with the courage and determination to go on. Symbolically, these experiences prove that fresh and healthy energy can be activated even in the most difficult situations.

Basically, the co-operative enterprise form is flexible and effective.

This is the reason why co-operatives can play a useful role in both developing and developed countries. We receive both great praise and hard criticism. One of the best ways to overcome these

criticisms is to strengthen co-operation among co-operators, improving our social visibility and the economic and cultural proposals of our movement.

A stronger Co-operative Alliance provides help in developing more incisive actions, giving a louder voice to the co-operative movement at an international level and in facing the economic and cultural challenges of today and the future.

Consequently, the restructuring of ICA has been strongly influenced by the afore-mentioned. The renewal of ICA will improve its functioning at all levels – global, regional and sectoral -, through fairly balancing autonomy and integration, and based on shared, solid values and a few, but effective, rules.

In the last few years, there has been great effort in this direction, with ICA benefiting from the enthusiastic and skilled work of a large group of co-operative leaders from within the Board, from thematic committees, networks and working groups.

Both global and regional bodies and offices have worked hard, with determination and a strong spirit of co-operation.

As well, the incorporation of Cooperatives Europe, as the European region of ICA, has rendered co-operative action considerably more effective, in the complex reality of the European Union.

The Restructuring Working Group, chaired by Mr Alban D'Amours, has assiduously worked for two years. The commitment of its members and Desjardins' staff has been essential for its success.

I would like to heartily thank all of them for the quality of their work.

I am deeply grateful to the ICA Board members for their open and committed discussions, which have made it possible to jointly submit, to this General Assembly the restructuring proposal of ICA. In effect this marks the completion of work begun by the setting up of the Task Force in Seoul, 2001.

I strongly hope that this General Assembly will approve these proposals with the enthusiasm and the willingness to give an innovative impetus to the role and activities of the International Co-operative Alliance.

Thank you