

Feature interview

The youth representative on the ICA Board, Juan Carlos Mejia Cuartas speaks out

Inspired by a background of “sharing and collectivity”, Juan Carlos Mejia Cuartas has been living the co-operative identity since he was a small boy. In this month’s feature interview, the ICA youth delegate on the ICA Board, describes his work with young co-operators around the world.

Digest: *How did you become involved in the co-operative movement?*

JCM: I was born in Bogotá, Colombia but raised in Medellín, a provincial city. I come from a large family and grew up with aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins. Sharing and collectivity has always been a constant in my life from my very roots. My mother especially, is an inspiration for me. She has always been involved in communitarian work, not only through her work as a school teacher, but because of her relationships with her colleagues and all the movements she participated in, to which I was constantly taken.

I got involved with co-ops when I was just a kid and my co-op ran recreational programmes for the members' children. We lived the co-operative identity through these camping holidays, workshops, courses and other activities aimed at making us better citizen.

The activities continued when we were older. I was

part of a group that supported some promotional activities in the co-op and later, some of us got involved in a leadership training programme.

I've always had this passion to interact with people from different cultures, both in my own country and abroad. Before I was born, my mother had travelled around South America and I remember asking her to tell me about all the wonderful places she'd been. This interest led me to undertake a degree in International Business, which was more or less a new career area at that time, at the EAFIT University in Medellín.

Towards the end of my degree I got back to working with co-ops again. I was involved in a research project helping a group of peasant women develop a business. The project was very ambitious and well designed from the business and technological perspective, but it taught me that projects like this are not sustainable in the longer term, if the social fabric is too weak to support other kinds of initiatives. The business did not succeed, but the project gave me many important insights into co-operative work.

After graduating I was hired by my old co-op as a special projects co-ordinator working with youth. This was a new role. Together with other co-operative leaders and with the institutional support of some local and national co-ops, we combined efforts to form the Colombian Youth Network.

This has been a process where we've learned by doing - sometimes right, sometimes wrong, but always gaining from experience.

As time goes on, I believe we have become more assertive in the type of projects we run. We have stayed committed and kept working to strengthen the co-operative movement through youth involvement.

Digest: *What does your current work in the co-operative movement involve?*

JCM: At the moment I'm working at the Universidad de Antioquia in Medellín, Colombia. I decided that if I really wanted to contribute to the co-operative movement, it had to be done from a neutral space and somewhere I could have contact with young people, and I think there could not be a better environment for this than the university.

I am part of a programme that intends to form new academies for the generational transition. Something I've learned is that there can't be networks without base work. It's necessary to identify the relationships that constitute the network and if they don't exist, they have to be built in the first place.

So, with the objective of designing a model aimed at getting more young people involved in co-ops, I am working with other young



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Juan Carlos Mejia Cuartas interview...continued

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co-operative leaders and academics, on identifying the experiences of young people in Colombian co-operatives. We expect to have it ready by January 2008.

come together in order to build a common vision that helps the ICA move ahead. I'm also a communication channel between the people involved in the group identified as 'ICA Youth' and

There is a lot to be done, but the lack of resources - money, people and time, are huge limitations. Europe is a region yet to be developed as well as Africa.



We are also going to start research on pilot co-operatives, to identify key factors in the formation of co-operatives for young people. But it is a long process, which will take about five years to consolidate.

We strongly believe that systematised experiences contribute to the development of the co-operative form, not only for their sustainability but for the promotion of co-ops as an alternative structure for business development with social inclusion.

Digest: What does your position as ICA Youth Representative on the Board involve?

JCM: As a Board member I try to contribute to all the discussions, even the ones that are not directly related to youth. I think that although a person represents one specific group or interest, all those views have to

those ICA Board members and staff. This is done through Board meetings and regional and international events like Global Forum, where I was invited to speak about co-operatives as a way to empower youth.

Networking is another important facet of my role. I need to identify the experiences of co-operators all over the world, which means learning a little of what they do and what they need, and then connecting them with other similar or complementary experiences so they can interact and grow. It has been a very satisfying role.

So far, I have contributed to making connections between Nigeria and the USA, linking Indonesia with Japan and networking among Argentinean co-operative youth organisations. I'm also working on a project with Mexican youth.

Digest: What are the main challenges for the co-operative movement globally?

JCM: From my point of view I can identify three main challenges. The first one is **visibility**. Co-operatives need people to be aware not only that they exist, but the public needs to have an understanding of what they really are – what do they stand for, how are they structured and how do they benefit their members?

The second challenge is **coherence**. Co-operatives need to act according to the co-operative philosophy, to remain committed to these core values even if they approach them in very individual ways.

Thirdly, the co-operative movement needs **articulation**. Co-ops need to

At the recent ICA Regional Americas Youth Conference in Lima, Peru.

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- *Coherence*
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talk more among themselves and learn how to work together, instead of repeating efforts. I call this synergising in order to increase their impact.



Juan Carlos Mejia Cuartas with Jo Bibby-Scullion, the ICA's first youth representative in the ICA Board, at the 2005 ICA General Assembly in Colombia

"..Managers who have invested in youth have experienced an increase in their membership and the volume of their business.."

Digest: *In your opinion, what does the co-operative movement need to do to engage more young people?*

JCM: First of all, co-ops need to understand that working with young people goes far beyond the social obligations of co-ops. This is a strategic move in order to strengthen the existence not only of the co-operative enterprise but the co-operative identity. Managers who have invested in youth have experienced an increase in their membership and the volume of their business, not to mention the loyalty and commitment of members to the co-op.

Managers and boards need to set guidelines for youth work that is concrete and not just paying lip service to the notion. This work has to be well intentioned,

with clear objectives and policies on how it should be done.

One last thing is that managers and boards have to be in touch with youth. By this I mean that besides setting the path and designating staff and resources to help accomplishing the objective, they have to interact with young people so that they can learn from them and visa-versa.

Digest: *Why should it matter to the co-op movement that young people are involved?*

JCM: The Sustainability. Long-term vision. Future marketing!! You name it. Co-operatives may remain as enterprises, but I'm not so sure about the sustainability of the nature of the business. By definition, members of a co-operative are both owners and customers. Imagine a scenario where co-operative members come to vote to decide on the future of their co-op and they do not know the implications of the decisions they are making, just because they have never been involved in the co-op.

Also, if members do not understand and identify with what co-operatives offer that is different to other businesses they will shop, borrow money, work for, and build up any other kind of enterprise that satisfies their basic needs.

Digest: *Finally, can you give some examples of youth co-operative work you have seen or been involved in?*

JCM: I've seen some very interesting examples, both in my own country and abroad. From my own experience the university co-operatives in

Canada and Japan are amazing examples of inclusion, innovation, representation of interests and the profitability of co-operative business oriented to youth.

I also have to mention the Co-operative Youth Network in Argentina, composed of farmers' sons and daughters who gather to solve problems related to agriculture in their region. The network has managed to integrate with similar experiences in Uruguay and Paraguay.

In Colombia there are many interesting examples in different fields: Youth groups, youth networks, and school programmes that teach young people about the co-operative philosophy so that they develop values like discipline, foresight, self-commitment, democracy and leadership.

Dr. Ian Macpherson and his team, gathered many interesting examples of the youth experience of co-ops from all over the world. "Youth Reinventing the Co-operatives" was launched in English at the last GA in Cartagena. A Spanish version was launched at the last co-operative researchers meeting in Rosario, Argentina.

In India there is a co-operative of delivery boys, which is a very interesting entrepreneurial exercise. Also in the Philippines they hold writing contests related to co-operatives, which enhances the development of co-operative thinking. I'm sure there are many other examples that haven't been identified yet and are waiting to be discovered!