

## Interview

## Director of Development talks about new directions

In the first of a new series of occasional interviews, we talk with the ICA's Director of Development, Jan-Eirik Imbsen. Jan-Eirik is a long-time co-operator and development specialist. He is well known throughout the ICA and among its members and partner organisations as a passionate advocate for the role and importance of co-operatives as an effective development tool.



Jan-Eirik Imbsen on board a flight in West Africa.

**Q** Firstly, can you tell us a little about yourself and how you came to be interested in co-operatives and co-operative development?

**A** I was born in Trondheim, Norway. After finishing university, my wife and I went to Kenya for three years as volunteers, teaching at a secondary school in a remote rural area, where we had no water, electricity, medical or other facilities.

These three years gave us the opportunity to see first hand what life is like for people living in a poor, marginalised area. Our son was also born there during this period.

I was subsequently hired by the Royal Norwegian Society for Development (NRD/NORCOOP) to work in Norway with the co-operative development programme initiated by NRD and the Norwegian co-operative movement.

My wife and I then went back to Kenya. I was in charge of the Association

for the Physically Disabled of Kenya. Our twin daughters had just been born. So, all three of our children would spend the bulk of their childhood in Africa.

We spent the next five years in West Africa, where I was in charge of the Norwegian co-operative movement's support programme. I also worked with ICA's Regional Office for West Africa. This led to an invitation to work with ICA's development programme in Geneva.

**Q** How long has the ICA been involved in co-operative development?

**A** Our development programme has over forty years of experience. The ICA acts as a coordinator and catalyst of co-operative development, with the aim of promoting and strengthening autonomous and viable co-operatives throughout the world.

Each of the ICA regional offices identifies priorities and regional programmes through a process of consultation with member organisations and development partners.

**Q** What examples of co-operative development have impressed you?

**A** When I go to the regions, I try, whenever possible, to visit the field. I do this both to learn, but also to remind myself what

this is all about.

I have seen a lot of good, examples of co-operative development. It is impossible not to be moved when you attend a member education class and you see the pride in the face of a woman when she for the first time writes her name on a board in front of her peers.

In West Africa, co-operative members are increasingly affected by poverty. The ICA has initiated poverty reduction projects targeting women in Benin, Senegal, the Gambia, and Burkina Faso.



Africa: Through microfinance and insurance programmes this woman has become a leading entrepreneur in her local community in Burkina Faso. She can also insure the future of her child and family.

One area that I have visited on many occasions is Kongoussi, a very dry and poor rural area about 150 km north of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso. The programme has involved four village groups in which about 100 women have benefited from loans to undertake income generat-

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ing activities and to cover health insurance for women and children. This programme has also been replicated in Senegal.

Another visit was to Costa Rica. The two co-operatives visited were CoopeAgri and CoopeSilencio, both members of the Forestry Network established by the ICA with the support of SO-CODEVI (Canada). These co-operatives show once again the success of the co-operative model in helping to create a better



Asia: women artisans in Gujarat, India

life for people. They are also outstanding examples of fair trade practices and environmental sustainability.

**Q** You are currently reviewing the ICA's development strategy. What do you see as its likely future direction?

**A** The ICA's strategy should lead to an enabling environment for co-operative development.

It should have a member service delivery that will strengthen their development as businesses. It should also add value to the work that our partners are doing. This is not new, but the way in which we propose to achieve this objective requires a new

orientation.

Without pre-empting the result of this process, I can foresee more emphasis on the following areas:

- policy development
- advocacy
- lobbying
- representation
- networking
- coordination

The ICA is particularly useful as a network in which co-operatives, governments and development partners can pursue their objectives more effectively.

The ICA should facilitate partnerships; organise joint approaches to multilateral and bi-lateral donors; create access to government policy makers through regular regional collaboration. At the global level, the Joint Meetings of Agencies have led to concrete collaboration. This is something that the ICA is particularly equipped to do by virtue of its being the global co-operative apex organisation.

The ICA should also build up a knowledge base to get co-operatives on to the international development agenda; to produce, collect and disseminate statistics and information on best practices in co-operative development.

**Q** You are also leading ICA's involvement in its Global Co-operative Poverty Campaign and the linking of this to the Global Call to

Action Against Poverty (GCAP). Can you explain a little about this?

**A** Poverty reduction is a central theme of our work. The ICA supports the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

Through the joint ICA/ILO campaign, we want to highlight the role and contribution of co-operatives to poverty reduction. We will work at all levels to create a conducive environment for co-operative development by informing and sensitising policy makers in governments and international institutions. The Essential Research for a Co-operative Facility for Africa project (funded by the UK's DfID and implemented by the ILO with ICA involvement) is one example of a concrete project under this campaign.

One of the key benefits of joining the global GCAP campaign is that we can highlight the potential of co-operative enterprise to a broader audience.

The ICA is working with GCAP at global and regional levels. We are also encouraging our members to link with the many national coalitions already campaigning. The GCAP initiative gives the ICA and its members a wider platform on which to build support for co-operative enterprise solutions for poverty reduction.

## Interview cont'd



Photo shows Jan-Eirik Imbsen, second from right, with ICA Americas Regional Director, Manuel Marino along with other ICA staff and two co-op staff from CoopeAgri

“...ICA's new strategy should have as one of its main objectives the creation of an enabling environment for co-operative development....

It should also add value to the work that our partners and members are doing. ”

Jan-Eirik Imbsen