

ICA DG Report

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Visits to two of the world's largest co-operative movements monthly

I don't suppose you can visit two more countries than USA and China. But that is where I have been in the last month, indeed only one week separated the two visits. These days what you notice most I think, are the similarities as opposed to the differences. Indeed main difference now is, I suspect, the physical size of people - a question of diet perhaps! But in both countries there is a recognisable vibrancy in the streets where economic and social progress is clearly evident. And this is reflected in the co-operative movements as well with both the American and Chinese in good heart.

In the last Digest I emphasised the slogan co-operatives mean business and this is what describes what is happening in these two countries. We are working closer and closer with our American colleagues particularly in the areas of increasing membership and providing more relevant services to those members. One of the most impressive parts of the American movement is the sheer size of the cooperative share of the utilities market. That I hope is going to translate into a new energy/environment sector for ICA, perhaps the one area of activity which is currently lacking in our structure. For many people this is the main activity which we should be emphasising. The Americans are also very interested in working with us on the Global 300 project and the idea of bringing CEO's together on a regular basis as we did in Italy last month.

And that is where the Chinese come in. They are no less interested in our business oriented approach, indeed possibly more so. Nowhere is there a more dramatically growing economy and it is very important that we help our Chinese colleagues in building the co-operative movement especially at a time when many state enterprises are moving to the private sector. Given the Chinese government's commitment to market socialism, it seems to me a very fertile time to emphasise the special role that cooperation can play and shows how cooperative enterprise can provide all the commercial acumen which the private sector provides - without forgetting the social aspect which is not exactly the forte of that sector! Speaking at the International Agriculture Co-operation Economic Conference organised by our friends in the All China Federation of Marketing and Supply Co-operatives in Wuxi, I emphasised that very point. Along with an exhibition on modern agricultural methods, this conference fitted in very well with the UN/ ILO/ICA expert group meeting on co-operatives and employment in Shanghai. My contribution emphasised the importance of linking with the WTO and influencing its policies from a co-operative point of view. Other contributions were from China, New Zealand and India.

So I would suggest the next CEO forum should be in China! There will be no difficulty in persuading our American colleagues of the importance of the Chinese market, and I suspect that would apply to many other members. There is no doubt that the Chinese and US cooperative movements mean business!