

Gender, Co-operatives and HIV/AIDS

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The GEC, and I personally, place a lot of importance on this seminar. Why? Two reasons. Firstly, women are those who, in general, care for others and usually, in family health care, they are “the first line”. If we look at history and different cultures we can see that men have been traditionally the healers, the people with power, while women have always been the carers, a secondary role, but as we well know, very important. Of course, now many things have changed.

Today, many women are included in the ranks of doctors, some in very high and prestigious positions. However what has not changed is women’s fundamental role in health care. As women in the last years have improved and increased their role in the Health sector, so too, must the co-operatives also improve, in the coming years, their role in this area. By combining these two strengths women and co-operatives the process could be speeded up. This is the first reason why this seminar is so important. We think that in the health sector the spread of co-operation in new activities and branches is very important. Health care has an increasingly important role for the future of humanity. Co-operatives, with the support of women, must contribute in developing and spreading an awareness and knowledge everywhere and for all people about this. However the present problem for humanity is the access to a decent health care and this is creating more and more divisions between nations and individuals as the UN pointed out in its recent reports.

Let us now come to the second reason why this seminar is so important.

Technology has provided us with the tools to fight and eliminate many illnesses and diseases thus prolonging our life expectancy, especially in the wealthier countries. However, on the other hand, during the last years, we have had to face new health emergencies, which have created a sense of uncertainty and a new marginalisation. For some a dramatic perspective of life and death, has become a tragic reality especially in the poorer countries.

AIDS and SARS are now considered the two main health emergencies. In these last months SARS has become symbolic of what can happen in a globalised world, also regarding health. Spreading from one specific area to all over the world, threatening the economic and social fabric of important countries with drastic repercussions everywhere. Moreover, we now have reports of the re-emergence, of other once considered, eradicated diseases.

This can be considered an unexpected effect of globalisation that we must face. We now know that no country is exempt from the global processes of the spread of diseases, such as SARS sadly showed us. This means that we need stronger global organisations to monitor and keep a check on this problem. As ICA we need to demand a strengthening of the International Institutions and opening their doors to NGO's.

Stronger global governance is also a way to face, the modern plague, AIDS that has changed our mentality and affected the economy of many countries. AIDS has marked the split between years of open and sexual freedom, and now instead we have fear and marginalisation. For many countries, especially in Africa and Asia, it means a collapse of the economy and for the people a drastic reduction in their life expectancy.

The latest UN report on the future population forecasts that, due to AIDS, the demographic rate will decrease by 200 million by 2050.

At the moment, in some areas, for example in sub-Saharan Africa, the average life expectancy is now 47 years, whereas it should be 62 if not for AIDS.

Unfortunately there is a very important economic aspect associated with AIDS, causing conflicts between the rich and the hard-hit countries. Negotiations regarding the sale of pharmaceuticals to combat this disease are entwined with international trade and business interests.

As well, though, in the richer countries AIDS and the ageing population are now considered two issues that could dismantle the welfare state as we know it in Europe.

The UN report also highlighted that women are the most affected by this illness and we can imagine that this data is engrained in the imbalance between the roles of men and women in the family and society.

As we have heard from our keynote speaker, AIDS is not only a health problem, but a cultural and social one and this is why we believe that co-operatives can play an important role contributing to eradicating this modern day plague by also addressing the issue of poverty.

In fact, in the last ICA Board-meeting, in Geneva on June 16-17, poverty and the role of co-operatives was again discussed. . We must all recognise that the majority of the poor in all countries and continents is women. To make this our development activities effective we must focus on this problem as many International Institutions already do.

We wish to fully support the ICA development activities because we realise that in eradicating poverty we also eradicate many problems rooted in poverty. Health, gender, education and war. A fight against poverty is also a fight against ignorance and prejudice.

As you know, co-operatives have always had a very strong tradition in training not only in business but also in the social sphere.

We must promote this strength focusing on the fight against HIV/AIDS. Personally I know that this is not easy and we must proceed very carefully because of strong religious and deeply-rooted cultural beliefs. But at the same time we cannot ignore this reality if we want to strengthen the role of co-operatives in addressing members concerns as well as the concerns of the community in which they operate.

The proposal I wish to present to this joint seminar is to work out together through all of the ICA structures and members how to promote training and awareness-building at the grass roots level for prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS particularly aimed at women as the most effected group and are also in the first line of stopping the spread of disease.

This ICA initiative will need support from partner organisations and would be regionally and nationally implemented. We can also involve co-operatives that have supported research in HIV/AIDS and in doing so contribute to more effective results.

I know that what I am proposing could seem very far from our core business and some people have already told me this. But if co-operatives want to play an important role globally they will dare to pioneer new horizons.

I have the pleasure now of introducing our next two speakers who will present experiences on how co-operatives have taken up the challenge of addressing HIV/AIDS.