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'Co-operatives empower women'

Presentation by Dame Pauline Green, President, International Co-operative Alliance
at the celebration to mark 100 years of the Cypriot Co-operative Movement and
50 years of the independence of the Republic of Cyprus

12 November 2010, Nicosia (Cyprus)

Mr President, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen – co-operators and friends, I am pleased and honoured to have been asked to join you at this special event celebrating, firstly, the 100th anniversary of the co-operative movement in Cyprus, and secondly, the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Republic of Cyprus as an independent state.

I would like to say just a few words about both these anniversaries combining as they do for me, the two defining areas of personal and professional commitment and engagement over the last 25 years. Firstly, I speak here today in my capacity as President of the International Co-operative Alliance. In deference to the title of this seminar, the co-operative movement and the empowerment of women, let me say that the International Co-operative Alliance was formed in 1895. In its 115 years existence, I have the distinction of being the first woman president. Since the Rochdale Pioneers established the modern co-operative philosophy in 1844, our movement has been open on an equal basis to men and women. I hope that I will be the first of many women Presidents in the future.

It is no mean feat for a national movement to be celebrating its centenary. I want to congratulate the movement here in Cyprus on this achievement. The Cypriot movement is viewed internationally as mature and financially sophisticated. Its contribution to the global movement is recognised in its commitment to Cooperatives Europe, and I quote by way of further example, the recent contribution of Cypriot co-operators in donating 60,000 Euros to the co-operative reconstruction fund for Haiti. With something like 500,000 Swiss francs raised globally for that work, you will see that Cypriots have made a significant and important contribution.

It is perhaps important to say publicly here, that the level of market share of Cypriot co-operative financial institutions, in particular in home ownership, is the envy of many other national co-operative movements.

I know that life is not easy at the moment. Recession hits co-operative businesses as hard as any other. However, during this global financial melt down, although many co-operative financial businesses have not been entirely unscathed, the co-operative banking, credit union and investment institutions have fared much better than their high street competitors. Across the globe, our asset base has grown, our deposits have increased and we have continued to lend at a time when lending from the commercial sector in many countries had virtually collapsed.

Could I also say that I am very grateful for the support of the Cyprus government in being one of 91 governments to put its name to the resolution currently going through the United Nations in support of the proposal that 2012 will be International Year of Co-operatives.

Colleagues,

With the International Year, our global movement has a once in a generation opportunity to take a massive step forward, and lead the growth of our movement in all parts of the world.

To do that we need to massively increase the knowledge and visibility of the size and sustainability of our model of business, and of its reach into every community across the world. And our movement is huge. The 300 largest co-ops in the world alone are worth 1.3 trillion US\$. Our movement is owned by nearly one billion people around the globe, and employs over 100 million people.

We need to demonstrate that the values and principles that have inspired our movement for nearly 200 years, are even more relevant today, and that we, collectively are a movement of creativity, innovation and flair that is producing solutions to the problems of today's world.

I know that the Cypriot movement, supported by its government, will join us in 2012 and lend its support to the Year's success.

Let me also say a few words about the 50th anniversary of the independence of Cyprus.

I have no doubt that like everyone in this room, I have dreamt and hoped that this anniversary would be one that was built on the unity of Cyprus. That by this year we could have seen Greek and Turkish Cypriots jointly organising and running a unified state – your common state. This is not yet the case is a cause of sadness to all. Saying that is in no way to deny the huge and ongoing efforts to secure that unity. Nor to undermine this anniversary. That the state of Cyprus is recognised by the international community as a sovereign and independent state and has been welcomed into the family of the European Union, is a tribute to the rule of law and democratic legitimacy that prevails **here** – and I congratulate you on that.

During my ten years in the European Parliament, I worked hard on a parallel approach for Cyprus, based on entry of Cyprus to the EU, and a roadmap for the solution to the Cyprus problem. Whilst that approach did not quite succeed, I do believe that Cyprus in the EU provides the security of the European family around this island and for its people. It also means that when the solution to the Cyprus problem comes, as it surely must, it will be a solution based on European values that will sustain both Greek and Turkish Cypriots through the transition to a fully fledged unified European democracy across the whole island.

I offer you Mr President, your government and the Cypriot people every good wish as you continue your efforts to bring that to fruition.

I bring my best wishes to the people of Cyprus and to its co-operative movement on both these auspicious anniversaries.

Thank you.