



**ICA - Europe Regional Assembly
9 -11 November 2006, Manchester, UK**

**Address by Ivano Barberini,
President, International Co-operative Alliance**

Dear Mr. Vladimir Spidla, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities,
Dear Co-Presidents of Cooperatives Europe, Ladies and Gentleman, dear friends,

I would like to thank you for your kind invitation to address the participants in this Regional Assembly, which is a special event in the history of ICA.

This Assembly also ends the cycle of ICA Regional Assemblies – a season of significant debate, widely and actively participated in, about the present role and the future of our Organization.

The discussions highlighted the awareness that we must introduce the necessary changes to provide new solutions to the new problems and, as well, to the old ones. How can ICA contribute to strengthening the role, reputation and development of the co-operative movement?

As we all know, co-operative enterprise is part of both its territory and a global network, and part of a movement that has a future only if it is able to strengthen its image, social visibility and its economic performance in the globalised economy and in a borderless world. This is what being united in the International Co-operative Alliance means.

Modern society needs the co-operative movement. Economic development is a process concerning all aspects of society, requiring the commitment and responsibility of all citizens. By its very nature and because of the aims it pursues, co-operation has experienced a renovation of its *raison d'être* and its perspectives for development.

A responsible globalisation is both necessary and inevitable, as the world can no longer continue in a direction leading to an ever-growing increase in inequalities and poverty.

Even developed countries are now acknowledging the need to re-think, looking at new ways in the globalisation structure, so all can benefit. We, the cooperative movement must also provide our contribution in this new trend for globalisation.

We see that the fundamental discriminating factor between the various forms of enterprises is the ethic of responsibility, and regarding this, we know that a significant part of co-operative distinctiveness relates to the matter of social responsibility. On the contrary, it is just the opposite for the drivers of globalization, who practice the “art of escaping social responsibilities”.

In our globalised world, geographical distances tend to disappear, while social distances increase, becoming more and more unbearable.

The failure in reaching the Millennium Development Goals, the risks to the environment and their repercussions, also economically, the many armed conflicts and the threat of terrorism, show the vital need to adopt a long term responsibility towards our planet.

Resulting from this, we will see, without an improvement in living conditions, the phenomenon of mass migrations to the Northern part of the world spinning out of control.

Now more than ever, Europe is exposed to the risk of the collapse of the African continent. For this reason the cut in aid to Africa during the last two decades, shows, besides a lack of sensitivity towards the African continent, a blindness towards European's own interests.

In his report presented to the European Union and the G8 Summit in Scotland in July 2005, British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, defined African poverty “a scar on the world’s conscience“. “To intervene,” he affirmed, “is a moral duty to confront not only the problems relating to poverty, but also all other dramatic consequences of the events affecting Africa.”

It is the only continent where, in the last 25 years, the number of poor has increased. Per capita income has dramatically fallen, from \$546 in 1970 down to \$450 in 2002.

This part of the world has the highest percentage of population with an income lower than \$1 a day - more than half of the rural population (56%) has an average yearly income of \$163.

34 out of the 40 countries with the highest infant mortality rate are Africans. The 10 countries with the lowest life expectancy are also African. AIDS has already caused 11 million orphans and it is expected that this figure will increase to 20 million by the year 2010.

Peace is the indispensable condition to overcome this devastating situation. However, how can we strive for peace in areas where globalisation is seen in its worst form, where increased interdependence and global proximity do not represent a resource but an excuse to accelerate practices of exploitation and deny the equal access to resources?

The challenge for Africans and their partners from the developed countries is to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the democratic processes underway in several African countries.

Here, co-operatives are also playing an increasingly important role, especially in rural areas, where all too often organizational forms safeguarding peasants’ interests are lacking.

The commitment of co-operatives at an international level is aimed at building health, school and infra-structural facilities. Above all, co-operatives are involved in the creation of an entrepreneurial culture - this being the basis for the African people to take the future into their own hands.

A shared sense of identity is a form of social capital, of being able to activate group action around common needs and aspirations.

As part of the wider commitment to reinforce the cooperative movement at all levels, we are responsible for strengthening ICA, regionally and globally, and this is achieved through improving the relations between ICA and its members, as well as, among members themselves.

On-going change in ICA is a sign of its vitality. In this, ICA counts on and benefits from the increasing and qualified commitment of dozens of managers and co-operative leaders acting in Working groups, thematic committees, sectoral organizations, Regional Councils, the ICA Board and regional and global offices.

Thanks to this wide participation, in spite of the very limited resources, global ICA is involved in several important activities, aiming to build a more effective and articulated organization. In particular, I wish to mention:

The Global Campaign against Poverty with ILO, the On-going Regionalization process, the Focus on ICA Africa by a Board Commission, the Re-definition of ICA governance, the Review of the ICA global vision, mission and strategy, the Four-year program and budget, the Structural working group, the Communication strategy, and the 300 largest cooperative projects.

These are initiatives aimed at achieving such goals, as: safeguarding cooperative uniqueness; strengthening the role of representation; developing a stronger involvement in international lobbying and increasing dialogue with the main international institutions; promoting the cooperative image; mainstreaming gender policy; spreading useful information to encourage better practices (best practices, country reports, case studies, innovations); providing a forum for discussion and a system able to encourage its members to work together to find new ideas and establish partnerships; developing a promotional policy in areas of the world with a weaker cooperative presence and encourage the interest and commitment of young people in the cooperative movement.

The ICA restructuring process has now entered a new phase, in line with the decisions taken that began it all in distant 1992.

Supporting the development of the co-operative movement is a considerable task to carry out – revealing the multi-dimensionality of the co-operative organization.

The regionalization debate has not been simple, nor is concluded. The fear that it can cause a split is a constantly recurring theme in discussions about the organization.

However, even more than a legal form, the essential factor in creating unity is a strong willingness to build an organization that ensures the dual goals of jointly strengthening the ICA, both regionally and globally.

Keeping in mind that using the term “we” is a much better cooperative way to relate to each other than “you and I”.

The choice to create Cooperatives Europe is essential to the strengthening of cooperative representation in Europe and it is important that the new organization is part of the ICA – that it is its European region.

The valuable co-operation between Cooperatives Europe and ICA is crucial for the future of the entire organization.

Ladies and Gentleman, dear friends,

To have a future, the cooperative movement must be able to awaken the interest and commitment of its members and to share its vision of the world and its projects within a civil society.

This can only be achieved on the basis of the relationships between generations of leaders, members and employees, based on reciprocal listening, shared practices and knowledge, loyalty, solidarity and respect.

Innovation requires a clear design and the courage to change and abandon the old and obsolete parts of its structure, organization, policies and image.

This concerns our movement at all levels - from the co-operative enterprise to its national and international organizations.

This ability to change has enabled our movement to grow all over the world, showing a strong and long-lasting vitality.

The commitment to peace, social justice, freedom and solidarity is the pillar of co-operation and represents the basis for an active and responsible participation, aiming to continuously open up new ways for achieving true human development.

This meaning inspires the renewal of our organization and motivates the unity among co-operators. ICA's good reputation is based on this and also, the generally recognized need to have a global co-operative organization in a globalised world.

Here, just a few miles away, lie the very roots of our movement.

The merit of the Rochdale Pioneers, in setting up the first true successful co-operative in 1844, consists not so much in being precursors of the co-operative idea, but in having contributed to the "work itself, considered in its entirety and its results, for the originality of its ideas and the successful application of the formulations of their predecessors, and above all, in the faith, perseverance and unity of its actions".

The moral lesson passed on by this group of humble workers is as high in the virtue of the emotions stirred up by the circumstances in which their initiative grew, as well as for the modesty, spirit of sacrifice, the unbiased awareness of their rights and their strength in facing the difficulties in the first attempts to grow.

These circumstances are quite similar to those existing today in some developing countries - mainly in Africa. This is a message for the co-operation of developed countries.

The most important lesson, even nowadays, is probably that in adhering firmly to the co-operative values and in considering unity as the fundamental condition to advancement.

The ideal and material dimensions merged into a system of values which had the strength to launch a clear message, showing how, from nothing, or nearly nothing, a huge amount of energy can explode, producing unimaginable results.

Thank you very much.