

Ivano Barberini

ICA General Assembly Review

Everywhere, co-operatives have great opportunities to grow, because modern Society needs their role and initiatives.

A vital cooperative enterprise, strengthened by being part of a cooperative network at local, regional and global level, is an indispensable resource for the community it belongs to. In many sectors, cooperatives are able to do what multinationals don't do or cooperatives do it better than multinationals.

However, the path for development is still uphill. In the globalized world, where the challenge is economic as much as cultural, the co-operative system must consist of visionary enterprises setting both the objective of achieving excellent business performances and that of building a stronger distinctive identity.

This is why co-operatives need a shared vision of where the world is going and all the synergies they can generate in order to have a more incisive and visible role within the society.

The co-operative system has to be able to affect the dominant economic culture, which is carried out by the globalization drivers, penalizing social economy.

Now, many of these issues have an international or a global dimension, therefore they must be faced up to that level.

The International Cooperative Alliance is called to do its duty, improving its project, its role and its way of working at global, regional and sectoral level.

First of all, to achieve this goal, ICA must innovate itself.

Keeping in mind that “Global ICA” means the whole ICA family – central, regional and sectoral.

Certainly, it is not the first time that ICA has to face an imperative like this.

Born at the dawn of modern globalization, it went through the whole twentieth century and has entered the twenty first century, strengthened by difficulties and recurring crisis on which ICA engaged its members in its choices of change.

Our commitment of making ICA more effective has really improved during the period of time between the ICA General Assembly, which took place in Cartagena (Colombia) on September 2005 and the GA to be held in Singapore next October.

The strengthening of ICA, regionally and globally, has been a priority, and this would be achieved through working together and improving the relations between ICA and its members, as well as, among members themselves.

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 bodies, the ICA Board and regional and global offices.

The ICA Board, in office since two years, worked hard to make some proposals to the GA in Singapore.

A widespread responsibility and a higher decentralisation towards ICA Regions were joint to a team spirit and to an effective work on global themes. In order to keep this commitment, we have to share firmly our cooperative basic values as well to continuously update our strategies and operational activities, related to the changeable general context.

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 ICA restructuring and membership, the Communication strategy, and the 300 largest cooperative Project.

These initiatives were set to achieve four main objectives: - the strengthening of the democratic life and the way of working of ICA; the shared definition of a vision and a middle term strategy; the improvement of the cooperative reputation and the diffusion of best practices.

These activities aimed at achieving some permanent goals, such 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 fight against poverty, the preservation of international peace through the creation of decent work and the economic development, linked with the improvement of standard of life, represent the main

point of collaboration between ICA, ILO, UN and other international institutions.

The commitment to peace, social justice, democracy, 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.

It's no accident that the theme of ICA and UN International Day of Co-operatives 2006 and 2007 were respectively "co-operatives and the pursuit of peace" and "Co-operatives values and principles for corporate social responsibility". These topical themes are closely connected.

The Memorandum of Understanding, signed by International Labour Organization and International Cooperative Alliance made their collaboration more cogent and concrete, including a joint annual check on achieved results.

As regards to the restructuring of ICA, the regionalization process, decided back in 1992, made important steps during these last few years. The decision made at the Oslo General Assembly, on the basis of the proposals made by the Task Force, created the premises for a more effective structure of ICA.

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

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 experience made in the last few years called for an opening of a new phase of the restructuring, able to take into consideration the specificities of each region and the integration at global level.

More and more, the International Cooperative Alliance must act like a “Governed Network”, made by vital and self-determined nodes, united by shared vision, values, rules and strategic objectives.

This can be a much more effective way, consistent with the nature of ICA, rather than the combination “centralisation/decentralisation”.

Based on their approved multi-annual programmes, the ICA Regions are working well, carrying out several qualified initiatives, which are highly appreciated by ICA members and, often, by stakeholders and Institutions.

Working in the hard African context, ICA-Africa has to face a very difficult situation, due to the weakness of its associated cooperative organizations, which affects the financial equilibrium of the Regional Office.

The on going restructuring aims to achieve a sustainable way of working and to strengthen the sense of belonging of ICA African members. In that continent, the worldwide cooperative movement should assist co-operatives, but their problems cannot be solved without a strong commitment of African co-operators.

The organizations built to last are always committed to innovate.

The main ICA structural change, realized in the last two years, was the setting up of Cooperatives Europe. It has been 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.

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.

Concerning a agreed global strategy for the International Co-operative Alliance, the workshop, promoted by the Governance Working Group, in Stockholm, on September 2006, made a first step. Its main goal has been to help the ICA to be a focused organisation, providing tangible benefits for its members.

That means to ensure the dynamism and strength of ICA through effective project and program, renewed structure and service offering.

The adopted method and proposals are really helpful to clarify the role of the ICA in the short term; to identify the strengths, priorities and united action, a shared vision and strategic direction, well-defined governance rules and to improve significantly the reputation and recognition of cooperatives globally and amongst key target audiences.

These guidelines represent a very good landmark for the restructuring of ICA and for the middle term planning of its activities.

The implementation of some of the most important strategic objectives was the aim of the setting up of an ICA Restructuring Working Group.

The mandate given by ICA Board has been to table some recommendations on membership and revised subscription formula as well as on the most suited organizational global structure for the ICA which would best support the fulfilment of the proposed mission, vision and 4-years strategic plan for ICA itself.

The membership theme is as essential as complex. For a long time, many of the issues tackled by RWG have been without a satisfactory solution.

The wide documentation provided by the RWG opened an unprecedented and serious debate within the ICA Board, thanks to the Chair of the Group, Mr Alban D'Amours, and his organization, which expended considerable effort and energy to facilitate it.

Reaching an effective and widely shared conclusion on new membership criteria and subscription formula is indispensable to put them in practice.

We must take all the needed time to the attainment of this goal.

In the last few years, ICA has devoted a particular attention and an intense work to elaborate and implement its Communication strategy.

The cooperative system is a very complex phenomenon. Often, co-operatives are victim of warped information, carried out by people or organizations that ignore or mystify the facts.

In general, the resources at our disposal to implement an effective communication are scarce. ICA has been committed to adopt some new communication means economically sustainable. We achieved some important and highly appreciated results.

The research on the worldwide largest co-operatives has aroused interest and caused wonder, as it happened, for instance, in the occasion of the Responsible Globalization Forum, which took place last year in Lyon (France).

This work has been very difficult, because there are several different structures or legal forms, adopted by the largest co-operatives.

In its first stage, the 300 project aimed to classify the co-operatives on the basis of their annual turnover.

Besides a more complete and precise statistical analysis, the work in progress is aimed to add some more qualitative information.

The use of some other parameters can better highlight the performances achieved by co-operatives in all economic sectors.

Creating a network among the largest cooperatives can give them an important contribution to compete in the globalized economy, where new subjects, like China and India (and, probably, Russia and Brazil) are playing a stronger and rising role.

Today, the interdependence between local and global issues is clear everywhere. Sharing knowledge and experiences achieved by cooperatives operating at national and international level helps each one of them to update their competitive strategy,

This was the aim of the first CEO's Forum, held on April 2006, which saw the active participation of almost twenty large cooperative groups coming from all regions.

In conclusion, we can say that the work carried out by ICA global and regional offices, elected bodies, committees and working groups during the last two years produced some very important achievements, even if some of them are not still conclusive.

I wish to thank all of them heartily for this wide commitment and for the support by ICA members.

On-going change in ICA is a sign of its vitality

However the way we have to cover is still long, because the process of change is unbroken. I am sure that that commitment will continue with the same dedication, innovative spirit and willingness to work together.