



THOUGHTS ON THE COOPERATIVE IDENTITY AND THE FUTURE ICA'S 125TH ANNIVERSARY

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It is remarkable that any organization can survive and thrive for a century or more. Most do not. The ICA has reached its 125th anniversary and remains vital and robust thanks to the dedication of innumerable cooperative leaders around the globe.

To recall the history of the ICA from 1895 forward is to think, first and foremost, of survival through two World Wars and the peace processes that followed. It is also to think about the enormous progress on human rights and equality of opportunity for all human beings that has, with great immediacy, continuously driven toward social justice. The ICA has represented an important voice and call to action throughout, and the Statement on the Cooperative Identity, as adopted by the ICA General Assembly in Manchester, UK twenty-five years ago, is the bridge between our proud cooperative past and the great hopes we have for our cooperative future.

Each of us as a person has a unique identity. This is also true of cooperative enterprise as a whole. Our cooperative identity does two things — it differentiates cooperatives from every other type of institution and simultaneously shows our global commonality. The Statement on the Cooperative Identity presents a comprehensive view of what it means to be a cooperative enterprise — the definition of a cooperative, the cooperative values and the cooperative principles.

Our Cooperative Values

The cooperative values — self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity — inspire the principles. The cooperative values are unique to cooperatives and should be celebrated as such. No other institution is likely to emulate these values. We can and must use these values as the basis of our promotion, defense and advocacy for cooperative enterprise.

It is also important to note that the cooperative values are accompanied by four ethical values — honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. It can be argued that all organizations and institutions should conduct themselves in accordance with these ethical values. Yet we know from countless examples over the years that this is not the case. For cooperatives, this is a non-negotiable point — if you violate those ethical values, the membership will demand change.

Our Cooperative Principles

The cooperative principles, derived from the values, are the “operating system” for all cooperatives. The late Professor Ian MacPherson referred to the principles as “the way in which co-operators and cooperatives try to put their values into action.”

Principles 1-4 — Voluntary and Open Membership, Democratic Member Control, Member Economic Participation and Autonomy and Independence — are the unique institutional principles that other types of organizations cannot claim and would not necessarily wish to claim. They represent the non-negotiable components of a cooperative structure.

The remaining principles are unique to our collective vision for how all cooperatives should see their broader outreach responsibilities.

Cooperatives have been brilliant in their individual and collective commitment to the 5th Principle — Education, Training and Information. Constant examples come forward, sometimes daily, of educational curricula, specific training programs for trustees, managers and employees and informational videos and print materials for cooperative members. This is happening all over the globe and bodes well for our collective future.

The 6th Principle- Cooperation Among Cooperatives - is perhaps the single most important focus for our future. Our global relationships remain fundamental to our success as cooperatives. This has always been the case, but it is so critically important today. From global supply chain management to shared ideas among cultural cooperatives, global cooperation is essential.

The addition of a 7th cooperative principle has been of major importance to the cooperative movement. The idea of concern for community was accepted as implicit in the 6th principle. The additional principle brings a higher level of visibility to cooperatives as local agents for improving the quality of life in the communities they serve and adds a great deal to the full story of cooperative impact. To quote an often-used phrase, we must think globally and act locally. This is especially true in the commitment of cooperatives around the world to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

Professor MacPherson, a major contributor to the Statement on the Cooperative Identity, felt strongly that the definition of a cooperative and the articulation of the cooperative values are relatively unchangeable, but the principles should always reflect changes in society and the environment. In other words, the principles are not, nor were they meant to be, sacrosanct.

The challenges that we face today are in so many ways in need of new, innovative thinking. It is appropriate to ask, 25 years after the adoption of the Statement on the Cooperative Identity by the General Assembly in Manchester on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the ICA, whether the principles are sufficient to address the state of the globe in 2020. Some would say they are not.

Among the concerns expressed are that the principles do not fully address the environmental issues associated with climate change, the growing income and wealth inequalities worldwide and the absence of access to services and quality of life for so many people. As these and other concerns are voiced, we should not only consider additional principles but also modifications to the language of the existing principles.

Sustainability and Our Cooperative Future

The global COVID-19 pandemic has tested every institution around the world, and cooperatives are no exception. Cooperative responses to the pandemic have been exceptional — the establishment of new supply chains for personal protective equipment, the provision of emergency food and medicines and even special insurance coverage for caregivers. In so many sectors of the economy — food, housing, health care,

utilities and financial services, for example – cooperatives are responding with innovative ideas and imagination.

Having the sole mission and purpose of serving their members facilitates such cooperative innovation and entrepreneurship in the unique circumstance of the pandemic. The same cooperative purpose ensures a strong commitment to a sustainable future for all.

Former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland defined “sustainability” as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” In her keynote address to the ICA 2017 Global Conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, she brought attention to the role of cooperatives in the elimination of poverty, environmental protection, equal access to goods and services and food security. “Working with and for society,” she noted, “cooperatives can help fulfill the vision of sustainable development we launched three decades ago.’

Our responsibility to future generations is without question the inspiration for cooperative growth and development in the coming decade, and cooperatives have an important role to play in achieving the SDGs by 2030.

The UN Development Programme makes the point that the SDGs are interrelated to one another, that “action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability.” This is exactly the “triple bottom line” of cooperatives – balancing social, economic and environmental outcomes.

Among the interrelated SDGs are the goals of gender equality, reduced inequalities and decent work, and there is ample evidence that cooperatives as contributors to local economies enhance the likelihood that equity, inclusion and respect for the diversity of human beings is fully achieved in the workplace and society as a whole.

The goals of clean energy and climate change are uniquely interrelated, and both traditional and new energy cooperatives around the world are developing innovative approaches to an affordable and environmentally friendly energy future.

The goal of responsible consumption and production fits precisely with the values that cooperatives practice around the world everyday.

The elusive goal of peace, justice and strong institutions is perhaps the subject area in which cooperatives can make the greatest overall contribution. Throughout its history, the ICA has focused specific attention on peace and justice. As recently as October 2019, the ICA General Assembly approved a *Declaration on Positive Peace through Cooperatives* that includes the following statement:

The cooperative movement cooperates to find equitable and just ways to solve problems in a sustainable and democratic manner, thus contributing to prevent violence and hatred. Education of all members to participate fully, voluntarily and respectfully in their cooperatives and communities is an essential part of a culture of peace. Cooperatives are an active part of a culture of and for peace.

The ICA has a clear and essential role in promoting, defending and advocating for cooperative enterprise. With its global reach, the reputation and performance of the ICA is absolutely critical to the expansion of the cooperative idea to meet the enormous challenges the world faces today.