



INTERNATIONAL
CO-OPERATIVE
ALLIANCE
Switzerland

Route des Morillons 15
1218 Grand-Saconnex
Geneva

Tel: (41 22) 929 88 38
Fax: (41 22) 798 41 22
E-mail: ica@ica.coop
Website: www.ica.coop

International Women's Day – 8 March 2011

“Equal access to education, training and science and technology: Pathway to decent work for women”

On the International Women's Day, the United Nations calls on local, national and international communities to focus on the importance of equal access to education, training and science and technology as crucial pathway to provide women with decent work opportunities.

Investing in women's education has well recognised benefits not only for women's own well-being but also for society as whole. The link between better education for women and the reduction of poverty and improved human development is well documented. Women's access to education provides significant opportunity for self-empowerment. More educated women lead to better nourished, healthy and educated children, girls and boys, thus breaking the vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty. Indeed, we know that educated and empowered women are agents of family and community well-being, and thus catalysts for socio-economic development at the national and local level.

Today, the United Nations is asking the international community to go beyond just promoting education and training but to also enable equal access to science and technology to provide women better access to decent work.

Undoubtedly, access to education, training and science and technology are closely related. With lower levels of education and less access to training, many women lack the skills and experience needed to develop, produce and utilise new technologies. Moreover, since women's businesses generally tend to be smaller and have less access to capital for investment in these new technologies, acquiring science and technology education and training which can empower women in all aspects of their lives remains a challenge. Facilitating and promoting access to technology not only will spur economic growth, but will enable women and men, girls and boys to create, receive, share and use information and knowledge for their economic, social, cultural and political development.

In today's knowledge society, a truly socially inclusive society should make sure that it empowers all members of society without gender bias.

The co-operative movement's principle on co-operative education, training and information is recognition of the important role the movement can play in this area.

Much has been done by co-operatives worldwide to provide women with life-long learning opportunities, not only through targeted programmes, but also through the direct participation in co-operative governance and management, representing important daily “learning by doing” experiences.

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Many co-operatives have provided women with opportunities to become entrepreneurs and access decent work. They have enabled them to move out of informal and precarious job markets. They have improved access to credit, product and market information, technology and training in management skills and enterprise development.

The appropriate use of technology, especially ICT (Information and Communication Technology) has led co-operatives to create new opportunities for decent work, conquering new and more profitable markets and, and above all, improving access to information. We know for example that rural women co-operators in a number of countries are able to access information on best farming practices, pest and disease control, up to the minute market prices and weather forecasts through technology. This access has enabled them to improve both their agricultural productivity as well as their livelihoods.

However, ICT not only improves economic efficiency, it has also provided an extraordinary way for co-operators, both women and men, to participate in technology development and create networks for sharing knowledge worldwide thus reducing isolation. Co-operators are using the technologies available to promote 'co-operation among co-operatives', another of the Co-operative Principles.

Consequently, co-operatives have an important role to play. By increasing women co-operators' access to education and training programmes, they will facilitate more decent work opportunities for women. By taking advantage of the global co-operative network and fostering exchanges between co-operators worldwide with this enhanced capacity, they will be creating opportunities for collaboration among all co-operators. They will promote the transfer of know-how; they will promote the development and use of participatory and user-driven technologies and research programmes, to name only a few.

Therefore, 8 March 2011, International Women's Day, we call on ICA member organisations and co-operators, to not forego the contribution of the large talent pool that women co-operators represent and to strengthen their commitment for fostering equal access to education, training and science and technology by providing women co-operators with targeted training programmes, particularly on new technologies, and promoting exchanges which can crucially work to build bridges and foster collaborations among co-operators worldwide.

Let us lead with good practice. Let us show what can be achieved when co-operatives enable women all over the world to reap the benefits of equal access to education, training and science and technology!

Dame Pauline Green
President
International Co-operative Alliance
(ICA)

Stefania Marcone
Chairperson
ICA Gender Equality Committee

The International Co-operative Alliance is an independent, non-government association which unities, represents and serves co-operatives worldwide. The ICA was founded in London in 1895. Its members are national and international co-operative organisations in all sectors of activity including, agricultural, banking, fisheries, housing, tourism, and consumer co-operatives. ICA has more than 247 member organisations from 92 countries, representing nearly 1 billion individuals worldwide.