



Press Release

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UNITED NATIONS LAUNCHES YEAR-LONG CELEBRATION OF VITAL ROLE OF COOPERATIVES IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Governments, heads of international organizations and representatives of cooperative organizations will meet today at United Nations headquarters to launch the International Year of Cooperatives (2012) under the theme “Cooperative Enterprises Build a Better World”. Programmes during the Year seek to encourage individuals, communities and governments to recognize the agency of cooperatives in contributing to sustainable socio-economic development and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Cooperatives are business enterprises owned and controlled by the members that they serve. Their member-driven nature differentiates them from other forms of business by taking decisions balanced by the pursuit of profit with the needs and interests of members and their communities. The Netherlands-based Rabobank has earmarked \$200,000 to help finance activities during the International Year of Cooperatives focused on promoting the role of cooperatives in sustainable development.

“Historically, cooperatives have found their genesis in times of economic hardship,” said Sha Zukang, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and Secretary-General of “Rio+20”, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. “This is a testament to their capacity to alleviate the effects of such crises. In fact, in the wake of the 2008-2009 global financial and economic crisis, financial cooperatives proved to be more resilient than their investor-owned counterparts.”

A 2009 study by the European Association of Co-operative Banks, a non-profit organization with 79 million members with a market share of 20 per cent, found that commercial banks, and some public banks, were responsible for more than 95 per cent of bank write downs registered worldwide. Recapitalization (in particular State aid) was also massively directed towards commercial banks and some public banks.

Besides banking and credit, cooperatives are spread across a spectrum of sectors, such as agriculture, fisheries, housing, insurance, services and travel. In its 2008 Global 300 report on the largest cooperatives in the world, the International Co-operative Alliance, a non-profit group with 260 member organizations from 96 countries representing some 1 billion individuals, indicated that the top 300 cooperatives alone had an aggregate turnover of \$1.1 trillion, comparable to roughly one tenth of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the United States. Most of the 300 largest cooperatives are found in the developed economies of France, Germany, Japan, Netherlands and the United States, with 30 per cent engaged in the agriculture and food sectors, 23 per cent in retailing, 22 per cent in insurance and 19 per cent in banking.

In developing countries, cooperatives play a prominent role. In 2009, Brazil’s agricultural cooperatives exported \$3.6 billion worth of produce. Cooperatives also play an important role in peacebuilding and bridging ethnic divides. In Rwanda, a credit union system was rebuilt by the World Council of Credit Unions without regard to ethnicity and there are currently 149 credit unions with an estimated 400,000 members.

About the International Year of Cooperatives

The United Nations General Assembly, in its resolution 64/136 (2010), declared 2012 the International Year of Cooperatives, in recognition of the contribution of cooperatives to socio-economic development, especially with regard to poverty reduction, employment generation and social

integration. The objectives of the year are to: expand public awareness of the role of cooperatives, particularly in relation to the fulfilment of internationally agreed development goals, such as the United Nations Millennium Development Goals; encourage the growth of cooperatives worldwide; and establish a policy and legal environment conducive to the strength and stability of the cooperative movement.

For more information, please visit <http://social.un.org/coopsyear>, or contact Vikram Sura, United Nations Department of Public Information, at tel.: +1 212 963 8274, e-mail: sura@un.org; or Felice Llamas, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, at tel.: +1 212 963 2924, e-mail: llamas@un.org.

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