

International Women's Day 2016
Message from the Chairperson of the ICA Gender Equality Committee
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Gender equality for sustainable development and a better world

Gender equality has been widely recognised not only as a fundamental human right but also as the necessary basis for achieving world peace, prosperity that benefits all and social, economic and environmental sustainability.

The most important global principles and commitments, including the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, Agenda 21 and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, have provided highly valuable proof on the symbiotic relationship between gender equality and sustainable development, as well as global guidelines for action.

From its beginnings, the co-operative movement has also shown the potential of its basic values and principles, and organisational structure, in achieving equal opportunities for men and women in terms of sustainable development.

Gender equality as a condition for development is implicit in the foundations of co-operative movements. We know that providing women and girls with equal access to education, medical care, a decent job and representation in political and economic decision-making processes will drive truly sustainable economies and social justice.

We have put different institutional mechanisms, legislative provisions, policies, programmes and plans in place to promote gender equality and bring about development that is focussed on sustainability – an intrinsic value to the cooperative movement. Nonetheless, it is clear that there is still a way to go in valuing and sufficiently appreciating the contributions that gender equality and women's empowerment can make to sustainable development. We recognise that as a movement, cooperativism still has a major role to play in this sense.

This is precisely the appeal we are making this year within the framework of celebrating International Women's Day. The International Co-operative Alliance, ICA, through the Gender Equality Committee, is urging its member organisations and all co-operative members around the world to come together once more through global initiatives and get involved in the 'Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step It Up for Gender Equality' campaign.

The campaign theme for this International Women's Day 2016 defines the challenges for all humanity from the Sustainable Development Goals, SDG, set out in Agenda 2030, and positions gender equality and women's empowerment as fundamental pillars in facing up to them.

In the co-operative movement we are convinced that we should not only make strides in gender equality for sustainable development but also be forceful and ensure we are on the right path so as to eliminate the discrimination that still impacts women's lives today; this discrimination is most often seen in gender division of work, unequal access to productive resources and their benefits, limitations to participation in decision-making processes and access to public authority in its different manifestations.

Although the co-operative movement has been making huge efforts for Planet 50-50 and taken strides towards gender equality, and despite progress having been made in the Millennium Development Goals in recent years, women and girls across the globe continue to suffer discrimination and violence whilst major gender inequality endures in social, economic, political and environmental spheres.

However, beyond being victims, women play a fundamental role in development and in achieving the SDGs, with many goals specifically recognising equality and empowerment as part of the solution and as goals themselves.

Taking a decisive step also means recognising the great gap in achieving gender equality at co-operatives whilst being aware of our huge potential to contribute to the solution. Since all aspects of life are related to gender equality, we need to continue in our efforts to eradicate gender discrimination wherever we come across it.

As co-operatives, we need to significantly increase investment in initiatives that aim for gender equality and women's empowerment at both a local and national level. Agenda 2030 offers an exceptional framework to move forward.

Our presence, representation and defence of the contribution made from the co-operative sector in gender equality debates should be proactive in every country to ensure our experiences and contributions to achieving sustainable development are visible, shared and acknowledged.

Unity in approach and action in the co-operative movement is essential to move forward in achieving this equality within a timeline of one co-operative decade.

This celebration is an exceptional chance to continue to shape a common vision and renew our commitment as co-operatives so as to play a role in development processes, strengthen institutional frameworks and ensure our management, action and funding mechanisms take gender and the fundamental role of women into account.

You are all called to make this great leap and to walk hand-in-hand on this path towards the gender equality, women's empowerment and sustainable development we hope for and expect.

Colombia, March 2016.