

International Cooperative Youth Statement 2012

Presented at the United Nations during the Closing Ceremonies of the International Year of Cooperatives, November 20 2012

Preamble

We, young people from all over the world, committed to the cooperative movement present this statement to promote youth empowerment through engagement with cooperatives.

In the context of multiple global crises, youth led social movements and the need for a new development consensus post 2015, we recognize that youth development is an increasingly urgent concern that encompasses social, economic, political and environmental dimensions and has taken a more central focus for decision-makers at all levels.

We further recognize that young people have long been, and increasingly are, disproportionately affected by unemployment, underemployment, disempowerment and disengagement. Through effective involvement with cooperatives¹, young people can work together with governments, civil-society and other stakeholders, to overcome these challenges.

We thus strongly encourage the engagement of young people with cooperatives as a viable and promising option for their transition to full economic, social and civic participation.

Simultaneously, we emphasize the need for cooperatives to engage with young people in order to adapt to changing environments, sustain and develop themselves.

In this matter, we take into account young people without distinction, recognizing the diversity within this group, including specific issues of gender, race, ethnicity, economic background. In the same spirit, we present this statement recognizing the differing economic, social, and political development contexts among countries. We assert special attention be given to those groups and countries experiencing adverse pressures. On the other hand, we emphasize the specific potential that exists in developing countries for cooperative and youth empowerment.

In recognition of all the above, and as a contribution to the conclusion of the International Year of Cooperatives 2012 declared by the United Nations, we commit to the following statement that intends to build the way forward.

Why Cooperatives?

We acknowledge that the cooperative environment provides working conditions more favourable to youth engagement than do other organizational forms. Their democratic governance structure and organizational aims, which go beyond profit maximization, enable young people to explore different working and leadership roles, and to get involved in decision making procedures and multi-

¹ Cooperatives are autonomous associations of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise (internationally recognized definition, International Cooperative Alliance)

stakeholder dialogue. Young people can become creative in cooperative environments which allow them to develop their entrepreneurial and managerial capacities.

We note that cooperatives, motivated by sustainability and long term development perspectives, can be more resilient to crises and offer more stable work environments. Furthermore, cooperatives provide and facilitate employment, income and the development of employment skills. Finally, cooperatives are important agents of financial, economic, community and human development.

We further acknowledge that cooperatives enable young people to:

- Pursue opportunities for securing and increasing income, when engaged as employees or members;
- Pursue avenues for productive self-employment through the pooling of knowledge and resources, and improving access to markets and productive resources;
- Develop work ethics that are characterized by self-motivation through allowing young people to be the owners of their work;
- Build self-confidence through allowing individual and team achievements;
- Explore and master various working situations and develop problem solving skills which institutions of formal education may often fail to transmit;
- Acquire general working and specific professional skills relevant to future employment;
- Develop professional networks within and beyond the cooperative sector; and
- Develop leadership skills for taking over responsibility within and beyond the cooperative sector.

In effectively run cooperatives, where collective achievements and social impacts carry more weight than individual concerns, we appreciate that young people have the opportunity to develop social consciousness and attain a sense of self actualization. Through their democratic governance, cooperatives also expose young members to democratic values and culture. The experience attained through engaging with an environment of accountability and solidarity gives young people the confidence to take on leadership roles in various contexts, even beyond the cooperative movement.

Despite these real and potential benefits, we are conscious that many hurdles exist that inhibit the ability of youth to engage effectively with cooperatives and vice versa.

We observe the following challenges as necessary to overcome:

- There is a lack of comprehensive evidence regarding involvement mechanisms, as well as outcomes and impacts of cooperatives on young people. As a result, knowledge concerning the impact of the cooperative model is limited and often anecdotal. A more rigorous evidence base from which to draw may encourage greater promotion and support to youth engagement with cooperatives. As young people, we can contribute to the generation of that knowledge base.
- The cooperative difference² is often misunderstood or unknown by young people and the key influencers in their development, such as parents, teachers and decision makers.
- Within cooperatives themselves, dialogue and mechanisms for effective youth involvement are lacking. In addition, cooperatives may have difficulty engaging with youth due to a lack of resources, capacity and supportive environments.

² The cooperative difference or advantage is the way in which cooperatives and their members concisely refer to the many inherent social and economic benefits unique to the cooperative model

- A generational divide exists between the younger and older generations leading to difficulty in integration of youth into the cooperative movement. Younger people see cooperatives as outdated or do not perceive them as viable job options. Youth who have integrated into cooperatives face vertical mobility and representation barriers. The older generation perceive youth as competition, or as lacking commitment.

- In some cases, governments have misappropriated the term “cooperative” due to a misunderstanding of their nature as people-driven businesses. The result is a reputation that has created a lasting reluctance to engage with cooperatives.

To overcome these challenges:

We urge governments and policy makers, educational and research institutions, cooperatives, civil society, and the international community to work together with us to address effective youth engagement with the cooperative sector.

In support of the ICA Blueprint for a Cooperative Decade and basing on the ILO Youth Employment Strategy, we encourage governments to include youth specific language into their proposed International Plan of Action on Cooperatives. In going forward with the implementation of the UN System Wide Action Plan on Youth, we encourage UN agencies to engage with cooperatives in addressing issues of youth empowerment.

We need opportunities for learning and understanding the cooperative values and principles, and for seeing the cooperative model at work in a youth friendly environment where young people’s needs and concerns are acknowledged and addressed. We call upon the cooperative community, governments, international organizations, educational institutions, civil-society and the media to deploy resources in order to enact communication strategies that include education and research, which are adapted to and accommodate the needs of young people.

We request that governments and policy makers at all levels ensure a policy environment that facilitates effective youth engagement. We recognize that many governments have worked to promote cooperatives, encouraged youth involvement, implemented national cooperative development plans and other support strategies in both the short- and long- term. However, bureaucratic hurdles and over-regulation sometimes pose a problem, and governments must be careful to respect the autonomy and independence necessary for effective cooperative development. Governments should continue engaging with cooperatives and vice-versa, ensuring enabling policy environments lending themselves to co-operatives by updating the laws and regulations that would generate opportunities to create and develop co-operatives.

We call upon educational and research institutions to work with governments and other stakeholders to properly integrate cooperative education into national curricula from the primary to tertiary levels and in vocational and technical education and training. We remind that early and effective education remains a proven mechanism for raising levels of awareness and improving the likelihood of youth engagement with any issue or opportunity. In the same line, we emphasize that business advisory services need to increasingly present the cooperative form of organization as a viable option. By educating young people about the cooperative model, we can establish a spirit of collectivism that makes reducing competitive attitudes between younger and older generations possible. Cooperatives

and civil society stakeholders also have a role to play here in providing opportunities for informal education on the cooperative way.

We need to build upon the cooperative models track record of fostering equitable socio-economic development. It is necessary to do this by creating financial and technical support for cooperative development. International financial institutions, governments, the broader cooperative community, and we as individuals need to allocate significant monetary support for cooperative development. We can do this through the creation of cooperative development funds and greater access to financial products for cooperatives.

To effectively track and assess youth engagement, we call upon the international cooperative and governmental communities to collaboratively establish benchmarks and measures of youth engagement in cooperatives alongside indicators of their social and economic development. These standards need to be rooted in a cooperative understanding, modeled after proven best practices and successes of various cooperatives.

We further call upon all multi-stakeholders to collaborate and cooperate on all issues by allowing the inclusion of youth representatives on cooperative boards and on national cooperative councils. Authentic inclusion involves affording youth full voting rights and responsibilities. To facilitate this level of engagement in governance, attention will need to be given and changes made to legislative measures restricting those of certain ages and genders from being board directors or member-owners of enterprise. This would be a vital step in engaging with younger members of cooperatives and give them a greater understanding of the organizational processes.

In appreciation of the many forms of social, economic, and political oppression that impact the lived realities of people in varying ways, we acknowledge there is no universal method to youth cooperative development - there are myriad mechanisms and methods that will need to be employed to empower young individuals and groups across the world to contribute to the cooperative community.

Conclusion and The Way Forward

Building upon the momentum created by the International Year of Cooperatives, we commit to continue raising awareness, particularly among young people, of the existing and potential role of cooperatives in society.

We commit to promoting the strategic usage of the 6th principle of cooperatives, "Cooperation among cooperatives", through networks that will strengthen the local economy and foment social cohesion.

Finally, we as young and empowered members of the global community, commit to taking an active role in civil society, sharing our experiences with one another and being innovative and forward-thinking in our engagement for a more equitable world. Those of us already engaged in the cooperative community, commit to encouraging our peers to participate, sharing our cooperative stories with others,, and utilizing our voices to strategize within and between our cooperative institutions to become more inclusive of young people and give greater attention to youth issues.