

The role of the cooperative movement in general, and health co-operatives in particular, both in tackling the challenge of decent employment worldwide and in providing health services for the more underprivileged, is one of the key topics discussed in this interview by Simel Esim, Director of the Co-operatives Unit of the International Labour Organization, the specialist UN agency which marks its centenary in 2019.

Simel Esim

Director of the Co-operatives Unit of the International Labour Organization (ILO)

“The potential of health cooperatives is still largely untapped”

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What are the links between the ILO and the cooperative movement?

As early as 1920 the ILO had a specialized unit focusing on cooperatives which continues to this day. A close connection with the cooperative movement was established by the first Director General of the ILO, Albert Thomas, who was a French co-operator and a member of the Central Committee of the ICA. Since then the ICA has had a general consultative status with the ILO, which remains the only specialized agency of the United Nations with an explicit mandate on cooperatives.

ILO activities on cooperative enterprises are guided by an international standard on cooperatives, the ILO Recommendation on the Promotion of Cooperatives, 2002 (No. 193). The international cooperative movement was involved in the process leading to the adoption of the Recommendation which has proven to be highly relevant for the revival of cooperative enterprises in many parts of the world. Since its adoption, more than 110 countries have used the Recommendation to support the revision and development of national policies and laws, and it has contributed to a number of regional and sub-regional uniform model laws. The ILO's work on cooperative enterprises continues to be guided by this import international standard.



What are the main objectives and activities of the ILO Cooperatives Unit?

In the 99 years since its establishment, the Cooperatives Unit has gone through numerous changes along with the developments in the global context and the evolution of cooperatives. The unit services the ILO constituents directly and through its field offices and in close partnership with cooperative and social and solidarity economy movements.

Close personal ties to the co-operative movement



Simel Esim's links to the world of co-operatives date back to her childhood in Turkey. She comes from a family with a long co-operative tradition, and to this day her father still works at housing co-operatives. With a degree in Political Science, she completed her Master's in International and Middle Eastern Economic Studies, and holds a Doctorate in Economics, centred on developing economies. She has worked at the World Bank and the International Centre for Research on Women, in Washington DC, focusing on the informal economy, the economic empowerment of women and labour migration, among other issues.

Before joining the Co-operatives Unit of the ILO as Director, her research into women working in the submerged economy allowed her, in her own words, "to confirm the fundamental role that co-operation, reciprocity and mutual assistance can play in helping to generate means of subsistence, services and bargaining power for women". She has also been involved in development cooperation projects, offering her the opportunity "to lend support to the creation and consolidation of young people's and women's co-operatives in a range of countries in the Middle East and North Africa".

The ILO COOP strategy is three-pronged: Advancing cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy organizations as economically, socially and environmentally responsible and viable business options toward a sustainable future of work; Encouraging the integration of decent work agenda as a priority in the cooperative and social and solidarity economy movements' agendas; and ensuring that specificities of cooperatives and other

social and solidarity economy organizations are recognized in analysis, policy, and actions toward achieving decent work and a sustainable future.

Within the work of the ILO, where do health co-operatives stand?

The ILO's work on cooperatives runs across sectors including health. Recommendation 193 covers all sectors of cooperatives. Decent work, which is ILO's core mandate, is also closely associated with good health. The ILO's ultimate objective in the field of social health protection is to achieve universal access to affordable health care of adequate quality and financial protection in case of sickness.

ILO's in-country experiences show cooperative insurance and mutual health insurance organizations are critical to the provision of social protection to their members especially in rural and informal economies across the globe, but especially in the Global South. Through our policy and development cooperation work we support the creation of a favorable ecosystems for cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy organizations across sectors.

We have observed first-hand how groups of informal economy workers, waste-pickers, taxi-drivers often use the cooperative model to access health insurance. Ageing domestic workers use cooperatives for old age income security in countries like Trinidad & Tobago. In provision of child care services cooperatives are being used across the world. In countries like Namibia, Tanzania, eSwati, cooperatives have been used effectively in HIV/AIDS mitigation.

The Espru Foundation turns 30 in 2019 promoting the potential of the cooperative business model. How do you think health cooperatives can continue contributing to the Sustainable Development 2030 Agenda?

Good health is one of humanity's most valued assets. Sustainable Development Goal 3 focuses on physical and mental health and well-being and to extend life expectancy for all. Its aim is to achieve universal health coverage which includes financial risk protection, access to quality healthcare services and access to affordable medicines and vaccines. The Goal includes the commitment to accelerate the progress made to date in reducing newborn, child and maternal mortality and ending all such preventable deaths before 2030. As healthcare is a labour-intensive industry, workers in health care, such as doctors, nurses or other health workers, can also make a big difference. Improvements in healthcare provision can be reached if resources are pooled and health professionals enjoy better working conditions.

Health cooperatives can provide responses to ineffi-

ILO: a century promoting decent work

The International Labour Organization (ILO) marks its centenary this year. "After a devastating war, the ILO was founded in 1919 on the principle that lasting and universal peace could only be established on the basis of social justice," says Simel Esim. A hundred years after it was created, the main achievements of the ILO, according to the Director of its Co-operatives Unit, are as follows:

- **Giving employers and employees a voice.** The ILO's tripartite structure gives governments, workers and employers an equal voice when setting labour standards and policies.
- **Limiting working hours.** The first ILO Convention, adopted in 1919, limited hours of work and ensured adequate rest periods for workers. Challenges of excessive hours of work and the need to protect workers' health and safety by limiting working hours and providing adequate periods for rest and recuperation remain pressing issues to this day.
- **Working to abolish child labour.** Child labour" is work that deprives children of their childhood and that is harmful to physical and mental development.

Over the past 15 years, nearly one million children have been withdrawn or prevented from entering child labour thanks to ILO projects across 110 countries.

- **Bringing an end forced labour.** "Forced labour" is work that is performed involuntarily and under the menace of any penalty. The ILO first took a public stand against human trafficking and debt bondage in the 1930s with a renewed campaign to end modern slavery launched in 2014.
- **Promoting the skills workers and employers need.** A lack of opportunities to upgrade skills is a major constraint for local industry development. The ILO has been working on linking training to current labour market needs as well as anticipating and building competencies for the jobs of the future; and building quality apprenticeship systems and incorporating core skills into training for young people
- **Making workplaces inclusive for people with disabilities.** People with disabilities make up an estimated one billion, or 15 per cent, of the world's population. About 80 per cent are of working age. The right of people with disabilities to decent work, however, is frequently denied. The ILO is working to establish legal frameworks and practical schemes to promote greater

opportunities and fair treatment for people with disabilities.

- **Helping to close the gender pay gap.** Ensuring that the work done by women and men is valued fairly and ending pay discrimination is essential to achieving gender equality. Yet, gender pay gaps continue to prevail as one of today's greatest social injustices. The ILO works with its constituents in putting in place specific gender equality policies that are embedded within a general policy environment which is promoting equal and inclusive labour markets.
- **Striving to stop gender-based violence at work.** In June 2019, delegates of the ILO's International Labour Conference will discuss violence and harassment in the workplace, with a view to adopting the first international convention to help prevent the problem and put into place measures to protect and support affected workers everywhere.
- **Leading the way on the future of work.** The world of work is evolving rapidly. To understand and effectively respond to new challenges, the ILO is increasingly disseminating knowledge on recent trends and driving discussions on the future of work. A Global Commission was formed on the topic and recently launched a report titled Work for a brighter future.

ciencies in serving the interests of people, when services and products are unavailable or not accessible. They can combine workers' skills and financial resources to respond to market failures in serving the interests of workers, producers and users and providing services and products otherwise inaccessible. The potential of health cooperatives is still largely untapped. Better understanding their competitive advantages and unleashing them would address the health needs of populations where their services are much needed.

In your opinion, what is the future of the cooperative movement? And of health cooperatives in particular?

There are growing calls for new forms of business and new models of growth. The world needs innovative solutions to reverse the deterioration of worker rights, improve employment opportunities and working conditions, the organization of work and production, and the governance of work. In this context it is important for the global cooperative movement to demonstrate its

commitment to advancing social, economic and environmental sustainability. From an ILO perspective it will be important for the cooperative movement to show how it contributes to securing decent work and the concrete alternatives it offers to counter retreat of worker rights.

Such commitment would benefit from being substantiated with concrete actions. Cooperatives can actively contribute to shaping the future of work we want. For instance, the bigger and more established cooperatives can show their support for emerging cooperatives to address world of work challenges, like those set up by unemployed youth, low-income women and freelance workers. Codes of conduct for eliminating worse forms of child labour, forced labour and discrimination could be adopted as part of a "Cooperatives for decent work" the theme of this year's International Day of Cooperatives. Needless to say these cannot be done alone. Alliances with trade unions and other social and solidarity economy enterprises and organizations can be sources of strength and innovation in this regard. ●