



International
Labour
Organization

A background illustration featuring a globe, several interlocking gears, and silhouettes of people in various professions (a farmer, a worker, a person with a suitcase, a woman with a broom, and a nurse).

Cooperative movement engagement in sustainable development and the post-2015 process: Survey findings

In order to bring cooperative voices into the discussion around the post-2015 development agenda, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) have launched an initiative on the contribution of cooperatives to sustainable development. This brief reports on the results of an online survey that investigated the current and potential contributions of cooperatives to sustainable development.

Cooperatives and Sustainable Development

- Sustainability is recognized as one of the five pillars of the International Co-operative Alliance's (ICA) Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade, which aims to position cooperatives as builders of economic, social and environmental sustainability by 2020.¹
- The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) acknowledged the role of cooperatives in contributing to social inclusion and poverty reduction, particularly in developing countries.²
- Cooperative enterprises are present in all sectors of the economy and have already demonstrated their capacity to address numerous themes proposed to be included in the post-2015 development agenda.³

The online survey

The findings presented in this brief are based on an online survey, which was available through the ILO COOP website between September and December, 2013. The purpose of the survey was to find out how cooperative business model is contributing towards achieving sustainable development, and how do the actors in the cooperative movement perceive the debate around the post-2015 development framework and the role of cooperatives in this debate.

The survey targeted actors in the cooperative movement through various communication channels and networks. A total of 291 respondents from for example primary cooperatives, cooperative unions and federations, cooperative support institutions, and both governmental and non-governmental organizations participated in the survey.

¹ ICA (2013) Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade. Available at <http://ica.coop/en/media/library/member-publication/blueprint-co-operative-decade-february-2013>

² UNGA (2012) The Future We Want" Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly adopted on 27th July 2012. Available at <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/476/10/PDF/N1147610.pdf?OpenElement>

³ ILO (2014) Cooperatives and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Contribution to the Post-2015 Development Debate. A Brief. Available at http://www.ilo.org/empent/Publications/WCMS_240640/lang-en/index.htm

“ *Cooperative principles of mutual help and solidarity need to be integrated into the thinking on sustainable development goals.* ”

Quote from a survey respondent

Contribution of cooperatives to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

Developing a global partnership for development, ensuring environmental sustainability, and promoting gender equality and empowering women were seen as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with the most significant contributions by the respondents' institutions. These institutions were involved in for instance through providing training, sharing knowledge, and contributing to research, as well as direct project implementation and organizing conferences, in support of the MDGs. Most of these contributions toward MDGs were focused on local and national levels, with less activity on regional and international levels. Respondents reported less contributions on health related MDGs, such as improving maternal health, reducing child mortality, and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.

Cooperatives' participation in the post-2015 debate

Close to half of the respondents expressed their organizations' participation in thematic, national or regional consultations on the post-2015 development agenda. This clearly indicates an interest by the cooperative movement towards post-2015 processes. There is a selectivity bias involved as those who responded to the survey are likely to be more involved and interested in the global development agenda than the cooperative movement at large. The reasons given for not having taken part in the consultation processes included lack of knowledge about consultations, and not feeling invited to join them.

Cooperatives have the potential to contribute to the proposed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁴

The respondents noted that the themes of the proposed Sustainable Development Goals are well-aligned with the priorities of their organizations. Many of them indicated the high potential of cooperatives and the cooperative movement to contribute to the achievement

of the proposed goals. Even for the achievement of health related goals, where contributions to the MDGs were judged relatively less significant by respondents, more than 75 per cent per cent believed there is significant potential for cooperatives and the cooperative movement to contribute.

The respondents identified the following proposed SDGs as those where cooperatives have the most potential to contribute to:

- *Ending poverty* (mentioned by 27% of the respondents), and
- *Creating jobs, sustainable livelihoods, and equitable growth* (20%).

Potential of cooperatives was also seen significant for the following proposed SDGs:

- *Ensuring food security and good nutrition* (10%),
- *Providing quality education and lifelong learning* (9%),
- *Ensuring good governance and effective institutions* (8%), and
- *Empowering girls and women and achieving gender equality* (7%).

“ *The cooperative model offers women, especially poor women, opportunities to lift themselves out of poverty, and have their voices heard collectively.* ”

Quote from a survey respondent

Cooperatives create jobs

Promotion of decent work through better quality, more stable and sustainable jobs has become an increasingly important issued to address for the cooperative movement. The level of unemployment remains high, particularly among youth, and there is an increased need for more and better jobs, sustainable livelihoods and equitable growth. Close to 85 per cent of the respondents reported their institutions' involvement in the promotion of decent work and job creation. Cooperatives contribute to this goal by creating stable employment, advocating and promoting social protection for all, as well as complying with international labour standards and fundamental principles and rights at work.

⁴ HLP (2013), "A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development," New York: United Nations. Available at <http://www.post2015hlp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/UN-Report.pdf>

“ Cooperatives provide an alternative business model for employee engagement and skills development: They show the way forward for achieving sustainable development goals. ”

Quote from a survey respondent

Cooperatives show resilience to crises

Studies⁵ have shown that the cooperative enterprises across sectors have continued to grow and prosper during the financial crisis, and this is reaffirmed by the survey results. Among the respondents 68 per cent observed that the number of cooperatives has grown in their country or region during the past decade; 63 per cent noted that individual membership in cooperatives has increased; and 57 per cent perceived the number of people employed by cooperatives as having risen.

Challenges facing cooperatives

Respondents identified several challenges for cooperatives in contributing towards the sustainable development framework:

- Inadequate enabling environment for cooperative development in many countries, either due to restrictive laws and regulations stemming from a legacy of state control, or from the absence of a cooperative legal framework - 63 per cent of respondents observed that government support to cooperatives had either remained the same or declined in the past decade;
- Cooperatives' limited engagement in articulating a global vision for sustainable development - 29 per cent of respondents institutions' contributions to sustainable development were reported to be at local and 35 per cent at national level, compared to 19 per cent at regional and 17 per cent at international level; and
- Persistent misconceptions on the cooperative business model among employers' organizations, trade unions as well as research institutions, despite positive evidence on cooperatives' contributions.

⁵ ICA (2011), Global 300 Report 2010: The world's major cooperatives and mutual businesses. Available at <http://ica.coop/sites/default/files/attachments/Global300%20Report%202011.pdf>; Birchall, J. (2013), Resilience in a Downturn: The Power of Financial Cooperatives, Geneva: ILO. Available at http://www.ilo.org/empent/Publications/WCMS_207768/lang--en/index.htm

The way forward for cooperatives to engage more fully on sustainable development

The survey respondents observed the cooperative movement was doing better on acting local than on translating their thinking to the global level. They pointed out to two critical elements in order to secure more active engagement by the cooperative movement on sustainable development: the Government on provision of a supportive policy and legal framework; and cooperatives and their organizations in promoting the cooperative model as outlined in the provisions of the ILO Recommendation 193 concerning the Promotion of Cooperatives.⁶

“ Renewed understanding and commitment to of cooperative principles, especially the principle on members' economic participation, is needed. Without that engagement at the members' level many cooperatives risk facing demutualization. ”

Quote from a survey respondent

“ The cooperative movements around the world need to form stronger alliances with NGOs, government agencies, international organizations and other movements in advancing the work on sustainable development. ”

Quote from a survey respondent

“ There are plenty of cooperative opportunities in countries around the world, if people can only be brought to understand the relevance of organizing into cooperative enterprises and the important contribution that cooperatives can make to their lives and well-being. ”

Quote from a survey respondent

⁶ Available at http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:R193

HIGHLIGHTS OF WAYS FORWARD AS IDENTIFIED BY SURVEY RESPONDENTS

<i>Governments</i>	<i>Cooperatives and their organizations</i>
Relevant legislation must recognize and allow for cooperative way of doing business in terms that are <i>not less favourable</i> than those applicable to other types of enterprise and social organization.	Cooperatives and their organizations need advocate effectively at the national and international levels in recognizing their business model toward achieving sustainable development goals.
Governments need to adopt policies that help realize the potential of cooperatives especially in promoting measures that ensure good labour practices are followed, including access to relevant information.	Cooperatives and their organizations need to actively promote fundamental rights and principles at work, including equality and non-discrimination, freedom of association, elimination of child labour and forced labour.
Governments need to promote education and training in cooperative principles and practices, at all levels of the national education and training systems, and in creating public awareness.	Cooperatives and their organizations need to encourage and assist in the formation and strengthening of new types of cooperatives among women, youth and workers, especially those among informal economy workers.
Legislation allowing for the formation and effective functioning of worker cooperatives needs to be put in place as this is an impediment in quite a number of countries.	Cooperatives and their organizations need to establish stronger alliances with like-minded movements and institutions to make the case for their business model in achieving economic, social and environmental justice.
Governments need to define legal obligations of cooperatives (e.g. registration, taxation, licensing, etc.) and support newly established cooperatives to comply with such obligations.	Cooperatives and their organizations need to engage in educating their members and increasing public awareness on the membership and service driven nature of their business model for renewed interest in cooperatives delivering on sustainable development.



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