

Celebrating 125 years: Bringing the future into focus

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125 years of international cooperation

On 19 August 2020, the **International Cooperative Alliance - ICA** is celebrating its 125th anniversary, showing a longevity and strength that few international organisations can claim to have. On this important anniversary, I am pleased to share some material specially prepared for this day on our ICA website. Several co-operators and historians are sharing some important considerations which you will find on the website:

- In his [video address](#), ICA President Ariel Guarco situates the 125 anniversary in the light of the ongoing global challenges, not least the pandemic, and thanks all co-operators for their contributions and efforts to overcome them.
- In [this video](#), Gillian Lonergan, retired UK National Cooperative Archive Librarian; Rita Rhodes, ICA historian; Martin Lowery, ICA Cooperative Identity Committee Chair; and Vina Vida Rempillo, training coordinator and youth co-operator from the Philippines' National Confederation of Cooperatives, share their knowledge of, and enthusiasm for the cooperative movement. You can also read more stories from their interviews [here](#).
- Gillian Lonergan, Rita Rhodes, and Martin Lowery have also written insightful think pieces to enhance our knowledge on the cooperative movement and the future, which can be found [here](#). Several national co-operators and historians of the cooperative movement from countries which had delegates at the very first international Cooperative Congress held in London 125 years ago, share their views here with their analyses on their countries' participation at that congress and the reason why it has been such a remarkably influential event. They also reflect upon what 125 years of relations with the ICA has meant for their national cooperative movements. More national contributions from countries that were represented at the first congress will be uploaded in the incoming days and weeks, and we kindly invite you to visit the ICA website regularly [here](#).

Whereas cooperatives today represent an impressive global reality in terms of membership, employment and economic share in the most diverse sectors, the international cooperative

movement as we know it today would probably not have survived, had not the ICA been established in the first place. This was done in great part to promote a clear entrepreneurial, social and organisational model, aimed at meeting people's needs and aspirations, a model that could be managed by all those involved by themselves. A business model that, by 1895, had already gathered 50 years of extensively tested evidence of success and power of replicability.

Co-operators have always learnt from each other

In her think piece, Gillian Lonergan explains the rise of the cooperative model over those 50 years preceding the ICA's foundation in 1895. The Rochdale Pioneers' Rulebook, as it was called, was quickly followed by hundreds of British cooperatives and known as the "Rochdale method", probably because it combined governance considerations (such as the principle of one person one vote) with very practical provisions borne out of 19th century entrepreneurial experience (like the rule of cash payment). But what is even more noteworthy is that in the middle of the 19th Century, early co-operators crossed borders and travelled long distances to meet and exchange observations and ideas stemming from the experience of their respective cooperative models: the Rochdale cooperative received visitors from many countries as early as in the 1860s, Gillian Lonergan explains. Co-operators from various countries attended and participated in each other's early national congresses. US Madison University Emeritus Prof. Ann Hoyt and Prof. Daniel Plotisnksy, Director of Idelcoop, Argentina, explain how US and Argentinean cooperators made study visits to several European countries at that time. As Dr. Peter Gleber, Scientific Director of the Cooperative History Information Centre in Berlin, explains, Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch, one of the founders of the German credit cooperative movement, had studied Robert Owen and the early German co-operators had a high respect for the Rochdale principles, in spite of the fact that the latter were more oriented towards consumer cooperatives. Prof. Jean-François Draperi from France explains that, during this early period of incubation and networking, the French and British co-operators developed a positive dialogue about the two forms of cooperatives represented by consumer and producer cooperatives. Prof. Alexander Sobolev from Russia explains that the early Russian co-operators studied the English, German, and French models alike.

The ICA's first years and through the two world wars: guidance and resilience

Prof. Rita Rhodes from the UK explains that the ICA, since its creation in 1895, managed to gather a gradually growing international cooperative movement, while maintaining a high level of adaptability and dialogue among the different cooperative schools, sectors and trends that were gradually learning to know each other. This adaptability is what, according to Rita Rhodes, has enabled the ICA and the cooperative movement to remain unified. This was indeed a prudent approach not only because of the changing international context, with the establishment of new states at the end of World War I, not least the Soviet Union, but also of the internal differences within states, like Dr. Eva Bauer explains in the case of the Austrian-Hungarian empire and the new Austrian state, and Dr. Mattia Granata about the development of two cooperative organisations in Italy along different political lines (socialist and catholic), but both following closely the cooperative model.

But there was a limit to adaptability. While the ICA was carrying out its first review of the cooperative principles in the 1930s, the German, Austrian and Italian cooperative movements, undergoing fascism, were excluded for several years.

The post-world war II, cold war and decolonization

Following the second world war, as Prof. Rita Rhodes explains, a second revision of the cooperative principles in 1966 was driven partly by the changing international arena. Prof Soboliev recognizes that ICA activities were partly used for Russian political purposes at that time, but also underlines that exchanges of views and experience among ICA members were useful to all sides, and reminds that hundreds of co-operators from developing countries were trained in cooperative studies at the Moscow Cooperative Institution during the post war for decades.

The 1966 review of the cooperative principles, as well as the 1995 one, discussed the sensitive issue of political neutrality and autonomy and independence, and Daniel Plotinski explains that Argentina took an active part in this debate. During that time, with decolonization, more organisations affiliated from outside Europe, making the ICA gradually a truly global organization, and more representative of the various regions of the world. This laid the ground for the rise of the ICA Regions.

The cooperative movement today

Martin Lowery, in his think piece about the present and the future of the cooperative movement, discusses the important contribution of cooperatives to the immense advances of today's world in the fields of human rights and equality of opportunities. Making the cooperative values fully explicit for the first time in 1995 with the **Statement on the Cooperative Identity** helped clarify the operational excellence of cooperative principles. Martin Lowery also elaborates on the addition of the seventh cooperative principle of 'Concern for Community', with its full conformity with the UN Sustainable Development Goals – SDGs- which were approved 20 years later, and their triple bottom-line vision of development: economic, social, and environmental. He argues that the global challenges of today as further evidenced by the current pandemic, and the key role of cooperatives in contributing to meeting such challenges, require to deepen the understanding of the cooperative principles, including the possibility of their being completed in the light of these ongoing challenges.

Cooperatives and peace

In addition, special mention should be made here about cooperatives and peace along the ICA's history up to this very date, as highlighted by several contributors to our 125 Anniversary.

Back in the 19th Century, one of the founders of the German cooperative movements, Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch, had already affirmed that "the cooperative is peace", according to Peter Gleber. Rita Rhodes in her think piece points out that the First ICA Declaration on Peace goes back to 1902, whereas Ann Hoyt recalls that the 1913 Glasgow Congress expressed deep concern for the pre-war climate then emerging. Rita Rhodes explains that, after World War I, an

ICA Congress in Switzerland presented a global report on cooperatives during the war period, which she upholds as an early example of truth and reconciliation. Mattia Granata emphasises the focus on cooperatives and peace brought by Ivano Barberini, the first ICA Italian President (2001-2009). Ann Hoyt underlines the 2006 ICA Declaration mentioning peace under Barberini's presidency, and hails the ICA Declaration on Cooperatives and Positive Peace approved by the ICA 2019 General Assembly held in Kigali, Rwanda, adding that the quest for positive peace is probably one the key contributions of cooperatives during the entire ICA history. Martin Lowery ends his think piece echoing Ann Hoyt, considering that positive peace is probably one of the areas where cooperatives can bring the most lasting impact on the development of communities everywhere and in the future.

Evolving to meet emergent and urgent needs

The achievement in establishing the ICA 125 years ago and the continued strength of the cooperative model is a testimony to its relevance and contribution of cooperatives to cooperative members, their families and communities, and societies at large, around the world. The cooperative movement and the ICA have managed to survive and grow through the great economic depression, the fascist and Nazi regimes, the tragedies of two world wars, the high tensions of the cold war and the arms race, crimes against humanity during internal conflicts, pressures to conform to for-profit motives only, as well as the so many concurrent crises and challenges. The ICA is representing today 315 member organisations in 111 countries—more than at any time in these 125 years. There is corresponding evidence that, since the industrial revolution until today, cooperatives have been economically sustainable in all sectors of the economy, and continue to be responsive to the fundamental and evolving human needs.

New forms and types of cooperatives are being invented all the time, just like the original Rochdale Pioneers cooperative did, with amazing innovations. Social cooperatives, an extremely valuable experiment, were invented in Italy in the late 1970s, and are now extending all over the world. We have recently seen the emergence of freelancers' cooperatives, community cooperatives, renewable energy cooperatives, food cooperatives, and various types of multi-stakeholder and platform cooperatives as innovative and successful cooperative models. It is only natural that new forms of cooperatives will continue to emerge as the socio-economic needs of human beings evolve, and aspirations manifest themselves into a common will to make this world a better place.

Cooperatives' future is being built here and now

The cooperative model may have been sometimes depicted as 'old-fashioned', which we cannot agree with as innovation and dynamism seem continuously to spring from the 5th cooperative principle of education, training and information, of members, staff, communities and public at large but also the youth, women and vulnerable groups in every society across the world. With the emergence of new technologies and the youth's leadership in global issues, we observe among them a strengthening and vibrant interest towards the cooperative model. This was particularly tangible during the recent cooperative Global Youth Forum, in February 2020 in Malaysia, which was also a large mutual learning exercise. The youth, as global citizens, are becoming more determined to actively bring up the subject of environmental crises and the

impact of climate change to the fore, as well as the need for addressing inequality and discrimination. The cooperative model continues to be increasingly relevant thanks to young co-operators, offering one of the most important channels for democratic organisation and ensuring both the satisfaction and sustainable management of their economic, social, cultural and environmental needs.

Cooperatives attest to the human spirit of cooperation, resilience and solidarity, capable of overcoming all types of challenges, transformations, and crises. But it is through our children, through the youth and their leadership today, that the cooperative model will remain an important agent of social transformation, working steadily towards sustainable, inclusive, encompassing development of all individuals, families and communities, towards positive peace. The ICA will be there, as it has always been, as the platform for exchange dedicated to the cooperative model.

The International Cooperative Alliance will continue to deliver its value with unwavering determination, for decades to come, to support all and each one's efforts to improve life on this planet for all, with the humble but bold contribution of our cooperative identity.