

Sergi Rodríguez

“Cooperativism could serve as a model for global development”

**Interview with Ivano Barberini,
President of the International Cooperative Alliance**

To talk with Ivano Barberini is to talk with cooperativism as a permanent background theme. His analytical capacity and his extensive knowledge can lead him to talk and talk for hours about what seem to be accessory matters, but ones which are later revealed as the traces of a perfect circumference in which the cooperative movement always occupies a central position. Barberini likes to put things in their place and to call them by their name, even when this means going against the trend. He is a vital person, an human earthquake who, when tackling important themes, likes to ask “senti?” from time to time in order to leave things clear, before returning to his contextualised discourse, replete with a thousand anecdotes and experiences taken from his long history as a cooperativist.

What do you expect from this International Conference on Social Economy?

Cooperativism has been dealt with in many countries, but never before on a European level, at least not outside the International Cooperative Alliance. We are beginning to perceive a change in attitude, and some of these European countries are now fomenting the debate. This had already taken place in Latin America. In the case of Salamanca, a reevaluation of the role of the individual in his/her society is expected, together with a recovery of an economic concept which does not hold capital as its only reference. The individual must be the central element of the economy, of greater importance than capital itself.

As president of the ICA, how would you define the current state of cooperativism in the world today?

The General Secretary of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, has correctly said that we must reevaluate the cooperative movement, because one half of humanity is in conditions to assist the other half. This is true. However, one of the main problems facing the movement is its poor, low profile. There are coo-



Sergi Rodríguez

peratives throughout the world that functioning well in almost all sectors and that possess an important social value. In India, for example, almost 220 million members are grouped together in around 500,000 cooperatives. The International Cooperative Alliance, without going any further, currently represents 760 million people. However, even in Europe, where the movement has existed for almost 150 years, it is also little known and understood.

What are the motives which lie behind this lack of knowledge about cooperatives?

One of the motives is the lack of communication. It is usually said that cooperatives are more about doing than about explaining. Perhaps that is right, but it seems to me that the crux of the question lies in the unfounded attacks which cooperatives receive in many countries. In Italy, for example, the persecution of cooperatives became a state priority some months ago, above all in legislative terms, as is also happening in Hungary and and Senegal. Above all, these attacks are launched at those cooperatives which are competitive in the market, whilst those which function in isolation are accepted. This is the main reason behind the attacks, which are the result of a dominant discourse, according to which the market must

“The individual must be the central element of the economy, of greater importance than capital itself.”

chanced at those cooperatives which are competitive in the market, whilst those which function in isolation are accepted. This is the main reason behind the attacks, which are the result of a dominant discourse, according to which the market must

only think in producing wealth and not in solidarity, whilst simultaneously refusing redistribution. It is the old “business is business” motif. The idea that there exists a type of business which combines the creation of wealth and its distribution is not tolerated. Years ago, around 1920, an Italian economist wrote “cooperatives maybe tolerated, but when they become bothersome, there must be intervention”. There are still many today who think that a cooperative loses its definition as such if it chooses to compete in the market. Many see the differential identity of the cooperatives as a privilege.

How can this deep-rooted attitude be changed?

It forms part of a cultural strategy, of a change in mentality. The discourse based on profitability must be exchanged for one which combines economy and solidarity. European society wants to control the difference, to present it as something extreme, but the very same society must see the need to protect individuals and to respect the environment. Globalisation must always hold the individual as a reference. This idea is included in the book written by recent Nobel Prize winner Joseph E. Stiglitz, former Vice-President of the World Bank. Stiglitz has shown himself to be very critical with the globalisation process, due to it being excessively inspired by business and controlled by the richer countries, which are ignorant of the search for an improved distribution of wealth aimed at relieving the situations of extreme poverty which exist in the world.

How does the ICA see the globalisation process and the movements which oppose it?

The anti-globalisation movement is a response from the civil society, which is not in agreement with the current model of globalisation and which wishes to participate in the definition of a new model. It is not easy to situate the cooperative movement within this context. The ICA is apolitical, and it must continue that way. However, it

possesses a series of values and principals that govern its actions and that could be useful to these anti-globalisation movements in the development of their proposal. Nevertheless, the most efficient way of acting would be to define a Social Economy Charter which allowed a influence to be exercised on the dominant culture by the institutions. The promotion of development is the construction of a fairer, more peaceful world. Under the slogan “make money, make peace”, Simon Peres himself called for the foundation of cooperatives in Gaza. Our model is not only capable of assisting in the elimination of poverty, but also the causes which provoke poverty. This is because it is the civil society itself which forms a structure and helps to overcome the shortcomings of weak States. Thanks to development programmes, the creation of cooperatives is underway in many places around the world, but there is still work to be done.

Does this mean that the ICA could assume a more standout role in the process?

It would form a part of the reflection phase which the orga-



Ivano Barberini, in a recent meeting with Kofi Annan.

A life at the service of cooperativism

The trajectory of Ivano Barberini (Modena, Italy 1939) is so closely linked to cooperativism that it is difficult to know where his private life ends and his commitment to the cooperative movement begins. An economics graduate, Barberini passed through almost all of the stages before becoming president of the International Cooperative Alliance in 1996. In 1960, at the age of 21, he began his professional career in Modena Federcoop, and three years later was elected vice president of the food cooperative CIAM-UNIBON. In 1968, he joined the board of the Modena Cooperati-

ve Alliance and four years later became the delegate in Bologna of CoopItalia, the most important logistics management cooperative in Italy, from where he coordinated the inter-regional actions of Emilia-Ramagana, Vénetto, Márques and Friuli. In 1975, he became president of Coop Emilia-Venetto, one of the most outstanding entities in Italy, due to the innovations that it introduced in sales techniques. In 1979, he became president of Coop Nazionale, where he remained until 1996. Simultaneously, whilst educating himself in business strategies and management innovation, Barberini held the presidency of the European Community of Consumer Co-

operatives (Eurocoop), and he became a member of the banking cooperative Banec's management team. Since 1996, he has also held the posts of board member of Fondazione Italianeuropei, vice president of the Permanent European Cooperatives, Friendly Societies, Associations and Foundations Conference (CEPCMAF) and of the Coordinating Committee of the European Cooperatives Committee (CCA-CE) and president of the Lega Nazionale della Cooperative e Mutue (Legacoop). He is the author of the books *Costruire il futuro* and *Competere per cosa?* He is monthly collaborator for the *Specchio Economico* magazine.

nization is currently undergoing. We must adapt our structures to the current times. We must achieve a more decentralised structure capable of favouring the development of cooperativism throughout the five continents, and this must be done through a strategy which combines utopia with reality. With all of the prudence which an organization such as this must show, avoiding involvement in politics but promoting the defence of work and environmental respect, matters which are of interest to everybody. This would mean having to often swim against the current, because the promotion of the idea of freedom as a responsibility goes against the current interpretation, which classifies it as egoism.

Would cooperativism, due to its flexibility, also be a good model for global development?

I read that a short while ago. A cooperative is a company born to last. The secret lies in its capacity to adapt itself to the particular circumstances of each situation without changing its fundamental values. In fact, they are almost the same values as in 1844, when a group of weavers wrote the so-called Rochester declaration, which has later served as the base for others in 1937, in 1966 and in 1995. In this last case, for example, mention was made of how to adapt the fundamental values to each context through the employment of operative lines. In China or in India, where almost every village has one, the cooperatives are considered as an element of cohesion. Nevertheless, in smaller countries such as Puerto Rico, I have seen cooperatives with 700 workers, 500 of which were members, and which were dedicated to the repair of aeroplanes for large airline companies. It is clear that the competitive advantage of the cooperative lies in the reduction of costs and the quality of the work. Neither

“Isolated cooperatives are tolerated, whereas competitive cooperatives are attacked. many see their differentiating factors as a privilege”

must we forget the cooperative’s capacity to integrate the most under-favoured collectives, such as those with mental disorders. In Italy, there is a cooperative which runs a launderette, a restaurant and a hostel in which people who have recently left hospital may experience a favourable atmosphere in which they are able to feel useful. The cooperative is a formula with many possibilities, and it must achieve a higher profile throughout the world. This task must count with the involvement

of the international institutions.

Another of the aspects to have stood out in Salamanca, apart from the matter of cohesion, is that of the internal democracy of the cooperatives, which in the long run is transmitted to society in the form of democratic values.

The cooperativist movement is based, in large measure, on participation. The 1995 revision of the Charter states that the cooperatives “must cooperate amongst themselves”, which, for example, you do not find in companies. Solidarity is born of the social pact between the member and the cooperative. A cooperative is always an entity of great trust, a place where one feels safe with respect to others, a place without betrayal. One Italian statistic, for example, demonstrates that mortality in cooperatives is a third of that in commercial companies: employment, at the same time, has tripled in cooperatives during the last 25 years. The members of a cooperative feel that are depended on, and on this dependence the solidarity is built. Some days ago, I attended a congress of the British Coop Union in Belfast. It was the second congress to be held in Ireland since the birth of the cooperative movement in 1844. But there was a desire to hold the congress there as a means of supporting the peace movement, although 90% of the delegates were from the United Kingdom. Cooperativism can be a model for global development, because it promotes participation, eliminates social exclusion, provides security and constructs peace. Some months ago, during the ICA Assembly in Seoul, Israeli and Palestinian delegates met within the context of cooperativism, which is beyond their religious and political differences.

Perhaps a demonstration of the validity of cooperativism lies in the fact that many of the projects which surge in the Internet sector are adopting the cooperative model.

Cooperates value efficiency, and Internet is efficient. The names of our entities refer to the idea of a network, as is demonstrated by the fact

Seigi Rodriguez





Eduard Ullastre

that the first of them were not named coop, but society. They were supportive through efficiency, because if they did not redistribute wealth, and people remained without money, they would have a difficult time collecting their wages for the work done, which is also a sacred value within cooperativism. The conjunction of efficiency and solidarity lies in the idea of Internet, which simultaneously offers a magnificent opportunity to strengthen the links between cooperatives. The clearest example of this collective identity lies in the creation of the new coop dominion, which is reserved for the exclusive use of cooperatives. But it is also a good instrument through which to publicise oneself, because it allows one to reach a massive audience at a much-reduced cost.

What is worldwide cooperativism lacking?

The collaboration between the different families of cooperativism, above all those in each country. There is too much control in Italy, for example, whereas in Germany there is a need for a greater service mentality. There exists a Third Sector Forum, but it is limited to social cooperatives, which is

not the same thing. In Portugal, the third sector includes the full range of the social economy, whereas in Italy it only covers those entities which lie outside the market. There is a need for a decided action within the European countries towards a strengthening of cooperativism in each country. The strength of the movement could lie here and, in part, that of Europe too.

To finish, I would like to ask you how the ICA sees Catalan cooperativism, which has held a pioneering role not only in Spain, but also in Europe.

I am mostly familiar with the consumer cooperativism, such as Eroski in Mondragón, and Asistencia, with its interesting experiences in health care and hospital management.

Both of these cooperatives have known how to promote themselves. In fact, Spanish legislation on cooperativism is very interesting, much more so than Italian legislation, which has failed to understand the dimension and the richness of cooperativism. Concepts such as the external friendly society, which allows the friendly society benefit to be transmitted to non-members, are good proof of this.

“The cooperative model not only helps in overcoming poverty, but also its causes, because they come from the civil society”