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UN launches Year of Cooperatives with spotlight on development



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The United Nations today [launched](#) the International Year of Cooperatives with the General Assembly President underlining their role as catalysts of socially-inclusive development and capacity to empower communities through jobs and income generation.

“Cooperatives contribute to food security, rural development, and other social services,” said Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, opening the Assembly’s plenary meeting to launch 2012 as the International Year.

“They are not only provide productive employment opportunities to marginalized groups including women, youth, persons with disabilities, older persons and indigenous people, but also make a valuable contribution through the technical assistance programmes of their human resources development component.”

The Assembly had earlier decided that 2012 will be observed as the International Year of Cooperatives in recognition of their contribution to socio-economic development, particularly with regard to poverty reduction, employment creation and social integration. The theme of the year will be ‘Cooperative enterprises help build a better world.’

Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro pointed out that as the world witnesses growing public discontent as a result of the financial and economic crises, the international community could learn from the cooperative movement, which, she said, balanced both economic viability and social responsibility.

“As self-help organizations, cooperatives are inherently people-centred. They not only meet material needs, but also the human need to participate proactively in improving one’s life.

“Moreover, with democratic decision-making processes and a focus on cultivating member skills and capacities, cooperatives offer a model for harnessing the energies and passions of all,” [said](#) Ms. Migiro.

During the year, efforts will be made to expand public awareness of the role of cooperatives – especially in relation to the fulfilment of the internationally-agreed poverty reduction and socio-economic development targets known as the Millennium Development Goals ([MDGs](#)). Efforts will also be made to encourage the growth of cooperatives worldwide and strengthen them through policies and legal frameworks that facilitate their growth.

“By virtue of their organizational characteristics, cooperative enterprises are user-owned and community responsive. They continue to aggregate economic power enabling communities to compete successfully in the global economy,” Mr. Al-Nasser added.

At an informal roundtable on the role of cooperatives in sustainable development, Sha Zukang, the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, pointed out that cooperatives had an important role to play in the transition to a green economy, saying they offered a business model with comparative advantage in creating socially-inclusive and environmentally sound economic practices.

“Cooperatives have also been noteworthy for their contributions to rural development and agricultural productivity across both the developed and developing world,” said Mr. Sha, who is also Secretary-General of next year’s UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20).

Across Europe, for example, cooperatives account for some 60 per cent of the processing and marketing of agricultural commodities, and they also hold a 50 per cent share in the supply of inputs,” Mr. Sha added.

At a news conference at UN Headquarters, Mr. Sha described cooperatives as “self-help organizations” that generated employment and improved incomes, thus contributing to poverty reduction. “Cooperatives also strengthen local economies and communities by tapping local resources and opportunities,” he said.

In Rome, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)), the UN International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) and the UN World Food Programme ([WFP](#)) stressed that smallholder farmers reap benefits from joining agricultural cooperatives through boosting their bargaining power and sharing resources to enhance food security and reduce poverty.

“Ranging from small-scale to multi-million dollar businesses across the globe, cooperatives operate in all sectors of the economy, count over 800 million members and provide 100 million jobs worldwide – 20 per cent more than multinational enterprises,” the three Rome-based agencies said in a statement.

In 2008, the largest 300 cooperatives in the world had an aggregate turnover of \$1.1 trillion, comparable to the gross domestic product (GDP) of many large economies, the agencies pointed out.

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