Co-operatives in Social Development
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Theme 3 - Raising Public Awareness

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1. Introduction

The United Nations has declared 2012 as the International Year of Co-operatives with the stated goal of increasing public awareness about co-operatives and their contributions to socio-economic development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Year is also intended to promote the formation and growth of co-operatives and encourage Governments to establish policies, laws and regulations conducive to the formation, growth and stability of co-operatives.

This paper focuses mainly on the independent media and communication dimension of public awareness, reflecting the expertise and background of IPS. Other public relations aspects of raising awareness will be addressed in the Communication Strategy of the IYC Secretariat, with a slogan and logo already in place.

A strong communication and media component can contribute to the double purpose of increasing the visibility of co-operatives during IYC, and strengthening their long-term capacity to communicate. All IYC stakeholders including those co-ordinated by the United Nations and beyond should be informed, consulted and encouraged to engage with the proposed public awareness communication and media activities.

“Co-operative enterprises build a better world” is the slogan of IYC. It captures the dynamism and reach of co-operatives, which have impact both as economic engines and as social actors. Co-operatives range in scale from small to multi-million dollar businesses united by an organisational model characterised by joint ownership and democratic control. Globally, the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) estimates that co-operatives employ more than 100 million women and men and have more than 800 million individual members.

Co-operatives are active across a huge variety of economic and social sectors. Agriculture, fisheries, consumer and financial services, housing, and production are just some of the economic sectors where co-operatives are active. Child-care, health and social care, schools, sports, tourism, utilities (electricity, water, gas, etc.), and transport are other sectors where the co-operative model is common.

In different countries and regions co-operatives have particular roots and cultural resonances. Public awareness strategies will need to integrate and reflect this rich and diverse global reality.

In terms of size, scope and impact co-operatives should be naturally present in the media’s news agenda, and to some extent they are, although often without recognition of their unique organisational structure. One immediate opportunity during IYC will be to highlight the range of businesses and services that are co-operatively managed.

Furthermore IYC also provides an opportunity to highlight the unique benefits of the co-operative model in tackling pressing planetary crises. Values like solidarity, tolerance and equality are embedded in the explicitly socially conscious co-operative organisational
model. Putting people, not capital, at the heart of their activities, co-operatives are playing a huge role in social development, for example in empowering women, achieving food security and providing ethical financial and banking services.

Naturally then, the United Nations has identified IYC as another way to push for the achievement of the MDGs as the 2015 deadline approaches. It is a major communication and media challenge and opportunity to get the word out about the achievements of the co-operative model and its potential to address economic, social, human rights, environmental and sustainability issues.

IPS international news agency, which is itself a co-operative, has always believed that information is an agent of change. Founded in 1964 as a workers co-operative of journalists building a communication bridge from Latin America to Europe, the agency has grown into a leading global communication institution with a news agency at its core.

Most of the more than 400 journalists writing for IPS originate from developing countries, are based there, and are specialised in sustainable development, poverty, human rights and gender issues. Over the last ten years, IPS organised tens of media seminars and trainings focusing on MDG issues, and produced handbooks, training manuals and glossaries, as well as award-winning journalism. IPS is headquartered in Rome in Italy, a country with a strong and dynamic co-operative sector, and is a member of the Italian Lega delle Cooperative.

As an international communication organisation with a de-centralised structure, IPS has the global capacity, experience and contacts to put at the disposal of the UN IYC and its awareness-raising goals. The news agenda and expertise of the IPS editorial team has a strong coincidence with the goals of the year in terms of socio-economic development, (including poverty reduction, employment generation and social integration) and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Some proposals on how all UN IYC stakeholders can take maximum advantage of the communication and media opportunities afforded by the international year follow. The approach is two-fold: in the first instance to revive and create a strong pool of media / communicators within the co-operative movement and to strengthen their capacities and shared platforms; and secondly to market, distribute and reach out to the general public, decision-makers and civil society with news about cooperation and UN IYC, its strength, impact and potential, using traditional, new and social media channels.

2. Proposed objectives for awareness raising

The objective of a media and communication plan of action around public awareness might encompass:
• Strengthening the global growth of co-operatives and the role they play in fostering social and economic development, towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

More specific objectives can be to:

• Contribute a strong communication and media dimension to the celebration of the International Year of Co-operatives, 2012;

• Strengthen the sustainable capacity, linkages and shared platforms of the communication and media actors of the co-operative movement during and beyond 2012; and

• Use mass, traditional and social media to get greater visibility and awareness about the scale, impact and potential of co-operative enterprises in solving economic and social challenges.

3. Possible awareness raising activities

The activities and coverage should be aligned to the extent possible with the calendar of IYC events being developed by the United Nations (including lead agencies FAO and ILO), national committees, ICA members and other stakeholders. In this way the activities will be undertaken in a way that is cost-effective and participatory, and will promote maximum synergies with other efforts and events. Balanced participation from industrialised, emerging and developing countries should be sought, recognising that new South-South patterns of trade and development are re-shaping international relations.

Co-operative Media Pool

The proposal is to convene, within 2011, a critical mass of co-operatively organised media organisations and news providers from within the co-operative movement. This meeting would be an early and timely opportunity to share ideas, needs, strategies and planning around IYC and how to use the year to build a more effective and sustained co-operative media presence and visibility. The creation of a common “media pool” that can share selected content and be an entry point for news from and about co-operatives will be on the agenda.

The ICA General Assembly in Cancun, November 2011 could be one venue for this event.

The intention would be not to set up a new, heavy structure or organisation but to create a first circle of media actors that are already part of the co-operative movement and to discuss, agree and provide a network from which to build variegated initiatives (content, capacity-building, shared platforms) and stronger relationships among the participants.
In convening such a gathering and agreeing its objectives, specific emphasis will be put on the social and economic role of co-operatives, and how they can contribute to the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals. In inviting participants the organisers should work towards bringing together co-operatives from industrialised, emerging and developing countries.

Linkages or sponsorship could be sought with leading co-op enterprises, for example drawn from the ICA’s Global 300 Report, which identifies the 300 largest co-operatives in the world. For example, the report launch itself is a newsworthy event, and can provide a concrete example of the way in which co-operatives can make the news. Establishing links between co-operative media and some of the biggest enterprises creates the potential for future news coverage and other forms of partnership.

**Co-operative news portal**

IPS is convinced of the utility of establishing a common, multi-lingual news portal about co-operative enterprises as a flagship public awareness tool for UN IYC. The proposed site would curate news content primarily from co-operative media (including IPS), plus linked content about co-operatives from other media sources. The co-operative media pool above could generate the first circle of content.

The website will be complementary to other sites about IYC and co-operatives with a unique focus on news content, and will provide prominent links out to other ICA, UN and other sites. As well as being a stand-alone source of news that will be marketed to specific target audiences, the site will be set up to provide different types of news content feeds (RSS and other automated feeds) that can be featured on other websites, including the main UN IYC portal.

The primary audiences of the website itself will be co-operative activists and members who can be informed and inspired about the scope of their movement; journalists and researchers looking for information about co-operatives and IYC; and general readers doing the same.

A newsletter could be established to push out the material to these audiences, and social media tools (Facebook, Twitter) will be associated with the site to reach even wider audiences. Specific marketing effort could be made to interest mainstream media journalists and gatekeepers, bloggers and social media users to visit the site and share and contribute content.

Initial priority languages can be English, Spanish and French, followed by the other UN languages and other languages if resources are forthcoming. The IPS regions have built a track record of distributing news in Southern and Asian languages as well, in order to reach non-capital and non-English audiences. Some translation should be ensured although it is not essential that the content be common across all the languages.
The organisation of the site should take account of the goals and themes of IYC - co-operatives as social and economic actors for a better world. In terms of transparency, the site should carefully identify the source of all material, and indicate whether it is editorially independent professional journalism, (like IPS and others) or news content generated from within a co-operative enterprise. Ideally, site editors will curate content contributed directly by the co-operative media pool and others, and will trawl general media sources for relevant journalism. The editors would decide the prominence and placement of material on the site to maximise the timeliness and interest of the site.

If resources were available then multi-lingual, multi-media content (audio, slideshows, short videos) would greatly enhance the site. As noted above it would be essential to match the website with a very strong social media marketing dimension.

**Coverage of major IYC events in 2012**

During 2012 the stakeholders of IYC will organise local, national, regional and global events to highlight and celebrate co-operatives. These events can be a rich source of material for raising public awareness, generating media coverage, including through the proposed co-operative media pool and the news portal.

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The calendar of events of IYC is still in preparation.

**Capacity-building for co-operative communicators and media**

IYC is an opportunity to create sustainable communication capacity by holding training and capacity-building events for communicators within the movement, as well as creating capacity-building tools.

The agenda and the components of the different trainings would be designed in a participatory way, taking account of recommendations from members of the media pool and the selected trainees consulted in advance. Training fellowships would enable applicants from smaller and poorer co-operatives to participate in the trainings.

PIS views training as a process not an event, and would envisage the trainees continuing to be mentored at a distance throughout 2012, and encouraged to engage in the other activities described in this proposal.

IPS has a strong track-record of training journalists and others. More than 300 participants are trained in IPS seminars and workshops each year. Most IPS training takes place in the South, managed by IPS Africa, IPS Asia-Pacific and IPS Latin America.
**IYC media and communication seminar**

During 2012 it would be appropriate to convene a high-level event that brings together some 50 leading thinkers and practitioners from the media and communication sectors.

The seminar would reflect on the continuing contribution that media and communication could bring to the co-operative movement. It will be an opportunity during 2012 to re-convene with members from the co-operative media pool, and to map out directions for the future. The event may be scheduled alongside another event, according to the emerging calendar for IYC.

**4. Conclusions**

The International Year of Co-operatives is a major opportunity to build awareness and communication capacity, platforms, news pools and partnerships that are sustainable, all toward telling the untold stories and contributions of co-operatives in development.

It is a chance to work with the communicators, media, members and stakeholders of the co-operative movement itself, and to engage with the general public, decision makers and civil society through mass and social media.

For maximum impact the public-awareness work should commence in 2011, continue throughout IYC 2012 and with the aim of creating sustainable platforms, partnerships and news flows for the long-term.