

International Year (2012): Cooperatives Advance Sustainability and Social Responsibility

Rio+20 coincides with the International Year of Cooperatives (2012), and the conference's proceedings offer an opportunity to highlight the contributions of cooperatives to sustainable development. Cooperatives embrace and embody a vision of enterprise that fosters inclusion, equity, and dignity. As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recently said: "Cooperatives are a reminder to the international community that it is possible to pursue both economic viability and social responsibility."

Cooperatives are member-driven, and managed through deliberative, democratic decision-making, in accordance with a philosophy of self-help, and the principle of "one-member, one-vote." By allowing participants to pool their collective resources and attain greater economies of scale, cooperatives serve as powerful tools for mutual empowerment. They enable access to markets, goods, and services to those peoples and groups that may be neglected, underserved, or disadvantaged by the traditional/dominant market model.

Cooperatives, however, are more than just another way of doing business - though their success in this regard can be observed, for instance, in the relative resilience of financial cooperatives and credit unions during the recent economic downturns. For as they are organized by, and oriented towards, their home communities, cooperatives promote both initiative and solidarity. And in being so rooted in the needs and conditions of their communities, cooperatives can prove highly flexible, dynamic and adaptable. This is evidenced in the wide variety of contexts and environments that host cooperatives - from those that ensure food security through increased agricultural productivity and expanded marketing, to those that mobilize women in order to provide them with independent income and a more secure role in society. Moreover, the attention to long-term sustainability has been leading cooperatives to greater concern for the environment, and the need to preserve it for the generations to come. Consistently, cooperatives bring people together so that they can assert control over their own livelihoods, and their futures.

Grounded in core values that prevent the undue prioritization of profits over people, cooperatives present an alternative to business as usual. They offer an innovative way of balancing the sometimes competing pressures of economic activity, and social inclusion and development. As dignitaries and leaders congregate for the Rio+20 Conference, to explore how to create a global economy that will be more just and more equitable- and therefore truly sustainable- they would do well to consider the theme of the IYC: "Cooperative enterprises build a better world."

[More info on the International Year of Cooperatives \(2012\)](#)

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