

U: UNITED NATIONS AND CO-OPERATIVES

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Introduction

The title 'United Nations and Co-operatives' covers two vast realities. Describing their connection meaningfully within the limited space available requires delimiting both terms of the title.

By 'co-operatives' we understand here those entities which fall under the internationally recognized definition of co-operatives as enshrined in the 1995 International Co-operative Alliance Statement on the Co-operative Identity (ICA Statement) and in the International Labour Organization Promotion of Co-operatives Recommendation No. 193, 2002, (ILO R.193). It reads: '[...] the term 'co-operative' means an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.'

By 'United Nations' (UN) we understand the United Nations Organization (UNO) itself and the conglomerate of heterogeneous UN agencies (for example the United Nations Research Institute on Social Development, UNRISD), programs (for example the UN Development Program, UNDP), and specialized organizations (for example the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO; the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, UNIDO; the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization, FAO; and the International Labour Organization, ILO). They compose the so-called United Nations System (UN System). Given the multi-dimensional character of co-operatives and their degree of interpenetration with the economic, social, and societal fabric of most countries, on the one hand, and the variety of powers of the entities of the UN System (general mandate, mandate limited by subject matter and/or sector), on the other hand, co-operatives are being used by many of these entities to execute their programs, either systematically or sporadically. These entities and their actions are too numerous to be dealt with here, even if one were just to sketch them. This overview is therefore limited to those entities which have systematically and over time contributed to developing co-operatives as institutions, namely the UNO itself, especially through its Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and its Department of Economic and



Social Affairs (DESA), the FAO and the ILO. This is not to undervalue the contributions other entities have made to the development of co-operatives, in addition to those mentioned above also the so-called Bretton Woods institutions, in particular the World Bank.

FAO, ILO and UNO have been collaborating since 1971 with each other, with the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) and other non-governmental organizations, currently the World Farmers Organization, through an interagency committee. Since 1989 this committee has been called the Committee for the Advancement and Promotion of Co-operatives (COPAC).

UNO, FAO and Co-operatives

UNO: Through its Resolution 370 the ECOSOC recommended as early as 1951 that governments promote co-operatives in agriculture. But only the 1968 UN General Assembly Resolution 2459 can be seen as the starting point of continued policy work on co-operatives by the UNO. Since then, the Secretary-General of the UNO has reported regularly to the General Assembly on the status of co-operatives, including at the national level, the effects given to resolutions concerning co-operatives, and has suggested further action, if appropriate. These reports are elaborated in close co-operation with all relevant entities of the UN System and with the co-operative movement/s through COPAC.

Shortly after the adoption of the ICA Statement in 1995 the UNO commissioned COPAC with the elaboration of guidelines for governments for the promotion of co-operatives. These guidelines were adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2001 as 'Guidelines aimed at creating a supportive environment for the development of co-operatives'. COPAC also played a decisive role in the preparation of the declaration by the UNO of 2012 as the International Year of Co-operatives (IYC), as well as in coordinating activities throughout the IYC.

The UNO does not have a permanent structure for the promotion of co-operatives. It has, however, been continuously committed through DESA to ensuring that the economic and social role of co-operatives be strengthened and that this role be known. In this latter context the yearly celebration of the International Day of Co-operatives needs mentioning.

FAO: In contrast to the UNO, the FAO has a limited mandate. Since its inception in 1945 it has frequently worked through co-operatives when executing its programs. During the 1950s and 1960s it organized numerous



events (conferences, training sessions etc.) on the development of co-operatives as institutions, either itself or jointly with the ILO and the UNO. The institutional aspect of co-operatives came again to its attention when, in 1979, the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development triggered the FAO People's Participation Program.

For many years, the FAO did not have a permanent structure for the promotion of co-operatives in general. But it contributed, albeit with changing emphasis, to developing co-operatives in the sectors for which it has a mandate. During the 2012 UN International Year of Cooperatives (IYC) the FAO reviewed its policy and in 2013 it established its 'Office of Partnerships, Advocacy and Capacity Development'. This Office focuses on cooperatives and producers organizations. Among others, it supports governments to provide an enabling environment for the organizational development of cooperatives.

Based on a general agreement with the ILO, a Memorandum of Understanding between the two organizations ensures effective collaboration.

ILO and Co-operatives

The link between the UN and co-operatives reaches beyond the emergence of the UN System during and after World War II. The reasons relate to the ILO. The ILO is older than the other components of the UN System. It has played an active role in the development of co-operatives almost since the start of its operations in 1920 in Geneva. The *raison d'être* of this involvement can be found in the history of modern co-operatives and of the ILO. The ILO was already interacting during the 1920s with the predecessor of the UNO, the League of Nations, for example through the 1927 International Economic Conference.

According to its Constitution the ILO is the only international organization to have an unlimited mandate to work on, with, and through co-operatives and it has adopted the only governmental international legal instrument on co-operatives, namely ILO R. 193.

Since 1921 the ILO Office has had a Co-operative Branch. Over its almost 100 year history the ILO has worked on a wide gamut of co-operative related issues. As far as the development of the institutional aspects are concerned, one may mention the following: participation in the preparation and revision of co-operative laws in the widest possible sense of the term, in the reform of respective administrative services, in the establishment of higher level co-operative structures (unions and federations), in the



organization of co-operative education and training, and in management capacity building. The Co-operative Branch rightly claims to have invented technical co-operation in the late 1930s.

The work of the Co-operative Branch became part of the core mandate of the ILO, which is labour standard setting, when in 1966 the Conference of the ILO adopted ILO Recommendation No.127 concerning the role of co-operatives in the economic and social development of developing countries. This recommendation addressed the governments of the so-called developing countries, Member states of the ILO. This changed with ILO R.193. This recommendation is of universal applicability; it addresses, severally and jointly, besides the constituents of the ILO, i.e. the governments, the employers and the workers' organizations of all Member states, also the co-operative organizations. The importance of the inclusion of the co-operative organizations is further underlined by the fact that the ILO Conference integrated the ICA Statement into the text of R. 193. This was the first time that a text of an international non-governmental organization became part of a text of an international governmental organization. The subsequent signing in 2003 of a Memorandum of Understanding between the ILO and the ICA as a non-governmental organization constituted a further novelty.

Time will show whether this institutional *rapprochement* will revive attempts of the early 1920s to structurally integrate co-operatives into the ILO and thus upgrade the consultative status that the ICA has had since 1948. The ILO is the only international tripartite organization: employers and workers' organizations have as many seats and votes in all organs of the organization as have the governments of the Member states. However representative each of the constituents is, it may be assumed that the ILO is thus more democratic than other international organizations. The ca. one billion members of co-operatives around the world do not feel represented despite their sharing a common objective with the ILO, which is social justice. The validity of the argument that was used in the 1920s to not attribute co-operatives with the same status as employers' and workers organizations, namely that co-operatives are sufficiently represented by the governments, was and is questionable. However that may be, globalization has changed the notions of labour/work and of enterprise and the weights and roles of the constituents of the ILO. Globalization dissolves the structural congruency between the state and the labour market partners. This might lift one of the covert barriers to the inclusion of co-operatives in this organization.



Conclusion

Interaction between the UN System and co-operatives has a long history; it is multifaceted. Over the past 20 years three international instruments, the above mentioned ICA Statement, the UN Guidelines, and ILO R. 193, have been adopted. Independently of their individual legal value, together they define the powers and tasks of the UN System, of the respective Member states and of other actors in the development of co-operatives. At the international level emphasis has shifted from the adoption of texts to their implementation. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) signalled this shift; the draft Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) further underlines this shift. Sustainable development is the overarching development goal and paradigm. The Rio + 20 Declaration 'The Future We Want' refers to co-operatives as partners. Given their specific objectives and structure, co-operatives might be an indispensable partner. Integration of co-operatives into the structure, not only of the ILO, but also of other UN entities, might do more to bring about this partnership.

References

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