



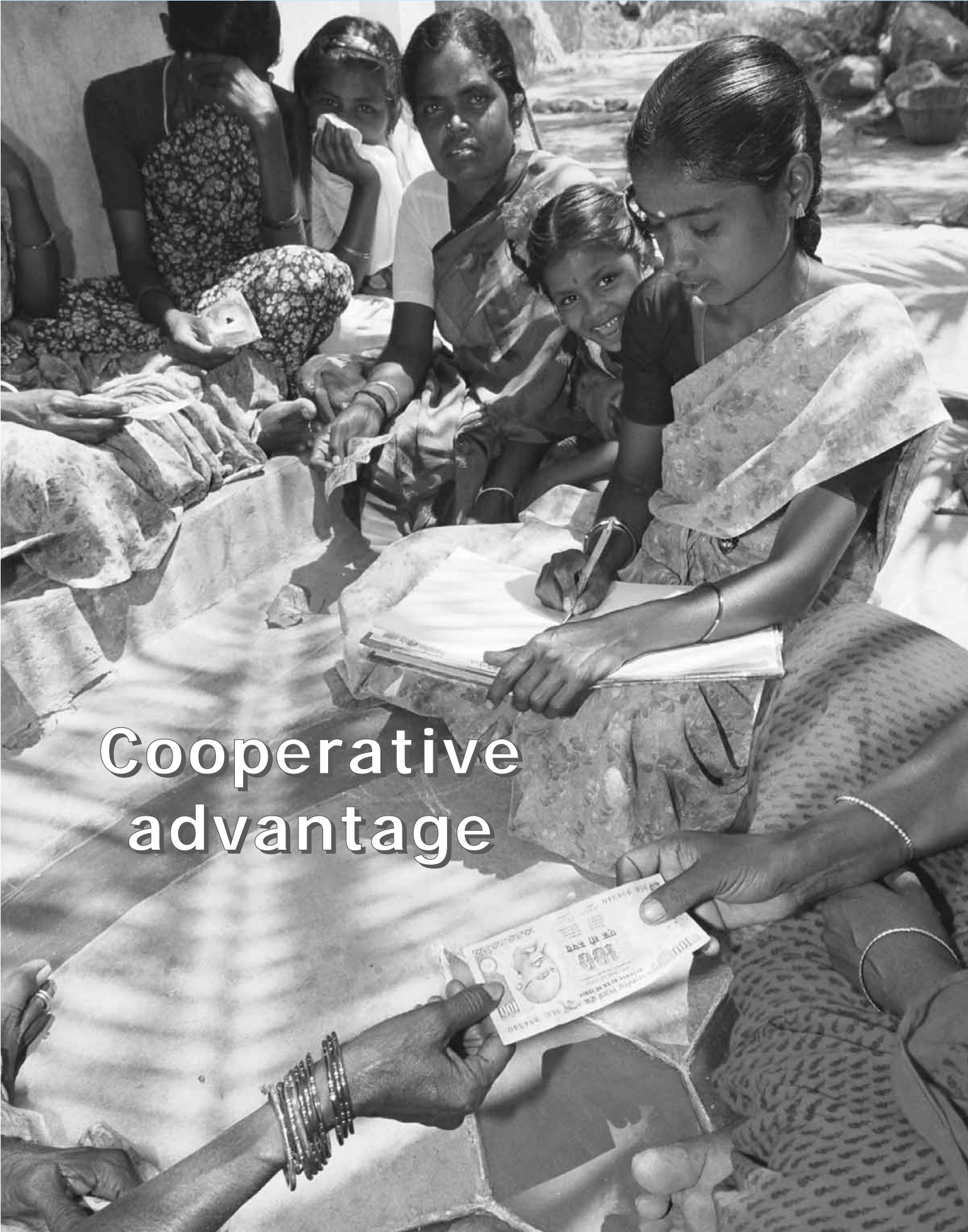
International Labour Organization
Asia Pacific Region

ISSUES

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International Labour Organization Asia Pacific Issues



Cooperative
advantage

In brief

China to continue boosting township enterprises

CHINA - China will continue to boost the development of township enterprises next year, according to Minister of Agriculture Du Qinglin at a national conference on rural works in Beijing, *Xinhua* news agency reported.

Township enterprises in China were expected to grow by 11 per cent and absorb two million more farmers next year, according to Du.

To achieve the goal, the Ministry of Agriculture in 2004 would speed up restructuring of township enterprises, promote economic cooperation between such enterprises in the east and those in the west, and carry out technical innovation for them, Du said.

Despite the impact of SARS, China's township enterprises made a total profit of 855 billion yuan (US\$ 103 billion) in 2003, up 13.2 per cent from the figure for last year, according to the ministry. Township enterprises contributed to 30 per cent of China's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2003, increasing farmers' earnings and easing unemployment in China's vast rural areas. – *Xinhua*.

Child-labour free economy Kerala's unique selling proposition

INDIA - Kerala will use its child-labour free economy and 'envious' social indicators to attract foreign investment to the state, according to a *Times of India* report.

"The state has an enviable track record in social sectors and is a child-labour free economy. These strengths would be used as Kerala's USP to attract global investment," said the state's Investment Promotion Secretary P.H. Kurian.

The state also ranks highest in physical quality of life index, density of science and technology personnel and number of hospital beds per 1,000 population, Kurian remarked after a media briefing in New Delhi.

Kerala recorded 0.64 points in Human Development Index as against the national average of 0.47 points.

"A strong social sector would ensure higher returns for investment," he said. Plans were on to brand the state as the destination for 'ethically produced goods', he said adding "we are working on this direction to create the state's brand image". – *Times of India*.

Study launched on easing corporatization of SMEs

PAKISTAN - In order to promote corporatization and extend the benefits of corporate status to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the country, the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SEC) in collaboration with the Ministry of Industries and Production (MOIP), has initiated a research study on, "Simplification and Promotion of laws and Procedures for Corporatization of SMEs".

The study is designed to strengthen the

legal and policy framework for SMEs by studying the impact of the prevailing laws and regulations and suggesting measures for facilitating the corporatization of SMEs, a press statement said.

The major components of the four-month study are designing a comprehensive strategy in collaboration with major stakeholders, reviewing legal and regulatory framework, developing a policy framework, and designing and initiating a promotional strategy for corporatization of SMEs. This is the premier study of its kind in the country where active participation of the major SMEs and other stakeholders is involved.

The findings of this report would be disseminated at seminars. – *Pak Tribune.com*

Calls for mandatory childcare centres in Bangladesh

BANGLADESH - Speakers at a workshop in Bangladesh stressed the need for mandatory childcare centres at every workplace so that working mothers could concentrate fully on their work, content in the security that their children were safe and sound.

Speakers said that due to a lack of childcare centres in the workplace, mothers remain anxious about their children and cannot concentrate on their work properly, the *Daily Star* reported.

However, an organization needs a happy workforce in order to maintain or improve the quality of service or production, participants said. – *Daily Star*.

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Introduction: Issues

Poverty is a complex, deep-seated, pervasive reality. Virtually half the world lives on less than US\$ 2 a day. More than one billion people struggle on \$ 1 a day or less. And an even greater challenge lies beyond what statistics can measure – poverty breeds a growing sense of powerlessness and indignity, of being unable to think, plan or dream beyond the daily struggle to survive.

The ILO's mandate and its activities are crucial in the development of more flexible and efficient labour markets. The creation of decent work opportunities can offer individuals a route out of poverty, or at the very least a better position to fight a way out of poverty. Poverty is linked closely to the work of the region's three subregional offices'

specialists in Bangkok, Manila and New Delhi in areas such as child labour, occupational safety and health (OSH), vocational rehabilitation (people with disabilities), vocational skills and training, and the trafficking of women and children among a host of other important human, economic and social issues.

In our efforts to overcome the region's decent work deficits, I would like to cite the Director-General of the ILO Juan Somavia's rallying call from his report, *Working Out of Poverty*, presented at the 91st session of the International Labour Conference (ILC).

"We know that work is the best route out of poverty. But one cannot legislate employment in and poverty out. It is a long and complex

process that requires all elements of society to work together. Governments, employers and workers each have a unique and crucial role to play in defining its consensus.

"I invite you to emerge from this International Labour Conference with a renewed tripartite commitment to helping free people and societies from the global poverty trap. Tripartism is our strength and unique contribution. Together, let us take the next and needed step on the road out of poverty and to decent work for all."

This edition of *Issues* focusses on some of the numerous poverty-reduction efforts taking place in our region in the ILO's efforts to secure decent employment opportunities for all.



Photos (Cover/P3) ILO/Crozet M

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Gender and the Millennium Development Goals

The following report comes from a presentation delivered by Social Economist and University of Sussex Professor Naila Kabeer, author of, "Gender Equality and the MDGs" during an ESCAP meeting in Bangkok.

During a comprehensive presentation Professor Kabeer cited examples in India of excessive mortality rates that have been referred to in studies as, 'the problem of missing women'. In other areas discrimination exists, but not in 'life-threatening' forms.

Professor Kabeer pointed out that:

- There is gender inequality within rich and poor countries
- Gender inequality is found across different groups within societies it affects privileged and 'untouchable' classes

In terms of gender and poverty, there can be intensified forms of discrimination that tend to be worse for girls and women than boys and men. There is an 'absolute dimension' and a 'relative dimension'. Professor Kabeer said there are specific areas where there is a need to focus on equity and justice.

She also cited situations where boys and men face real difficulties, such as the case of academic underperformance in the Caribbean and higher mortality rates in post-Soviet Russia.

Models of masculinity and femininity tend to differentiate means and priorities. Models of masculinity, which women often tend to support, can pose a major barrier. Without understanding these models, we would not be able to adjust them, she said.

Professor Kabeer said macro analysis often appears to be 'gender neutral', but tends to represent stereotypical domains. She said markets and States often consciously and unconsciously reproduce inequalities, as well as reinforcing and modifying inequalities.

While the overarching aim of the MDGs is to halve world poverty, there are references to children and hunger, but no

specific mention of gender. Kabeer calls this a 'missed opportunity'. While generalizations should not be made, there would appear to be clear connections between gender inequality and household poverty.



"The nature of gender relationships varies considerably across the world, and in this respect there is a 'geography' of gender inequality."

PROFESSOR NAILA KABEER,
AUTHOR, 'GENDER AND THE MDGs'

Female labour force participation and household poverty

Professor Kabeer explored the relationship between employment and household poverty. For example, poor households, she said, are more dependent upon women's employment.

Women often work in the informal economy, and employment opportunities have increased through globalization, labour having been reduced to a commodity.

There are clearly relationships between male unemployment and women's employment, crisis and child labour, family breakdown and female headship. Women often act as 'buffers' in times of austerity, Kabeer noted. When a woman is the head of the household, this is often a clear indication of household poverty.

Kabeer talked about the intergenerational transfer of poverty, and pointed out that both women and men should have the same access to opportunities for decent work, as well as appropriate social safety nets.

In terms of gender inequality as a barrier to human development, Kabeer said there is an equity case for addressing inequalities and an instrumental case for addressing inequalities.

The extension of hours of work means fatigue, burnout, as well as long-term implications for the well being of girls. This is cited as a factor relating to justice and equity. Kabeer said gender analysis should be integrated into the MDGs.

Gender equality and women's empowerment

Kabeer cited some important areas for discussion:

- Education
- Paid work from agriculture
- Political participation, voice, organization and collective action
- Linking capabilities and participation

Education

Female access to education often results in an adjustment in power relations, so that women and girls are better prepared to resist domestic violence and gain improved levels of self-esteem. However, Kabeer noted that not all forms of education are necessarily empowering.

Some forms of education may help girls and women become 'better mothers', but offer little in terms of questioning the world around them.

There is evidence from India that educated women discriminate more 'effectively' against their daughters. In some cases, those who come from poorer households are taught by teachers who remind them of their position in society, producing a negative effect in terms of self-esteem. Girls and women suffer from sexual harassment in school from boys and teachers alike. This may explain why girls and women often perform better in same sex schools.

Paid work from agriculture

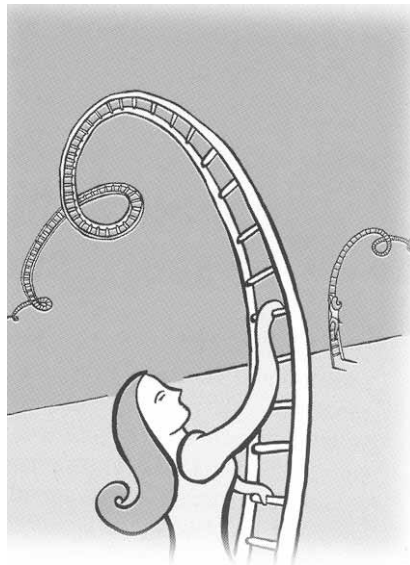
Women working in their own right can often negotiate more successfully in the household.

They are more likely to walk out of abusive marriages when they go out to work rather than staying at home, Kabeer noted. However, they often face long working hours and exploitative conditions, she added.

Political participation, voice, organization and collective action

Can women achieve more than greater autonomy within the household?

Kabeer said that organizational capacity was paramount in any kind of struggle. Globally-enforced labour standards can do little to help women in the informal sector. Kabeer urged the ILO to pay greater atten-



tion to the rights of workers in the informal sector.

“Women must strive for greater participation in local government, which is now

within greater reach of ordinary women and men. This has been achieved in some States in India, such as Kerala and West Bengal. This often resulted in women becoming more accustomed to public forms of participation, made it easier to see the clear benefits, while revealing that women allocate budgets in a different manner,” Kabeer said.

Linking capabilities and participation

Formal political spheres, as mentioned in the MDGs, should not be the only entry point for women. Anywhere that people challenge relations of power is part of the struggle for equality, Kabeer said. Anywhere women struggle against patriarchal privilege is part of the struggle for gender equality. However such struggles must be public struggles. Only then can individual change be transformed into structural change.

ILO/Japan Programme: Gender empowerment in action

One of the most successful projects under the International Labour Organization (ILO)/Japan Programme has been the Asian Regional Programme on the Expansion of Employment Opportunities for Women (EEOW), Nepal Chapter.

The EEOW Nepal Chapter was established in 1998, and aimed to contribute to the Royal Government of Nepal’s national efforts at alleviating poverty. The main thrust of the project was to promote gender equality through the social and economic empowerment of women through four key components of the project – micro finance, skills and technology transfer for self employment, raising awareness of women’s rights, and building the capacity of project partners’ Community-Based Organizations (CBOs).

A fundamental feature of the EEOW Nepal Chapter project strategy was the social mobilization and organization of target women. The organizations provided a key service delivery channel for project interventions, while the capacity of the organizations was bolstered through the development of Women’s Saving and Credit Organizations and Cooperatives. Cooperatives have historically provided a vital channel for reaching those living



EEOW - Raising awareness, generating decent employment opportunities for Nepali women.

in poverty, and have also played a significant role in poverty-alleviation efforts in rural communities.

The project was able to ensure that women were actively involved during each stage of the project, encouraging self-help and empowerment among the women involved in the project.

During the implementation stage of the project, EEOW Nepal Chapter developed effective working partnerships with employers’ and workers’ groups, as well as non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

The Development Project Service Centre, Nepal (DEPROSC/N), Vijaya Development Resource Centre (VDRC)

and Society of Local Volunteers’ Efforts (SOLVE) were the key project partners in Nuwakot, Nawalparasi and Dhankuta, respectively.

The project helped women create household-based self-employment opportunities, group-based enterprises and the provision and sale of services.

The raising of goats and pigs was one activity identified and chosen by women as an opportunity to generate income. The project assisted in identifying and arranging for robust breeds to be available to villages to ensure sustainability.

In terms of changing attitudes, the project helped to put an end to the widely-held belief that women could not castrate livestock. In rural areas, this is considered to be a taboo practice.

Seventeen women from three districts were trained as Village Animal Health Workers under the EEOW Nepal Chapter Programme. These highly-trained women say that their services are in great demand, and that the idea that women cannot participate in this practice has diminished. This shift has encouraged many other development organizations to train more women to be able to carry out this work.

Cooperative spirit: A fairer share

ILO and International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) recently held a meeting in Bangkok on the subject of the role of cooperatives and the development of poverty-reduction strategy papers (PRSPs). Issues spoke with ICA Regional Director Shil Kwan Lee and B.D.Sharma

Please describe the importance of collaborative efforts between ILO and ICA

"Collaboration between the ILO and ICA goes back a long way. Both organizations are committed to harness the potential of cooperatives as an effective institutional system for socio-economic development of the people, particularly those that have a poor economic base, such as small farmers, workers and employees.

Important areas of collaboration, among others, have been Human Resource Development and Cooperative Legislation and policy reforms. Such collaborative efforts have had a very positive impact on the development of effective HRD Systems for cooperatives and enabling a legislative and policy environment in Asia Pacific Region to prepare cooperatives to face the challenges of globalization.

Recently, we have also collaborated with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) to bring trade unions and cooperatives together for the socio-economic development of the workers, particularly those who are in the informal sector. We have jointly organized a number of seminars/workshops to develop a workable strategy. A pilot Project has also been formulated to test this strategy for replication.

Another important thing is that both the ICA and ILO are committed to cooperatives. The ICA was actively involved in the formulation of Recommendation No 193. The ICA considers the content of this recommendation to be part of its mandate, so our objectives closely coincide in terms of development.

The meeting that took place in Bangkok recently is another example of our collaboration. It is relevant to mention that the ICA General Assembly, the highest body of our management, has unanimously

called upon the global cooperative movement to join the global campaign against poverty in order to achieve the UN Millennium Goal of elimination of poverty by 2015. This meeting provided a step forward to meeting this commitment towards poverty reduction and the process will continue."

Can you cite any 'role model' cooperative example in the region?

"There are many different and varied cooperative business models in Asia. Countries in the region have good and bad examples of cooperatives, but it is practically impossible to draw any kind of geographical line in terms of development.

However, agricultural cooperatives in Japan and Korea, for example, have been very successful, and many countries want to learn from them. Some of the credit and finance cooperatives, such as SANASA in Sri Lanka, have also made noticeable

"Cooperatives also seem to have adjusted to the huge changes associated with globalization. They serve the poor, who have few or no assets, while they are also able to operate as professionally as any regular corporation at tertiary level. So we would say that flexibility and adaptability would be the main reasons the cooperative movement has remained so robust."

progress. In India, dairy cooperatives have proven to be useful models from which others can learn.

There are two main models of cooperatives active in the region. Firstly, government sponsored cooperatives, and on the other hand 'spontaneous', independent cooperatives developed by the members themselves. Government sponsored cooperatives have diversified a lot, however many continue to fail. Once government sponsored cooperatives have been transformed into member-based cooperatives with professional management and an independent structure, they have shown excellent results.

Coops are made up of economically poor

people who organize and manage their own businesses. Therefore cooperatives fundamentally differ from investor oriented enterprises. In such a situation, it is obvious that they may not be as professional as the private sector and may be more susceptible to political interference, which can have a damaging effect on the image of cooperatives, so we continue to improve the situation and strengthen management capabilities. Things really are improving. Some countries have developed very advanced management capability and business performance. However, in some, much remains to be done to improve the situation."

Could you tell us how cooperatives have been playing a role in 'formalizing' the informal sector?

"In India, SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) has developed a unique example of formalizing informal workers. Women *coolies* were formed into cooperatives, and over nearly 20 years, they have developed their own Women's Cooperative Bank and Credit Unions, as well as handicraft production centers throughout the country. In Sri Lanka, SANASA is playing a prominent role in formalizing workers through the formation of cooperatives. Now micro finance has been accepted by cooperatives. And it is possible to transform self help groups into fully fledged cooperatives."

Globalization and the way ahead

"Well, cooperatives have three distinct characteristics. Firstly, they are driven by a particular set of ideals. Secondly, a cooperative is a business enterprise. Thirdly, and most importantly in regard to your question, cooperatives adapt quickly. This was proven following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, when credit unions continued to operate efficiently while their counterparts in the private sector struggled. Cooperatives also seem to have adjusted to the huge changes associated with globalization. They serve the poor, who have few or no assets, while they are also able to operate as professionally as any regular corporation at tertiary level. So we would say that flexibility and adaptability would be the main reasons the cooperative movement has remained so robust.

With this in mind, we see great potential for cooperatives to continue to provide valuable services both in the traditional areas of rural and agricultural development, employment generation, consumer protection and also in new areas of health, education, insurance and information technology.”

What are the biggest challenges facing the coop movement ?

“Firstly, it is important to make clear that there are different kinds of cooperatives, which we could describe as being ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ and which exist in countries at different levels of development. Both face challenges and opportunities. The main challenge facing developed cooperatives is that they have not only to sustain and grow in competitive

markets but also preserve their cooperative identity. Developing cooperatives include State-sponsored cooperatives that are struggling to become independent autonomous and self-reliant. Therefore, improving management ability and ensuring useful and efficient governing systems are key issues for cooperatives and we must pay more attention to this in order to ensure a good development environment for coops.

A cooperative is a business enterprise that works for its members. The main role of the government is to provide a good business environment so that cooperatives can compete in the market with the private sector. However, in the context of poverty reduction, government may mobilize cooperatives by supporting them to reach the poor. But care should be taken that gov-

ernment support to cooperatives should not lead to politicization of coops, which may lead to vested interests and corruption in cooperatives.

In light of this, the ICA has been emphasizing transparency and professionalism in the management of cooperatives. Those found guilty of corrupt practices should be punished. While legislation should ensure the autonomy and independence of cooperatives, it should also control the misuse of cooperatives.

Every year, the ICA organizes government leaders’ and cooperative leaders’ meetings, and once every three years we organize a cooperative ministers’ conference in order to develop good relations between the government, political sector and cooperatives.”

A KEY ROLE FOR COOPERATIVES IN POVERTY REDUCTION EFFORTS

The importance of cooperatives in terms of providing job opportunities and socio-economic solutions cannot be underestimated. Cooperatives employ more than 100 million workers and boast 760 million members worldwide, with 450 million members in Asia and the Pacific alone.

Cooperatives have a great tradition of helping the urban and rural poor to raise their social and economic conditions. With a membership of more than 200 million and working capital of US\$ 57.9 billion, the cooperative sector in India is one of the largest in the world. Cooperatives can be found in 99 per cent of the country’s villages,

where two out of three families hold membership.

Cooperative enterprises have provided the capacity to transform marginalized and poor communities, not just through their ability to raise physical capital based on self-help, but also because of their ability to build human and social capital through their emphasis on education and training. As an institution, a cooperative can play a vitally important role in reaching poor communities, where social services are weak.

Cooperatives have managed to adapt and respond amid globalization, using vehicles such as micro finance and micro enterprises. Indeed, the micro enterprise is not a new phenomenon, and might be better described

as an evolutionary development of the traditional ways of the founding parents of the cooperative movement.

A new ILO Recommendation (No. 193) has advanced the thinking on cooperatives even further by advocating the need for governments to recognize the global importance of cooperatives in both economic and social development, encourage international cooperation, while at the same time reaffirming the cooperative identity based on values and principles. It underscores the equal treatment of cooperatives vis-à-vis other types of enterprises and social organizations, and defines the government’s role in creating a supportive policy and legal framework, and in facilitating access to support services and finance without undue interference.

Credit coops manage villagers’ savings in Mayurbhanj

In the remote forests of Mayurbhanj in Orissa, India, an ILO/INDISCO programme has generated a process of community-owned and community-driven initiatives to provide sustainable decent and productive employment opportunities in the area.

Covering a group of 40 villages, including 2,216 households, the programme began in May 2001, and is building capacity through the development of credit management and skills for income generation. Since the programme’s inception, over 2,000 jobs have successfully been created.

While traditional occupations using natural resources, such as *sabai* grass and *saal*

leaves, continue to satisfy local demand, some enterprising women have ventured into the production of *applique* and machine-knitted garments. A tribal affinity for working the land means that horticulture remains by far the most popular kind of work among men and women in Mayurbhanj, generating gains of four times the initial investments, according to staff involved in the project.

Gender mainstreaming activities have helped bring 46 women’s self-help groups, comprising 1,464 women, into the process of becoming formal primary credit cooperatives. These credit coops manage village savings and credit activities to provide fellow members of the community with an important source of capital investment on easy terms.

This initiative is estimated to have helped 205 indebted families to emerge from the debt trap – no mean feat considering that in poverty-stricken tribal regions money lenders have tended to rule the roost. Greater empowerment, through functional literacy, an improved awareness of rights, social protection measures and the provision of support services has improved the people’s ability to access and negotiate with local authorities.

The project is now well on its way to achieving its objectives, having generated interest at local, state and national levels through a process of social dialogue, allowing grassroots experiences to influence the policy environment.

Shelf life special: *Moving forward*

A World Bank report estimates that there are about 260 million people with disabilities living in absolute poverty worldwide - on less than US\$ 1 a day.

Referring to the United Nation (UN)'s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), World Bank President James Wolfensohn told the *Washington Post* in December 2002, "unless disabled people are brought

into the development mainstream, it will be impossible to cut poverty in half by 2015".

Moving Forward: Towards Decent Work for People With Disabilities, a new book edited by Senior Specialist in Vocational Rehabilitation at the ILO Subregional Office for East Asia, Debra Perry, highlights a diverse range of best practices in the promotion of decent work opportunities for

people with disabilities in Asia and the Pacific. The following selection of highlights perhaps best illustrates the innovative ways that the ILO and its tripartite constituents from government, employers' and workers' organizations, along with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), organizations representing people with disabilities and other partners are working to generate decent work opportunities in the region.

Cambodia and Thailand

Kodhawe Khattiyot, a 23-year old woman from the North of Thailand, was born without feet. After learning of the Redemptorist Vocational School for the Disabled, she applied to study computer science with an emphasis on programming. After graduating, she secured a job as a freelance web designer, which allowed her to work from home. Having established herself with an in-demand vocational expertise, she then managed to secure a full-time job with a salary comparable with that enjoyed by other graduates with a bachelor's degree.

Founded in the 1980s by Father Raymond Brennan, a Catholic priest living in Thailand, the school grew to house and train about 240 people with physical disabilities, including men and women from Bangladesh, Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Even in the 1980s, Father Brennan could see that computers would become indispensable features of the workplace.

Supornthum Mongkolsawadi, the principal of the school, believes that teamwork among the staff and students is the school's most significant accomplishment. "There is a strong willingness among everyone to make the programme succeed."

In Cambodia, the ILO provided technical assistance to the World Rehabilitation Fund, an international NGO, to develop a partnership between employers and organizations providing vocational services to people with disabilities. The Business Advisory Council (BAC), a network of volunteers from business, is at the heart of the partnership, working in tandem with existing job training and employment programmes to help people find a better life through employment.

Eng Naleak, disabled from birth with fingers missing and impaired



Learning can be fun at the Redemptorist Vocational School for the disabled.

mobility, seldom went beyond her home in a distant village before joining an IT training programme at Wat Than Skills Training Centre. Now she works as a data entry clerk in Phnom Penh.

"I love my job and never dreamed my life would be like this," she says. She now earns a good living and is able to send money home to her family.

The region's continuing commitment to promote the rights of people with disabilities is remarkable, however, despite the passage of legislation and disability-positive policies over the past decade, people with disabilities remain disproportionately poor, unemployed and excluded.

India and Sri Lanka

"I had always felt scared about my future" recalls Hirak Jyoti Rakshit, a cheerful person who enjoys dance and acting. Hirak, a 24-year old man with cerebral palsy, is now self-employed, working with his mother in their home-based business providing screen and press printing and office stationary. The Indian Institute of Cerebral Palsy (IICP) 's Adult Training Centre (ATC)'s individual counselling helped Hirak recognize his abilities, including entrepreneurship.

Having set up his business in 1999, former IICP trainers urged Hirak to expand the business after only a year and apply for a loan from the National Handicapped Finance Development Corp., a funding agency within the Ministry of Social Justice and Employment.

The ATC provides time-bound training for open and self-employment through links with business, government and universities, helps young people cope on their own with guidance and counselling for trainees and their families, and involves a family member in training alongside students interested in

establishing family-based businesses. In Sri Lanka, CEI Plastics, a private firm that makes plastic moulded products for industry, has played a key role in promoting the employment of people with disabilities. It employs 40 men and women with disabilities in the workshop, stores, injection-moulding packing line and blow-moulding packaging section and as general workers who are required to move around among different tasks in the factory.

Since disabled workers are distributed throughout the factory and are not confined to one particular activity or location, disabled workers are visible because of their disability, but at the same time difficult to locate as they have integrated so well with their able-bodied colleagues. "Disabled workers are eager to learn, easy to teach and generally more conscientious than their able-bodied peers," says CEI Manager Anver Dole. "Their production is often way above the average, and they interact very well with other employees." The Employers' Network on Disability uses CEI as a role model to demonstrate that the productivity of workers with disabilities is equal to, and sometimes exceeds that of other workers.

China and Hong Kong

Ho, aged 47, has worked on the full-time staff of the Rehabilitation Alliance Hong Kong (RAHK)'s 7-11 partnership convenience store for eight years. His boss described his performance as a cashier as "excellent".

Ho finds his current work more rewarding than his years of work in different factories. "It was unbearable," he says of his previous employment. "The other workers looked down on me and told me I would never be very much in life except a factory worker." He found the 7-11 position through open recruitment. "I enjoy life more now," he says, adding, "not only does my present job give me respect, security and job satisfaction, but also lets me live independently." Ho has now taken on a team leader role and assists in training new staff members.

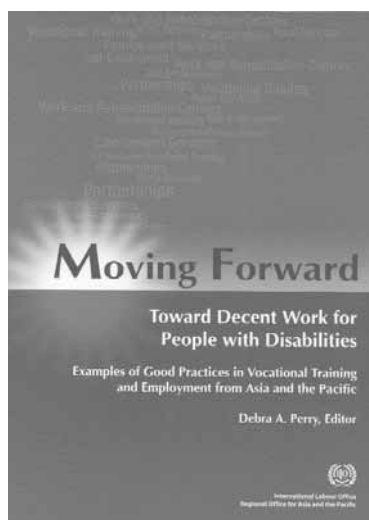
Members of the RAHK dreamt of a tangible example of a business operated by people with disabilities in the mid-1990s. Following careful deliberation and analysis, the group saw convenience and opportunity in numbers: 7-11. In 1995, RAHK teamed up with the Hong Kong 7-11 Convenience Store Company and bought franchise rights for two

stores and hired 22 employees, 17 of whom had some kind of disability. Ever since, the business and workers have flourished and the RAHK is now expanding.

In mainland China, the Green Certificate Training Project is a national programme aimed at improving farming practices and farmers' agriculture skills. In Tieli county, Heilongjiang province, a Green Certificate programme includes education in the skill of raising scorpions, which are used in Chinese medicine. This caught the attention of Fei Ziyu, a physically disabled man.

In his first year of tending scorpions (4,000 of them), Fei increased his annual income to 3,000 yuan (US\$ 360). Overjoyed with his success, Fei volunteered to train other physically disabled men and women.

Raising scorpions is just one example of skills taught to people with disabilities in rural areas. Training courses focus on applying new skills to areas requiring low investment that lead to a significant rise in income.



Towards Decent Work for People with Disabilities

The region's continuing commitment to promote the rights of people with disabilities is remarkable, however, despite the passage of legislation and disability-positive policies over the past decade, people with disabilities remain disproportionately poor, unemployed and excluded.

Moving Forward will inspire policymakers, service providers and people with disabilities toward more creative solutions to the challenges people with disabilities face in accessing training and employment.

Access to such opportunities is crucial in order for people with disabilities to escape or avoid poverty.

For ordering information, please contact: perry@ilo.org

'Net Navigator

This regular column will provide an opportunity for readers to submit a short overview of their work-related Web browsing habits in a spirit of info sharing within the organization and among its constituents and partners. To get the ball rolling I will this week detail some of the sites I use on a regular basis in my daily work for the ILO. If you'd like to share some sites of interest in your area of the World of Work, please forward them (maximum 500 words) to thompsons@ilo.org for inclusion in future *Issues*.

One of my first ports of call when accessing the Internet at work is the BBC (www.bbc.com). There may be some bias since I am a British national, but I feel that the news there is extremely objective and has a greater 'development perspective' in terms of the stories it covers when compared to its international rivals.

I also point my browser to Google's News sec

tion (<http://newsgoogle.com>), and perform a search on ILO stories. I doubt it is the most comprehensive news monitoring tool available, but it is good value since it costs us zip!

Another excellent addition to monitoring comes from DCOMM with the launch of its own clipings database (<http://campo.ilo.org/pcdb>).

Another useful site in terms of labour issues is the ICFTU web site. (www.icftu.org). Here you can find a host of detailed info on workers' rights and campaigns. Save yourself a click by signing up for its email alert service.

Finally, some more 'in-house' sites of interest. The regional office web site for Asia and the Pacific (www.ilo.org/asia) provides an overview of activities generated by the regional office. Communications' Assistant Manida Pongsirirak kindly provided the site with a fresh new look.

For more details on the development of the Decent Work Agenda in the region, you may wish to visit a separate specialist site (www.ilo.org/asia/dw).

DCOMM is in the process of rolling out a much improved content management system, which we should be able to update you on soon.

Our initial reaction from Public Information in the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific is that this looks really useful and practical and should help us ensure that the ILO's web presence appears more 'unified'. Don't forget DCOMM's own site (<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/inf/index.htm>), where you can download a copy of *World of Work*, or choose from a range of useful and accessible fact sheets.

Steve Thompson, Public Information Officer, Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

Micro-finance: Financial services for the poor



Micro-finance requires a cautious approach. Poorly-designed programmes create donor dependency, reinforce inequalities and leave people indebted.

Micro-finance can be an excellent tool for development. Poor people are in dire need of access to financial services for a number of important reasons.

All require safe and accessible savings facilities as a form of protection during financially challenging periods of their lives, while some need credit in order to start or expand their businesses. Others need affordable and accessible insurance cover or remittances.

The financial services available to the poor often have serious limitations. Banks do not have the capacity - or the interest - to lend to the poor and money-lenders demand exorbitant interest rates. Savings facilities are often not safe and not accessible.

Micro-finance is about giving people long-

Good practices in micro-finance involve:

- financial products that are adapted to the needs of the clients;
- building institutions that can deliver these products on a sustainable basis;
- a pricing policy that allows for the durable provision of financial services;
- an understanding that savings are as important as credit.

term access to affordable financial services. The Bangkok sub-regional office uses micro-finance as a tool in no less than 12 of its technical cooperation projects.

The objective in most of these projects is to provide access to credit for a specific target group, such as women entrepreneurs, people with disabilities or workers who have been laid off.

The Subregional Office (SRO) for East Asia in Bangkok uses micro-finance as a tool to: combat trafficking of children and women; support entrepreneurship among women; facilitate self-employment amongst people with disabilities; prevent child labour; reduce the vulnerability of women; promote small enterprise development; and to provide alternative livelihoods for laid-off workers

While micro-finance has the potential to

contribute to all of these goals, the use of micro-finance requires a cautious approach.

Poorly designed credit programmes create donor dependency, reinforce inequalities and leave people indebted.

Micro-finance specialist Linda Deelen recently joined the SRO for East Asia in Bangkok to support the Office in the design and management of viable micro-finance initiatives.

This reinforcement will help the office to maximize the impact of micro-finance activities within the overall agenda of employment creation and poverty alleviation.

Reducing women's vulnerability in Vietnam

In Vietnam the ILO supports micro-finance institutions in the development of financial products that will reduce poor women's vulnerability, such as emergency loans, flexible savings or insurance. The project has helped the partner financial institutions to identify the risk management needs of poor women. The project is now supporting the partner institutions in the pilot-testing of financial products that will allow poor women to better cope with shocks.

Constituents in focus: NTUC

Formed in 1961, Singapore's National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) has tried to keep faith with the basic aim of trade unionism – looking after the interests of workers. However, NTUC has changed the way it operates over the years, partly due to Singapore's political structure and climate.

Lim Boon Heng, NTUC Secretary-General, says that the union can only help workers get jobs and better pay by ensuring economic growth. In this respect, the NTUC works closely with government and business in a tripartite partnership. The NTUC and its 'social partners' consult one another



NTUC Secretary-General
Lim Boon Heng

on issues critical to the well-being of workers, enterprises and the country, contributing significantly to the social and economic development of Singapore.

NTUC describes itself as a 'value-adding' labour movement – adding value for workers by protecting their interests and providing them with benefits, adding value to business by fostering industrial harmony and encouraging workers to upgrade

their skills and by becoming more productive.

The union says that it adds value to society by stabilizing prices through its network of cooperatives and by making available quality social and recreational facilities to Singaporeans at competitive prices.

This strategy has proven very successful in attracting new members.

To find out more about the NTUC, which represents a grouping of 63 unions in Singapore, visit its comprehensive web site at www.ntuc.org.sg

Regional Meeting: Lifelong learning in the spotlight

While lifelong learning can create a 'win-win' situation for employers and workers, several challenges still need to be overcome in Asia and the Pacific, where learning environments differ vastly from country to country.

"The workplace is a key environment for lifelong learning, and social dialogue needs to be promoted to improve the quality and relevance of learning," said Areeya Rojvithee, Senior Expert on Skill Development, Ministry of Labour, the Royal Thai Government, during the presentation of a Common Understanding at a Regional Meeting in Bangkok in December.

Representatives of governments, employers' and workers' organizations from Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Viet Nam agreed on the Common Understanding.

Lifelong learning is now commonly accepted as being a key economic necessity in the development of workforce knowledge and skills in response to a changing labour market. However, experiences are varied depending upon the level of development, the existing legal, social and institutional infrastructures and availability and financing of each individual country.

Participants agreed that there is a need for an improved understanding of lifelong learning, while the quality and portability of qualifications needs to be enhanced. In several States, access is a major factor, so there is a need to work towards 'access for all' with a gender balance.

Incentives need to be provided to employers to provide training and to workers to participate in it. Government has a principal role in funding disadvantaged groups, including people with disabilities, youth, the unemployed, low skilled workers and women. The investment model should be appropriate to the level of development of the individual country.

At present, formal education systems may still not be sufficiently relevant to the needs of industry, enterprises and individuals beyond general education. Expectations of enterprises, the community and individuals must match the available opportunities of the



H.E. Uraivan Thienthong, Minister of Labour, Royal Thai Government, centre, and Trevor Riordan, IFP/SKILLS, right, join ILO Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific Yasuyuki Nodera during the inaugural session of a Regional Meeting on Lifelong Learning in Bangkok.

labour market. Since learning thrives in the learning workplace, partnerships between government and social partners are essential in the pursuit of lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning works best where governments provide the policy framework, in consultation with social partners, financial support, and match investments to national priorities to ensure the development of a national learning framework.

In terms of skills recognition to promote lifelong learning, national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) and core work skills were identified as crucial elements. An NQF can also contribute toward maximizing governments' resources by matching investment in skills with government priorities. Despite the significant benefits of NQFs, they have not been developed in most countries in the region primarily because countries have focussed on the development of frameworks for initial training.

Core work skills include problem solving, communications skills and the ability to take initiative. While they are not formally taught in many countries, employers increasingly expect new employees to already have them. These skills should be developed not only as part of vocational education and training, but also need to be embedded within compulsory and post-compulsory education and training curricula.

In some countries, a lack of recognition in the workplace of core work skills is one of the impediments for the further development of core skills. For example, in some cases, job advertisements demand a certain qual-

ification, but not specific skills, including core work skills, which are needed to do the job.

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is an important factor in the development of lifelong learning models, but this aspect presents a host of challenges. There is still academic resistance to competency assessment, and this remains a problem in promoting RPL. Academic institutions tend to be funded on the process, for example with regard to tutors or delivery hours, rather than the outcome in terms of achieving the competency. This can be a barrier for effective implementation of RPL.

Those who have gone through a significant process in obtaining a qualification might resent those who obtain the very same qualification without going through the same process, or be unconvinced of the quality of skills developed through informal learning.

Further understanding of the concept of RPL and how it differs from formal learning may also facilitate its implementation. If RPL is to act as a 'staircase' in skills development, methods of assessing prior learning need to be rigorous, but also responsive to the needs of people who have developed skills outside of formal learning and may have had negative experiences of learning and assessment in the past.

Participants at the meeting agreed that social dialogue is essential for promoting lifelong learning, particularly with regard to RPL. The involvement of the social partners is more likely to result in the effective implementation of RPL.