



**Message by Juan Somavia  
Director-General of the International Labour Office  
on the occasion of  
International Day of Cooperatives**

**3 July 2010**

The theme of this Day “Cooperative enterprise empowers women” is timely.

Fifteen years after the Beijing Platform of Action and as we take stock of where we stand on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, we know that progress towards gender equality has been too slow.

It is a matter of the realization of the rights of half the world’s population. Gender equality with effective participation and empowerment of women is also key to meeting many persistent development challenges.

Cooperative principles of social solidarity, democracy, equality and equity underpinned by the self-help approach, provide a solid foundation for promoting gender equality.

Organization brings strength and cooperatives have shown themselves to be effective means of organization at all development levels. Whether building self-esteem and self belief, creating choices, opening up access to opportunities or building the capacity to influence – cooperative enterprises that live up to their ideals are powerful forces for empowerment. For the excluded and vulnerable, cooperative enterprises have proven to be strong forces for social change and for economic advancement.

The ILO’s mandate meets the cooperative endeavour on the road to social justice.

Decent work for all – productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity is a keystone of social justice and of balanced social and economic development. It means fostering entrepreneurship, enterprise development and job creation with incomes that support a decent life for workers and their families, respect for fundamental rights at work – including freedom from discrimination, access to social protection, and participation in dialogue.

Women comprise some 40 per cent of the working population yet constitute 60 per cent of the working poor. Often confined to the less productive sectors, their share of income is less than men. They still continue to carry a heavy share of family care responsibilities and globally, there is a growing trend towards women-headed households, especially in rural areas.

Guided by their value-base, cooperatives can be key channels for promoting decent work for all – women and men. As productive enterprises they generate jobs and support income earning opportunities including through credit and training. In our own work in Tanzania, for example, cooperative business management training for women in areas such as dairy production and beekeeping has helped to improve production and incomes. As social

collectivities cooperatives respond to their members' needs for social services and support. Experience shows that cooperatives are also effective points of entry for addressing a broad range of gender equality issues such as unpaid work, shared responsibilities and gender-based violence.

At this time when the economic crisis threatens to undermine past gains and to entrench patterns of inequality, it is particularly important to marshal all forces for a recovery with social justice.

The cooperative movement is well placed to deliver, and to be a strong advocate for the multidimensional approaches that are needed to overcome gender inequality.

The ILO looks forward to continuing its long-standing collaboration with the cooperative movement to promote decent work for women and men.

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