

Interview with Greg Vines, DDG Management and Reform

About the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) General Assembly in Cape Town, 5 November 2013

Q. What is the significance of the ILO's participation in this conference?

The [ICA Conference](#) itself was significant as this year, for the first time in its 118-year history, it was held in Africa. It also had a poignant theme: [A Co-operative Decade in Action](#), which underlined the unprecedented number of serious 'world of work' issues we are currently facing, and focused everyone on the need to take action.



Cooperative enterprises have proven resilient to the crisis. [Our own research](#) has shown that financial cooperatives have remained financially sound for the most part; that consumer cooperatives have had increased turnover; and that worker cooperatives have seen growth. The world is rediscovering the cooperative advantage as an alternative way of doing business in a democratic manner that takes into account social and environmental concerns.

At the same time the ILO has embarked on 'the centennial project' – a forward-looking exercise on the future of the world of work that comprises of a number of initiatives. One such initiative is looking out how we engage with private sector enterprises, with a strong emphasis on corporate social responsibility and improved labour standards across global supply chains. An area where we see cooperative enterprises and their organizations playing an important role as value driven, principled businesses.

Q. What did you present at the ICA conference?

I highlighted three areas of joint action for the ILO, along with its constituents, and the cooperative movement for the years to come: Cooperatives and sustainable development; statistics on cooperatives; and application of labour standards in cooperative enterprises. I believe these efforts will have paramount value for recognition of cooperative enterprises as critical actors in the world of work.

Q. Could you tell us more about these three areas of action?

Cooperatives and sustainable development

The most important discussion at the United Nations now is around the post 2015 development framework for a sustainable development agenda. The ILO is actively involved in this, helping to define the post-2015 development framework that calls for

job creation and social protection to be included in the Universal Development Goals.

At the same time we are happy to have joined forces with the ICA, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and other partners to gather evidence on how cooperatives have contributed to sustainable development and [highlight their potential](#) to contribute to the achievement of the proposed Universal Development Goals.

We presented our preliminary findings at a [workshop during the global conference](#) and I was encouraged to see the outpouring of interest and ideas from top cooperative leaders, researchers and practitioners alike.

We will continue with an expert group meeting around this effort and hope to bring the important contribution of the cooperative model, and its relevance to sustainable development, to the forefront of our work. We also strongly believe that it will be critical to have cooperative voices heard in this post-2015 development framework. There is an interesting thinkpiece on the topic on the [UNRISD website](#).

Statistics on cooperatives

Positioning cooperatives as enterprises that can contribute to improved livelihoods, generation of employment, and the quality of jobs created, requires a solid evidence if we want to engage and influence policy makers. I understand that much work has been done on this front by the cooperative movement through official registrars and cooperative associations' registrars and a number of surveys.

As a UN agency responsible for labour statistics our engagement is often through the national statistical offices. And I am happy to note that during the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians in October a [resolution was adopted on statistics on cooperatives](#) by national statistics offices from around the world. This calls for developmental work on the measurement of cooperatives and for a progress report to be ready for discussion at the 20th International Conference of Labour Statisticians in 2018. A critical next step will no doubt be for national statistics offices to engage with cooperative researchers and institutions to identify the type of indicators needed to show the cooperative advantage.

Application of labour standards in cooperative enterprises

We are also keen to see how cooperative enterprises are faring as employers in creating decent work opportunities. We can integrate delivering fundamental rights and principles messages through cooperative enterprises and their apex institutions in our flagship projects like BetterWork and IPEC.

It would be great if we could engage with cooperative enterprises and show how these collective enterprises are faring with respect to core labour standards of freedom of association, elimination of worst forms of child labour, forced labour, and discrimination. Engaging with cooperative enterprises to advance these core labour standards is a concrete area of joint action during the cooperative decade.

What is the relationship between the ILO and ICA?

The [ICA](#) is the world's largest civil society organization with one billion members and 100 million workers. From the onset, the ILO has recognized the importance of cooperatives in fulfilling its mandate and, in 1920, [the Cooperative Branch](#) was established to focus on cooperatives.

Albert Thomas, ILO's first Director General, who was also a member of the Central Committee of the ICA, established a close connection with the cooperative movement. Today, the ILO is the only specialized agency of the United Nations with an explicit mandate on cooperatives and so we continue to work closely with the ICA at both global and regional levels.