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At work together: The cooperative advantage for people with disabilities

This brief is part of the ILO COOP Cooperatives and the World of Work series. It has been produced in partnership with the Gender, Equality and Diversity Branch (GED) at the ILO.

INTRODUCTION

Cooperatives are enterprises that place people before profit. They uphold values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. They practise honesty, openness and social responsibility in their operations.¹ As values-driven businesses they have a role – and a responsibility – in helping to promote decent work for all, including people with disabilities.

Worldwide, there are at least 785 million women and men of working age with disabilities. They often face enormous obstacles to equal opportunities in the world of work, ranging from attitudinal and physical to informational barriers. Consequently, the right of people with disabilities to work and employment is frequently denied. Disabled men and particularly disabled women experience higher rates of unemployment and economic inactivity than their non-disabled peers and they are also more vulnerable to discrimination in the workplace.² Moreover, the exclusion of people with disabilities from the world of work comes with a high economic cost for individuals, their families and society at large. An ILO study has shown that the economic loss for countries can be worth up to 7 per cent of Gross Domestic Product.³

Cooperatives can be part of the movement forward, towards ensuring that women and men with disabilities can enjoy their rights and achieve equality and justice in the world of work.

In addition to the ILO Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention, 1983 (No. 159)⁴ and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)⁵ which calls up its over 150 State Parties under Article 27 on work and employment to promote the development of cooperatives for women and men with disabilities, the ILO Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 (No. 193) is of particular relevance. It calls for the promotion of potential of cooperatives in all countries, “to improve social and economic well-being, taking into account the need to eliminate all forms of discrimination”.⁶

Box1: What are cooperatives?

A cooperative is defined by both the International Co-operative Alliance and the International Labour Organization as “**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**”.

Source: International Co-operative Alliance. Available online at <http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles>

1 International Co-operative Alliance. Available online at <http://ica.coop>

2 World Health Organization; World Bank. 2011. World Report on Disability. Available online at http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/en/

3 ILO. 2009. The price of exclusion: the economic consequences of excluding people with disabilities from the world of work. Employment working paper No. 43. Available online at <http://labordoc.ilo.org/record/422936?ln=en>

4 ILO Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention, 1983 (No. 159). Available online at <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/convde.pl?C159>

5 United Nations. 2006. United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Available online at <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

6 ILO Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 (No. 193). Available online at <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/convde.pl?R193>

Box 2: Cooperative Principles

The International Co-operative Alliance has established the following seven internationally agreed Cooperative Principles:

1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Member economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training and information
6. Cooperation among cooperatives
7. Concern for community

Source: International Co-operative Alliance. Available online at <http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles>

Moving towards a human rights-based approach to disability

The obsolete and discredited idea of treating people with disabilities as passive recipients of other people's endeavours was reflected historically in some so-called cooperatives run for women and men with disabilities. There was a tradition in several countries of establishing segregated workplaces exclusively for 'the disabled', which undertook contracts for the state. Ventures like these did not offer workers the right to participate in their own undertakings and also marginalized those with disabilities. They were not genuinely participative, and therefore not genuine cooperatives. Furthermore, because many of these ventures were dependent on state support, they failed when that support was withdrawn.⁷

The international policy shift towards a human rights-based approach to disability was symbolized by the adoption, in 2006, of the CRPD. The recognition that "*disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others*" challenges whole societies to become more inclusive of people with disabilities.⁸ Policies, programmes and services are changing to move away from an approach that segregate disabled people from the rest of society. The inclusion of women and men with disabilities and their equal access to the mainstream constitute the new paradigm. It is a paradigm shift that also leads the cooperative movement to review its past experiences and to develop rights-based ways of promoting disability inclusion in the workplace.

There are good examples from around the world where cooperatives have understood clearly what needs to be done. There is also opportunity for further progress to be made.

At work together: disability inclusion in cooperative enterprises

A recent report (covering 74 countries and around three-fourths of the world's population) estimates that worldwide more than 26 million people work in cooperative enterprises as employees or worker-members.⁹ Among these people there are also women and men with disabilities.

Some cooperatives publish information on the percentage of their workers who have disabilities and the steps being taken to ensure their inclusion in the workplace. However, collecting disability-disaggregated data is not a universal practice, and the international cooperative movement may wish to further encourage this good practice. Thus, consolidated data on the numbers of people with disabilities working for cooperatives are not currently available.

Although the seven cooperative principles do not specifically mention adherence to international labour standards, some parts of the cooperative movement recognize the importance of cooperatives operating with demonstrably high standards of employment practice.

Using their 'cooperative advantage', cooperatives can promote disability inclusion within their own structures in multiple ways. For instance, recruitment procedures need to be designed in an inclusive way, actively reaching out to disabled job candidates and providing reasonable accommodation during the selection process, including information in alternative formats like audio or sign language interpretation. HR officers as well as other cooperative workers need to be sensitized about disability issues. Cooperation with Disabled Persons' Organizations can be instrumental in this regard and beyond. Further, accessibility needs to be ensured not only when it comes to information but also in terms of the built environment (buildings and facilities) and emergency procedures. Where general accessibility standards are insufficient to address disability-related needs of individuals, clear procedures on how to request reasonable accommodation, e.g. adjusting and modifying equipment or adapting working hours, are needed. Ideally, cooperatives have an explicit policy on disability inclusion in place that is designed in consultation with people with disabilities and backed up by the commitment of the cooperative workers.

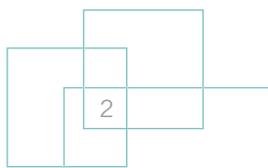
Box 3: Key ILO instruments for disability inclusion

The key ILO instruments promoting equal opportunities for people with disabilities at work are: the ILO Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention, 1983 (No. 159) and the Code of Practice on Managing Disability in the Workplace (2002).

7 J. Bartelli. 2015. Cooperatives and People with Disabilities: A Primer.

8 United Nations. 2006. United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Available online at <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>.

9 Comité International des Coopératives de Production et Artisanales (CICOPA); Desjardins Group. 2014. Cooperatives and Employment: a Global Report. Available online at http://ica.coop/sites/default/files/media_items/cooperatives_and_employment_a_global_report_en_web_21-10_1pag.pdf



A way into work

New models for cooperative enterprises designed to promote the inclusion of women and men with disabilities into the workplace are being developed in order not to replicate the mistakes of the state-controlled models of the past. Increasingly, cooperatives encourage active involvement of people with disabilities in the management of their enterprises.

The social cooperative model developed in Italy is a good example. Legislation enacted in 1991 (“Law 381”) promotes social cooperatives, which deliver services such as providing work integration for disadvantaged groups into Italian society, including people with disabilities. Governmental support is available for social cooperatives where at least 30 per cent of employees belong to disadvantaged groups. These arrangements respect cooperative autonomy and member control. They also acknowledge that state support is legitimate and necessary for cooperatives with social objectives advancing social welfare. Approximately 45,000 workers from disadvantaged groups work in social cooperatives in Italy.¹⁰

There is growing interest in different areas of the world in the concept of multi-stakeholder cooperatives, where membership is drawn from the different related parties in an enterprise. Multi-stakeholder cooperatives may provide a structure for people with disabilities to share ownership and control of an enterprise with other partners.

Public procurement policies that support cooperatives of disabled women and men are also an effective way of balancing support measures with self-determination. One example from the Philippines is described at the end of this briefing note.

Meeting the service needs of people with disabilities

In many parts of the world, cooperatives have demonstrated an understanding of, and a determination to meet, disability-related needs of their customers.

One area in which cooperatives are focusing on is transportation services accessible to people with disabilities. For example, TitiFloris, a successful French cooperative enterprise, offers accessible transportation and taxi services.¹¹ Established in 2006, it has grown rapidly and now operates in several cities and towns in the west of the country, employing 350 workers. Additionally, TitiFloris provides standard minibus transport services for children and the elderly. It specialises in offering transportation services for people using wheelchairs and other persons with disabilities. Sixty of TitiFloris’s employees are people with disabilities, and the cooperative was a prize-winner in 2014 for its work towards workplace inclusion.

¹⁰ ILO. 2011. Social and Solidarity Economy: Our common road towards decent work. Available online at <http://labordoc.ilo.org/record/441172?ln=en>

¹¹ Titi Floris - Coopérative de transport routier de personnes. Available online at www.titi-floris.fr

In Rio de Janeiro, Especial Coop Taxi performs a similar role providing services to physically disabled persons with its dedicated fleet and specially trained drivers. Formed in 2003, Especial Coop offers a service that takes into account the needs of customers, including disability-related needs, that mainstream services have not yet addressed. Drivers in the cooperative have received training in understanding the needs of their clients.¹²

In Singapore, the cooperative insurer NTUC Income launched an insurance plan in 2013 designed for children and young people on the autism spectrum. NTUC Income is the first insurer in Singapore to voluntarily offer insurance to a part of the community usually denied coverage.¹³ NTUC Income also consults with the Autism Resource Centre Singapore and its members to better understand the condition and the profile of children and young people with autism, of which there are estimated to be over 30,000 in Singapore. The underlying message from NTUC Income is that as a cooperative, it should provide for all customers without discrimination.

Credit unions (member cooperatives for savings and loans) are also looking to ensure that their services are inclusive of members who have disabilities. In the United States, for example, the National Federation of Community Development Credit Unions partners with the Disability Outreach Network in order to make financial services and credit accessible to people with disabilities while providing them with financial education.¹⁴ Among its services, the initiative provides deaf persons access to low-interest loans in order to purchase special equipment, as well as income tax advice.

Conclusion

Historically, cooperatives were sought out by communities and groups who were experiencing disadvantages as a way to assert their collective interests in the world of work. As they are particularly well placed to promote the right of persons with disabilities to decent work, cooperatives continue to play an important role in contributing to breaking the cycle of marginalization and social exclusion of people with disabilities.

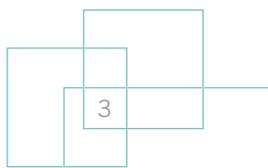
In line with international labour standards and the CRPD, cooperatives in many countries are increasingly adopting a rights-based approach to become more inclusive of women and men with disabilities, so that they can participate fully and on an equal basis in their communities and in society at large.

Cooperatives can promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in the world of work in many different ways. Cooperative-to-cooperative collaboration for advancing the rights of women and men with disabilities as cooperative founders,

¹² Especial Coop Taxi. Available online at <http://www.especialcooptaxirj.com.br/>

¹³ International Co-operative and Mutual Insurance Federation (ICMIF). Available online at <http://www.icmif.org/>

¹⁴ National Federation of Community Development Credit Unions. Available online at <http://www.cdcu.coop/initiatives/serving-underserved-markets/disability-outreach-network/>; National Disability Institute. Available online at <http://www.realeconomicimpact.org/Asset-Development-Community/Inclusive-Credit-Unions.aspx>



members, workers and leaders is of particular importance. As part of its commitment to promote decent work for all, it is essential for the cooperative movement to give even greater priority to achieving the inclusion of people with disabilities in cooperative workplaces.

CASE STUDY

They're making the most of the cooperative advantage

'We're here to be a profitable business' says Spanish cooperative Manchalan¹⁵

Manchalan, a workplace where over 90 per cent of the employees have disabilities, was set up in Guadalajara near Madrid in 1999 with the support of the Mondragon group of cooperatives, working in partnership with the Spanish national organization for the blind ONCE and the specialist agency Gureak. It undertakes work for a range of commercial clients, including the plastics components firm Tajo, a cooperative within the Mondragon family. Under its present structure Manchalan is partly owned by Tajo and is treated as one of Mondragon's family of enterprises.

Manchalan says that it aims to achieve two goals: to deliver social benefit by supporting people with disabilities integrate into the workplace and to be commercially profitable. It provides a range of services, including industrial assembly work, plastics injection, and direct marketing and contact centre services for client companies.

The 2007 financial crisis in Spain caused Manchalan to restructure and focus on its economic and social performances. "We are in the market, selling and earning money, and we scrutinize everything," the firm's managing director told a Guadalajara newspaper. "We can't just sit and wait for businesses to come and offer us work, because that's not going to happen. We aim to be profitable for our clients. It's no good to have prices 20 per cent less than competitors if our productivity is 40 per cent less."

In this respect Manchalan's approach is similar to that being adopted by the whole Mondragon cooperative group. At its 2014 Congress, Mondragon cooperative delegates discussed the group's strategy for the future, which combines a commitment to cooperative values with a focus on economic profitability and sustainability.

15 - Nueva Alcarria. 17 June 2011. Manchalan ofrece rentabilidad con los más altos estándares de calidad en todos sus servicios. Available online at <http://www.nuevaalcarria.com/jeconomia/general/123802-manchalan-ofrece-rentabilidad-con-los-mas-altos-estandares-de-calidad-en-todos-sus-servicios.html>; Manchalan S.A. Available online at <http://www.manchalan.com/>

They're making the most of the cooperative advantage

A cooperative approach to job creation in the Philippines¹⁶

Safra-Adap, a cooperative in the southern Philippines city of San Francisco, produces quality school chairs and furniture, which it sells to the government's education department. Its full name is the San Francisco Association of Differently Abled Person, and as its name implies its workforce is made up entirely of people with disabilities. For some employees, their disabilities were caused by congenital factors, some had polio, and others are blind or deaf. Safra-Adap provides both training for its 45 members and a viable business concern, paying higher than average income. Although 80 per cent of its production is the school chair contract, the quality of its workshop means that it can also compete successfully with other local joinery businesses.

Safra-Adap is one of the member organizations of the National Federation of Co-operatives of Persons With Disability (NFCPWD), a secondary cooperative which was founded in 1998 with five cooperative members and has now grown to embrace sixteen such cooperatives, all like Safra-Adap made up of women and men with disabilities. NFCPWD itself is entirely owned and staffed by disabled people.

The Federation provides advice and training to its members among other things on governance, managerial and technical skills, and health and safety practices. It also bids on behalf of its members for contracts, and has for the past thirteen years, successfully won procurement contracts for school furniture.

A recent initiative has seen NFCPWD launch a Business Development Unit, designed to offer technical support to enable member cooperatives to attract new income streams and to market their services stronger.

16 - T. Kent. 22 November 2010. Philippines: A co-operative approach to creating jobs for disabled people, in The Guardian. Available online at <http://www.theguardian.com/journalismcompetition/co-operative-approach-disabled-people-jobs-philippines>



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