Opening Speech by the ILO Director-General Guy Ryder
ILO/ICA Joint Conference on Cooperatives and the Future of Work
ILO, June 24, 2019 Geneva

President of the ICA, Ariel Guarco,
Director-General of the ICA Bruno Roelants,
Ambassadors, Guests, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me add my words of welcome to this conference on “Cooperatives and the Future of Work”, jointly organized by the ILO with our friends in the International Cooperative Alliance. It comes at a most historic moment as the ILO marks its Centenary.

There is something very appropriate about this being the first significant event after the Centenary International Labour Conference which closed last Friday.

The ICA has been a steady and unswerving partner to the ILO in advancing its mandate over the last 100 years. I suspect that you all know that the first Director-General of the ILO, Albert Thomas, was a leading figure in the French cooperative movement and a member of the Central Committee of the Alliance. The ICA has had a general consultative status here at the ILO ever since.

From its very beginning, the ILO recognized cooperatives as a most important tool to achieve its mission for social justice and decent work. This recognition is reflected in the ILO’s constitution, and in consequence the ILO established a Cooperative Service in 1920 which continues to make major contributions to the work of the Organization to this day. In the past decade, this work has extended beyond cooperatives to consider the wider social and solidarity economy. Let me remind you and indeed ourselves that the ILO remains the only specialized agency of the United Nations with an explicit mandate on cooperatives.

As I mentioned, the ILO completed its 108th International Labour Conference last Friday. It brought together over 6,000 representatives of governments, workers and employers from the ILO’s 187 member States. It also brought to Geneva 27 heads of state or government, 3 kings and 5 vice-presidents to address the Conference and to celebrate the ILO Centenary.
In addition to its more routine work, this year’s Conference took two decisions which I think will stand as landmarks in the future. Following an initial discussion last year, the Centenary Conference discussed the adoption of international labour standards on violence and harassment at work, the first of their type. I am extremely pleased to be able to welcome the fact that the Conference adopted a Convention supplemented by a Recommendation on this critical issue that negatively affects the health, security and well-being of working women and men around the world. Also I would add that this was the first Convention that the ILO has adopted since 2011.

In another milestone, delegates debated the forces transforming the world of work, and the mission of the ILO in shaping the future of work and attaining a shared prosperity for all. The Conference adopted an ILO Centenary Declaration that will guide and inspire the work of our organization as we move into our second century. Importantly, the declaration refers to the role of cooperatives and the wider social and solidarity economy.

The ILO’s activities on cooperatives are guided by an international standard, the ILO Recommendation on the Promotion of Cooperatives, No. 193, adopted in 2002. The cooperative movement played a critically important role in the adoption of the Recommendation. And it has proven to be highly relevant for the strengthening of an enabling environment for cooperatives in many parts of the world. Since its adoption, more than 110 countries have used the Recommendation to support the revision and development of national policies and legislation. It has also guided many regional and sub-regional model laws on cooperatives.

More recently the ILO and the ICA joined forces, along with other members of the Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives, COPAC, including the FAO and UN DESA, with regard to the Guidelines concerning statistics of cooperatives. These were finally adopted at the 20th International Conference of Labour Statisticians held here in October 2018. This is I think a starting point for moving toward harmonized, reliable and, what is essential, internationally comparable statistics on cooperatives – most important work.

I am happy to see that Reema Nanavaty the leader of the Self Employed Women’s Association, who was a member of the ILO’s Global Commission on the Future of Work is with us today. SEWA is both a trade union of women informal economy workers, and
a representative of the cooperative movement with its membership of 106 cooperatives of producers, workers and consumers.

The report of the Global Commission of which Reema was a part, issued in January, examines how to achieve a better future of work for all at this time of unprecedented change and exceptional challenges. It identifies the new forces which are transforming the world of work such as technological advance, the greening of economies, changes in demographics, and globalization. And it highlights as well the role of cooperatives in particular in advancing gender equality and in transitioning from informality to the formal economy.

This is no surprise, as it is a demonstration of the growing interest of the world of work in exploring values-driven business models, ones that are based on cooperation, mutualism and solidarity. Cooperatives and the wider social and solidarity economy are increasingly coming up with solutions to the forces transforming the world of work.

To take one important area, cooperatives are working on climate change adaptation and mitigation. Mutual insurance for crops; diversification of crops; energy saving irrigation; and construction techniques are among the adaptation strategies cooperative enterprises use. Important examples in climate change mitigation include forestry and renewable energy cooperatives.

To take another area, the platform economy, cooperatives are being established by gig economy workers to improve working conditions for their members. Taxi drivers are among the workers that have been setting up worker cooperatives and using online applications to counter the intermediation of ride-hailing companies that in many cases can withhold rights and benefits from the drivers.

A third area concerns demographic challenges, where cooperatives are playing a complementary role to local and national governments. They provide people-centred quality care services in child care, ageing, disability and mental health care across a range of countries in both north and south.

In addition, and in particular since the financial crises of just over a decade ago, savings and credit cooperatives, cooperative banks and credit unions have seen steady growth, keeping credit flowing, especially to small and medium sized enterprises. They have
remained stable while creating direct and indirect employment. They have also engaged in new financial mechanisms and innovations to serve their members and communities.

Colleagues, bringing these innovative cooperative responses to scale requires an ecosystem of policies and relevant support institutions, financial and non-financial. At the ILO we are committed to working with our constituents and the cooperative movement in supporting the creation of just such an ecosystem that is conducive to the growth of cooperative enterprises.

As a mark of this commitment, in a few minutes President Ariel Guarco and I will be signing a new memorandum of understanding that I think will mark the beginning of the next phase of collaboration between the ILO and the ICA.

Colleagues, the times call on us to act with urgency to shape a fairer, inclusive and more secure future of work with full employment and decent work for all. Such a future is a precondition for sustainable development that puts an end to poverty and leaves no one behind. The ILO is committed to carrying forward into its second century its enduring mandate for social justice by making people’s rights, needs and aspirations the primary objectives of economic, social and environmental policies – this means a human-centred approach to the future of work.

I hope and I believe that this human-centred approach resonates with the cooperative identity, values and principles. In these times of unprecedented change and of exceptional challenges in the world of work we look forward to continued partnership with the cooperative movement in this quest for sustainable development and a fairer, inclusive and more secure future of work with decent work for all.

I wish you all the greatest of success in this conference and welcome you all to it.