Panel Discussion

"Cooperatives and the Role of Information and Communication Technologies"

Objective

The Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA) is organizing a Panel Discussion on **"Cooperatives and the Role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)".** The meeting will take place on 6 June 2012 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The event is part of the observance of the "International Year of Cooperatives," and its proceedings are aimed at examining how ICTs contribute to the efficiency, and to the strengthening and growth, of the cooperative movement.

ICTs are defined as those technologies that facilitate communication and the processing of information by electronic means, and include everything from radio, satellite, television to telephones (fixed and mobile), computers and the Internet.

Background

At the 1995 World Summit for Social Development (WSSD), the concept of an inclusive society, a society for all, was established as a priority of social development. The key outcome of this Summit- the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action[1]- recognized the potential role of ICTs in attaining social development objectives. Specifically, it placed emphasis on facilitating access to such technologies as integral to upholding rights and to enhancing levels of engagement and participation- particularly for the impoverished, and those typically marginalized in civic, political, and socioeconomic life.

The 2009 General Assembly resolution on cooperatives in social development[2] invited Governments, in collaboration with the cooperative movement, to develop programmes aimed at enhancing capacity-building of cooperatives. The primary goals are targeted toward improvements in the organizational, management and financial skills of cooperative members,

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1. Final Report of the World Summit for Social Development (also includes the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action), A/CONF.166/9: http://doc.un.org/DocBox/docbox.nsf/GetAll?OpenAgent&DS=A/CONF.166/9

2. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly 64/136 on cooperatives in social development, Para. 7

as well as the introduction and expansion of programmes **to foster the access of cooperatives to new technologies.**

By adapting ICTs, cooperatives can: enhance connections and communications among members and across organizations; broaden and deepen the reach of their operations; and reduce costs and improve administration.

ICTs facilitate fast and cost-effective communication, enabling members to maintain more consistent contact with each other, and to cultivate new relationships with similar organizations, cooperative federations and international bodies. These expanded support networks allow members to better avail of new information and innovations, and to even receive regular training remotely in spite of distances from the organization's primary centers. By ensuring the timely delivery of news and know-how, ICTs contribute significantly to strategic planning, as well as coordination and response to critical developments.

Moreover, access to globalized networks affords greater scope for cooperatives, so that they can draw on expanded opportunities for growth and diversification. Through ICTs, cooperatives can cultivate new markets, and reduce vulnerability that may arise from reliance on a more limited set of clients and partners. In a faster-paced world, ICTs can be crucial to the survivability of cooperatives.

Internally, ICTs can transform the collection, analysis, storage, and reportage of information and finances. These improvements over manual systems boost efficiency and lower operating costs, in addition to fostering trust and transparency. The adoption of computerization and modern management techniques can make records more accessible, thereby bolstering member confidence and helping to attract higher-quality staff.

Key Challenges

Sustaining the use of ICTs is the key challenge after the period of support. The continued costs of maintaining this change means that new technology must either generate enough income to be self-sustaining, or be sufficiently beneficial to members that the will accept the additional costs entailed. Moreover, there is a need for renewed advocacy and awareness-raising so that more groups can harness the potential of ICTs. Indeed, evidence suggests a widening "digital divide," as technologically-proficient cooperatives pull ahead of smaller counterparts with less familiarity. Different groups may thus require varying levels and durations of training and support, depending on their prior experience with ICTs, or even a lack thereof.

ICTs—whether mobile phones, computers, telecenters for Internet access, or radio broadcasts— are not ends in themselves, but means. As they are simply conduits for the transmission of information, it is crucial to remember that it is the information itself that is truly important. Selecting the method of dissemination is therefore a crucial task, and cooperatives must develop the capacities and partnerships that will enable them to identify the particular technologies and techniques most appropriate for members and management.

Conclusion

The meeting will look at how ICTs help cooperatives and their members. The speakers will emphasize ICTs as a vital channel for collaboration and for expanding cooperative operations, especially in rural areas.

The meeting should address the following questions:

- ❖ How can ICTs be used effectively to help cooperatives and improve their efficiency?
- ❖ What impact can ICTs have on cooperatives? What more needs to be done?
- ❖ What ICTs innovations have taken place or are taking place?
- ❖ What are the challenges of ICTs implementation in cooperatives?
- ❖ How can ICTs empower cooperatives using applications which provide powerful platforms to help members of cooperatives promote their services, express their views and share good practices?