

Fifth Asia-Pacific Co-operative Ministers' Conference

Beijing, China, 11 – 16 October 1999

JOINT DECLARATION



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Adopted by Representatives of Governments,
Co-operative Movements and International
Organizations in Asia and the Pacific
at the
5th Asia-Pacific
Co-operative Ministers' Conference

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5-18



International Co-operative Alliance
Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific
E-4, Defence Colony, New Delhi-110024. India



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ISBN : 92-9054-058-3

Re-printed:
February 2002 {300}

Typeset and printed at Document Press, HS-14 Kailash Colony Mkt, New Delhi-110048.
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JOINT DECLARATION

**ADOPTED BY REPRESENTATIVES OF GOVERNMENTS,
CO-OPERATIVE MOVEMENTS AND INTERNATIONAL
ORGANIZATIONS IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC**

**AT THE 5TH ASIA-PACIFIC CO-OPERATIVE
MINISTERS' CONFERENCE**

Beijing, China, 11 – 16 October 1999

PROLOGUE

Co-operatives have come into existence in various parts of Asia and the Pacific in the last one hundred years. As the new millennium begins, this part of the world can already count co-operatives among successful enterprises, parallel to private and public sectors in terms of economic impact. They create wealth, employment and income opportunities for people. They help people gain economic leverage in the marketplace.

But the contribution of successful co-operatives is more than economic. They promote social equity, social justice, equality and social responsibility. They exemplify real democracy and build communities. They contribute to peace as well as social stability.

For this reason, people themselves have joined hands in organized cooperation. Governments, too, have taken it upon themselves to promote such cooperation, in their sincere desire to achieve equal distribution of wealth and improve the lives of the majority. And so have various national and international development agencies.

In a general sense, it can be said that much progress has been achieved in this field of human endeavour by cooperatives, governments and international development agencies, acting separately or jointly with others. The same cannot yet be said, however, of specific circumstances – involving certain sectors, individual cooperatives or even individual countries. Here, some restrictions,

limitations and constraints due, for instance, to the political situation still exist and hamper free development of cooperatives.

Recognizing the important role that governments play in co-operative development, the International Co-operative Alliance Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific has initiated active dialogue between co-operatives and governments. It has convened a series of ministerial conferences since 1990. The 5th Co-operative Ministers' Conference in Beijing, which is issuing this Declaration, brought together 15 ministers, 36 high ranking government officials from 24 countries in dialogue with 139 leaders of national cooperative movements and international organisations.

Need for Action

This latest interaction comes at a time when Asia is just emerging from its worst economic crisis. It is set against the backdrop of increasing globalization, liberalization of markets and the opening up of national economies. Without doubt, these objective conditions point to fresh opportunities as well as new challenges to co-operatives in the region.

This Conference has recognized this new reality. In addition, it has taken cognizance of the experiences of the past and the problems, difficulties and obstacles that have heretofore hindered co-operative development. This examination has taught us, among others, that:

- co-operatives contribute their best to society when they are true to their nature as autonomous, member-controlled institutions, and when they remain true to their values and principles (*autonomy and independence*);
- the potential of co-operatives is best realised when their distinct character is recognized by law (*legal existence*);
- co-operatives can achieve their objectives, if they are recognized for what they are and what they can do (*recognition*);
- co-operatives succeed like any other enterprises in a competitive environment and where they are allowed to operate in equal footing with other enterprises (*fair playing field*);
- government must set the legal boundaries, but cooperatives can and should regulate themselves within them (*self-regulation*);

- co-operatives belong to their members whose shares are the basic capital, but in today's competitive world, they must seek additional resources without threatening their co-operative character (*capitalisation*); and
- development assistance can be important for co-operative growth, most effectively when this partnership recognises the co-operative essence and is operationalized within a framework of networking (*official development assistance*).

A Common Agenda

In the light of this examination, this Conference has summarized a new approach to co-operative development in the region focusing on two imperatives in the legislation and regulatory field:

First, the need to create and sustain an enabling policy and legal environment conducive to co-operative development.

Second, the need to establish new forms of cooperation between government and co-operatives.

The resolutions and recommendations outlined below represent concrete measures as well as action steps that this Conference has adopted to address these issues. They reflect the unanimity of approach of the ministers, government officials, co-operative leaders and international organizations present at the conference. The true test of their validity, however, will still be the translation of these resolutions and recommendations into concrete action.

The Way Forward

Given this new thinking and the need to give cooperative development in the region a new direction, this Conference submits to governments, cooperative organizations, international development institutions, and other stakeholders the following **Resolutions**. Within the context that they are framed, these resolutions are meant to create the enabling environment that cooperatives need to realize their potential – in the spirit of partnership with government.

RESOLUTION No. 1: On Autonomy & Independence

Context

That cooperatives can succeed and become a major contributor to national development is already a given. There are enough examples of these successes in the region. Even in developing economies where failures have generally marked their overall development, there are individual coop successes that demonstrate their importance to the economy.

A closer look at these successes reveals one simple fact: these cooperatives are driven by good management that is clearly accountable to members, who ultimately control their direction. The same can be said of cooperatives that grew out of government support and nurture in the beginning. These cooperatives parlayed their autonomy and independent decision-making into good operational results.

Much of Asia, however, still uses this argument in justifying external intervention: Cooperatives are weak, therefore, they need continued external (government) support. This is a self-fulfilling argument and compelling evidence suggests that cooperatives precisely remain weak because of continued external intervention. The two key ingredients of success of cooperatives (good management and effective member control) are clearly ignored by this argument, at the expense of real opportunity for cooperatives to grow and succeed.

It is important that:

- a) The autonomy and independence of co-operatives are legally guaranteed and recognized.
- b) Co-operatives are empowered and allowed to develop their own capacity.
- c) Governments have to firm up and consistently pursue a strategy of disengagement from co-operatives, in cases where there is still official involvement in co-operatives.

RESOLUTION No. 2 : On Legal Existence

Context

Cooperatives are formal institutions recognized as such by most laws in Asia-Pacific countries. These laws recognize cooperatives as distinct institutions, different from private and public ones. Only in a few countries is this distinction not made clear or some types of cooperatives are not given full recognition as such. In others, certain government policies and procedures still prohibit or constrain cooperatives from undertaking enterprise activities. This includes, for instance, the right of free access and the right to own natural resources.

Even from a legal standpoint, what makes cooperatives different from other forms of economic enterprises is their adherence to a set of principles guiding their organizational and business practices. These principles are clearly enunciated in the universally accepted ICA Cooperative Identity Statement (ICIS). They define what a cooperative is and on what conditions an enterprise is organized and carrying on business on a "cooperative basis". When incorporated in the law, ICIS clearly spells out what makes an enterprise legally and in fact a cooperative. It provides the standard against which the cooperative-ness of an enterprise can be measured.

The legal existence of co-operatives should be strengthened to ensure their meaningful contribution to the economy and society in general. This can be done in the following ways:

- a) Recognition of co-operatives as defined in ICIS in law.
- b) Setting ICIS as the minimum condition for legal definition and acceptance of co-operatives.
- c) Acceptance of co-operatives as being equal to and equivalent with all other forms of social and economic organizations.
- d) No government barriers to the principle of voluntary and open membership and the principle of democratic member control.
- e) No special barriers to the area or field of co-operative enterprise.
- f) Recognition of new initiatives by cooperatives as legitimate.

- g) Government registration of cooperatives.

RESOLUTION No. 3 : On Recognition

Context

One of the reasons why cooperatives fail is because they are made or expected to do tasks that they cannot do under artificial conditions. Some examples of these artificial conditions: When coops are organized to serve the poor and the resulting organizational construct is all externally driven. When they are asked to deliver services to the community on the strength of external incentives (e.g. grants and cheap or subsidized loans).

On the other hand, these are objectives that are real to cooperatives that draw strength from members, from a service relationship that is based on real demand. When cooperatives grow and succeed on this basis, their activities translate into benefits not only to members but to the larger society as well.

Successful cooperatives clearly demonstrate economic benefits (otherwise, members and other stakeholders will not support them). What is less obvious are the social ramifications of their activities. When members gather for their annual general assembly to assess the performance of accountable officers and choose them through democratic elections, they strengthen civil society by exemplifying democratic governance. When they harness small savings of members and create investment opportunities for them, they promote equitable distribution of wealth. And so on.

It is these contributions that governments have to recognize when they relate to cooperatives in the area of policy, regulations, and development program implementation. But then again, cooperatives have to be recognized for what they are – self-help, member-controlled institutions whose strength comes from within – if these contributions are to become real.

Governments have to recognize that:

- a) Co-operatives, by serving the needs of members and their communities, contribute to national development, to the reduction of poverty, to job creation, to rural and community development, to the development of social services, and to the improvement of the quality of life of

people; they also serve as real examples of democratic governance.

- b) Co-operatives as well contribute to equity, social justice and democracy, and to giving a “human face” to the market.
- c) Co-operatives do best, and they can realize these contributions, if they are autonomous and independent.

RESOLUTION No. 4 : On Fair Playing Field

Context

When cooperatives are recognized for what they are and what they can do, they can occupy their rightful place among the important sectors of the economy. In an open market economy, they succeed like any other autonomous economic enterprises, delivering products and services in response to the demand of their market. They fail because they cannot meet and satisfy this demand. Special privileges cannot make up for this failure, and often these considerations lead to organizational complacency and operational inefficiencies, and they distort the market as well.

Government sometimes considers priority areas in the development of the national economy. For this reason, it provides certain privileges and temporary incentives to economic sectors able to contribute to its overall development plan. Cooperatives deserve these special considerations, just like other economic enterprises, precisely because they can provide a distinct contribution. When special privileges are granted to private sector, excluding cooperatives, society will have lost such contribution from an important part of the economy.

Cooperatives are economic enterprises with a distinctly social purpose because they are established by people or entities to gain the market leverage they otherwise would not have if they acted individually. Thus, cooperatives are instruments of members to improve their economic and social situation. This is their unique contribution to development. And this is where governments can utilize the advantage of cooperatives when pursuing their development objectives.

Like other enterprises, cooperatives also benefit from infrastructure projects undertaken by government for rural development in general and for agricultural development in particular.

Governments can take advantage of the unique contribution of co-operatives to national development by giving attention to the following considerations:

- a) Recognition and acceptance by government, of co-operatives as legitimate and involved partners in development, national policy and social planning.
- b) Assistance from government for the delivery of social and community service, on the basis of full equality with private or public enterprises.
- c) Government assistance, when needed, should be limited to seed and start-up money. Recovery strategies and targeted programs should be undertaken on a limited basis and should ensure co-operative independence.
- d) Assistance in coop HRD, including education and training for managerial, entrepreneurial and co-operative development.
- e) Introduction of co-operatives in the curriculum of educational systems as well as allowing formation of co-operatives in schools.
- f) Encouragement of new co-operative initiatives, such as the formation of co-operatives among SMEs, new generation co-operatives, social service coops and others.
- g) Removal of all legal and other barriers which limit equal participation of men and women in membership, leadership, management and decision-making in co-operatives.

RESOLUTION No. 5 : On Self-Regulation

Context

As legitimate formal institutions, cooperatives can only benefit from a law that ensures that cooperatives stick to their economic and social objectives, remain transparent in their operations, and ensures that rights of members are protected. The coop law should spell out clearly these conditions as well those that will make cooperatives truly socially responsible institutions. Within these limits, the law has to recognize the ability of cooperatives to exercise self-determination and self-control, if they are to develop into autonomous institutions.

This points to the importance of self-regulation. Institutional mechanisms for self-regulation are part of the overall development of cooperatives. Such mechanisms create opportunities for them to develop standards and establish appropriate institutional systems. At the primary level, this could mean the institutionalization of proper internal control systems. At the higher levels, this could mean the enforcement of standards that will strengthen democratic governance and operational integrity. Whatever the case, self-regulation strengthens the confidence of cooperatives within and outside them – and ensures that they meet the objectives of the law.

It is important that:

- a) Co-operatives should formulate their own rules and regulations, which will guarantee accountability and transparency within the framework of the law. Such rules and regulations should be reviewed and updated from time to time, in consultation with all stakeholders.
- b) Co-operatives should define their modes of transparency and accountability including reporting, audit and control committee, etc.; but the law may set the minimum standards for transparency and the penalties in case of non-compliance. Such modes should be understood by all stakeholders.
- c) The law should set the conditions for registration and de-registration, the formation and dissolution by members of co-operatives, and should define modes and mechanisms for settlement of disputes.

- d) The law should require internal and external audit. The responsibility for internal audit belongs to the co-operative, and the co-operative movement. Where a co-operative is unable to carry out internal audit, the co-operative movement shall assist by: (a) providing necessary assistance, and (b) developing appropriate instruments and training so that primary co-operatives may conduct their own internal audit.
- e) The government retains the right of dissolution of coop societies only for violation, as specified in the law and executes such right in accordance with the procedures defined by law.
- f) Co-operatives and the co-operative movement are responsible for organization and development of co-operatives including HRD, training, education, etc.

RESOLUTION No. 6 : On Capitalization

Context

Capital is central to the issue of ownership and control of an enterprise. In cooperatives, there is also a social purpose to capital: It is a means by which members gain access to needed services, not an instrument to realize economic returns; it has to be within reach of the least of all members so as to ensure equal opportunity for all. Thus, basic share capital in cooperatives receives little or no compensation (i.e. interest). It is there to ensure that members maintain ownership and control of the coop enterprise. Without this ownership and control, cooperatives lose their identity as such.

Once this basic condition is fulfilled, additional capital or investments needed by the coop enterprise become a function of the market. Cooperatives can look to members for additional capital or investments, which should receive compensation at least equal to alternatives in the market. They can receive investments from outside. They can invest in other cooperatives or set up holding companies or subsidiaries. All these will increase their leverage in the market.

At the same time, it has to be recognized that intense competition in the market could create pressures on cooperatives. The law has to ensure that members maintain effective control even as cooperatives adjust to the competitive environment. It should protect them from takeovers and similar pressures from competition.

In formulating laws and policies, governments can promote the cause of co-operatives by considering the following conditions:

- a) Member participation in capital should be increased but individual shareholdings should not exceed a certain percentage of total equity. Limited interest or dividend should be paid on basic share; however, a market competitive rate of return may be paid on additional investments beyond the basic share.
- b) Co-operatives should be encouraged to invest in other co-operatives, both within the country and abroad. Laws that prohibit foreign investment are relevant to this consideration.
- c) When seeking to raise capital, co-operatives should be encouraged to adopt the following strategy; first seek capital from members; if further capital is required it should seek capital funds from other co-operatives within the country and/or co-operatives in other countries; and if further capital is required only then should it be sought from other non-cooperative sources.
- d) Investments from outside (non-member sources) can be accepted if these do not lead to loss of member control. Coops may be allowed to set up holding companies/subsidiaries, provided they are established to serve member interest and they retain member control over such institutions.
- e) Co-operatives can promote their image and comparative advantage in the market by projecting their distinctiveness and co-operative character.
- f) Coop laws and bylaws should prescribe special voting conditions in case of "change of nature" of co-operatives into non-coop forms, such conditions, for instance, to include approval by a major percentage of membership.
- g) Co-operatives which are operating within the law (including laws relating to solvency and honesty) should be protected from takeovers by other sectors.
- h) Co-operatives and governments should, in case of wind ups, seek to protect the co-operatives' residual assets built up over a time by making an appropriate co-

operative development fund the beneficiary of such assets.

- i) Government should recognize the special nature of co-operatives when formulating taxation laws and policies.
- j) In carrying out reforms in some countries, privatization in other countries or restructuring of state owned enterprises, government should give priority to co-operatives, ensuring that this is in line with their coop nature and their capacity to undertake and manage them. This process should serve the interest of employees and the users and should facilitate job creation.
- k) If the government's economic assistance is offered following natural disaster, it should be made available to co-operatives on the basis of equality to other sectors and it should ensure that the co-operative does not suffer any loss as a result of waiver of loans.
- l) The law should prohibit speculative investment of funds obtained by co-operatives from external sources.

RESOLUTION No. 7: On Official Development Assistance

Context

In many countries in the Asia-Pacific region, cooperatives have been the object of external assistance both from governments and international aid agencies. Unfortunately, the overall record of this assistance has weighed more on the side of failure, with disastrous consequences to the image and reputation of cooperatives. This is so because this external input, while well intentioned, tended to ignore the very nature of cooperatives as self-help and autonomous organizations. On the other hand, development assistance could be utilized productively by cooperatives – as long as it capitalizes on their strength as people-oriented institutions.

Co-operatives are legitimate focus for development assistance by international and national agencies. They welcome such assistance in the region provided that:

- a) The ICA Co-operative Identity Statement (ICIS) is respected.
- b) Funds are provided for and through co-operatives.
- c) Initiative at grassroots level is not stifled.
- d) Assistance is provided according to the needs of co-operatives including legal, policy and institutional reforms; HRD and capacity building.
- e) Development assistance should be based on the expectation that it will be managed along the lines of economic responsibility, competent management, and accountability.
- f) Programs of development assistance should be coordinated to ensure that there is no overlapping or conflict of goals and that maximum coordination is achieved.
- g) National governments and development assistance agencies should recognize ICA and ICA ROAP as appropriate partners and agent for developing and coordinating projects in partnership with member organizations.
- h) Efforts must be made to ensure that the World Bank financial and development programs fully recognize and accept co-operatives and ICA.

RESOLUTION No. 8: On Networking

Networking is an important element in maximizing the effectiveness of Official Development Assistance. Networking may be promoted through following programs:

- a) The establishment of an ICA ROAP website.
- b) Enhancing the ICA ROAP Regional Database.
- c) Strengthening the HRD, HRM and R&D programs within coop institutions and jointly with other institutions.
- d) Networking with Asian Productivity Organization and the World Productivity Movement.
- e) The joint ICA-NEDAC Declaration, which should be translated into an action plan with the required technical,

financial and institutional support from agencies, including continued support from FAO and other appropriate agencies like the World Bank.

- f) Networking with ILO Coop Branch including COOPNET, COOPREFORM and INDISCO programs.
- g) Networking with other important development agencies such as the Asian Development Bank.
- h) Consultation with ICA whenever national governments formulate new cooperative laws.

Conference Programme

Monday, 11th October 1999

09:00 - 18:00 Registration of Participants (Friendship Hall, Friendship Hotel)

Arrival of Honourable Ministers, distinguished delegates from ICA member organisations and International Institutions/Agencies (all day).

Tuesday, 12th October 1999

09:30 - 10:30 **INAUGURATION CEREMONY**
at the Friendship Palace Hall,
Friendship Hotel.

- Inaugural Speech by His Excellency Wen Jiabao, Vice-Premier of the People's Republic of China.
- Speech by Mr. Roberto Rodrigues, President, International Cooperative Alliance.
- Greetings by Mr. Bai Lichen, Vice-Chairman, Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and President, Board of Directors, All China Federation of Supply and Marketing Cooperatives.
- Award Ceremony : To award Plaque to the Government of the People's Republic of China and All China Federation of Supply and Marketing Cooperatives.
- Group Photograph with Vice-Premier in front of the Friendship Palace.

10:30 - 11:00 Nutrition Break

- 11:00 - 12:30 **Work Session I**
 Appointment of Steering Committee
 Appointment of Chair of Work Session 1
 Adoption of Conference Procedures and Agenda
 Keynote Address by Honourable Abdullah Tarmugi, Minister of Community Development, Government of Singapore on "*Critical path for co-operative growth and development in the face of the Asia Crisis*".
- 12:30 - 13:45 Lunch Break
- 13:45 - 15:00 **Work Session II**
 Global Trends and Coop Legislation by Mr. Bruce Thordarson, Director-General, International Cooperative Alliance.
 Cooperative Ministers' Conference in Retrospect by Mr. Robby Tulus, Regional Director, ICA Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.
 Key Issues and Recommendations by Dr. Yehudah Paz, Board Member, International Cooperative Alliance.
- 17:00 - 17:30 A special audience – for invited delegates – with His Excellency the Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China.
- 18:00 - 19:30 Banquet Dinner, hosted by the Government of China, at the Great Hall of People.

Wednesday, 13th October 1999

- Work Session III**
- 09:00 - 10:30 Presentation of Country Statements (10 minutes each)
- 10:30 - 11:00 Nutrition Break.
- 11:00 - 12:30 Presentation of Country Statements (continued)
- 12:30 - 14:00 Lunch Break

Work Session IV

- 14:00 - 15:30 Presentation of Country Statements (continued)
- 15:30 - 16:00 Nutrition Break

Work Session V

- 16:00 - 17:30 Presentation of Country Statements (continued)
- 19:30 - 21:30 Banquet Dinner hosted by the All China Federation of Supply and Marketing Co-operatives, including cultural shows, at the Friendship Palace.

Thursday, 14th October 1999

Work Session VI

- 09:00 - 10:30 Statements by International Organisations/Agencies.
- 10:30 - 11:00 Nutrition Break
- 11:00 - 12:00 Statements by International Organisations/Agencies.
- 12:00 - 12:30 Briefing, methodology & logistical details of Break-out Sessions
- 12:30 - 14:00 Lunch Break
- 14:00 - 18:00 Breakout Sessions.

Friday, 15th October 1999

Work Session VII

- 09:00 - 10:30 **Plenary** : reports from break-out sessions, followed by discussions.
- 10:30 - 11:00 Nutrition Break
- 11:00 - 11:30 Adoption of Group Reports
- 11:30 - 12:30 Lunch Break
- 12:30 - 16:30 **Field visit** to the Great Wall and one Supply and Marketing Co-operative.

18:30 - 20:30 Dinner Reception hosted by Beijing Supply and Marketing Co-operatives.

Saturday, 16th October 1999

09:00 - 10:30 Adoption of JOINT DECLARATION

10:30 - 11:00 Nutrition Break

11:00 - 12:00 Formulation of COUNTRY ACTION PLANS by respective country delegates/representatives.

12:00 - 12:30

- Consideration of Venue and Dates for the 6th Asia Pacific Co-operative Ministers' Conference.

- Formal Closing

12:30 - 14:00 Farewell luncheon

14:00 Free Time or departures.

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STATEMENT ON THE CO-OPERATIVE IDENTITY

Definition

A co-operative is 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.

Values

Co-operatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.

Principles

The co-operative principles are guidelines by which co-operatives put their values into practice.

1st Principle: Voluntary and Open Membership

Co-operatives are voluntary organisations, open to all persons able to use their service and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.

2nd Principle: Democratic Member Control

Co-operatives are democratic organisations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary co-operatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and co-operatives at other levels are also organised in a democratic manner.

3rd Principle: Member Economic Participation

Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-operative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the co-operative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their co-operative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

4th Principle: Autonomy and Independence

Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organisations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organisations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy.

5th Principle: Education, Training and Information

Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public - particularly young people and opinion leaders - about the nature and benefits of co-operation.

6th Principle: Co-operation among Co-operatives

Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.

7th Principle: Concern for Community

Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities approved by their members.

