



United Nations

Department of
Economic and
Social Affairs

Aide-Mémoire

VIRTUAL EXPERT GROUP MEETING

THE ROLE OF COOPERATIVES IN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: RECOVER BETTER

FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

2 and 4 JUNE 2021

Purpose of the meeting

In its resolution A/RES/74/119, the General Assembly recognized that cooperatives, in their various forms, promote the fullest possible participation in the economic and social development of local communities and all people¹. The resolution requested the Secretary-General to continue to render support to Member States in creating a supportive environment for the development of cooperatives. This Expert Group Meeting is convened to provide inputs to the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the resolution.

Background

The economic recovery from COVID-19 pandemic has seen some countries bounce back with positive GDP growth, while the growth outlook for many others remains fragile and uncertain. The 'uneven recovery', particularly in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean reflects an ongoing challenge that hinders the effort to bolster global prospects². The Secretary-General affirms that the current health-induced crisis around the globe has given a unique generational opportunity to examine the fragile state of society.³ In order to build back better and achieve the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, a New Social Contract is required in the post-COVID era. The New Social Contract involves governments, people, civil society, business and other stakeholders to build a more inclusive, equitable, resilient, and sustainable society with social protection for all. It will be based on equal opportunities and access to employment/decent work for all, quality education, essential healthcare (or achieve universal health coverage) and basic income for all. The implicit arrangement of social contract emphasizes the varieties of relationships between the government and citizens, as well as between different groups of the population, which significantly rely on the individual participation of citizens in decisions affecting their

¹ General Assembly resolution A/RES/74/119, 'Cooperatives in Social Development', <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/119>, 10 January 2020.

² World Economic Situation and Prospects as of mid-2021, https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/WESP2021_UPDATE.pdf.

³ Secretary-General speech at Nelson Mandela Lecture, 'Tackling the Inequality Pandemic: A New Social Contract for a New Era', <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-07-18/remarks-nelson-mandela-lecture-tackling-the-inequality-pandemic-new-social-contract-for-new-era>, 18 July 2020.

every lives.⁴ Cooperatives have a significant role to play in the social contract since they put people, rather than profit, at the center in their operations.

General Assembly resolution A/RES/74/119 further recognizes the importance of cooperatives in promoting the development of all people, including women, youth, older persons, indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities.⁵ Cooperatives and other social and solidarity endeavor to serve those who are marginalized and vulnerable sectors of the population. They often act to address social vulnerabilities that may not align with the interest of traditional profit-driven businesses. Cooperatives and other social and solidarity enterprises are therefore of major importance in supporting socially inclusive policies and the 2030 Agenda, particularly in the process of economic and societal recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in developing countries. They have proven their resilience and sustainability, most recently after the economic and financial crisis that began in 2008.⁶ They promote the idea of democratic self-management and active citizenship.⁷ By giving primacy to social objectives above profits, cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy enterprises have the potential to create greater equality, inclusion and values of justice that are grounded in people's agency,⁸ strongly associated with all sustainable development goals.

In order to establish the right environment for growth and prosperity of cooperatives, supportive legislation has been recognized as an important booster. Report of the Secretary-General A/74/206 of July 2019 emphasizes that the enabling environment needs to be strengthened further by taking into account the complex, multipurpose and heterogeneous nature of cooperatives.⁹ While it is useful to consider the social and cultural functions of cooperatives, more attention is needed to focus on the evolving economic and business elements of cooperation. In many jurisdictions, cooperative laws have been gradually extended to include legal subtexts, legal policies and implementation of self-governance. In successive General Assembly resolution on cooperatives in social development, most recently in resolution A/RES/74/206 2020, governments are recommended to review existing legislation and make amendments as required,¹⁰ to make them more conducive to the growth of cooperatives, including the creation of a supportive environment for the role of women in cooperatives.

⁴ ILO 2019, Cooperative & Social and Solidarity Economy: Responses to Key Issues in the Report of the Global Commission on the Future of Work, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---coop/documents/publication/wcms_705803.pdf.

⁵ General Assembly Resolution A/RES/74/119, 'Cooperatives in Social Development', <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/119>, 10 January 2020.

⁶ See Birchall, Johnston & Ketilson, L.Hammond, 2009, 'Resilience of the Cooperative Business Model in Times of Crisis', IOM, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/documents/publication/wcms_108416.pdf.

⁷ Utting, Peter. 'Introduction: The Challenge of Scaling Up Social and Solidarity Economy', UNRISD, [https://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/\(httpPublications\)/0E6AD972672826FFC1257E12005DFD1C?OpenDocument](https://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/(httpPublications)/0E6AD972672826FFC1257E12005DFD1C?OpenDocument).

⁸ UNRISD Flagship Report 2016, 'Chapter 4: Promoting Social and Solidarity Economy through Public Policy' in *Policy Innovation for Transformative Change*, [https://www.unrisd.org/80256B42004CCC77/\(httpInfoFiles\)/7E583F050CE1D2A4C125804F0033363E/\\$file/Flagship2016_Ch4.pdf](https://www.unrisd.org/80256B42004CCC77/(httpInfoFiles)/7E583F050CE1D2A4C125804F0033363E/$file/Flagship2016_Ch4.pdf).

⁹ Report of the Secretary-General A/74/206, 'Cooperatives in Social Development', <https://undocs.org/A/74/206>, 22 July 2019.

¹⁰ General Assembly resolution A/RES/74/119, 'Cooperative in Social Development', <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/74/119>, 10 January 2020.

Recognizing their huge potential, the General Assembly in its resolution A/RES/64/136 declared the year 2012 the International Year of Cooperatives.¹¹ The declaration aimed to encourage all Member States and other stakeholders to promote the role of cooperatives, and to raise awareness of their important contribution to social and economic development. By having the central theme of “Cooperative enterprise build a better world”, individuals and institutions were encouraged to actively form and grow cooperatives for socio-economic empowerment.¹² Policies, laws and regulations were urged to be created in ways that facilitate the growth and prosperity of cooperatives. The International Cooperative Alliance proposed the 2020 Challenge,¹³ with the aim for cooperatives:

- To become the acknowledged leader in economic, social and environmental sustainability
- To become the model preferred by people
- To become the fastest growing form of enterprise

Objectives of the Meeting

Recognizing the important role that cooperatives can play in the post-pandemic recovery, the Division for Inclusive Social Development of the Department of Economic and Social , in collaboration with the International Cooperative Alliance, is organizing an expert group meeting on “The Role of Cooperatives in Economic and Social Development: Building Back Better From the COVID-19 Pandemic”, to be held virtually on 2 and 4 June 2021. The meeting will discuss key questions related to the implementation of General Assembly resolution on cooperatives in facilitating social development, including the role they can play to build the world back better from the COVID-19 pandemic. The meeting will provide expert analysis and policy recommendations that will inform the preparation of the forthcoming report of the Secretary-General on cooperatives in social development. In particular, the expert group meeting aims to:

- 1) Analyze actions that have been taken by cooperatives to support their members and economies at large during the pandemic, and see the possibility of scaling up these activities in other countries, as appropriate to support building back better;
- 2) Discuss lessons learned from the International Year of Cooperatives that are being shared by countries and can help further growth and development, and establish whether there is any merit in declaring another international year of cooperatives;
- 3) Analyze available best practices in cooperatives legislation and the steps needed to promote further growth and development; and the best practices that can be shared, including steps needed to develop such legislation;
- 4) Discuss emerging challenges faced by cooperatives in dealing with social development during the pandemic, and possible approaches to overcome those challenges;
- 5) Discuss the underpinnings of cooperative enterprise model and identify potential room for improvement moving forward in better addressing the 2030 Agenda and the ‘2020 Challenge’

¹¹ General Assembly resolution A/RES/64/136, ‘Cooperatives in Social Development’, <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/64/136>, 11 February 2010.

¹² United Nations Department of Public Information, 2012 – International Year of Cooperatives web page, <https://www.un.org/en/events/coopsyear/>.

¹³ International Co-operative Alliance Annual Report and Accounts 2012, <https://www.ica.coop/sites/default/files/publication-files/ica-annual-report-and-accounts-2012-277091096.pdf>.

with particular attention to the role of woman in cooperatives and the ways in which women's empowerment can be better addressed.

Expected Outcomes

The meeting is expected to provide substantive input for assessing the gaps, challenges and lessons learned over the course of the pandemic regarding the role of cooperatives; strategies for creating an enabling environment for cooperatives; strategies for promoting cooperatives to make them more widely known and adopted as a preferred business model. Experts will draft papers addressing all the key questions that will be posted electronically as reference documents.

Organizational and administrative matters

The event will take place virtually on June 2 and 4 2021. Each expert group meeting session will include presentations by lead experts who will present papers on the topics of the sessions, which will be followed by in-depth discussions. At the end of the meeting, participants will outline the major conclusions and recommendations of the meeting.

All inputs to the meeting will be made available as a resource guide on the website of Division of Inclusive Social Development (<http://social.un.org/>) as well as a summary of discussion.

Presenters are encouraged to prepare PowerPoint presentations and share them in advance with the organizers. All presentations and other relevant correspondence should be sent to **Mr. Andrew Allimadi** (allimadi@un.org), and copied to **Mr. Joshua Del Duca** (delduca@un.org).

Documentation and the language of the meeting

The documentation of the meeting will comprise of relevant publications and documents related to the topics of the sessions. Experts will be invited to provide their contributions in advance and all documentation will be made available on the same DISD website above.

The working language of the meeting will be in English. Documentation for the meeting will be provided in English.