

# ICA: 125 YEARS, 4 VOICES





There are 3 million cooperatives worldwide – and 1.2 billion members on the planet. The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) was founded in 1895 as the apex body representing these cooperatives, a global voice and forum for knowledge, expertise and coordinated action across sectors and regions. 19 August 2020 is the 125th anniversary of its founding. To mark the occasion, we heard from four voices in the cooperative movement to find out:

**WHAT THE COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT WAS LIKE IN 1895** [*Chapter 1, Gillian Lonergan*]

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ICA AND THE COOPERATIVE IDENTITY** [*Chapter 2, Dr Rita Rhodes*]

**HOW COOPERATIVE IDENTITY IS RELEVANT TODAY** [*Chapter 3, Dr Martin Lowery*]

**WHAT THE ICA MEANS TO THE NEXT GENERATION** [*Chapter 4, Vina Vida Rempillo*]



## Chapter 1

# GILLIAN LONERGAN

Gillian Lonergan spent her working life as a librarian at the Co-operative Heritage Trust's National Co-operative Archive. She retired in 2019, after three decades in the movement. We speak with her to find out more about the cooperative movement at the time of the 1895 World Cooperative Congress and the importance of the principles set out by the Rochdale Pioneers. She also offers her thoughts about the role of the ICA in guiding the global cooperative movement and shares her favourite anecdotes about the ICA.

### **What was the cooperative movement like before the first International Cooperative Congress?**

By the time of the ICA Congress in 1895 there were 1,400 different societies in the UK alone. The first cooperative societies that we know about in the UK were mostly productive societies – but with the Industrial Revolution, many people were going into towns for the first time, and what they really needed was a good supply of good quality, unadulterated food at good prices and good weights and measures. So the setting up of consumer cooperatives that ran shops was the obvious way to go. As they developed, UK cooperatives got together to form the Cooperative Wholesale Society so they could buy things in bulk and distribute among themselves. They also set up the Cooperative Union. When I first worked for the Cooperative Union back in the 1980s, I was told it had been mostly set up because the Rochdale Pioneers found they were spending more of their time helping other people set up co-ops and

answering their problems. So they helped set up a separate organisation that would give advice and guidance to cooperative societies and also connect them. It was a rapidly growing movement by the time of the 1895 Congress.

### **Why did they feel there was a need for an International Cooperative Congress?**

Cooperators have always been fascinated by what other cooperators are doing and what they can learn from it. Cooperators themselves were visiting other cooperatives and exchanging good ideas and good practice. But to have an international conference was a big thing, and people were getting really excited about it from around 1890 onwards. In 1895, people came from so many different places – from America, India and across Europe – who wanted to get together and learn from each other. And I think it was everything that people had hoped that it would be. It was such a great event that people felt it had been worth the wait.

**Which countries helped to organise the first International Cooperative Congress and then set up the International Cooperative Alliance?**

If you look at the organisations that were in discussions between 1890 and 1895, the ones that recur most often are France, Germany, Italy and the UK. But they had delegates from America, Austro-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, Flanders, France, Germany, Holland, India, Ireland, Italy, Romania, Serbia, Scotland and Switzerland. It's interesting that one of the problems at the event was the sheer number of languages involved. They didn't have any professional interpreters. So, individual delegates who knew more than one language were helping other delegates to understand what was going on. One of the things they decided during that Congress was that before they held future events they needed to bring it down to a few languages.

**If we look at the practices set out by the Rochdale Pioneers, how did these become known as the Rochdale Principles?**

The Rochdale Pioneers set up their society in 1844 but for most of those 28 original members it was not a sudden thing. They had been looking at cooperatives for years, had been talking to other cooperators, had been out visiting people involved in all sorts of different membership-based organisations to get their ideas together. In their rule book which was published in 1844, they put together all of the ideas that they had gathered. And that became known as the Rochdale Method.

There had been a lot of cooperative societies before that, you have to remember, but many of those societies were dependent on a particular group of people in a particular place at a particular time. And they very rarely went on to the next generation of members. When the original members left or died or got interested in something else, the societies actually folded, but the

Rochdale Pioneers in their method actually encouraged the constant recruitment of new members, because they were determined that their society was going to keep going for a very long time.

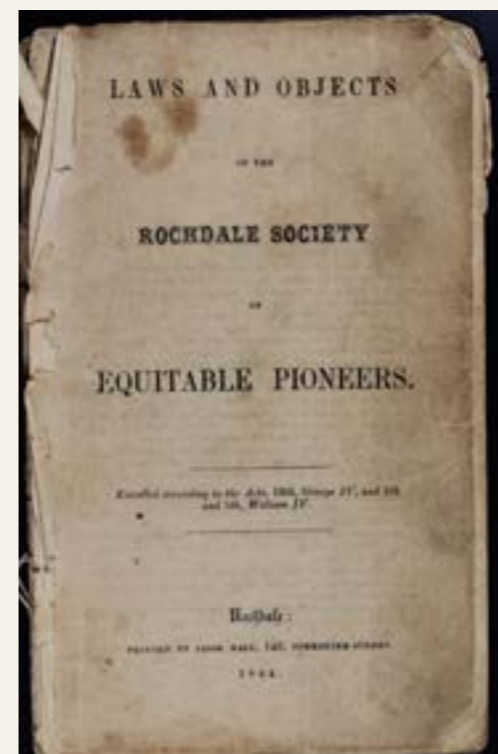
**“COOPERATORS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN FASCINATED BY WHAT OTHER COOPERATORS ARE DOING AND WHAT THEY CAN LEARN FROM IT”**

**How quickly did these practices spread across the UK as a set of practical rules? And how did they help the businesses adopting them to differentiate themselves?**

It spread very rapidly – by the late 1850s, they were having histories written about them and were being asked by all sorts of different people for copies of their rulebook, for advice on how to set up cooperatives. It spread so fast that by the 1860s, the Co-operative Wholesale Society was being set up, the Cooperative Union was being set up – they had a real head of steam going at that time.

**Were there any tensions between the Rochdale Principles, or practices, and those of other emerging coop sectors?**

The Rochdale Principles are a fascinating story, because they didn't write them down to start with. People often think the Pioneers had them in 1844, but they were actually written in 1860 in the almanac produced for members who wanted a guide on setting up cooperatives. That list became



known as the Rochdale Principles, and were picked up and run with by cooperatives in all sorts of different places. Now they have changed quite a lot as time has gone on, because it's a living movement. It's never static, things are always going to change, which is why the principles have altered over the years.

**How were different traditions of the cooperative model interpreted?**

When you look at the international cooperative movement, cooperatives are often established because there's an identified problem that needs to be addressed. A lot of the cooperative banks were set up because small farmers needed money in order to buy fertiliser or seed. In the 1880s in Ireland, Horace Plunkett was working with the dairy and agricultural co-ops. So he asked the Cooperative Union in Britain for a copy of their model rules for consumer cooperatives, and he tweaked it to fit with the needs of the agricultural cooperatives that he was helping to get established. People the whole world over

learn from each other, and adapt. In the UK, for example, we had so many people moving into cities, that it took us down the path of the productive societies because the workers wanted to set up their own cooperative factories. I still see that happening across the world.

**One of the several goals at the very first Congress was to manage the common cooperative principles, alongside knowledge sharing and commercial links. What has changed over the last 125 years?**

There's a lovely part in the draft of the constitution for the ICA from 1896, which encourages cooperators "get acquainted with each other", which I think is a brilliant first aim for any organisation, not least an international organisation. It's just brilliant.

I think everything else follows that and develops over time. The ICA was started from a conference, and without very much in the way of funding, or premises or anything else. And I think you start with what you can do, and you develop on your own. In the 1930s, the ICA reviewed the Rochdale Principles, to see what was still relevant to the cooperative movement, and how they're put into practice. One of the great strengths of the cooperative movement is the continued surveys of itself in the 1930s, 1960s and 1990s, when it reviewed not only the principles themselves, but also how they are put into practice. If you look at the material from those surveys, you get so much information about how cooperatives have developed, and how they operate at the time of the review, so that you get a real picture of development. That's something that the ICA has done right throughout its history. And speaking as somebody who worked in the National Archives my entire working life, I think this is wonderful. It gives you a real starting point, and a real feel for what was happening at the time. And those materials that they produced are a goldmine for researchers. The number of people

*The Laws and Objects of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers*

# “COOPERATION IS DONE IN DIFFERENT WAYS IN DIFFERENT PLACES AND IN DIFFERENT SECTORS, BUT WE CAN ALL LEARN FROM EACH OTHER, AND WE’RE ALL WORKING IN THE SAME DIRECTION.”

who have visited the National Cooperative Archive and gone through those materials is more than I could care to remember, and each person takes something different from it.

## What is your impression of the mood at that very first Congress?

The first Congress is fascinating because even in the verbatim report you get a feel for the excitement. People were spending five days together, talking and learning. Some days, they actually didn’t come to an agreement about the topic on the allocated day, so debates continued the next morning until a consensus was reached. Everybody was listened to. All views were welcomed and everybody got the opportunity to put forward their ideas, and to completely disagree with somebody else and use it as a start of a debate.

## What resolutions were adopted at that first Congress?

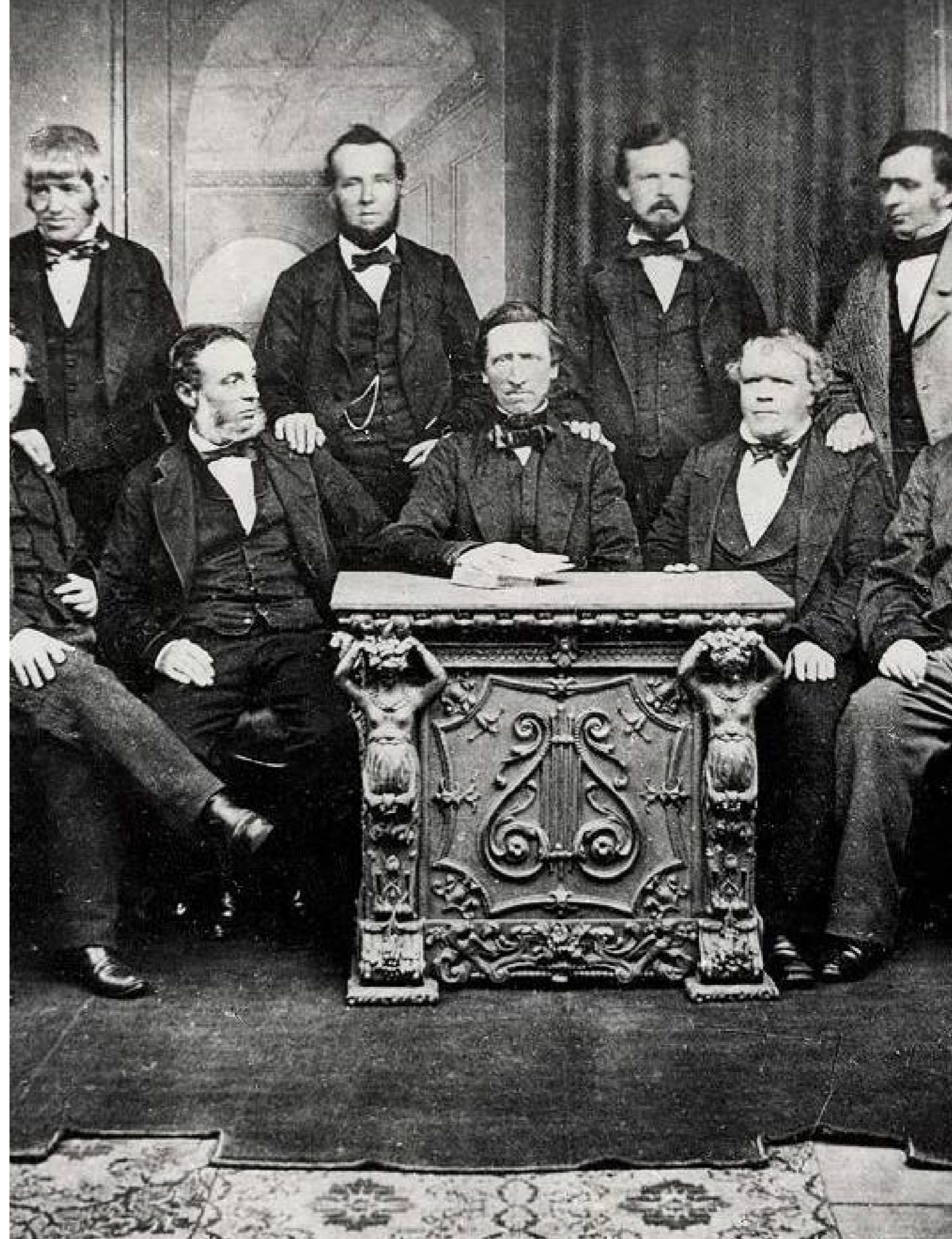
There were various resolutions to do with the inclusion of different sectors. The two people who had really pushed for the ICA Congress were Edward Vansittart Neale (1810–1892) of the Co-operative Union and Edward Owen Greening (1836-1923), who was heavily involved in productive and agricultural cooperatives. One of the things they really wanted was to have more than one sector involved, for it to be totally inclusive of anybody who wanted to join.

## Why is the ICA still vital and relevant to today’s cooperative movement?

It has always had the core role of bringing people together. And this is very important. I think that it’s been the same for the last 125 years, and I can see it being the same in another 125 years, that recognition that we can all learn from each other. Cooperation is done in different ways in different places and in different sectors, but we can all learn from each other, and we’re all working in the same direction. And I think the ICA is vital in that, and at the heart of that communication.

## What would your message be to the next Congress?

To the next ICA Congress, I would love to say: keep the enthusiasm that has been evident right throughout every Congress of the ICA. Over the years I have met people who have been to ICA Congresses, and every one of them has come back buzzing with new ideas, just the sheer joy of being there and having the opportunity to meet so many different people and learn so many different new ideas. Make sure that you keep that in all of the Congresses that you ever go to, that enthusiasm and open-minded sense of ‘what can I come back with from this?’ and ‘what can I bring to my own country from this?’



*The Rochdale Pioneers set up their society in 1844*



## Chapter 2

# RITA RHODES

Dr Rita Rhodes is a cooperative educator, historian, author and academic. She was the Co-operative Union's Sectional Education Officer in Scotland and later Education Liaison Officer at the UK's National Co-operative Development Agency. She then joined the ICA to become its Education Officer and secretary to its Women's Committee and later became a lecturer in Co-operative Studies at the University of Ulster. After gaining her Ph.D she became a visiting research fellow at the Co-operatives Research Unit of the Open University, presenting papers to many ICA Research conferences. She was twice chair of the UK Society for Co-operative Studies and was appointed a fellow of the Plunkett Foundation. She has written a number of cooperative histories including *The International Co-operative Alliance During War and Peace 1910-1950* (ICA Publications 1995), *A Thematic Guide to ICA Congresses 1895-1995* (with Professor Dionysos Mavrogiannis; ICA Publications 1996), *An Arsenal for Labour* (Holyoake Books 1998) and *Empire and Co-operation* (John Donald 2012). We spoke with her about the development of the ICA and the cooperative identity following the organisation's first Congress in 1895.

### **Why was there a need for an international body for cooperatives, at the time the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) was founded?**

I question if there was a need, but there was certainly a wish. Some people have described cooperative ideas as almost semi-religious ideas. People get excited by them and they want to join up and discuss them. This idea spread in Europe, including Russia, in the late 19th century – and inherent in the cooperative idea is internationalism. At that time in Western Europe, cooperative organisations were young and were characterised by the ideas

of self help, mutual aid and trade, equality and democracy. These things stood equal and cooperatives wanted to discuss them, but the need in that first meeting was to join and say: 'Hello, here we are. What do we think? How do we propagate these ideas more widely? How do we really encourage relations between cooperatives, particularly in terms of trade?'

### **What was the mood at the first Congress?**

One of pleasure and of joy. Some years ago I happened to attend a conference organised by the ICA which was held in the Royal Society of Arts in London. We then learned

that the first meeting of the ICA had also been held there in 1895 with around 200 attending. I believe that its elegance will have prompted good talk with an ambiance that was relaxed and stylish.

**What were the questions or ideas that first Congress hoped to address?**

How to encourage relations between co-ops. Until 1919, ICA membership comprised individuals and cooperative associations. It was a quite loose organisation that was looking at how to bring cooperators together, because there was an impulse, an impetus to do this. It also wanted to enable cooperators and cooperative associations to exchange experiences. A third hope was that through an alliance, it could develop commercial relationships; and eventually trading relationships.

**Were any of these aims seen as singularly important?**

I think the goals of sharing knowledge and creating commercial links – and also managing the Cooperative Principles – were equally important. They were interdependent and interrelated. Also keep in mind that the organisation formed was an ‘alliance’, which is quite a loose, friendly framework. It isn’t a business framework where you have a hard and fast constitution. It has always remained, by name, an alliance, and I think that stresses its fraternity and its friendliness. But commercial relations did become more important, particularly after the First World War.

I want to mention here a tension that was important but quite divisive, between consumer coops and other kinds of cooperatives, particularly producer cooperatives. It’s a fact of history that the early successful cooperative model was the consumer coop; and that had tremendous repercussions for the ICA because consumer coops, that became mass membership organisations with large turnovers, paid regular subscriptions to the ICA, and

helped it become established. But there’s a tension between the dynamics of consumer cooperation, and other kinds.

One of the original ideas of Robert Owen (1771-1858, one of the early developers of cooperative ideas) was that in the factors of production, labour is as important as capital – and in a cooperative, capital should be subsumed to that of the member or the shareholder. Consumer coops became universal, in that they could provide for members from cradle to grave, but other types of coop were more sectoral, with limited membership, such as farmers cooperatives. So, essentially, there was a tension between the needs of consumers and the needs of producers. One good example of this is the relations between Irish Creamery producers and the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS, the central wholesaling body of the British retail co-operative movement), which set up its own creamery departments in Ireland, in direct competition, to ensure a consistent supply of quality creamery products for its consumer members. Sir Horace Plunkett held that a man employed in a subsidiary could not be as full a man as one who produced.

The question of how you reconcile the difference between the needs of consumers and producers has been a difficult one, but hopefully recent moves will help.

**There are different interpretations and traditions of the cooperative movement around the world. How did the first delegates from different countries find common ground?**

I think the common ground was there from the beginning. There was a common understanding that a cooperative was democratic, it was egalitarian, it limited the role of capital and emphasised the role of the member. And it was about self-help to relieve a problem – that was its objective. That understanding was found throughout cooperative ideas geographically.

*The first International Cooperative Congress was held at the Royal Society of Arts, 19-22 August 1895*



I'd like to make a point about the British Empire. There are a lot of bad words said about it and I agree with a lot of them, but I believe that imperialism and cooperation came together. On the surface, you couldn't think of two more diametrically opposed ideas, but they proved to be complementary. In my view, the British Empire has been, historically, the biggest developer of cooperatives throughout the world, by taking the ideas set down in Rochdale around the world. Including India. For example: India's first cooperative legislation was passed in 1904, to set up thrift and credit societies. When slavery was abolished, one of the ways that it was possible to compensate was by the appointment of indentured Indian workers, who went into Southeast Asia, East Africa the West Indies. And what did the Windrush generation bring to Britain? They brought the idea of thrift and credit societies that they learned from Indians coming from India under imperial legislation.

**What were the resolutions that were adopted at that first Congress? Why were they important?**

In 1998 the ICA published a book, *The Thematic Guide to ICA Congresses*, that Professor Dionysos Mavrogiannis from Greece and I had written. In it we described each Congress of the ICA's first 100 years and later analysed the frequency with which subjects came up. The important thing about the first resolutions at the 1895 Congress was that those concerning relations between cooperatives would come up time and time again, as would trade and commercial relations between cooperatives; also how to propagate cooperative ideas.

One of the things that we do in cooperative history is meet people we become attached to. One of those people for me is Albert Thomas (1878-1932), a French cooperative leader, and the first director of the International Labour Organization (ILO), who set up the

cooperative branch. In the 1920s he was involved in some of the attempts to develop closer relations between consumer cooperatives and agricultural cooperatives, and attempts to set up an international cooperative wholesale society. Sadly, these early efforts failed, but they went on, and we list them through the thematic guide – and I would say they come back to the first resolutions. The impulse for international cooperative relations seen at the first congress are seen throughout the thematic guide.

**The ICA reviewed the cooperative principles in 1937, 1966 and 1995. Why were the early reviews undertaken?**

I don't think there was great apparent need for them. In the 1930s, discussions were led by the French, who are very lively in international relations. They said: 'We all know what cooperatives principles are, but wouldn't it a good idea to have them written down?' This became significant for the ICA, because if an organisation wanted to join the Alliance, it had to show that it kept to the principles that were listed in the 1930s. There was a tension that came out of that, because the person handling the administration of the 1930s review was the General Secretary of the ICA, Henry May, who is another figure for whom I have tremendous respect. He was a British cooperator. The ICA was based in London and he naturally thought of cooperative principles as consumer principles. This caused difficulties, and they had to go back and do it a second time a year later, to involve producer cooperatives and address the question of inalienable assets.

From an organisational point of view, the good thing was that you knew when a society was accepted into ICA membership, it observed those principles.

In regards to the 1960s review, again the point I would really emphasise is that international cooperative relations



are very closely linked to international relations. Following the world wars and the Russian Revolution, Soviet cooperatives were a different form of cooperative from that recognised in Europe. How do you accommodate that in the 1960s?

One controversial point that I have picked up in my cooperative research is that there are influences coming on the ICA that are never openly spoken about or discussed in Congresses. After the First World War, the big debate was how genuinely the Soviet cooperatives could be called cooperatives and if they could they still remain in the ICA. There was a suggestion – that hardly ever comes out in correspondence, but it is there – that Britain wanted trade with the Soviet Union, and that the British delegation in the ICA is the biggest... But this fudge was never openly spoken about, one has to be very careful about this.

A fudge has helped the ICA a couple of times in unexpected ways. For example, when we come to the Second World War, the cooperative movements of Italy, Germany,

Austria, Spain and Japan have already been withdrawn by their governments who would not tolerate voluntary cooperation. And what did the Alliance consist of? It consisted of cooperative movements in the war allies of America; Britain; free France; and the Soviet Union. Wasn't that useful! And again, when the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union eventually collapsed, it was the ICA who was there to say 'come on in, you remember the old cooperative ideals, show us you can adapt.' So, in two respects, although we can be critical of a fudge, the fudge helped.

I would like to add that my adult education began with two years at the Co-operative College, and a tutor I admired tremendously – and I still say he was the best teacher I've had – was Arnold Bonner. He was the grandson of the person who kept the reading room for the Rochdale Pioneers and was absolutely rooted in cooperation. He acted as secretary to the 1960s review committee and died suddenly, shortly afterwards, probably from overwork.

**This year the ICA is marking 25 years since the 1995 review, and the publication of its Statement on the Cooperative Identity. Why was this third review needed? What was the process?**

I think in part it was prompted by the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, and the accommodation of cooperative movements from those regions into the wider cooperative movements again; it is worth taking note of the ICA's position in international relations.

There were two attempts at this review. The first was by Sven Åke Böök (1936-2004) of Sweden, but for whatever reason, I think the ICA executive felt his approach was too academic and appointed Professor Ian MacPherson (1939-2013) of Canada. His methodology was to recruit a number of contributors to this thought process, and Professor Mavrogiannis and I were part of that.



Expressing a personal view, I liked the old system of representatives from different geographical areas, coming together and talking, then one rapporteur summing up. I felt that the 1990s system – and this is no criticism of people who contributed or of Professor MacPherson, who I thought did a brilliant job but a very, very difficult job – brought a lot of disjointed things together which might have been easier under a different format.

### **What does the cooperative identity mean to you?**

It means everything. I was born into a cooperative family. My husband, Bernard, was born into a cooperative family, and we both became members of cooperatives, worked in cooperatives and held various positions in the British cooperative movement. I'm lucky in that I also worked for the ICA and my perspective widened. I am also aware that identity can shift. I can't ignore that different forms of cooperative will come and go, and I've got to accept that the consumer cooperative that I was born into and was most happy in, is very different from what it was originally.

But the cooperative identity has also weakened. One of the problems I have is that there are organisations that call themselves cooperatives but are not cooperatives, which try to become involved but which in doing so dilute the co-operative identity. To share effectively we have to accept shared principles.

### **Why is the ICA still vital and relevant to today's international cooperative movement?**

For international relations. Within an international system there are international non-governmental organisations, and the ICA is one of the longest surviving of those and one that has had a continuous existence. That is a considerable achievement. One of the features of the ICA and one of the strongest parts of its policy has always

been peace, supporting methods of trying to solve international disputes through mediation, arbitration and the setting up of international organisations like the League of Nations.

Henry May, who was ICA general secretary in the inter-war period, was a great character who, when the League of Nations was set up, rather cockily said, 'We welcome it, as a younger sister'. This was in 1920, only 25 years after the ICA was founded. He believed the ICA was the 'real league of the people', and I think that is its role. All the way through the ICA's history you see its international relationships. The ICA is still necessary in bringing that cooperative message to international relations, particularly in the question of peace. It's got to be a strong organisation, it's got to be a defined organisation and this is very, very important.

Looking back on the history of the ICA, I think a lot of it has survived through action, and a lot of it has survived through luck. In the Second World War, for example, Britain was badly bombed. But it wasn't invaded. And it just so happened that one of the two vice presidents of the ICA was R.A. Palmer, who at the time was chief executive of the Cooperative Union in Manchester. During the war, he became acting president. As luck would have it, the British delegation to the ICA was its largest, and it formed itself into a de facto Central Committee. They knew that they would be accountable, and in the first post war Congress in Zurich in 1946, its actions during the war were reported and approved.

This acting central committee was able to relate to American and Canadian affiliates and also the International Labour Organization which had evacuated to Canada; representatives, directed by the acting Central Committee in London, helped and participated in the programs that were being built by the embryonic United Nations (UN) and made a considerable contribution to the setting up of the UN. The ICA became



*Albert Thomas (left) and Väinö Tanner*

one of the first three international non-governmental organizations to be given consultative status in 1946.

### **What is your favourite anecdote or story from your time working, researching and learning about the ICA?**

It's very difficult to make a choice, but I would like to mention two people.

One is Albert Thomas, the first director of the ILO, who held a position on the executive of the ICA and in various committees. In his obituary, there is reference to him rising from his seat in ICA meetings and charging to the rostrum to question or proclaim. He was a real character, not only a powerful international figure, but also a powerful cooperative figure.

Another gentleman for whom I have immense fondness is Väinö Tanner (1881-1966), a Finnish cooperative leader. He was ICA president from 1927 – and was then also Finland's Prime Minister; in those days, the cooperative movement, cooperative ideas, brought leading figures together. He was a very modest, gentle man. After the end of the Second World War the Soviets charged him

as a war criminal and imprisoned him for five years. In 2011, the ICA research committee held its conference in Finland and I was able to spend a few days in Helsinki and to meet up with a long standing friend, Raija Itkonen, the ICA's first woman Vice-President in the 1980s. She and her husband kindly took me to Väinö Tanner's grave. It was a moving experience as I paid my respects.

These two gentlemen were very important in international relations, but were very different. They are just two of many wonderful figures who shine through my ICA memories.

### **What is your message to 33rd Congress delegates?**

Celebrate our 125th anniversary – but also commemorate those who made it possible.



## Chapter 3

# MARTIN LOWERY

What does cooperative identity mean and how is it relevant today? We talked to Martin Lowery, chair of the ICA Identity Committee, to explore how embracing the cooperative identity and values can help to tackle some of today's greatest issues. Dr Lowery has been involved in the movement for over 30 years and serves as the Chair of the National Cooperative Bank (NCB) and Executive Vice President, Emeritus, of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA).

**You've been in the cooperative movement for a long time. What does the cooperative identity mean to you?**

Just as every human being has an identity, a self-identity, cooperative enterprises do as well. Cooperatives are people driven, or member driven, and as a member, you actually own it and can make a difference in terms of the direction of the business and the services that are provided. Because it is an ownership model, and people centric.

**Do you think the cooperative identity can help us solve some of the global issues such as the 2020 pandemic?**

I think that there are a number of aspects of the pandemic that make the cooperative enterprise approach much more important to consider. If you look at the values within the Statement on the Cooperative Identity, particularly those of self-help and self-responsibility, a key point that we're learning from this horrible situation we face globally is that we are all about self-help and self-responsibility, not only in taking care of ourselves, but also the solutions such as the social distance guidelines that are so necessary to minimise transmission of the virus. Cooperative values sit very

well there: self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. Think about those in relationship to getting past the pandemic and beginning to think what a post-pandemic world will look like. Especially with digital platforms being so critical to our ability to communicate with one another.

**Why are the cooperative values so important?**

They are unique to cooperatives. When we add the ethical values of honesty, openness, caring for others, and social responsibility, those are values that can be shared by everyone on the globe and should be, but the cooperative values themselves are unique to the cooperative enterprise, and actually define our operating system. The values literally drive the principles that guide us in terms of governance and management and membership involvement and engagement in the cooperative.

**What can cooperatives do to promote cooperative values to their members?**

The fifth cooperative principle is education, training and information. That is intended to apply to each individual cooperative.

Cooperatives do that extraordinarily well, in my opinion. One of the great things about a cooperative is that continuing education, and clearly disseminating information is seen as a very high priority. I would argue that the same thing is true of the ICA.

Additionally, Principle 6 - Cooperation among cooperatives, combined with Principle 5, becomes a major part of the agenda of the ICA. Looking at the global network of cooperatives, it is happening today with the pandemic – there's a great deal of transfer of information that's occurring among cooperatives globally that makes for a better informed constituency, and hopefully, for a true participation in getting past the pandemic as a global body.

The seventh principle, concern for community, is what we're all about. It's about quality of life in the local community. So when we look at an inclusive economy, one that is for all people in a community, regardless of race, gender, etc. That is something cooperatives can excel at. There's an expression about thinking locally and acting globally. You can also reverse that: thinking globally and acting locally. If you look at climate change, that's exactly what climate action is about, you're thinking about the global consequences of CO2 and other greenhouse gases, but you have to act locally to achieve any reduction. So you're thinking globally about climate action but the activity has to be done at the local level, which is where individual co-ops take on the responsibility. Climate policy is thinking globally. But climate action is acting locally.

#### **How is ICA relevant to the global cooperative movement?**

ICA first and foremost is a virtual place. It's the way that we convene as cooperatives, to share information and ideas, to become inspired and to get that burst of energy that we need to continue doing the right

things for society. It's less a location in Brussels, Belgium, that has a headquarters building. It's much more the convening of the global cooperative movement. And, in that regard, it is a part of a global network, a hub, but not necessarily an entity that has any direct control or authority over any regional, sectoral, or local cooperative.

#### **How has ICA evolved over the years to meet the needs of cooperative movements?**

I was privileged to have developed a friendship with the late Professor Ian MacPherson of the University of Victoria. He was very instrumental in finalising the 1995 Statement on the Cooperative Identity, focusing on how the values defined the principles. And I learned quite a bit from him, in particular, his view was that the principles are changeable. The values themselves are more eternal or perpetual, but the principles can and should be changed.

So when we look at what's happened in the 25 years since the principles and values have been codified, we have added only the seventh principle, and that was at the point where all the principles came together. Since then we have had a number of thoughts to add an eighth principle, or to modify the existing seven principles. That needs to be embraced, as Professor MacPherson would wish it. As the cooperative movement continues to evolve, new issues and ideas will come forward that need to be addressed.

There are continued debates to create an 8th principle for a sustainable environment, or from another side, on diversity, equity and inclusion. These debates will continue over time, but I think as we engage in those debates, we should recognise that the principles themselves are not inviolate, that they can be changed, they can be modified.



### **What needs to be done to pave the way for the future of the cooperative movement?**

Before ICA created the Cooperative Identity Committee, there was a Principles Committee that issued guidance notes on the cooperative principles. I would suggest that every cooperative leader, whether a board member, a manager or employee, take a look at those guidance notes and ask whether they fully represent the world as we know it today. I think the answer will be: 'Not quite'. We should also look at some new language that better reflects the cooperative movement and the changes we're seeing. We're seeing significant growth in worker cooperatives. Those types of cooperatives are not all of a single sort. In some cases they're connected to trade unions and in other cases they are platform cooperatives who are owned by artisans or professional groups like attorneys. So, those kinds of new phenomena are a reason to begin to think about the principles as living guidelines. And that will only be successful if the discussion occurs at the local cooperative to make sure they truly understand and embody the cooperative values and principles. A lot of cooperatives around the world are giving more attention to living the values than living the principles. So there's an interesting dynamic that's needed here. So many cooperatives will talk very openly about value systems that they believe in, and may not have been paying sufficient attention to how the principles themselves can guide the way they think about business that they're delivering or the enterprise that they are offering to their members.

### **What has been your experience with cooperators you've met around the world?**

My experience is that there's something unique about people who are attracted to the cooperative enterprise, and that doesn't show in any sort of obvious way; it shows more in the subtlety of the relationships. There's a sense of wanting to collaborate, a

sense of kindness, a sense of caring for one another as one of the ethical values shows. And I find that all over the world. Any place I've gone, where you're working with cooperators, there's a commonality there, a commonality of humanity, of a sense of belonging and caring for one another that one doesn't always find in society.

### **Can you share some of the key achievements that the ICA has accomplished over the last few decades?**

In regard to the cooperative identity, I think the greatest achievement is that the Statement exists. And the ICA achieved that – without the ICA there would be no Statement on the Cooperative Identity because there would be no global entity that could bring that forward. So I think that is probably the most important achievement. I also am very intrigued by the resolution that was passed by the General Assembly in Kigali, Rwanda, in November 2019 on positive peace. The whole history of the ICA has been very much associated with peace and harmony in the world. That may sound like a very idealistic statement, until you begin to look at specific examples in Colombia, in Nepal, and other places around the world where cooperatives have been a part of not only conflict resolution, but part of achieving what we call positive peace, meaning the absence of structural violence, the absence of structural impediments to improve quality of life for everyone in the community. I think that resolution will be a very important component of cooperative actions in the coming years because we are seeing a significant rise in conflict situations around the world. The ICA successfully navigated through World War I and World War II as well as the Cold War. And now it is looking at continuing issues, in some cases turmoil around the world, and has a definite role to play in bringing that sense of positive peace to communities, for the sake of humanity.

### **Why should cooperatives be members of the ICA?**

If you think of the ICA as a global network first and foremost, and the source of educational, training and informational materials, one of the reasons to participate is to not be duplicative, to be able to share materials, across the world that are based on the common principles and values. But beyond that, there is much to learn from one another. And we need to continue to focus our attention on the globe, not simply on our individual co-operatives within our individual countries or regions, because the idea that we are interconnected as a globe is not going to go away, regardless of contemporary politics of looking, perhaps to be more isolationist. It's cooperatives themselves that historically have reached out beyond their boundaries. We bring greater support to those that we serve as members, and we create a sense of global purpose, as opposed to simply an individual purpose. And that is a sufficient reason to support the ICA into the future. If you're not supporting ICA, you're probably not supporting the apex organisation within your country or region, and you're probably not supporting the sectoral organisations, either. And that ultimately makes you, as a cooperative, a very isolated island. And that is not good, or healthy for your members, because they're not getting the maximum support that you can give them as a cooperative.

### **What have been the greatest challenges the ICA has faced?**

I think one of the greatest challenges the ICA has – and has always had – is how to reach out to individual cooperatives. There are many individual cooperatives that are not even aware of the existence of the ICA, and that's not helpful to our ability to grow together. The apex organisations that are members of the ICA should be carrying that message through to their members, and should be supportive of a larger participation in the ICA. So I think that there's work to be done to determine how that outreach can be done in ways that it hasn't been in the past. I also believe

that one of the teachings of the 2020 pandemic is that the more we operate virtually, the more people we're bringing into participation. That's a very good thing for the ICA and for the global cooperative movement.

### **What is your favourite story about the ICA?**

I was privileged to get to know the late Ivano Barberini (1939-2013) quite well, who was president of the ICA between 2001-2009. One of the anecdotal things I take from that relationship is the title of his autobiography, which is *How The Bumblebee Flies*. The joke in it is that a bumblebee should not be able to fly. It is not constructed in such a way that it should even be able to get off the ground, given the ratio of the wing size to the body. He uses that as an analogy to cooperatives, and the fact that in many ways, it's a bit of an awkward model because it requires a decision making process that involves many people. And as you involve more people, it takes more time to reach an effective decision, but once you do, you're the bumblebee that's flying. I've found that consistently through sectors, regions and globally, that you need to be an inclusive and involved kind of enterprise. Once that process is completed, and everyone is together, you can move very quickly to achieve the results that you wish to achieve.

I was privileged to be involved in the creation of the first electric cooperative in the State of Hawaii on the island of Kauai. It took four years, and a number of false starts. A number of citizens on the island acquired the assets of an investor owned electric utility and wanted to create a cooperative. Great idea. Three years later, we were successful, but it took a lot of work in the education of the citizenry of the island of Hawaii. Some were totally sceptical. Some were really concerned that they would be on the hook if the utility failed or the cooperative failed because they would be owners. So we had to

explain a lot of things about ownership, membership, the nature of patronage capital, the question of whether a board of directors could successfully govern, and whether local board of directors could successfully govern an electric organisation, an electric service. I'm also quite proud to say that they are among the best energy cooperatives in the world, and are moving very quickly toward 100% renewable energy for the island of Kauai.

**What do you hope to see happen at the 33rd World Cooperative Congress in 2021?**

What I would hope to see out of the Congress is a real, strong embrace of the Statement on the Cooperative Identity, not from a philosophical point of view but from a very practical point of view. What does it mean to me as a cooperator, what does it mean to my organisation? What does it mean to the cooperatives in my country, that we fully embrace the principles and the values and the unique definition of what we are as a cooperative to achieve that? We hope to have very exciting keynote speakers and panel discussions, such that the participants in the Congress will leave with extra plans, very specific ideas as to how to implement what they've been hearing back home. And I hope that the way we're constructing this will allow for maximum participation by the attendees, so that they feel that they have been actively involved in the process, discussions and ideas that are generated out of the Congress.

**What would your message be to potential Congress attendees?**

Be inspired for the future. Each of us is going through a tough period of time, with the isolation that has occurred due to the global pandemic. We need inspiration, we need hope, we need a new level of energy, and the Congress will provide that. Whether you're attending physically, or whether you're participating in the program virtually. Inspiration and hope.

**Why do you think the cooperative enterprise works for the future? Why is it going to be so relevant to how we solve some of the global issues that we have today?**

I believe that cooperatives offer the most effective way to create local action that is sustainable for the quality of life of people everywhere. "Think globally, act locally" is more important to understand today more than ever. Realising that local action is the way we solve problems in the world. We don't solve them by simply setting policy at the national or international level. It's only through the actions of human beings that things can change for the better.

**What can the next generation do to bring the cooperative movement forward into the future?**

My observation about the next generation of cooperators is that they see the cooperative enterprise approach as very much fitting their own sense of values and purpose. They see institutions failing all around them. Governmental institutions, corporations, they see a level of difficulty of achieving the quality of life that is perhaps for some of them insurmountable in their own mind, and they look to the cooperative approach as being the answer, as being a way that they can effect change and effect change in a positive and sustainable way that will improve their lives in a way, that they are concerned, would not occur otherwise.

**Do you draw inspiration from the next generation? Are you hopeful?**

Each of us on the other end of the generational divide are drawing inspiration or frustration. And I think that that's a good thing, because that means the younger people are pushing us to be better, and do better and achieve more as cooperative leaders. We need them as part of that leadership cadre as well.

*The ICA Youth Network's Ana Aguirre (Vice-President) and Sébastien Chaillou (President)*





## Chapter 4

# VINA VIDA REMPILLO

Vina Vida Rempillo had planned a career as an accountant. At 16 she was accepted into the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP) but the accounting course was full, so she enrolled in the Bachelor in Cooperatives Programme. In spite of her initial reservations, she found herself loving the course and started pursuing a career in cooperative training. She is now a training coordinator at the Philippine National Confederation of Cooperatives. In January she attended the Global Youth Forum on Cooperative Entrepreneurship (GYF20) in Kuching, Malaysia. We spoke to her to find out how she began her cooperative journey, what cooperative identity means to her and how she sees the role of the ICA leading the global cooperative movement.

### How did you join the National Confederation for Cooperatives (NATTCO)?

I was still in high school and preparing for college entrance exams. At that moment I was so sure about what I wanted that I had planned everything. I wanted to be an accountant, a business person, busy with all the numbers, counting the company's sales and expenses. That's what I had in my mind when people asked me: 'What do you want to be?'

At 16, I got admitted to university. I remember I was with my eldest sister – she was helping me out with all the enrolment process and requirements. There was a bulletin board where all the available courses were posted. I was looking for the course I wanted but failed. There were no slots left

for me and I was so stressed. I was thinking: 'No, this is not what I planned for!'

So I tried to calm myself down. The courses still available were Political Science, Decision Science and English. I was panicking and then suddenly my sister told me that they were offering Financial Management and Accounting. And I was so excited. And then she said it is a Bachelor in Cooperatives programme. 'Bachelor in what? Cooperatives? What is that? A grocery store? Do you want me to manage a store? Are you sure?' I decided to give it a try. I decided that after a year, if I still didn't like the course, I could transfer. So when I enrolled in the Bachelor in Cooperatives programme, I really did not have any idea what this cooperative course was all about, and what my job will be after this.

But after a year I did not transfer. I did not change my course because I found myself loving what I was doing. I was learning that I can be more than just someone who is busy with all the numbers. I could be a business person helping people and their businesses grow. After I completed college, I found this Facebook post from an alumna of our department. Her cooperative was looking for a teaching associate. Again, to be a teacher, or to teach people, was not part of my plan. So I tried my luck and applied to her cooperative, and a week after I submitted my application I got a call, went for an interview and got the job as a training associate. I was so happy.

I prepared training materials, assisted speakers during training, and prepared some training reports. And I liked it – traveling across the Philippines, visiting different cooperatives, listening to their stories about how they started from being a small cooperative in the province to now becoming the biggest cooperative in the region. It was so fulfilling! After a year I got the chance to handle some topics myself, such as the basic cooperative course, which touches on what a cooperative is and the cooperative values and principles. I really can't believe the journey I had, I felt like I was on the outside, entering the unknown. But I learned how to deal with uncertainty and turn that into a beautiful story.

**What does cooperative identity mean to you?**

I've been in the cooperative sector for more than four years now, and I realised that cooperatives work. It's not just a job any more, I have become an advocate of cooperatives. For me, once you start working in a cooperative you find yourself enjoying it. It will be hard to find a new job with the same level of satisfaction, the values and principles are all integrated. And it is so nice to meet people with the same vision through cooperative events. We share the same goal, to help people help themselves.

**Why do you think other young people should join cooperatives? What would be your advice to those young people who, like you, might not necessarily consider cooperatives as their first option?**

All the research studies I read about the new generation argue that young people are looking for motivation and inspiration when they are doing things. They ask themselves: Will it be worth it? Will it be helpful? And they want to be leaders. This is what we have been doing in the cooperative movement for more than a century now. We involve ourselves in our cooperative, and the values and the principles give us motivation to continue to work for this movement. The people are our inspiration. Cooperatives offer an enterprise where we can meet people with the same needs, with common goals and interests. I am hoping that the younger generation can see the impact cooperatives are having on society.

What I would say to those young people who may not consider cooperatives is: the beginning is always the hardest. But we have to make a difference if we want to change the world, if we want to make something, if we want to have a big impact on society, and I can see the change in the cooperative sector, that's why I am hoping the younger generation can see our goals and our intentions.

**Why do you think the ICA is vital and relevant to today's international cooperative movement? And why should apex organisations such as yours be members of the ICA?**

The ICA will always be relevant. Leaders need to have leaders, too. If people need cooperatives, then cooperatives need the ICA. If we want people to recognise the impact of our movement on this society, we need to work as one, and for us to do that, we need guidance, and it's what the ICA can do – lead cooperatives. The role of the ICA is to provide guidance, the standard that we must follow. The ICA will guide credit unions and cooperative organisations



who, in turn, will guide their communities and empower their people. Thousands of cooperatives around the world working as one, achieving the same goals. We can actually change the world.

**How do you think the ICA could and should engage with the next generation of co-operators?**

As leaders in our cooperative we understand the challenges faced by the younger generation who often feel that their issues and opinions are taken less seriously. The first step towards engaging young people is listening to their opinions, and understanding their interests and what motivates them. Young people want to be consulted, they want to be heard. So we have to work with them, tap into their expertise, their energy and their enthusiasm to be involved in social issues.

The Philippines is a country prone to natural disasters. And right now we're in the middle of a pandemic. How have cooperatives helped during the COVID-19 crisis and how have they helped their communities recover from natural disasters in the past?

There's a lot that one can really admire about cooperatives: whatever situation, they always find the way to help financially, emotionally, spiritually. They are always acting for people's welfare. So here for the Filipino cooperatives, we have a reserve fund for community development, education and for insuring things. We also started adopting business continuity management strategies to help cooperatives prevent and recover from any business disruption. People are expecting and counting on us to help them during these challenging times so we cannot stop, we have to continue operating for our members and the people.

