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Cooperatives providing community services, a response to social needs

Community services are a key component of economic development, sustainable employment and social cohesion in the 21st Century. Over 200 people, including Paul Singer, Secretary of State for Solidarity Economy under the Ministry of Labour and Employment of Brazil and Roberto Rodrigues, ex-President on the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), participated at the workshop *Access to Community Services* organised by CICOPA, the international organisation of cooperatives in industry and services, and IHCO, the International Health Cooperative Organisation in Cape Town (South Africa).

There are pressing needs for community services all over the world, and cooperatives are increasingly becoming involved in them. This session has presented several concrete examples of cooperatives providing community services from countries such as Argentina, Japan, Brazil, USA and Spain. The workshop shared the main global trends regarding cooperatives engaged in community services (health, education, housing, environment, social services and the labour integration of disadvantaged citizens etc.) with the help of international experts and examples of cooperatives in the field.

The workshop has shown that the cooperative movement, through democratically controlled business operations, has already begun to meet the challenge of satisfying community service needs in a more intensive manner over the last few years. Cooperatives often provide higher quality and improved cost efficiency compared to other delivery patterns, according to a number of studies.

The cooperative model, especially when several stakeholders are involved in its democratic control governance system, is particularly well adapted to community services, because it is virtually the only one that can fully empower the various local actors involved in the activity through joint and democratic control, while implementing such activities in a strictly entrepreneurial fashion. As a matter of fact, around the world, at least 12,600 cooperatives active in the provision of social services and according to data available 2,100 schools are run as cooperatives.

The session was concluded by the President of CICOPA, Manuel Mariscal, and the President of IHCO, Jose Carlos Guisado who agreed in the closing message, underlining that cooperatives are the answer to social needs. *Access to Community Services* has been organized in the framework of the global meeting of the cooperative movement that is taking place in Cape Town until 6th November

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CICOPA represents 80.000 of industrial and service cooperatives providing 3 million jobs across the world. Many of those cooperatives are worker cooperatives, namely cooperatives where the members are the staff of the enterprise, i.e., worker-members. Because of this, those enterprises are characterized by a distinctive type of labour relations, called "worker ownership", different from the one experienced by conventional employees or by self-employed. With the recent transformation of the world economy, industrial, artisan and service cooperatives are no longer a marginal phenomenon. A new and growing typology of cooperatives represented by CICOPA are social cooperatives, namely cooperatives whose mission is the delivery of goods or services of general interest. Numbers have increased in both industrialised and developing countries over recent years. CICOPA currently has a total of 46 members in 31 countries, four of which are development organisations. CICOPA has two regional organisations: CECOP- CICOPA Europe and CICOPA Americas.