

IRU – International Raiffeisen Union Video Speech Input for

UNDESA Division for Inclusive Social Development – 60th Commission for Social Development (CSocD60) on “Women cooperative warriors combat COVID19 with sustainable gender and equity strategies: Iconic case of Working Women’s Forum (India) and the Indian Cooperative Network for Women”

delivered 11.02.2022 by Andreas Kappes, IRU Secretary General

Speech Transcript:

On behalf of the IRU – International Raiffeisen Union and DGRV, the apex organisation of cooperatives in Germany, I would like to convey to you the warmest greetings from Europe.

As Secretary General of the International Raiffeisen Union, I feel honoured that the organizers, the Indian Cooperative Network for Women and the Working Women’s Forum, have invited me to join today’s event.

Due to technical constraints, we decided to record my speech in advance. I kindly ask for your understanding.

Since 2020, mankind has been struggling with a pandemic that has the world firmly in its grip.

Until today we suffer under the societal, economic, and social upheavals resulting from the pandemic. They are enormous. The exact extent of the pandemic is not yet foreseeable. However, it is already clear that women are economically and socially affected to a greater extent than men.

Yet women were already struggling with massive inequalities before the pandemic: Across the globe, women earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs, are more likely to be employed in the informal sector.

They have less access to social protections. They are the majority of single-parent households. They provide most of unpaid care work. Statistics show, that during the pandemic gender-based violence massively increased.

In sum, women’s capacity to absorb economic shocks has been much less than that of men even before the Pandemic. It is therefore no surprise that current data suggests that the

impact of the COVID-19 global recession will result in a prolonged dip in women's incomes and labour force participation.

COVID-19 is currently deepening pre-existing inequalities. Social, political and economic vulnerabilities are exposed which in turn amplify the impacts of the pandemic.

However, there are several examples of women-led cooperatives that have been particularly resilient in the crisis.

India is a remarkable country with a long tradition of cooperative self-help. The ICNW is one famous example for this. But there exist more.

In Telangana for example, DGRV has been supporting an auditing federation for many years, which now has almost 90 women's self-help groups as members. The federation is financially sustainable through providing regular audits to the groups.

At the same time, the women groups benefit from the audit and from bookkeeping and accounting services. All in all, all women's groups have been able to weather the crisis well so far. The members' deposits are secure.

Also in Latin America cooperatives have gained significant importance regarding the mitigation of the COVID-19 impact.

One example is the cooperative ASOMUARTEC consisting of 17 women. Almost all of them have to take care of their children alone.

Amid the first wave of the pandemic, the women unite. They now produce and sell handicrafts as a cooperative. The women try to use natural materials as much as possible, such as plant fibres, dried flowers, natural textiles, or wood. The local DGRV project supported them with the registration process and provided advice regarding the marketing of their products.

The pandemic clearly demonstrated to the women how important cooperation is. The quarantine forced the members to work in their own homes for months, but they could only manage the marketing together.

In the meantime, they sell their products on regional markets, establish new supplier relationships, and find more and more potential buyers.

Besides more money, this economic success strengthens the women's self-esteem above all.

In Africa, cooperatives successfully contribute to mitigating the consequences of the pandemic through local production, too.

For example, in South Africa, a bakery cooperative is currently the main bread producer and supplier in two municipalities in Pretoria. The cooperative can financially support the whole family and create jobs for the community. It played a crucial role as service provider during the national COVID-19 lockdown.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been transforming our realities and perspectives. Today's world differs from the one we have known until early 2020. During the last years, women are literally standing on the front line of response to the pandemic in areas such as social and financial services, agriculture, education and health. At the same time, gender disparities have become accelerated and aggravated.

Yet, the examples just mentioned show that especially women cooperatives around the world have played a crucial role during the pandemic. Therefore, this sector is already a vital part of the solution to the crisis.

Cooperatives are based on internationally agreed principles such as self-help, self-responsibility, self-administration, and to the values of democratic member control, honesty, openness, solidarity, social responsibility, and concern for others.

It is important to continue to follow these principles.

Jointly, we continue our work based on self-help, on cooperative values and principles, on respect for women, equality, and democratic behaviour.

I send my heartfelt cooperative greetings from Bonn, Germany to you around the world.
Thank you very much for your attention!
