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Cooperative Alliance

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## **Comments on Priority 2 – Reinforcing CSO and LA networks**

Contributions by the participants of the Policy Forum on Development  
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### **General comments**

The cooperative participants of the Policy Forum on Development strongly welcome the initiative to strengthen representative and membership based networks and platforms. A support program for economic and social development actors is a great step in the right direction and perfectly in line with previous discussions and conclusions of the Structured Dialogue and the Interim Meetings of the Policy Forum.

### **Specific comments**

Further to the already expressed views and comments within the session of the Policy Forum on Development, we were given the chance to submit more details of our discussions via mail. The following comments are part of these discussions.

The cooperative network is an organised one. Via the different member organisations – being mainly cross-sector or sector federations – the cooperative movement has a wide geographical coverage and direct links to primary cooperatives and apex organisations around the globe. Being part of civil society and promoting democratic ownership and decision-making, the cooperative movement is a long-standing development actor and eager to interact more with the EU Institutions and other CSO families.

As the “Priority 2” program intends to work on strengthening capacities and to support networks in acting as strategic partners, we would like to share the following observations:

#### **1. Reinforcement of capacities and representativeness of networks**

##### *Member empowerment*

One of the biggest and most important challenges for primary cooperatives, as well as for federations and networks, is to make sure that the members are continuously strengthened. Member-based organisations exist through and thanks to their members, and member capacities determine the dynamism and performance of a network. Therefore, one of the main tasks of federations and networks is to assure that members are provided with the necessary support to

keep up with their duties. Such support might be accomplished through political representation and advocacy, facilitation of information flows and technical assistance. The exchange of member practices is in that sense also very helpful, in order to learn from each other and mutually strengthen abilities, capacities and political positions. For example, ICA Asia is providing tools to the members on taxation, legislation and accountancy, while paying specific attention to gender and youth trainings and workshops.

Information is power and it is continuous. Member education is therefore one of the seven principles of cooperatives. It is against this background that the ICA endeavours to empower its members through education and information. We believe that partnership with Institutions, such as the EU, will help ICA regional offices to deliver on this.

### *Governance & citizenship*

Governance questions are a complex issue within cooperative enterprises and structures. The cooperative governance is closely linked to the concept of responsibility, as co-operators are involved in decision-making processes and ownership. As networks, we can work on capacity building linked to governance and participation and promote youth and gender equality as priorities within cooperatives; furthermore, responsible citizenship and environmental issues are high on the agenda, like the green office certification happening already in one region. Such concepts and actions can have an important impact, thanks to the wide reach of the cooperative network.

## **2. Strategic partners for key policy makers**

### *Enabling environment*

The cooperative federations are providing different tools to the members, as well as advocacy guidelines. But important advocacy work with governments is ongoing, and needs to be furthered, in order to permit cooperative enterprises to work in all sectors and apply these tools. For example in Latin America, ICA Americas has promoted a legal framework for cooperatives, which has been adopted by the Latin American Parliament. Now, this has to be pushed through in each country of the region, and therefore support from the national parliaments is necessary. In Europe, the “European Cooperative Society” regulatory framework helped to propose guidelines to governments on how an efficient national cooperative law should be constituted. Besides national governments, there exist obviously other Institutions, which have an influence on cooperative regulations, and are decisive in the creation of an enabling environment; relations with these Institutions have to be built up.

### *Dialogue*

Cooperative enterprises, and the principles they rely on, are very often not well understood by decision makers and governments, as well as by local authorities and other actors. ICA Africa is in this sense organising since 1984 ministerial conferences in the region, to promote dialogue between governments and the cooperative movement, in order to better understand each other. These conferences include all ministers in charge of cooperatives and ICA Africa would like to extend it to a cooperatives’ parliamentarian forum to educate the lawmakers on cooperative matters. These conferences have helped to create more cooperative friendly legislations. Also ICA Asia & Pacific has created a “Asia-Pacific Cooperative Ministers Conference” to help creating an enabling legal and policy environment for inclusive growth of the cooperative business model.

Spaces of dialogue are essential, as the best relations and conditions for local communities and their cooperatives can only be created through mutual understanding. Dialogue is needed at local, national and regional level.

## **Final remarks**

The “Priority 2” has as an ambition to built upon existing networks and structures. The cooperative movement supports very strongly this intention. Partnering with existing dynamics and representative structures will have a snowball effect on the implementation of actor strengthening activities and on? the interactions with key decision makers and policy monitoring.

The cooperative movement is looking forward to an enhanced collaboration with EU Institutions. We believe that in terms of dialogue, information flows, citizen reach, advocacy and resource management, as well as in economic and social development processes in general, the cooperative model of entrepreneurship represents a real added value.

As a long-standing development actor and organised structure, we strongly support the idea of long-term partnership, and are looking forward to an enhanced cooperation in dialogue, policy consultations, capacity development and cooperative promotion.