General Assembly of Cooperatives Europe

Brussels, April 20, 2016

Opening Speech by D.J. Lehnhoff - President

Dear Monique Leroux, President of the Alliance,

Dear Dame Pauline Green, former President of the Alliance and founding Co-President of Cooperatives Europe,

Dear Etienne Pflimin, founding Co-President of Cooperatives Europe,

Dear Presidents and Chairpersons from our Member Organizsations, honourable guests.

Chers amis Cooperateurs, Dear fellow co-operators, Estimados amigos cooperativistas,

It is a great honour for me to open our 11th General Assembly of Cooperatives Europe today in Brussels, marking the 10th anniversary of our still young organisation.

The first decade of a truly European cooperative organisation has passed since its founding General Assembly in Manchester in November 2006.

There are still a number of people with us here today, who have participated in this historic event 10 years ago. In particular, I am very grateful to have the two founding Co-Presidents with us today, Dame Pauline Green and President d’honneur Etienne Pflimlin, to whom we will dedicate a special part after the opening speeches of the current Presidents of Cooperatives Europe and of the Internationql Cooperative Alliance.

Having arrived at the 10th anniversary mark is a time for Cooperatives Europe to thank its members for their commitment of building and developing our European organisation together.

It’s a moment for celebration despite or maybe because of the continuous difficult economic, social and political climate we are currently experiencing around Europe.

Cooperatives are an important actor for socio-economic development in Europe. But also for promoting the fundamental human values of self-help, self-reponsibility and solidarity in business and society, embedded in our seven cooperative principles – the basis for any collaboration between people, organisations and countries.

And aren’t our times today just made for much more cooperation again in and outside cooperatives. Intolerable social inequality, irresponsible political and economic behaviour, tax evasion, environmental destruction, human conflicts and the rise of populism and nationalism call for drastic socio-economic change.

Europe has been hit by terrorist attacks over the last few months, in Paris, Ankara, Istanbul and in this very city of Brussels as well as in so many other cities around Europe before. Only a few hundred meters from here (at Malbeek station), ordinary people like us lost their lives on March 22 taking the metro to work. Let us think of all those innocent people killed in Europe with a minute of silence… (please, stand up)

Thank you, everyone.

Cooperatives are part of our civil society and therefore we have picked one of the current major societal challenges in Europe as a topic for our traditional thematic panel – the refugee challenge.

It’s my great pleasure to welcome co-operators from Italy, Sweden, Turkey and Israel, who want to share with you their ‘on the ground’ experience of working with refugees. Cooperatives are vehicles for developing socio-economic solutions through cooperation and that’s what we would like to bring forward here today.

In a globalised world, countries and organisations need to work more closely together. European integration is fundamental for our security and well being, but also for our development. What is true for countries is valid as well for us cooperatives. It is not enough anymore to work on a local, regional and national level.

We need more European cooperation and partnerships amongst cooperatives in Europe. And for that we need the appropriate institutional, human and cultural capital, of which Cooperatives Europe is an important element together with our European cooperative sectors. Strong cooperative regions are at the same time the foundation for a strong global organisation.

We need to be very close to our members thereby. Therefore we have to do as much as possible on local and regional level and then on a national level –and as much as necessary on a European and international level.

Why? Because the key factors of our success is our people-centred, member based business, close their needs and aspirations.

Only in this way can we build trust and loyalty, which is our key cooperative asset, to open us doors.

We have come a long way since 2006 in building Cooperatives Europe. Over the last years we have reached a number of major achievements in building a strong European cooperative community.

Let me just highlight five particular points:

1. **Cooperative Working Group and Roadmap:**

Together with the EU Commission we have developed concrete recommendations for cooperatives via a permanent cooperative working group with regular meetings since 2013.

Our European cooperative roadmap has already lead to a first concrete project with members on promoting the transfer of businesses to cooperatives.

The next project is in preparation to promote cooperatives more in secondary schools and universities and get young people involved. And there are many more initiatives with members and our young co-operators network in the pipeline.

1. **Young Cooperator Network**

* Launch of network in Paris last year
* Regular participation in our Board meetings
* Participation today, where they will provide us with an outlook   
   after the General Assembly of the Youth Cooperatives Europe   
   Network over the last two days
* It is essential for cooperatives to concentrate on youth – who   
   shall grow to love the co-operative model and its principles   
   dearly; as we all do today. Youth is a central issue for   
   Cooperatives Europe.

1. **Development Partnership**

Last month Cooperatives Europe together with the Global Alliance and the other Alliance regions in Americas, Asia-Pacific and Africa entered into a historic partnership with the EU Commissioin in international development, in order to promote and develop the cooperative model and in particular strengthening our regional and global organisations.

This achievement is thanks to Cooperatives Europe’s continuous work over the last 10 years with the EU Commission getting official recognition for cooperatives in EU development policy and implementing a first pilot project between 2013-2015, which together lead now to this next step of a global partnership.

I am certain that this 5-year programme will considerably strengthen our interaction with the global Alliance system by working together on promoting cooperatives and building joint actions in international advocacy, research and communication. Such projects do not come easily when distribution of money and power is involved.

I am very proud that we have jointly managed to develop an operating agreement for this programme, which brings forward the joint responsibilities and opportunities.

This project is a unique chance for more visibility and recognition of our cooperative model in the framework of the EU’s support for international development.

In other words – a great opportunity –however, it will require close collaboration and very good governance, but also great responsibility and trust between all partners.

At the end of this programme in 2020 we must have proven our credibility, in order to be a good partner for further projets.

1. **Member Report as baseline for future benchmarking**

* Official launch of Member report tonight
* Thanks to the contributing members, who financed this work   
   and provided the relevant information

This is a first step to provide more detailed facts and figures (such as market share, turnover, employment, number of active members) for each member country and sector, in order to prove the economic and social strength of cooperatives in Europe.

1. **Financial sustainability**

Cooperatives Europe was basically born without any own financial reserves. Yet we have managed over the last five years, despite of many obstacles, to stabilise the finances of Cooperatives Europe.

The objective remains to build up reserves for Cooperatives Europe to be more independent from turbulences and unforessen financial requirements, which any organisation can face from time to time.

Celebrating an anniversary is, of course, also, about looking back at those ten years. Looking back by those, for which this organisation has been created - our European members. Let’s listen to them this afternoon with their particular impressions and join in with them to celebrate the diversity and richness of our membership.

As concerns our statutory business we have also thought about some elements to make this part livelier this year while listening to the feedback of our members from previous General Assemblies. This is your General Assembly and therefore the floor should be to members to express themselves. Members engaged in the various topics, Cooperatives Europe is dealing with, will provide their input and views this afternoon.

And of course, there is no cooperative gathering in Europe without some informal exchanges and partying, for which I look forward to welcoming you back here tonight for a cocktail and reception.

Let me wish you all a festive General Assembly of Cooperatives Europe. I count on your energy and enthusiasm and I shall be available as much as possible today to listen to your concerns, suggestions, ideas, requests and offers for engagement.

Thank you for your attention and thank you to all our member donors, who have made this event possible today.

Happy Birthday COOPERATIVES EUROPE