

International Women's Day 2015

“Co-operation: Empowering Women, Empowering Humanity”

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The concept of power has traditionally been associated with control and domination. Most of the time, increasing the power of some people decreases the power of others, particularly in the global environment of the capitalist economy.

However, since the birth of co-operation, this no longer takes place. At the heart of our values and principles, power means “joining together with other people and acting by consensus”. On the one hand the term can mean suppression, but for us it stands for resistance, the ability to make decisions and a source of emancipation. This is the main focus of empowerment.

Due to the anniversary of International Women's Day, a key focus for the United Nations in 2015 is to invite everyone to empower women and to further extend this empowerment to all human kind. They are calling for the recreation of a world in which every woman can make her own decisions, such as taking part in politics, contributing to economic development, having access to education, setting up a business, benefitting from wealth democratisation and living in a society free from violence and discrimination.

This appeal comes during an historic year in which we commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing and during a year in which the world is preparing to set a global sustainable development agenda.

We at the Alliance have been active in this global scene since Beijing 1995 and remain so for Beijing+20, demonstrating our commitment to being the world leader in co-operative development. Both our co-operative movement and the Alliance International Gender Equality Committee welcome the UN appeal to imagine a world in which women have equal rights and full social justice that guarantee and extend their freedom.

As in Beijing, we are convinced that “strengthening women's role and promoting their full and equal participation in all areas of society, including their participation in decision making processes and access to power, are essential in order to achieve equality, development and peace”.

We know that women's empowerment is a fundamental and necessary obligation in order to achieve gender equality. Achieving equal rights and gender equality will depend on our ability to change the balance of power relations between men and women as well as throughout society. But, at the same time, creating gender equality is what is needed to produce sustainable women's empowerment.

Empowerment is the driving force behind giving co-operation a high potential for transformation. By definition, the term co-operation includes the meaning of empowerment: awareness of our capabilities; awareness of our abilities to develop and deploy resources which allow us to take control of our future and our lives; and the capacity to identify, discuss and resolve issues to help us make decisions for our future and for our development.

We acknowledged these as part of our core values in 2010, when we commemorated our International Co-operative Day, with its theme 'Co-operative enterprise empowers women'. We publicly considered the ways in which co-operatives can allow women's empowerment, giving them the opportunity to engage not only on a social and economic level but also on a political one.

According to our values and to our co-operative principles, we constantly reconsider the hierarchical relationship between power and subordination that are intrinsic elements of our society. Equality, democracy, autonomy, responsibility, mutual aid and solidarity give women the opportunity to be heard and their opinions to be considered relevant and credible.

These global principles that have been the pillars of our co-operative movement from day one, today place us at the heart of reflection and action related to women's empowerment.

This year the commemoration of International Women's Day provides the Alliance and all its members with the perfect opportunity to, not only "imagine" women's empowerment, but to actually contribute to its achievement. This is a chance for us to rediscover our potential and our success as people who wish to promote women and men's transformation in a more equitable society. This is also the time to think about and take action on social inequalities, challenges and new opportunities to strengthen our leadership and demand more power for women.

The promotion of women's empowerment should start from the multiple options available via our co-operative development model: from a personal, social and economic perspective; from employment and entrepreneurship; and from the different opportunities we have to achieve a life of dignity and increased freedom. This concept that is also defined as "spatial" women's empowerment refers to their opportunity to be protagonists, to have their voices heard and to gain legitimacy in the public arena.

Since the beginning of the international co-operative movement, we have rejected the traditional concepts of leadership and authority, opting to support social authority and shared leadership instead.

As women co-operative members, we do not consider authority as a way to exert power over other people or as subjugation and segregation, we think instead of it as an influential and flexible instrument that can favour solidarity towards other

social or working groups. In this process the main pillars are social innovation, creativity, active and democratic participation and solidarity.

For these reasons the co-operative agenda must include the following actions focused on women:

Eliminate perceptions of subordination.

We need to do more for women so that their usual perception of impotence and subordination is eliminated. This provides them with more awareness of their rights and thus empowers them.

Promote social capital and networking.

Women who are more aware of their potential and who can identify themselves with other people who live in the same conditions are the foundation for building networks and social capital.

Create visibility of women.

Creating visibility around women and their leadership is a way to promote their empowerment. In every co-operative in the world we find women's autonomy and leadership.

Increase skills and authority.

Women's empowerment increases the wellbeing of both their families and the society in which they live. It also allows both them and society to feel secure, to have greater opportunities to earn a living and to be more effective in the public arena.

Promote ownership, self-determination and negotiation of roles.

Women constitute 70% of the world living in poverty and they only own 1% of all property. Co-operation has to support initiatives that can promote common ownership of the means of production, facilitate their access to the job market and help them to take control of the planning and management of their lives.

Within the international co-operative movement, debate and action regarding gender and women's empowerment must continue. Our efforts as a movement are still minimal compared to those contributions that could increase our innovative practices.

In order to gain further achievements, we need to examine and re-evaluate compelling issues such as women's active participation and representation in executive, decision-making and leadership positions within co-operatives.

We previously agreed that, "a better balance of women and men amongst our co-operative members represents a progressive force and a competitive advantage for our co-operatives". A value which continues to exist today! Empowering women still is the most effective way to strengthen their social role and the impact of both co-operatives and co-operation.

As in the past, today this concept underlines the importance of men in the women's empowerment process and their contribution to all the efforts that are still needed to help women to increasingly recognise their potential and take on empowerment and action.

In this special year of the 2015 commemoration of International Women's Day and of the celebration of Beijing+20, the Alliance endorses all efforts and initiatives carried out by thousands of co-operative organisations in the world that have promoted women's empowerment and have changed the balance of power in relationships to achieve a better world.

We at the Alliance present ourselves to the rest of the world as "co-operators" and co-operatives committed to both imagination and action, working for women and human empowerment. We will continue to commit to this cause which will help to keep our co-operative identity and devotion to our principles alive and strong.

We call upon all co-operative members throughout the world to keep on contributing to our continuous and common action in order to meet our objectives: consolidation of a co-operative movement and a society lead by women and men who are driven by autonomy, self-determination and equal opportunities to exercise and benefit from their skills and freedoms, which in turn allows them to define and achieve their own desired development and future.

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