



# International Co-operative Alliance



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## PRESS RELEASE

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

### **"Womens' vote came first in many co-ops"**

8 March 2012

Co-operative businesses gave women equal voting rights almost a century before most parliaments of the world did. "On this International Women's Day in 2012 which is also the United Nations International Year of Co-operatives, I am asking co-operative businesses to follow that example and put more women at the core of their businesses", said Dame Pauline Green, the first female president in the history of the International Co-operative Alliance, an organisation whose members represent one billion people across the world.

Dame Pauline, who leads the largest global business sector by number of shareholders and employees, acknowledged the millions of women who have helped make a democratic, people-led business model the most popular in the world today. But she also recognized the lack of official recognition of the participation of women in rural co-operatives in developing nations.

Dame Pauline paid tribute to Dorimène Desjardins who co-founded the largest Co-operative financial group in Canada, and the sixth largest financial institution in Canada. When she died in 1932 a local paper wrote that without Dorimène Desjardins, "Desjardins caisses (local co-ops) would have probably not existed". She had no job title and no salary but the impact of her contribution was as significant as her husband Alphonse Desjardins.

"It is certainly not by sheer luck that Desjardins Group is today the largest Canadian private organization led by a woman, Monique F. Leroux," she said. Dame Pauline highlighted the global leadership role Desjardins' CEO Monique Leroux had played in implementing governance practices characterized by a broader role for local coops and members. At the same time Desjardins Group reported record surplus earnings and member dividends. Desjardins has been recognised as one of Canada's Top 100 employers in 2012 as well as being ranked 18th in Global Finance's World's 50 Safest Banks.

Co-operative businesses are founded on the principle of one member one vote. Early examples in Rochdale, England (considered the birthplace of the modern co-operative model) awarded women equal membership rights to men, at a time when women were still excluded from owning property. This was 88 years before British women got the full vote. In Quebec, Canada, the Desjardins caisses were often managed de facto by women, especially in rural areas. Married women until 1964 were denied the right to sign any legal document without their husband's consent.

Dame Pauline said there were multitudes of women working in co-operatives who were largely unrecognized outside their communities. Co-operatives like The Argan Tree, Cocoki, and the co-operatives which form part of the SEWA network in India were all



examples of women managing profitable co-operative businesses. These case studies are highlighted on the global website for the United Nations International Year of Cooperatives 2012 ([www.2012.coop](http://www.2012.coop)) and the global campaign of co-operative stories ([www.stories.coop](http://www.stories.coop)). Women in co-operatives case studies are found on The Global News Hub for Cooperative News special edition: <http://www.thenews.coop/iwd>

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### NOTES TO EDITOR

1. **The International Co-operative Alliance** is the global voice for the values-based business model of the co-operative, uniting co-operatives worldwide and providing a forum for knowledge and concerted action.

ICA was established by co-operatives in 1895. In 1946 the ICA became one of the first three non-governmental organisations to be accorded "consultative status" with the United Nations. Membership is growing and the ICA currently has around 270 members in almost 100 countries active in all sectors of the economy: agriculture/forestry, banking/credit unions, consumer, health, insurance, workers, fisheries, housing, transport and tourism. ICA members represent around one billion people worldwide, and employ 100 million people.

2. **Desjardins Group** [www.desjardins.com](http://www.desjardins.com) is the leading cooperative financial group in Canada with assets of \$190billion. Drawing on the strength of its caisse network in Québec and Ontario, and its subsidiaries across Canada, it offers a full range of financial products and services to its 5.8 million members and clients. Desjardins specializes in Wealth Management and Life and Health Insurance, in Property and Casualty Insurance, in Personal Services, in Business and Institutional Services. As one of the largest employers in the country and among Canada's Top 100 Employers for 2012TM, Desjardins is supported by the skills of its 44,645 employees and the commitment of nearly 5,400 elected officers. A new education and cooperation program is now available to Desjardins members and the general public. For more information, visit [www.desjardins.com/co-opme](http://www.desjardins.com/co-opme).
3. **Co-operatives** are successful values based businesses owned by their members. Whether they are customers, employees or residents, the members get an equal say in the business and a share of the profits.
4. The United Nations has declared 2012 the **International Year of Co-operatives**. With its theme of 'co-operative enterprises build a better world', the Year is an opportunity to raise public awareness of how co-operatives are successful values based businesses owned by their members.
5. Further information about the International Year of Co-operatives is available at [www.2012.coop](http://www.2012.coop).
6. Follow the ICA on **twitter** at @icacoop. Like the ICA's **Facebook** page at [www.facebook.com/internationalcooperativealliance](http://www.facebook.com/internationalcooperativealliance)

