

REGIONALISM - A BACKWARD STEP?

by Iain Williamson

One day at the International Co-operative Alliance's Congress in Stockholm back in 1988 - overcome by one of those impulsive and extravagant gestures which sometimes happen to even the most cautious of Co-operative consumers - I bought a little tin badge. I received it in exchange for a handful of kroner which went, I think, towards planting a tree somewhere in Africa.

It seemed like a good, even worthy, idea at the time. And so did the inscription on the badge, "Kooperation utan Gränser", which loosely translates as "Co-operation knows no Frontiers". What a magnificent concept, I mused, becoming engulfed in a wave of international idealism; and how well it sums up the work of the ICA!

Since then that tin badge and its simple slogan have become something of a talisman. I've carried it with me whenever possible while crossing national boundaries as a gesture of contempt - a sort of "up yours, but not Delors" - to all those petty frontier officials who, wherever you go, seem to be armed to teeth with machine guns and rubber stamps (have you noticed how, for all the technology of the modern age, the humble rubber stamp still plays such a crucial role in maintaining the status quo of states?) in a determined effort to make you feel as unwelcome as possible.

Creating New Frontiers?

How disappointing, therefore, to find that the ICA, after a century of remarkable achievements against all the odds, during which it has overcome so many of the difficulties thrown up in its path by the jealousy and greed of nationalism and the harsh realities of North-South and East-West global divisions, is now busy creating new frontiers of its own.

Under the revised structure formally implemented after the Congress in Tokyo in 1992, the ICA has changed to a system of being governed and operated on regional lines - something which flies completely in the face of the truly global organisation which was the world representative for Co-operatives during the previous 97 years.

That last statement is factually incorrect, of course, because for the first

years of its glorious history the ICA was inevitably little more than a cosy club for European consumer Co-operatives. However, in the last half century it has grown in stature while developing a truly global and diverse character, representing, as it does today, many more Asian than European Co-operators and areas of business activity far larger than the consumer sector.

There is no doubt that this was a well-meaning reform, intended (subconsciously, if not intentionally) to group Co-operative organisations more closely together in the three great power and trading blocs which now seem to be emerging - the Americas, the European Union and the Pacific Rim (though not necessarily in that order of importance). Unfortunately, rather than achieving a kind of "strength through unity" at a regional level, the danger is that this new set-up may seriously weaken the very body it is intended to reinforce.

The Dangers

The sheer imbalance of the new structure speaks for itself. Just look at the figures, which seem to embody all the regional inequalities which the ICA should be dedicated to eradicating:

Region	Individuals represented in the ICA
Asia and the Pacific	500 million
Europe	156 million
The Americas	88 million
Africa	20 million

Clearly, there is a serious danger that one or more of the new regions will develop more rapidly and successfully than others, leading to an artificial unevenness within the ICA structure. The longer-term threat is rather more worrying, for what little central power the ICA now possesses could ultimately be devolved to the stronger regions, leaving the centre out of touch with reality and stripped of any genuine international clout.

Make no mistake about it; for all its success in surviving as a global organisation for a hundred years, the ICA is not in itself a strong and powerful organisation. Far from it. Its finances are precariously balanced and easily weakened (almost fatally so during the early 1980s, when it ran up serious fiscal deficits) and it operates from a headquarters in Geneva that is probably smaller than your average Late Shop, with a staff of scarcely a dozen.

Working to its Strengths

The great strength of the ICA lies in its ability to bring together in one forum Co-operative representatives from the rich and the poor nations, in simplistic terms from white and black or north and south, so that they can learn from each other and maybe even provide genuine mutual aid in the true spirit of Co-operation.

Another great strength is in the ICA specialised organisations for the different Co-operative business sectors, several of which - notably insurance, banking and the distributive trade (Inter Co-op) - have agendas for practical global collaboration which reach far beyond the restrictive boundaries of a Co-operative world unevenly divided into regions.

There is every chance at the ICA Centennial Congress in Manchester that a new specialised committee will be established to represent the fast-growing health care Co-operative sector, which is rapidly taking off in countries as diverse as the United States, India and Japan. In Britain, where health care Co-ops are only now beginning to be considered as one way of transferring some of the responsibilities for an ageing population from a cash-starved NHS and local authority infrastructure, we have much to learn from the experiences of Co-operators in other countries - but at a global and not a regional level.

As the actual cost of international travel falls and the power of global-scale communications through the Internet and the information superhighways begins to erode the real and imagined strengths of the nation-state, it does seem at last that we are within reach of the ultimate dream of all internationalists - the global village.

What a pity, at such a potentially exciting moment in its history, that the International Co-operative Alliance seems to have turned its back on the concept of "Co-operation without Frontiers" in favour of a parochial and ultimately destructive regionalism.

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