

**INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATIVE ALLIANCE (ICA) GENERAL ASSEMBLY
SEPTEMBER 2005**

Trent Bartlett, CEO of Capricorn Society and Deputy Chairman of Co-operatives WA was a guest speaker at the recent ICA General Assembly held in Colombia, South America. Trent spoke on the topic “Best Practice of Successful Co-operative Business” and has written the following account of the General Assembly meeting and the insight into the co-operative movement gained by attending the ICA meeting.

“Since joining Capricorn some 4 years ago, I have endeavoured to be a student of the Co-operative movement.

I have met with a number of Australian federations as well as New Zealand and have taken on the role of Deputy Chair of Co-operatives WA.

I also sit on the Industry Reference Group in WA – working with Government on the drafting of the new Co-operative legislation in order that I can better understand and influence matters of importance within the Co-operative Sector.

Unfortunately, this has done little to prepare me for what I experienced at the ICA General Assembly.

As I reflect, I am somewhat humbled at being given the opportunity to speak on behalf of Capricorn at this significant event. I am amazed by the achievements (both economically and socially) of some of the various global Co-operative sectors and individual Co-operatives and Co-operators from around the world.

The global Co-operative movement is an incredible force and this is most visible when attending the ICA General Assembly – which could be described as a “United Nations Meeting of Co-operatives”.

The entire spectrum of the Co-operative movement was represented at this event and includes such types as;

- Large Co-operative Federations representing multiple Countries or States Co-operative Sectors
- Workers Co-operatives
- Healthcare Co-operatives
- Artisans Co-operatives
- Banking Co-operatives
- Insurance Co-operatives
- Phone Co-operatives
- Agricultural Co-operatives
- Primary Producer Co-operatives
- Housing Co-operatives (including the rapidly growing Senior Housing sector)
- Retail Co-operatives
- Consumer Co-operatives – (a derivative of retail co-operatives)

- Purchasing Co-operatives (Capricorn's category – covering a huge spectrum of industries from Builders to Hospitals).

The ICA does not have a Federation or individual Co-operative from either Australia or New Zealand listed in its membership.

In the moving opening & closing ceremonies – I was saddened to see the Australian flag was missing.

I was the only delegate from Australia even though 1,400 delegates from 70 countries were represented at the Assembly.

The Co-operative sector is significant in global commercial and social terms, highly specialised yet so misunderstood.

Some initial work conducted by the ICA and presented at the Assembly has provisionally flagged that the Global Top 300 Co-operatives in total revenue terms equate to over \$800 billion of global commerce and the overall sector is some 6% of world GDP.

Arguably, if revenue was set aside and the measure was changed to adding value in the sense of social responsibility – everything from third world poverty reduction to post-Tsunami reconstruction in Aceh or micro finance and gender equality for women – the social contribution of the Co-operative movement to the world is just as significant.

Yet, the movement is well hidden from mainstream reporting and media commentators. This is not so difficult to accept when you realise that the Co-operative sector is somewhat of a mystery to itself – fractured and poorly networked in local let alone global terms.

The ICA Assembly certainly proved to me that I will not learn about the world of Co-operatives by waiting for it to come through my door and I certainly won't read about it in the press or see it on TV.

The only way Co-operators will learn is from one another and through networking and co-operating.

The topics covered in the Assembly were as varied as the nature of the Co-operatives that attended.

The first 3 days of the ICA Assembly were taken up with a variety of different sectoral, thematic and other meetings.

Youth Conference

The ICA has established a global youth network to promote co-operatives to younger generations and they held their own Assembly 2 days prior to the ICA General Assembly.

CICOPA World Conference

This sectoral division of the ICA also held its World Conference prior to the ICA General Assembly which highlighted the work of artisan co-ops; worker co-op start-ups; co-operative contributions to local development and health services as workers co-operatives.

Consumer Co-operatives International

This group held a workshop on “Successful Consumer Co-operatives Competing on Our Co-operative Values”.

ICA America’s Division

This division presented a seminar on “Free Trade – a challenge for Co-operatives and their integration into the Americas”

ICA Gender Equality Committee

The Committee convened a meeting on “Micro finance and Co-operatives” which was seen to be especially relevant as this is the United Nations Year of Micro credit and this was also the theme of the “International Day of Co-operatives”.

The seminar highlighted the experience of co-operatives providing Micro finance, especially focusing on women.

Human Resource Development Committee

This fascinating session focused on “The Co-operative Learning Centre:- CLC: A Portal to Co-operative Education and Training”. The team from the British Columbia Institute of Co-operative Studies presented an introduction to the CLC and then facilitated a discussion on its role in today’s co-operative movement.

Global 300

For the first time, an attempt has been made using available public data to record the Top 300 Co-operatives in the world, based on gross turnover.

A range of statistics and benchmarks were shared with the Assembly but fell short of naming the Co-operatives 1- 300.

Based on my discussions with the ICA – Capricorn is ranked between 100-200 until such time as further information is made available from the non-reporting entities from the Global co-operative sector.

The list will be published by June 2006.

The presentation generated a great deal of interest and feedback to the ICA.

A number of delegates made suggestions such as;

- The ranking needed to be broken into sectors (i.e. a co-op may not make the Global 300 – yet it could be a leading Co-operative of its type within its own industry or Country)
- The “value-add” to members rather than pure volume would be a more appropriate measure albeit harder to quantify

- The Co-ops with social values ranked them higher than commercial or economic values and were concerned their sector's contribution was going unrecognised"

Consumer Co-operatives International, the International Agricultural Co-operative Organisation and the International Federation of Agricultural Producers

This joint session focused on Co-operative Integration in Agricultural Marketing and reviewed successful missions and strategies in building effective linkages between producer and consumer co-operatives.

The General Assembly

Co-operative Principles

A presentation from Jonathon Birchall, a well-known Scottish co-operative academic, presented an interesting paper on "Co-operative Principles 10 Years On" – i.e. a review of the ICA's 1995 Statement on the Co-operative Identity".

Co-operatives – Competitive Business Models

The President of the Desjardins Group in Québec presented on how co-operative values and principles are increasingly important in competition with other commercial businesses and how this has helped Desjardins to be successful.

Social Responsibility and Values Driving Mainstream Business Success

The former Vice President for Corporate Development at Enron (or the Enron Whistle-Blower as she is now known) presented on the demise of Enron and the huge ethical problems exposed. The opportunity to draw attention to how co-operative enterprises should use their natural advantages here were explored.

Co-operatives Making Fair Globalisation a Reality

An International Labour Organisation (ILO) executive presented on the unique contribution that co-operatives can make to fair globalisation, strengthening economic capability and corporate social responsibility through the application of values and principles.

An interesting point here was the fierce competition from commercial enterprises in China, Mexico and India and the same demands being placed on Co-operatives to meet international standards of health and safety whilst remaining competitive.

A Level Playing Field for Co-operatives in Competition

A session was held on how the European co-operatives are challenging International Accounting Standards, trends in co-operative legislation, with particular reference to taxation, competition law and mergers.

The session also contained a presentation on agricultural co-operatives and the impact of World Trade Organisation negotiations.

Global Solidarity – Co-operating Out of Poverty

A session was held on the Co-operative movements approach to global poverty reduction and post-Tsunami reconstruction in Aceh.

Business Fora

The 3 speakers from the top to the bottom of the globe presented under the topic of “Best Practice of Successful Co-operative Business”.

The first speaker was the Executive President of Saludcoop, Colombia. Saludcoop is a healthcare co-operative and Colombia’s second largest employer. The Speaker, Dr Carlos Palacino, is also the ICA America’s Division President and the host nation for the ICA General Assembly for 2005. Dr. Palacino was awarded the Order of Democracy by the ICA for his services to the Global Co-operative Movement.

The second speaker was the President and CEO of S Group, Finland. This group of co-operatives has a turnover of approximately US\$9 billion.
A fascinating and complex conglomerate – and still a Co-operative.

The third speaker was myself.

The 2 most commonly repeated themes were;

- Co-operative values remain a true source of competitive advantage that can be successfully leveraged despite the challenges of globalisation
- Co-operative education (for Co-operatives and their members) holds the key.

The next ICA General Assembly will be in Singapore in 2007.

This will be the closest the Assembly will probably get to Australia and unlike the Cartagena Assembly, English will be the dominant language.

I look forward to attending the next Assembly to further develop the valuable new relationships and networks that I have formed in our Co-operative Sector that is so specialised and unique.

I hope I am not the only Aussie there in 2007!