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The Cooproute, building European heritage

Cooperatives disseminate sustainable tourism and culture

Today Cooproute, the European Route of Cooperative Culture, has been presented in Brussels, the capital of the continent where the cooperative movement was born in 1844, near Manchester. As a key sector of the European economy which easily connects European citizens, tourism represents a very effective sector to enhance the European heritage. *"Meeting tourists, cooperatives can easily transmit their culture and values, which play a key role in building the European society. Supporting Cooproute is an opportunity we offer to enrich our citizens through the diversity which the cooperative culture represents"*, Luca Dal Pozzo, president of CECOP, said. In the same sense, Silvia Draghi from the Tourism Policy Unit at the European Commission underlines that cooperative values *"have become European values"*.

The conference participants expressed the reason why cooperatives are an inspiring model in offering a sustainable tourist experience, while disseminating the cooperative values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. The debate also recommended European stakeholders that Cooproute should be recognized by the Council of Europe as a European Cultural Route. *"The cooperative culture is good for Europe – said Ms Silvia Costa, Chair of the Committee on Culture and Education at the European Parliament- because it is inspired by the sustainability of development, it has entrepreneurial spirit but with solidarity and, above all, it has a great ability to seize new people's needs, in the respect of their territories"*.

Around 80 destinations are already part of Cooproute. They are cooperatives and museums offering a sustainable and innovative tourist experience all around Europe: they preserve the local cultural and industrial heritage while promoting the history and values of the cooperative movement, with a specific focus on youths. The choice of destinations is varied. At the moment, most of them are museums, historical and natural sites, while others offer entertainment and accommodation, as well as services directly related to tourism. There are also cooperatives active in education, agriculture, social work or craft production which also provide significant tourist experience. The majority of them are worker cooperatives and social cooperatives.

Four Cooproute landmark cooperatives shared their experiences at the conference named **How to promote sustainable tourist experiences through the European route of cooperative culture**, from the Rochdale Pioneers Museum in the UK, which is considered the birthplace of the modern cooperative movement, to the work of the cooperative L'Olivera, committed to integrating disadvantaged people in rural Catalonia, in Spain.

Gerard Barras from the French cooperative Ardelaine that produces diverse tourist services as a complementary activity to wool transformation, said that Cooproute is going to allow the circulation of people that *"may become a little bit more European"*. Representatives from the cooperative Viseras that offers tourist itineraries combining visits to museums with the discovery of the local heritage also shared their experience.

What kind of Europe are we promoting through Cooproute? Thanks to their enterprise model, cooperatives represent an important source of inspiration for a more responsible and people-centered tourism. The activities of Cooproute cooperatives significantly contribute to the preservation and the development of their area's cultural and industrial heritage. By doing so, not only are they making their area attractive to tourists, but they are also actively promoting cooperative values and attitude.

"The countries in the South are the ones that have the biggest hidden cooperative heritage, we need to offer it to the European Union", concludes the Vice-President of the Spanish Confederation of Worker Cooperatives (COCETA, in Spanish) and President of CICOPA, the International organization of cooperatives active in Industry and Services, Manuel Mariscal.

CECOP, the European Confederation of cooperatives active in industry and services, has designed Cooproute in partnership with other cooperative organisations, local authorities and entities from all around Europe. It started in the framework of a 18 month project co-financed by the European Commission, which is now coming to a close. However the itinerary is consolidating itself. So far the highest number of Cooproute destinations can be found in Italy, where the idea of the project emerged, but also Spain, the United Kingdom, as well other countries such as France, Malta, Portugal, and Bulgaria. All sites anywhere across Europe wanting to strengthen their tourism potential, while promoting the history, culture and values of the cooperative movement, can apply through the Cooproute online guide available at www.cooproute.coop

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CECOP – CICOPA Europe (European Confederation of Worker Cooperatives, Social Cooperatives and Social and Participative Enterprises) groups national organisations in 16 countries which in turn affiliate over 50.000 cooperative and participative enterprises in industry and services, the vast majority being SMEs, and employing 1.4 million workers across Europe. Most of them are characterised by the fact that the employees in their majority are members-owners, while some of them are second-degree enterprises for SMEs. More than a thousand worker cooperatives in the CECOP network were created as business transfers to employees of conventional enterprises in crisis or without heirs. Furthermore, around 4.000 of the enterprises of our network are specialised in the reintegration of disadvantaged and marginalised workers (disabled, long-term unemployed, ex prisoners, addicts, etc).