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Cooperatives provide around 40.000 jobs to disadvantaged persons in Europe

The primary mission of several thousand cooperatives all over Europe is to provide sustainable and quality employment to those who are furthest and most excluded from the labour market and at the risk of poverty: persons with physical or mental disabilities, the long-term unemployed, migrants, minorities, ex-offenders, etc. Today, those cooperatives provide almost 40.000 jobs to disadvantaged citizens that can be found across Europe: in Italy, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Sweden, France, Spain and the UK. For instance in Italy, social cooperatives from the CECOP network provides around 32.000 jobs for disadvantaged persons and are one of the main categories of employers for those workers. In Bulgaria and Romania, cooperatives are the first employer for disabled workers.

The European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, László Andor gave a keynote speech at the Conference Cooperatives and Work Integration of Disadvantaged Persons by highlighting that social cooperatives play a key role in Europe, “they bring a fresh vision and approach to the current mainstream economy. Among others they have been capable of enhancing the ability of disadvantaged groups of people to protect their own interests, by guaranteeing self-help outside the family in accessing basic goods and services. Cooperatives hold powerful tools for social innovation”. He mentioned the added value of membership in cooperatives, especially in social cooperatives where also disadvantaged workers are members of the enterprise and decide on its future. “The considerable contribution of cooperatives to the work integration of disadvantaged people is one of the most cost-effective ways of meeting the Europe 2020 targets for employment, innovation, education and social inclusion”, concluded the Commissioner. This conference has been co-organized by the European Confederation of Cooperatives in Industry and Services (CECOP-CICOPA Europe) and Confcooperative-Federsolidarietà, the largest Italian Federation of Social Cooperatives, at the European Economic and Social Committee in Brussels. It has presented positive actions put in place by cooperatives in different European countries in order to provide quality employment and qualifying vocational training to persons with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups.

Bruno Roelants, Secretary General of CECOP-CICOPA Europe stressed that during the last few years following an the increase of those furthest from the labour market, which has happened unfortunately, in parallel with the reduction of national budgets dedicated to social inclusion policies, “cooperatives demonstrated they were able to do more than just provide jobs for the vulnerable citizens”. Through qualifying vocational training and adapted support services, the most disadvantaged workers are able to develop their personal and professional capacities and skills. “Thanks to their specific participatory model, cooperatives allow employees, including disadvantaged ones, to take part in the governance and democratic control of the enterprise - as long as they are able to do so - thereby increasing both their empowerment and their economic and social integration”, Bruno Roelants concluded .

Several cooperatives presented their story, such as the worker cooperative for workers in reintegration process, Juratri (France), the social cooperative for migrant workers Ecosviluppo (Italy), Severoceske Druzstvo Zdravotne in Czech Republic, which integrates disabled workers and the cooperative consortium for ex-offenders and drug addicts Vägen ut! (Sweden).

The conference was concluded by Giuseppe Guerini, President of Confcooperative –Federsolidarietà who has underlined “social innovation means concrete experiences” and cooperatives are ready to share them. “There is a big emphasis on the social entrepreneurship issue and increasing attention from EU intuitions about a number of concepts such as “social impact measurement”, or “social investment”. These concepts are too often just theory and reveal the lack of a veritable strategy to cope with the dramatic effects of the current socio-economic situation. Today we heard concrete stories. Cooperatives have a lot of stories like that to tell. We are often criticized because of the low attractiveness of cooperatives for investors. That’s trues but, at the same time, cooperatives have doubled their capital reserves, unlike all other types of enterprises. In addition to that, in the social impact measurement we should take into account that cooperatives don’t only create new jobs but they can also maintain them”, concluded Giuseppe Guerini.

CECOP – CICOPA Europe (European Confederation of Worker Cooperatives, Social Cooperatives and Social and Participative Enterprises) is a European confederation grouping 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. Among the main sectors of activity, we find metal industries, mechanical industries, construction and public work, wood industry and furniture, white goods, textiles and garments, transport, media-related activities, social services, education and culture, environmental activities, etc. 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. Furthermore, around 4.000 of those enterprises are specialised in the reintegration of disadvantaged and marginalised workers (disabled, long-term unemployed, ex prisoners, addicts, etc). 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.