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Consultation on ICA Statement on the Cooperative Identity

Dear Alexandra Wilson,

Dear members of the Advisory Group,

Thank you very much for drawing up the third draft and for giving us the opportunity to submit our comments. On behalf of the Central Association of German Consumer Co-operatives (Zentralverband deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften e.V.), with its 652 member co-operatives, we would like to submit the following comments:

1. Positive assessment of the third discussion draft

The ZdK welcomes the fact that the third discussion draft takes up numerous comments from the international consultation process. Compared with the second draft, the text has become more precise, more balanced and more accessible in several respects.

The ZdK particularly welcomes the fact that the first principle now expressly recognises that co-operatives may provide for reasonable membership restrictions related to their purpose. This clarifies that open membership is not to be equated with an unconditional right of admission. Cooperatives must be able to shape their membership in accordance with their purpose, their capacities and their democratically agreed orientation.

It is also positive that the second principle once again makes the active participation of members more visible. Democratic control is not exhausted by formal voting rights, but depends on participation, discussion and the opportunity to genuinely influence the direction of the cooperative.

The ZdK also welcomes the fact that the third draft better reflects the diversity of cooperative models. The express reference to cooperatives with different classes of members takes account of the development of multi-stakeholder cooperatives and other plural forms of participation. At the same time, it remains important that democratic control by the members is preserved and that one member, one vote remains recognisable as the guiding principle for primary cooperatives.

Of particular importance from the ZdK's perspective is the further development of the intergenerational understanding of cooperatives. The third draft retains the idea that cooperatives, as stewards for future generations, bear responsibility beyond the current generation of members. At the same time, this responsibility is now expressly understood as social, economic and environmental responsibility. The ZdK welcomes this addition. It makes clear that long-term cooperative responsibility does not concern only environmental or social aspects, but also includes the economic viability of the cooperative.

This reflects an important cooperative idea: cooperatives are long-term enterprises of their members. They promote the interests of today's members while also securing the conditions that enable future members to use and further develop the cooperative. The formation of reserves, economic stability, democratic renewal, education, regional rootedness and sustainable action are therefore not contrary to member promotion. Rather, they are an expression of a long-term understanding of the cooperative task of promoting members.

Finally, the ZdK welcomes the fact that the sixth principle continues to expressly mention cooperation among cooperatives without overburdening it with additional, undefined common objectives. Cooperatives strengthen their members and the movement as a whole when they use the services of other cooperatives and cooperate at local, national, regional and international levels.

Against this background, the ZdK regards the third discussion draft as a significant improvement compared with the second draft. The following comments therefore focus on a small number of points where, in our view, further clarification would be useful.

2. Self-help and mutual self-help

The third discussion draft uses the wording mutual self-help in the values. The ZdK considers it important that the established term self-help remains recognisable as the broader cooperative concept.

In the cooperative understanding, self-help does not necessarily mean that members directly support one another. In many cooperatives, self-help is organised institutionally through the cooperative: members join together in order to meet economic, social or cultural needs through a jointly owned enterprise.

At the same time, mutual support among members is an important expression of self-help in many cooperatives. This applies, for example, where members contribute labour, knowledge, voluntary work

or other forms of direct support. Examples can be found in housing and building cooperatives, village shops, community-supported agriculture, energy cooperatives and other community-based projects.

In the ZdK's view, self-help should therefore not be replaced by mutual self-help. Rather, mutual self-help should be made visible as a possible and important form of self-help.

The ZdK therefore proposes the following clarification:

Cooperatives are founded on the values of self-help, including mutual self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity.

This wording retains self-help as the broader concept while expressly including mutual self-help. It makes clear that mutual self-help can be an important form of cooperative self-help without narrowing the broader concept of self-help.

3. Accountability of senior management or leadership roles in the second principle

The third discussion draft provides that persons elected or appointed to senior leadership roles are accountable to the members. The ZdK shares the intention of clearly anchoring accountability within cooperative leadership structures. At the same time, the wording should take account of different governance systems and legal frameworks.

From a German perspective, a distinction must be made between elected board members or elected representatives on the one hand and employed or appointed managers on the other. Elected representatives are democratically legitimised and directly accountable to the membership. Non-elected management personnel, by contrast, are usually in an employment or service relationship and are accountable within the respective governance structure, for example to the management board, supervisory board or other competent bodies.

Direct accountability of employed managers to the members would not readily fit this structure. The international background of the proposed wording is presumably that in many cooperatives an elected board works together with an appointed CEO or full-time management. This should be taken into account without blurring the accountability of different roles.

The ZdK therefore proposes to clearly state the accountability of elected representatives to the membership and to locate appointed or employed managers within the cooperative's democratic governance structure. At the same time, the important idea should be retained that members exercise their democratic control through voice, vote and active participation.

The ZdK therefore proposes the following wording:

Persons serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. Persons appointed to senior management or leadership roles are accountable within the cooperative's

democratic governance structure. Members exercise their control through their voice, their vote and their active participation.

This wording clearly distinguishes between elected representatives, who are directly accountable to the membership, and appointed or employed managers, whose accountability is embedded in the cooperative's democratic governance structure. At the same time, it preserves the idea contained in the third draft that members exercise their control through voice, vote and active participation.

4. Linking success in the fifth principle more closely to the purpose of the cooperative

The third discussion draft states in the fifth principle that information, education and training should strengthen the engagement of members, elected representatives, managers and employees and enable them to contribute to the success of the cooperative and to its democratic life.

The ZdK supports the idea that information, education and training should enable members, elected representatives, managers and employees to effectively help shape the cooperative. At the same time, the term success should not be understood in an isolated business sense.

Cooperatives are enterprises, but they differ from other forms of enterprise through their member-oriented nature. Their success is not measured solely by growth, profit or market position, but by whether they fulfil their purpose and promote their members. Even though the promotional purpose of cooperatives is not anchored in all legal systems in the same way as in German cooperative law, orientation towards the needs of members is at the core of the international definition of a cooperative.

The ZdK therefore proposes to retain the wording used in the third discussion draft as far as possible, but to explicitly link the term success to the fulfilment of the cooperative's purpose.

The ZdK therefore proposes the following wording:

Cooperatives provide information, education and training to their members, elected representatives, managers and employees to strengthen their engagement and enable them to contribute fully to the cooperative's success in fulfilling its purpose and to its democratic life.

This wording largely retains the order, structure and wording of the third discussion draft. It merely clarifies that the success of the cooperative should be understood in connection with the fulfilment of its purpose. This avoids an interpretation of success merely as economic success, growth or market position.

5. Principle 7: Contribution to the common good — Gemeinwohl — and to a more secure, just and peaceful future

The ZdK welcomes the fact that the seventh principle continues to emphasise the responsibility of cooperatives for their communities and for sustainable development. Cooperatives do not act in

isolation. They are embedded in local, regional, national and international communities and can make an important contribution to the common good.

In German, the term *Gemeinwohl* expresses this idea. The term cannot be translated perfectly. Common good is probably the closest English equivalent, but the German term also carries a specific meaning in German social, legal and cooperative discourse. For the ZdK, it is important that cooperatives are not understood solely as instruments for the immediate benefit of their current members. They are member-oriented enterprises, but they often also create positive effects for their communities and for the *Gemeinwohl*.

At the same time, it should be made clear that individual cooperatives cannot be made directly responsible for achieving a secure, just and peaceful future for all. This objective can only be pursued through the combined efforts of many cooperatives, their federations and the international cooperative movement.

For individual cooperatives, the decisive point is that they contribute within the framework of their purpose, their capacities and the decisions of their members. This limitation is important in order to preserve the democratic self-determination of members and to avoid unrealistic expectations being placed on individual cooperatives.

It also seems appropriate to refer to the internationally recognised phrase “Cooperatives build a better world”. This motto of the International Years of Cooperatives expresses the idea that cooperatives worldwide can contribute to a better world without making each individual cooperative solely responsible for achieving global objectives.

The ZdK therefore proposes the following wording:

Through practices and policies supported by their members, cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities. Together, cooperatives worldwide help build a better world by contributing to the common good, including a more secure, just and peaceful future for all.

This wording distinguishes between the responsibility of individual cooperatives for the sustainable development of their respective communities and the contribution of cooperatives worldwide. It refers to the internationally recognised idea that cooperatives contribute to building a better world. At the same time, a more secure, just and peaceful future for all is understood as part of a contribution to the common good and not as an isolated obligation of each individual cooperative.

6. Summary

The ZdK supports a careful further development of the ICA Statement on the Cooperative Identity. The third discussion draft has been improved in many respects compared with the second draft and takes up important comments from the international discussion.

With the proposed clarifications, the third draft could, in the ZdK's view, further develop the cooperative identity in a way that reflects the international diversity of cooperatives while preserving the central elements of member promotion, democratic self-determination, self-help and long-term responsibility.

With cooperative regards

Zentralverband deutscher
Konsumgenossenschaften e.V.

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