

OPEN LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Brussels, 3 July 2021

**Dear co-operators,
Dear colleagues,**

Today we celebrate the International Day of Cooperatives. This year's theme is *"Rebuild Better Together"*, and thus, it reflects in a special way the current situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

First and foremost, I would like to take this opportunity, once again, to convey my heartfelt appreciation to all consumer co-operatives and their employees and volunteers for their commitment during the last one and a half years. These were - and unfortunately still are - difficult times for our society. It has brought us to our breaking point, in many places even beyond. Some have lost family members and friends; others are struggling with the long-term consequences of illness. Despite the difficulties, our movement has persevered in fulfilling its mission of serving our consumer-members and the local communities, providing them with food and daily goods.

Due to the lockdowns a lot of work was done at a distance. The food trade cannot do that. Here, people had to and still must be on the ground, be it the warehouse staff, the delivery people and very importantly, the staff in the stores. That is courage and dedication which we laud.

Now that the number of COVID-19 cases is dropping again almost everywhere in the world, we hope that the worst is behind us. We want and need to rebuild our society.

The 2021 Intentional Day of Co-operatives is dedicated to this hope of rebuilding better. Many businesses have not survived financially the restrictions. After life at a distance, we must get used to closeness again. We should use the impetus to improve individually and collectively. It is not enough, nor suggested, to return to old ways. We must rebuild better. To do this, it is important to analyse how the world has changed. Modern communication has helped us avoid many problems - digitalisation has made a big step forward. Yet, we must strike the right balance between digital and analogue.

The example of online trade makes this clear. Which items are most suitable for online trade and how is this service to be structured? In the case of fresh food, this is very costly and probably not sustainable in the long term due to refrigeration and packaging, which contribute to CO2 emissions. But for other products, too, we should look at the consequences of the growing online trade. This is not only about the growing delivery traffic, but also about the treatment of returned goods. Some online traders destroy them because it is too costly to check whether the items are eligible for resale. This contradicts the ambition for a sustainable economy. These are the type of cases which crystallise the importance of this year's theme: how are we supposed to rebuild better? It is about pausing and using the restart to analyse and improve processes. Clearly, certain things must stop, and others need to commence.

And we are supposed to do it together, as opposed to individually. That builds a bridge to the co-operative idea and our model. The pandemic clearly showed us that values like consideration, community and solidarity are important for our society. We experienced this in a very practical way by keeping our distance from others; the stronger ones restricted themselves to protect the more vulnerable ones.

Co-operatives are, by default, structured around a collective mission. The focus is on the benefit for all and not on the unconditional profit maximizing. For this reason, co-operatives are an excellent way to do what was already the theme of 2012 - the International Year of Cooperatives: Cooperatives build a better world.

Happy International Day of Cooperatives!

Mathias Fiedler
President