

## **International Forum on Fair tourism and trade, held in Chiapas**

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In my talk I will seek to present the experience of the Cooperative movement in tourism consisting of different threads but linked by common founding principles. One of these is the attention towards the local area they belong to which is the theme of this meeting.

The cooperative movement began life with the aim of finding answers for the needs of members. Any citizen could be a member on the basis of the principle and practice of an “open-door” policy. Originally problems with priority status included employment, housing and fair consumer prices particularly for foodstuffs. However following this cooperatives began to broaden their range of activities and became active in saving funds, insurance, assistance for small associated businesses in various sectors (agriculture, fishing, the retail business and transport etc.). As people’s needs changed, management of diverse service areas started up in fields of health care and personal services on a more general basis.

However, side by side with activities aiming at satisfaction of members’ primary needs has always been a high level of attention for less material needs; culture, leisure time, relaxation and tourism. Cooperatives have always been aware of the problem of facilitating members’ access to holidays and travel even in the past when tourism was more accessible to the wealthy classes. So cooperatives have contributed to promoting the large phenomenon known as social tourism which saw union organisations, religious associations and associations for leisure, culture and sport as protagonists. They have created holiday centres and resorts where members and their families can stay at reasonable prices and they have worked in the area of holidays for children.

Further to this, based on one of the principles of cooperation, the seventh or “concern for community”, they have channelled resources into actions and initiatives for their local areas, the places where they have their social roots, for the benefit of the entire community and not only for members. Often this has been in the form of initiatives for social and cultural life, for sport and entertainment, for trips or stays in tourist locations.

In more recent times this vocation has been articulated in new ways and attention has shifted to locations which are more distant, poorer and less developed. New initiatives based on solidarity have derived from this, and significant projects of development and international cooperation have been started up. A new sensibility has developed leading to an interest in fair trade, and responsible and community based tourism within the cooperative movement.

In my country, Italy, Legacoop which is the largest cooperative organisation has enthusiastically participated in the setting up of AITR, the *Italian Association for Responsible Tourism* and today twelve of its own cooperatives are members. Other tourist cooperatives which are members of Confcooperative - the second large Italian cooperative movement association with a Christian background – are also members of AITR.

However we must distinguish between three phenomena with different characteristics even though they have a common background.

The first of these is economical development in the South of the World which can touch on forms of responsible or community based tourism as an expression of the principle of concern for community. In this case solidarity is a strong part of an action and is developed within projects for cooperation and development with planned forms of partnership between donating cooperatives and receivers who contribute their own resources and start up activities in their own area for the benefit of their community. In fact recourse to local partners is always present in the idea of cooperative development. A receiving cooperative is never the beneficiary of charitable help in one direction only but is always required to contribute towards the project financially and to take on direct responsibility.

The second is the attention for sustainable and responsible tourism developed by travel agents and tour operators in the cooperative field seeking to offer their members and clients travel and holidays characterised not only by good financial value, information, customer assistance and management of customer complaints but also by higher standards on an ethical level and on the level of sustainability as well as in the travel contents.

The third is constituted by the birth of cooperatives with a decided orientation towards ecotourism and requalification of natural heritage. They propose holidays back to nature, trips into places of natural interest, hiking and nature education. They collaborate with natural parks in managing visitor centres, scientific or tourist activities and nature protection and conservation.. These cooperatives are strongly connected to their communities and location and tend gradually to become involved with other inherent aspects of their territory; the production of quality foods and agricultural products, artistic handicrafts, historical and cultural manifestations, material culture based on historic crafts, traditions and folklore. Sometimes they are able to involve various elements of the local community in small tourist development projects which open up to hospitality and reception. These include: farmers, woodsmen, artisans, pensioners who can testify to local history, collectors and people with hobbies, small cultural associations, local parishes, families who have started up forms of hospitality like bed & breakfasts. Obviously this is alongside tourist organisations in the true sense such as local tourist authorities and public administrators. For this type of cooperative it has been natural to join the AITR because their tourist proposals are based on some common principles; on involvement of the local community and the educational value of holiday stays and so are closely connected to the concept of community based tourism. The sense of connection to the local area is extremely strong.

Analogous experiences have been carried out in some agritourism cooperatives and fishing cooperatives who have diversified their fishing activities. They have made it possible for guests to participate in their fishing trips and hosted them in the homes of their fishermen members. These are experiences allowing guests to enter into close contact with the rural and fishing worlds, to become familiar with aspects connected to production, transformation and preservation of products, to participate in significant moments and learn about technical and professional aspects, problems, vocabulary and traditions. It gives them the opportunity to taste products and learn to cook them, and to take the products home with them when they have been transformed and preserved. The experience is based on novelty, emotions, the guest's active role and a richer relationship between residents and guests.

So we can see that in their relationship to the local area cooperatives bring into play a mix of social belonging, networks of relationships, knowledge and historical principles and bring aspects of reliability and trust to their field. Cooperatives, with their roots in the local area do not move to other areas, or to more convenient destinations. They do not de-localise their activities.

The results of these policies and practices are very significant.

Italian consumer cooperatives represent 12% of the market in fair trade and solidarity trade. They have their own *Solidal* trademark, linked to Transfair whose correspondent on an international level is Fairtrade. They propose 24 products almost all of which are foodstuffs. The producer is guaranteed purchasing continuity, advanced payment, earnings of at least 30% in more than those in traditional networks and a small sum to support local development projects. The decision to commit to fair trading is not taken at high levels, it is shared at the base with member consumers. It is worth noting that producers are often associated into worker cooperatives, so that we can say there is a presence of cooperative connectivity embracing agricultural producer cooperatives and consumer cooperatives. In the United Kingdom there are around a hundred products on sale and consumer cooperatives have a turnover of £25 m. Important initiatives are in process in Swiss cooperatives and in the Scandinavian area.

But consumer cooperatives are also present in international solidarity. In Italy consumer cooperatives have started up 30 projects for a total of 6 million Euro involving 332,000 donators

and 18 NGOs for organisation. Other initiatives have been started up by workers' and business cooperatives, and by associations and foundations connected to the cooperative movement.

The ICA has started a large project on a world scale called COOP, *Cooperating Out Of Poverty*, in collaboration with the ILO and the involvement of its entire world of associates numbering 800 million people.

In the field of travel agencies, in Italy (Robintur, Nuova Planetario), Spain (Eroski) and the United Kingdom (Travelcare) attention is increasing for travel and holidays which respect criteria for sustainability, in economic, environmental and social terms. Naturally it is not simple for retail travel agency chains to commit to this direction. It requires care in choice of suppliers, and strong information campaigns for customers. In Italy 41 agencies in the cooperative field adhere to initiatives of Agenzia Amica [Friendly Agencies] which respect higher standards in levels of organisation, professionalism and ethics.

Italy's most important tour operator for responsible tourism, *Viaggi Solidali*, is a member of Legacoop and their president Enrico Marletto is here to represent them today. Lo Spirito del Pianeta, another operator in the field has also requested membership.

In Italy it is cooperatives which are promoting experience in community based tourism in Italy (I Briganti del Cerreto), of agritourism attentive to the theme of environmental education (Dulcamara), hospitality with particular attention for the disabled both as guests and employees (Le Mat), local renewal and forms of aggregation for adults and young people (La Tana libera tutti), ecotourism for schools where discovering nature goes together with discovering local traditions (Atlantide, ARDEA, La Lumaca, La Sorgente, Kronos, Sherpa).

Abroad there are also several cooperatives characterised by their strong connection to the local area, and the requalification of natural, social and cultural resources (Cooprena in Costa Rica and other situations in Latin America and Asia)

To sum up; what have I been saying?

The cooperative movement is interpreting new trends in the economics of solidarity and thus the development of fair trade and community and responsible tourism. It is doing this through the simple re-modernisation of its own traditions, founding values and historical practice which have characterised 150 years of activity. Strong connections to local territory and the attention for ideas of justice, the concept of equality and universal brother and sisterhood, democratic participation in decision making, financial participation by all subjects and co-responsibility in initiatives, all constitute a legacy of principles and concrete practice which make the movement more credible and more at home in terrain which unfortunately also lends itself to opportunistic initiatives and a specifically earnings-orientated mentality.

For this reason we are willing to always collaborate, and always bring our contribution together with that of all other interested and committed parties.