

The ICA-ROAP Regional Youth Seminar 2004

A Moment to Reckon

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It was a moment past – three days of a remarkable addition to the pages of the book of our lives. Different experiences abound as more than 200 young people and a few adult leaders from countries like India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam and some guests from UK and USA gathered in the seminar.

A Time To Meet Friends

What a wonderful way to meet different peoples from different parts of the world! It was a time to renew ties with old friends and meet new ones. It was a time to learn other cultures, languages, and hopes and dreams. It was a perfect time for a fruitful networking.

A Time To Laud Significant Initiatives

Each participating country shared its notable accomplishments with regards to youth involvement and development.

India inspired us with the entrepreneurial spirit of the indigenous people of the Irula tribes who catch snake and collect venoms as a means of living, the retrenched employees of the Indian Coffee Promotion Board who now operate 158 branches of the Indian Coffee House, and the modestly paid workers of the Shankar Transport Company who went into strike, lost their jobs and started to operate their own transport facility which now pays dividends to its workers and the community.

Indonesia discussed about its putting up of the Young Cooperative Communicative Body in nearly all its provinces which facilitate different trainings in the areas of leadership, management, business and entrepreneurship.

Iran showed how grateful their members were for the young people who have helped excavate bodies and appease grieving relatives of victims of the killer earthquake which devastated rural communities, claiming lives and damaging properties.

Japan presented a number of activities of university students in cooperatives who are members of the National Federation of University Cooperative Associations (NFUCA), the environmental awareness drive of the Japan Association of FCA Youth Groups (GYOSEIREN), the management training run by the National Council of Agricultural Cooperative Youth Associations (JA Youth), and the setting up of the Youth Committee in the Japanese Workers' Cooperative Union (ROKYOREN).

Malaysia drew us close to its school cooperatives as it launched the School Coop Tourism project that developed packages about prominent national personalities in order to help school children and youth know and love their country more.

The Philippines highlighted the Coop Youth Planet program designed by NATCCO exclusively for cooperatives intending to develop the potentials of youth members aged 7-25. There were also the numerous school children generating savings and applying their management skills through laboratory coops assisted by the Cooperative Education and Development Center (CEDC), the enterprises and community services facilitated by young people in the Visayas Region through the VICTO Youth Net, and the campus cooperatives belonging to the Metro Manila Federation of Consumers Cooperative (MMAFECO) which encouraged youth participation.

Singapore satiated us with its innovative campus cooperatives formerly selling mere books and stationeries now venturing into the operation of internet games and bubble tea café. It also spoke about the bonus points earned by students participating in cooperative activities which are supported by the Ministry of Education, the different campus seminars, the job attachment program that provided working experience to students prior to their graduation, and the Inter-Campus Cooperatives BizChallenge, an online business simulation game for entrepreneurship training.

Sri Lanka shared the variety of activities facilitated by the National Youth Services Cooperative Union Ltd. such as trainings in different areas particularly on entrepreneurship, financial assistance and consultancy services, the Sanasa Movement that not only encouraged savings but also included Children's Committees to provide more opportunities to young people aside from what the schools offer.

Thailand talked about the three independent cooperative federations whose memberships include youth: the vocational school coops, the university coops, and the consumers coops. Their strategy is to strengthen the businesses of each federation and then linking with other types of cooperative federations such as the thrift and credit coops to facilitate their other business transactions. The establishment of a common coop member card for all is advantageous to achieving their goal of unifying their business systems.

United Kingdom underscored the contributions of the informal community organizations that aim to educate young people based on the cooperative principles through facilitating weekly meetings, playing group games, and setting camps. Youth voices were heard as they supported campaigns for issues relevant to environment and equality and participating in various decision-making boards.

The United States of America, through the North American Students of Cooperation (NASCO), recognized the role campus and community cooperatives play especially in the lives of students. The housing cooperatives offer affordable housing to students who own and operate them at the same time. As owners, they share in the costs, partake in the household chores, and take control of their immediate environment.

Vietnam told about the Vietnam Cooperative Alliance's Youth Union which organized meetings, sports competitions, writing contests, cultural activities, and study tours for the further learning of youngsters. And also of the university consumers cooperative which earned good reputation in providing services to students including housing.

A Time To Thread The Needle's Eye

We triumph without glory when we conquer without danger.¹

We have gained those victories because we decided to fight. It is worth noting, without doubt, the problems that we have encountered, the battles that we have fought, in order to savor our feats.

It's interesting to realize that the problems besetting the countries in this region² are, to a certain point, similar. Following are some of the significant areas of concern³:

¹ Pierre Corneille (1600s), French playwright

Legal Basis. All participating countries have set of laws pertaining to the organization and development of cooperatives. However, the verses of these laws differ from one country to another. Some policies are seemingly lax which make it easy to put up cooperatives, while others are strict and inhibit growth. Despite this, determined people still find ways to pursue the goal of putting up legitimate cooperatives.

Age and Membership. Since membership in a cooperative is a contract in itself, it is but normal to find that only persons at the age of majority (at least 18 years old) are accepted as members.

In some countries, young people like students are encouraged to put up laboratory cooperative instead, which has to be attached to a primary cooperative to oversee its operations. Since a laboratory cooperative is a self-contained organization, the youth are left on their own to handle the operations. However, the laboratory cooperative charter (as in the case of the Philippines) limits the scope of businesses in which the youth can engage in. Furthermore, since laboratory cooperative owners are minors, they still have to be represented in case they need to undertake a business agreement. This situation also deprives them contact with adults (except for their adviser) from whom they could learn as well.

While there are those that support the participation of the young, which, at some point, make it compulsory for school children, there are also those that explicitly disallow the membership of young people, particularly students, in the cooperative.

A lot of cooperatives in the communities (other than the schools), on the other hand, have engaged young people mostly through their savings programs. To “comply” with legality, some cooperatives consider their youth members as associates. This serves as their pass to do business with the youth.

Participation and Leadership. In countries where young people are accepted as members of cooperatives, provision of access to get involved in activities, to voice out their opinions, to take part in the discussion and decision-making processes, or to be chosen for any leadership or management positions, are not yet well established.

² Asia and the Pacific Region

³ Based on the country papers and sub-theme reports

Since a lot of cooperatives in the communities still tend to cater to the adult population, more often than not, the young members play a passive role in the operations of cooperatives. Ignored is the fact that their needs might be different from their adult co-members.

Nevertheless, it is good to note that there are organizations which have already started opening up these critical positions to the youth by creating youth committees or allocating seats for the youth in their leadership pool.

Training. Trainings provided for the youth come in different forms depending on the countries where they are in. These usually cover entrepreneurship, leadership, management, and bookkeeping and are done through classroom-type sessions or on-the-job activities. Most of the participants said that the trainings were not enough or sometimes not suitable for them. Whether these trainings were coherently planned or not is hard to determine at this point yet it is a concern that each country needs to address.

It's obvious that the young people have a number of needs waiting to be addressed. We can't help but appreciate the efforts of some proactive cooperative organizations which have seen the value of carrying out this training job in any way they can.

Awareness and Appreciation. Mostly, young people have no idea that cooperatives exist and what their reasons for existence are. Further, if they have any idea at all, more often than not, it is distorted. Ask a random number of young people in the streets about coops and you'll know that their top-of-the-mind idea is that coops are for aged folks who have nothing much to do in life, selling different stuffs from a dusty store, or lending money with hope of recovering it but to no avail⁴. This might be funny, but this basically reflects how coops are in the eyes of the youth. The lack of strategy for disseminating the right information about cooperatives is common to most countries. Facilities and services of, and benefits from the cooperatives cannot, at times, match what other forms of business organizations can have and give. It is fair to say [personally] that in the eyes of the ordinary youth, cooperatives are a pale choice for an investment of time and money.

⁴ Based on personal interview conducted by the author in some areas in the Philippines

We are lucky that there are some active youth members and leaders in a number of cooperatives in the region. Commonly, these are young men and women who are children, relatives, or friends of active adult leaders or employees of cooperatives.

Financial Resources. Implementing programs for the youth require costs that somebody has to take charge of, if not the youth themselves, then the cooperative. A lot of plans remained as plans due to limited funds, to no funds at all, or to improper allocation of funds. It is true however that there are cooperatives which are willingly financing youth activities, and in these areas, the youth are more active.

Programs. Almost every country has organizations facilitating programs for the youth. Common is the fact these programs were conceived by adults and implemented by adults for the youth, or at times, implemented by the youth themselves with the supervision of some adults. Most of what we have are savings programs, trainings, seminars, fairs, gatherings, and exchanges. Although there are a number of programs running in the region, there is no common program that exists for all. Whether the youth were consulted or involved in the conceptualization phase is difficult to establish unless declared and proven by the facilitating organization. A means of knowing if a program is based on the needs of the youth is on the way they respond to this. Some programs were well patronized by youth; the others did not receive much attention.

Key People. Effectively implementing a program means having the right people to run it. Given that most cooperatives experience shortage of human resources in operations, finding people to handle youth programs often becomes a problem, moreover, getting the right ones. Finances and the availability of qualified resources often get in the way.

Reviewing history, youth involvement is fairly a new concept under test since the last few years. Not many persons are excited to take charge of the responsibilities especially so if they are already occupied with unrelated tasks. Sometimes, cooperatives choose young people believing that they can establish rapport with their fellow youth and make the program work. Sometimes, the tasks are given to women representatives whose motherly care is seen an asset. Sometimes, to anyone who doesn't seem to have much work.

Lucky are we if we find the willing whose skills are enough, who have the ability to relate well and garner youth participation effectively, or those who are eager to learn more in order to get qualified.

A Time To Unravel Our Strength

Every generation has underestimated the potential for finding new ideas. Possibilities do not add up. They multiply.⁵

And they multiply... In 2003, there are about 3.69 billion inhabitants in Asia, accounting for three-fifths of the world's population. About 47.66% or 1.758 billion⁶ of the Asian population are from the participant countries to this seminar⁷. All over Asia, youth population is estimated at around 18%⁸. You can just imagine the number of young people existing in this region and whose potentials we can possibly tap.

Collectively, at present, how many lives of young people have we touched through our cooperatives? How much difference have we made in their lives, in other's lives through the programs we initiated? Or should we still need to ask ourselves how much difference do we really want to make in the lives of these young people? It's never too late.

Picking from the speech of Dato Shaharil Talib, Director, Asia-Europe Institute, University of Malaya, he said "The young cooperators have the potential to be the true ambassadors of the future... the youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow. However, the kind of future that can be imagined and then built is not simply a given of history. It is a future that has to be fought for, to be struggled over... [But] This will be no easy task... We have to work together for mutual advancement [because] the real strength of the cooperative movement lies in shared experiences, shared values, shared sense of purpose and shared results."

⁵ Paul M. Romer, a U.S. academic

⁶ Population figures based on 2000 estimates from the Microsoft Encarta Reference Library © 1993-2003 Microsoft Corporation

⁷ India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam

⁸ Figure based on paragraph 5 of the article, Background of the ICA Regional Youth Seminar and Youth Activities in Asia-Pacific, seminar material, ICA-Regional Cooperative Youth Seminar 2004

The flowers or weeds that will spring up tomorrow are in the seeds we sow today. If we plant good seeds in well prepared soil, heaven's sun and rain will do their part until harvest comes.⁹ But if we miss one of these elements, we are sure to reap a lesser grade stuff.

Do we have the seeds to sow? Do we know their quality? Are we going to grow flowers or weeds? Have we prepared the soil where to

plant them? Will we have the benefits of the sun and rain to expect a good harvest? We only have today.

A Time to Dare and Conquer

I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.¹⁰

Our moment of victory is too short to content ourselves with it. We must never stop seizing the opportunities for time is not always on our side. Youth hood is not forever. It is just a state we pass through. We are mere passersby on a road we can travel but once.

Remember Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade?"

*Flashed all their sabers bare, flashed as they turned in air
Sab'ring the gunners there, charging an army, while all the world
wondered.
Plunged in the battery smoke, right through the line they broke;
Cossack and Russian reeled from the saber stroke shattered and
sundered.
Then they rode back, but not, not the six hundred...
They that had fought so well came through the jaws of Death.
Back from the mouth of hell, all that was left of them, left of six
hundred.
When can their glory fade? O the wild charge they made! All the
world wondered.
Honor the charge they made! Honor the Light Brigade, noble six
hundred!*

But only a hundred and fifty men were able to come back.

⁹ Seeds – youth, Soil – community, Sun and Rain – environmental forces

¹⁰ Nelson Mandela, South African president and lawyer, from his speech, Long Walk to Freedom.

Tragedies and disasters are not the result of a single decision, a single event, or a single mistake. They are the culmination of things in our lives. Something happens and it becomes a catalyst for all the things we've had at risk.¹¹

Our lives will be long or short. We cannot leave our future to chance. We cannot simply talk. We cannot simply gather. We have to move, take action together. We have to collectively envision the future that we want for ourselves, for our children, and for our grandchildren. Like the Light Brigade, we can go valiantly through the battle without further thought and offer ourselves for our cause. Or we could sit down and, like generals, map out a plan of invasion, and then charge when we are ready.

The throng of more than two hundred, who were in the seminar sharing notions, tactics, trials and triumphs, where will they be after some time? Will we have them during the battle? Are we assured of winning in this war?

The cost of the underdevelopment of our youth is more than the loss of the youth victims themselves. The major price we pay is in the loss of lives and dreams. Every one of us pays some emotional price as well for this sluggishness in terms of anxiety, insecurity, and the haunting thought of a probably bleak future.

Youth development is everybody's responsibility, our responsibility. If we're not satisfied with what we have, we need to do something about it. We can.

A Time to Heed the Call

Have we ever asked ourselves why we do exist? We exist because there are more young people waiting for guidance. We exist to continue paving the way for our children and their children. We exist because there are people who cannot move on in life on their own and they need us to tug them along to safer grounds. We exist because there are people waiting to be loved, to be heard, to be cheered on, to be encouraged, to be inspired. We exist to help build bridges for others to cross and get their dreams. We exist for others – and that fulfills our goals and reveals our real worth.

¹¹ Neal Beidleman

We are co-partners, co-sharers of responsibilities. We have needs to address and a lot of potentials to harness. Let our networking efforts come to fruition. Let us stand up and get moving after our pencil pushing. Only action will lead us to wherever we want to go.

Let us all dare to imagine new futures¹². We have today.

¹² Dato Shaharil Talib, Director, Asia-Europe Institute, University of Malaya