

Closing words from the chairman of the Association of Cooperative Sciences Institutes, Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Konrad Hagedorn, on the occasion of the XVII. International Conference on Cooperative Studies (ICCS), September 18-20, 2012 in Vienna.

The XVII. International Conference on Cooperative Studies (ICCS) of the Association of Cooperative Sciences Institutes (AGI), held 18 to 20 September 2012 in Vienna, was simultaneously a complete scientific success as well as a grand social event! As it turned out, however, the concluding remarks of the Chairperson of the AGI did not take place as announced in the program. Through an oversight, the conference was ended earlier than planned at the conclusion of its final podium discussion. This would not have been worth mentioning were it not for the loss of an opportunity to heartily thank the organisers and their co-workers, the speakers, moderators and discussants, all other participants and, last but not least, the sponsors for their outstanding contributions. However, this has given us the opportunity to convey to you the following appraisal of the conference in written – and thereby perhaps more memorable – form. Here, then, are the concluding remarks of AGI Chairperson as they were originally to be given at the end of the conference.

Honoured colleagues and guests,

We are now at the end of an event that has been equally communicative as well as knowledge-rich. We have just experienced a conference that can be considered a model of the liveliness and interactive framing of problems through dialogue that can take place between cooperative practice and cooperative science. It was also, however, a conference during which daunting theoretical and empirical problems were revealed, in particular s regards the present economic 'crisis'. At the same time, repeated emphasis was laid on the need for new approaches, new methods, to gain a better understanding of cooperative undertakings and how to support them, under the banner of 'experimental research on behaviors and attitudes'. And, in the end, although the main concern was self-help and self-organization, there was also a focus on the role of the state (e.g., the EU) in facilitating such decentralized cooperative efforts. Overall, I think we can look back at this conference as one giving us courage and determination to bring the cooperative sciences into greater prominence on the world stage.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, if you will allow me to mention a few issues from the conference that seem noteworthy, naturally as seen from my perspective:

- At the top of the list was the concreteness and degree of detail that was brought to the debate concerning practical questions of how cooperatives function, such as in the domains of advanced auditing or proper accounting. For the academics in the scientific community, such questioning can

often act as a healthy glimpse into the complexity of practical management, and the practitioners need to be especially thanked for their contributions to this aspect of the conference.

- Repeatedly, attention was brought to the great financial and political crises taking place today and the question of whether approaches from our discipline could help to solve the institutional failures that have caused them. Here the conference brought a crucial task for the future to the table, while also revealing that our knowledge is not – or at least not yet – sufficient for formulating conceptual recommendations for institutional innovations of such scale and momentous import. All the more telling was the continual reappearance of indications of this challenge to our discipline during the course of the conference.
- Another integral component of this conference was a palpably felt, and not merely postulated, interdisciplinary practice. As an economist, I am often admire the great degree of differentiation and precision in the formal development, constant amendment and fine tuning of laws, decrees, ordinances and procedural rules. Institutions, understood as sets of rules, many of which are encoded in legal form, need to be equipped so that they can become productively operational. This is one of the keys to sustainable development of societies and is extremely meaningful in practice.
- Standing on the other side is economic analysis and its approaches, which were quite well represented here at the conference, stressing foremost questions of efficiency and organisational feasibility. As the interdisciplinary exchange of the last few days has demonstrated, such economic approaches are not in opposition to the legal ones, as one might be led to believe due to disciplinary blinders. Rather, both fields of research interact with each other more in the sense of a syllogism. On the one side are the, usually legally defined, basic principles, while on the other side there are the constraints of the scope of action, marked by universal scarcity, through which concrete practice becomes possible. Competitiveness, the survival of cooperatives, and their adaptability are relevant objectives to be brought to bear here. The synthesis of the two elements is what characterises constructive discourse.
- My attempt to offer a picture of this conference would be terribly incomplete if I failed to point out the many contributions dedicated to quite specific and concrete questions, such as the founding of cooperatives, cooperatives in transformation countries, customer relations, energy cooperatives, and many other areas that could also be mentioned. Noteworthy is that the role of cooperatives in economic development – internationally, including in developing countries – clearly emerged as a focal point.
- Last, but not least, what should the role of the state be vis-à-vis cooperatives as ‘robust institutions’ and sustainable forms of organisation? This question came up again and again regarding issues such as the impact of the Basel III equity capital regulation on cooperative banks or how agricultural producer groups should be supported by the EU in the future. To my mind, this is a key and promising area for cooperative research in the field of policy to devote itself to.

Thus far, I have only mentioned some aspects and tasks for the future that have especially characterised this conference. But now I want to consider the event as such. Aside from the careful consideration given to content issues, the splendid location and atmosphere within which the conference took place needs to be recognized, provided for us through the University of Vienna's Institute for Business Management, the City of Vienna, and the unmatched engagement of the cooperative associations. The high quality of this conference is especially due to the untiring efforts of its organisers, particularly Professor Brazda for his farseeing planning and design of the event as well as Professor Rößl and a multitude of their co-workers. In fact, the event's organization was so smooth as to be almost imperceptible – truly a model of organisational excellence. In this regard, execution of the conference was handled with the utmost professionalism by Dr. Holger Blisse, Mr. Florian Jagschitz and others. Equally essential were the contributions of the co-workers of the event management team, especially Mr. Schneider and the young people responsible for handling the technical aspects of the plenum and group sessions.

I extend a heart-felt thanks to all of you for their exemplary work in making this conference a success!

In closing, just as at the beginning of our conference, I would also like to especially thank our sponsors. Here, I particularly mean our supporters among the cooperative practitioners and enterprises of Austria and Germany. In aiding this conference, you have sent a strong signal of your connectedness with scientific cooperative research. Let me not forget to also thank once more the speakers, moderators, and discussants of the conference for their substantive contributions and ability to continually stimulate our thought processes. I also remind us of a special event that occurred during the conference, namely the giving of the International Scientific Prize of the AGI. This year the award has gone to Professor Münkner, from Marburg, for his enduring contributions to cooperative science and practice through a first-class combination of teaching, research, and consulting that should be a model to us all.

Before finally ending my remarks, I would like to remind you that there are some post-conference workshops still awaiting your participation! Looking ahead, I very much hope that we will all see each other again – full of new ideas and in good health – at our next, eighteenth, international conference in Luzerne, Switzerland.