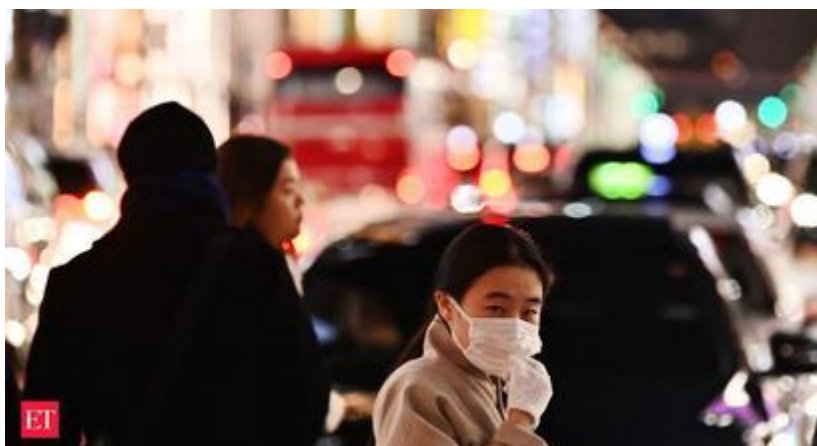


“We are all individually vulnerable – It’s more than ever urgent to cooperate”



Picture credit: Economic Times

Balasubramanian Iyer responded to questions posed by Eugenie Park, reporter from Erounnet (<http://www.eroun.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=11054>) an Internet news company covering stories in the social sector.

**Q: As the Regional Director of AP region, do you find the crisis due to COVID-19 in coop business serious in Asia? Are there any specific figures?**

**A:** The Covid-19 pandemic is a crisis faced by humanity, and cooperatives are not isolated from it. The situation is still unfolding in many countries so it very difficult to put specific figures; but as we know, it will be very large.

The impact on cooperative business will vary as we work across many sectors. Even during this time of crisis, many activities of cooperatives are deemed essential and need to continue. This includes agriculture and allied sectors, credit, health, retail and others. These cooperatives may see a lesser impact compared to those in the services sector, which are more severely impacted. The impact is bound to be across economic and social terms.

To cut community transmission, governments are advocating ‘social distancing.’ The impact of being confined, not being able to freely step out, loss of contact, ways and means to survive, and keeping oneself and family together will extract costs.

**Q: How is the cooperative movement dealing with the pandemic? Are there any examples of cooperatives contributing to tackle the pandemic in the AP region that I can introduce to the readers? (For example in Korea, more that 25 members coops in iCOOP donated goods to health centres, hospitals, low-income groups, etc.)**

**A:** I am happy to hear that cooperatives in Korea are coming together to help front line workers and groups most impacted. The work being done by iCOOP, Korea is very encouraging, and resonates with reports coming out from across Asia.

In Australia, the Business Council of Cooperatives and Mutuals, the apex body, is providing information to their members on the government assistance for coronavirus impacted businesses and what it means.

In India, one of the plants of the Indian Farmers Fertilizer Cooperative has received requests from the local administration for support. They immediately arranged for the supply of several medical emergency items including nebulizers, oxygen cylinders, masks, sanitizers, etc.

In the Philippines, cooperatives have launched a nationwide campaign of donations to combat the virus and help the elderly, who are the most vulnerable. These include washable face masks, vitamins, and other kits.

In India, the Self-Employed Women's Association's health wing, Lok Swasthya has low cost pharmacies outside two large public hospitals 24x7. Lok Swasthya is also manufacturing low cost hand sanitizers as the poor cannot afford these, and also to bridge the demand-supply gap in markets.

In Iran, the Iranian Women Co-operators' Think Tank, comprising among others the Tehran Handicraft Cooperative Union, Iranian Chamber of Cooperatives, the Iranian Cooperators' Association, and Rah-e-Roshd Cooperative School has been running projects in different provinces in collaboration with the medical community to produce masks and isolation gowns.

President Ariel Guarco and Director General Bruno Roelants of ICA have written letters of concern and support to all members. ICA is inviting members to share their ongoing experience as well as their short-term and long-term needs on the [Loomio Platform](#). ICA is also planning to establish a Cooperative Solidarity Fund to support cooperatives in need.

**Q: The Summer Olympics have been postponed. Are there any possibilities that the 2020 World Congress might be rescheduled?**

**A:** The ICA Global Board is currently having online deliberations about this very issue. There are a number of parties involved in organising the 2020 World Congress whose views need to be ascertained, projections made about what the situation would be, the sentiments of cooperatives taken on board, etc. The decision should be made and conveyed soon.

**Q: What kind of wise measures do you think coops should take in this kind of situation to survive?**

**A:** Measures can be taken across the entire cooperative system - apex bodies, cooperatives, and members. Government across the world are taking steps to provide massive stimulus to kick-start the economy. Apex bodies can look into details of the stimulus and see how cooperatives can benefit, provide the information and help cooperatives access the benefits.

Cooperatives, as people-centered business, can look at member needs and ascertain support requirements. For example, some credit cooperatives are deferring loan repayments; while it could impact their business in the short-term they are keeping their member interests at the centre. Some cooperatives are using their Cooperative Development Fund meant for education to provide medical and other supplies. I see this as an opportunity to enhance cooperation among cooperatives. Credit

cooperatives can step up and provide assistance to many of the worker and services cooperatives which have had to shutter their operations, defer payments and lay-off workers.

Members themselves need to ensure they adhere to measures put in place by the government and support members and others in their community in whichever way they can.

**Q: Are there any messages of hope that you want to deliver to all cooperators in the AP region?**

**A:** I would like to share a message that a member sent to me, “the coronavirus crisis reminds that we live in a common home where we are all individually vulnerable and at the same time collectively interdependent. It’s more than ever urgent.