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Cooperatives contribute significantly to sustainable tourism in Europe

Today, 4th December 2013, the more than 1,000 worker and social cooperatives from the CECOP – CICOPA Europe network involved in activities linked to tourism celebrate the European Tourism Day. The cooperative business model, which is based on values such as self-responsibility, democracy, equality and solidarity, allows to achieve a more sustainable and responsible tourism while combining economic competitiveness with social and environmental needs.

Tourism represents today a key sector of the European economy, generating over 10% of EU GDP (directly or indirectly) and employing 9.7m citizens in 1.8m businesses, according to the European Commission. In its Communication published in 2010 “Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination – a new political framework for tourism in Europe”, the European Commission committed itself to promote the development of sustainable, responsible and high-quality tourism. Worker and social cooperatives active in the tourism sector respond to a number of challenges such as the respect and reinforcement of the local community in touristic areas as well as the stronger involvement of citizens, environmental sustainability and accessibility for everyone (regardless of age, health and economic profile).

Given its potential in terms of wealth creation, tourism should develop its capacity to generate benefits for the whole society in fields such as: employment, wealth generation, culture, sustainability, environment etc. The approach based on passive consumption and unsustainable exploitation of destinations showed its limits and negative effects. The tourism market is now offering a growing range of more responsible and sustainable experiences for tourists, including, for instance, the promotion of local industrial and craft heritage.

From this perspective, worker and social cooperatives active in industry and services represent an important source of responsible innovation: cooperative tourism can improve the range on offer in Europe both qualitatively and quantitatively, exploiting its huge potential in terms of entrepreneurial and territorial competences. Indeed, cooperatives enhance social capital locally, because they are rooted in territories and know how to develop them, paying attention to all categories of people, including disadvantaged persons. It can be observed that cooperatives, and in particular worker cooperatives, social cooperatives and artisans' cooperatives, have a specific impact in terms of territorial development, through the creation and maintenance of jobs and the development of local activities and skills.

CECOP – CICOPA Europe, in partnership with cooperative organisations and local authorities from all around Europe, is designing an innovative transnational itinerary in the field of cultural and industrial tourism: Cooproute, the European Route of Cooperative Culture going through various European countries. This itinerary will gather cooperative enterprises preserving traditional local skills and products and developing material and immaterial cultural heritage. Other sites and destinations that illustrate cooperative culture and values will be part of the itinerary, such as artisan cooperatives producing traditional textiles, ceramics or the Rochdale Pioneers Museum in the UK, considered to be the birthplace of the modern cooperative movement. Cooproute itinerary aims to be recognized as a European Cultural Route by the Council of Europe.

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CECOP – CICOPA Europe (European Confederation of Worker Cooperatives, Social Cooperatives and Social and Participative Enterprises) groups national organisations in 16 countries which in turn affiliate over 50.000 cooperative and participative enterprises in industry and services, the vast majority being SMEs, and employing 1.4 million workers across Europe. Most of them are characterised by the fact that the employees in their majority are members-owners, while some of them are second-degree enterprises for SMEs. Furthermore, around 4.000 of those enterprises are specialised in the reintegration of disadvantaged and marginalised workers (disabled, long-term unemployed, ex prisoners, addicts, etc). More than a thousand worker cooperatives in the CECOP network were created as business transfers to employees of conventional enterprises in crisis or without heirs.