

ANAND DECLARATION¹

We welcome the July 2021 policy decisions by the Government of India to constitute an independent Union Ministry of Cooperation (MoC) to provide a separate administrative, legal and policy framework for strengthening the cooperative movement. Seen together with the judgement of the Supreme Court of India striking down some provisions (Part IXB as it is applicable to States) in the 97th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA), retaining the right to form cooperatives under 19(1)(c) and 43B indicating the “State’s endeavour to voluntary formation, autonomous functioning, democratic control and professional management of cooperative societies”, we believe presents an opportunity for a new impetus to rethink and rejuvenate the cooperative movement in India.

With a renewed focus on the autonomy and independence of these member-driven organisations, we reaffirm our commitment to cooperative values and aim to work with the Ministry and fellow cooperators across India to

- a. Recognise the invaluable role of cooperatives in reducing inequality and building resilience of their, often poor and marginalised, members in coping with the pandemic induced distress
- b. Call upon local, national, regional, and international cooperative networks to seek and ensure public recognition of the past and present contribution of cooperatives in India by governments and stakeholders at state and national level, by supporting local economies across sectors and realizing the social and cultural needs & aspirations of people, especially vulnerable sections of the society including women, the elderly, people with disabilities, indigenous communities, and refugees etc.
- c. Call upon primary coops and coop networks to promote member-ownership of the cooperatives, build capability of the Boards, improve transparency & accountability, create new employment opportunities locally, increase the purchasing power of large numbers of people. (*Sahkar se Samruddhi*)
- d. Moving away from the overstructured and underpowered framework that ails cooperatives to one that can empower citizens towards collective action and enable ‘ease of doing business’ for cooperatives.
- e. Strengthen cooperative Networks shall strengthen the role of Federations in ensuring cooperatives function as bottom up enterprises practicing ‘Good Governance’ and promote self-regulation through high standards of education and training, assisting and encouraging regular auditing and reporting of financial performance as well as performance audit of governing bodies.

¹ The joint declaration is by the 25 participants of the consultation on “Autonomy and Independence of Cooperatives” held at the Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA) on September 3, 2021. The participants represented National and state level cooperatives, federations and development foundations, academics, civil society organisations and international cooperators from 9 states of India.

- f. Emphasising the important role of the state in:
- Visualising cooperatives as important for the growth of the rural economy and serving the urban poor
 - Supporting the creation of a large cadre of highly competent and accountable leadership who have the vision to lead their coops with business acumen and political wisdom. Investing in building capacity of cooperative boards and staff to be seen as a public good for making self-reliant (*Atmabirbhar Bharat*) institutions
 - Building an enabling ecosystem that facilitates and catalyses the incubation of producer collectives, ensuring greater inclusion of women and the marginalised in running these institutions, supporting digitization of operations that can enable scale and data transparency
 - Creating platforms for learning from good practices from different parts of India and other parts of the world
 - Working with like-minded institutions in making India a leader in the cooperative movement.
 - The MoC must strive to facilitate all the State Governments to Legislate amending State Coop Laws to ensure that cooperatives enjoy right under 19(1)(c).
- g. Emphasising the need for professional management to serve this sector by creating a Young Professional scheme with possible mentoring and anchoring by institutions like IRMA in collaboration with other higher education institutions and civil society organisations (akin to the Mahatma Gandhi National Fellowship or earlier PMRDF).
- h. Systematically educate state governments, donor agencies, civil society organizations (CSOs), Corporate Social Responsibility funding agencies (CSR) and Banks on the need for self-reliant cooperatives and their potential contribution to revive deprived rural and urban economies.
- i. State Governments to ensure that the State Cooperatives laws are amended in keeping with the 19(1)(C) and 43B.

This multi-stakeholder consultation with co-operators, practitioners, academics, and experts across India examined the legal and constitutional implications of the policy decisions and explored how future initiatives on cooperatives can embed the autonomy of the cooperative sector and make it vibrant. We commit to carry forward this consultation to other regions too with an intention to build momentum for a rejuvenated cooperative movement in India and a working group, like the Cooperative Initiatives Panel in the 1990s at Anand, that would review cooperative acts in different states and bring out policy briefs documenting practices for wider debate and adaption.