

IVANO BARBERINI
Introduction by Rita Levi-Montalcini

**HOW
THE BUMBLEBEE
FLIES**
**COOPERATION, ETHICS
AND DEVELOPMENT**
Interview by Miriam Accardo
Roberto Casadei Dedicazione

The Co-operative Bumblebee

How The Bumblebee Flies – Cooperation, Ethics and Development Is a book-length interview with the late co-operator Ivano Barberini. Barberini saw a co-operative as a ‘bumblebee’ that, over its long history, has shown that it knows how to fly, despite what physicists have said to the contrary. In order to keep on flying and attain its goals, which, like all social objectives, are always on the horizon, the cooperative must continue to face up to the challenges imposed by reality.

As a co-operative movement insider, Barberini looks back over his international co-operative career to the present day – providing evidence and direct knowledge of the co-operative reality including not only the numbers but also a reasoned and insightful analysis and reflection on cooperation over time and in different fields and the continuing and enduring importance of co-operative values and adaptability to change.

The book is in two parts – Co-operatives Around the World and Co-operatives in Italy. The chapters in Co-operatives Around the World are The Nature of Co-operation, Historical Roots and the Development of the Co-operative Idea, What is a Co-operative?. Co-operation Today, Co-operatives, Poverty and Peace, Standardization and Demutualization, Managing Change, Communications and The Social and Ethical Role of Responsibility. The chapters in Cooperation in Italy are Cooperation in Italy, The Cooperation of Consumers, The Great Crisis and The Coop System – Innovation and Leadership.



In How the Bumblebee Flies Ivano Barberini is interviewed by Miriam Accardo – a professional journalist with a degree in political science. Barberini was born in Modena, Italy, in 1939 and died on 6 May 2009. When he died he had been President of the International Cooperative Alliance since 2001. Barberini had also been President of Coop Italia, Bologna office, and Coop Emilia Veneto Coop (now Coop Adriatica). For 17 years he was President of the Coop/Associazione Nazionale Cooperative di Consumatori and from 1996 to 2002 he was President of the Lega Nazionale delle Cooperative e Mutue. At the European level he held various positions including the presidency of EuroCoop, president of the International research institute Archivio Disarmo. In October 2008 he was awarded the prestigious Sigillum Magnum of the University of Bologna. At the farewell reception of the ICA General Assembly on 20 November 2009 Barberini was posthumously awarded the 2009 Rochdale Pioneer

Award for his life-long contribution and legacy to the world co-operative movement. Among his publications are *Competere per cosa* (1995) and *Costruiamo il futuro* (1996)

What underpins Barberini's comments is revealed in this statement: "In order to understand the world you must see it as a whole and not only from one's own point of view. Political action, responsibly exercised is called upon to establish a turning point for this situation, by recognizing the right to food, health and dignified work as a universal right. Humanitarian aid has proved everywhere to be of limited effectiveness. It is the aid that constructs 'systems', capable of self-regeneration, that can provide an impulse toward a real and lasting improvement in the living conditions in poor countries." (p 81)

He examines the evolution of the co-operative movement and argues co-operation has ancient roots in Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. (p 21) He emphasizes that the basic principles are 'vital organs' that are "indispensable to the safeguarding of an organism's identity and survival." (p 41) The ongoing significance of co-operative values and principles is a recurring theme – that co-operative values and principles are integral to a co-operative's identity and survival. For Barberini the substance of co-operation is putting the person at the centre and public welfare, equality and solidarity.

Barberini argues that the cooperative is an enterprise that must be able to compete in the market both economically and culturally but this depends on the relationship with members: "In order to be able to change rapidly, the enterprise needs close and unbroken relations with the members and the stakeholders. The more a cooperative is organized to be a change leader, the more essential it is for there to be an equilibrium between innovation and continuity, in harmony with its mission. This choice requires the courage to abandon everything that is old and obsolete in the structure, in the organization, in the policies, and in the image. The definition of new paradigms and the management of complexity therefore require competence, courage, loyalty, and team players." (p 99)

He argues that demutualization is a threat "when the member changes from an individual to an anonymous figure or stops focusing attention on the life of his society." (p 93) and that: "In most cases, demutualization is caused by the choices of the cooperative executives, with the support of outside consultants and with the acquiescent consensus of the boards of directors; very rarely is it a product of pressure from the members." (p 94)

In responding to whether there is a risk of co-operatives becoming anachronistic, Barberini responds: "No, precisely because the principles on which it operates are 'basic', which is to say, drawn from essential needs, needs the individual cannot do without, except at the cost of renouncing rights that are fundamental, such as work, culture, solidarity, and social welfare. For the cooperative universe, the difficult exercise

involves distinguishing continually which values and principles to respect and maintain and which to 'adapt' and update to the changes in the market and in society just to prevent cooperation from becoming anachronistic and, therefore, inefficient with respect to its real core mission." (p 115)

It is an important book because it explains and locates co-operation within a broad economic and political context and the centrality of co-operative values and principles to co-operation and, therefore, member ownership and control.

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