



Skills Knowledge within Innovation Lifelong Learning System - S.K.I.L.L.S.

Project Number: 133981-LLP-1-2007-1-IT-LEONARDO-LMP

Grant Agreement: 2007-1970/001-001-LE3 - MULPRO

Sub-programme or KA: Multilateral project (Development of Innovation)

Project information

Project acronym: SKILLS

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Project website: <http://www.skillcoop.eu>

Reporting period: From 01/01/08
To 31/12/2008

Report version: 1

Date of preparation: January 29th 2009

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission.

This publication [communication] reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Executive Summary

Cooperative enterprises originated in an agricultural context as a result of changes that took place throughout the Industrial Revolution both in England and in Europe in the eighteenth century. They proposed a new model of enterprise focused on the members and their need, focused their business on the answer to common needs thanks to the power of the group.

Cooperatives are now important protagonist in the international market, both for their widespread presence in the world and as economic alternative based on specific values and principles. These values and principles were updated with a new concept of cooperative identity in 1995, responding to the need recognised for cooperatives to move closer to the context in which they existed. “Big values are translated into small decisions at the coop every day”¹, and the knowledge of the values and principles is the focus for a fair and successful management of the cooperative enterprises.

In line with the today recognized need to reinforce the cooperative identity for successful cooperatives, the SKILLS project is developing an innovative learning system, validating existent non formal and informal learning to combine them with different methodological approaches and innovative contents for training co-operators to become more aware and active in the cooperative enterprise.

The main objectives of the project are to:

- strengthen the democratic nature of cooperatives developing common informal and non-formal training programmes;
- validate professional experience in the cooperative sector;
- develop innovative learning programmes and materials based on partners’ experience and cooperative learning methodology;
- support good governance of democratically run enterprises;
- build a network of cooperative trainers able to support adult learners;
- disseminate the results to be used in cooperative enterprises throughout the European Union.

The project so far has allowed the partners to work on these objectives, especially highlighting:

- the need to strengthen cooperative identity;
- the difficulty in offering specific technical training (book keeping, marketing, etc.) at a European level, considering the different cultural contexts and needs;
- the need to learn about the uniqueness, strengths and advantages of a cooperative way of working, especially as a way to survive in a period of economic instability and social unrest;
- the interest for involving all levels of cooperators (see the definition of the target of interest in an innovative curriculum for co-operators).

The next steps will be to construct a *learning system* to support cooperators and raise the cooperators awareness as active members, using non formal and informal learning to introduce cooperative ethics, values and principles. This system aims to combine existent experience and new contents and approaches in an innovative way to construct a system for learning and validating pre-existent non formal and informal learning.

1 Cumbie Patricia (2007), *Expressing the Passion and the Purpose of the Cooperative Identity* in CDS Solutions – July/August

Table of Contents

1. PROJECT OBJECTIVES..... 5

2. PROJECT APPROACH 7

3. PROJECT OUTCOMES & RESULTS..... 10

4. PARTNERSHIPS 13

5. PLANS FOR THE FUTURE 14

6.CONTRIBUTION TO EU POLICIES 20

1. Project Objectives

The SKILLS project aims to improve the quality of the qualifications and cooperative competences for members by developing new curricula based on informal and non-formal learning and interactive education materials, exchanging and disseminating good practices in cooperation and validation.

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- to validate professional experience in the cooperative sector;
- to develop innovative learning programmes and materials based on partners' experience and cooperative learning methodology;
- to support good governance of democratically run enterprises;
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- the need to learn about the uniqueness, strengths and advantages of a cooperative way of working, especially as a way to survive in a period of economic instability and social unrest;
- the interest for involving all levels of cooperators (see the definition of the target of interest in the CV).

The specific target originally chosen for the SKILLS project was that of co-operators who need training to become more aware of the characteristics of social enterprises and to acquire the technical competences necessary for an efficient management, i.e.: cooperative managers; cooperative members; cooperative workers; unemployed people considering cooperative enterprise as a solution for employment; university students who want to understand the cooperative model as an alternative economic model which could also be a future for them.

The work carried out in the project so far has confirmed this choice of target for SKILLS, especially for all levels of cooperators throughout the cooperator life cycle (potential members – members – board members).

The SKILLS system can also be used by trainers at different levels, i.e.: vocational trainers who work with cooperative members, personalising training and validating non formal and informal learning in cooperatives; and university professors who are interested in cooperatives and want to introduce them into their courses, presenting the social enterprise and cooperative as a different way for enterprises to operate in a global context.

Such people are identified in SKILLS as 'mobilisation actors', as described in the CV.

SKILLS can have an important impact on the world of cooperation in the countries involved. The system developed will have a formalised training catalogue that will help cooperatives in improving the skills of their workers, members and managers and can be used as a way of promoting the cooperative model. The same system will be used for validating other non formal and informal learning processes.

An in depth analysis of the learning opportunities (in depth because the partnership had to agree upon terms and definitions) highlighted:

- a variety of non-formal learning opportunities (especially for technical contents);
- the absence or lack of learning possibilities in the subject of cooperative identity;
- the difficulty in identifying informal learning occasions in everyday life in the cooperative, the board meetings and in the use of the Internet.

The most important long-term beneficiaries are the cooperative enterprises at local and national levels who offer learning possibilities to their members in order to increase awareness for training in answer to one of the most important I.C.A. principles and to encourage co-operators to become more active and aware in their cooperatives. These organisations will use the training catalogues developed by SKILLS both for personalising training for their members and for strengthening their international network and the exchange of good practices. To this aim, they will also be involved in a preparatory study of the possibility to have mandatory training for co-operators, with the support of the catalogues produced. The same organisations will use the catalogues as a possible way to promote the cooperative model to different targets (unemployed, university students, international partners, etc.). Also the individual cooperatives will use the catalogues to improve their knowledge and skills to become more competitive in a global context without forgetting their social nature (ethics, principles and values).

In conclusion:

- the objectives originally set have been further confirmed and agreed;
- a shared glossary was an initial step of the work of the partnership to agree on project definitions and outcomes;
- cooperative identity was agreed as focus point;
- differences between the different partner cooperative systems were evident and so the need to create a general “umbrella” able to include all characteristics, which would also provide extra value to the project at a European level.

2. Project Approach

SKILLS is developing an innovative learning system, validating existent non formal and informal learning to combine them with different methodological approaches and innovative contents for training co-operators to become more aware and active in the cooperative enterprise.

Generally, training of co-operators is not embedded at national and regional levels of the countries involved as people tend to work in co-operatives without a precise idea of social enterprises and without specific skills in accounting, administration and law. The learning system proposed will respond to the need of training, analysing and validating the existent non formal and informal learning opportunities on the basis of a shared balance of skills to give a general model for the validation of the pre-existent learning structure.

The starting point is to recognise a need of active and participated learner-oriented training that encourages adults to improve their skills with a Co-operative Learning approach, residential training and an ICT-based learning approach. These different approaches cover the different aims of the proposed training and were identified in line with current trends in adult learning, where:

- the learners are protagonists;
- the group is an effective way for learning and working together in a co-operative way; the learners can stay in their cooperatives and learn on-the-job;
- the group can share their knowledge and skills in the different European contexts;
- the training activities are supported by user friendly didactic multimedia and video materials;
- know-how is transferred from non formal and informal contexts;
- materials will be used for an initial balance of skills for a personalised learning process and will remain as back up as a kind of tool-box to be used when needed.

The above elements are considered important for the aims of this project, especially for adult training and learning, as adults are “autonomous and self-directed, goal-oriented, relevancy-oriented and practical and they have previous knowledge and skills” (Malcolm Knowles²).

Furthermore, the Cooperative Learning approach affirms that the learning processes improve in cooperative situations as opposed to competitive or individualistic situations. Hence, the choice of this approach using group activities, shared rules and methods following theories described by the Johnson brothers³ and Sharan⁴.

SKILLS adopts the different methodological approaches in both non formal and informal learning in the cooperative field, where working together is the best way for learning technical contents and skills on-the-job. The combination of approaches (ICT, working together, cooperative visits, learning on the job, etc.) validates the non formal and informal learning which is more reflective and active, less prescribed and standardised; with more parameters combined; and more initiative and forward-looking attitudes.

As support to the training process, information and communications technologies were chosen in accordance with:

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- 2 Knowles, M. S. and Knowles, H. F. (1955) *How to Develop Better Leaders*, New York: Association Press.
Knowles, M. S. and Knowles, H. F. (1959) *Introduction to Group Dynamics*, Chicago: Association Press. Revised edition 1972 published by New York: Cambridge Books.
 - 3 Johnson D.W. e Johnson R.T. (1994), *The nuts and bolts of cooperative learning*, Edina, MN, Interaction Book Company.
 - 4 Sharan Shlomo (ed.) (1990), *Co-operative learning. Theory and Research*, Praeger, London.
Sharan Shlomo (ed.) (1994), *Handbook of Co-operative Learning Methods*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, London.

2. everyday life as a starting point for adult learning as protagonists and active participants – various researchers and authors on this subject have described different ways of introducing everyday life into the learning processes, e.g. Maragliano⁵ who proposed a combination of ICT; Infante⁶ suggested the use of games and theatre; Trentin⁷ considered knowledge management approaches supported by ICT-
3. the concept of *learning through ICT* that Eurelings⁸ defines as the use of technologies as active and activating resource that can substitute the trainer.

These approaches were agreed and shared with the partners in the first testing session developed in Sweden in November 2008 (see report) and will be used in the development of the learning system.

The work on the project continues to develop a precise theoretical base for the validation process.

Two different approaches of possible reference were presented during the project meeting in Sweden (November 2008), as follows:

4. a seven-step approach:
 - a. **information:** giving the information to the learners about what they know and where you want to go, sharing the objectives with the people involved;
 - b. **interview/meeting:** accompanying people in understanding what they know and how they learn it as a moment for explaining what they are doing;
 - c. **self assessment:** necessary for learners in identifying what they learn, with the fundamental help of a facilitator in this phase;
 - d. **grading and planning the action:** how to use the skills and knowledge in a process guided by a trainer who plans the validation activity;
 - e. **validation:** it is necessary to have a formal institution to validate the process;
 - f. **accreditation:** reorganising the validated informal and non-formal learning occasions in possible certificates or training courses.
 - g. **suggestion of learning possibilities:** to provide information on how to improve knowledge and skills, which is not always present as a step but helps with confidence.
5. the OCN Open College Network Method born in Manchester in 1970's. That is used in Denmark and Sweden. It is a method with several steps (the Programme Plan as education and training described by the individuals; the Units of learning as detailed description of the subjects of each specific education or training courses; the OCN certificate as validation of the Unites of learning) aimed for improving specific skills of people with formal education. The focus is the validation of the non-formal and informal learning in order to certificate the skills of the learners. The method proposes the organisation of panels participated by different organisation (community, labour,

⁵ Maragliano Roberto (1997), *Nuovo manuale di didattica multimediale*, Laterza, Roma-Bari

⁶ Infante Carlo (2000), *Imparare giocando. Interattività tra teatro e ipermedia*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino

⁷ Trentin Guglielmo (2004), *Apprendimento in rete e condivisione delle conoscenze*, Franco Angeli, Milano

⁸ Eurelings Anneke (2001), *Multimedia in Education* In Marc Van Lieshout, Tineke M. Egyedi e Wiebe Bijker (ed.), *Social learning technologies. The introduction of multimedia in education*, Ashgate, Aldershot

government, etc) that validate the proposed learning occasions reorganised in training courses.

The construction of a validation model will be one of the next steps of the project. The existent non formal and informal learning should be analysed and validated in the first year, guided by the developed skill balance that will be a collection of the knowledge and competences necessary for efficient co-operators, work carried out analysing and comparing the systems and learning experiences in the different countries. Specific indicators and models of validation developed by the partners to describe and evaluate experience are used, along with periodical meetings to share experience and results.

SKILLS lasts 24 months, divided into two main parts:

In the first year of the project:

- a common and shared definition was agreed for formal, non-formal and informal learning in line with the CEDEOF principles. The construction of a glossary supported the partners in identifying common objectives and describing their specific contexts (see glossary in the CV);
- the formal, non-formal and informal learning occasions offered to the cooperators in the countries involved were identified, underlining the variety and differences in their technical contents (accounting, work certification, management, etc.), but without a specific cooperative connotation (the same courses could be useful for all kinds of enterprises as there are no references to cooperative values and principles). The lack of learning occasions about cooperative identity also confirms the need to work on informal learning situations (and especially everyday life in the cooperative enterprise, board meetings and the use of the Web) to reinforce the 'sense of belonging' and the 'cooperative spirit';
- possible approaches and items of interest for the validation system were discussed, revealing the need to involve official validators and hence the choice of Cooperatives Europe.

in the second year of the project:

- catalogues, interactive meetings, itinerant workshops and ICT-based didactic materials will be a way of personalising the learning for co-operators, which will be tested with real end users in a continuous cycle of improvement and customisation of the system, based on the needs, expectations and specific language of the users.
- possible final products of the SKILLS project will be identified and a learning system constructed as part of a coherent exploitation plan, along with a more precise identification of the target of interest (see CV), and an in depth analysis of the cooperative systems and protagonists (see Balance of Skills), involving trainers and facilitators in the testing sessions as an initial exploitation and dissemination of the project results, the catalogue, the didactic materials, etc.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

The SKILLS project was structured in different work packages as project activities.

PREP1 Balance of skills to analyse the context of the different types of cooperatives involved in the project (social, labour, retail, etc.) in order to identify the learning objectives necessary to train a more aware and active co-operator.

PREP1.1 the construction of a shared model of skill balance. (D1.1. Model of balance of skills). A model was developed by the partnership in a deliverable that offered the opportunity for a mutual acquaintance and presentation of the cooperative systems involved, leading to:

- the description of the cooperative system in the participant countries/regions as different learning contexts of interest for the project;
- a learning structure in the cooperative system of the participant countries/regions as description of the existent learning systems in the cooperative contexts and as premise for the following analysis of the formal, non-formal and informal learning occasions;
- an identification of skills for a 'good and aware co-operator' as analysis of the skills that cooperators consider important for their role.

PREP1.2. the creation of a balance of skills for each kind of cooperative involved, taking the specific characteristics into consideration both of the sectors and the countries involved. (D1.2. Balance skills). The work on this deliverable described the cooperative systems involved, their similarities and their differences, establishing the learning contexts of the project.

PREP1.3. the sharing of the results and construction of a skill reference framework. (D1.3. Skill framework). Items emerging in this deliverable were as follows:

- a comparison of ICA principles with cooperator activities in the cooperative system in each country, highlighting the need for developing specific skills in order to introduce and enhance a cooperative way of working;
- an initial identification of the skills needed, i.e. knowledge of the cooperative system; ethical skills; knowledge of cooperator rights, duties and responsibilities and the ability to exercise them; the benefits from products/services; the ability to produce quality products/services; improve managerial skills in developing, reinforcing and promoting the knowledge of the cooperative system, the cooperative identity and active membership;
- an agreement on the definition of the cooperator life cycle and the needs to develop the skills identified for members along with specific management skills for developing, reinforcing and promoting the knowledge of the cooperative system, identity and an active membership.

Aim of the SKILLS project was to answer to the need recognised at an international level to reinforce cooperative identity, via the ICA principles and in line with a validation approach that will involve Cooperatives Europe.

The main outcome of this workpackage will be a preparatory work of detailed analysis and the sharing of training needs to analyse the pre-existent learning processes in order to make co-operators active and aware at all levels. The results will be developed according to a shared model that will provide comparable data and information for the construction of a reference framework that will be the starting point for the proposed curriculum and learning system.

PREP2 Identification of informal and non formal learning processes. The focus of this workpackage is to analyse how people are now helped in learning how to set up and manage

a cooperative according to the ethics, values and principles recognised by ICA and to have technical skills for managing successful social enterprises.

PREP.2.1 Constructing a shared grid to identify and analyse the informal and non formal learning, referring to the present European common principles of validation. This will produce D2.1. Grid for the analysis. A shared model for the analysis and comparison of the learning systems present in the coop systems involved. Starting point was a shared definition of formal, non-formal and informal learning:

- **“Formal learning:** learning typically provided by an education or training institution, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and leading to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner’s perspective.”⁹ In the specific context of the SKILLS project, different actions like technical/professional training courses for improving professional skills (based on the right of the co-operator for training as it is foreseen in cooperative law) are considered for the co-operators.
- **“Non-formal learning:** learning that is not provided by an education or training institution and does not typically lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s perspective.”¹⁰ Courses, seminars and workshops are considered in specific areas, both in improving technical and socio-institutional skills.
- **“Informal learning:** learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or “incidental”/ random).”¹¹ The long tradition in the cooperative field transferred from one generation to another; the day to day experience working in the cooperative; and actively participating in its activities are important for informal learning.

PREP.2.2. Analysing each cooperative context involved. This will produce D2.2. Present learning occasions. The collection of the formal, non-formal and informal learning occasions present in the cooperative systems involved in the project revealed a context with a variety of non-formal learning occasions (especially with technical contents). At the same time however, there was also a lack of learning occasions for a cooperative identity and a difficulty in identifying possible informal learning occasions present in everyday life in the cooperative, board meetings, and in the use of the Internet.

PREP.2.3. Sharing of the results and constructing a skill reference framework. This will produce D2.3. Learning framework.

The main outcome of this workpackage will be a preparatory work of detailed analysis and sharing of the learning opportunities available in the countries and cooperative contexts involved. This analysis will lead to better acquaintance of the realities involved allowing a reciprocal learning process amongst the partners.

A shared grid will be developed for the analysis and evaluation of the further informal and non formal learning events and activities proposed in the countries and cooperative contexts involved. The results of this work will be a starting point for structuring the curriculum and the learning system.

PREP3 Construction of the learning system To make co-operators more aware and active, non formal and informal learning are central for introducing cooperative ethics, values and principles.

⁹ The EC (2001) Communication on Lifelong Learning: formal, non-formal and informal learning

¹⁰ The EC (2001) Communication on Lifelong Learning: formal, non-formal and informal learning

¹¹ “The EC (2001) Communication on Lifelong Learning: formal, non-formal and informal learning”

This workpackage is central to the project because it develops the innovative learning system that is the aim of SKILLS. The outcome produced will be the learning system that will be developed in different versions according to the results of the testing phase (PREP5).

D3.1. and D3.2. will be documents produced both in a paper version and in an interactive electronic version. A handbook will present the use of the system for structuring personalised learning processes and validating non formal and informal learning. The instructions about the timetable, the use of pedagogical materials and the organisation of outdoor activities (itinerant workshops), will all be given to potential trainers in the handbook.

PREP4 Preparation and design of multimedia and interactive didactic materials The aim of the project is the development and validation of an innovative system for people to learn in cooperation. This system will be supported by different didactic materials:

1. a curriculum for co-operators to become more aware and active, with specific attention towards social and labour cooperatives and the pre-existent non formal and informal learning(D4.1);
2. interactive and multimedia materials (usable both via the Internet and on DVD) to support the construction of personalised learning processes (D4.2);
3. a system for the validation of the proposed system that will evaluate both the testing of the materials and the system (D4.3).

This workpackage is of prime importance for the project because it develops the innovative pedagogical products that support the learning system proposed. The curriculum will be the guide for personalising and possibly certifying the learning process using the learning system proposed.

In line with the European Qualification Framework (EQF) approaches, this curriculum proposes:

- common levels relating to the learning outcomes gained with the proposed learning system that combine non-formal and informal learning occasions. The learning outcomes identify what the co-operators have to know, what they understand and/or are able to do in order to be an aware and good co-operator. The curriculum proposes three levels that represent the whole life cycle of a co-operator: potential member (1), member (2) and board member (3).
- common principles to validate non-formal and informal learning occasions. The curriculum (and therefore the validation and the learning system) proposes the principles emerging from the European Commission and CEDEFOP work on the inventory of non-formal and informal learning and the related cluster¹², i.e. voluntary validation; respect of privacy; equal access and fair treatment; equal involvement of the stakeholders; orientation and counselling for individuals present; quality guarantee; respect for stakeholders' interests; impartiality and transparency; professionalism of the validators.

PREP5 Test and validation of the learning system In a lifelong learning perspective, this test of the proposed learning system will be a validation of the pre-existent non formal and informal learning processes analysed.

The first testing session was organised with an initial observation of trainers and cooperative members on the work of the project so far. However, as some of the work has been delayed in the project it will be difficult to have materials to test, but testing and comparisons of ideas within the partnership and at a European level could be vital at this stage to help further progress.

¹² CEDEFOP – European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2007), *[Validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe. A snapshot 2007*, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg

4. Partnerships

The various European countries involved in the project each have valid experience and competencies in different fields, market situations and socio-economic backgrounds, which has made the project work and agreement more difficult at times but continues to be strong motivation for a project content with a cutting edge, able to provide materials that will be useful in different contexts and cultures within Europe.

All partners have experience in European projects, and so each partner is responsible for work packages according to their specific knowledge and competences.

The partners that represent the cooperative movement contribute with their professional skills in the cooperative system, while the partners with competences and knowledge in the fields of vocational education and training contribute in better defining learning approaches to fit cooperative training needs.

The work so far has been a constant exchange of good practices and knowledge, and a comparison of the different European contexts, with many differences and similarities which will be analysed and considered in order to produce a general model to be used in other countries.

Communications have been regular using e-mail, telephone, videoconferences, the web platform, and pre defined meetings in loco. This has meant that partners have sought to resolve any conflict in real time and with honest and open discussion, although not always easy with the common language as English and no partner's native tongue.

The partners work at a local level to involve their members and the cooperatives in their regions in the SKILLS activities, organising events and meetings for presenting the project. The non formal and informal learning processes are opportunities for sharing SKILLS with the local community and economy in order to raise awareness with cooperators and to help them become more involved as members.

SKILLS will have an important impact on the cooperation world, especially in the context of the countries involved. The system developed will offer the possibility to have a formalised training catalogue as system for validating non formal and informal learning but also as training offers that help cooperatives in improving the skills of their workers, members and managers and in promoting the cooperative model.

All the work is being developed in English to facilitate communications amongst partners and in order to exploit the materials produced throughout Europe. However, each partner will also develop the materials in their native language to have materials to use at the end of the project, and which not only transfer linguistically but also take into consideration local characteristics and the cultural aspects of each country so that the training is more specific, personalised and useful.

5. Plans for the Future

The cooperative context

Cooperative enterprises originated in an agricultural context as a result of changes that took place throughout the Industrial Revolution both in England and in Europe in the eighteenth century. In fact, the most important historical events that influenced the start of the cooperative movement were the changes in the production processes and in transportation, transforming the social, political, cultural and economic stability into a very dynamic context

In Europe, the affirmation of capitalism was accompanied by the development of the cooperative model from the end of the eighteenth century, whereby cooperation provided the possibility of a different economic movement based on alternative ethical values and principles that recognised the power of the people rather than that of the individual in capitalistic way of thinking. People united together in order to answer to a recognised and shared need, which was impossible to achieve individually, and so only possible as part of a group able to face the market.

The initial phases and attempts of cooperating were first experimented in:

1. France, with the first cooperatives of dairy producers set up in 1750;
2. the USA, with Benjamin Franklin who experimented in the insurance sector at the end of the eighteenth century creating enterprises similar to cooperatives;
3. Italy and Luxembourg, with the first production and agricultural cooperatives created in the first years of the nineteenth century.

The UK was recognised as *cradle of cooperativism* with the Rochdale pioneers who founded the first consumer cooperatives in Manchester in 1831. These cooperatives had more than 1million members by the end of the nineteenth century.

The next step was the need to have an international organisation that represented this new model of enterprise, in order to give them importance on the global market. The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) was therefore set up in London in 1895, with 13 European countries and also representatives from the USA and Argentina. ICA's aim was to promote and support the cooperative system in the international market by developing common principles and values for their members, without religious or political standing.

ICA was put to the test straight away having to support the cooperative movement in the difficult century of the two World Wars. Now too, ICA continues in their important role for a consolidated movement, promoting cooperativism in developing countries, where cooperation represents a possible tool for a social and economic emancipation of the local communities (collaborating with other important international organisation like UN, FAO, ILO and UNESCO).

The ICA principles and values came to the surface especially in the Eighties, in answer to the need to update, along with the changing economic and social context. As a consequence, the values and principles and also the cooperative definition (as basis for a cooperative identity) were reviewed in 1995.¹³

Thanks to this long history of cooperation, ICA brings together over 800million people around the world. In 1994, the United Nations estimated that the livelihood of nearly 3billion people (half of the world's population) was made secure by cooperative enterprise¹⁴. At a European

13 Summary from: Granata Mattia (2006), *La storia. L'evoluzione cooperativa in una dimensione globale* in VVAA (2006), *GUIDA ALLA COOPERAZIONE TRENTINA. Storia, valori e regole del movimento cooperativo nel contesto internazionale*, Cooperazione Trentina, Trento - Italy

14 Data from the ICA Web site: <http://www.ica.coop/al-ica/>

level, cooperatives are represented by Cooperatives Europe that counts 171 individual cooperative organisations from 37 different countries of the European Union, and from 6 European Sector Organisations (out of 7). Cooperatives Europe represents a force for both economic and social change with 267,000 cooperative enterprises, 163million members and 5.4 million jobs¹⁵.

Cooperative identity as ongoing debate

Cooperatives are important protagonist in the international market, both for their widespread presence in the world and as economic alternative based on specific values and principles. These values and principles were updated with a new concept of cooperative identity in 1995, responding to the need recognised for cooperatives to move closer to the context in which they existed, with specific attention to the principles¹⁶ as practical guidelines which come from everyday life and are immediately applicable. In fact, “big values are translated into small decisions at the coop every day”¹⁷, and the knowledge of the values and principles is the focus for a fair and successful management of the cooperative enterprises.

As a way of promoting the cooperative movement and enterprise, ICA organised the 85th ICA International Day of Cooperatives (Co-operative Values and Principles for Corporate Social Responsibility) in 2007 with the objective to 'celebrate the contribution cooperators have and continue to make as responsible corporate citizens in co-operatives throughout the world. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) seeks to address the issue of how businesses can better society through responsible behaviour, transparent reporting and accountability, stakeholder engagement, innovation and governance.'¹⁸

SKILLS project and reinforcing cooperative identity

SKILLS will have an important impact on the world of cooperation with the countries involved in the European partnership. The system developed will offer the possibility of a formalised training catalogue to help cooperative enterprises in improving the skills of their workers, members and managers and may be used as a way of promoting the cooperative model. The same system will be used for validating other non formal and informal learning processes.

In the first year of work on SKILLS the partners constructed and shared a reference glossary necessary for the project, and identified cooperative identity as main objective of the project, and therefore its promotion and development.

The initial results of the project were:

- a glossary of reference for formal, non-formal and informal learning:

15 Data from the Cooperatives Europe Web site: <http://www.coopseurope.coop/> . Cooperatives Europe is the organisation of reference for the European cooperatives.

16 ICA gives a precise definition of cooperative as '*autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise*' and declares that co-operatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. The co-operative principles are guidelines by which co-operatives put their values into practice.

17 Cumbie Patricia (2007), *Expressing the Passion and the Purpose of the Cooperative Identity* in CDS Solutions – July/August

18 Message of the International Co-operative Alliance - *85th ICA International Day of Co-operatives, 13th UN International Day of Cooperatives - 7 July 2007 - “Co-operative Values and Principles for Corporate Social Responsibility”*

- cooperative enterprises involve their members in different actions, e.g. technical training courses to improve professional skills (based on the right of the cooperator for training as foreseen in cooperative law) [Formal learning];
- courses, seminars and workshops in specific areas, both in technical and socio-institutional skill improving, e.g. information and advice services on accounting, compiling balance sheets or legal matters. [Non-formal learning];
- a long tradition in cooperation passed on from one generation to another, and the day to day experience working and actively participating in a cooperative enterprise are important areas for informal learning. [Informal learning];
- the specification of the learning target:
 1. all types of members existing in the different cooperative systems involved as target groups for a basic training in order to introduce a common cooperative identity using the same language and metaphors;
 2. 'mobilisation actors' as facilitators in the skills gaining process to promote and strengthen cooperative identity, throughout the whole life cycle of a co-operator as potential member (1), member (2) and board member (3). These mobilisation actors are also involved as validators in the testing sessions.
- the identification of cooperative identity as focus for reinforcing cooperators' skills in:
 1. managing cooperatives ethically and working with other cooperatives;
 2. working in a cooperative way;
 3. maintaining solidarity with the local community;
 4. taking part in training programmes;
 5. deciding and participating in the decision making process.

The SKILLS project: the future

The next steps will be to construct a *learning system* to support cooperators and raise their awareness as active members, using non formal and informal learning to introduce cooperative ethics, values and principles. This system aims to combine existent experience and new contents and approaches in an innovative way to construct a system for learning and validating pre-existent non formal and informal learning.

First step of this system is to develop a *curriculum for co-operators* to become more aware and active, with specific attention towards social and labour cooperatives and the pre-existent non formal and informal learning. The curriculum will act as guide to personalise and possibly certify the learning process using the learning system proposed.

Following the Lisbon Treaty, the proposal of a co-operator curriculum supports the development of ethical and technical skills recognised at European level to allow the mobility and dialogue among different cooperative systems.

The partners agreed to refer to the International Cooperative Alliance principles as guide to work on the skills necessary to manage cooperatives ethically and to work with other cooperatives. This means a recognised value at international level which transfers the same value to the cooperator curriculum.

In line with the Copenhagen Declaration, the cooperator curriculum is a tool for

- rendering transparent and validating cooperator skills through an identification of the skills necessary and their description in line with the ICA principles, and the validation of non-formal and informal learning occasions suitable for gaining them;

- improving the quality of non-formal learning opportunities for co-operators by way of constructing a learning system to validate and combine non-formal with informal learning opportunities in order to have a good and aware co-operator;
- helping the cooperator understand and use learning opportunities available to improve her/his ethical and technical skills through the collection and validation in a learning system.

The partnership is working on the final version of this curriculum.

Other important part of the learning system is the validation system with both formative (supporting an ongoing learning process) and summative aims (aiming at certification). The validation system assesses and recognises the wide range of knowledge, know-how, skills and competences which people develop throughout the proposed innovative learning processes. This system allows a comparison of the non formal and informal learning processes present in the participant countries, and to construct and test a possible common system of learning for cooperators. Partners are analyzing different possible validation approaches comparing the different best practices present in the countries involved. Result of this work will be a system that involves the institutions of reference, such as Cooperatives Europe, as validator.

The validation system refers to the EC interest in lifelong and life-wide learning, considering the development of a learning system for a more active and aware co-operator with a new context for training and learning that involves new areas (cooperatives and the cooperative systems), new life cycles (the co-operator life cycle), new possible certification (i.e. SKILLS results as a standard), new methods and training organizations (non formal and informal learning occasions offered by the cooperatives themselves), a valorisation of individual experience (the co-operator and her/his life in the cooperative as focus of the learning system both for self improvement and for extending knowledge to all cooperators involved in the system), and as a new form of meta cognitive learning.

The validation system proposes the following in line with the Lisbon Treaty:

- to support cooperatives in developing their competitive advantage in a sustainable way that promotes social cohesion according to their values and principles towards the knowledge economy;
- to validate an innovative learning system that recognizes and improves the skills and the knowledge of the cooperators.

The definition of reference is CEDEFOP in the 'Validation of learning outcomes: The confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of a validation standard. Validation typically leads to certification.'¹⁹

The principles also come from CEDEFOP:

- validation must be voluntary;
- the privacy of individuals should be respected;
- equal access and fair treatment should be guaranteed;
- stakeholders should establish systems for validation;
- systems should contain mechanisms for guidance and counselling of individuals;
- systems should be underpinned by quality assurance;

¹⁹ CEDEFOP (2008), *Validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe. A snapshot 2007*, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2008

- the process, procedures and criteria for validation must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance;
- systems should respect the legitimate interests of stakeholders and seek a balanced participation;
- the process of validation must be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest;
- the professional competences of those who carry out assessments must be assured.

The future of the project shall focus on completing the learning system developing innovative interactive and multimedia materials (usable both via Web and DVD) to support the construction of personalised learning processes .

This learning system will be tested and validated and then introduced in the cooperative systems involved in the partner countries of Italy (Trentino), Spain (Basque Countries), Sweden and Turkey as necessary support to cooperator training and as way for promoting cooperativism in the individual contexts to increase the number of members. Focused dissemination plans are being developed and researched by the partners to diffuse the knowledge of SKILLS outcomes in the different contexts, e.g. articles in local newspapers and sector specific magazines, presentations in partner websites, directly involving cooperators in project activities (testing, analysis of the cooperative systems, etc.), presentation of the project in events open to the public (cooperative board meetings, delegations visiting from other countries, etc.) and so forth. These plans are periodically reviewed according how SKILLS evolves and its outcomes. The involvement of international representative bodies (ICA and Cooperatives Europe) will further support the dissemination activities.

The results of the project will be published in catalogues of learning services and a model for the validation of other non formal and informal learning that will be introduced in the cooperative systems of the participant countries. The catalogues will be used to formalise cooperative learning offered and the international exchanges that the learning system constructed will propose.

6. Contribution to EU policies

267,000 cooperative enterprises, 5.44million jobs, 163 million members, 171 member organisations, from 37 European countries, operating in almost all sectors of the economy (agriculture, banking & insurance, housing, pharmacies, industry & services, consumer & retail,) supported by the Cooperatives Europe (the European Region of the ICA).

These figures taken from the Cooperatives Europe report speak for themselves, clearly demonstrating the ever growing importance and recognition that cooperatives have in our society today. The cooperative system is increasingly active and resilient throughout the world and especially in Europe where it originally started in years of difficulty, and continues to thrive in the current social era marked by changing times. Cooperation is an answer to many challenges that we are facing throughout Europe today, and is especially important for the young and those entering into a new form of working together and of enterprise, as a way to survive on the global market and in a world that is under growing pressure to find solutions to help faltering employment, social cohesion, social responsibility and sustainable development.

Hence the value of a project like SKILLS in creating a learning system to collect and use practical guidelines for validating non formal and informal learning in cooperatives, taking into consideration the important and necessary relationship between pedagogy, organisations, applications and technologies, in order to offer an innovative way for validation in the cooperative field. The system being designed in the SKILLS project has high expectations and a difficult task to attain, aiming to enhance cooperative identity, visibility and image, whilst helping to convey the meaning and the strength of such system in order to add value to the cooperative model and provide value in a wider European context and so with future EU policies.

The various European countries involved in the project each have valid experience and competencies in different fields, market situations and socio-economic backgrounds, which has made the project work and agreement more difficult at times but continues to be strong motivation for a project content with a cutting edge, able to provide materials that will be useful in different contexts and cultures throughout Europe.

The experience matured in the SKILLS project so far demonstrates its validity at a European level, with ongoing debate amongst partners which will be useful material to inform decision makers on the importance of learning and training in cooperativism and in the validation of non formal and informal learning. The development of a preparatory study for stimulating the construction of a mandatory system of training for cooperators will be an interesting tool for disseminating the results of SKILLS throughout Europe, but also for stimulating the debate about cooperatives and their important role in the European economy. Moreover, a general model of validation that takes into account different possible cooperative and learning models will assure the opportunity to have a system usable throughout Europe.

Cooperation in its various forms, whether SMEs, mutual societies, associations, foundations or social enterprises, are all significant economic actors not only as important source of entrepreneurship and work, but also because of their key role in involving their members more in society, and therefore extremely important in future EU strategy.