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18379

Distr.
LIMITED

ID/WG.498/49(SPEC.)
23 May 1990

United Nations Industrial Development Organization

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Interregional Symposium on the Role
of the Industrial Co-operative Movement in
Economic and Industrial Development

EP

Moscow, USSR, 11-15 June 1990

THE URBAN POPULATION'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS COOPERATIVISM*

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5/90

*The views expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Secretariat of UNIDO. This document has not been edited.

Understanding the public's attitude towards cooperativism is the goal of a periodic inquiry of the All-Union Center for Study of Public Opinion on Social-Economic Questions. The poll was conducted in 41 cities in April 1989. All in all, three thousand people were polled, residing in the Pre-Baltics, Central Asia, the Ukraine, Belorussia, Moldavia, and a number of regions of the RSFSR: Central, North-East, the Urals, Siberia, Far East, and the Northern Caucasus. The results of the poll are representative of the the urban population of the country aged 16 and older.

The results of the poll precisely show that the products of cooperatives are coming under great public censure today, especially, with regard to prices. Here, the opinions of the poll participants are unanimous -- the prices for cooperative goods and services are extremely high. 91% of those polled felt this way. Negative answers among the respondents prevail concerning both quality and assortment of cooperative products -- 58% and 43% respectfully.

Only cooperative service quality did the urban population rate nearly as positively as negatively -- about 40% of those polled. Regarding this fact, one should keep in mind that the buying of, goods at cooperatives or use of their services is till now not great. Only 3% of city-dwellers regularly (at least once a week) buy cooperative produced goods or use their services, while the figure for those who use cooperatives at least once a month is only 8%. Nonetheless, in sum, 44% of those polled answered that at least once they bought cooperative goods or used their services.

It is noteworthy that those who more or less regularly buy cooperative products (once/twice a month) are less critical than those who do not use cooperatives. 38% to 40% of the first group positively evaluated the quality of cooperative products, while, amongst those who have never used cooperatives, only 13% gave positive evaluations. In their evaluations of assortment, one observes an analogous picture (40-49% and 21% respectfully).

The attitude towards service efficiency depends to a lesser degree on how often those polled buy at cooperatives or use their services. Although, it again arose that those who use cooperatives gave a more favourable appraisal than the rest of poll participants.

Inexperience in buying at cooperatives, as was mentioned, does not, however, prevent the majority of city-dwellers from holding quite definite opinions on cooperative products. And, the opinions, on the whole, are negative.

Concerning the attitude towards the people who work in cooperatives as a social group, public opinion is more favourable than on issues of cooperative products. This fact itself is instructive as it indirectly testifies to the fact

that with regard to the shortcomings of cooperative products, the public does not solely blame cooperators. Concretely, the picture looks like this: 4% consider cooperators as idlers; 18% as initiative-taking and enterprising; and 21% view cooperators as those who are capable workers, desiring extra income. Of the remaining poll respondents, a large part stated that in cooperatives all sorts of people work.

Opinion concerning the opportunity and desires of the poll participants themselves working in cooperatives divides roughly in equal parts: 34% claim that they do not want to work in a cooperative. At the same time, however, over a third of urban-dwellers (36%) answered that they would work in cooperatives. In full, 29% desired overtime work at a cooperative in their free time off from their regular work. 7% would like to switch outright from their present work to a cooperative. 27% of the respondents found it difficult to give an answer to this question.

The poll asked respondents to evaluate the probability of possible consequences of cooperative development. On the one hand, a large part of the population considers the probable consequences of cooperative development to be rising prices and a dwindling of cheap goods (77%), a rise in crime (speculation, corruption, and racketeering) - 74%, and a violation of traditional Soviet income differentiation principles - 50%. On the other hand, however, 64% believe cooperativism improves the situation in consumer markets with its variety of goods and services. Furthermore, more than a third of the respondents consider that cooperative development is not inherently a threat to socialism. One-fifth are of the opposing opinion. Finally, a third consider that the cooperative movement improves present-day economic conditions. Negative opinion on this question is only 20%. But what is the significance of these possible scenarios in the minds of the population? Are the secondary effects too great a price to pay for an increase in goods and a generally improved economic situation associated with cooperative development? The answer to this question is given by the poll participants themselves.

Notwithstanding the dangers which, in the opinion of the participants, are linked to the cooperative sector today, 45% of city-dwellers support the development of cooperatives. 30% are against, 10% are indifferent to the fate of the cooperative movement and 15% did not give a definite answer. Moreover, among the supporters of further cooperative development, there are more than a few who do not dismiss the possible negative consequences of such a step. Such that, 31% support the continued development of the cooperative movement, acknowledging the fact that perhaps this will lead to an eroding of the foundation of socialism; 37% of supporters consider it a possibility that there will be a violation of Soviet income differential principles; and, finally 43% support cooperative development, despite the fact that they associate cooperative activities with an increase in crime and prices for consumer goods.

In analyzing these facts, one should not forget that in mass public opinion the development of cooperativism is associated with official policy of party and leadership. This means that a definite segment of the population might be "voicing support" for cooperativism simply on the accepted rule of many long years of agreeing with everything that is decided from above. However, to leave all to this type of passive support, especially when there is so much talk on topical issues -- such as cooperative development -- would be illogical. Besides the above reason, there are others accounting for the increased support of public opinion towards the usefulness of cooperative development. Many, for example, contend that the primary reasons for the appearance of negative phenomena in the cooperative sector are not so much the economic nature of the cooperative form of ownership or the personal characteristics of people working in cooperatives, but, moreso, on the general economic crisis and ineffectiveness of the system of management.

At this time, people have less faith in the ability of the government to solve the very serious economic problems such as shortages in consumer goods. By comparison, in cooperativism people see considerable potential possibilities in the short run. Finally, a large part of the population is beginning to understand that the way out of the economic crisis, in which the country remains mired, is impossible without definite social sacrifices. And, judging from the poll results, certain sacrifices such as cooperative development are not so great to outweigh the economic benefits promised by this new sector of popular economy.

This general conclusion confirms the urban population's chiefly positive attitude towards cooperative development in the majority of economic branches and activities in which cooperatives are expanding. Moreover, there is active support among the urban population for the creation of cooperatives in agriculture, construction, the production of consumer goods, everyday public services, as well as the procurement and converting of secondary raw materials. Support for cooperative development in these branches is from 67% to 79% of the urban population. A negative attitude predominates with regards to the creation of cooperatives in areas such as trade and societal nutrition, publishing and circulation of printed press and general literature, education, and health services. The percentage of negative responses towards cooperative development in these areas varied from 38% to 51%, while positive answers ranged from 27% to 37%. This lack of popular support for cooperatives in health service and education is explained primarily by the traditional notions of income differentiation.

Public opinion concerning cooperativism is formed under many influences, a number of which are demographic. Women, for example, are more critical towards the development of the cooperative movement than men. Such that among men, more than a half (53%) support further cooperative development. A quarter

of men are against. Amongst women, by comparison, support for cooperative development is significantly less -- 38% for, 34% against.

The age factor also plays a large role. In practice, the youth's attitude towards cooperativism is more positive than the middle-aged and older generations. Among youths aged 16-29, the figure supporting cooperativism is 51%. Among those urban-dwellers aged 30-49, the figure is 46%. For those 50 and older, it is 37%. There are reasons for this. One is that there is an especially wide assortment of goods for youths among cooperative products. Young consumers' higher demand for cooperative products therefore corresponds to their higher estimation of these products in comparison to the middle and older aged.

Further, it is important to remember that for young people, cooperatives offer the possibility of better-paying work. Since possibilities in the regular state sector are extremely limited, young people are more inclined to work for cooperatives. For example, among those under 29, 11% desire to work full-time at cooperatives and 39% want to work in their free time. For the age group 50 and older, by comparison, those desiring full or part time work at cooperatives is 2% and 14% respectively.

Another factor explaining the urban population's differing opinions towards cooperativism is education level. Among those who either have a higher education or at least have studied at a higher level, 59% support the development of the cooperative movement. Among those respondents with a higher technical training education, the figure supporting cooperative development is already 45%; among those who have a professional-technical education -- 39%; a general high school education -- 41%; and, only a middle school education -- 29%.

As was expected, people's income level plays an important role in determining their attitudes to cooperativism. Such that, among respondents whose income does not exceed 75 rubles a month per family member, 38% support cooperative development; among the group whose income is 75 to 150 rubles per person, 50% support cooperative development; in urban families with an income level of more than 150 roubles per person, the figure is 58%.

The regional factor also significant in the formation of attitude towards cooperativism. For example, 52% of Moscovites support cooperativism, versus 21% against. For the rest of the RSFSR, the figures are 44% and 29% respectively; for the Ukraine, 48% and 29%; for Kazakhstan, however, there are already slightly more people against cooperative development (38%), than are for (37%).

To a slightly lesser -- but still significant -- degree, attitudes towards cooperative development vary with the differing types of urban populations. For example, if in Moscow, Leningrad, and the other republican capitals in the poll, more than half the population supports cooperative development with 21% (Moscow) to 24% (republican capitals)

against, then in regional centers and other large cities, support for cooperative development is only 46%, and opposition - 30%. For the smaller cities support dwindles to under 40% with opposition opinion already more than 35% of the population.

At last, one cannot fully understand the population's differing attitudes to cooperativism without an analysis of the opinions of the traditionally looked to social groups, such as laborers, office workers, students, and pensioners. Of these groups support for cooperative development today is strongest among office workers - 51% and students - 61%, and, of course, those working in cooperatives. Laborers and pensioners are considerably more reserved in their attitudes to cooperativism. Among laborers, 38% support cooperative development with 36% against. Pensioners' opinions split virtually in half, 35% for and against.

To summarize...the poll shows that 1.5 times as many urban-dwellers strongly support cooperativism than are against, while 1.7 times as many feel at least more positively than negatively towards the cooperative movement. Finally, more than a third of urban-dwellers themselves are ready to work in cooperatives. Thus, among the urban population, there predominated at least until recently a positive attitude towards the cooperative movement. Public opinion today, however, is extremely dynamic. How it changes in its attitude to cooperativism will be revealed by the results of the next poll, scheduled for the beginning of 1990. One thing is clear...the fate of the cooperative movement depends most on the well-grounded and energetic pursuit of subsequent local and state policy.