



General conclusions

Bernard THIRY, Director General of CIRIEC

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have come to the end of this 29<sup>th</sup> CIRIEC Congress. This congress was held under the two banners of tradition and change.

Tradition indeed for this is the 5<sup>th</sup> CIRIEC Congress on Austrian soil and the 4<sup>th</sup> in this magnificent Wiener Rathaus. Tradition also for the quality of organisation and the reception we were given by our Austrian hosts under the leadership of Erich Haider, our new Honorary President, and Heidi Maier, the Secretary General of the Austrian Section of CIRIEC. Thank you very much.

Tradition also for the quality of exchanges between theoreticians and practitioners, between the stakeholders of the social, cooperative and public economy.

But also change. First of all by following through on the novelties initiated 2 years ago in the Berlin Congress spurred on by our President, Willy Hanss. One, a work in sectoral workshop allowing specialists in a sector (energy, water, health, social housing, transport) to press on with the operational concretisation of the general interest, in the very premises of Viennese enterprises responsible for the provision of general-interest services. In the weeks ahead we will obviously be evaluating the success of this formula. Two, the award of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edgard Milhaud Prize. The creation of this prize is a personal initiative of Wilhem-Georg Hanss, intended to reverse, in part, the lack of interest among young researchers in the Public, Social and Cooperative Economy. We are very grateful to him for this. Change also by the expansion of our debates to consideration of sustainable management of energy and natural resources.

We opened our Congress with the ceremony for the conferment of the International Energy Globe Awards. We dedicated a plenary session to a debate between three eminent specialists in sustainable energy management and ethical issues in modern society. By so doing we increased the audience of our Congress: nearly 500 participants from 50 countries from all the 4 corners of the world, or an unprecedented geographical coverage. This expansion has also allowed us to relativise the problems affecting the countries of Europe, Japan and North America regarding the enormous challenges of developing countries.

The biennial CIRIEC congresses are the occasion to set in perspective the world economy, the economic and social difficulties and the challenges of the public, social and cooperative economy. This Congress has not been found wanting on that point. The world crisis that we

have experienced for the past 4 years has been the permanent backdrop to our debates. The banking crisis in Europe has become a crisis of public finance and governance of the euro zone. The austerity measures, whatever their long-term benefits as regards demographic challenges, continue to plunge Europe into an economic depression with all the consequences mapped out by Mrs. Nilsson from the European Confederation of Trade Unions. The Japanese scenario, which is to say a protracted near-zero growth period plus extremely low interest rates, now appears the most likely. The financial markets have been set up to teach the States a lesson. The rating houses, whatever their mistakes before the crisis of 2008, are now as before a benchmark. Japan is inching its way out of a long period of inaction and the aftermath of Fukushima and can now look forward to significant advances in its economy.

Turning to the United States, they bury their responsibility in the crisis of 2008 and the insufficiency of their public finances, pointing the finger at the forecasts on the euro and the European crisis. Well, compared with the difficulties and problems facing the developing countries, these problems would seem to be manageable, as in fact was rightly observed by Mrs. Gandhi yesterday morning.

Despite this rather gloomy backdrop, our Congress did not give way to despair. I would even say quite the opposite.

First of all we can only welcome the affirmation of the importance of the public, social and cooperative economy that has driven many sessions yesterday and today. The importance of the municipal economy in Vienna (water, gas, electricity, public transport, social housing), the pride of being a fundamental element of the general interest and the rejection of privatisations, such are some of the messages from Mrs. Brauner, Deputy Mayor of the City of Vienna. The importance of enterprises in charge of general interest services (the public service employers represent 30% of employment in the European Union and the general interest services contribute 26% to the GDP of the European Union), and the importance of general interest tasks and resistance to the crisis, such are some of the messages from Mrs. Ronzitti, Secretary General of CEEP. In the same spirit, Lady Pauline Green, President of the ACI showed us the will to affirmation of the cooperative and mutualist sector at world level with the particular event that is World Cooperatives Year and all the events that punctuate this year. Many studies have shown that the cooperative sector, including the cooperative and mutualist financial institutions, have weathered the crisis better than their competitors.

In this spirit of affirmation the EESC has always been an objective ally of the social, public and cooperative economy, as was again shown by the statement of the President of Group 3, Mr. Jahier. An institutionalised expression of European civil society, the EESC is an important place for the identification of the different aspects of the general interest. This spirit of affirmation also benefits from the support of Ministers Benoît Hamon and Paul Singer.

The contributions of the public, social and cooperative economy in facing the challenges of the crisis and giving shape to the general interest are also a matter of quality.

Without wishing to be exhaustive, I would mention in particular:

- ⇒ the numerous technical innovations, or in terms of organisation, governance or regulation,
- ⇒ the creation of a new cooperative model, for example in the field of renewable energy,
- ⇒ the development of digital equipment to promote the use of public transport,

- ⇒ the introduction of a pluralist governance to promote the common interests of various components on the social economy of Quebec and reconciling consolidation and innovation,
- ⇒ the changes in public railway companies to simplify governance and stimulate an efficient and sustainable means of transport.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are living in an increasingly technocratic society with a growing "democratic" deficit. The citizens have lost confidence in the national, let alone European institutions. They no longer have confidence in the financial world or in many enterprises. Beside the social partners and in close cooperation with them, the public, social and cooperative economy can remedy this negative situation. It could allow citizens to express their needs. The municipal economy, with its proximity to the citizens and the decision-making centres. The social and cooperative economy by the mobilisation of the citizen and the appropriate use of new social media. These are all so many vectors for maintaining and creating the links that are, as all of us here are convinced, indispensable for the well-being of our democracies.