International Cooperative Alliance

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Building a Better World Together

Cooperatives: key partners in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals

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#coops4dev

International Cooperative Alliance

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Cooperatives Build a Better World

Publication Series Information

Building a Better World Together is a collaborative publication produced by the **International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) and the Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC)** with contributions from ICA's regional organisations, sectoral organisations and thematic committees. Edited as a series of policy briefs during the United Nations International Year of Cooperatives 2025 (IYC), this report documents and highlights the diverse ways in which cooperatives contribute to the achievement of each and everyone of the 17 **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** through evidence, case studies and practical examples from around the world, demonstrating their contribution to inclusive economic development, social progress, community resilience and environmental sustainability. This publication forms part of the legacy of the **IYC2025**, under the theme **"Cooperatives Build a Better World."**

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Cooperatives demonstrate the importance of standing together to forge solutions to global challenges.

From more than 100 countries, you are driving development across communities large and small — fighting poverty and social exclusion, strengthening food security, helping local entrepreneurs access markets, and so much more.

Your united efforts are essential as our world confronts complex challenges and strives to advance the Sustainable Development Goals. The United Nations is proud to stand with you in this essential work — because, as you remind us, cooperatives build a better world.

— António Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General

Message excerpted from the UN Secretary-General's address for the launch of the International Year of Cooperatives 2025.

Foreword

BUILDING A BETTER WORLD TOGETHER

The Sustainable Development Goals are a shared commitment to building a more inclusive, equitable and sustainable world. Yet, as we move towards 2030, progress remains far too slow. Achieving the SDGs will require more than ambition. It will require partnerships with the organisations already delivering solutions in communities and economies around the world.

Cooperatives are among those essential partners. With more than one billion members worldwide, cooperatives are deeply rooted in communities and active across virtually every sector of the economy. They create jobs and livelihoods, strengthen food systems, expand access to finance, health, housing, energy and other essential services, empower women and young people, reduce inequalities and strengthen community resilience. Through democratic ownership and member participation, cooperatives connect economic activity with social and environmental objectives and translate global ambitions into practical action.

But the scale of this contribution is still not fully visible. **What is not measured is too often not recognised.** Reporting on cooperative impact is therefore essential, not only to demonstrate accountability to members and communities, but also to provide governments, development partners and policymakers with evidence of the contribution cooperatives are making to sustainable development at local, national and global levels. Better data and stronger impact reporting can help identify what works, strengthen advocacy and create opportunities to scale effective solutions.

This publication is an important step in building that evidence base. It brings together examples of cooperative contributions across the **17 Sustainable Development Goals**, demonstrating that cooperatives are not simply beneficiaries of development. **They are active contributors, implementation partners and co-creators of sustainable development.** However, this report is **only a snapshot**. The scale and diversity of cooperative action taking place every day are far greater than these pages can capture. The cases presented here offer a glimpse of what cooperatives are achieving across sectors and regions, and of the much greater contribution that remains to be documented, measured and brought into view.

The task ahead is therefore to move **from visibility to participation, and from recognition to partnership**. I call on governments to recognise cooperatives as strategic partners in national and local development and to involve them in the design, implementation and monitoring of development strategies. Cooperatives should have a meaningful place in **SDG planning, Voluntary National Review consultations and other national development processes**, with their contributions properly captured in the reports governments present to the United Nations.

I equally encourage cooperatives to use this publication as a practical advocacy tool. **Document your impact. Build your evidence. Tell your stories. Engage your governments.** Use that evidence to advocate for the inclusion of cooperatives in national development plans, sectoral strategies and VNR processes. The contribution is already being made; we must ensure that it is visible, counted and reflected in policy.

As we prepare for the **next SDG Summit and the discussions that will shape the post-2030 development framework**, the cooperative movement must be part of the conversation. The experience and voice of more than one billion cooperative members represent an enormous development asset and should help shape future solutions and partnerships.

My sincere appreciation goes to COPAC, the ICA global and regional offices, our sectoral organisations and thematic committees, and all those who contributed to this publication. This report demonstrates the power of partnership across the cooperative movement.

Cooperatives are already building a better world. Our collective responsibility now is to ensure that their contribution is recognised, supported and fully reflected in the development agenda of today, and the world we build beyond 2030.

Jeroen Douglas
Director General
International Cooperative Alliance

CONNECTING THE DOTS ACROSS THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Being a researcher on cooperative and more broadly social and solidarity economy, what has been continuously striking me, and still does, is not a lack of evidence, but how scattered it was. A fisheries cooperative here, a savings group there, an energy cooperative somewhere else, each quietly doing its part for sustainable development without anyone quite joining the dots to the 2030 Agenda. So when ICA and COPAC began putting together a policy brief for each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals over the past eighteen months, I read them with the same habits I always bring to a stack of papers: looking for gaps, overclaims, missing regions. I did not find many. What I found instead was something closer to confirmation of what many of us working on cooperatives have quietly suspected for a while: there is barely an SDG to which cooperatives do not make some meaningful contribution.

Reading across the briefs as a researcher, however, what struck me most was not the breadth of sectors involved, but the fact that cooperatives rarely advance a single Goal in isolation. Because they hold economic, social and environmental aims together inside a democratic business model, their impact naturally spills across Goals at once. In a way, what distinguishes cooperatives is not only what they do, but how they do it — through democratic governance, participation, shared ownership and a genuine concern for community. These are not just cooperative principles on paper; they are, this collection shows, cooperatives' way of working to achieve the SDGs.

These briefs compiled in this report were built collaboratively, brief by brief, through COPAC members working alongside ICA's regional offices across Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific, and Europe, together with sectoral organisations and thematic specialists who understood both the technical substance of each Goal and the lived reality of cooperatives on the ground. Every brief passed through rounds of research, peer review and cross-regional consultation, precisely so that the case studies inside them would reflect the genuine diversity of our movement rather than a convenient sample of familiar examples. That patience shows in the final product, and it deserves real recognition.

So, I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the dedication and contributions of our COPAC and ICA colleagues, in particular Joseph Njuguna, Director of Policy, ICA and Mattie Milliken, COPAC Coordinator, who have helped hold this eighteen-month process together; every COPAC member organisation that contributed data, review, and judgement; the ICA regional offices and sectoral bodies that supplied case studies from every corner of the cooperative world; and the ICA-EU Partnership, #coops4dev, whose support made the series possible. Above all, I would like to thank the practitioners and cooperators whose everyday work constitutes the actual evidence base behind every page that follows.

As the 2030 Agenda enters its final and most demanding stretch, and as attention turns to the 2027 SDG Summit and the discussions on the post-2030 development framework, my hope — as a researcher and as President of COPAC — is that this collection will serve as a practical reference: for governments preparing Voluntary National Reviews, for development partners designing programmes, for those shaping the post-2030 agenda, and for cooperators making the case for the contribution of cooperatives. Every goal is ours. I believe this collection demonstrates that clearly.

Dr. Ilcheong Yi
Head of Partnerships, UNRISD
COPAC Chair

COOPERATION ACROSS SECTORS AND BORDERS

The IYC25 Policy Brief Series is a tangible proof of the power and resilience of cooperation at a time of changing development narratives and geopolitical turmoil. The content of this publication - outcome of the collective efforts done by each regional office of the ICA and UN COPAC - shows that while key challenges in the legal and political recognition of cooperatives remain, there are rising opportunities to affirm our business model across all economic sectors. The European cooperative contribution to the UNAgenda2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is here showcased across many national and sectoral cooperative success stories of innovation and sustainability. Some of our European members - part of the Cooperatives Europe Development Platform (CEDP) - further shared the long-term impact of cooperation among cooperatives beyond borders. Through cooperative education and technical assistance, they are proof of an alternative European private sector that simultaneously creates local economic equity in Europe and across continents.

Agnès Mathis
Director of Cooperatives Europe
Europe Region of the International Cooperative Alliance

BUILDING AFRICA'S FUTURE TOGETHER

It is my pleasure, on behalf of the International Cooperative Alliance Africa Regional Office (ICA-Africa), to contribute to this joint COPAC-ICA publication on the Sustainable Development Goals.

This publication brings together a series of policy briefs that demonstrate and reaffirms a simple but powerful truth that sustainable development is most effective when it is people-centred, locally owned, and economically inclusive.

Africa stands at a defining moment in its development journey as it continues to grapple with persistent challenges ranging from poverty and food insecurity to unemployment, inequality, climate shocks, and constrained access to essential services. However as highlighted in regional case studies, the continent epitomizes resilient communities working together through the cooperative business model.

Across Africa, cooperatives are empowering women economically, creating opportunities for young people, strengthening food systems, expanding access to finance, health, education and clean energy, and building peaceful and resilient communities. They are also increasingly connecting producers to markets, strengthening value chains, and unlocking the transformative potential of trade within Africa and beyond. As implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area gains momentum, cooperatives have an increasingly important role in ensuring that trade is inclusive, sustainable, and delivers tangible benefits to communities.

For ICA-Africa, three priorities remain central to this transformation: fostering inclusion, strengthening an enabling policy and regulatory environment, and promoting cooperative-to-cooperative trade. Together, these priorities will enable cooperatives to scale their impact, enhance competitiveness, and contribute meaningfully to Africa's economic and social transformation.

Showcasing the contribution of cooperatives to the SDGs is therefore more than documenting success stories. It is about providing evidence that inspires investment, strengthens partnerships, and informs policy. It demonstrates that cooperatives are not peripheral actors in development, but indispensable partners in delivering national, regional and global development goals.

As we approach the final stretch towards 2030, this publication is both a reflection of progress and a call to action. We invite governments, development partners, the private sector, and cooperative leaders to deepen collaboration and invest in cooperative solutions that place people, shared prosperity, and sustainable development at the centre of the world's future.

Dr. Rose Karimi
Regional Director
International Cooperative Alliance – Africa (ICA-Africa)

LOCAL SOLUTIONS, REGIONAL IMPACT

It is a pleasure to introduce the Asia and Pacific perspective in this consolidated report, *Building a Better World Together: Cooperative Contributions to the SDGs*. Cooperatives across the region have long advanced the aspirations embodied in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), well before the adoption of the 2030 Agenda gave them a global framework and deadline.

In South Asia, forestry and land cooperatives secure livelihoods for rural and forest-dependent communities, while savings and credit cooperatives bring low-income members into the formal financial system, addressing financial exclusion that conventional banking has often been slow to overcome. In the same sub-region, land rights cooperatives formed by women who have historically been excluded from state recognition exhibit how cooperatives can expand access and strengthen social inclusion where formal systems have fallen short.

In Southeast Asia, energy cooperatives are developing new models to provide affordable and reliable electricity to underserved communities, while producer cooperatives enable smallholder farmers to access regional markets and improve household incomes. In East Asia, agricultural federations coordinate input procurement and market access across primary cooperatives to enhance farmers' bargaining power and protect their incomes. National cooperative federations link retail, food security, and rural service systems at scale, while forestry cooperatives contribute to sustainable forest management, biodiversity conservation, and decarbonisation efforts.

Together, these examples reflect a region where cooperatives remain central to advancing poverty reduction, food security, financial inclusion, clean energy, environmental sustainability, and accountable local institutions. Sustaining and expanding this contribution will depend on continued investment in cooperative governance, greater participation of young people and women in leadership, stronger enabling policy frameworks, and deeper partnerships between cooperatives and the wider sustainable development community.

This report captures both the diversity and impact of cooperative action across Asia and the Pacific. It is a testament to what cooperatives have already achieved and a reminder of what remains possible when communities continue to work together through cooperatives.

Balu Iyer
Regional Director
ICA Asia Pacific

COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLES IN ACTION ACROSS THE AMERICAS

The IYC25 Policy Brief Series examines the cooperative model through a multilateral lens, highlighting the strong interconnections between the values and principles of the United Nations and those of the cooperative movement. Together, these shared principles contribute to advancing peace, prosperity, and democracy.

The series also builds on a regional initiative undertaken by Cooperatives of the Americas, the Regional Office of the International Cooperative Alliance, during 2024–2025 through its online platform, COOPIMPACT. The platform brings together cooperative initiatives from across the Americas that contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals and links them to one or more of the cooperative principles. An internal group of experts reviewed and validated these initiatives, whose capacity was strengthened through support from the ICA–FFPA partnership, which gives voice to the concrete actions and growing capacity of our members to demonstrate how cooperatives are contributing to building a better world and ensuring that no one is left behind.

Danilo Salerno
Regional Director
Cooperatives of the Americas
Regional Office of the International Cooperative Alliance

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UN Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC)

COPAC is a multi-stakeholder partnership established in 1971 by the United Nations to promote and support people-centred, self-sustaining cooperative enterprises. Bringing together the **International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), International Labour Organization (ILO), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), and International Trade Centre (ITC),** COPAC works to advance cooperatives as important actors in sustainable development, social justice and inclusive growth. COPAC played a central role in shaping and coordinating this publication as part of the International Year of Cooperatives 2025.

International Cooperative Alliance (ICA)

The International Cooperative Alliance is the global voice of cooperatives, bringing together cooperative organisations across regions and sectors. ICA provided overall leadership, coordination, technical input and editorial support for this publication, working with its regional offices, sectoral organisations and thematic committees to bring diverse cooperative experiences and evidence together.

ICA Regional Offices

The regional offices of the ICA were instrumental in bringing perspectives, evidence and case studies from across the cooperative movement:

Cooperatives Europe – representing and supporting cooperatives across Europe and contributing regional expertise, examples and perspectives to the publication.

ICA Africa – providing evidence and insights from the diverse cooperative movement across the African continent, highlighting cooperative solutions to economic, social and environmental challenges.

ICA Americas – contributing experiences and case studies from North, Central, South America and the Caribbean, demonstrating the breadth of cooperative action across the region.

ICA Asia-Pacific – bringing perspectives and examples from one of the world's largest and most diverse cooperative regions, highlighting the scale and impact of cooperatives across sectors.

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Special appreciation goes to the **lead authors**, whose coordination, research and writing shaped the publication:

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The Wider Cooperative Movement

We extend our sincere thanks to colleagues across the **ICA sectoral organisations, thematic committees and wider cooperative network** who shared expertise, case studies, data, examples and feedback. Their contributions helped ensure that the publication reflects the diversity of cooperative action across sectors, regions and development contexts.

This publication is, ultimately, a collective effort. We are grateful to everyone who contributed their time, knowledge and experience to documenting how cooperatives are **building a better world together**.

Executive summary

BUILDING A BETTER WORLD TOGETHER: COOPERATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

The SDGs provide a shared framework for tackling poverty, hunger, inequality, climate change and other interconnected challenges. Yet progress towards 2030 remains uneven and, across many Goals, far too slow. Meeting these ambitions requires development approaches that are **inclusive, resilient, locally rooted and capable of delivering impact at scale**.

Cooperatives are already doing this. With more than **1 billion members and around 3 million cooperatives worldwide**, the cooperative movement is deeply embedded in communities and spans virtually every sector of the economy; from agriculture and finance to health, education, housing, fisheries, insurance, manufacturing and retail. As member-owned and democratically governed enterprises, cooperatives combine economic activity with social inclusion, community resilience and environmental responsibility. Their distinctive model enables people to pool resources, share risks, create livelihoods and services, and retain value within their communities.

Building a Better World Together brings together the cooperative contribution to **all 17 SDGs**, drawing on evidence, case studies and experiences from different countries, regions and sectors. Developed by the UN Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC) and the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), with contributions from ICA regional and sectoral organisations and thematic committees, the publication provides a practical picture of how cooperatives are contributing to sustainable development.

COOPERATIVES AND THE 17 SDGS

Across the Goals, the evidence demonstrates the **breadth, scale and interconnected nature** of cooperative action.

SDGs 1–5: Tackling poverty, hunger and exclusion. Cooperatives contribute to **No Poverty (SDG 1)** by creating livelihoods, strengthening incomes and expanding access to finance and markets; **Zero Hunger (SDG 2)** by strengthening food systems and supporting farmers and fishers; **Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3)** through healthcare, insurance and care services; **Quality Education (SDG 4)** through education, training, skills and lifelong learning; and **Gender Equality (SDG 5)** by expanding women's economic participation, leadership, access to finance and decision-making.

SDGs 6–11: Delivering essential services and building inclusive economies and communities. Cooperatives contribute to **Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6)** through community-managed water and sanitation systems; **Affordable and Clean Energy (SDG 7)** through renewable energy, energy access and efficiency solutions; and **Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8)**, supporting more than **280 million livelihoods globally**. They advance **Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (SDG 9)** through collective investment and technological innovation, **Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10)** by widening access to economic opportunity and ownership, and **Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11)** through housing, transport, waste management, energy and community infrastructure.

SDGs 12–17: Building sustainable systems, resilient environments and stronger institutions. Cooperatives advance **Responsible Consumption and Production (SDG 12)** through sustainable sourcing, recycling and circular economy solutions; **Climate Action (SDG 13)** through climate-smart practices, renewable energy and adaptation; **Life Below Water (SDG 14)** through sustainable fisheries and marine resource management; and **Life on Land (SDG 15)** through forest conservation, ecosystem restoration and biodiversity protection. Under **Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16)**, cooperatives strengthen democratic participation, accountability, trust, social cohesion and positive peace. **SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals)** brings these contributions together, reflecting the cooperative movement's capacity to connect communities, governments, development partners and other stakeholders, mobilise resources and share solutions across borders.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE TELLS US

Although the SDGs address different dimensions of development, the case studies reveal several common characteristics of cooperative impact.

First, cooperative impact is multidimensional. Cooperatives generate economic value while simultaneously advancing social inclusion, community resilience, economic empowerment and environmental sustainability. Their member-owned structure enables them to share and reinvest value rather than extract it from the communities in which they operate.

Second, cooperatives effectively reach underserved communities. Across sectors, they respond to gaps in markets, finance, infrastructure and essential services. Their local presence, community trust and ability to organise collective action allow them to reach people and places that conventional systems may struggle to serve.

Third, cooperative contributions rarely fit within a single SDG. A cooperative intervention can simultaneously improve incomes, food security, gender equality, employment, climate resilience and community well-being. This interconnected impact mirrors the integrated nature of the SDGs.

Fourth, ownership and participation are part of the impact. Democratic governance gives members a voice in decisions that affect their livelihoods and communities, while collective ownership can strengthen accountability, resilience and long-term stewardship.

THE BARRIERS ARE ALSO CLEAR

The report identifies persistent constraints that limit the ability of cooperatives to expand their contribution. These include **weak or outdated legal and regulatory frameworks, limited access to suitable finance, gaps in infrastructure and technology, insufficient technical and managerial capacity, restricted market access and weak data systems**.

A particularly significant challenge is **visibility**. Cooperative contributions are often poorly captured in national statistics, sectoral monitoring systems and SDG indicators. This makes their economic, social and environmental impact harder to measure, recognise, finance and replicate.

The evidence therefore points not to a lack of cooperative activity, but to a **gap between what cooperatives are contributing and what development systems are able to see and capture**.

PRIORITIES FOR SCALING IMPACT

Across the 17 Goals, the report identifies a consistent set of priorities: **strengthen enabling legal and policy frameworks; expand access to appropriate finance and markets; invest in cooperative capacity, digitalisation and innovation; improve data and impact measurement; strengthen infrastructure; and deepen partnerships across governments, development institutions and the cooperative movement.**

Better evidence is particularly important. For cooperatives, impact measurement can strengthen accountability, learning and advocacy. For policymakers and development partners, it can help identify where cooperative models can complement public programmes, close service gaps and scale effective solutions.

A CONTRIBUTION FAR GREATER THAN THESE PAGES CAN CAPTURE

This publication is necessarily selective. The case studies represent only a fraction of the cooperative activity taking place around the world. Taken together, however, they provide compelling evidence of the **scale, diversity and relevance of cooperative action across all 17 SDGs**.

The findings point to a simple but important conclusion: **Cooperatives are not operating at the margins of sustainable development. They are already part of its delivery system.**

The opportunity now is to better understand that contribution, strengthen the conditions in which cooperatives operate, learn from what works, and create the space for successful cooperative solutions to reach many more people. The evidence is growing. The solutions are already there. **The next challenge is to scale their impact.**

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Introduction

Cooperatives are active across economies and communities, creating livelihoods, delivering essential services, strengthening resilience and advancing social and environmental progress. This publication brings together evidence and experiences from across the cooperative movement to demonstrate how these contributions align with the **17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).** It moves from the global ambitions of the 2030 Agenda to the practical work of cooperatives on the ground, highlighting what they are contributing, the evidence behind that contribution, and the policy lessons that can help strengthen and scale their impact.

The graphic below provides a simple guide to this journey: **from the 17 SDGs, to cooperative contributions, to evidence and case studies, and ultimately to policy implications.**

SDG 1: END POVERTY IN ALL ITS FORMS EVERYWHERE

1 NO POVERTY

POVERTY REDUCTION IS A CENTRAL PILLAR OF THE 2030 AGENDA, YET THE PROGRESS IS FALLING FAR BEHIND.

In 2025, an estimated 808 million people, about **10 percent of the world's population, are projected to live in extreme poverty**, surviving on less than USD 3.00 per day (2021 PPP).[1] Decades of gains have been eroded by conflicts, climate shocks, and economic crises, leaving SDG 1 advancing at its slowest pace in over twenty years. While economic growth has lifted millions out of poverty, it has not reached everyone equally, and the gains achieved remain fragile.

Access to work, once considered the main pathway out of poverty, no longer offers a guaranteed escape. According to the 2025 UN Sustainable Development Goals Report, **6.9 percent of employed persons**, more than 240 million workers, still live below the poverty line.[2] Although social protection systems have expanded, 3.8 billion people remain without coverage, and in low-income countries, coverage reaches only 9.7 percent.[3] At the current rate, only one in five countries is on track to halve national poverty rates by 2030. Ending poverty requires more than income growth; it calls for inclusive and resilient economic systems that uphold dignity, equality, and social justice.

THE COOPERATIVE MODEL: A PEOPLE-CENTRED PATH TO RESILIENCE AND CATALYST FOR POVERTY ERADICATION

Cooperatives are uniquely positioned to combat poverty and uphold human dignity. By placing people before profit, they create pathways out of poverty through decent work, shared purchasing power, social inclusion, and community solidarity. As democratic, member-owned enterprises, cooperatives enable individuals to meet common needs while reinvesting in their communities. Guided by the *Statement on the Cooperative Identity* and its seven principles, they combine **economic participation, social inclusion, and concern for community** in a single, people-centred model of enterprise.[4]

Unlike conventional profit-driven businesses, cooperatives pursue long-term and multidimensional well-being across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. More than 1 billion people—about 12 percent of the global population—are members of one of the 3 million cooperatives worldwide. Through collective ownership and decision-making, they promote fairer wealth distribution and build social capital. By pooling resources, members share risk, stabilise income, and generate employment—benefiting at least 280 million people worldwide, or 10 percent of the global workforce.[5]

In agrifood systems, cooperatives empower smallholder farmers and consumers to access markets and secure fair prices. Credit and savings cooperatives (SACCOs) and credit unions expand access to finance by providing affordable loans, savings mechanisms, and insurance products to low-income communities for housing, health, and education. Worker and social cooperatives transform precarious jobs into dignified employment, especially for women, youth, and informal workers. They also deliver health, childcare, eldercare, and emergency support services to the most vulnerable and marginalised groups. They create platforms for Indigenous peoples and migrants to exercise economic agency and leadership. Across sectors, cooperatives demonstrate that enterprises can operate democratically, rebuild trust, and embed respect and care at the heart of sustainable poverty eradication. Through collaboration among cooperatives and concern for the community, they anchor prosperity in place and turn solidarity into practical, measurable outcomes. They demonstrate that when people have access to democratic ownership, collective resources, and supportive networks, poverty can be reduced not only through income but through empowerment, participation, and shared prosperity.

CASE STUDIES ON HOW COOPERATIVES CONTRIBUTE TO POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Empowering women in Kenya's dairy sector

The Maasai Kajiado Women Dairy Cooperative is a women-led co-operative established to enhance household incomes and support family livelihoods by empowering women traditionally excluded from livestock ownership and financial decision-making. Today, it has grown to over 5,000 members, with more than 3,200 actively involved across Kajiado Central, East, and West. Through collective milk collection, processing, and marketing, members have improved market access, secured fairer prices, and stabilized incomes. Although climate variability since 2015 has caused revenue fluctuations, the cooperative has strengthened resilience through training in modern dairy practices, animal health management, and business skills, alongside diversification into value-added products such as yogurt, ghee, and fermented milk. Beyond economic gains, the cooperative advances gender equality by granting women financial control, promotes environmental sustainability through pasture conservation and water harvesting, and fosters community cohesion and collective empowerment among Maasai women.

Raising cocoa farmers' incomes and empowering women in Ghana

Ghana's **Kuapa Kokoo Farmers' Cooperative Union**, one of Africa's largest cocoa cooperatives with over 100,000 members, has become a global example of how producer cooperatives reduce poverty in rural economies. Before organizing, smallholder cocoa farmers—many cultivating less than 3 hectares—faced predatory buyers, low farm-gate prices, and limited access to credit or extension services. Through Kuapa Kokoo, farmers now benefit from collective bargaining, transparent weighing systems, and guaranteed fair prices, including Fairtrade premiums. These premiums fund community development projects such as boreholes, schools, women's entrepreneurship centres, and farm-productivity training. Women's participation has increased markedly through the cooperative's **Women's Programme**, which supports income diversification into soap-making, vegetable gardening, and small trading activities. Independent assessments (Fairtrade Foundation; ODI) show that Kuapa Kokoo members earn **20–40% higher net incomes**, experience more stable cash flow, and invest more in their children's education than non-members. By ensuring fair market inclusion and social investment, the cooperative directly advances SDG 1 while addressing multi-dimensional poverty in cocoa-growing communities.

Formalizing waste pickers and expanding social protection for urban informal workers in Brazil

Associação dos Catadores de Papel, Papelão e Material Reaproveitável (ASMARE), founded in 1990 in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, is one of the most internationally recognized examples of a cooperative movement transforming informal, marginalized work into dignified livelihoods. Before ASMARE, waste pickers—many of them women, Afro-Brazilian, or unhoused—worked in extreme precarity, earning little and lacking legal recognition or social protection. ASMARE organized these workers into a cooperative structure, negotiated formal agreements with the municipality, and secured access to recycling centres, equipment, training, and safe working conditions. These changes allowed waste pickers to earn more consistent incomes, improve occupational health and safety, and access social security enrollment and municipal services. ASMARE's model later informed Brazil's National Solid Waste Policy, placing cooperatives at the centre of inclusive urban recycling systems. Beyond income, the cooperative fostered community empowerment, gender inclusion, adult literacy, and political representation, demonstrating how cooperatives can transform informal labour markets into structured, rights-based economic participation.[6]

Forest-based cooperatives build livelihoods and resilience in Nepal with Finnish expertise

Through its international cooperative activities, **Food and Forest Development Finland (FFD)** founded by Pellervo Coop Center, helped found the **Amritpur Social Entrepreneur Cooperative (ASEC)** in Nepal.[7] Formed by ten community forest user groups in Nepal's Dang District, ASEC has now grown to over 9,200 members managing community forest resources sustainably. It strengthens forest users' livelihoods through entrepreneurship, leadership, and climate resilience training. Through the latter, FFD is equipping the local community with ad-hoc tools to avert and adapt to natural disasters, today among the key drivers of poverty.

ASEC has launched several income-generating enterprises, including a sal leaf plate business that employs staff full-time and engages hundreds of women in leaf collection. It also supports 43 small businesses, 35 led by women, to generate income through non-timber forest products (NTFP) and non-forest, climate-smart businesses. ASEC also partnered with **Tulsipur Sub-Metropolitan City** to develop three ward-level climate adaptation plans, which local authorities have committed to financing. These initiatives are not only reducing poverty through job creation and business development but also enhancing women's leadership, voice, and resilience within their communities.

The contribution of European consumer cooperatives

Across Europe, cooperatives are demonstrating solidarity through practical initiatives that address poverty and social exclusion. In the Czech Republic, more than 300 cooperatives under Skupina COOP participate each year in the ***Autumn Food Collection Solidarity Day***, donating non-perishable food and essential goods to families in need.

In Sweden, Coop Mitt has partnered with ***Julhjälpen Gävleborg*** to provide grocery bags to families with limited financial resources. Over the past five years, the cooperative has donated more than 200 bags during the Christmas season, helping create what it calls "the Christmas miracle everyone deserves." Since 2016, Julhjälpen has supported low-income families with children in Gävle and surrounding areas.

In Spain, Consum Cooperative continues to support the **Adecco Foundation's *#EmergenciaPorElEmpleo* (Emergency for Employment) programme**, which promotes labour inclusion for people in vulnerable situations. Through this partnership, 41 individuals have received assistance, 752 training and job guidance sessions have been conducted, 226 job placement services provided, and 29 employment contracts secured, showcasing the cooperative commitment to inclusion and decent work.

Fair-trade and organic coffee create stable, high-value incomes in rural Mexico

Unión Majomut, founded in 1983 in Chiapas, Mexico, is one of the country's most respected indigenous coffee cooperatives. It organizes Tzotzil and Tzeltal smallholders who historically faced deep poverty, limited market access, and exploitation by middlemen. Through collective milling, organic certification, and long-standing relationships with fair-trade buyers in Europe and North America, Unión Majomut has enabled its members to significantly improve the prices they receive for their coffee. By eliminating intermediaries and collectively negotiating export contracts, the cooperative helps producers capture a much larger share of the final value of their product. In addition to higher incomes, members benefit from technical assistance in agroecology, pest management, and climate adaptation—vital in an area heavily affected by coffee rust and environmental degradation. Unión Majomut is also known for its strong social programmes, including youth training, women's income diversification initiatives, and community savings groups, all of which reinforce local resilience and reduce rural out-migration.[8]

Mundukide Foundation, inter-cooperation between Spain and Mozambique

The Mondragon Cooperatives, recognizing that approximately one billion people worldwide live in extreme poverty, most of them hard-working individuals who nevertheless earn very little from their labor, partnered with a group of development NGOs to establish the Mundukide Foundation 25 years ago. One of their key initiatives operates in northern Mozambique, a region marked by severe poverty, where average family income is around $200 per year. Over the past 15 years, cooperative activities aimed to increase the ability of the local population to generate income, which contributes to equitable and sustainable development, enabling people to be autonomous and self-sufficient. Thus far, more than 30,000 peasant families have participated in the programme, which focuses on improving organization, production, and sales. As a result, these families have achieved significant income growth, collectively generating more than €30 million.

Haliéus and Legacoop supporting poverty reduction in Laos

With around 17% of the population under the poverty line, Laos is still ranked among the 44 Least Developed Countries (LDCs), facing the challenge to reduce rural poverty. Among others, the coffee producers of the province of Dakcheung made positive improvements in the last years in terms of product quality and production sustainability thanks to several projects from different donors, but the results in terms of an increase in income were still lacking due to constraints in marketing the production and poor organization among farmers.

The Italian association of cooperatives Legacoop, through its structure dedicated to international development, Haliéus, started supporting the local producers of the Dakcheung province by improving their cooperative organizations and their capacity to connect to regional and international markets, leading to the improvement of their sales and income. The SuperWeCoffee project, realized in connection with the NGO CARE, sees the active contribution of two other key cooperative players as 4Form, the training consortium of Legacoop, and Fairtrade Italy, demonstrating the strict relations of the SDG1 with other SDGs (SDG4 *Quality Education* and SDG12 - *Responsible consumption and protection*).

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Cooperatives have long demonstrated their ability to improve livelihoods, build economic resilience and expand access to essential services. Yet despite their proven impact, many continue to operate in environments that limit their full contribution to SDG 1. In numerous countries, cooperative laws remain outdated, overly restrictive, or misaligned with the ICA cooperative identity. These gaps often push cooperatives toward workarounds that undermine their democratic governance and economic potential. Access to affordable finance remains one of the most significant barriers, especially for small and emerging cooperatives led by women, youth, and informal workers. Weak governance capacities, limited market linkages, and low levels of digital readiness can further constrain cooperative growth and sustainability.

The enabling environment is not the only challenge. External pressures, including climate change, natural disasters, conflict, inflation, and global market volatility, expose the vulnerability of cooperatives that rely heavily on agriculture or natural resources. At the same time, cooperatives are not yet fully prepared to take advantage of the opportunities presented by globalization, digitalization, and the transition to green economies.

Yet, the opportunities are profound. Across the world, new cooperative ecosystems are emerging around community finance, renewable energy, platform work, health and care services, and climate-resilient agriculture, sectors that directly address poverty, inequality, exclusion, and vulnerability. Cooperative unions and federations are innovating with pooled social protection schemes, micro-insurance initiatives, and community-based savings systems that reach populations left out of formal structures. Digital platforms are enhancing traceability, improving cooperative management systems, and connecting small producers to more stable and fair markets.

With the right policies, investments, and partnerships, cooperatives can scale these innovations and serve as catalysts for economic democracy and long-term poverty reduction.

CALL TO ACTION

To unlock the full potential of cooperatives in achieving SDG 1, concerted action is needed from governments, donors, and development partners.

1. Integrate cooperatives into national and local poverty-reduction strategies

Governments should formally recognize cooperatives and other Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) actors as partners in poverty alleviation, rural development, resource stewardship, and social protection. National SDG monitoring systems should include cooperative statistics and mapping—an increasingly emphasized recommendation by the United Nations[9] — to more accurately capture their contributions to employment, income generation, and community resilience.

2. Strengthen the legal and institutional environment

Legal frameworks should recognize the unique nature of cooperatives and guarantee their autonomy. Governments can incentivize inclusion by revising cooperative laws to allow mixed ownership, ensure democratic governance, and encourage broad membership (especially of women, youth and informal workers). Public policies can encourage local procurement from cooperatives (e.g. in food, housing or public works), strengthening their market position.

3. Expand cooperative access to finance and markets

Create or scale up financing facilities tailored to cooperatives: for instance, dedicated cooperative banks, national apex organizations for saving-and-credit cooperatives, and support for producer organizations in value chains. International donors and development banks can channel funds through cooperative-friendly channels. Public procurement rules should favor co-operatives where appropriate, helping them win contracts in infrastructure or services. These steps ensure cooperatives have the capital and market access needed to benefit members. They can be instrumental in bridging the urban–rural divide, strengthening domestic markets, and enabling small producers to benefit from global economic opportunities.

4. Invest in cooperative education and capacity building

Support technical assistance and training programs on cooperative management, accounting, governance and digital tools. For example, linking universities and vocational schools with cooperative colleges can professionalize the movement. Capacity building should especially target rural areas and underserved groups (women, youth) so that emerging cooperatives can thrive. Cooperatives themselves can form networks for peer-learning, further bolstered by international partnerships (South–South cooperation on best practices) to create more opportunities for job creation and poverty alleviation initiatives and programs. Stronger capacities will lead to better-managed cooperatives, greater accountability, and higher economic and social returns for members.

5. Foster multi-sectoral and cross-institutional partnerships

Finally, enhance collaboration across sectors and institutions: trade unions, civil society, private sector and governments can form alliances to scale cooperative solutions. For instance, public social protection programs could partner with cooperative savings schemes to reach the informal poor. Development agencies should integrate cooperatives into broader poverty and employment initiatives (e.g. in rural development, health insurance, housing). Such crosscutting efforts amplify the solidarity effects of cooperatives and ensure that progress in poverty reduction is inclusive and sustainable.

By adopting these measures, the global community can unlock the full potential of cooperatives as engines of poverty eradication and resilience-building. In practice, this means supporting the next generation of farmer cooperatives, craft and artisanal cooperatives, worker and social cooperatives, platform cooperatives, and community finance institutions so they can create decent livelihoods for the millions still left behind. With nearly 3.5 billion people worldwide living in poverty by moderate measures, strengthening cooperatives is a people-centred strategy to reduce vulnerability and restore global progress toward SDG 1. When fully recognized, properly resourced, and effectively supported, cooperatives become powerful catalysts for economic democracy, community empowerment, and lasting poverty eradication.

SDG 2: END HUNGER, ACHIEVE FOOD SECURITY AND IMPROVED NUTRITION AND PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

2 ZERO HUNGER

WITH ONLY FOUR YEARS REMAINING UNTIL 2030, PROGRESS TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 2 (ZERO HUNGER) REMAINS CRITICALLY OFF TRACK.

According to The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2025, an estimated 673 million people, or 8.2 percent of the global population, experienced hunger in 2024, while 2.3 billion people faced moderate or severe food insecurity. Hunger has declined in parts of Latin America and southern Asia, but continues to rise sharply in Africa and western Asia, driven by conflict, climate shocks, and persistently high and volatile food prices. These trends have undermined access to healthy diets, disproportionately affecting low-income households, women, and children, and underscore the urgent need for systemic, locally grounded solutions that strengthen food system resilience and protect vulnerable populations.[10]

Gender inequality remains a central driver of food insecurity. The FAO reports that women account for approximately 41 percent of the global agrifood workforce and play critical roles across production, processing, distribution, and household nutrition, yet they are disproportionately concentrated in informal, insecure, and lower-paid work. Structural barriers, including unequal access to land, finance, technology, and decision-making, continue to constrain women's productivity and incomes. Women farmers earn on average 22 percent less than men, manage smaller and less productive plots, and shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid care work. At the same time, agrifood systems remain a vital source of employment for young women, highlighting both the scale of exclusion and the untapped potential for inclusive transformation.[11]

Cooperatives are uniquely positioned to address these challenges by strengthening collective bargaining power, improving access to markets, finance, technology, and extension services, and embedding women-led and family-based enterprises within resilient local food systems.[12] Through democratic governance and shared ownership, cooperatives enable women to amplify their voice in economic decision-making, secure fairer market terms, and translate productivity gains into improved household nutrition and food availability. The UN International Year of the Woman Farmer in 2026 offers a timely opportunity for UN agencies, governments, and development partners to scale cooperative-based approaches that recognise and invest in women's contributions as a proven pathway toward Zero Hunger.[13]

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE: HOW COOPERATIVES FIGHT HUNGER AND STRENGTHEN FOOD SECURITY IN PRACTICE

Cooperatives build resilient and inclusive food systems by directly addressing the structural failures that drive hunger, such as fragmented production, weak bargaining power, post-harvest losses, and unequal access to markets, finance, and technology. As locally rooted, member-owned enterprises, cooperatives align economic incentives with food security outcomes, prioritising stability, affordability, and long-term community wellbeing over short-term profit extraction. UN and FAO evidence consistently shows that diversified networks of small and medium food enterprises, particularly cooperatives, are better able to absorb shocks, stabilise supply, and rebalance power within agrifood value chains.[14]

Crucially, cooperatives fight hunger not only by increasing production, but by improving how food systems function. By shortening supply chains, strengthening local and regional markets, and anchoring value creation within communities, cooperatives help ensure food remains accessible during economic, climate, or conflict-related shocks. This cooperative difference explains why the UN International Year of Cooperatives resolution recognises cooperatives as institutional solutions for improving global food security and calls on governments to strengthen their access to markets and finance. As highlighted by FAO's High-Level Panel on Resilient Food Systems, cooperatives are not peripheral actors, but key mechanisms for translating food system productivity into sustained progress on SDG2.

In practice, cooperatives enable small-scale producers to aggregate output, jointly purchase inputs, access extension services, and invest collectively in storage, processing, and transport infrastructure that would otherwise be unattainable individually. In Brazil, agricultural cooperatives bring together more than one million rural producers, the majority of whom are family farmers, and account for a substantial share of national production in staple food value chains such as grains, dairy, and beans.[15] This scale allows cooperatives to influence production practices, reduce losses, and ensure that productivity gains translate into reliable food supply rather than market exclusion. In Rwanda, farmer cooperatives supported through structured market arrangements coordinated access to improved seeds, training, and guaranteed buyers, contributing to significant yield increases in maize production while reducing post-harvest losses and price volatility.[16] Similar outcomes are observed in many countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where dairy, grain, horticulture, coffee, and fisheries cooperatives stabilise food supply by pooling risk, negotiating fairer prices, and ensuring that productivity gains translate into affordable food rather than exclusion.

Cooperatives also strengthen food security by shortening supply chains and improving the functioning of local food markets. Community-supported agriculture (CSA) cooperatives in Germany illustrate how shared-risk models link producers and consumers directly: members make regular contributions in exchange for a share of seasonal harvests, providing farmers with predictable incomes while improving access to fresh, locally produced food.[17] Solidarity-based contribution mechanisms within these cooperatives help ensure affordability for lower-income households, demonstrating how cooperative governance can balance producer livelihoods with consumer access.

Beyond production and distribution, cooperatives contribute to food security by reducing food waste, promoting sustainable practices, and anchoring value within communities. In Portugal, multi-branch cooperatives illustrate how these mechanisms operate in practice. Cooperativa Rizoma, member of CASES, is a Portuguese multi-branch cooperative whose activities contribute to food security and community resilience, reaching more than 500 stakeholders. Through its Green Academy (Academia Verde), Rizoma delivers workshops on sustainable gardening, biodiversity and healthy eating, fostering food literacy and ecological awareness, while the Circulab initiative promotes community composting and waste reuse to reinforce circular food practices. The Open Garden (Horta Aberta) organises community-based activities and organic production, supplying the cooperative grocery shop and supporting neighbouring agroforestry systems. Complementing these initiatives, the Rizoma grocery shop supports more than 100 local producers, reduces food waste and improves access to healthy, locally produced food, thereby strengthening short food supply chains and contributing to food security at local level. Similar approaches are observed across dairy, fisheries, horticulture, and consumer cooperatives globally, where pooled risk, fair pricing, and local market integration help stabilise food availability during economic, climate, or conflict-related shocks.[18]

Together, these mechanisms explain why cooperatives are increasingly recognised as institutional solutions for strengthening resilient food systems. By improving coordination, redistributing value more equitably, and linking productivity gains to affordability and nutrition, cooperatives translate food system performance into sustained progress toward SDG 2.

This growing evidence base is increasingly reflected in global policy recognition and calls for scale. The UN's International Year of Cooperatives resolution recognises cooperatives' capacity to strengthen global food security and urges governments to improve their access to markets and finance,[19] while FAO's 2025 High-Level Panel on Resilient Food Systems affirms that cooperatives are institutional solutions capable of correcting coordination failures, redistributing value more equitably, and translating productivity gains into sustained progress toward SDG 2.[20]

The Youth Declaration on Cooperatives in Agrifood Systems, launched at the 2025 World Food Forum, further underscores the central role of youth and women in cooperative-led food systems transformation, calling for investment in skills, recognition of unpaid care work, and expanded market access.[21] Building on this momentum, the UN International Year of the Woman Farmer in 2026 provides a timely opportunity to scale cooperative-based approaches that address women farmers' structural barriers to land, finance, markets, technology, and decision-making,[22] in line with the objectives of the UN Decade of Family Farming (2019–2028), ensuring that productivity gains translate into improved nutrition, food security, and inclusive development.[23]

We Effect, the cooperative development organisation of the Swedish cooperative movement, demonstrates how the International Year of the Woman Farmer can be operationalised through cooperative-based support. By combining organisational strengthening with business and production development under a consistent gender lens, We Effect supports women-led and gender-responsive cooperatives to promote climate-resilient agriculture, shorter and more transparent value chains, and improved nutrition outcomes.[24] By embedding women farmers at the centre of resilient local economies, such approaches help ensure that productivity gains translate into food security, poverty reduction, and social inclusion.[25]

CASE STUDIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Argentina: Expanding Affordable Food Access through Consumer-Owned Retail

One of Argentina's largest consumer cooperatives, Cooperativa Obrera, contributes to SDG 2 by improving access to nutritious and affordable food for millions of people across the regions where it operates. As a consumer-owned enterprise, it prioritizes fair pricing, quality standards, and the reliable availability of essential goods, helping to strengthen local food security and reduce barriers for low-income households. The cooperative also addresses food insecurity through initiatives such as *Alimentos Solidarios*, which recovers food that is safe for consumption but no longer commercially sellable and redistributes it to community organizations, schools, and social programmes. By combining food-waste reduction with targeted social support, Cooperativa Obrera enhances nutrition outcomes while promoting more sustainable food-system practices, advancing progress toward Zero Hunger by 2030.

European Union: Building Resilient Agri-Food Value Chains at Scale

Copa and Cogeca are the united voice of 22 million farmers and 22,000 agri-cooperatives in the EU, guaranteeing food security for 500 million people throughout Europe. By placing long-term sustainability at the core of their model, ensuring a future to next generations of farmers, European agri-cooperatives address many challenges, including soaring production costs, climate-induced extreme weather, and the increasing power imbalance throughout the agricultural value chain. Cooperatives improve farmers' access to markets, inputs, and processing and, by fostering price stability, fair incomes and reducing volatility, they help build resilient food value chains capable of withstanding economic and climate shocks.[26] Beyond primary production, European agri-cooperatives are vital suppliers of nutrient-dense food and high-quality proteins. They develop innovative food products that delight consumers and promote balanced, healthier lifestyles. In many instances, their research and innovation teams push the boundaries of science and technology to build a more sustainable future for agriculture. Furthermore, they strengthen the social fabric by combating rural poverty and creating stable employment. Ultimately, the cooperative model in the agri-food sector is a cornerstone in preserving Europe's farming heritage and ensuring food security both at home and abroad, thereby contributing to the achievement of SDG 2, 'No hunger'.

Republic of Korea: Integrated Cooperative Systems for National Food Security

Founded in 1961, the National Agricultural Cooperative Federation (NACF) represents approximately 2.1 million farmers nationwide in South Korea. Facing climate shocks, rural depopulation, and declining food self-sufficiency, NACF launched the Nongshim Cheonsim ("Farmers' Heart is Heaven's Will") movement in 2025 to strengthen food system stability through cooperative integration. Nongshim Cheonsim functions as an integrated framework coordinating cooperative retail networks (including the nationwide Hanaro Mart chain), domestic food consumption campaigns, rural regeneration initiatives, and the diffusion of affordable smart farming technologies. The framework also links 308 rural labor intermediary centers, thereby stabilizing agricultural labor supply during peak farming seasons and reinforcing production continuity in vulnerable rural areas. By collectively owning logistics infrastructure and retail channels, NACF enables smallholder farmers to access markets and improve farm income stability. The Nongshim Cheonsim movement demonstrates how large-scale cooperative integration can overcome food system coordination failures beyond individual producers' capacity, contributing to SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and strengthening domestic food system resilience.

Poland: Reducing Food Waste through Cooperative-Led Policy Reform

In 2019, Poland enacted the Act on Counteracting Food Waste following advocacy by the National Cooperative Council, which submitted legislative proposals to Parliament addressing food insecurity among low-income and care-dependent populations. The law removed legal barriers preventing the transfer of near-expiration food and unsold fresh products from retail and wholesale operations to social welfare centers, orphanages, canteens, and food banks. Agricultural and food cooperatives—particularly dairy, meat-processing, and bakery cooperatives—developed tailored logistics and storage systems to manage short-shelf-life products and processing waste. Dairy cooperatives addressed spoilage-prone products through optimized transport and inventory management, while meat-processing cooperatives redirected byproducts to fur farming operations as animal feed, in compliance with regulations. The cooperative sector's institutional capacity to coordinate waste-reduction mechanisms across production, distribution, and social service networks contributed to decreased food waste and improved nutritional access for vulnerable groups.

Somalia: Strengthening Food Security in Fragile and Climate-Vulnerable Contexts

In Somalia's fragile and climate-vulnerable context, agricultural cooperatives play a critical role in advancing SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). With support from FAO and local authorities, the Somalia Union Cooperative Movement (UDHIS), established in 1973 as the national umbrella body for cooperatives, promotes climate-smart and sustainable agriculture through training in good agricultural practices, crop diversification, irrigation rehabilitation, shared access to inputs and machinery, and collective marketing. These interventions have contributed to more predictable harvests, year-round food availability, improved dietary diversity, and higher household incomes. At national level, nearly 50 cooperatives involving over 5,000 farmers have strengthened production capacity and resource management, with yields targeted to increase two-to-three-fold.[27] The resulting gains have supported rural employment, access to savings and credit, and greater resilience to climate shocks, while strengthening women's leadership and economic participation, particularly through women-led cooperatives in Lower Shabelle linked to Village Savings and Loans Associations.

Japan: Reducing Input Costs to Protect Smallholder Incomes and Productivity

In 2015, Japan's agricultural cooperative federations launched a systematic input cost reduction program to address declining farm incomes amid rising production expenses. The initiative consolidated agricultural inputs through collective purchasing and standardized specifications across 496 primary cooperatives serving 3.89 million farmer members. Fertilizer brands were reduced from 550 to 24 through unified formulations and advance ordering, lowering manufacturing costs. Direct-to-farmer pesticide packaging expanded container sizes to serve up to 4 hectares, reducing logistics expenses. Cardboard specifications were standardized to pallet dimensions, and agricultural machinery costs decreased 10–30% through planned joint procurement of function-specific equipment. The program operates through prefectural and national federation networks that coordinate bulk orders and negotiate producer specifications. By reducing input costs while maintaining production capacity, the system protects smallholder incomes and ensures stable domestic food supply—Japan's cooperatives account for 50% of national farm output (USD 39 billion, 2022). This institutional model demonstrates how cooperatives can leverage collective bargaining and standardization to advance SDG 2.3 (agricultural productivity and small-scale farmer incomes) and SDG 2.4 (sustainable production systems) in high-cost agricultural economies.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

"No farmers, no food, no future" captures the core threat to global food security: deepening power imbalances across agrifood value chains continue to squeeze farmers' margins and undermine the economic viability of food production.[28] While cooperatives offer one of the most practical and scalable pathways to advance SDG 2, their impact is constrained by persistent structural barriers. Addressing these challenges also presents clear opportunities to scale cooperative contributions to Zero Hunger.

Enabling legal and policy environments. In many countries, outdated or fragmented cooperative laws, registration procedures, tax regimes, and land-use policies limit cooperatives' ability to operate across value chains, attract investment, and participate fully in national food security strategies. Modernising cooperative legislation, simplifying administrative processes, and aligning fiscal and land policies with contemporary agrifood markets would enable cooperatives to scale, diversify, and contribute more systematically to SDG 2 implementation.

Access to finance and infrastructure. Many cooperatives lack access to long-term finance for cold storage, logistics, processing facilities, and digital systems that are essential for reducing post-harvest losses and price volatility. These constraints, compounded by rising production costs and climate-induced extreme weather, erode farmer incomes and weaken food system resilience. Cooperative-friendly financial instruments, blended finance mechanisms, and targeted public investment can unlock capital-intensive infrastructure and stabilise food supply and availability. Expanding access to climate insurance, including coverage for cooperative-owned infrastructure, is also critical to protect producers against extreme events and ensure continuity of production and faster recovery following shocks.

Capacity, governance, and market integration. Gaps in management skills, governance, market intelligence, and data systems undermine cooperative performance, particularly among small and emerging organisations. At the same time, limited access to formal markets, quality standards, and buyers leaves many cooperatives unable to compete with large agribusiness actors. Expanded technical assistance, leadership development, digital tools, peer learning, and integration into structured value chains, including public procurement and school feeding programmes, can secure demand, improve margins, and incentivise investment in nutrition and quality.

Gender, youth, and social inclusion. Women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, and small-scale producers continue to face systemic barriers to land, finance, leadership, and technology adoption, limiting the transformative potential of cooperatives. These challenges are compounded by demographic pressures, including ageing farming populations in many regions.

Data, visibility, and risk management. Weak data on cooperative contributions to food security limits their recognition in policy design, investment planning, and crisis response. In parallel, limited access to climate insurance constrains cooperatives' ability to manage increasing climate-related risks. Strengthening national data systems, integrating cooperative indicators into SDG monitoring, and expanding climate insurance coverage for both producers and cooperative-owned infrastructure would enhance accountability, resilience, and continuity of food production.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To unlock the full potential of cooperatives as drivers of hunger mitigation, stakeholders should take coordinated action to strengthen cooperative-led food systems.

1. Institutionalise cooperatives within food security and SDG 2 frameworks

Governments and international organizations should formally recognise agricultural, food, and consumer cooperatives as delivery partners within national food security strategies, SDG 2 roadmaps, humanitarian–development–peace nexus responses, and economic stabilisation efforts. This includes systematically embedding cooperatives in public procurement, school feeding, social protection, and emergency response mechanisms, particularly in contexts affected by climate shocks, conflict, and market volatility.

2. Establish enabling legal, policy, and regulatory environments for cooperative-led food systems.

Member States should modernise cooperative laws, fiscal regimes, and administrative procedures to reflect contemporary agrifood markets, enabling cooperatives to operate across value chains, mobilise member capital, own shared infrastructure, and innovate. Policy reforms should balance transparency and accountability with flexibility, removing structural barriers that limit cooperative scalability and long-term contributions.

3. Scale patient and blended finance for cooperative infrastructure and services

Development banks, donors, and governments should expand cooperative-friendly financing instruments, including long-tenor concessional loans, blended finance facilities, and risk-sharing mechanisms, to support investments in cold storage, logistics, local processing, and digital systems. Priority should be given to infrastructure that reduces post-harvest losses, stabilises food supply and prices, strengthens local and regional food systems, and enhances climate resilience.

4. Strengthen cooperative capacity, innovation, and market integration with a gender-transformative focus

Targeted investment is needed to strengthen cooperative governance, business management, data systems, digital-enabled services, and market access, enabling producer organisations to aggregate supply, negotiate fair prices, meet quality standards, and access higher-value markets. Support programmes should integrate gender-transformative approaches, particularly during the International Year, to expand women's leadership, access to land, finance, technology, and decision-making across agrifood systems.

5. Build evidence, accountability, and partnerships to scale cooperative impact

UN agencies, governments, and cooperative organisations should strengthen data collection and reporting on cooperative contributions to food security, nutrition, incomes, and resilience, and integrate cooperative indicators into SDG monitoring and national statistical systems. Multi-stakeholder platforms should be mobilised to align policy, investment, and innovation pipelines, ensuring that cooperative-led solutions are scaled, replicated, and sustained across regions.

SDG 3: ENSURE HEALTHY LIVES AND PROMOTE WELL-BEING FOR ALL AT ALL AGES

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING: A FOUNDATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Health and well-being are foundational to human dignity, sustainable development, and resilient societies. Yet more than half the world's population still lacks access to essential healthcare. Rural populations, informal workers, and marginalized communities face the most severe barriers—barriers that were magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which overwhelmed public systems and widened existing disparities.[29] Rising healthcare costs, shortages of trained health workers, and fragile infrastructure further threaten the delivery of equitable and quality services.

As the world observed **World Health Day** on April 7, 2025, the global health landscape remains a mix of progress and persistent challenges. This year's theme, "***Healthy Beginnings, Hopeful Futures***," draws attention to maternal and newborn health, an area where inequality remains stark. Nearly 300,000 women still die each year from pregnancy or childbirth-related complications, while more than 4 million newborns are lost to stillbirth or early death, many from preventable causes. These losses are concentrated in low-income and conflict-affected settings, where access to prenatal care, skilled birth attendants, and postnatal support remains limited.[30]

Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. It includes targets for universal health coverage (UHC), reduced maternal and child mortality, improved mental health, access to sexual and reproductive health services, and better preparedness for health emergencies. But progress is lagging. Four out of five countries are off track to meet maternal survival targets, and non-communicable diseases like hypertension and diabetes are compounding pregnancy-related risks.

Reversing these trends demands urgent investment and coordinated action. A people-centered, rights based approach that strengthens healthcare systems, addresses social determinants of health, and improves working conditions for health and care workers is essential to building a future where every woman, child, and community not only survives but thrives. This includes ensuring occupational safety and health (OSH) for all health and care workers, many of whom face long hours, low pay, and high exposure to physical and psychological risks. Safeguarding their well-being is critical not only to workforce retention and service quality, but to the overall resilience and sustainability of health systems.

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE IN HEALTHCARE

Health cooperatives trace their origins to the 19th century, when mutual aid societies and worker associations began organizing healthcare services for their members in response to limited and unequal access. Rooted in solidarity and collective action, these early efforts laid the foundation for a people centered model of healthcare that continues to grow and diversify.

Over time, health cooperatives have evolved to meet changing needs, responding to shifting demographics, rising healthcare costs, and persistent inequalities. Their presence continues to grow globally. According to the International Cooperative Alliance, more than 3,300 health cooperatives now operate across 76 countries, serving over 100 million households and generating an annual turnover of 15 billion US dollars. The 2019 UN Secretary-General's report on cooperatives in social development recognized this growing role, highlighting how cooperatives contribute not only to improved health outcomes but also to better working conditions for healthcare professionals.[31]

Health and social cooperatives exist in diverse forms, including user-owned clinics, worker-led home and elder care services, cooperative pharmacies, and community based insurance schemes. Their flexible structures allow them to adapt to local needs, integrating medical services with social support, especially in underserved areas. Many actively engage women, older persons, and informal workers as members, providers, or decision makers, ensuring services reflect community priorities. They reinvest in service quality, workforce development, and innovation, while inclusive and participatory governance strengthens health literacy, accountability, and resilience. Above all, their deep community roots foster trust, an essential foundation for effective and equitable health systems.

KEY CONTRIBUTIONS OF HEALTH COOPERATIVES

Health cooperatives offer flexible, people-centered solutions that improve service delivery, lower costs, and expand access, especially where public and private systems fall short. As explored in the *Cooperative Health Report*,[32] their impact can be seen across five key areas:

1. Providing Essential Health Services

Health cooperatives deliver a broad spectrum of care, from general medical services to specialized treatment, mental health support, rehabilitation, and dental care. These services are designed to be affordable, inclusive, and responsive to community needs, particularly in areas where public or private systems fall short.

In Uganda, KAMACOS reaches over 80,000 people through its cooperative-run health center and mobile outreach, offering free and low-cost care in rural areas.[33] In Lesotho, the Village Health Workers Cooperative Society delivers primary healthcare through a savings and credit scheme, offering a sustainable, community-based solution that improves access and continuity of care.

2. Managing Health Facilities

Many cooperatives actively manage healthcare facilities that prioritize patient well being over profit. These facilities are guided by shared ownership, reinvestment in services, and democratic oversight.

Spain's Espriu Foundation integrates cooperative hospitals, insurance, and care services, reinvesting profits to improve access for 2.2 million users. It also hosts the International Health Cooperative Organisation (IHCO), amplifying cooperative voices in global health policy spaces.[34]

3. Expanding Access to Insurance

Health insurance cooperatives offer inclusive, community driven alternatives to commercial providers, often reaching individuals excluded from conventional coverage.

In the Philippines, CHMF covers 60,000 members through cooperative-affiliated plans[35] and in Kenya, CIC Insurance serves over 1 million people with affordable microinsurance.[36] Globally, the mutuals and cooperative insurance sector wrote over USD 1.41 trillion in premiums in 2022, capturing a record 26.3% share of the insurance market, according to the latest ICMIF report.[37]

4. Supporting Vulnerable Populations

Cooperatives play a vital role in delivering healthcare to marginalized groups, including Indigenous Peoples, migrants, older persons, and those with disabilities.

In Australia, the Ballarat and District Aboriginal Cooperative (BADAC) provides integrated health and social services grounded in cultural safety, including medical care, aged care, and rehabilitation support.[38] In Ireland, The Great Care Co-op was founded by migrant caregivers to address low wages and exploitative conditions in the home care sector. Operating under the Buurtzorg model,[39] It empowers care workers with decision making authority, fosters close caregiver client relationships, and delivers dignified, person-centered care.[40]

5. Responding to Health Crises

The adaptability of health cooperatives became especially clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, when their community embedded structures enabled rapid response. From digital health services to flexible safety protocols, cooperatives mobilized resources quickly to protect their members and communities.

In Italy, Gulliver Cooperativa Sociale, which manages health centers and senior care homes, redesigned its operations to prevent infection, including new training, spatial modifications, and safety procedures. As a result, its Cialdini care home recorded zero COVID-19 cases, and half of its ten facilities remained COVID free during the crisis.[41]

6. Championing Data Sovereignty and Trust

Health cooperatives are uniquely positioned to ensure ethical data governance by aligning information systems with cooperative principles of transparency, accountability, and member control.

In Switzerland, MiData is a health data cooperative that enables individuals to manage and share their personal health data securely, with full transparency and democratic oversight. Members decide how their data is used, whether for care, research, or community benefit, ensuring that sensitive information remains under the control of those it affects most.[42]

COOPERATIVES IN ACTION: CASE STUDIES

Japanese Health and Welfare Co-operative Federation (HeW CO-OP)

The Japanese Health and Welfare Co-operative Federation (HeW CO-OP) brings together 96 cooperatives that provide integrated medical and social services across the country. A defining feature is its use of "Han groups," small neighborhood-based units that engage members in health promotion through activities such as exercise classes, healthy cooking, and cancer screening drives. These groups play a key role in preventing noncommunicable diseases while strengthening community ties. HeW CO-OP also invests in training medical and care professionals and integrates members and workers into decision-making processes, reinforcing accountability and responsiveness. By embedding health education into daily life and prioritizing prevention, it fosters healthier and more resilient communities.[43]

Uganda Health Partners Cooperative Limited (UPH)

Uganda Health Partners Cooperative Limited (UPHC)[44] is a worker-owned cooperative that supports around 30 community-based health insurance cooperatives working with over 70 healthcare providers across the country. Together, these cooperatives offer prepaid benefits packages to more than 40,000 members, reducing out-of-pocket costs and improving access to care in underserved areas. UPHC also trains new cooperatives, promotes financial literacy, and supports data-informed planning, helping to scale sustainable and locally led models. By integrating insurance with service delivery and supporting policy engagement, UPHC demonstrates how cooperative health models can expand coverage, enhance equity, and complement national health systems.

Unimed, Brazil

Unimed[45] is the largest system of medical cooperatives in the world, with 339 regional cooperatives, 166 hospitals, and more than 156,000 workers, serving over 20 million people across 92 percent of Brazil. It offers both private and supplementary services, with a strong focus on prevention, health education, and social responsibility. Through its National Policy on Social Responsibility, Unimed supports community outreach, the inclusion of vulnerable populations, and environmentally sustainable practices.Physicians benefit from independence and shared resources, while patients receive accessible and high-quality care. Its scale and structure illustrate how cooperative models can deliver broad health services while remaining rooted in accountability and social values.

The Federation of Cooperative Pharmacists of Greece (OSFE)

The Federation of Cooperative Pharmacists of Greece (OSFE) [46]represents over 5,000 pharmacists working in 25 regional cooperatives, supplying more than half of Greece's pharmaceutical needs. Its cooperative logistics network ensures access to medicines across urban, rural, and island communities, filling critical gaps in the country's healthcare system. During the COVID-19 pandemic, OSFE mobilized quickly to distribute face masks, self-tests, and scientific information, while continuing to educate members on safety and treatment protocols. By balancing professional autonomy with equitable reinvestment and community service, OSFE shows how cooperatives can build strong and decentralized health infrastructure rooted in the public interest.

UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF HEALTH COOPERATIVES

Despite their proven contributions, health cooperatives often operate in policy blind spots, lacking formal recognition, access to financing, and integration into national health strategies.[47] Structural and regulatory barriers, workforce shortages, and limited investment in care infrastructure continue to constrain their reach, particularly in low income and informal settings.[48] Many cooperatives remain underrepresented in global health data and research, making it difficult to quantify their full impact on universal health coverage and decent work. Still, momentum is growing. The World Health Organization has emphasized community based and people centered care as a global priority,[49] while ILO research highlights the role of cooperatives in expanding home based care and HIV/AIDS prevention.[50] Technological innovation and evolving social protection frameworks are creating new entry points for cooperative health models, particularly in remote, aging, or underserved communities. To fully realize this potential, health cooperatives require supportive legal frameworks, targeted investment, and inclusion in policy and financing mechanisms.

1. Strengthening Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

Governments and **policymakers** should establish and enforce regulatory frameworks that acknowledge and support the unique characteristics of health cooperatives, and promote an ethical and equitable care economy through cooperatives. This includes recognizing cooperatives as legitimate healthcare providers, reducing bureaucratic barriers, and ensuring fair competition with public and private healthcare institutions through, but not limited to, a multistakeholder approach. Legislation should enable cooperatives to access funding, establish new healthcare models that have people at the center of their enterprise, including advancing data sovereignty, and integrate with national healthcare systems.

2. Expanding Financial Support and Incentives

Governments should create targeted funding mechanisms, including grants, low-interest loans, and tax incentives, to help cooperatives establish and expand their operations. Special financial tools should be developed to support new cooperative healthcare ventures, ensuring their sustainability. **Public-private partnerships** can also play a role in financing cooperative healthcare initiatives, leveraging **private sector resources** for the public good.

3. Enhancing Education, Training, and Research

Investment in education and training is essential for strengthening cooperative healthcare models. **Governments**, **cooperatives**, and **academic institutions** should work together to integrate cooperative principles into medical and business education curricula. Training programs should focus on governance, financial management, and healthcare service delivery within the cooperative framework. Research initiatives should explore innovative ways to improve cooperative healthcare models and assess their impact on public health systems.

4. Strengthening Cooperative Networks and Advocacy

Health cooperatives should unite under **representative organizations** to amplify their voice in policy making and healthcare reforms. Strong networks enable cooperatives to share best practices, pool resources, and advocate for policies that support their growth. **Governments** and **international organizations** should recognize and engage with these networks in policy dialogues, ensuring that cooperative models are considered in global health strategies.

As we mark the International Year of Cooperatives (IYC) in 2025, it is time to elevate their role in transforming health and well-being for all.

SDG 4: ENSURE INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE QUALITY EDUCATION AND PROMOTE LIFELONG LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

Education powers opportunity, equality, and participation in society, yet millions face barriers to accessing quality learning.

The global data is sobering: in 2023, an estimated 272 million children and youth were out of school—around one in six of school age.[51] Even among those enrolled, learning losses are severe. UNICEF reported in 2022 that about 70 percent of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries could not read a simple text, a phenomenon now widely referred to as "learning poverty."[52] Literacy rates among adults also remain far from global targets, with 754 million people unable to read or write, nearly two-thirds of them women.[53] Regional disparities are stark, with sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and parts of Latin America showing the highest out-of-school rates and the lowest proficiency levels. Conflicts and crises further erode enrolment and disrupt learning. These deficits have profound consequences: UNICEF warns that today's learning crisis could cost societies an estimated $21 trillion in lifetime earnings.[54]

Quality education is a human right and a cornerstone for achieving all other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It underpins poverty reduction, health, gender equality, and inclusive economic growth, yet progress is faltering.[55] The UN Secretary-General's 2024 SDG Report warns that global action remains inadequate and that new partners and models of education delivery are urgently needed to ensure no one is left behind.[56] Cooperatives offer a proven but underutilized approach. Grounded in democratic governance and community participation, they embed education and training into their core values. In doing so, cooperatives provide inclusive, locally driven solutions that expand access, reduce inequalities, and equip people, especially youth, with the skills and opportunities to thrive as learners, workers, and leaders.

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE IN EDUCATION

The Cooperative Principle 5 mandates cooperatives to "provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers and employees" and to inform the public, particularly young people and opinion leaders, about the nature and benefits of co-operation.[57] In practice, this means education is central to cooperative identity and plays a vital role in strengthening the capacity of individuals and communities to participate effectively in cooperative and social development.

Cooperatives support the spectrum of education across all ages. They offer affordable early childhood care, support primary and secondary schooling and open pathways towards technical, vocational, and higher studies. At the same time they equip adults with lifelong learning and skills training. In some contexts, homeschooling cooperatives enable parents to pool resources and teach their children when public systems fall short, while private or semi-private cooperative schools extend cooperative education across all stages. For vulnerable groups, member-owned schools and training initiatives ensure inclusive, community-driven learning opportunities. Through this holistic commitment, cooperatives not only fill service gaps but also embed democratic participation and solidarity into education, empowering people to thrive as learners, workers, and active citizens.[58]

EXPANDING ACCESS & EMPOWERING YOUTH

Cooperatives improve education access by reaching underserved populations and mobilizing resources where public systems may not. They work in rural areas, informal settlements, and conflict-affected regions, often offering places of learning and support services. For example, cooperatives of producers in agriculture, fisheries, or craft sectors frequently support local schools or scholarship funds. ILO publications highlight how cooperatives address child labour and school dropouts: their stable incomes, community networks, and awareness campaigns help keep children (especially girls) in school.[59] Crucially, cooperatives also prioritize equity. Guided by cooperative principles of openness and concern for community, cooperatives consciously include disadvantaged groups and give marginalized people such as the poor, migrants, ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities a voice and support.

ILO research shows that, worldwide, cooperatives of persons with disabilities specialize in accessible services and capacity building. For instance, Filipino disability cooperatives produce 10% of the country's school furniture under a public procurement programme. Those cooperatives formed the National Federation of Cooperatives of Persons with Disabilities, which today serves more than 1,500 members and provides loans, training, and career guidance for disabled workers.[60] In the United States and Ireland, credit union federations partner with disability organizations to train staff and improve physical and informational accessibility for members with disabilities.[61]

International organizations have recognized this potential. UNESCO's GEM Report notes that cooperatives of vulnerable groups (migrants, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples) have been "instrumental in providing… literacy training and employment or life skills training".[62] UNICEF and UNHCR commend cooperative livelihood programmes (such as the Meryem Women's Cooperative in Turkey) for giving refugees on-the-job training and social integration.[63] In rural education, cooperatives can help children attend school by reducing costs (through subsidized fees) and improving livelihoods (so families are less reliant on child labour).[64]

Beyond access to education, cooperatives also foster youth empowerment and leadership development by providing young people with a platform to organize, acquire entrepreneurial skills, and participate in decision-making. Through cooperative structures, youth learn practical business management such as accounting, marketing, and democratic governance, while building confidence as leaders in their communities. ICA's Youth Committee demonstrates how cooperatives empower young people to have a voice in shaping local development. By combining training, mentorship, and democratic participation, cooperatives prepare a generation of socially responsible entrepreneurs and community leaders.

CASE STUDIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Morocco – Yasmine Annajah Cooperative

Founded in 2018 in Beni Mellal, the Yasmine Annajah Cooperative was created not only as a cooperative but also as a school. Serving 220 children with a team of 13 teachers and additional support staff, it provides quality education to children from vulnerable backgrounds. The cooperative also funds scholarships, strengthens language and digital skills, and organizes extracurricular activities such as scientific excursions. By demonstrating that cooperatives can directly operate schools, Yasmine Annajah showcases a replicable community-driven model for advancing SDG 4.

Malaysia – ANGKASA

In collaboration with the Ministry of Education, ANGKASA runs the School Cooperative Excellence Awards (SCEA), showcasing how school cooperatives foster entrepreneurship and democratic participation. Since their introduction in 1968, over 2,000 school cooperatives with 1.6 million members have flourished, offering services from shops and printing to tourism and agriculture, with some generating turnovers exceeding RM 1 million annually. Open to students, teachers, and staff, these cooperatives practice democratic governance through annual meetings and elections, supported by training. By incentivizing innovation, contributing to community well-being, and nurturing young entrepreneurs, school cooperatives strengthen human capital and local economies.[65]

Paraguay – Federación de Cooperativas del Paraguay (FECOPAR)

FECOPAR, a federation of savings and credit cooperatives, partners with the Ministry of Education and Sciences to embed cooperative education into formal curricula. Through certified teacher training schemes, a Technical Baccalaureate in Cooperatives, and youth laboratory initiatives, FECOPAR equips students aged 16–18 with cooperative knowledge and practical skills. The federation also runs financial education workshops with universities and maintains a Youth Committee that develops young cooperative leaders. These programmes strengthen the role of cooperatives in national education systems and prepare youth to be both cooperative members and active citizens.

Kenya – Cooperative University of Kenya (CUK)

The Cooperative University of Kenya (CUK) advances quality education by offering specialized academic courses and training in cooperative business, community development, and financial management, equipping young people with practical skills for employment and entrepreneurship.[66] Through partnerships with SACCOs, cooperative societies, and regulators, students gain hands-on experience in democratic governance, financial planning, and business operations. By nurturing youth leadership and fostering cooperative values, CUK empowers young people to become socially responsible entrepreneurs and leaders in their communities.

Moshi Co-operative University, from 'MoCU Conducts 14-Day PUVU Training for Co-operative Managers and Accountants in Lindi' (mocu.ac.tz)

Tanzania – Moshi Co-operative University (MoCU)

Moshi Co-operative University (MoCU) integrates cooperative principles into higher education, entrepreneurship training, and applied research, equipping students with practical skills to address real-world challenges.[67] Through initiatives such as the Wazalendo Savings and Credit Cooperative Society (WSACCO), students gain hands-on exposure to cooperative practice and financial inclusion. By fostering critical thinking, leadership, and democratic participation, MoCU prepares graduates to become innovators and advocates for inclusive growth and sustainable development.

India – Tribhuvan Sahkari University

Established in 2025, Tribhuvan Sahkari University (TSU) in Gujarat is India's first national cooperative university. Building on the legacy of the Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA), TSU offers specialized degrees and certificates in agribusiness, cooperative banking, rural credit, and marketing.[68] It is expected to train thousands of professionals to meet the growing demand for skilled personnel among nearly one million cooperative board members and four million employees across India. As a hub for research, innovation, and policy development, TSU will also incubate cooperative start-ups and partner with regional training institutes to expand its reach.

Spain / Cameroon: Cooperativa Gredos San Diego

Through an intercooperation project launched in 2017, Cooperativa Gredos San Diego (GSD) in Madrid partnered with Cameroonian institutions to establish a new secondary school. The cooperative provided educational management and jointly designed curricula that incorporated cooperative values while addressing gender equality by supporting single mothers. The school has expanded access to quality education in the Diocese of Edea, and in 2025, secured funding for another 14 years to ensure. This demonstrates how international cooperative solidarity can directly contribute to SDG 4 while strengthening local education systems.

Chile — Digital & Cooperative Education through Coopeuch

Coopeuch, Chile's largest savings-and-credit cooperative, has made financial and digital education central to its mission, reaching members and the wider public through online platforms, broadcast media, and targeted programmes. Its flagship hub, Coopeuch Educa, offers modules on budgeting, savings, digital payments, and financial planning, with specialised streams such as the 60+ Digital programme for older adults. This has been expanded into Coopeuch Educa TV, a televised and online series that explains cooperative principles and financial topics from green finance to AI. Coopeuch also partners with the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile to deliver free online courses, provides scholarships for members' children, and promotes digital inclusion through its app and branch network. By combining mass communications, formal training, and community-based activities, Coopeuch builds financial capability, promotes cooperative values, and empowers participation in the digital economy.

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Europe – REScoop.eu Energy Communities

REScoop.eu, the European federation of energy communities, brings together a growing network of 2,500 cooperatives and 2 million citizens advancing a people-centred energy transition. Education is central to their mission, with members applying cooperative principles to build awareness and skills for sustainability. In Belgium, the student cooperative CORE in Leuven develops engineering projects on circular economy and responsible energy use while engaging communities through interactive workshops such as the "Energy Escape Room." In the United Kingdom, Repowering London trains young people for careers in the green energy sector, equipping more than 150 youth with practical skills, while also running workshops that help households understand their energy rights and manage consumption. Through initiatives like these, REScoop.eu members demonstrate how energy cooperatives combine innovation, education, and youth empowerment to advance inclusive and sustainable learning.

Philippines – Tagum Cooperative

Tagum Cooperative operates a "Laboratory Cooperative" for youth under 18, providing a unique training ground in cooperative governance and operations. With its own Youth Board of Directors, committees, and biennial general assembly, the laboratory cooperative gives young people hands-on experience in democratic decision making and financial literacy. By fostering values of thrift, saving, and self-management, Tagum builds the foundation for responsible economic participation and future cooperative leadership.

Portugal – CASES: FORMAES & Academy Y.ES

Since 2011, CASES has delivered the FORMAES Training Programme for the Social Economy, offering online courses tailored to cooperative leaders, staff, and volunteers. Complementing this, the Academy Y.ES is a six-day immersive course that introduces young people to social economy principles while fostering entrepreneurship. Together, these initiatives have reached over 500 participants, strengthening skills, promoting inclusive education, and inspiring youth-led innovation in the cooperative sector.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Structural inequalities based on gender, disability, socio-economic status, migration, and geography continue to deny many young people access to education, while conflict and climate crises intensify their vulnerability. At the same time, education systems remain disconnected from labour market realities, leaving graduates without clear pathways to decent work. Cooperatives help bridge these gaps by offering community-driven solutions that reflect real needs and expand opportunities. Their participatory governance engages parents, teachers, and youth in shaping education, while cooperative schools, digital platforms, and enterprises demonstrate how innovation and solidarity can create inclusive learning environments. By empowering young peoples' agency and leadership, cooperatives not only respond to immediate challenges but also lay the foundation for more resilient and equitable education systems.

CALL TO ACTION

To realize the potential of cooperatives in advancing SDG 4, stakeholders can take the following steps:

1. Integrate cooperatives into education strategies and curricula

Ministries of Education can accredit and subsidize cooperative schools, colleges, and universities, include cooperative representatives in Education Sector Reviews, and incorporate cooperative values, entrepreneurship, and democratic governance into national curricula.

2. Provide financial and technical support

Governments and donors can establish funding windows for cooperative-run schools, training centres, and scholarship schemes. Public procurement contracts for school furniture, uniforms, and services can be earmarked for cooperatives, while subsidies can help cooperative childcare centres integrate with national systems.

3. Create stronger school-to-work pathways

Cooperative technical institutes can be linked with national apprenticeship schemes and green jobs programmes to ensure graduates transition into sustainable livelihoods. Partnerships with employer and worker organizations can expand these opportunities.

4. Strengthen cooperative education institutions

Cooperative universities and colleges should receive seed funding and recognition within higher education systems. Partnerships with institutions, such as Mondragon University (Spain) or IRMA (India), can support faculty exchanges, research collaborations, and curriculum development.

5. Leverage multi-stakeholder platforms

National SDG forums and Education 2030 monitoring bodies can expand to include cooperatives alongside governments, teachers, and private providers. International networks (ICA, COPAC, UNTFSSE) can organize knowledge-sharing on cooperative education, as seen in the recent ICA-Americas dialogue on education (December 2024), which brought together leaders from 20+ countries to align cooperative education efforts.[69]

Cooperatives advance quality education by expanding access, improving learning outcomes, and embedding democratic values. They equip young people to participate fully in society and the economy while keeping education responsive to community needs. In a time when global challenges risk excluding millions from learning, cooperatives show resilience and inclusivity by placing education at the heart of community development. The International Year of Cooperatives 2025 remains a rallying call for collective solutions to ensure every young person can learn, grow, and thrive.

SDG 5: ACHIEVE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

GENDER EQUALITY is a fundamental human right and a vital pillar of a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world. It underpins the achievement of all other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by ensuring that everyone can participate fully and equally in all aspects of life. Yet, despite decades of global commitments, progress remains uneven and fragile. Structural barriers continue to limit access to economic opportunity, leadership, and decision-making, while wage gaps, occupational segregation, and the unequal distribution of care work reinforce disparities, particularly for women and girls. Intersecting crises such as economic instability, climate change, conflict, and displacement further deepen these inequalities. At the same time, a global rise in anti-rights movements threatens to erode hard-won gains, weaken protections, and reinforce exclusionary policies that stall meaningful progress.

The **2025 UN Secretary-General's report on women's rights**[70] highlights both significant strides and persistent challenges. While legal protections against gender-based violence have expanded and more women have entered leadership positions, deep-rooted structural inequalities and chronic underinvestment in gender equality initiatives continue to stall progress. The increasing demand for care services, combined with inadequate policy responses, places further strain on women's economic independence. As the international community convenes for the **69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69)**, marking three decades since the **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**,[71] the urgency for transformative solutions has never been greater.

The world is currently not on track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), as progress on key targets such as ending violence, ensuring equal leadership, and recognizing unpaid care work remain slow and uneven.[72] Achieving gender equality requires bold, inclusive, and scalable approaches to tackle the persisting structural and social barriers.

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE

In a world where women remain underrepresented in leadership, decision-making, and entrepreneurship, cooperatives offer a powerful alternative to the conventional business model. Their structure, based on open membership, democratic governance, and shared ownership, helps dismantle structural barriers to women's economic and social empowerment. Their relevance has been recognized by the G7 Labour and Employment Ministers, who affirmed the role of cooperatives in advancing inclusive labour markets and building economic resilience.[73]

A key strength of the cooperative model is its ability to expand financial inclusion in contexts where women continue to face restrictive laws, discriminatory lending practices, and entrenched social norms that limit access to credit, savings, and investment. By pooling resources and sharing risk, cooperatives offer collective financial mechanisms that promote autonomy, build resilience, and enable women to invest in their livelihoods. This, in turn, generates ripple effects that benefit families, communities, and broader development goals.

Cooperatives also play a crucial role in ensuring safe, dignified, and inclusive workplaces by reinforcing protections against discrimination, violence, and exploitation, as outlined in the **ICA Declaration on Decent Work and Against Harassment**.[74] Many cooperatives go further by offering training, mentorship, and leadership pathways, particularly in male-dominated sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing, helping women gain skills, confidence, and upward mobility. Recognizing that a truly inclusive labour market must also value and support women's care responsibilities, many cooperatives adopt gender-responsive policies such as childcare services and flexible scheduling. Others organize informal care workers into formal enterprises, improving job quality, and expanding essential services.

Beyond economic inclusion, cooperatives foster systemic change by building networks of trust, mutual support, and collective action. These networks create spaces where women, especially those facing social or economic exclusion, can connect, organize, and advocate for their rights. Through shared experiences and solidarity, cooperatives help shift social norms, challenge discrimination, and amplify women's voices in both community and institutional settings. This collective empowerment strengthens individual agency and drives broader social change.

COOPERATIVES IN ACTION: CASE STUDIES

Tubusezere Cooperative[75] was founded in 2012 by a group of former sex workers in Rwanda to deliver HIV and AIDS care and prevention services—delivered by and for former sex workers. With support from the Society for Family Health, members received training in health service delivery and cooperative management. Today, the cooperative offers STI and TB screenings, family planning, condom distribution, and monthly HIV/AIDS education—mostly free or subsidized—for members and other vulnerable women. By organizing collectively, the cooperative promotes women's empowerment, expanding access to essential health services, and supporting the reintegration of marginalized individuals into society through solidarity, agency, and economic inclusion.

Founded in 1999 in Agadir, Morocco, the **Tissaliouine Cooperative Union** has empowered over 1,200 rural women across six provinces by creating sustainable livelihoods through the production and sale of argan-based products. What began as four cooperatives has grown into 18, boosting women's incomes, expanding their skills through professional training, and providing stable employment where few opportunities previously existed. The union's success in diversifying products and increasing capital reflects its broader impact—enhancing economic independence, social inclusion, and community resilience for women in marginalized areas.

Founded in 2016, Resew Cooperative in Ukraine promotes repairing and upcycling textiles while advocating for eco-friendly lifestyles. A women-led initiative, Resew also supports queer and trans communities by producing comfortable and affordable clothing. Beyond textiles, it fosters cooperative education through a board game that simulates real-world cooperative challenges. Following the 2022 war, displaced women members reorganized to provide stable jobs while upcycling military uniforms into everyday clothing, blending sustainability with resilience. Resew continues to be an active voice in labour rights and cooperative education across artistic, cultural, and social movements in Ukraine.

GEVI Consultants is a Uruguayan women's cooperative dedicated to promoting a Green and Inclusive Economy. They have experience and technical knowledge in the design and execution of projects that promote sustainable development, contributing to a positive impact in the country and the region by offering comprehensive technical advisory services, consulting, research, and training on green issues such as the circular economy, green jobs, waste management, climate change, and sustainable production, among others. After completing the 2024 cooperative incubation process through INCUBACOOP—a joint initiative of MIEM, INACOOP, and CUDECOOP—GEVI has deepened its commitment to advancing sustainable development in Uruguay and across Latin America through collaboration and cooperative networks.

Looms of Ladakh Women Cooperative Ltd., founded in 2017, empowers over 250 women artisans across 15 villages in Ladakh, India. By organizing women into producer groups and improving market access, the cooperative has strengthened economic inclusion and leadership opportunities. Producing high-quality pashmina goods, it reached a $70,000 annual turnover by 2022–23 and continues to grow. Through ethical business practices, strategic partnerships, and international recognition—including features at Times Square and the UN—the cooperative demonstrates how women-led enterprises can advance gender equality and sustainable livelihoods in remote regions.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Cooperatives have long supported women's empowerment, but participation remains uneven across sectors and regions as structural barriers, policy gaps, and social norms continue to limit women's leadership and economic opportunities. Historically, discriminatory laws restricted women's rights to own property, inherit land, or register businesses—barriers that continue to influence access to resources and support today. In many contexts, women still face legal and customary constraints that hinder their ability to join, lead, or benefit equally from cooperatives.

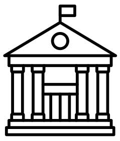
While many countries have made progress in reforming discriminatory legislation, implementation remains inconsistent, and enabling legal and policy frameworks are not always matched by practice. Successive United Nations General Assembly resolutions and Secretary-General reports have consistently called for laws and policies that guarantee women's full and equal participation in cooperatives, including access to land, financing, and procurement opportunities.[76] At the regional level, the **European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy (2020–2025)**[77] promotes gender mainstreaming across EU and national policies, though no member state has yet achieved full equality. In Africa, the **African Union's 10-Year Strategy on the Social and Solidarity Economy**,[78] launched in 2024, includes gender-sensitivity as a guiding principle, laying important groundwork for cooperative development that reflects women's needs and contributions. However, stronger alignment between high-level policy commitments and local implementation is still needed to remove persistent legal and institutional barriers.

Socio-cultural norms continue to shape women's roles within cooperatives and often restrict their influence and leadership—particularly in rural and male-dominated sectors. In these contexts, women-only cooperatives offer valuable spaces for peer support, confidence-building, and skill development. At the same time, ensuring women's meaningful participation and leadership in mixed cooperatives is essential to transforming governance structures and challenging entrenched inequalities. Persistent underrepresentation in leadership roles can discourage new women members and limit the reach of cooperative values in practice.

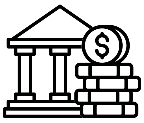
A lack of sex-disaggregated data further constrains progress. Many cooperatives and support organizations lack accurate information on women's membership, leadership, and participation in training and governance. When data is collected, it often fails to capture the depth or quality of women's engagement. This weakens accountability, limits access to gender-responsive funding, and hinders evidence-based policymaking. Additionally, cooperative education and training rarely address gender-specific barriers, leaving gaps in leadership development and women's economic empowerment.

Despite these challenges, emerging opportunities offer clear entry points for action. Digital tools and platforms are expanding access to markets and services, particularly for women in rural and informal settings. The **2023 Indian G20 Presidency's B20 communiqué**[79] highlighted the need for gender-responsive financial inclusion policies, digital empowerment strategies, and targeted investments in women-led enterprises. Increased recognition of the care economy positions cooperatives to formalize and improve working conditions in care services while reducing women's time poverty. With strategic investment in gender-responsive financing, digital inclusion, and inclusive cooperative education, the cooperative model can play a transformative role in closing gender gaps and advancing more just, resilient, and sustainable economies.

CALL TO ACTION



Governments should revise cooperative laws to remove legal and economic barriers, ensure gender-responsive policies, integrate cooperative education into national frameworks, and invest in training programs that enhance women's leadership, membership and participation in cooperatives.



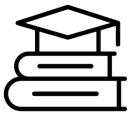
Financial institutions should increase investment in cooperatives through affordable credit, grants, and gender-responsive financing mechanisms that expand access to capital, particularly for women and marginalized groups. They should also support financial literacy and capacity-building initiatives tailored to cooperative members.

The private sector should engage cooperatives as key partners in inclusive supply chains, invest in women-led cooperative enterprises, integrate cooperatives into responsible sourcing strategies, and promote digital and financial inclusion for cooperative members.

Cooperative networks and federations, at both the national and regional level, should embed gender equality into their governance structures, increase women's representation in leadership[80], and mainstream a gender perspective into their policies and work[81]. Innovative approaches include **gender audits** to assess the "gender-friendliness" of their internal and external work, as well as a more active involvement of male members in creating more spaces for women participation. More broadly, they need to leverage digital tools and innovation to improve market access, so as to create additional economic opportunities for their current and prospective women members.

UN Agencies and International Organizations should promote cooperative approaches as a strategy and practical tool for achieving SDG 5, strengthen policy frameworks that support gender-equitable cooperatives, facilitate knowledge-sharing across regions, and provide technical assistance to enhance and support cooperative development.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs should advocate for gender equality in cooperatives, provide technical assistance, offer capacity-building programs for women cooperative members, and support cooperative-led initiatives that promote decent work and economic empowerment.



Academia and research institutions should advance research on the role of cooperatives in achieving SDG 5, including their impact on women's economic empowerment, leadership, and access to decent work. Educational institutions should integrate cooperative models into curricula and support the collection of sex-disaggregated data to inform evidence-based policies and track progress toward gender equality.

Cooperatives are powerful engines of gender equality, fostering economic inclusion, democratic governance, and financial independence. By providing equitable access to resources, decision-making, and employment opportunities, cooperatives contribute to more inclusive and sustainable economies. However, unlocking their full potential requires structural reforms, increased investment, and a strong commitment from all stakeholders including the cooperative movement itself.

The time for action is now. Investing in cooperatives is not just a moral imperative; it is a strategic necessity for building resilient, inclusive economies that promote gender equality at scale. As part of the International Year of Cooperatives (IYC), this brief highlights the need to strengthen policies, partnerships, and investment in cooperative enterprises that drive meaningful progress. Recognizing and supporting cooperatives as key actors in sustainable development will be critical to ensuring a more just and equitable future.

SDG 6: CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

ACCESS TO CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION IS A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHT AND A PREREQUISITE FOR HEALTH, DIGNITY, ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.

Progress on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 underpins advances across the entire 2030 Agenda, influencing outcomes related to food security, public health, education, gender equality, poverty reduction, and climate resilience. Yet, despite notable gains over recent decades, the world remains far off track to achieve SDG 6 by 2030. As of 2024, only 74 percent of the world's population had access to safely managed drinking water services, 58 percent to safely managed sanitation services, and 80 percent to basic hygiene facilities. This leaves approximately 2.2 billion people without safely managed drinking water, 3.4 billion without safely managed sanitation, and 1.7 billion without basic hygiene services.[82] A decade after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, progress is not accelerating at the pace required. On current trajectories, the gap between existing service levels and the SDG 6 targets continues to widen, and the 2025 reporting cycle confirms that the Goal remains off track across virtually all indicators.

The challenge extends beyond access to household services. Progress on water quality and ecosystem protection remains insufficient. Only 58 percent of domestic wastewater is safely treated, resulting in the continued discharge of large volumes of untreated wastewater into rivers, lakes, and coastal ecosystems and undermining progress toward SDG target 6.3. Freshwater ecosystems are deteriorating across many regions, with more than 60 percent of countries in Central Asia, South-Eastern Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa reporting at least one type of degraded freshwater ecosystem. Declining surface water levels across 364 river basins have affected an estimated 93 million people, posing significant risks to water security and ecosystem health and hindering progress toward target 6.6.[83]

Similarly, implementation of integrated water resources management (IWRM) remains incomplete, with global implementation at only 57 percent, and current rates of progress suggest that full implementation may not be achieved before 2049.[84] At the same time, more than 2.7 billion people live in countries experiencing severe water stress, highlighting growing pressures on finite freshwater resources. Though the technological solutions to many of these challenges already exist, the principal barriers to progress are increasingly institutional rather than technical. Fragmented governance arrangements, inadequate and poorly coordinated financing, limited local ownership, and weak stakeholder participation continue to constrain implementation. Community engagement remains particularly under-resourced. Although 92 percent of countries report having formal mechanisms for participation in rural drinking water and sanitation services, only 41 percent report high levels of participation in practice, and just 9 percent indicate that sufficient financial resources are available to support meaningful community engagement.[85]

Accelerating progress toward SDG 6 will therefore require not only increased investment but also more inclusive and locally grounded approaches to the governance, financing, and delivery of water and sanitation services. This is particularly important in rural, peri-urban, and informal settlements, where conventional utility-based models have often struggled to provide sustainable and equitable coverage.

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE AND CASE STUDIES

The strength of the cooperative model lies in its ability to combine community ownership with professional service delivery. Because users are also owners, investments are directed toward service quality, affordability, and long-term sustainability rather than shareholder returns. This institutional arrangement directly addresses several of the barriers identified in the 2025 SDG 6 monitoring reports, particularly weak local participation, fragmented governance, and insufficient financing for community-based water and sanitation systems.

Unlike conventional service delivery models that often struggle to reach dispersed rural settlements, peri-urban communities, and underserved populations, cooperatives are embedded within the communities they serve. Their democratic governance structures enable local people to participate directly in planning, financing, managing, and monitoring water and sanitation services, fostering a strong sense of ownership and stewardship. As a result, cooperatives have consistently demonstrated their ability to deliver sustainable, inclusive, and resilient water and sanitation solutions in contexts where centralized public systems or private providers have been unable or unwilling to operate effectively.

Expanding Access to Drinking Water and Sanitation

@SAGUAPAC

One notable example is Santa Cruz Public Services Cooperative (SAGUAPAC) in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, widely recognized as one of the world's most successful water cooperatives. Founded in 1979, SAGUAPAC provides drinking water and sanitation services to more than 1.9 million people through an extensive and continuously expanding network of water and sewer infrastructure. Operating under democratic governance and member oversight, the cooperative has consistently achieved service quality and coverage levels comparable to, and often exceeding, those of many public and private utilities in Latin America. Through sustained investments in water production, wastewater treatment, network expansion, and modern technologies that optimize water use, alongside environmental education campaigns promoting responsible water consumption, SAGUAPAC has significantly expanded access to safe drinking water and sanitation while protecting water resources and reducing environmental pollution. Its model has improved public health, supported economic development in one of Bolivia's fastest-growing urban areas, and made a substantial contribution to achieving SDG targets 6.1 (safe and affordable drinking water) and 6.2 (adequate sanitation and hygiene), establishing the cooperative as a regional leader in sustainable water and sanitation service delivery.

The Nordic countries provide some of the most advanced examples of cooperative participation in water service delivery, demonstrating how community-owned models can complement public utilities and contribute to universal access to safe drinking water and sanitation. In Finland, more than 1,400 water cooperatives provide drinking water and wastewater services to rural communities beyond the reach of municipal utilities. Many of these cooperatives have evolved into professionally managed service providers covering entire municipalities and surrounding rural areas, in some cases serving up to 99 percent of the local population. Their success has been supported by enabling legislation, technical assistance, and cooperative networks such as the Association of Finnish Water Cooperatives (SVOSK), established in 2009 to provide training, knowledge-sharing, and sector coordination.[86] The Finnish experience demonstrates how member-owned enterprises can deliver high-quality, affordable, and sustainable water services while maintaining strong local accountability and long-term infrastructure stewardship.

Denmark similarly relies on a highly decentralized water system in which approximately 2,500 consumer-owned water cooperatives provide services to smaller towns and rural areas, compared with just over 100 municipal utilities serving larger urban centers. Supported by their national federation, Danske Vandværker, these cooperatives receive technical, legal, financial, and managerial support that enables them to maintain high service standards and comply with strict water quality requirements.[87] Together, the experiences of Finland and Denmark illustrate how cooperative water systems can effectively expand access to safe water, strengthen community participation, and ensure the long-term sustainability of water infrastructure. They offer valuable examples of how cooperative enterprises can help achieve SDG 6, particularly in rural and underserved areas where centralized service delivery models face operational and financial challenges.

Similarly, in Chile, the Federation of Sanitary Services Cooperatives (FESAN) supports dozens of member cooperatives that collectively provide water and sanitation services to more than 60,000 people in rural and semi-rural communities. Following major earthquakes and natural disasters, cooperative members worked together to rebuild damaged infrastructure, including wastewater treatment facilities and eco-treatment lagoons. This collective approach has strengthened resilience while ensuring continuity of essential services for affected populations.

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In Côte d'Ivoire, many cocoa-growing communities continue to face limited access to safe drinking water despite their central role in global cocoa production. The Cooperative Society of Modern Eco-farmers of Méagui (ECAMOM), established in 2006 in the country's south-western region, demonstrates how cooperatives can address this challenge through community-led investment. As a Fairtrade-certified cooperative, ECAMOM has strategically invested its Fairtrade Premium in water infrastructure, including the installation of five boreholes serving the villages of Sokoura, Assemiankro, Bolendrikro, Kouakouemikro, and Felixkro.[88] As the cooperative expanded from around 300 members to nearly 3,800 members by 2022, these investments significantly improved access to safe drinking water for cooperative members, their families, and local schools. The initiative has reduced the incidence of waterborne diseases, improved hygiene and public health, and eased the burden on women and children who previously spent considerable time collecting water, enabling greater school attendance and participation in income-generating activities.[89] ECAMOM's experience illustrates how cooperatives can leverage shared resources to deliver essential services, strengthen community resilience, and advance SDG targets 6.1 (safe and affordable drinking water) and 6.2 (adequate sanitation and hygiene), while contributing to broader rural development.

Similarly, India is leveraging its extensive cooperative network to strengthen rural water security by expanding the role of Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS). Traditionally focused on agricultural credit and farm services, PACS are increasingly being designated as Paani Samitis (water committees) under the Government of India's Jal Jeevan Mission, taking responsibility for the operation and maintenance of village piped water supply systems. This approach builds on existing, trusted community institutions rather than creating new governance structures, strengthening local ownership and improving the long-term sustainability of rural water services.

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The initiative has expanded rapidly since 2023. Government data show that the number of PACS identified to manage rural water systems increased from 596 across six states in the early phase of implementation to 1,381 across 12 states and union territories by the end of 2023, and reached 1,833 across 16 states and union territories in 2024. The initiative forms part of a broader cooperative reform under which the Ministry of Cooperation introduced model by-laws enabling PACS to become Multipurpose Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (MPACS), allowing them to undertake more than 25 economic and community service activities, including water and sanitation. Between February 2023 and April 2025, nearly 19,600 new multipurpose PACS, dairy, and fishery cooperatives were registered as part of a national target of establishing 200,000 new multipurpose cooperatives over five years. By integrating water management into village cooperatives with established governance systems and strong community trust, India is enhancing the sustainability of rural water infrastructure while empowering local communities to manage essential public services. The initiative demonstrates how cooperatives can serve as effective institutional partners in advancing SDG target 6.b on strengthening the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management, while contributing to universal access to safe and reliable drinking water.

Improving Sanitation, Waste Management, and Public Health

Cooperatives also contribute to SDG target 6.3 by improving sanitation, preventing pollution, and managing waste. In many developing countries, waste picker cooperatives have become critical actors in preventing solid waste from entering waterways, drainage systems, and urban environments.

A leading example is the Solid Waste Collection and Handling (SWaCH) Cooperative in Pune, India, a worker-owned cooperative of more than 4,000 waste pickers that provides door-to-door waste collection services to approximately one million households. By recovering and recycling nearly 83,000 tonnes of waste annually, SWaCH significantly reduces environmental pollution and prevents large quantities of waste from reaching rivers, streams, and landfill sites. The cooperative also conducts community awareness campaigns on sanitation, menstrual hygiene, and composting, generating both environmental and public health benefits while creating dignified livelihoods for thousands of low-income workers, particularly women.

In Colombia, the worker cooperative Planeta Verde has demonstrated how cooperative approaches to waste management can simultaneously improve environmental outcomes and generate employment. By organizing waste collection, recycling, and environmental education activities, the cooperative has reduced local pollution while creating stable income opportunities for workers who previously operated in the informal sector. Such initiatives illustrate how cooperatives contribute to both improved sanitation environments and inclusive economic development.

Strengthening Livelihoods and Community Resilience

The impact of cooperatives extends beyond infrastructure and environmental outcomes. By fostering local ownership, creating jobs, and retaining resources within communities, cooperatives strengthen resilience and improve livelihoods. Water user cooperatives reduce the financial burden associated with unreliable services, improve agricultural productivity through more secure water access, and support local economic development. Waste management cooperatives create thousands of jobs while improving sanitation and environmental quality. Producer cooperatives often reinvest surpluses into water infrastructure, schools, health facilities, and ecosystem restoration projects that benefit entire communities.

Across America, Africa, Asia, and Europe, these experiences demonstrate that cooperatives are not simply alternative service providers. They are institutional mechanisms through which communities organize collective action, mobilize local resources, and ensure that water and sanitation systems remain responsive, accountable, and sustainable over time. Their contribution is particularly significant in regions where conventional delivery models face persistent challenges reaching vulnerable populations.

As governments seek to accelerate progress toward SDG 6, cooperative enterprises offer a practical and proven pathway to expand access to safe water and sanitation, improve environmental stewardship, strengthen community participation, and enhance the livelihoods of millions of people. Yet despite these achievements, their contribution remains largely absent from global monitoring and financing frameworks. Greater recognition and support for cooperative approaches could therefore unlock significant additional progress toward achieving universal and equitable access to water and sanitation by 2030.

Protecting Water Sources and Freshwater Ecosystems

Beyond service delivery, cooperatives increasingly contribute to protecting freshwater ecosystems and water sources, supporting SDG target 6.6. This role is becoming increasingly important as climate change, land degradation, and unsustainable land use intensify pressure on freshwater resources.

In Costa Rica, the rural electrification cooperative Coopesantos R.L. has become a recognized leader in watershed conservation. Through investments financed by cooperative revenues, Coopesantos has acquired and protected approximately 237 hectares of land surrounding critical water sources that supply more than 33,000 rural residents. The cooperative has also coordinated the planting of more than 60,000 trees around springs and recharge zones, helping to improve water quality, enhance groundwater recharge, and strengthen resilience to climate-related droughts.[90]

In Ethiopia, the Oromia Coffee Farmers Cooperative Union demonstrates how agricultural cooperatives can contribute to water security while improving rural livelihoods. Revenues generated through coffee marketing and value addition have been reinvested into community development projects, including the construction of 56 clean water supply stations serving coffee-growing communities.[91] These investments have reduced the time women and children spend collecting water, improved public health conditions, increased school attendance, and strengthened local economic productivity. The example illustrates how producer cooperatives can transform economic gains into broader social and environmental benefits.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The experiences of water, sanitation, waste management, and producer cooperatives worldwide demonstrate that cooperatives can be effective vehicles for expanding access to safe water and sanitation, improving water resource management, protecting ecosystems, and strengthening community resilience. Yet despite their proven contributions, cooperatives remain underutilized in national and global efforts to achieve SDG 6. Their potential is constrained not by the limitations of the model itself, but by legal, financial, institutional, and informational barriers that prevent them from operating, scaling, and attracting investment on equal terms with public and private providers.

Many of these barriers stem from policy and regulatory frameworks designed around centralized public utilities or investor-owned companies that do not adequately recognize community-owned enterprises. As a result, cooperatives in many countries and localities are often treated as exceptions rather than legitimate partners in water governance and service delivery. Addressing these constraints presents a significant opportunity to accelerate progress toward SDG 6 while advancing the broader commitment to inclusive, participatory, and locally driven development.

Limited Legal Recognition and Enabling Frameworks: In many countries, water, sanitation, wastewater, and waste management legislation does not explicitly recognize cooperatives as eligible service providers. Cooperative laws, where they exist, are often outdated or disconnected from sector-specific regulations governing water and sanitation services. This creates uncertainty regarding licensing, water-use rights, infrastructure ownership, service contracts, and regulatory oversight. In some cases, cooperatives are unable to obtain the permits required to operate legally or access public investment programmes, regardless of their capacity to deliver services.

Creating an enabling legal environment is therefore a critical first step. Governments can strengthen cooperative participation by updating water, sanitation, and cooperative legislation to explicitly recognize cooperatives as legitimate service operators, capable of owning and managing infrastructure, holding licenses and permits, entering into service agreements, and participating in public-private-community partnerships.

Limited Access to Finance and Investment: Access to finance remains one of the most significant barriers facing cooperatives in the water sector. Water and sanitation infrastructure requires substantial upfront investment and long-term maintenance financing, yet most financing mechanisms are designed for large utilities or private companies with significant collateral and borrowing capacity. Small and medium-sized cooperatives often struggle to access affordable credit, long-term loans, guarantees, or investment capital, even when they have strong repayment records and demonstrated community support.

This financing gap is particularly acute in underserved rural and peri-urban areas where operating costs are high and household incomes are low. Without adequate financial support, cooperatives may struggle to expand coverage, upgrade infrastructure, adopt new technologies, or maintain service quality over time. Dedicated financing mechanisms, including blended finance facilities, guarantee funds, concessional lending windows, revolving funds, and community infrastructure grants, could help unlock cooperative investment while ensuring affordability for vulnerable populations.

Procurement and Contracting Barriers: Even where cooperatives are legally recognized, public procurement and contracting systems often favor large commercial providers. Tendering requirements commonly rely on turnover thresholds, technical specifications, and contract sizes that are difficult for community-based enterprises to meet. Consequently, cooperatives are frequently excluded from municipal service contracts, delegated management agreements, and infrastructure development programmes despite having strong local knowledge and proven operational capacity.

Reforming procurement frameworks presents an important opportunity to broaden participation. Governments and utilities can create procurement mechanisms that recognize the specific characteristics of community-owned enterprises, including smaller contract lots, community-provider windows, framework agreements, and evaluation criteria that value local accountability, social impact, and community participation alongside financial considerations.

Capacity Constraints and Technical Support Needs: Many cooperatives operate effectively despite limited access to technical support, training, and professional services. Smaller providers often face challenges in meeting increasingly complex requirements related to water quality monitoring, wastewater treatment, digital reporting, operator certification, asset management, climate resilience planning, and regulatory compliance. These challenges can limit access to financing, licensing, and expansion opportunities.

Strengthening cooperative capacity represents a high-impact investment opportunity. Governments, development partners, universities, and cooperative federations can support the establishment of technical assistance centers, shared service platforms, regional support hubs, and training programmes that enable cooperatives to access expertise, reduce operating costs, and meet regulatory standards. The experiences of Finland's SVOSK and Denmark's Danske Vandværker demonstrate the value of cooperative support networks in strengthening service quality and long-term sustainability.

Exclusion from Water Governance and Decision-Making: Although cooperatives are inherently participatory institutions, they are often absent from formal water governance structures. In many countries, they are underrepresented in river basin organizations, water resource management bodies, national water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) coordination platforms, regulatory consultations, and SDG review processes. This exclusion limits opportunities to contribute local knowledge, influence policy decisions, and advocate for the needs of the communities they serve.

The absence of cooperatives from decision-making forums is particularly problematic given the emphasis placed by SDG target 6.b (Cooperation & Participation) on community participation in water and sanitation management. Greater inclusion of cooperatives in governance mechanisms would not only strengthen democratic participation but also improve policy effectiveness by incorporating practical experience from frontline service providers. Governments can support this objective by ensuring cooperative representation on basin councils, in WASH coordination mechanisms, and in national SDG review processes.

DATA GAPS AND STATISTICAL INVISIBILITY

Despite serving millions of people worldwide, cooperatives remain largely invisible in national and global water statistics. Most monitoring systems do not distinguish service providers by ownership or governance model, making it difficult to quantify the contribution of cooperatives to water access, sanitation coverage, wastewater treatment, watershed protection, and other SDG 6 outcomes. As a result, cooperative achievements often go unrecognized in national planning, policy formulation, and resource allocation processes.

This statistical invisibility has significant consequences. What is not measured is difficult to support, replicate, or finance. Improving data collection on cooperative service provision would enhance evidence-based policymaking and provide a clearer picture of the diverse actors contributing to SDG 6. Governments can address this gap by incorporating ownership and governance categories into

WASH information systems, utility registries, and national monitoring frameworks, while international agencies can encourage similar approaches within global SDG reporting mechanisms.

CALL TO ACTION

The evidence presented in this brief demonstrates that cooperatives are already making significant contributions to water supply, sanitation, wastewater management, watershed protection, and community resilience across diverse social, economic, and environmental contexts. From water cooperatives in Finland and Bolivia to sanitation cooperatives in India and watershed initiatives in Costa Rica and Ethiopia, cooperatives have shown their capacity to deliver sustainable, inclusive, and locally accountable solutions where conventional approaches often struggle to reach. Unlocking their full potential requires deliberate policy action to create an enabling environment in which cooperative enterprises can operate, invest, innovate, and scale. Governments, development partners, financial institutions, UN agencies, and cooperative organizations should therefore prioritize the following actions:

1. Establish Enabling Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

Governments should review and modernize water, sanitation, and waste management legislation, as well as cooperative legislation, to explicitly recognize cooperatives as eligible service providers and partners in water governance. Cooperatives should be able to obtain operating licenses, access water-use rights, own and manage infrastructure, enter into service agreements, and participate in public-private-community partnerships on equal terms with other providers. Clear legal recognition is the foundation upon which investment, service expansion, and long-term sustainability depend.

2. Expand Access to Finance and Investment

Governments, development banks, donors, and impact investors should establish dedicated financing mechanisms tailored to the needs of cooperative enterprises. These should include blended-finance facilities, guarantee funds, concessional loans, revolving credit schemes, and grant programmes that support infrastructure development, system upgrades, climate adaptation, and service expansion. Financing frameworks should also incorporate affordability measures to ensure that cooperatives serving low-income and marginalized communities can remain financially viable while maintaining universal access.

3. Reform Procurement and Partnership Mechanisms

Public procurement and contracting systems should be adapted to recognize the specific characteristics and strengths of community-owned enterprises. Smaller contract lots, community-provider windows, framework agreements, and evaluation criteria that value social impact, community participation, and local accountability would enable cooperatives to compete fairly for service delivery and infrastructure management opportunities. Such reforms would broaden the pool of capable service providers and strengthen local ownership of development outcomes.

4. Strengthen Technical Capacity and Cooperative Support Systems

Investment in capacity development is essential for enabling cooperatives to meet evolving technical, environmental, and regulatory requirements. Governments and development partners should support national and regional technical assistance platforms that provide training, certification, digital reporting systems, laboratory services, climate resilience planning, and operational support. Cooperative federations and apex organizations should be strengthened to deliver shared services, facilitate peer learning, and promote innovation across the sector.

5. Ensure Cooperative Representation in Water Governance

Cooperatives should have a formal seat at the table in water governance and decision-making processes. Governments should include cooperative representatives in river basin organizations, water-user platforms, WASH coordination mechanisms, regulatory consultations, and national SDG review processes. As democratic and community-based institutions, cooperatives provide a direct channel for citizen participation and local knowledge, contributing to more inclusive, accountable, and effective water governance.


G1

SDG 7: ENSURE ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE, RELIABLE, SUSTAINABLE AND MODERN ENERGY FOR ALL

7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY

SDG 7 COMMITS THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY TO ENSURING UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE, RELIABLE, SUSTAINABLE, AND MODERN ENERGY BY 2030.

Although considerable progress has been made, the world remains off track to meet this goal. In 2023, nearly 92 percent of the global population had access to electricity, renewable energy capacity per capita reached a record high, and international public financial flows to developing countries exceeded USD 21.6 billion. Yet more than 600 million people still lack access to electricity, and 2.1 billion continue to rely on polluting cooking fuels. Growth in renewables, improvements in energy efficiency, and the scale and distribution of investment remain uneven and insufficient.[92]

Widening regional disparities remain a defining challenge of implementation.[93] In sub-Saharan Africa, new electricity connections have barely kept pace with population growth, making decentralized solutions critical; indeed, between 2020 and 2022, mini-grids and stand-alone solar systems accounted for 55% of new connections in the region, underscoring both their effectiveness and the limits of centralized grid expansion. In South and Southeast Asia, electrification rates have improved significantly. Yet, progress on clean cooking lags, constrained by high upfront costs, weak distribution networks, and affordability barriers for low-income households. Latin America and the Caribbean have achieved near-universal access, but face mounting affordability pressures and growing climate-related reliability risks, particularly in hydropower-dependent systems vulnerable to drought. Across developing economies, high financing costs, perceived investment risks, and limited access to capital continue to slow deployment of modern energy systems, leaving hundreds of millions without reliable, affordable, or clean energy services.

In higher-income countries, while access is largely universal, energy poverty, price volatility, aging infrastructure, and rising demand from electrified transport, heating, and data centers are placing new strains on system resilience. Across Europe, through different mechanisms from Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs)[94] with local municipalities or industries, or housing renovation and energy sharing, citizen-led approaches have helped communities navigate repeated energy price crises, including those triggered by Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine.[95] For example, the Greek energy cooperative CommonEn, founded in 2021 in Ioannina, secured enforcement of net metering by the local supplier, significantly reducing electricity bills for its members.[96] It also demonstrates inter-cooperative solidarity by supplying free electricity to vulnerable households.

These trends suggest that the primary obstacle to achieving SDG 7 is no longer technological feasibility, but implementation capacity, institutional design, and equitable investment distribution. Energy infrastructure and capital flows remain concentrated in high-income regions, while many low- and middle-income countries lack the regulatory stability, long-term financing instruments, and locally anchored institutions required to expand and manage modern energy systems.[97] As a result, rural and peri-urban communities in Africa and parts of Asia remain underserved, while affordability and resilience challenges are intensifying even in advanced economies. Bridging this gap requires delivery models that combine infrastructure investment with community ownership, financial sustainability, and long-term accountability. Energy and electric cooperatives are well positioned to contribute as locally rooted, member-driven partners in advancing affordable and clean energy for all.

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE: HOW COOPERATIVES ADVANCE AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY

Cooperatives play a distinct and strategic role in advancing SDG 7 by addressing structural gaps in energy access, affordability, and the clean-energy transition through democratic ownership and locally anchored service delivery. Unlike investor-owned utilities, cooperatives are established to serve their members rather than maximize shareholder returns. This universal-service orientation makes them particularly effective in regions historically overlooked by commercial providers. In Bangladesh, the Palli Bidyut Samity (PBS) rural electrification model, comprising 80 locally governed distribution cooperatives, now delivers electricity to more than 100 million people, roughly half of the national population, transforming rural livelihoods and productivity.[98] In the United States, more than 900 rural electric cooperatives created during the New Deal era now serve approximately 42 million people across 2,500 counties and maintain around 42 percent of the country's distribution lines. Operating on a cost-of-service, not-for-profit basis, U.S. cooperatives return excess revenues to their member-owners, with over US$1.3 billion in capital credits in recent years, thereby stabilizing tariffs and reinforcing long-term system reliability.[99] The World Bank has similarly recognized decentralized, community-anchored delivery models, including mini-grids and stand-alone systems, as among the most effective pathways to reach the remaining unelectrified populations.[100]

Energy cooperatives also strengthen affordability and financial sustainability by mobilising local investment into solar, wind, hydro, and biogas projects, ensuring that energy production remains community-owned and socially accountable. By reinvesting revenues into maintenance, modernization, and expansion rather than extracting profits, they moderate price volatility and enhance long-term viability. France's Enercoop exemplifies this model in practice: structured as a network of 10 regional cooperatives, it supplies 129 MW of 100% renewable electricity to 58,000 consumers while reinvesting surpluses for member benefit and to support further energy transition initiatives. In Costa Rica, four renewable energy cooperatives —Coopelesca, Coopeguanacaste, Coopesantos R.L., and Coopealfaroruiz— founded between 1965 and 1972, were established to bring electricity to rural and remote communities that had been historically underserved by traditional providers. They are now united under the Conelectrica Consortium and represent around 200,000 members. They generate power from diversified renewable sources, including hydropower, solar, and wind, distribute electricity nationwide, and reinvest surpluses into local sustainable development initiatives. Beyond expanding clean energy access, these cooperatives promote environmental stewardship and climate action by engaging communities in conservation efforts and awareness-raising. Their cooperative model ensures inclusive service delivery, local ownership, and tangible community benefits, reaching even the most remote households while strengthening resilience and sustainable development.[101]

In Malawi, the Clean Energy Cooperatives Program (CECP), implemented by NRECA International, aimed to establish five community-owned clean energy cooperatives in rural areas as part of the country's push for universal electrification by 2030. CECP focuses on developing viable project portfolios, building local technical and managerial capacity, securing financing, strengthening regulatory frameworks, and partnering with the Ministry of Energy to institutionalize the model. Rooted in the Seven Cooperative Principles, the initiative prioritizes service quality, sustainability, and community ownership over profit, positioning rural electric cooperatives as a practical pathway to self-reliance and long-term energy access.[102] These examples demonstrate that cooperative ownership models can deliver reliable and modern energy services in contexts where private capital is limited or risk-averse.

In the renewable energy transition, cooperatives anchor local ownership, build public trust, and retain economic value within communities. Examples across Germany, Denmark, and Ireland demonstrate how community-led energy projects can scale nationally, strengthen public acceptance of renewables, generate local employment, and retain economic value within communities, showing that cooperative governance is not only socially inclusive but also technically and financially viable in advancing universal, sustainable, and affordable energy access. Germany's citizen energy movement, in particular, illustrates the scale such models can achieve: by 2016, citizens and farmers collectively owned approximately 42 percent of the country's renewable generation capacity through more than 1,000 energy cooperatives.[103] Community-owned renewable projects consistently generate higher local economic returns than externally owned developments, as revenues are reinvested locally and procurement favors regional businesses. By embedding energy infrastructure within democratic governance structures, cooperatives enhance social acceptance, reduce opposition to renewable installations, and strengthen long-term operational stability.

Beyond energy supply, cooperatives are playing a growing role in demand-side management, energy efficiency, the electrification of end uses, and clean cooking transitions. Trusted local institutions are uniquely positioned to facilitate the adoption of efficient appliances, electric mobility, irrigation pumps, cold-storage systems, and clean cooking technologies through collective financing and member engagement. In higher-income contexts, cooperatives are also protecting consumers amid rapid load growth. In the United States, several generation and transmission cooperatives negotiating data-center interconnections have required large commercial loads to finance 100 percent of necessary grid upgrades, shielding rural households from disproportionate rate increases while strengthening system resilience. In Portugal, the Cooperativa Eléctrica de Loureiro (CEL) is an almost centenary limited cooperative company that, since 1933, has guaranteed the supply of electricity to the parish of Loureiro, in the north of Portugal. Responsive to legislative and technological changes in the energy sector, CEL operates 21 transformer stations that distribute energy to homes, commerce, and industry, expanding as the population and industrial activity in Loureiro increase. By establishing environmental criteria for suppliers, the coop prioritises the responsible use of natural resources, implements photovoltaic systems for self-consumption, reduces CO_2 emissions, and contracts 100% green energy for its industrial stations.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that cooperatives are not peripheral actors but system-level partners capable of expanding access, enhancing affordability, strengthening resilience, and accelerating the clean-energy transition. Their member-owned, community-centered structure positions them as practical and scalable instruments for delivering SDG 7 in both underserved and advanced energy markets.

CASE STUDIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Community-Owned Energy for Last-Mile Access and Productive Use

In sub-Saharan Africa, cooperatives are emerging as key partners for last-mile energy. In Liberia, the Totota Electric Cooperative (TEC) demonstrates how community-owned energy models can directly advance SDG 7 in fragile and underserved contexts. Established as the country's first community-owned rural electric cooperative with technical support from NRECA International, TEC developed and operates a solar-plus-storage hybrid microgrid serving households, small businesses, and commercial refrigeration facilities in Totota. Designed as a locally managed micro-utility, the system delivers reliable and affordable electricity while strengthening local economic activity, including cold storage services that support food preservation and income generation. Notably, within a short operational period, the cooperative achieved financial self-sufficiency, covering its operating costs and building reserves, illustrating that decentralized, member-owned energy systems can be both socially impactful and economically sustainable. The Totota model highlights how cooperatives can serve as effective last-mile delivery partners in expanding modern energy access across sub-Saharan Africa.

Across Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda, rural electrification cooperatives manage mini-hydro and solar systems beyond the reach of national grids. In Tanzania, cooperatives are integrating renewables into agricultural value chains: dairy unions use solar cooling, rice cooperatives operate solar irrigation pumps, and cashew cooperatives deploy solar drying units to reduce losses and increase value addition. In Tanzania, cooperatives are integrating renewables into agricultural value chains: dairy unions use solar cooling, rice cooperatives operate solar irrigation pumps, and cashew cooperatives deploy solar drying units to reduce losses and increase value addition.

Citizen Energy Communities Driving the Transition

Across Europe, energy cooperatives and citizen energy communities have emerged as powerful drivers of SDG 7 implementation, combining democratic ownership with large-scale deployment of renewable energy, while optimising the simultaneous production and consumption at the local level. Under the EU Clean Energy Package, citizen energy communities are formally recognized, providing a supportive policy framework that has enabled rapid growth. **REScoop.eu**, the European federation of energy cooperatives founded in 2011, now brings together 121 member organizations across 25 countries, representing around 2,500 renewable energy cooperatives and approximately 2 million citizens. In line with the **EU Renewable Energy Directives**, Italy has been increasingly investing in the energy transition, defining specific **incentives** for the creation of renewable energy communities (REC). Although the Italian cooperative legal framework offers different legal forms for creating such communities, including associations and participatory foundations, the cooperative model is clearly emerging as the most effective in ensuring citizens' ownership and economic participation, especially because members can realize joint investments and promote energy democracy. The blooming of already over 60 REC members of **Legacoop** in the last couple of years responds to the SDG targets 7.1 (universal access to affordable, reliable, and modern energy services) and 7.2 (the *share of renewables in the energy mix*). Through its international cooperative development structure, Haliéus, Legacoop has been advancing collaboration with public and private actors in Cuba, where the current energy crisis is calling for an urgent renewable and inclusive energy transition.

In Flanders (Belgium), the energy cooperative Ecopower counts 72.000 members that invest together in wind turbines, solar panels, and fossil-free heating. 100% green energy is provided as a service to over 60,000 members. In 2022, while electricity prices were skyrocketing across Europe, Ecopower kept its prices as stable and low as possible, supplying electricity at a lower price than any other energy supplier in Belgium. This was made possible not only by its commitment to locally producing community-owned renewable energy, but also by its determination to prioritise members' interests over profit.

Cooperative Utilities Delivering Scale and Affordability

In the United States, the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) represents more than 900 rural electric cooperatives that were originally established in the 1930s to electrify areas that investor-owned utilities deemed unprofitable. Today, these cooperatives serve approximately 42 million people across 2,500 counties, maintain roughly 40–42 percent of the nation's electric distribution lines, and operate on a not-for-profit, cost-of-service basis, returning margins to members in the form of capital credits. This model has ensured sustained reinvestment in infrastructure modernization, grid resilience, renewable integration, and increasingly, protections for rural consumers amid rising large-load demands such as data centers.

In Bolivia, the Cooperativa Rural de Electrificación (CRE) in Santa Cruz serves approximately 800,000 consumer-members under a transparent, cost-based tariff structure. Revenues are reinvested in expansion and service quality, demonstrating how cooperative governance can deliver reliable, financially sustainable energy services at scale.

Cooperative Leadership in Renewable Transition

CLIMBS Life and General Insurance Cooperative, an ICA-AP member organization in the Philippines, is advancing inclusive and resilient energy by developing the Renewable Energy Cooperative of the Philippines (RECoop). RECoop is a secondary cooperative dedicated to providing affordable, high-quality renewable energy solutions and prioritizing underserved communities. Guided by cooperative principles, they aim to empower communities, promote economic inclusivity, and support environmental sustainability. This initiative stemmed from the community conversations that arose during the Inaugural Global Cooperative Climate Summit held in Bangkok, Thailand, last November 2024. The growing demand for electricity and solar energy has tripled, as many remote areas have little to no access to electricity grids, leading to geographic isolation. Fossil fuels and economic constraints are also pressing issues for energy supply and stability. This essential step towards transformation has led many cooperative leaders to take charge and invest in renewable energy resources. Pivoting towards greener, cleaner sources of energy, the ReCO-OP aims to provide easy, affordable access to far-flung areas and rural communities with little to no energy supply. Learning from the previous experiences of the PHCCI-Dumaguete, one of CLIMBS' member-owners, its solarization project has achieved savings of about 30-40% on its electricity bill using solar energy.

In Australia, power has been historically distributed through private distributors. The majority of electricity has been generated from burning coal, despite Australia being blessed with vast desert regions and some of the longest sunshine hours in the world. Australia recently unveiled new decarbonisation targets, including a move to net zero before 2050, providing significant opportunities for a clean energy future. Energy cooperatives are helping drive the shift towards renewables and are providing greater value to their members as a more secure, long-term asset. The collective purchasing power created by individuals coming together through an energy cooperative returns control to people and helps to drive down costs. Cooperative Power, or CoPower for short, is a community-based initiative operating across large parts of Australia, bringing a unique not-for-profit, democratic model that redistributes profits back to the people. CoPower invests in community renewable energy (like solar plants, wind energy, battery storage, and home energy efficiency).

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Energy cooperatives are uniquely positioned to advance SDG 7, delivering affordable, reliable, and resilient energy, yet structural barriers limit their scale, integration, and impact.

Regulatory barriers often favor large utilities, leaving cooperatives struggling to obtain licenses, grid access, or fair procurement terms. This limits their ability to develop generation assets, operate distribution networks, or participate in emerging energy markets such as local trading and demand response.

> **Opportunity:** Governments can explicitly recognize cooperatives in energy laws, streamline permitting, reserve capacity for community projects, and guarantee fair grid access, unlocking widespread decentralized generation and system resilience.

Access to finance and technical support remains a critical constraint. Traditional lenders favor large, collateral-backed projects, sidelining cooperatives that deliver long-term social and economic value. Many cooperatives also lack training, technical assistance, and digital tools to manage complex energy systems.

> **Opportunity:** Development banks, donors, and public authorities can expand concessional and blended finance tailored to cooperatives, while leveraging established SACCO networks to unlock community-level capital for renewable energy. Coupled with sustained capacity-building in governance and operations, this would enable cooperatives to invest in renewables, district heating, and mini-grids, clean cooking, and energy efficiency initiatives, while ensuring long-term financial sustainability.

Integration into national energy plans is often limited, leaving cooperatives at the margins of renewable energy strategies, heating, cooling, and clean cooking initiatives, and energy transition roadmaps.

> **Opportunity:** Formal inclusion of cooperatives as implementers in policy design, rural grid expansions, and renewable auctions strengthens coordination, leverages local expertise, and ensures equitable last-mile delivery.

Demand-side and efficiency roles of cooperatives are underutilised. Cooperatives can drive energy efficiency, the transition to renewable thermal energy, the adoption of clean cooking, and demand-response services, yet policy rarely taps this potential.

> **Opportunity:** Explicitly empowering cooperatives to lead demand-side programs can reduce system costs, improve grid stability, and expand access through trusted, community-based engagement.

By addressing regulatory, financial, planning, and operational barriers, energy cooperatives can scale rapidly, deliver inclusive energy services, and serve as trusted partners in achieving universal, sustainable, and affordable energy access under SDG 7.

CALL TO ACTION

To accelerate progress toward SDG 7, governments, development partners, and multilateral institutions should strengthen the enabling environment for energy cooperatives and recognize them as key delivery partners:

1. Integrate cooperatives into national energy strategies.

Include cooperatives in renewable energy plans, thermal energy and clean cooking initiatives, renewable energy roadmaps, and grid expansion programs. Consult cooperative networks in policy design and designate them for last-mile service delivery to ensure coordinated, inclusive, and efficient implementation.

2. Expand access to cooperative-focused finance.

Develop concessional loans, blended finance facilities, revolving funds, loan-to-grant schemes, guarantees to de-risk lending by banks, and results-based funding tailored to cooperatives. Support investments in renewable generation, mini-grids, transmission, storage, renewable thermal energy supply chains, and energy efficiency programs while ensuring long-term financial sustainability.

3. Reform regulatory frameworks.

Adjust licensing, tariff-setting, grid-access, and procurement rules to accommodate community-scale projects and cooperative ownership. Simplified permitting, guaranteed grid connections for citizen-led projects, and reserved auction capacity will enable cooperatives to participate fully in energy markets.

4. Invest in capacity building and technical support.

Provide ongoing training in governance, operations, management, and digital systems. Strengthen cooperatives' ability to plan, operate, and adapt to evolving energy systems, ensuring reliability, efficiency, and resilience.

5. Empower cooperative-led demand-side solutions.

Enable cooperatives to lead energy-efficiency programs, the electrification of productive uses, bulk clean cooking initiatives, local flexibility services, and demand-response mechanisms. Leveraging cooperatives' local knowledge reduces costs, improves grid stability and energy security, and broadens access to renewable energy.

6. Strengthen data, monitoring, and visibility.

Integrate cooperative energy indicators into national reporting, SDG tracking, and energy planning. Elevating cooperatives as core actors ensures evidence-based policymaking and recognizes their role in delivering inclusive, affordable, and sustainable energy solutions.

SDG 8: PROMOTE SUSTAINED, INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH, FULL AND PRODUCTIVE EMPLOYMENT AND DECENT WORK FOR ALL

DECENT WORK AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH FOR A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Decent work is central to achieving inclusive growth, reducing poverty, and building more resilient and equitable societies, yet millions of people around the world face obstacles to securing safe, stable, and fairly compensated employment. Informal work, underemployment, low wages, unsafe conditions and broader decent work deficits continue to affect large segments of the global workforce, particularly in developing and emerging economies, where access to social protection and formal employment opportunities remains limited. At the same time, ongoing shifts in the global economy, including demographic changes, climate and environmental pressures, and digital and technological innovations, are reshaping how work is organized and valued. While these transformations bring new opportunities, they also risk deepening inequality and leaving workers behind.

Sustainable Development Goal 8 sets out a vision for inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.[104]

It calls for action to improve labour rights, expand opportunities for youth and women, and support the transition from the informal to the formal economy. As the world marks **International Workers' Day** on May 1 and prepares for the **International Labour Conference** in June 2025, it is clear that achieving this vision requires innovative approaches and models that place people at the center of economic life.

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD OF WORK

Cooperative enterprises are owned by their members and driven by values, not profit. They reinvest in communities and support over 280 million livelihoods worldwide — nearly one in ten workers globally.[105] By aligning economic activity with democratic participation and social purpose, cooperatives advance the vision of decent work and inclusive growth at the heart of SDG 8.[106] In many regions, cooperatives also create pathways for informal workers to access social protection, enhance collective voice, and gain legal recognition.[107] They expand opportunities for women, youth, and disadvantaged groups by fostering inclusive leadership and offering operational flexibility that helps balance work with other responsibilities, such as caregiving.

Their resilience during crises and collective approach to navigating shifting labour markets reflect the adaptability of cooperatives amid growing inequality, climate disruption, and technological change. They are at the forefront of creating opportunities in rural areas and in emerging sectors such as the care and digital economies, where they support freelance and platform workers by fostering shared purpose and mutual support.[108] Grounded in non-discrimination and sustained investment in education and skills, cooperatives continue to serve as dynamic drivers of inclusive and sustainable economic progress.

Cooperative Employment and Membership by Continent and Category (2017)

Continent	Employees	Worker-Members	Producer-Members (Including Their Employees When Data Available)	Total
Europe (31)	4,627,853	1,231,102	10,132,252	15,991,207
Africa (13)	1,649,914	237	5,715,232	7,365,383
Asia (14)	7,734,113	8,200,505	204,749,940	220,684,558
Americas (15)	1,798,777	1,409,608	3,048,429	6,220,854
Oceania (1)	26,018	No available data	34,592	60,610
Total	15,836,675	10,841,452	223,680,445	250,410,412

Source (adapted from): CICOPA (2017), *Cooperatives and Employment: Second Global Report – Contribution of cooperatives to decent work in the changing world of work*, International Organisation of Industrial and Service Cooperatives.

COOPERATIVES IN ACTION: CASE STUDIES

Founded in 1925 in Kerala, India, the Uralungal Labour Contract Cooperative Society (ULCCS) has grown from a small rural collective into one of India's largest and most diversified worker-owned cooperatives. Inspired by the teachings of Shri Guru Vagbhatananda and rooted in the values of dignity of labour, equity, and social justice, ULCCS now employs over 18,000 workers who are also cooperative members, ensuring democratic governance and control. The cooperative provides fair wages, social security, skills development, and safe working conditions, while prioritizing worker welfare over profit through health insurance, pensions, and continuous upskilling.

With an annual turnover of USD 300 million, ULCCS delivers major infrastructure projects—including roads, IT parks, and smart cities—while reinvesting surpluses into community development. Its activities span construction, IT services, agriculture, tourism, education, geriatric care, and consultancy, creating employment across income levels and sectors. The cooperative also incubates youth- and women-led enterprises, further expanding its social impact. Recognized by the UN and ILO, ULCCS exemplifies how worker cooperatives can advance decent work and inclusive growth. Its success demonstrates the potential of cooperative models to address unemployment, inequality, and skill gaps, contributing meaningfully to SDG 8.

In Rwanda, as in many countries, cooperatives are central to advancing inclusive and sustainable employment. This is especially true in the transport sector, where cooperatives are key players, over 12% of the country's 10,103 registered cooperatives are transport-related, including 182 motorcycle cooperatives with a combined membership of 48,341 and 1,340 direct employees.[109]

One example is the Abahuza Cooperative, a moto-taxi enterprise based in the capital, Kigali. Founded in 2009 by 10 ex-combatants with only a few motorcycles, the cooperative has grown to support over 450 drivers. By 2019, it had a registered fleet of 973 motorcycles with Rwanda's regulatory authority. Beyond providing stable employment, Abahuza has empowered its members to become owners of their vehicles and enabled them to become entrepreneurs. The cooperative has also played a critical role in reintegrating marginalized groups, including former combatants, into the workforce and broader community, offering not just livelihoods but dignity and inclusion.[110]

Based in the city of Cobán, Guatemala, the Federation of Cooperatives of the Verapaces (FEDECOVERA, R.L) is an autonomous second-level cooperative founded on February 23, 1976. Led by small producers organized in first-level cooperatives and associations, FEDECOVERA is dedicated to building a better future through shared benefits across its supply chain. Its primary objective is to improve the livelihoods of farmers, most of whom are descendants of Indigenous peoples, by providing the tools they need to enhance production and access international markets.

Over the past 45 years, FEDECOVERA has achieved significant milestones. It offers eight products—cardamom, coffee, tea, allspice, cocoa, turmeric, essential oils, and sustainable forestry goods—and is recognized as the world's leading organic producer and exporter of cardamom and allspice. With global business experience, FEDECOVERA exports to all five continents. It operates two industrialization plants: one in Cobán, Alta Verapaz, and another in Rancho Village, El Progreso. Today, FEDECOVERA unites 33,000 producer families through 42 cooperatives and more than 21 associations, impacting approximately 100,000 Guatemalan families.

GOEL - Cooperative Group, Italy

Founded in 2003 in Calabria, the southernmost region in Italy, GOEL began as a community movement determined to confront the mafia through democratic renewal and economic empowerment. Today, it has evolved into a vibrant network of 13 social cooperatives, 2 agricultural cooperatives, 2 voluntary associations, 1 foundation, and 32 mostly agricultural enterprises. These cooperatives operate across diverse sectors—organic farming, health services, hospitality, ethical fashion, eco-tourism, textiles, and cosmetics—creating an ethical, cooperative-based economy that resists organized crime.

GOEL's initiatives include "GOEL Welfare," which supports new migrants through shelters and skills training, helping them avoid exploitation. It also reintegrates vulnerable groups such as orphans, abused children, and people with disabilities or mental health challenges into the workforce. Its fashion label, Cangiari, brings the artisanal craft of marginalized women into Italy's haute couture market as the country's only fully organic and eco-ethical high fashion brand. In 2023, GOEL partnered with IFOAM to launch a due diligence checklist for cooperatives operating in high-risk areas, including surprise inspections, to ensure cooperatives uphold decent work standards. GOEL's bold model demonstrates how community-driven enterprise can build resilience, promote social justice, and challenge the systemic grip of organized crime.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Despite their substantial contributions to economic and social development, cooperatives continue to face barriers that limit their potential. In many countries, employment policies and labour statistics fail to fully reflect cooperative work, which leads to underreporting and exclusion from national strategies. Legal and regulatory frameworks often do not account for the variety of cooperative models, particularly those operating in emerging sectors. In some cases, restrictive procedures or a lack of tailored support make it difficult for cooperatives to register or benefit from the same incentives as other enterprises. Access to finance remains a persistent barrier, particularly for cooperatives led by women and young people, and those working in informal or underserved regions.

At the same time, momentum is building for more inclusive and sustainable economic models. The 2024 UN General Assembly Resolution on Promoting the Social and Solidarity Economy for Sustainable Development acknowledged the role of cooperatives in advancing decent work and addressing informality.[111] With growing interest from governments and social partners in creating fairer labour markets and responding to environmental, technological, and demographic transitions, the International Year of Cooperatives 2025 presents a timely opportunity for stakeholders to help cooperatives expand their impact and contribute more fully to achieving SDG 8 and the 2030 Agenda.[112]

CALL TO ACTION

To fully harness the potential of cooperatives in advancing decent work and inclusive economic growth, coordinated action is needed across policy, practice, and financing. The following priorities can help scale cooperative impact toward achieving SDG 8:

1. Strengthen enabling policy and legal frameworks

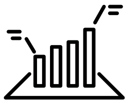
Formally recognize cooperatives as contributors to national employment strategies. Ensure labour laws and regulations support cooperative formation, reflect diverse cooperative models, and extend rights and protections, including social protection, to all members, especially in worker-owned and informal arrangements.

2. Support cooperative solutions in emerging and underserved sectors

Promote cooperatives in informal, digital, and green economies where decent work deficits are common. Encourage models such as worker-owned platforms, shared service cooperatives, and green enterprises through public procurement, financing, and inclusive policy tools.

3. Invest in education, skills, and inclusive leadership

Expand access to cooperative-specific training in governance, entrepreneurship, digital literacy, and leadership. Prioritize capacity building for women, youth, and informal workers to enhance their participation and influence within the cooperative movement.

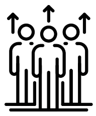


4. Integrate cooperatives into labour data and impact measurement

Incorporate cooperative-specific indicators into labour force surveys, SDG monitoring, and employment assessments to better track cooperative contributions, guide policymaking, and measure progress on formalization and inclusion.

5. Ensure cooperative participation in social dialogue

Involve cooperatives and their representative bodies in national and international labour policymaking to ensure employment strategies reflect diverse enterprise models and promote equitable, rights-based economic transformation.[113]



6. Mobilize investment and cross-sector partnerships

Direct public and private investment toward strengthening cooperative ecosystems, especially those advancing decent work in marginalized communities. Foster partnerships across governments, civil society, and development actors to scale cooperative innovation and impact.

By recognizing and supporting cooperatives as key drivers of decent work, governments and partners can help build more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable economies. Scaling up cooperative solutions is not only a matter of equity—it is essential to achieving the ambitions of SDG 8 and the broader 2030 Agenda.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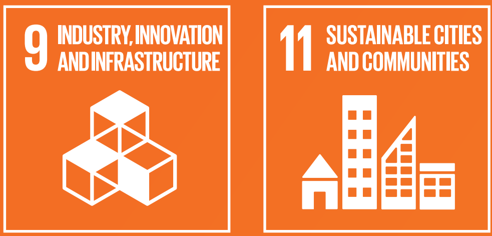
SDG 9: BUILD RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE, PROMOTE INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE INDUSTRIALIZATION, AND FOSTER INNOVATION

SDG 11: MAKE CITIES AND HUMAN SETTLEMENTS INCLUSIVE, SAFE, RESILIENT, AND SUSTAINABLE



RELIABLE INFRASTRUCTURE, VIBRANT INDUSTRIES, INNOVATION, AND WELL-PLANNED CITIES ARE ESSENTIAL BUILDING BLOCKS OF ECONOMIC PROGRESS AND IMPROVED QUALITY OF LIFE.

They create jobs, connect communities, expand access to services, and open opportunities for people to thrive. Yet these benefits remain out of reach for millions around the world. Despite significant investments and international commitments, progress toward SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) is not advancing at the pace required. Large gaps in infrastructure, industrial development, access to technology, and urban services continue to limit opportunities, particularly for people in rural areas, low-income communities, and developing countries, which has made many remain excluded from the economic and social gains that resilient infrastructure, productive industries, and inclusive, sustainable cities can deliver.

The 2025 SDG 9 Progress Report by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) highlights both the progress made and the challenges that remain in building resilient infrastructure, advancing sustainable industrialization, and fostering innovation. Around the world, manufacturing output continues to grow, digital connectivity is expanding, and investment in research and development is increasing. Global manufacturing value added has reached a record US$1,936 per person, up 17.3 percent since 2015. Today, 92 percent of the world's population is covered by 4G networks and more than half by 5G networks. Spending on research and development has also risen steadily, reflecting growing recognition of the importance of innovation in driving economic and social progress.[114]

However, these positive trends tell only part of the story. The benefits of industrial growth and technological advancement are not being shared equally. Even though the manufacturing production has increased, it has not generated enough decent jobs. Manufacturing employment remains stuck at just 14.2 percent of global employment, raising concerns about whether current patterns of industrialization are creating opportunities for the people who need them most. Access to finance remains another major obstacle. Many small businesses and entrepreneurs continue to struggle to secure the resources they need to grow and innovate. Globally, only 31 percent of small-scale manufacturing enterprises have access to credit, and in Sub-Saharan Africa, that figure falls to just 18 percent.[115] Also, the technological progress remains concentrated in a relatively small number of countries, leaving many developing economies at risk of falling further behind. The digital divide is equally concerning. Although connectivity has expanded rapidly in recent years, millions of people and entire communities still lack reliable access to high-speed internet and advanced digital technologies. This limits their ability to participate in the digital economy, access new markets, and benefit from emerging opportunities. Meanwhile, the growing impacts of climate change make it increasingly urgent to invest in cleaner technologies, more efficient production systems, and infrastructure that can withstand environmental shocks.[116]

Similarly, progress towards SDG 11 remains insufficient despite rapid urbanization and growing recognition of the importance of sustainable cities. Today, more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas, and by 2050, nearly 70 percent of humanity is expected to reside in cities.[117] Yet urban development is failing to keep pace with growing demand for housing, infrastructure, transport, and basic services. The global housing affordability crisis now affects up to 3 billion people, while more than 1.1 billion people continue to live in slums, informal settlements, or inadequate housing.[118] Urban expansion is outpacing population growth in many regions, increasing pressure on land, infrastructure, and ecosystems.

Moreover, cities remain highly vulnerable to climate change, accounting for a significant share of global greenhouse gas emissions while facing increasing risks from floods, heatwaves, storms, and other disasters. Although many countries have adopted urban policies and disaster risk reduction strategies, implementation remains uneven and underfunded. Access to affordable housing, sustainable public transport, green public spaces, waste management, and climate-resilient infrastructure remains particularly limited in low- and middle-income countries.[119] With only five years remaining until 2030, accelerating progress will require significantly increased investment in affordable and cooperative housing, sustainable mobility, resilient infrastructure, circular economy solutions, climate adaptation, and participatory urban governance.

Achieving SDGs 9 and 11 by 2030 will require more than continued economic growth; it will demand targeted investments in infrastructure, technology, innovation, housing, and finance, particularly for underserved regions and communities, alongside policies that strengthen local industries, support sustainable urban development, create decent jobs, and ensure that women, youth, and marginalized groups are fully included in the opportunities generated by economic transformation.[120]

Cooperatives are uniquely positioned to advance this agenda by pooling resources, mobilizing local capital, and placing people and communities at the center of development. Across sectors, they help small producers, enterprises, and households access finance, technology, markets, infrastructure, and affordable housing that would otherwise remain out of reach. Housing cooperatives provide secure and affordable homes; utility and energy cooperatives deliver community-owned services and infrastructure; worker and social cooperatives create employment and revitalize local economies; and multi-stakeholder cooperatives enable citizens, businesses, and public authorities to collaborate in planning and managing sustainable communities. Through democratic governance, community ownership, and a long-term commitment to social and economic value, cooperatives offer a proven model for fostering innovation, strengthening local economies, and building more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable cities and communities.

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE AND CASE STUDIES

@amul

Cooperatives Advancing SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure

Across the world, cooperatives are investing in infrastructure, expanding access to finance, fostering innovation, and supporting local industrial development. For example, in India, the dairy cooperative movement led by Anand Milk Union Limited (Amul), a dairy cooperative owned by Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation, transformed one of the world's largest agricultural value chains. Owned by millions of smallholder farmers, the cooperative has invested in cold-chain infrastructure, processing facilities, transportation networks, digital traceability systems, and market access platforms, enabling producers to participate in national and international markets. The model has strengthened rural industrialization while generating livelihoods for millions of households.

@mwalimu national sacco

In **Kenya**, savings and credit cooperatives (SACCOs) have become a cornerstone of inclusive economic development and one of the country's most important sources of finance for small enterprises. Serving millions of members, SACCOs provide affordable credit for manufacturing, transport, agribusiness, housing, and digital entrepreneurship, helping to address financing gaps often left unmet by conventional banking institutions. A compelling example is Mwalimu National SACCO, one of Africa's largest savings and credit cooperatives. Established in 1974 and owned by teachers and education-sector professionals, Mwalimu mobilizes member savings and reinvests them in productive sectors of the economy through affordable loans for small businesses, housing developments, education, and income-generating activities. The SACCO has also embraced digital innovation through mobile banking, online platforms, and agency banking services, expanding financial inclusion and improving access to services for underserved communities. By democratizing access to capital and supporting entrepreneurship, job creation, and local investment, Mwalimu National SACCO demonstrates how cooperative finance can strengthen the financial infrastructure needed for inclusive industrialization, innovation, and sustainable economic transformation, thereby making a significant contribution to achieving SDG 9.

@Copreci

In **Spain**, the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation demonstrates how worker-owned enterprises can drive innovation, sustainable industrialization, and competitiveness. Comprising more than 80 cooperatives across manufacturing, retail, finance, and knowledge sectors, Mondragon invests heavily in research and development, vocational training, and technological innovation while maintaining democratic ownership and quality employment. A notable example within the group is Copreci, a worker-owned industrial cooperative and global manufacturer of components for household appliances, which has strengthened its international competitiveness through continuous investment in advanced manufacturing, automation, research and development, and product innovation while expanding its production footprint across multiple countries. Together, Mondragon and Copreci demonstrate that democratic ownership and worker participation can reinforce industrial competitiveness, technological upgrading, and resilience, illustrating how cooperatives can advance SDG 9 by promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialization, fostering innovation, and supporting quality employment.

In **Japan**, the agricultural cooperative network (Japan Agricultural Cooperatives – JA Group) has been strengthening rural infrastructure, innovation, and sustainable industrialization. Through its nationwide network, JA has invested in agricultural processing facilities, storage and cold-chain systems, logistics networks, digital advisory services, and renewable energy initiatives that connect millions of farmers to markets while improving productivity and resilience. Cooperatives such as JA Zen-Noh, the national federation responsible for marketing and supply services, help farmers access modern technologies, quality inputs, processing infrastructure, and domestic and international value chains. By pooling resources and coordinating investments that individual producers could not undertake alone, Japanese agricultural cooperatives have modernized rural economies, reduced transaction costs, strengthened food processing industries, and supported innovation across the agricultural sector. Their experience demonstrates how cooperative enterprises can build resilient infrastructure, foster technological upgrading, and promote inclusive industrial development while ensuring that economic benefits remain rooted in local communities.

@Natural Dream Park

In the **Republic of Korea**, iCOOP Korea developed shared industrial infrastructure that strengthens innovation, sustainable industrialization, and market access for small producers. Founded in 1997 to make safe, organic food affordable for consumers, iCOOP has grown into a federation of 100 consumer cooperatives representing more than 310,000 member households. Its flagship Natural Dream Park in Goesan is a cooperative-owned industrial and community complex that integrates food processing factories, shared logistics and warehousing, a food safety testing laboratory, a food technology research institute, renewable energy systems, and community facilities. By pooling resources across its cooperative network, iCOOP has created infrastructure that individual small producers and cooperatives could not have financed independently, enabling higher product quality, innovation, and more efficient access to markets. Located in a rural region outside the Seoul metropolitan area, the initiative also generates quality employment and supports balanced regional development, illustrating how cooperative investment can strengthen inclusive industrialization and directly contribute to SDG target 9.3 by expanding small enterprises' access to industrial services, technology, and markets.

These examples demonstrate how cooperatives help overcome structural barriers to industrialization by mobilizing local capital, pooling risk, expanding access to infrastructure, and ensuring that the benefits of economic growth are distributed more broadly among communities. The UN Secretary-General has recognized cooperatives as important contributors to sustainable industrialization and innovation, noting their capacity to reach underserved populations with essential infrastructure and services.[121]

Cooperatives Advancing SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

@Riksbyggen

Cooperatives are playing an increasingly important role in addressing the global housing crisis and advancing SDG 11 by providing affordable, secure, and community-controlled housing. In **Sweden**, housing cooperatives have been a cornerstone of the national housing system for more than a century. Organizations such as HSB and Riksbyggen have helped millions of people access affordable housing through member-owned cooperatives. Cooperative housing emerged in response to housing shortages and speculation, and today it remains one of the country's most important forms of housing tenure. Sweden's cooperative housing model demonstrates how large-scale, member-owned housing can provide long-term affordability while ensuring resident participation in management and decision-making.[122]

In **Germany**, housing cooperatives (Wohnungsgenossenschaften) play a vital role in providing affordable, secure, and community-oriented housing. The country is home to approximately 3,000 housing cooperatives that collectively provide more than two million homes to over three million members, with Berlin alone hosting around 100 cooperatives managing some 200,000 apartments. Through member ownership, residents purchase cooperative shares and gain long-term tenancy rights, benefiting from cost-based rents, democratic governance, and a strong focus on community well-being. Long-established cooperatives such as Berliner Baugenossenschaft have demonstrated how cooperative ownership can preserve housing affordability across generations while maintaining high-quality housing and services. Increasingly, housing cooperatives are being recognized for their potential to contribute to sustainable urban development and energy-efficient housing, with initiatives such as the Solidarity City project led by TU Berlin exploring how cooperatives can enhance energy efficiency, reduce emissions, and engage residents in decisions about sustainable housing renovations and maintenance.[123]

In **Canada**, housing cooperatives provide affordable homes to hundreds of thousands of residents through member-controlled governance and collective ownership. Many Canadian housing cooperatives operate mixed-income communities that combine affordability with social inclusion, helping to create stable neighborhoods while protecting residents from housing market volatility. The Canadian model has become internationally recognized for demonstrating how cooperative housing can deliver both affordability and strong community participation over the long term.[124]

In **Chile**, the National Housing Cooperative (CONAVICOOP) has played a significant role in addressing the country's housing deficit for more than five decades. Since its establishment in 1974, the cooperative has delivered over 47,000 permanent homes, completed 8,599 home improvement projects, and rebuilt 1,312 homes following the 2010 earthquake, benefiting more than 70,000 families nationwide. Beyond providing affordable housing, CONAVICOOP develops projects in well-connected neighborhoods with access to public transport, schools, healthcare, green spaces, and community facilities, fostering safer, more inclusive, and resilient communities. Its strong regional focus is reflected in the delivery of more than half of its housing projects outside the Santiago metropolitan area, including over 21,000 homes across the regions of Valparaíso, O'Higgins, Maule, Biobío, and La Araucanía. By expanding access to affordable, quality housing while supporting balanced regional development, CONAVICOOP demonstrates how housing cooperatives can contribute to sustainable urbanization and advance SDG 11, particularly target 11.1, which aims to ensure access to adequate, safe, and affordable housing for all.[125]

In **Egypt**, housing cooperatives have long played an important role in expanding access to affordable housing for middle- and lower-income households. The country's cooperative housing movement, supported by the General Authority for Construction and Housing Cooperatives, has facilitated the development of hundreds of thousands of housing units through collective ownership and member financing mechanisms. Housing cooperatives have helped address urban housing shortages by enabling citizens to pool resources and access land, finance, and construction services at lower costs than would be possible individually. The Egyptian experience demonstrates the potential of cooperative housing to complement public housing programmes and support inclusive urban development in rapidly growing cities. The sector currently serves millions of members through thousands of housing cooperative societies across the country, making it one of the largest cooperative housing systems in Africa and the Middle East.[126]

Beyond housing, cooperatives contribute to many other dimensions of SDG 11. In **Uruguay**, the Federation of Mutual Aid Housing Cooperatives (FUCVAM) has enabled tens of thousands of low- and middle-income families to obtain affordable housing through collective savings, mutual labour, and democratic management. Widely recognized as a pioneering model of community-led urban development cooperative housing systems, FUCVAM has inspired similar initiatives across Latin America.[127]

Cooperatives also strengthen urban sustainability through service provision and community infrastructure. In **Brazil**, waste-picker cooperatives (catadores) have transformed the recycling sector by organizing and formalizing the work of informal waste collectors, increasing recycling rates, creating decent livelihoods, and reducing pressure on municipal waste systems. Since the late 1980s, waste pickers have organized into cooperatives that are now recognized partners in many municipal recycling programmes, helping to integrate social inclusion with environmental management. In cities such as Belo Horizonte, cooperatives have been formally incorporated into municipal waste systems through partnerships with local authorities, improving both recycling performance and income opportunities for workers. Waste pickers are estimated to collect nearly 90 percent of all recycled materials in Brazil, demonstrating their critical contribution to the country's circular economy and environmental goals. These cooperative models not only reduce waste and greenhouse gas emissions but also provide economic opportunities for marginalized communities and strengthen urban resilience.[128]

In **Japan**, the Seikatsu Club Consumers' Co-operative Union demonstrates how cooperatives can advance sustainable urban communities through responsible consumption, community-led environmental action, and renewable energy development. With approximately 420,000 members across 33 consumer cooperatives, Seikatsu Club promotes local and organic food systems, reusable packaging, waste reduction, and citizen participation in environmental decision-making. In 2022, it established the Seikatsu Club Energy Business Association to accelerate the transition to a 100 percent renewable-energy society through community-owned renewable-energy projects, electricity supply initiatives, and local energy partnerships. Building on nearly four decades of advocacy and investment in renewable energy, the cooperative has supported the development of wind and solar power facilities while strengthening economic solidarity between urban and rural communities. By combining sustainable consumption, renewable energy generation, and citizen engagement, Seikatsu Club contributes to more resilient, inclusive, and environmentally sustainable cities and communities.[129]

In **Saudi Arabia**, the Al-Baha Housing Cooperative Society (CAF-HB) has helped in expanding access to affordable, quality housing while promoting sustainable urban and regional development. Established in 2020 in response to Saudi Vision 2030, the cooperative was created to address long-standing housing shortages in the Al-Baha region by developing high-quality, competitively priced homes through a partnership with the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and Housing. Beyond improving access to homeownership, the cooperative creates local employment, supports innovative construction methods that reduce costs and accelerate delivery, and stimulates regional economic growth. Its flagship developments, including the Tilaal Al-Baha 1 housing project, delivered through the national Sakani platform, alongside the mixed-use Alia Al-Baha and Town Square projects, combine residential, commercial, and tourism infrastructure, demonstrating how cooperative housing can foster more inclusive, resilient, and economically vibrant communities while advancing SDG target 11.1 on access to adequate, safe, and affordable housing.

Transport cooperatives also contribute to SDG 11 by providing safe, affordable, accessible, and sustainable mobility services, particularly in communities underserved by conventional public or private transport operators. Through member ownership and democratic governance, they help connect rural and peri-urban populations to jobs, education, healthcare, and other essential services while reducing transport inequalities and social exclusion. In **Rwanda**, transport cooperatives have played a significant role in improving urban mobility, creating employment, and formalizing transport services. The Rwanda Federation of Transport Cooperatives (RFTC) and the Fédération Rwandaise des Coopératives de Taxi-Moto have organized tens of thousands of transport operators into cooperative structures, including bus, taxi, and motorcycle-taxi services. The motorcycle taxi federation alone represents tens of thousands of riders through a nationwide network of cooperatives and has helped improve governance, safety standards, professional training, and service coordination in a sector essential to daily mobility, particularly in Kigali. By providing affordable, accessible transport services, connecting residents to jobs, education, healthcare, and markets, and creating employment opportunities for low-income workers, transport cooperatives contribute directly to SDG 11's goal of ensuring access to safe, affordable, and sustainable transport systems for all. Their role in organizing informal transport operators into accountable, member-owned enterprises also strengthens social inclusion and supports more sustainable urban development.[130]

These examples demonstrate that cooperatives are not merely housing providers or service enterprises; they are institutions for community development. By mobilizing local resources, fostering democratic participation, and reinvesting benefits locally, cooperatives help cities become more affordable, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable. Whether through housing, renewable energy, waste management, transport, or community services, cooperatives provide practical and scalable solutions to many of the challenges identified in SDG 11. As governments seek effective pathways to achieve the 2030 Agenda, cooperative models offer a proven approach to building cities and communities that place people, rather than profit, at the center of development.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Despite their demonstrated contributions to sustainable infrastructure, inclusive industrialization, innovation, and resilient cities and communities, cooperatives continue to face significant structural barriers that limit their ability to operate at scale and maximize their impact on SDGs 9 and 11.

One of the most persistent challenges is the inadequacy of legal and regulatory frameworks. In many countries, cooperative legislation remains outdated or poorly aligned with contemporary economic realities, failing to recognize the diversity of cooperative models operating in sectors such as housing, transport, energy, digital platforms, manufacturing, and urban services. Housing cooperatives are often disadvantaged by land tenure, zoning, and property laws designed around individual or corporate ownership. Worker cooperatives in industry and construction frequently encounter labour regulations that do not adequately accommodate democratic worker ownership, while platform and multi-stakeholder cooperatives often operate in legal grey areas that limit investment, innovation, and growth. These barriers constrain cooperatives' ability to contribute fully to infrastructure development, sustainable industrialization, and urban resilience.

For instance, the findings of the ICA's International Legal Research and Analysis Initiative (ILRAI) on cooperative housing identified persistent barriers in many countries, including inadequate legal recognition, limited access to land, the absence of tailored financing instruments, weak integration into national housing policies, and insufficient data collection on cooperative housing. These constraints limit housing cooperatives' ability to scale their impact despite strong democratic governance and proven social outcomes. The ILRAI findings, therefore, highlight a significant opportunity for governments to modernize legal frameworks, integrate cooperative housing into national development and urban planning strategies, and expand access to long-term finance, enabling cooperatives to play a much larger role in addressing housing shortages, infrastructure gaps, and the transition toward more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable cities.[131]

Access to finance remains another critical constraint. Achieving SDGs 9 and 11 requires substantial investment in infrastructure, affordable housing, transport systems, renewable energy, digital connectivity, and industrial modernization. Yet cooperatives frequently struggle to access patient, long-term capital suited to their ownership structures and social objectives. Conventional lenders and investors often favour investor-owned enterprises, while many public investment programmes and development finance instruments are not designed to support cooperative enterprises. As a result, cooperative-led solutions that could effectively reach underserved communities remain underfinanced despite their proven social and economic value.

The accelerating digital transformation of economies presents both opportunities and challenges. Digital technologies can enhance cooperative governance, improve productivity, strengthen supply chains, facilitate market access, and support innovation across sectors. However, many cooperatives, particularly those serving rural, low-income, or marginalized communities, continue to face significant barriers related to digital infrastructure, connectivity, affordability, and digital skills. Without targeted investments in digital inclusion, there is a risk that technological advances will deepen existing inequalities and exclude many cooperative members from the benefits of the digital economy.[132]

Climate change and environmental pressures add another layer of complexity. Cooperatives operating in urban areas increasingly face risks associated with extreme weather events, heat stress, flooding, and infrastructure damage, while industrial and agricultural cooperatives must adapt to changing environmental conditions, resource scarcity, and rising energy costs. At the same time, the transition to low-carbon and circular economies creates both financial and operational challenges for smaller enterprises. Ensuring that cooperatives have the resources and policy support needed to invest in climate adaptation, resilience, and green technologies will be critical to achieving both SDG 9 and SDG 11.

Yet the opportunities for cooperative action are equally significant. Around the world, cooperatives are demonstrating innovative approaches to addressing infrastructure gaps, strengthening local industries, and building more inclusive and sustainable communities. Housing cooperatives are expanding access to affordable and energy-efficient housing; transport cooperatives are improving mobility and connectivity; renewable energy cooperatives are accelerating community-led energy transitions; and worker-owned enterprises are creating quality jobs while fostering innovation and local economic development. Emerging models such as platform cooperatives, community land trusts, circular-economy cooperatives, and cooperative urban agriculture initiatives further illustrate how democratic ownership can contribute to resilient and sustainable development.

The growing recognition of cooperatives and the social and solidarity economy at both national and international levels presents significant opportunities to scale their contribution to sustainable development. The adoption of the 2025 United Nations General Assembly resolution on cooperatives in social development, which calls for the celebration of an International Year of Cooperatives every ten years, reaffirms the vital role of cooperatives in the global economy and their potential to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.[133] Similarly, the recognition of cooperatives and the social and solidarity economy in the Declaration of the Second World Social Summit, together with the momentum generated by the International Year of Cooperatives 2025, has elevated the visibility of the cooperative model as a practical and people-centered approach to sustainable development.[134] These developments create important opportunities to strengthen partnerships among governments, cooperative movements, development finance institutions, UN agencies, and civil society organizations, while encouraging the integration of cooperative solutions into national strategies for development, industrialization, housing, infrastructure, and urban development.

In addition, advances in digital technology, green finance, impact investing, and blended finance mechanisms offer new avenues for cooperative growth. If appropriately designed, these instruments can help cooperatives mobilize capital, adopt innovative technologies, expand infrastructure investments, and participate more effectively in green and digital transitions. Cooperative federations and apex organizations are also increasingly developing shared services, pooled financing mechanisms, data platforms, and advocacy networks that strengthen the capacity and visibility of individual cooperatives.

As emphasized in the ICA's Position Paper on the Sustainable Development Goals, cooperatives are uniquely positioned to advance sustainable development because they combine economic participation, democratic governance, social inclusion, and concern for community within a single enterprise model.[135] By empowering people to collectively own and manage resources, cooperatives help build the infrastructure, industries, services, and communities needed for a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable future. Unlocking their full potential will require supportive policies, enabling legal frameworks, targeted investment, and stronger partnerships that recognize cooperatives as essential actors in achieving SDGs 9 and 11 by 2030 and beyond.

CALL TO ACTION

With only a few years remaining to achieve the 2030 Agenda, governments, development partners, international organizations, and the cooperative movement must take decisive action to scale cooperative solutions for resilient infrastructure, sustainable industrialization, innovation, and inclusive urban development. Cooperatives have demonstrated their capacity to deliver affordable housing, expand access to transport and essential services, create decent jobs, strengthen local industries, and build resilient communities. Unlocking this potential requires a shift from recognizing cooperatives as stakeholders to treating them as strategic partners in implementing SDGs 9 and 11.

1. Create enabling legal and policy environments for cooperative development

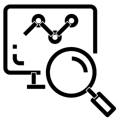
Governments should review and modernize cooperative, housing, land, infrastructure, and procurement legislation to ensure that cooperatives can effectively develop, own, finance, and manage housing, transport systems, energy projects, digital platforms, and other forms of community infrastructure. National legal frameworks should explicitly recognize housing, worker, platform, energy, transport, and multi-stakeholder cooperatives and provide mechanisms to protect cooperative assets and long-term affordability. In line with ILO Recommendation No. 193 and the UN resolutions on Cooperatives and on the Social and Solidarity Economy, governments should integrate cooperative development into national SDG implementation plans, industrial strategies, and urban development policies.

2. Expand access to finance for cooperative infrastructure, housing, and innovation

Governments, development finance institutions, multilateral banks, and donors should establish dedicated financing windows for cooperative enterprises engaged in housing, infrastructure, manufacturing, renewable energy, transport, and digital innovation. Public investment programmes should explicitly include cooperatives as eligible beneficiaries, while blended finance, guarantees, concessional loans, and impact investment mechanisms should be adapted to cooperative ownership structures. Support should also be provided for cooperative investment funds, cooperative banks, and credit unions that can mobilize long-term patient capital for community-led development.

3. Position cooperatives as partners in sustainable cities and industrial transformation

National and local authorities should formally include cooperatives in urban planning, housing delivery, industrial policy, and infrastructure development processes. Governments should establish targets and incentives for cooperative housing, community energy, sustainable transport, and circular economy initiatives within national development frameworks. Public procurement policies should also create opportunities for cooperative enterprises to participate in infrastructure projects, public service delivery, construction, recycling, care services, and local economic development programmes. Recognizing cooperatives as implementation partners can help accelerate progress toward more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable communities.



4. Invest in digital transformation, innovation, and data systems

To ensure that cooperatives can participate fully in the digital economy, governments and development partners should invest in affordable digital infrastructure, connectivity, and digital skills development, particularly in underserved rural and peri-urban areas. Support should be provided for cooperative-led digital innovation, including platform cooperatives, shared digital services, data platforms, and enterprise management systems. At the same time, national statistical systems should strengthen the collection of cooperative data to improve visibility, inform policymaking, and better capture cooperative contributions to SDGs 9 and 11.

5. Accelerate cooperative participation in the green and just transition

Climate action, energy transition, and urban sustainability strategies should explicitly recognize cooperatives as key actors in building low-carbon, resilient, and inclusive economies. Governments should support cooperative-led renewable energy projects, energy-efficient housing, sustainable transport systems, waste management and recycling initiatives, and climate adaptation investments. Particular attention should be given to worker, social, housing, transport, and environmental cooperatives that help ensure that the costs and benefits of the transition are shared equitably, while creating decent jobs and strengthening community resilience.

6. Strengthen cooperative ecosystems, partnerships, and knowledge sharing

Cooperative federations, apex organizations, research institutions, and international organizations should expand collaboration to share knowledge, scale successful models, and strengthen cooperative ecosystems. Greater investment is needed in cooperative education, leadership development, research, and technical assistance, particularly in emerging sectors such as digital platforms, renewable energy, sustainable construction, and circular economy enterprises. International cooperation and South-South exchanges should be leveraged to replicate successful cooperative innovations and strengthen cooperatives' global contribution to sustainable development.

Achieving SDGs 9 and 11 will require scaling proven solutions that combine economic viability with social and environmental impact. Cooperatives already demonstrate how this can be done. The challenge now is to provide the policies, partnerships, and investments necessary for these solutions to flourish and contribute fully to building resilient infrastructure, sustainable industries, and inclusive cities and communities by 2030 and beyond.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SDG 10: REDUCE INEQUALITY WITHIN AND AMONG COUNTRIES

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

IN AN ERA MARKED BY SOCIAL UPHEAVAL AND WIDENING DISPARITIES, THE PRINCIPLE OF “*FREEDOM, EQUALITY, AND JUSTICE FOR ALL*”, ECHOING THE CORE VALUES OF THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (UDHR)[136], HAS NEVER BEEN MORE URGENT.

Reducing inequality within and among countries is central to achieving the 2030 Agenda’s commitment to leave no one behind. Despite progress in poverty reduction in some regions, disparities in income, access, and opportunity continue to widen, both within societies and between regions. The richest 10 percent of the global population currently takes home over 50 percent of global income, while the poorest half receives just 8 percent.[137] Inequalities persist not only in earnings but across access to decent work, education, social protection, and political participation, disproportionately affecting women, youth, migrants, Indigenous Peoples, and persons with disabilities.

Globally, 3.8 billion people remain without any form of social protection. Youth unemployment is nearly three times higher than that of adults[138] and women continue to face entrenched wage gaps and concentration in informal and precarious work.[139] Discrimination against migrants, persons with disabilities, low-income households, and Indigenous communities is rising.[140] Productivity gains are increasingly decoupled from wage growth: the global labour income share of GDP has steadily declined since 2015, widening the divide between workers and owners of capital.[141] High debt burdens, volatile resource flows, and exposure to climate and geopolitical crises further limit the capacity of many developing countries to invest in inclusive development, reinforcing patterns of unequal opportunity across generations.

The 2025 Human Rights Day theme of “*Human Rights, Our Everyday Essentials*” reminds us that rights are the bedrock of daily life – the right to safety, to work, to a voice in public affairs – and that every person deserves dignity regardless of background.[142] Likewise, SDG 10 calls for reduced inequalities “*within and among countries,*” pledging to leave no one behind.[143] UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk warns that “*inequalities are rising, conflicts are raging, and the climate emergency is mounting,*” and that “*we need more solidarity and more human rights to address the current challenges.*”[144]

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE

Cooperatives are uniquely positioned to address these intersecting inequalities by expanding access to economic opportunity, strengthening labour protections, and ensuring that marginalized populations have a voice in economic decision-making. As democratic, member-owned enterprises, cooperatives transform exclusion into agency by redistributing economic value more equitably and reinvesting surpluses locally.[145] More than one billion people worldwide participate in over three million cooperatives across sectors such as agriculture, finance, housing, health, manufacturing, industry services, insurance, retail, and fisheries.

Cooperatives actively fight inequality by advancing human rights in value chains, supporting transitions from informality to decent work, and addressing systemic risks such as child labour and modern slavery. For example, Fairtrade-certified cocoa cooperatives in Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana have implemented Child Labour Monitoring and Remediation Systems that have identified and supported more than 60,000 at-risk children, while also increasing farmer incomes through minimum price guarantees and community-managed premiums.[146] These cooperative-led mechanisms strengthen rights-based approaches in agricultural supply chains where risks of exploitation are high.

Cooperatives also reduce structural inequality within countries by empowering small producers and low-income communities. India’s AMUL dairy cooperative network, comprising more than 3.6 million small farmers, many of them women, has helped raise rural incomes, eliminate exploitative intermediaries, and expand women’s economic leadership in agriculture.[147] In East Africa, coffee and tea cooperatives in Kenya support millions of smallholder farmers by securing better prices, improving financial inclusion through SACCOs, and protecting workers in value chains from forced or child labour risks.[148]

In the UK, cooperatives have taken a leading role in combating modern slavery and labour exploitation across supply chains. The Co-operative Group, one of the country's largest consumer cooperatives, has been recognised as an early mover in implementing robust human rights due diligence, including transparent Modern Slavery Statements[149] aligned with the UK Modern Slavery Act (2015). Through initiatives such as the Bright Future programme, the Co-op Group has worked with NGOs and employers to provide safe employment pathways, long-term support, and dignified reintegration for survivors of modern slavery.[150] Cooperative retailers and worker cooperatives have also strengthened supplier audits, wage transparency tools, and ethical sourcing frameworks in high-risk sectors such as agriculture, food processing, logistics, and garment production.

In the digital economy, platform cooperatives ensure that technological innovation does not deepen inequality.[151] Examples such as Up&Go in the United States and the Smart cooperative in Belgium demonstrate how collective ownership models can raise wages, provide social protection to gig workers, and prevent the extraction of value by digital intermediaries. Up&Go cleaners earn more than 30 percent above typical platform rates, while Smart, rooted in the artistic sector of Brussels, provides over 40,000 freelancers with access to insurance and collective bargaining mechanisms.

Cooperatives also reduce inequalities between workers and management by embedding wage fairness into their governance structures. The Mondragon Corporation in Spain, one of the world's largest cooperative groups, maintains an internal wage ratio where the highest-paid executive earns no more than six to nine times the lowest-paid worker.[152] This approach stands in stark contrast to the 200–300:1 ratios common in large multinational firms and demonstrates how democratic ownership can reduce income disparities while preserving competitiveness.

These actions demonstrate how cooperative business models, grounded in democratic governance and member accountability, can advance human rights, reduce labour exploitation, and build fairer value chains that directly contribute to SDG 10 and the implementation of ILO Recommendation 193.[153] The strengths of cooperatives will be especially needed as automation begins to build momentum across economies. Without an ownership structure ensuring the equitable distribution of wealth created by automated gains in productivity, labour industries that currently serve as the economic foundation of entire communities will begin to extract consumer savings without supplying options for making a living through work. This will only serve to accelerate the globe away from the goals of SDG 10 and rapidly increase disparities in purchasing power and resource access.

CASE STUDIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Socodevi - Canada

Through its development programs, SOCODEVI promotes inclusive economic participation by providing technical assistance, governance training, gender-equity tools, and business development services to farmers, women's and forestry cooperatives in Latin America, and other community-based organizations. These efforts help marginalized populations gain access to stable markets, improve productivity, and increase their income. SOCODEVI's methodology—focused on cooperative governance, transparency, and long-term self-management—ensures that benefits are distributed fairly among members, reducing internal gaps and reinforcing local democratic structures.

At the same time, SOCODEVI places strong emphasis on reducing social inequalities by targeting groups that face structural barriers, such as women, youth, indigenous peoples, and rural families. Their programs introduce gender-responsive budgeting, leadership pathways for women, and tools that promote equitable participation in decision-making. They also expand access to financial services through strengthened credit unions and savings cooperatives, ensuring more equitable access to credit and financial education. By empowering communities with the skills, networks, and institutional models needed to manage their own development, SOCODEVI helps reduce both economic and social disparities while fostering more resilient, inclusive local economies across Latin America.

The Women of Dadès Cooperative, Morocco

Located in the Tinghir province of southern Morocco, the Women of Dadès Agricultural Cooperative illustrates how cooperatives can reduce inequality by creating inclusive economic opportunities for rural women.

Founded in 2011 by Drissia Ait Heddou, a geography graduate and long-time advocate for women's empowerment, the cooperative emerged from earlier community organizing that began in 2003. Responding to limited employment opportunities for women, particularly those without formal education, the cooperative was established to build sustainable livelihoods rooted in local knowledge. It specializes in the valorization of agricultural products, especially roses from the Dadès Valley, a key element of the region's cultural and economic heritage.

With support from Morocco's National Initiative for Human Development and the Green Morocco Plan, the cooperative operates as a social enterprise providing flexible local employment, stable income, training, and technical support for rural women. Fairtrade certification in 2016 strengthened production quality, expanded market access, and enabled participation in national and international marketing initiatives.

Beyond income generation, the cooperative has driven wider social change by increasing women's financial independence, supporting household well-being, encouraging girls' education, and inspiring the creation of new cooperatives. Through solidarity and shared growth, the Women of Dadès Cooperative has contributed to greater social inclusion and reduced inequality in the region.

© Ecodes

Europe

CECOP, the European Confederation of Industrial and Service Cooperatives, represents around 43,000 cooperatives, employing 1.3 million workers. Its members include **worker cooperatives, social cooperatives**, and **cooperatives of autonomous workers**, all at the forefront of fighting inequalities, combining economic performance with social progress to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth.

In the Czech Republic, SOLEA is one of the most significant worker cooperatives employing people with disabilities in the country, as over 75% of the workers are people with disabilities. The cooperative, growing from 3 to 180 employees since 2000, manufactures plastics and metal components, supplying them to the automotive, engineering, and electrical industries. Social cooperatives can be owned by workers or also by other community members, such as service beneficiaries or local authorities. They specialise in the provision of services of general interest, often in areas where there is a lack of available, affordable, or quality services. Work-integration social cooperatives have it as their core mission to assist people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups with their (re)integration into the labour market. An example is Vesti Solidale **(Italy)**. Specialised in the management of special and municipal waste, including textile and electronic waste (WEEE) since 1998, it has been creating jobs for vulnerable people and promoting environmental sustainability. Vesti Solidale operates three plants in the province of Milan, including the largest textile waste management plant in northern Italy, which can process up to 20,000 tonnes of waste each year. Through their work with large companies, they collect, transport, and manage waste, provide consultancy services, and ensure environmental compliance throughout the process. Finally, some of CECOP members are responding through the rise of non-standard work via co-ops of autonomous workers (such as freelancers or the self-employed). These offer access to social security and job stability through mutualised services, while guaranteeing autonomy and flexibility.

Across Europe, energy cooperatives are ensuring low-income households are not left behind the energy transition nor discriminated against by fluctuating prices. The Oliver Energy Community provides affordable solar energy to 56 homes, five organisations, and a church in one of the neighbourhoods with the highest social exclusion rates in Zaragoza, Spain. Through broad community participation, this cooperative aims to make the energy transition accessible to a diverse group of citizens, including the most vulnerable, while reducing their energy costs. The Belgian energy cooperative Klimaan uses citizen investments to finance solar panels on 197 social housing units. This initiative prioritises social impact over profit, offering low-income households stable, affordable energy prices shielded from market fluctuations. Klimaan is also involved in research on the feasibility of a district heating network in a social housing neighbourhood, within the EU project SOCIALNRG.

Asia

In Sri Lanka, the Sanasa Federation of Co-operatives—along with more than 8,000 primary cooperatives and a million-plus low-income members—forms a community-focused network for savings, credit, and enterprise development. These federation members are mainly those from rural and poor backgrounds who have been left out of the formal banking system. By using democratic ownership and community-centered financial services, Sanasa makes it possible for the small farmers, women, and informal workers to access credit that is affordable, have savings practices, and get support for their livelihoods. Sanasa is able to diminish the gap in income, region, and opportunity by not only decreasing dependence on informal moneylenders but also amplifying the underserved communities' share of economic power through financial inclusion. Thus, Sanasa's cooperative model is a direct contributor to the UN SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) because it makes access to finance barrier-free, brings the income security aspect of the disadvantaged across Sri Lanka into focus, and amplifies the economic voice of the marginalized.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As the case studies above demonstrate, cooperatives play a vital role in expanding economic participation, strengthening resilience, and advancing equality. Yet their full potential to reduce inequalities under SDG 10 remains constrained by structural barriers. In many countries, cooperative legal and regulatory frameworks are outdated or poorly aligned with evolving economic models, limiting cooperatives' ability to operate in high-growth sectors such as digital labour platforms, social care, and renewable energy, where inclusive ownership could deliver significant benefits for marginalized workers and producers.

Access to finance remains a persistent constraint, particularly for cooperatives led by women, youth, migrants, Indigenous Peoples, or persons with disabilities. Conventional financial institutions often perceive cooperatives as high-risk, while public financing mechanisms rarely cater to member-owned enterprises, restricting their ability to scale and modernize. Social norms and discriminatory practices further limit participation and leadership, while weak national statistical systems fail to capture cooperatives' contributions to income equality, decent work, and service access. Digital divides compound these challenges, as limited access to infrastructure, skills, and tools makes it difficult for smaller or rural cooperatives to compete in modern markets or reach new members.

Despite these challenges, cooperatives are well-positioned to accelerate progress toward SDG 10. They are expanding in sectors that directly reduce inequality, including renewable energy, affordable housing, social care, and fair digital platforms. Platform cooperatives are emerging as alternatives to extractive models, ensuring that digital profits and decision-making power remain with workers and users, while financial cooperatives extend inclusive services to low-income households, migrants, and rural communities, and producer cooperatives strengthen smallholders' bargaining power and access to ethical value chains.

At the same time, growing recognition of cooperatives and the Social and Solidarity Economy through UN General Assembly resolutions and other intergovernmental outcomes is encouraging stronger legal frameworks, targeted financing, and sustained policy dialogue. With the right enabling environment, cooperatives can scale inclusive business models, deepen democratic participation in the economy, and deliver lasting reductions in inequality within and among communities.

CALL TO ACTION

To realise the full potential of cooperatives in advancing SDG 10, governments, UN agencies, international institutions, and development partners should prioritise policies and investments that expand democratic participation in the economy, reduce structural inequalities, and strengthen inclusion for all. We recommend taking the following actions:

1. Integrate cooperatives into national inequality-reduction and inclusion strategies

Governments should explicitly recognize cooperatives and other Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) actors as strategic partners in reducing income and social disparities. Policy frameworks for decent work, social protection, financial inclusion, care systems, and rural/urban development should explicitly account for cooperatives' role in expanding access for underserved communities. National SDG monitoring, including Voluntary National Reviews, should document and measure cooperative contributions to equity, access, and representation.

2. Strengthen and modernise legal and regulatory frameworks that protect cooperative identity and expand their scope

Policymakers should update outdated cooperative laws to safeguard autonomy and democratic governance while enabling new models such as worker-buyouts, platform cooperatives, social cooperatives, and youth- and women-led enterprises. Clear, enabling regulation will help cooperatives thrive in digital economies, care systems, renewable energy, and other high-impact sectors central to reducing inequalities.

3. Expand inclusive access to finance, insurance, and markets

Dedicated cooperative financing mechanisms are needed so that women, youth, migrants, and persons with disabilities can launch and scale enterprises. Development banks, public financial institutions, and cooperative apex bodies should design dedicated financing windows for cooperatives, particularly those led by women, youth, migrants, and persons with disabilities. Governments can accelerate inclusion by leveraging public procurement for food, care, housing, waste management, and community services to strengthen cooperative value chains and create local, dignified jobs.

4. Invest in cooperative education, leadership development, and skills for the future of work

Member States and development partners should scale training programmes on cooperative governance, financial management, digital transition, climate resilience, and care-economy services. Targeted capacity-building for traditionally excluded groups will ensure more inclusive leadership and strengthen the ability of cooperatives to close inequality gaps in fast-changing labour markets.

5. Strengthen data, partnerships, and international cooperation to scale equity-focused cooperative ecosystems

Governments, UN agencies, national statistical offices, and cooperative federations should collaborate to produce more robust, disaggregated data on cooperative employment, participation, and impact on inequality. At the international level, development partners should scale up South-South cooperation, peer learning, and investment in cooperative-led models for fair value chains, migrant inclusion, care provision, and digital platform governance.

By implementing these actions, policymakers can empower people rather than markets alone, reflecting the core spirit of the cooperative model. The recommendations are grounded in ongoing global efforts, including legal reforms aligned with international standards such as ILO Recommendation No. 193,[154] expanded rural credit schemes, and inclusive social protection frameworks. UN agencies, development partners, and private actors can further accelerate impact by mainstreaming cooperatives across development programmes and co-investing in cooperative capacity and skills.

Advancing SDG 10 through a human-rights lens means ensuring that no one is left behind. Cooperatives, with their people-centered and democratic approach, offer a practical blueprint for a fairer economy in which value is shared and participation is inclusive. As the UN International Year of Cooperatives 2025 unfolds, governments, international organizations, cooperatives, and citizens have a timely opportunity to strengthen enabling ecosystems, enact inclusive policies, and invest in cooperative solutions. Doing so will advance SDG 10 while affirming the fundamental human rights of freedom, equality, and dignity for all.

SDG 12: ENSURE SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION PATTERNS

12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

SDG 12, “RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION,” AIMS TO “DO MORE AND BETTER WITH LESS” BY DECOUPLING ECONOMIC GROWTH FROM ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION.[155]

It promotes a shift from a linear to circular growth model that prioritises reuse, repair, and recycling, while calling on businesses and governments to embed sustainability into their practices and enable informed consumer choice. Progress on SDG 12 underpins wider development outcomes, including climate action, food security, decent work, and reduced inequalities.

Global trends highlight the urgency of this transition. Material extraction has more than tripled since 1970, now exceeding 100 billion tonnes annually, while efficiency gains lag behind demand.[156] Around one third of all food produced is lost or wasted, contributing to emissions and undermining food security.[157] At the same time, growing waste streams, particularly plastic and electronic waste, are shifting environmental and health burdens to low-income countries and informal workers.[158] These outcomes reflect structural challenges in production systems. Global supply chains are often long and opaque, with limited traceability and weak accountability across multiple tiers. Market concentration and pricing pressures further reduce the influence of small producers, workers, and consumers, allowing environmental costs to be externalised and short-term efficiency to take precedence over long-term sustainability. Addressing these challenges requires more than technological solutions or changes in individual behaviour; it calls for ownership and governance models that embed responsibility, accountability, and long-term stewardship into economic decision-making, aligning production and consumption with shared social and environmental objectives.

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE

Cooperatives are uniquely positioned to advance responsible consumption and production because sustainability is embedded in their identity, governance, and operational logic. The seventh cooperative principle, concern for community, establishes a commitment to work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.[159] This long-term, member-driven focus allows cooperatives to internalise the environmental and social costs that conventional business models often ignore or ‘externalize’ to the public. Research suggests that cooperatives are well placed to contribute to global circular economy roadmaps, as they benefit from specialized ecosystem support and legal frameworks tailored to their mission.[160] Furthermore, a rising trend shows new, agile cooperatives launching with circularity as a core value from inception.

Cooperatives are therefore driven to contribute across the core dimensions and targets of SDG 12 by influencing how goods and services are produced, consumed, and recycled. Through collective action, cooperatives advance resource efficiency, circularity, and more sustainable value chains. Both agricultural and consumer cooperatives serve as a transformative force by leveraging collective actions to transition the agri-food and forestry sectors toward a circular, resource-efficient, and low-waste production model. Importantly, such practices are rarely implemented as isolated sustainability initiatives and instead emerge naturally from democratic ownership, collective decision-making, and long-term accountability to members and communities.

Sustainable production and efficient resource use (SDG Target 12.2)

Cooperatives support more sustainable production systems and the efficient use of natural resources by enabling collective investment in environmentally responsible practices. Producer cooperatives allow farmers, fishers, artisans, and small manufacturers to pool resources, access training, and adopt production methods that reduce chemical inputs, improve water and energy efficiency, and protect ecosystems while maintaining viable livelihoods. By strengthening bargaining power and stabilizing market access, cooperatives also reduce the pressures that often drive unsustainable extraction and overproduction. Collective governance enables members to agree on sustainable resource management practices that protect shared assets over the long term.

Food and Forest Development Finland has been supporting international cooperative development projects towards this goal in Tanzania through FFD’s

Greener Tanzania project.[161] **The Pastoral Women's Council (PWC)** has supported women in Monduli and Longido to build and replicate improved energy-saving stoves and insulated cookers using locally available materials. Although PWC is not a cooperative, the initiative directly benefits members of nearby producer organisations by reducing household fuelwood use, lowering emissions, and improving health and safety. Women have taken a lead role in training others, turning clean cooking into a community-driven model of sustainable consumption that complements the climate-resilient livelihood efforts of local farmer and pastoralist organisations. This partnership approach demonstrates how cooperative ecosystems can advance SDG 12 through practical, low-cost, and gender-responsive innovations. Similarly in Nepal, FFD supported 4 cooperatives to help women adopt climate smart fish farming and launch sal leaf and NTFP enterprises: sustainable, low waste value chains that reduce environmental pressure and strengthen women's incomes. Over 1,200 women members now influence production decisions and practices.

A complementary perspective emerges from consumer cooperatives that actively shape production systems upstream through their sourcing policies and long-term relationships with producers. In Japan, the Japanese Consumers' Co-operative Union has developed environmental production standards in collaboration with farmers, promoting reduced use of pesticides and chemical inputs while ensuring stable demand through cooperative purchasing systems. Similarly, in the Republic of Korea, iCoop Korea has built an integrated eco-food system linking production, processing, and retail. By investing in organic farming zones and environmentally responsible logistics, the cooperative reduces resource use across the value chain while supporting sustainable livelihoods for producers.

Another notable example is the Baja California Regional Federation of Fishing Cooperative Societies (FEDECOOP) in Mexico. Thirteen fishing cooperatives jointly manage ten Territorial Use Rights for Fishing zones along the Baja California coast. Through cooperative governance, FEDECOOP introduced catch limits for key species, beginning with the Baja spiny lobster in 1992 and later extending to other fisheries as stocks declined.[162] This cooperative-led management system has contributed to the recovery and long-term sustainability of local fisheries while ensuring stable livelihoods for fishing communities.[163]

Responsible consumption and consumer awareness (SDG Target 12.8)

Consumer and retail cooperatives shape demand by prioritising responsibly sourced products, reducing unnecessary packaging, promoting fair trade, and increasing transparency in supply chains. Because they are owned by their members, the consumers themselves, they can align purchasing decisions with shared social and environmental values, while directly influencing product standards, sourcing policies, and sustainability commitments.

In the United Kingdom, the Co-operative Group (one of the largest consumer cooperatives in the world), has implemented significant packaging reduction and recycling initiatives. Since 2018, the cooperative has removed more than 6,600 tonnes of plastic from its own-brand products and packaging, achieved 100% "easy to recycle" packaging, and increased the use of recycled content to over 40% in its plastic packaging.[164]

In Spain, the award-winning agri-cooperative Càmara Arrossera del Montsià, with its ORYZITE® project, transforms rice husks into a sustainable material that can replace a significant share of petroleum-based plastics. Being light and heat-resistant, this bio-based product has now entered high-tech supply chains in the automotive, furniture, and design sectors. These efforts demonstrate how consumer and agricultural cooperatives can use their purchasing power and governance structures to shift entire supply chains toward more sustainable practices. Furthermore, consumer cooperatives often invest in member education initiatives that promote sustainable lifestyles, responsible consumption, and greater awareness of environmental impacts, reinforcing behavioral change alongside market transformation.[165] An example is the Escuela de Consumo Circular, designed by HISPACOOP (ES) in 2022 to educate pupils from primary school through thematic videos on the principles of the circular model, its benefits, and how to put into practice more responsible and sustainable consumption.

Consumer cooperatives outside Europe further demonstrate how democratic ownership can transform consumption patterns. In Japan, the Seikatsu Club Consumers' Co-operative Union engages its members directly in product design and sourcing decisions, ensuring full transparency regarding ingredients, production processes, and environmental impacts. This participatory model enables consumers to actively shape more sustainable consumption practices.[166] In the United States, National Co+op Grocers supports a nationwide network of food cooperatives that combine retail with consumer education. Through in-store campaigns, product labelling, and community outreach, these cooperatives promote responsible purchasing decisions related to organic production, sustainable seafood, and non-GMO products, turning retail environments into platforms for sustainability awareness. In Argentina, Cooperativa Obrera combines retail operations with consumer education programmes that promote responsible purchasing, product awareness, and community engagement. Such models demonstrate how cooperative retail networks in emerging economies can play a critical role in shaping consumption behaviours while ensuring accessibility and affordability, reinforcing the social dimension of sustainable consumption.

Waste reduction and circular economy solutions (SDG Target 12.5)

Cooperatives also play a significant role in reducing waste and advancing circular economy approaches. Recycling, waste picker, and reuse cooperatives improve waste collection and material recovery systems while providing dignified livelihoods for workers who are often part of the informal economy. In many cities around the world, waste picker cooperatives have become essential partners in municipal waste management systems. By organising informal waste workers into democratic enterprises, these cooperatives improve recycling rates, reduce landfill use, and reintegrate valuable materials such as plastics, metals, textiles, and electronic waste into local economies.

The experience of waste picker cooperatives in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, illustrates this contribution. In the early 1990s, informal waste collectors, known as catadores, organised themselves into cooperatives such as ASMARE and were subsequently integrated into the city's solid waste management system. Over time, these cooperatives formed regional federations and contributed to the creation of Brazil's National Movement of Recyclable Waste Pickers.[167] Today, waste picker organisations across Brazil collectively divert an estimated one million tonnes of recyclable materials from landfills each year, while providing income, social protection, and improved working conditions for thousands of workers.[168]

Moreover, across Europe, many cooperatives are involved in national collection schemes for agricultural plastics, facilitating the collection, recycling, and recovery of materials used in farming activities. Their position within the agricultural supply chain, as distributors, service providers, and trusted partners of farmers, enables them to organise efficient systems and disseminate best practices. In Member States where such schemes are implemented, collection rates range between 75% and 95%, with the vast majority of materials subsequently recycled. In Germany, programmes supported by Deutscher Raiffeisenverband, such as ERDE, enable farmers to return used agricultural films and nets for recycling, while PAMIRA collects packaging from plant protection products and fertilisers. In France, the A.D.I.VALOR initiative has established a nationwide system for the recovery and recycling of agricultural plastics, collecting more than 93,000 tonnes annually with recycling rates exceeding 90%, with cooperatives operating a large share of collection points. These models demonstrate how circular economy systems can simultaneously deliver environmental benefits, social inclusion, and economic resilience.

Consumer cooperatives also advance circular economy solutions within retail systems. iCoop Korea has implemented zero-waste retail models, including reusable container systems and food waste recycling facilities that convert organic waste into agricultural inputs demonstrating how retail can close material loops and reduce waste at scale. In Canada, Mountain Equipment Co-op promotes product longevity through repair services, resale programmes, and recycling initiatives for outdoor equipment. By extending product life cycles and reducing the need for new resource extraction, such models contribute directly to waste reduction and more sustainable consumption patterns.

Transparent and sustainable supply chains (SDG Target 12.6)

Responsible supply chains and greater transparency are strengthened through cooperative governance structures. Because cooperatives are owned by their producer, worker, or consumer members, there is greater oversight of sourcing practices, labour conditions, and environmental performance. Cooperation among cooperatives can also shorten value chains, improve traceability, and ensure that value is distributed more equitably between producers and consumers. This is particularly important in sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and retail, where cooperatives help connect producers directly with markets while maintaining sustainability standards.

Through cooperative networks, federations, and international partnerships, these responsible supply chain practices can be scaled across regions and sectors.[169] For example, agricultural cooperatives are strengthening transparency and sustainability in global supply chains by organising smallholder producers and improving traceability from farm to market. The Malawi Zero Hunger project (2025-2028), implemented by the cooperative Fairtrade Italia, in partnership with Fairtrade Africa and Agricane, and funded by Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo (AICS), is supporting sugarcane producer organisations (SPOs) in Chikwawa and Nkhotakota that face climate vulnerability and income instability. Working with the Lakeshore Cane Growers Association, Kasinthula Cane Growers Association, and Phata Sugarcane Outgrowers Cooperative, they promote sustainable agricultural practices, including the use of organic fertilisers, soil management practices, and crop diversification. In a context marked by export restrictions, Fairtrade supports Small-scale Producers' Organisations in preparing for market reopening while supporting compliance with social and environmental standards.[170]

In Ethiopia, the Oromia Coffee Farmers Cooperative Union, which represents more than 400,000 coffee farmers, enables members to collectively process and export coffee directly to international buyers while implementing traceability and certification systems that ensure compliance with environmental and labour standards. Similarly, cocoa cooperatives in Indonesia, supported by organisations such as Rikolto, are adopting digital traceability tools and sustainable farming practices that allow supply chain partners to verify production methods, ensure fair payments to farmers, and promote responsible sourcing. Since obtaining SA8000 certification in 1998 (becoming the first company in Europe to do so), Coop Italia has embedded ethical sourcing standards across its supply chains, ensuring that social and labour criteria are integrated into procurement practices. Through initiatives such as the *"Buoni e Giusti" ("Good and Fair") campaign*, Coop Italia promotes responsible production practices in agriculture and requires suppliers to register with Italy's Network for Quality Agricultural Work, a public system designed to prevent irregular labour practices and combat labour exploitation (currently 800 suppliers and sub-suppliers across food and non-food sectors covered). Ethical compliance forms part of contractual requirements for suppliers and is supported by audits, corrective action plans, and continuous monitoring of working conditions, wages, and health and safety standards. Together, these examples demonstrate how cooperative enterprises can improve accountability, strengthen sustainable value chains, and ensure that smallholder producers receive a more equitable share of value, contributing directly to the objectives of SDG Target 12.6 on responsible business practices and transparent supply chains.

Consumer cooperatives also play a critical role in strengthening transparency and accountability in supply chains. In North America, Cooperative Coffees connects consumer cooperatives with small-scale coffee producers through direct trade relationships that ensure fair pricing, long-term partnerships, and transparent value distribution. These models demonstrate how cooperative supply chains can reduce asymmetries of information and power while embedding sustainability criteria into commercial relationships.

CASE STUDIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Progana Project, NCBA CLUSA

Sustainable Resource Management and Food Loss Reduction (Targets 12.2 & 12.3)

In the Dominican Republic, cooperative and producer-association models have played an important role in strengthening more sustainable agricultural production systems through the USDA Safe Agriculture/ Food Export Program (SAFE), locally known as Progana. Implemented by NCBA CLUSA with support from the United States Department of Agriculture, the programme operated from 2015 to 2023 to improve the competitiveness, quality, and sustainability of the country's beef and dairy sectors. With more than 66,000 direct beneficiaries, the initiative sought to improve agricultural productivity through better farm management, stronger producer organisations, expanded access to inputs and financial services, and enhanced institutional capacity across national value chains. Its broader objective was to strengthen domestic food systems while supporting compliance with international quality standards, including preparation for beef exports to the United States. A notable example is the **Association of Cattle Ranchers of Santiago Rodríguez (AGASAR),** which used targeted technical support and a matching grant to improve milk quality among its members after persistent low-grade production had reduced incomes. Through farm-based training on hygienic milking, container sterilisation, mastitis detection, and herd management, producers improved product quality, reduced losses, and strengthened compliance with market standards required by buyers such as Nestlé. The initiative shows how collective organisation, local extension services, and cooperative coordination can promote more efficient resource use, reduce waste, improve value retention for farmers, and build more responsible and resilient food supply chains.

Circular Innovation in Agri-Cooperatives (Targets 12.2 & 12.5)

European agri-cooperatives are leading the circular transition within and across their sectors. By strengthening cooperation across the food chain and investing in innovation, European agri-cooperatives - represented by **COPA-COGECA** - help build more sustainable production systems while supporting responsible consumption patterns. The Italian wine cooperative **Caviro** has developed a fully integrated circular model through a "total use" model in the wine sector, where nearly all by-products from wine production are valorised. High-value compounds are extracted for food, industrial, and pharmaceutical uses, while the remaining biomass is converted into bioenergy. The resulting digestate is then transformed into organic fertilisers that are returned to member farmers, effectively closing the loop. Through this system, Caviro achieves a waste recovery rate close to 100% while generating renewable energy and reducing emissions. **Södra**, a cooperative of over 50,000 forest owners in Sweden, is a global leader in circularity specifically because it has bridged the gap between forestry and the fashion industry, solving the "blended fiber" problem that has historically sent millions of tonnes of clothes to landfills. Their flagship circular initiative is a world-first technology called **OnceMore®**. Södra takes in post-consumer textile waste, like old hotel sheets or discarded clothing, that is typically a blend of cotton and polyester, and by using a unique chemical process at their Mörrum mill, they "dissolve" the textiles, separate the polyester, which is currently used for energy recovery, and extract the pure cellulose from the cotton. Södra then combines this recycled cotton cellulose with "virgin" wood cellulose from their members' Swedish forests (primarily birch and pine). The cooperative agri-food model therefore makes a tangible and scalable contribution to achieving SDG 12 by creating an additional revenue stream that benefits its owners.

Circular Agricultural Input Management (Targets 12.2 & 12.5)

In January 2024, the **JA Group** and the **Tokyo Metropolitan Government** formalized an agreement to recover phosphorus from municipal sewage facilities for use as agricultural fertilizer. The initiative establishes closed-loop nutrient cycles to reduce Japan's dependence on imported fertilizer inputs.[171] Global supply disruptions and declining food self-sufficiency have intensified pressure to source agricultural inputs domestically. The framework integrates three mechanisms: conversion of livestock manure into compost for feed crop production; phosphorus recovery from urban sewage for fertilizer application; and domestic cultivation of grain corn as a feed ingredient, which also mitigates continuous cropping problems in soybean rotations. Together, these streams form a circular agricultural system in which waste outputs are systematically reintroduced as productive inputs. This model demonstrates how cooperative federations can advance SDG Targets 12.2 and 12.5 by closing domestic nutrient cycles, offering a replicable framework for countries managing urban-agricultural resource integration.

Integrated Eco-Food System (Targets 12.2 & 12.5)

iCoop Korea has developed an integrated eco-food system that connects agricultural production, food processing, distribution, and consumption within a single cooperative network. The model prioritizes organic farming, environmentally responsible logistics, and reduced resource use across the value chain. A key component of this system is the establishment of food recycling centres that convert organic waste into agricultural inputs, effectively closing material loops between consumption and production. By combining sustainable production practices with circular resource management, iCoop Korea reduces environmental impacts while strengthening the resilience of local food systems. This integrated approach demonstrates how consumer cooperatives can simultaneously advance efficient resource use and circular economy solutions in line with SDG Targets 12.2 and 12.5.[172]

Sustainable Agriculture and Eco-Production Standards (Targets 12.2 & 12.6)

Through its long-standing partnerships with farmers, the **Japanese Consumers' Co-operative Union (JCCU)** has developed environmental production standards that promote reduced use of pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and other resource-intensive inputs. By integrating these standards into its procurement policies, JCCU ensures stable demand for sustainably produced goods while supporting producers in transitioning toward more resource-efficient farming systems. The cooperative model enables long-term contracts and shared risk between consumers and producers, reducing pressures for overproduction and unsustainable practices. By aligning consumption with sustainable production requirements and strengthening traceability across supply chains, JCCU demonstrates how consumer cooperatives can influence upstream production systems and contribute to more efficient resource use in line with SDG Targets 12.2 and 12.6.

Agricultural Cooperative Local Food Direct Sales Network (Targets 12.3 & 12.6)

In 2012, **NongHyup** (the National Agricultural Cooperative Federation of Korea) launched its first local food direct sales outlet through a member cooperative in Wanju County, North Jeolla Province, and has since expanded the model nationwide. The initiative establishes cooperative-managed short supply chains that connect smallholder farmers directly with local consumers, eliminating multi-tier intermediary distribution. Korea's conventional agricultural distribution system imposed high post-harvest losses and low market access for smallholders, 79 percent of whom farm less than 0.5 hectares. Each outlet operates under a same-day harvest protocol with mandatory producer identification on all products; unsold items are returned to the farm, reducing retail-stage food loss. By 2024, the network comprised 738 outlets serving 53,802 registered farm households, generating approximately KRW 545.5 billion in annual sales. Farmers realized KRW 178 billion in distribution cost savings in 2022 alone. This model demonstrates how agricultural cooperatives can operationalize SDG Targets 12.3 and 12.6 simultaneously, offering a transferable framework for countries with fragmented smallholder distribution systems.[173]

Kigro Recyclers

Waste Reduction through Cooperative Recycling and Reuse (Target 12.5)

Kigro Recyclers, established in 2019 in Nairobi as a self-help group and later registered as one of Kenya's first worker cooperatives, is owned and managed by informal waste collectors, most of whom are youth. With support from organisations such as Global Communities under USAID's Cooperative Development Programme, the cooperative provides garbage collection, recycling, and cleaning services while promoting more sustainable waste management practices. It collects and sorts waste from local communities into reusable and recyclable materials, generating income through resale while ensuring that residual waste is disposed of responsibly. The case highlights how cooperative models can reduce waste generation, strengthen recycling systems, and support environmentally sound waste management through locally driven solutions.[174]

Consumer Education through Cooperative Retail Networks (Target 12.8)

National Co+op Grocers (NCG) supports a network of community-owned food cooperatives across the United States that integrate retail operations with consumer education on sustainable consumption. Through coordinated campaigns, product labelling initiatives, and in-store information systems, NCG promotes responsible purchasing decisions related to organic production, non-GMO foods, and sustainably sourced products such as seafood. These cooperatives serve as platforms for raising awareness about the environmental and social impacts of consumption while enabling members to align their purchasing choices with shared values. This approach demonstrates how consumer cooperatives can influence demand patterns and foster sustainable lifestyles in line with SDG Target 12.8.

Consumer Awareness and Community Education (Target 12.8)

Cooperativa Obrera, one of the largest consumer cooperatives in Argentina, has developed a long-standing model that integrates retail activity with consumer education and community engagement. Through its "Educación Cooperativa" programmes and in-store communication initiatives, the cooperative promotes responsible consumption, nutritional awareness, and sustainable purchasing decisions among its members. By leveraging its extensive retail network, Cooperativa Obrera disseminates information on product quality, origin, and responsible use, while encouraging more conscious consumption patterns. This approach demonstrates how consumer cooperatives in emerging economies can act as key enablers of behavioural change, contributing to SDG Target 12.8 by aligning consumer awareness with sustainable consumption practices.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As demonstrated above, cooperatives offer practical models for responsible consumption and production, yet they often operate within systems that do not fully support their potential. Legal and regulatory frameworks frequently lag behind emerging sectors such as recycling, renewable energy, and digital platforms, limiting their ability to innovate and scale. Existing cooperative models also highlight clear pathways for expansion. In Japan, the Consumers' Co-operative Union shows how consumer-driven standards can shape production practices at scale, while in the Republic of Korea, iCOOP demonstrates how vertically integrated systems can internalise environmental costs across value chains. Strengthening policy support for such models could accelerate broader transitions toward more sustainable and inclusive economies.

Access to finance remains a persistent constraint. Many cooperatives seek to invest in sustainable technologies, traceability, and circular solutions but struggle to secure long-term, patient capital, as financial systems often undervalue their social and environmental returns. Experiences such as Mountain Equipment Co-op highlight how investments in repair, reuse, and product lifecycle extension can generate both environmental and economic value. Scaling these approaches will require tailored financial instruments, including cooperative development funds and blended finance mechanisms, to support investment in reuse, recycling, and sustainable infrastructure.

Cooperatives also face pressures from concentrated supply chains, volatile markets, and short-term incentives that challenge fair pricing and long-term stewardship. Cooperative trade networks provide a pathway to address these imbalances. Initiatives such as Cooperative Coffees show how direct relationships between consumer cooperatives and small-scale producers can improve price stability, enhance transparency, and support more equitable value distribution across supply chains.

Cooperatives remain underrepresented in circular economy strategies, and support from cooperative federations, consortia, and apex organisations remains limited. At the same time, growing global momentum around circularity and responsible consumption presents important opportunities. Québec's provincial roadmap, for example, recognises social economy actors as key drivers of repair, reuse, and resource efficiency in the textile sector, highlighting the importance of aligning cooperative and circular economy policies to support a just transition. Consumer cooperatives are particularly well positioned to act as intermediaries between producers and consumers, with networks such as National Co+op Grocers demonstrating how retail platforms can promote responsible consumption through labelling, education, and values-based purchasing. Expanding these approaches to include refill systems, product take-back schemes, and zero-waste models could further accelerate progress.

The transition toward more sustainable economies is increasingly aligned with the cooperative model. With the right support, cooperatives can play a stronger role in building systems that reduce waste and use resources more efficiently. Digitalisation further strengthens this potential, with advances in traceability, data-sharing, and member engagement enhancing transparency, improving resource management, and enabling cooperatives to scale sustainable practices across sectors and regions.

CALL TO ACTION

Achieving responsible consumption and production will require more than technological change; it will require economic models that place people, communities, and long-term sustainability at the centre of decision-making. Cooperatives already embody these principles in practice. What is needed now is a stronger enabling environment that allows cooperative solutions to grow and reach their full potential.

1. Recognise cooperatives as partners in sustainable consumption and production

Governments should recognise cooperatives as key partners in shaping and implementing national strategies for sustainable consumption and production. Whether through circular economy roadmaps, food systems policies, waste management strategies, or sustainable procurement frameworks, cooperatives can bring practical experience and community-based solutions to policy implementation. Including cooperatives in national SDG planning and reporting processes can help ensure their contributions are visible and fully integrated into sustainable development efforts.[175]

2. Update legal frameworks to support cooperative innovation

Develop concessional loans, blended finance facilities, revolving funds, loan-to-grant schemes, guarantees to de-risk lending by banks, and results-based funding tailored to cooperatives. Support investments in renewable generation, mini-grids, transmission, storage, renewable thermal energy supply chains, and energy efficiency programs while ensuring long-term financial sustainability.

3. Expand access to finance for sustainable cooperative investment

Investing in sustainability often requires upfront capital for new technologies, improved infrastructure, certification systems, or circular economy facilities. Financial institutions, development banks, and international partners can play a critical role by developing financing instruments tailored to cooperative enterprises. Dedicated funding mechanisms, guarantees, and blended finance models can help cooperatives implement environmentally responsible practices while continuing to provide decent work and inclusive economic participation.

4. Use public and social procurement to support responsible markets

Governments and large institutions can accelerate the transition to responsible consumption and production by using their purchasing power strategically. Public procurement policies that prioritise sustainable and socially responsible suppliers can help cooperatives expand markets, stabilise demand, and invest in greener production methods. Such policies can be particularly impactful in sectors such as food systems, waste management, community services, and renewable energy.

5. Invest in skills, data, and knowledge systems for sustainable cooperative ecosystems

Strengthening cooperative contributions to SDG 12 also requires investment in education, training, and knowledge sharing. Cooperative members and managers need access to skills related to sustainable production methods, circular business models, digital traceability systems, and sustainability reporting. In parallel, national statistical systems should better capture the environmental and social contributions of cooperatives so that policymakers can recognise their role in building sustainable economies.

6. Strengthen partnerships and international cooperation

The challenges of responsible consumption and production are global in nature, and cooperative solutions can benefit from stronger international collaboration. Development partners, governments, UN agencies, and cooperative organisations can work together to support knowledge exchange, North-South and South–South cooperation, and partnerships that strengthen sustainable value chains. By sharing experiences and innovations across countries and sectors, cooperative enterprises can scale solutions that benefit both people and the planet.

Building economies that respect planetary boundaries while ensuring dignity and opportunity for all will require new ways of organising economic activity. Cooperatives offer one such pathway. By bringing people together to collectively manage resources, shape markets, and share value more equitably, cooperative enterprises demonstrate that responsible consumption and production are not only possible but are already happening in communities around the world. As the International Year of Cooperatives 2025 highlighted, cooperatives are not simply alternatives within existing economic systems; they are practical and proven partners in building a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient global economy.

SDG 13: TAKE URGENT ACTION TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE AND ITS IMPACTS

13 CLIMATE ACTION

THE CLIMATE CRISIS REMAINS THE DEFINING CHALLENGE OF OUR ERA.

The year 2024 was the hottest on record, with escalating greenhouse gas emissions pushing the world far off track from the 1.5 °C target set in the Paris Agreement.[176] Intensifying heatwaves, droughts, floods, and ecosystem loss are deepening social inequalities, threatening livelihoods, and reversing decades of development progress. Climate change is also reshaping the world of work, creating new opportunities in renewable energy and green industries while displacing traditional jobs in high-carbon sectors.

As the world convened for COP30 in Belém, Brazil, the first Conference of the Parties hosted in the Amazon, there is renewed urgency to accelerate inclusive, locally led climate action. The Global Stocktake underscores that mitigation and adaptation must advance together,[177] anchored in equity, just transitions, and resilience for those most affected. Within this critical moment, the International Year of Cooperatives 2025 (IYC 2025) shines a spotlight on cooperative enterprises as vital partners in linking global ambition with local action. Cooperatives empower communities to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from climate shocks, strengthening livelihoods, protecting ecosystems, and ensuring that climate justice and sustainable development advance hand in hand.

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE

Cooperatives are uniquely positioned to advance SDG 13 through collective, democratic, and locally rooted approaches to climate mitigation and adaptation. Their people-centred model ensures that environmental action directly improves members' livelihoods while building long-term community resilience. Across sectors, cooperatives are greening their operations and value chains, demonstrating that sustainability and profitability can go hand in hand.

Brazilian cooperatives played a prominent role at COP30, advocating for consistent public policies, adequate funding, and legal frameworks to support regenerative, low-carbon models. They hosted a dedicated Coop Pavilion and participated in sessions on green finance, low-carbon agriculture, renewable energy, bioeconomy, sustainable logistics, food security, and climate adaptation. These efforts showcased that cooperatives are already contributing significantly to the climate agenda, while emphasizing the need for broader support to expand climate-positive initiatives.

The Organization of Brazilian Cooperatives (OCB) was central to cooperative engagement at COP30. OCB highlighted how cooperatives link the real economy to global climate commitments, bringing innovation, sustainability, and inclusion to local producers. The OCB manifesto positioned cooperatives as essential partners in climate action, capable of decentralizing climate finance, accelerating the adoption of new technologies, and strengthening community resilience.[178] Side events demonstrated practical initiatives, such as collaborations with Embrapa and credit cooperatives like Sicoob CCS, which advance low-carbon livestock farming and bioeconomy projects for local communities.

In the UK, Central Co-op's emissions reduction plan has been approved by the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi), confirming alignment with global climate goals. The co-op will cut direct emissions by 44% by 2030 and 90% by 2035, reduce indirect emissions by 97% by 2040, and eliminate deforestation from high-risk supply chains by 2025. The plan aligns with EU and global net-zero transition objectives and best practices for value-chain accountability, demonstrating cooperative leadership in science-based decarbonisation.

Cooperatives' local ownership structure creates competitive advantages in renewable energy through democratic control of production and use, community employment creation, and fair pricing. These features place cooperatives at the heart of a just transition, ensuring that climate action delivers decent work and equitable benefits. By aligning environmental responsibility with social inclusion, cooperatives turn the principles of sustainability and solidarity into practical, measurable outcomes. Through the project "*Informed forestry decisions, sustainable forest management and forest certification in smallholder forests in Vietnam*" (2023-2026), Food and Forest Development Finland - FFD is currently supporting Vietnamese smallholder cooperatives in transforming traditional forestry practices into climate-smart models that contribute to both climate mitigation and adaptation.[179] Cooperatives encourage members to prolong tree rotation cycles, diversify plantation species, and adopt sustainable forest management standards through forest certification. These practices increase carbon storage while reducing vulnerabilities to extreme weather. By pooling labour and resources, smallholders also help one another restore damaged forests after storms and floods, which are becoming increasingly frequent and severe in central Viet Nam.

In rural economies, agricultural cooperatives help members transition to sustainable and regenerative production by reducing deforestation, conserving soil and water, and restoring degraded ecosystems. Through shared investment and risk pooling, they enable smallholders to diversify crops, adopt green technologies, and access climate finance otherwise out of reach. COOP Czech Republic is deploying unmanned, energy-efficient stores in rural communities, developed in partnership with municipalities. These outlets reduce transport needs, energy use, and operational emissions while maintaining access to essential goods in low-population areas, ensuring local resilience. In cities, recycling and waste-pickers' cooperatives contribute to circular economies that reduce emissions from unmanaged waste and create dignified green jobs.

Energy cooperatives are leading the community-driven transition to renewables, enabling citizens to co-own wind, solar, and bioenergy infrastructure. Financial and insurance cooperatives mobilize resources for adaptation through microinsurance, green credit, and rapid-response mechanisms that protect vulnerable households from climate shocks. REScoop.eu, the European Federation of Energy Communities, is a growing network of 2,500 energy cooperatives across Europe, engaging more than 2 million citizens in climate action and the energy transition. By promoting citizen-led, local, and green energy, these cooperatives not only help reduce carbon emissions but also strengthen public support for renewables and foster local economic and social development.

Unlike conventional enterprises driven by short-term profit, cooperatives balance economic viability with social and environmental sustainability. Their democratic governance and local accountability foster trust, participation, and long-term stewardship of natural resources. By aligning environmental responsibility with community well-being, cooperatives translate climate commitments into practical, people-centred solutions that ensure no one is left behind.

CASE STUDIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Cooperative Bank of Kenya

As embedded in its Environmental, Social & Governance Policy, the Cooperative Bank of Kenya (Co-op Bank) contributes significantly to SDG 13 – Climate Action by mobilizing climate finance and supporting low-carbon transitions across cooperative enterprises. Leveraging its strong network of cooperatives and SACCOs, the Bank provides targeted financing for renewable energy, climate-smart technologies, and resilience-building investments in key economic sectors.

In agriculture, Co-op Bank has expanded access to Productive Use Renewable Energy (PURE) technologies, particularly solar-powered systems for dairy, maize, and potato value chains. More than 65 dairy

European Energy Communities Forum in Kraków, 2025. © REScoop.eu.

cooperatives now use solar-powered cooling and processing equipment, while over 500 maize farmers and 200 potato farmers have adopted solar irrigation and other clean-energy assets that enhance productivity, reduce emissions, and lower operating costs. These investments strengthen smallholder climate adaptation and accelerate the uptake of clean energy in rural communities.

In transport, the Bank supports e-mobility adoption among SACCOs by financing electric vehicles and related infrastructure. Early adopters report improved income stability from reduced fuel and maintenance costs, demonstrating the economic and environmental benefits of transitioning to low-emission transport.

Asia Pacific: Osaka Prefecture Forestry Association

The Osaka Prefecture Forestry Association (Osaka Shinrin Kumiai Rengōkai), created in 2001 through the merger of 16 forest unions, represents nearly 7,000 forest owners, employs about 50 staff, and has a capital of roughly $1.3 million. Guided by the philosophy "Protect the mountains and grow the forest," it manages forestry, timber sales, recycling, and disaster recovery across Osaka. On July 14, 2020, it also helped establish the Osaka Cooperative and Non-Profit Sector Liaison Council (OCoNoMi Osaka) to strengthen collaboration across cooperatives.

Committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the association obtained Sustainable Green Ecosystem Council (SGEC) Forest Management/Chain of Custody (FM/CoC) certification in 2017 to ensure sustainable forest practices and a reliable timber supply. It promotes decarbonization through biomass power, encourages forest recreation, and advances forest education (ESD) for children and volunteers, linking sustainability with community resilience.

Through these initiatives, Co-op Bank illustrates the pivotal role of financial institutions in advancing actions to combat climate change and its impacts. Its climate-responsive financing model enables cooperatives to adopt sustainable technologies, promotes low-carbon growth, and reinforces the resilience of cooperatives.

Creando Conciencia, Argentina

Creando Conciencia began in 2005 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, when a small group of neighbors and informal waste pickers ("cartoneros") decided to address two urgent problems: the growing waste problem in the city, and the precarious conditions of informal recyclers. Over time, the cooperative has grown significantly: between 2019-2023, they increased the volume of materials processed by nearly 135%, from about 2,683,573 kg to 6,275,000 kg. Today, they run waste-collection services (door-to-door and at EcoPoints), sorting and recycling of many types of materials (plastics, glass, paper, cardboard, metals, etc.), and they transform much of that recycled material into new products — for example, plastic furniture and everyday items such as trays, organizers, bins, school supplies, and household accessories.

The environmental and social impact of Creando Conciencia is impressive. Over their first ten years, they recycled more than 7,300,000 kg of waste, including glass, PET plastic, cardboard, and more — which reportedly saved nearly 20,000 trees and conserved hundreds of millions of liters of water. More recently (2022), the cooperative's recycling efforts avoided the emission of thousands of kilos of CO_2, saved tens of millions of kilowatts of electricity, and prevented the extraction of large volumes of petroleum. Beyond climate impact, Creando Conciencia has had a strong social outcome: many former informal recyclers now work as salaried cooperative members under safer, more dignified conditions; the cooperative also provides training, stable work, and social inclusion, showing how climate action and social justice can go hand in hand.

Genç İşi Kooperatif, Turkiye

Genç İşi contributes to SDG 13 (Climate Action) by equipping young cooperators with the knowledge, tools, and leadership skills needed to drive low-carbon and climate-resilient transitions in their communities. Through the *CIRCLE Project*, they build capacities in sustainability and climate risk assessment, climate-adaptive governance, and evidence-based decision-making for social and solidarity economy actors, particularly those operating and trading in the agri-food sector. Their new Youth4Coops initiative, with the cooperative development organisation Haliéus (IT) as one of their partners, further strengthens this contribution by mapping green transition good practices across Türkiye, Italy, and Spain, developing a practical guide, and training young members of agri-food cooperatives on digital and green transformation pathways. Together, these efforts empower youth to lead climate action within cooperatives, promote just and inclusive transitions, and accelerate the adoption of climate-friendly practices across the cooperative ecosystem.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Despite their proven impact, cooperatives face public and private sector barriers that limit their contribution to climate action. Access to climate finance remains a major challenge, as existing mechanisms often prioritise large-scale private actors and impose complex reporting requirements. Many cooperatives, particularly in developing countries, lack the technical capacity and climate data to qualify for adaptation and mitigation funds. Limited integration into national policy frameworks, worsened by weak legal recognition, hinders cooperatives from contributing to Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and local adaptation plans.

At the same time, global momentum around just transitions, nature-based solutions, and locally led adaptation presents new opportunities. COP30's emphasis on inclusion and indigenous leadership aligns with the cooperative movement's values of participation and equity. Digital innovation, carbon measurement tools, and inter-cooperative partnerships can accelerate the scaling of sustainable production and circular economy models. Strengthening collaboration between cooperatives, governments, and international institutions would unlock their full potential as trusted partners in implementing climate and development agendas. COP30 also saw the launch of transformative programmes like Coopera+ Amazônia, which will invest R$107 million in 50 extractivist cooperatives, benefiting over 3,000 families.[180] Such initiatives illustrate how cooperatives act as catalysts for sustainable development, generating income, protecting ecosystems, and scaling climate solutions from local to global levels. The cooperative presence at COP30 reaffirmed that when communities collectively own the institutions delivering energy, finance, and food, climate action becomes more equitable, durable, and locally grounded.

CALL TO ACTION

To unlock the full potential of cooperatives as agents of climate action, governments, development partners, and multilateral institutions should take the following steps:

1. Recognize and integrate cooperatives in national climate planning

Explicitly include cooperatives in climate strategies, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), and local adaptation plans as key delivery partners for mitigation and adaptation.

2. Expand and adapt climate finance

Create tailored financing instruments, concessional windows, and simplified application and reporting procedures that suit cooperative enterprises and federations. Provide blended-finance options and de-risking tools to increase access for smaller and rural cooperatives.

3. Invest in capacity and technical support

Fund training, extension services, and knowledge exchanges on green innovation, climate-smart agriculture, renewable energy, and digital monitoring (including carbon measurement and reporting tools). Support cooperative-to-cooperative learning and technical links with research institutions.

4. Put in place enabling legal and policy frameworks

Reform laws and regulations to strengthen legal recognition, tax treatment, and operational flexibility for agricultural, energy, financial, and other climate-relevant cooperatives. Ensure policies remove barriers to scaling community-led solutions.

5. Foster multi-stakeholder partnerships

Promote partnerships that connect cooperatives with governments, research organisations, private sector actors, and donors to pilot, scale, and finance proven climate solutions. Leverage public procurement, value-chain linkages, and technical cooperation to accelerate uptake.

6. Use cooperative governance for equitable stewardship

Harness cooperatives' democratic governance models to distribute ownership, benefits, and stewardship of natural resources fairly, ensuring climate investments reach and empower local communities.

By implementing these actions, policymakers can translate global climate commitments into inclusive, locally grounded outcomes that advance both the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda. As the International Year of Cooperatives closes, 2025 should be treated as a launchpad—not a finish line—for scaling cooperative solutions that deliver resilient livelihoods, protect ecosystems, and ensure that climate action serves the people who depend on the land and the sea.

SDG 14: CONSERVE AND SUSTAINABLY USE THE OCEANS, SEAS, AND MARINE RESOURCES

SDG 15: PROTECT, RESTORE, AND PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE USE OF TERRESTRIAL ECOSYSTEMS

14 LIFE BELOW WATER

15 LIFE ON LAND

BIODIVERSITY AND SUSTAINABILITY: FOUNDATIONS FOR OUR FUTURE

Marine and terrestrial ecosystems form the foundation of life on Earth, essential to regulating the climate, preserving biodiversity, and supporting human well-being. Oceans help stabilize temperatures and absorb carbon, while also sustaining livelihoods and food systems. On land, forests, wetlands, and other ecosystems nurture diverse species and underpin water cycles and local economies. However, these natural systems face mounting threats, from climate change and pollution to deforestation and unsustainable exploitation. The impacts fall heaviest on small-scale producers, Indigenous Peoples, and rural communities whose identities and survival are deeply linked with nature. Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water), which aims to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, and Goal 15 (Life on Land), focused on protecting forests, halting biodiversity loss, and restoring degraded ecosystems, will require urgent, coordinated efforts to safeguard the environment while fostering equity, resilience, and inclusive growth.

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD OF WORK

Cooperatives offer a proven model for locally led environmental action. As democratic, member-owned enterprises, they organize collective solutions to manage natural resources, adapt to climate impacts, and restore ecosystems. Their participatory structures ensure stewardship is both equitable and rooted in local knowledge.

In marine environments, cooperatives play a critical role in supporting environmental stewardship and sustainable livelihoods through small-scale fisheries (SSF) and similar networks. By improving fishing and post-harvest practices, managing local aquatic resources, and restoring habitats, SSF cooperatives help conserve biodiversity and strengthen community resilience.[181] Women-led cooperatives in Nepal exemplify this by pioneering climate-smart aquaculture and ecological enterprises, boosting income and empowerment while easing pressure on ecosystems.[182] In Mexico, the Cooperative Society for Fishery Production–United Fishers of San Felipe has combined ecological restoration and local knowledge to rebuild marine ecosystems and sustain livelihoods. By creating artificial reefs to combat illegal fishing and restore habitat loss, they have increased lobster stocks, improved fishery productivity, and contributed to more secure employment.[183] Similarly, in Turkey's Gökova Bay, fishery cooperatives lead participatory resource management, including community-led patrols and training local fishers (both men and women) as marine rangers.[184] Such efforts enhance compliance with conservation rules and reduce harmful practices.

On land, agricultural and forestry cooperatives engage in climate-smart practices and reforestation. In Vietnam, smallholders now use forest inventories and soil maps to manage forests sustainably, securing FSC group certification for over 1,800 hectares.[185] In Tanzania, over 14,000 hectares are now managed under customary land rights, combining restoration with income generation through tree nurseries and market centers.[186] In India, Safe Harvest (formed out of a cooperative) has pioneered a new "pesticide-free" product category, linking 100,000 smallholder farms to urban markets. By promoting non-pesticide management (NPM) agriculture, it protects soil and water quality while ensuring food safety and farmer livelihoods. With sales reaching USD 3.5 million in 2019–2020, it demonstrates the market potential of nature-positive farming models.[187]

Across sectors, cooperatives are driving environmental justice and innovation. They empower those often excluded from governance, and realign economic incentives with conservation by equitably sharing benefits and embedding traditional values into resource management. Many also safeguard intangible cultural heritage linked to biodiversity, such as Morocco's argan practices and Korea's Jeju haenyeo women divers.[188] Community-supported agriculture and fisheries reconnect producers and consumers, while education campaigns shape public behavior in favor of biodiversity. They are harnessing digital tools to improve traceability, promote sustainable consumption, and advocate for nature-positive policies. Cooperatives are not only conserving nature, they are transforming the very systems that put it at risk.

COOPERATIVES IN ACTION

Advancing Forest and River Conservation in Colombia

Since 2020, Colombia's National Teachers' House Cooperative, CANAPRO, has developed the Canapro Environmental project, a cooperative commitment to environmental conservation and protection. Its main focus is the conservation initiative of the Bita River basin in the savannas of the Vichada department in Colombia. This initiative has involved planting more than 1,000 hectares of forest under the name "El Bosque que Camina" (The Walking Forest) and the conservation of 424 plant species, including native forest species such as cogollo and saladillo, wildlife species including bees, 254 fish species, 19 amphibian species, and 38 reptile species.

Morocco's Pioneering Model for a Sustainable Blue Economy

In Morocco's Marchica Lagoon, a cooperative of 74 artisanal fishers has transformed local livelihoods by shifting from traditional fishing to sustainable seaweed farming. Supported by the Global Environment Facility, the Marchica Traditional Fishing Cooperative launched Africa's first red algae cultivation initiative in 2015, expanding from 1.5 to 11 hectares with annual yields reaching 57 tonnes. The project not only enhances biodiversity by purifying the lagoon's waters but also generates economic opportunities, especially for women and youth engaged throughout the production cycle. With growing demand in food, cosmetics, and pharmaceutical sectors, the cooperative connects local production to national value chains and is partnering with government actors to build new processing infrastructure and scale its impact.

Fijian Forest Cooperatives Linking Conservation with Community Prosperity

In northern Fiji, a group of nine Indigenous landowning clans (mataqali), along with a women's collective and youth group, formed what is now known as the Drawa Block Forest Communities Cooperative to protect 4,120 hectares of rainforest, including 1,723 hectares eligible for carbon offsets. By forgoing logging rights, the cooperative has focused on sustainable conservation activities such as rainforest honey production and verified carbon credit sales. By mid-2022, over 75,000 carbon credits had been sold, boosting household incomes by nearly 90 percent. To date, more than 132,000 credits have been issued, benefiting 120 Indigenous households. The cooperative has received both regional and international recognition, demonstrating how community stewardship can generate sustainable income while preserving biodiversity.

On the island of Taveuni, Tavoro Forest Park Co-operative Limited manages the iconic Bouma Falls through a community-owned ecotourism venture. Formally registered in 2014, the cooperative operates with rotating responsibilities for trail maintenance and facility upkeep, ensuring that benefits are shared across village households. With investments from both government and members, the cooperative has upgraded visitor facilities, contributing to conservation and local employment. Its model of linking environmental protection with sustainable tourism earned it the title of Best Cooperative SME of the Year in 2024.

Regenerative Forestry and Nature-Based Solutions in Finland

Metsä Group, a forestry cooperative and member of the Pellervö Coop Center,[189] is advancing regenerative forestry and land use to enhance both natural capital and economic value. Beyond timber, their forests deliver vital ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration and clean water.

With pilot projects at 25 mill sites, Metsä is developing biodiversity-friendly models that integrate alternative land use in built environments and protect endangered species and culturally significant sites. In 2021, they launched a 10-year funding programme to support regionally impactful nature projects beyond commercial forests, focusing on wetland restoration, aquatic bird habitats, and pollinator ecosystems. In 2025, Metsä released a climate transition plan embedding regenerative forestry into their core operations to support climate mitigation and adaptation.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The degradation of marine and terrestrial ecosystems is continuing at an alarming rate, with over 30% of global fish stocks overexploited and 25% of the Earth's land surface degraded due to unsustainable land use.[190] Communities that depend on these ecosystems, often Indigenous Peoples, women, and small-scale producers, are disproportionately affected, lacking secure tenure, reliable access to resources, and inclusion in decision-making. Furthermore, sustainability certification schemes, which improve market access and value, are often costly and complex, and climate-smart seeds or advisory services are often out of reach. As environmental challenges intensify, these vulnerabilities are deepening, underscoring the need for community-led models of resilience and restoration.

Cooperatives offer an inclusive and participatory approach in this context but often face systemic barriers that limit their reach and impact. Many are excluded from national strategies and lack legal recognition or rights, which are essential for managing land and marine ecosystems.[191] Access to tailored biodiversity or climate finance remains limited, especially in the Global South. Moreover, structural gender inequalities and the underrepresentation of youth and Indigenous voices in leadership roles hinder the transformative potential of cooperatives. Their contributions to conservation, restoration, and sustainable livelihoods are frequently overlooked in environmental policymaking and monitoring processes.

Despite these challenges, there is growing momentum to embed community-led, rights-based models into global environmental strategies. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration emphasize the need for locally rooted action.[192] This presents a significant opportunity to mainstream the cooperative model into global and national efforts. With targeted investments, enabling policies, and inclusive planning processes, cooperatives can accelerate progress on SDGs 14 and 15, fostering ecological regeneration while advancing social equity and economic empowerment.

CALL TO ACTION

Cooperatives are already advancing nature-based solutions, sustainable livelihoods, and inclusive governance, but their potential is constrained by legal, financial, and institutional barriers. The following recommendations outline concrete steps to unlock and scale their contributions to SDGs 14 and 15.

1. Secure tenure rights and legal recognition

Cooperatives should be granted clear legal status and secure access to land, forests, and marine resources to exercise their role as environmental stewards. Governments should develop and implement inclusive legal frameworks that protect cooperative structures and support their long-term engagement in natural resource governance.

2. Integrate cooperatives into environmental strategies

Cooperatives should be fully included in National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs),[193] National Adaptation Plans, and ecosystem restoration initiatives. This will ensure that community-based models are reflected in national implementation of global strategies.

3. Expand access to green and patient finance

Tailored financial mechanisms should support cooperative-led conservation and restoration, particularly in the Global South. These include dedicated windows in climate adaptation funds, biodiversity finance, blended finance models, and social impact investments for nature-positive enterprises.

4. Promote inclusive leadership and governance

Specific support should be provided to empower women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, and marginalized groups within cooperatives. This includes training, leadership development, and resources to ensure inclusive decision-making and equitable benefit sharing.

5. Invest in capacity building and innovation

Cooperatives need strengthened access to training on sustainable resource management, value chains, digital tools, and ecological monitoring. Investments in cooperative-led research, knowledge platforms, and cross-cooperative learning can help amplify impact and drive innovation.

6. Strengthen cross-sector partnerships

Governments, UN bodies, research institutions, and NGOs should engage cooperatives as core implementation partners. Joint platforms should be established for policy dialogue, technical assistance, and collaborative programming that bridges environmental, economic, and social goals.

The 2025 International Year of Cooperatives highlights the vital role of cooperatives in protecting ecosystems, supporting livelihoods, and strengthening community resilience. To realize their full potential, cooperatives must be included in biodiversity policies, granted legal recognition, and supported through targeted financing and capacity-building. Embedding cooperative models in environmental strategies can help advance a just, inclusive, and nature-positive transformation that leaves no one behind.

SDG 16: PROMOTE PEACEFUL AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, PROVIDE ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR ALL AND BUILD EFFECTIVE, ACCOUNTABLE AND INCLUSIVE INSTITUTIONS AT ALL LEVELS

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 16 (SDG 16) LIES AT THE HEART OF THE UN 2030 AGENDA, RECOGNIZING THAT PEACE, JUSTICE, AND INCLUSION ARE BOTH ENDS IN THEMSELVES AND ESSENTIAL ENABLERS OF ALL OTHER DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES.

The 2025 Global Progress Report on SDG 16 offers a sobering but important picture of where the world stands on peace, justice, and inclusion. Its central message is clear: progress exists, but it is uneven, fragile, and far too slow to meet the 2030 Agenda.[194] The report stresses that no **SDG 16 target is fully on track**, and that setbacks in peace, justice, and inclusion continue to undermine broader sustainable development. At the same time, the report highlights meaningful gains in areas such as access to information on laws and justice systems and the spread of independent national human rights institutions. These advances show that progress is possible, but only when supported by sustained political commitment, stronger institutions, and better data systems.

Nevertheless, global peace and security conditions have deteriorated significantly.[195] According to the OHCR SDG 16 Progress Report, forced displacement has reached unprecedented levels, with over 120 million people displaced from their homes worldwide, more than double the number recorded in 2015, driven by conflict, instability, and climate-related pressures. Conflict dynamics are intensifying and spreading into more densely populated areas, amplifying human suffering. In 2024 alone, at least 48,000 conflict-related deaths were recorded, reflecting a sharp escalation in violence. These trends are compounded by increasing risks to civic space: 502 human rights defenders, journalists, and trade unionists were killed across 44 countries, alongside 123 enforced disappearances, underscoring the direct relationship between violence, weakened institutions, and declining accountability.

Beyond conflict, violence remains pervasive. According to the IEP Global Peace Index (2024) reports, the world is witnessing the highest number of active conflicts since the Second World War, alongside a sharp rise in battle-related deaths.[196] While global homicide rates have declined modestly, they remain far from the SDG target of a 50 percent reduction by 2030. These patterns point to a broader erosion of safety and security, both within and outside conflict settings.[197]

This moment calls for a deeper understanding of what "peace" truly entails. As articulated by peace scholar Johan Galtung, peace is not simply the absence of violence, what he terms "negative peace", but also the presence of justice, inclusion, cooperation, and equality, or "positive peace."[198] The global efforts have largely focused on reducing visible forms of violence, but far less attention has been given to building the social, economic, and institutional conditions that sustain long-term stability. The current state of SDG 16 reflects this imbalance: formal frameworks may exist, but the lived experience of justice, trust, and inclusion remains uneven and, in many contexts, is deteriorating.

Access to justice remains severely constrained and unevenly distributed. In 2023, approximately 3.7 million people, or 31 percent of the global prison population, were held in pretrial detention without sentencing, representing a deterioration from 2015 levels and indicating persistent inefficiencies in judicial systems. Institutions themselves are under growing strain as civic space is shrinking, with attacks on journalists and human rights defenders continuing at alarming levels; on average, one killing or disappearance every 14 hours. Corruption remains widespread, and public trust in institutions is fragile.[199] At the same time, SDG 16 suffers from significant data gaps, with fewer than 30 percent of indicators supported by sufficient trend data, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings. This weakens governments' and stakeholders' ability to design targeted and effective responses.

These failures are not simply statistical. They reflect a deeper **breakdown of positive peace** – the social justice, trust, and cooperation that Galtung argued are needed to prevent violence in the first place. Instead of narrowing inequalities and building shared institutions, today's trends are widening rifts between communities and states in line with the observed global rise in militarisation and escalating cross-border conflicts.

Taken together, the 2025 Global Progress Report on SDG 16 is both a warning and a roadmap. The warning is that SDG 16 is drifting off course: violence is rising in some areas, access to justice is still too limited, and inclusion remains incomplete. The roadmap is that progress is possible where states invest in accountable institutions, protect human rights, expand legal identity, strengthen data systems, and create space for real participation. The report's deeper message is that peace, justice, and inclusion are inseparable. None can be achieved in a lasting way without the others, and all depend on human rights being placed at the center of implementation.

Despite grim indicators, there are avenues for renewal. The very organizations and mechanisms that underpin SDG 16: strong institutions, inclusive laws, and responsive governance, must be reformed in more participatory forms. As UNDESA emphasises, "*Urgent action is needed to protect lives and restore trust through peacebuilding, justice reform and accountability. This requires strengthening institutions, promoting inclusive governance, protecting civic space, and addressing root causes of conflict and injustice. Sustained political will and enhanced international cooperation are essential to drive lasting change.*"[200] This means investing in institutions that people see as fair and effective, and rooting out corruption and illicit power flows that erode peace. Cooperatives offer that model.

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE: ADVANCING PEACE, ACCOUNTABILITY AND INCLUSION

Cooperatives offer a distinct model of enterprise that embeds democratic governance, accountability, and social cohesion at its core. Built on the principle of **one member, one vote**, they align decision-making with members' and the community's needs rather than external profit interests. In this sense, cooperatives are not only democratic institutions; they are also **schools of democracy**, where people practice participation, deliberation, voting, and collective responsibility in their everyday economic lives. This regular experience of democratic engagement helps build the habits, skills, and expectations that sustain more open, inclusive, and resilient societies. It strengthens transparency, participation, and collective oversight, directly advancing SDG 16.7 (inclusive decision-making) and SDG 16.6 (effective, accountable institutions).

The cooperative model has long been associated with peaceful development. Since the 19th century, cooperatives have been grounded in the values of self-help, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity, promoting the idea that progress can be achieved through collective and peaceful action. This commitment is reinforced by **Principle 7: Concern for Community**, which calls on cooperatives to address structural drivers of conflict, such as inequality and exclusion, thereby contributing to SDG 16.1 (reducing violence)[201]. As schools of democracy, cooperatives also deepen civic culture from the ground up, making participation normal, shared power practical, and exclusion harder to sustain.

This peacebuilding role has been progressively articulated within the global movement, from the 1984 ICA Congress in Hamburg to subsequent reflections on cooperative values in Stockholm (1988) and Tokyo (1992), culminating in the 2019 ICA Kigali Declaration on **Positive Peace**[202]. This declaration recognises cooperatives as contributors not only to the absence of conflict, but to the presence of justice, inclusion, and trust, the core foundations of peaceful and resilient societies.

Cooperatives also contribute to the realization of positive peace through the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage, understood here as the shared social practices, democratic traditions, values, and knowledge systems of outstanding universal value that communities inherit, sustain, and pass across generations. Established during the International Year of Cooperatives 2025, the ICA's Cooperative Cultural Heritage (CCH) programme builds upon UNESCO's 2016 inscription of the "Idea and practice of organizing shared interests in cooperatives" on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity under the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage[203]. In recognizing cooperatives as living social practices passed from one generation to the next, UNESCO acknowledged their role in fostering social cohesion, solidarity, democratic participation, and peaceful cooperation through everyday forms of collective self-organization.

This understanding closely reflects the principles set out in the United Nations Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace (A/RES/53/243), which affirms that sustainable peace depends not only on the absence of violence, but on the promotion of human rights, democratic participation, inclusion, dialogue, and social justice. In this respect, cooperatives function not simply as economic enterprises, but as civic institutions through which communities exercise shared governance, accountability, and peaceful cooperation in daily life.

The preservation of cooperative cultural heritage also engages core international human rights commitments. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), particularly Articles 13 and 15, protects participation in cultural life and the transmission of cultural practices, while the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), including Articles 19, 21, 22, and 25, safeguards the freedoms of expression, association, assembly, and democratic participation that are intrinsic to cooperative organization. ICA CCH aims at preserving democratic institutional traditions that sustain social trust, inclusion, and peaceful coexistence, reaffirming cooperatives as culturally rooted and legally significant models of participatory, peaceful, and socially just organization that directly advance the normative foundations of SDG 16.

Evidence from practice demonstrates how cooperatives translate these principles into tangible outcomes. **Cooperatives Europe's** research "Cooperatives and Peace: *Strengthening Democracy, Participation and Trust – A Case Study Approach*," showcases twenty case studies from more than fourteen countries, covering different types and stages of conflict.[204] It highlights that cooperatives can act as **safe spaces for dialogue**, enabling cooperation across divided communities. In Cyprus, bicommunal cooperative initiatives have brought together Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot members, fostering trust and collaboration despite longstanding divisions. In the Western Balkans, agricultural cooperatives have supported post-conflict recovery by rebuilding livelihoods and encouraging interethnic cooperation, helping address root causes of conflict and reinforcing SDG 16.1 and 16.3 (peaceful societies and non-violent dispute resolution).

Cooperatives also address economic exclusion, one of the key drivers of instability. Worker and social cooperatives promote fair labour conditions, shared ownership, and inclusive economic participation, strengthening institutional trust. In Italy, social cooperatives integrate migrants and vulnerable groups through employment and service delivery, contributing to SDG 16.3 (inclusive access and justice) and SDG 16.7 (inclusive governance). Their governance structures further enhance transparency and reduce incentives for corruption, supporting SDG 16.5 (reducing corruption and bribery).

In fragile and conflict-affected settings, cooperatives play a critical role in stabilization and recovery, aligning competitiveness and fair and sustainable value chains in war and post-war conditions. In Colombia, worker cooperatives have been integrated into post-conflict development strategies, providing employment pathways for reintegrated populations and contributing to social stabilization efforts in regions affected by armed conflict[205]. In Rwanda, cooperative federations have been used to formalize agricultural markets and reduce intermediary exploitation, increasing transparency in pricing and market access for smallholder farmers.[206] These experiences demonstrate how cooperatives can simultaneously strengthen social cohesion and accountability.

Solidarity across the cooperative movement further extends this impact. The Co-operative Group has supported cooperative development initiatives in Gaza, helping sustain livelihoods in a highly fragile and conflict-affected context[207]. Coop Alleanza 3.0, a member of Coop Italia and the largest Italian consumer cooperative with over 2 million members, 350 stores, and over 16,000 staff, has shown that consumer cooperatives can do so. The experience of the cooperative "*Insieme*", founded by a group of wives and mothers in the aftermath of the Srebrenica massacre, highlights the cooperative contribution to territorial and economic valorisation, even in precarious situations. Leveraging local harvests, local producers came together and began producing jams and juices under the label 'Fruits of Peace', which Coop Alleanza 3.0 and other cooperative partners bought and stocked on their supermarket shelves, gaining high consumer appeal. Another example is the **Project MEAN** (European Movement of Nonviolent Action). Started in Italy by the network "For a new welfare", created by the Sale della Terra cooperative Consortium together with 35 other organizations, MEAN promotes peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance in Ukraine. Since the war of aggression in Ukraine, the consortium has been sharing this social agriculture approach to support berry and honey producers as well as women in small rural areas across Ukraine through twinning activities between Italian and Ukrainian municipalities. The project has both a political commitment, supporting Ukraine's path to the EU, and a socio-economic one, by stimulating the local microeconomics.[208] By reinforcing community-based economic structures, such efforts contribute to resilience, social cohesion, and local accountability, advancing SDG 16.1 and SDG 16.6.

As locally embedded institutions, cooperatives often remain functional even where state capacity is limited. In Nepal, for example, cooperatives played a key role in post-disaster recovery by mobilizing resources, coordinating aid, and ensuring inclusive participation in rebuilding processes[209]. In southern Tanzania, the Building Resilience with Trees project by Food and Forest Development Finland (FFD) focuses on building their institutional capacity, governance, and service delivery.[210] Working with farmer-based organisations and their unions, such as the Tanzania Tree Growers Associations Union (TTGAU) and the Njombe Agricultural Development Organization (NADO), the project promotes a farmer-led research approach, including training, participatory tools, and peer learning approaches. A key achievement has been the development of **Climate Resilience Action Plans by farmer organisations**, then endorsed by local government authorities, turning their needs into formal decision-making and planning processes at the local level. The project has also facilitated the creation of multi-stakeholder platforms, bringing together farmers organisations and cooperatives, research institutions, and government actors, towards better dialogue, accountability, and institutional trust in rural areas. Such actions show that by mobilising local actors through organised groups, supporting democratic participation and strengthening links with public authorities, cooperatives contribute to building inclusive and responsive local institutions. It demonstrates how well-functioning cooperatives and farmer organisations can act as key actors in governance systems, ensuring that smallholder farmers have a voice in decisions that affect their livelihoods.

These functions demonstrate how cooperatives can complement formal institutions while strengthening SDG 16 at the community level. In the current global context marked by rising inequality, declining trust, and deepening social fragmentation, the cooperative model offers a practical and tested pathway to rebuild the foundations of positive peace. By strengthening solidarity, widening participation, and addressing structural inequalities, cooperatives contribute in tangible ways to reducing the drivers of violence (SDG 16.1), expanding access to justice (SDG 16.3), promoting transparency and integrity (SDG 16.5), reinforcing accountable and effective institutions (SDG 16.6), and enabling more inclusive and representative decision-making (SDG 16.7). In doing so, they help translate the ambition of SDG 16 into lived realities, advancing more peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

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CASE STUDIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Africa

In Rwanda, cooperatives have proven to be more than just economic entities. They have served as platforms for reconciliation, accountable governance, and protection of rights. By creating employment opportunities, facilitating access to credit, promoting gender inclusion, and strengthening community dialogue, these cooperatives contribute directly to building peaceful, inclusive societies and stronger local institutions in post-conflict Rwanda.

Specifically, cooperatives in Huye District, like the Koakaka Cooperative brought together farmers from previously divided communities and created spaces for collaboration, dialogue, and shared economic opportunity. The cooperatives operate through Coffee Washing Stations (CWS), where members collectively process and market coffee. Beyond economic activities, these cooperatives provide extension services, training, access to agricultural inputs, and linkages to financial institutions. Membership is tied not only to coffee production but also to participation in peacebuilding clubs and community initiatives. This model creates a structured environment where farmers collaborate regularly, share responsibilities, and engage in collective decision-making

Through collective coffee production, peacebuilding activities, and community initiatives, members were able to rebuild trust, reduce social divisions, and strengthen inclusion. The cooperatives also created employment, particularly for women and young people, while improving household incomes and supporting access to basic needs such as education, healthcare, and housing.

The Umugenge cooperative in North Rwanda was also established after the genocide to pioneer a Mushroom Project in order to address the growing socio-economic and agricultural needs of the local community and promote peace-building and reconciliation. Members of any income level in the community could purchase affordable mushroom mounds and spores to farm, harvest, eat, and sell at the market.

Americas

The Cooperative Pact for Non-Violence on Gender from the Confederación Cooperativa de la República Argentina (COOPERAR, Argentina) is a regional initiative that unites Latin American and Caribbean cooperatives around a shared commitment to prevent, address, and eradicate gender-based violence within their organizations and communities. It promotes a culture of equality by encouraging cooperatives to adopt internal protocols, strengthen gender policies, and implement educational processes that raise awareness about discrimination, harassment, and all forms of violence. Through this collective action, the pact seeks to transform cooperative environments into safer, more inclusive spaces where women and gender-diverse individuals can participate fully and exercise their rights.

COOPERAR also serves as a platform for dialogue, cooperation, and exchange of good practices among cooperative actors, public institutions, and civil society organizations. By fostering alliances, providing technical guidance, and mobilizing the cooperative movement's values of solidarity and mutual support, the pact contributes to broader efforts to achieve gender equality and sustainable development in the region. Its approach underscores that eliminating gender-based violence is not only a human rights imperative but also essential for strengthening democratic participation, economic resilience, and social cohesion within the cooperative movement.

Cooperative Academy UA

Europe - Molochna Rika Cooperative (Ukraine)

Founded in 2013, the *Molochna Rika* cooperative has overcome numerous challenges – from fluctuating markets to the disruption of war. When the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in 2022, the cooperative was forced to suspend milk collection as processors canceled contracts. Yet the members – primarily women-led family farms (33 in total, 16 of which were under the age of 35) – remained united, determined to sustain production for their communities. Through the *Cooperative Economic Support Program (ESP)*, supported by **the WeProsper Project and the Coop Academy**, the cooperative received equipment for small-scale dairy processing, business and governance training through the Coop Academy, and later a 4-ton milk truck to relaunch milk collection. Since restarting in 2023, *Molochna Rika* has collected over 920 tonnes of milk from members and small producers, and has reestablished a contract with one of the largest dairy plants in the Dnipropetrovsk region. With many men mobilized, women members took over the management of family farms, ensuring steady income for their households and a reliable milk supply to the cooperative even in frontline areas. The cooperative now serves as a model of resilience and innovation in Ukraine – combining dairy and horticultural production, engaging young members in cooperative governance, and maintaining transparent management and strong community trust.

Asia and the Pacific

When Landless Women Built an Institution the State Could Not Ignore: The Kalika Cooperative, Nepal

In Sehari Tole ("place of rest" in the Rana Tharu language, spoken by an indigenous farming community of far western Nepal), sixty households lived on unregistered government land with no legal tenure, no state recognition, and no recourse. The community included Dalit families (communities subjected to hereditary caste based exclusion across South Asia, historically denied rights and access to public life), indigenous Rana Tharu people, and other ethnic minorities. Without land certificates, government subsidies and legal protections did not reach them. Women managed farms and households year-round while servicing informal debt at five percent interest, sometimes for amounts as small as four dollars.

In 2007, the National Land Rights Forum and the Community Self-Reliance Center began organising residents through collective savings of under one dollar per member monthly. Over six years, twenty-five women registered the Kalika Land Rights Agriculture Cooperative Ltd. in 2013, overcoming a solvency requirement of $375 against an initial fund of $120, negotiating fee reductions, and making ten consecutive three-hour walks to the government office against a discriminatory policy, until recognition was granted.

Today, the cooperative has 49 members, 46 of whom are women, from Dalit, Rana Tharu, and other caste communities. Democratic assemblies govern all decisions. A binding Code of Conduct prohibiting corruption, domestic violence, and caste-based discrimination institutionalises the principles of Sustainable Development Goal 16, specifically targets 16.1, 16.7, and 16.8, at the community level.

Outcomes are concrete. Rice yields tripled. Member-led mediation restored a blocked school road, cutting children's daily walk from one hour to fifteen minutes. Cooperative loans have enabled some members to establish a tailoring enterprise now employing other women in the community. Applications before Nepal's National Land Commission mark the community's first formal assertion of long-denied land rights.

The Kalika Cooperative was not discovered by policy. It was built despite it. Replicating this model at scale is not an aspiration. It is a policy debt long overdue.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COOPERATIVES IN ADVANCING SDG 16

Despite cooperatives being structurally aligned with the objectives of SDG 16 and the broader dimensions of **positive peace**, including social cohesion, inclusive institutions, and trust, their potential is constrained by persistent systemic, legal, and contextual barriers. Nevertheless, these constraints also reveal clear entry points for strengthening cooperatives as agents of peace, justice, and inclusion.

Structural and Enabling Environment Constraints

A primary constraint is the uneven and often weak enabling environment for cooperative development. In many contexts, legal and regulatory frameworks do not fully recognize cooperatives as distinct governance and economic actors capable of contributing to public service delivery, inclusive governance, or justice-related functions. Where cooperative legislation exists, it is frequently outdated, restrictive, or subordinated to investor-owned enterprise models. This limits cooperative autonomy, innovation, and their ability to scale beyond local initiatives, weakening their contribution to inclusive institutions and accountable governance.

From a positive peace perspective, this represents a structural deficit in the "institutions of trust" that underpin stable societies. As highlighted in peacebuilding literature, sustainable peace depends not only on the absence of violence but on the presence of legitimate, participatory institutions. Weak legal recognition of cooperatives, therefore, constrains one of the most locally rooted mechanisms for building such institutions.

Financial and Scaling Constraints

Cooperatives also face significant financial barriers. Unlike investor-owned firms, they are often limited in their ability to raise equity capital, resulting in underdeveloped cooperative financial ecosystems. This restricts investment in long-term, socially oriented activities such as community mediation, participation in local governance, or anti-corruption initiatives. This financing gap is particularly significant in SDG 16 domains, where returns are primarily social rather than financial and often accrue over long time horizons. As a result, cooperatives remain strong in localized interventions but struggle to achieve systemic impact at scale. This limits their capacity to contribute fully to **SDG 16.1 (violence reduction)** and **SDG 16.5 (anti-corruption and transparency)** at national or structural levels.

Institutional Exclusion and Governance Gaps

Despite their participatory nature, cooperatives are often excluded from formal governance and policy processes. This reflects a broader participation deficit identified in the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025, in which large segments of the population report having limited meaningful influence over decision-making. However, cooperatives, arguably one of the most established grassroots governance mechanisms, are rarely integrated into formal policy design or institutional reform processes. From a positive peace perspective, this represents a missed opportunity to strengthen "horizontal trust" between citizens and the state. The *Cooperatives for Peace report* evidence base demonstrates that cooperatives function as **bridging institutions**, creating spaces for dialogue, negotiation, and shared decision-making across social divides. Their exclusion from formal governance, therefore, weakens a key pathway to inclusive and resilient institutions.

Conflict, Fragility, and Operational Risk

The most severe constraints emerge in contexts of conflict and fragility, where deficits in SDG 16 are most acute. Rising levels of violence, displacement, and institutional collapse directly undermine the formation and sustainability of cooperative structures. The 2025 Global Progress Report on SDG 16 evidence highlights increasing conflict-related deaths and large-scale forced displacement, both of which erode social cohesion and disrupt local economic systems.

In such environments, cooperatives face heightened risks to continuity, democratic participation, and member engagement. Yet these are also the contexts where their potential contribution to positive peace is greatest. As *research on cooperatives and peace* shows, cooperatives can help rebuild trust and the social fabric in post-conflict settings by providing a shared economic purpose and structured interaction among previously divided groups. However, without targeted support, their stabilizing potential remains underutilized.

Emerging Opportunities

Despite these constraints, significant opportunities exist to strengthen the role of cooperatives in advancing SDG 16 and positive peace outcomes.

First, cooperatives can serve as **local infrastructure for peace**, particularly where state legitimacy is weak. Their embeddedness in communities enables them to rebuild trust, facilitate dialogue, and support reconciliation processes, as evidenced in post-conflict contexts such as Rwanda and the Western Balkans.

Second, cooperatives offer a practical mechanism to advance **inclusive economic participation** by addressing one of the root causes of violence identified in positive peace frameworks: structural inequality. By distributing ownership and decision-making, they reduce exclusion and strengthen social cohesion.

Third, there is growing potential for **policy integration**, where cooperatives are formally recognized as partners in delivering SDG 16-related outcomes, including access to justice, anti-corruption initiatives, and civic engagement platforms. This would directly strengthen **SDG 16.6 and 16.7**, while anchoring governance reform in community-based institutions.

Finally, strengthening cooperative ecosystems, including finance, legal recognition, and federation structures, can enable scaling from local impact to systemic influence. This aligns closely with the positive peace emphasis on building resilient institutions that sustain trust over time.

CALL TO ACTION: ADVANCING SDG 16 THROUGH POSITIVE PEACE

The current trajectory of SDG 16 is both a warning and a turning point. Rising conflict, deepening inequality, and declining trust are not isolated challenges; they reflect a broader erosion of the foundations of positive peace. At the same time, the ICA Declaration on Positive Peace through Cooperatives affirms that peace is built through democratic participation, social justice, and inclusive economic systems that respond to people's needs and aspirations. Urgent, coordinated action is therefore required not only to reduce violence but also to rebuild trust, strengthen institutions, and address the structural drivers of instability.

Five priority actions emerge:

1. Elevate SDG 16 as a cross-cutting national priority

Governments should place peace, justice, and institutional trust at the center of development strategies, with clear targets, financing, and accountability mechanisms aligned across sectors.

2. Institutionalize cooperatives as partners in peacebuilding and governance

Recognize and integrate cooperatives into public policy frameworks, recovery strategies, and local governance systems as trusted, community-based institutions that strengthen participation and cohesion.

3. Accelerate justice reform and protect civic space

Expand access to justice, reduce prolonged pretrial detention, and safeguard the role of journalists, human rights defenders, and civil society as essential actors in accountability and peacebuilding.

4. Invest in inclusive economic systems to address the root causes of conflict

Support cooperative development and other inclusive models that reduce inequality, expand opportunities, and strengthen social cohesion; core pillars of positive peace.

5. Strengthen SDG 16 data systems and accountability mechanisms

Improve the availability and quality of disaggregated data to better track violence, exclusion, and institutional performance, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

These actions are mutually reinforcing and move beyond managing symptoms to address the underlying conditions that sustain peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. They also reaffirm a central insight: durable peace cannot be delivered by institutions alone; it must be built through systems that people trust, participate in, and benefit from.

The United Nations General Assembly's designation of 2025 as the International Year of Peace and Trust further underscored the urgency of advancing this agenda. The resolution called on the international community to strengthen dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding as pathways to sustainable peace, while reinforcing a global culture of peace grounded in inclusion, human rights, and shared responsibility.

As we are currently experiencing growing uncertainty and fragmentation, the path forward is not only about restoring order but about rebuilding the social contract. This requires institutions that are not only effective but also legitimate; economies that are not only productive but also inclusive; and societies that are not only stable but also cohesive. Cooperatives, grounded in democratic values and collective action, offer a practical bridge between these ambitions and everyday realities. Investing in such models is not peripheral to SDG 16; it is central to delivering the positive peace on which all sustainable development depends.


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Wholly owned by Cooperatives
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ON DELEGATION SOUTH KORE
1-8 August 2017, New Delhi
Organised at
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SDG 17: STRENGTHENING GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 17, PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

Underscores that achieving the 2030 Agenda requires an unprecedented level of cooperation among governments, the private sector, civil society, the United Nations system, and other stakeholders.[211] It calls for mobilizing resources, knowledge, technology, and collective action through multi-stakeholder partnerships that leverage the comparative strengths of all actors.[212] As civic space contracts and global crises intensify, the need for inclusive, democratic, and well-resourced cooperation has become more urgent than ever. By promoting policy coherence and capacity building, particularly in developing countries, SDG 17 serves as the framework that connects and strengthens all other Goals.

Recent data from the 2025 HLPF SDG 17 Factsheet shows that Official Development Assistance (ODA) fell to $212.1 billion in 2024, a 7.1% decrease from 2023 in real terms, ending a five-year upward trend.[213] Although ODA remains 23% above 2019 levels, the decline signals growing volatility in development finance, compounded by the disbandment of USAID and cuts in EU development budgets as donors redirect funds toward domestic and security priorities.[214] Without alternative and innovative financing, SDG progress, particularly in vulnerable countries, is at serious risk.

Global Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) reached $1.4 trillion in 2024, according to UNCTAD's World Investment Report 2025, yet SDG-related investments fell by 11%, revealing a widening disconnect between capital flows and sustainable development outcomes.[215] Remittances to low- and middle-income countries held steady at $648 billion in 2023 but could not offset record-high debt servicing costs of $1.4 trillion, deepening the $4 trillion annual SDG investment shortfall and threatening progress across multiple Goals.[216] This strain is heightened by proposals under the UN80 reform agenda, which, while intended to enhance coherence, risk weakening programmes in areas such as gender equality, education, and rural development.[217] Without safeguards and renewed political and financial commitment, these reforms could accelerate backsliding in fragile and conflict-affected settings, highlighting the need for a coordinated multilateral response to protect gains and reinvigorate global cooperation.

In response to these challenges, the **Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FFD4)** convened in July 2025 in Seville, Spain. World leaders adopted the Sevilla Commitment and Platform for Action, setting out a renewed framework to unlock capital, address debt burdens, reform the financial architecture, and catalyze investment for the SDGs.[218] The outcome document explicitly acknowledged the role of cooperatives and the broader Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) in advancing sustainable, inclusive development:

> "*We will invest in productive sectors, the creation of decent jobs at scale, and skills development to enable all people to benefit from inclusive, equitable, and sustainable economic growth. We will promote entrepreneurship, including social entrepreneurship—particularly among women and youth—and facilitate the growth of micro-, small, and medium-sized enterprises, cooperatives, and the social and solidarity economy, as well as inclusive and sustainable industrialization. We recognize the contribution of culture and the creative economy in advancing sustainable development.*[219]"

This represents a meaningful policy shift, affirming cooperatives not only as beneficiaries but as key partners in development cooperation. With democratic governance, strong community roots, and a proven ability to mobilize resources for shared prosperity, cooperatives are well placed to bridge global ambitions and local realities.

THE COOPERATIVE ADVANTAGE IN SDG 17 IMPLEMENTATION

With over 3 million cooperatives serving more than 1 billion people worldwide, the cooperative model is built on values of democracy, equity, and solidarity.[220] Their federated structure, spanning from local groups to national and global networks, enables both horizontal collaboration across sectors and vertical alignment with policy frameworks at every level. Whether operating in agriculture, finance, health, retail, energy, housing, or services, cooperatives are locally embedded and often serve marginalized populations that are underserved by traditional business or government models.[221] Their unique architecture makes cooperatives powerful agents for linking local action to national strategies and global goals.

Importantly, the ILO Guidelines on Cooperative Statistics acknowledge multistakeholder cooperatives—enterprises established through collective, needs-driven initiatives involving different actors from the same sector, and in some cases, across the public, private, and civil society spheres.[222] This recognition underscores the agility and adaptability of cooperatives, demonstrating how they can effectively address evolving challenges. Their flexible, needs-based approach is not only vital for advancing the SDGs but also for shaping inclusive development pathways in the post-2030 agenda.

COOPERATIVES IN ACTION: SDG 17 IN PRACTICE

Cooperatives worldwide are advancing SDG 17 by forging inclusive, resilient, and community-driven partnerships. Their ability to link grassroots initiatives with broader development efforts demonstrates the potential of people-centered business models to deliver on the promise of the 2030 Agenda.

East Timor – NCBA CLUSA (USA) partnered with Cooperativa Café Timor on a $10 million New Zealand-funded project to improve healthcare and household incomes through coffee and cocoa production. CCT, the country's largest private employer, also contributes to the organic fair trade supply chain.[223]

Philippines – AgriCOOP connected remote farmer cooperatives directly to urban markets during COVID-19, linking 1.6 metric tons of produce to 39,000 consumers and strengthening food security.[224]

Colombia – Coopcentral Bank and its network, supported by DGRV (Germany) and USAID, connected small solidarity finance institutions to national and international systems, expanding digital transactions and building crisis resilience.[225]

Malawi – The "Our Malawi Partnership" (2021–2027), led by the UK Co-operative College and Central Co-operative Society, strengthens agricultural unions while expanding trade and member education through the national apex MAFECO.

Switzerland / Burkina Faso – Fair trade enterprise Gebana shares 10% of product sales profits with 2,500 farmers in Burkina Faso, safeguarding jobs and food supply chains after a 2017 crisis.[226]

Tanzania & Mozambique – REGCOOP, led by Norges Vel, ICA-Africa, and local partners, supports sustainable farmer-owned value chains, empowers women producers, and improves the enabling environment for cooperative growth.[227]

Türkiye – Rural cooperatives are mobilizing local investments to strengthen agri-food competitiveness under the EU-funded IPARD programme **(17.3)**, while women-led cooperatives in the Eastern Black Sea developed e-commerce platforms and secured geographical indication certifications with UN agency support **(17.6)**. Energy cooperatives are also partnering with municipalities to expand local solar energy production **(17.7)**.

Armenia – Farm Credit Armenia partnered with EIB Global through a €2.5 million loan to support youth and women entrepreneurs, contributing to the EU Economic and Investment Plan for the Eastern Partnership.[228]

CASES (PT) & Lusophone countries

As current President and member of the executive body of the Cooperative Organization of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (OCPLP), CASES – Cooperative António Sérgio for Social Economy (PT) is fostering inter-cooperation among 31 cooperative federations from Portuguese-speaking countries. This is pursued through a range of initiatives, including the shared use of the training and capacity-building platform provided by OCB (a member of the OCPLP) and the promotion of bilateral partnerships, all aimed at strengthening the cooperative contribution to South-South and Triangular Cooperation.

The Italian cooperative movement supporting people in Gaza

In July 2025, the Italian cooperative movement launched two humanitarian and solidarity partnerships as an emergency response in the Gaza Strip with two of the few field actors still having territorial presence. Legacoop raised over €100.000 from member cooperatives to organize the summer camps with socialization and educational activities for children in the Gaza Strip. Each month-long camp, realized by WeWorld-GVC with the support of the Swedish Akelius Foundation, will involve 60 to 70 children, including meals and school supplies.

Similarly, through the initiative #CoopforGaza, Ancc-Coop (National Association of Consumer Cooperatives) allocated €500.000 and launched a 2-month fundraising campaign through the Italian cooperative bank Banca Etica to support and strengthen Médecins sans Frontières' (MSF) work in 11 medical facilities in Gaza, including hospitals, field hospitals, and primary healthcare centers.

Visit to the Cooperativa Multiactiva de Piscicultores del Huila (Coopishuila)

Italy and Colombia for participatory governance

As part of the CO.LO.RES project, financed by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation and developed by Coopermondo e COSPE, several exchange missions took place between cooperatives in Putumayo and Cooperatives in other regions – including Antioquia, Huila in Colombia, and Emilia-Romagna in Italy. These missions involved grassroots organizations led by women, youth, and Afro-descendant or Indigenous populations, accompanied by key cooperative actors such as Coopermondo, Confcooperative, Confecoop (Colombian Confederation of Cooperatives), and ASOCOOPH (Association of Cooperatives and Solidarity Enterprises of Huila). From fishing to agri-food processing, from handicrafts to cooperative finance, the delegations were exposed to inspiring models of participatory governance, solidarity economy, and social impact. These experiences inspired participants to replicate virtuous models by adapting them to the Colombian context, with a tangible impact.

We Effect, HSB & Riksbyggen (SW) - *"Sustainable Housing – A Right for All"*

Among the few international organizations working with the right to housing, the Swedish cooperative development organization WeEffect has recently joined forces with two housing member organisations in Sweden – HSB and Riksbyggen to launch the "*Sustainable Housing – A Right for All*" program. This partnership is an innovative response to avert the negative impacts of Swedish aid cuts on housing rights in developing countries. The programme will support people's organizations and contribute to the construction of housing across East Africa and Latin America, while creating business opportunities for Swedish companies. The activities will see a multistakeholder action by cooperative companies, authorities, simultaneously bringing WeEffect closer to national housing policy and strengthening HSB and Riksbyggen's cooperative story with a global perspective.[229]

Globally, the **ICA–EU Financial Framework Partnership Agreement** (#coops4dev🌍), a collaboration between the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) and the European Commission, now in its second renewed phase, supports policy dialogue, cooperative education, institutional strengthening, and capacity building for cooperatives across Africa, Asia-Pacific, the Americas, and Europe. To date, it has advanced cooperative policy engagement and capacity building in over 60 countries.[230] Implemented through ICA's regional offices, the partnership delivers targeted, decentralized actions that localize implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda and foster new, locally led partnerships. For example, capitalizing on IYC25, **Cooperatives Europe** and **ALDA Balkans** (regional chapter of the European Association of Local Democratic Agencies) hosted the online dialogue "#MondayTalk: Beyond business as usual – how to cooperatively advance a local democratic economy", paving the way for a modern cooperative narrative in the Western Balkans that promotes democratic values and community engagement across sectors. Cooperatives Europe shared successful cooperative initiatives to address regional needs and misconceptions about cooperative formation, while ALDA Balkans strengthened its work on youth and locally led democratic entrepreneurship and created new engagement opportunities for its members and grantees.

At the UN level, several agencies are members of the Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC) and the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on the Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSE) as part of their efforts to actively collaborate with cooperatives to accelerate SDG achievement, particularly by reaching local and marginalized communities. For example, FAO supports agricultural cooperatives and producer organizations by promoting peer-to-peer, multi-stakeholder partnerships[231]; the ILO, through its dedicated Cooperative, Social and Solidarity Economy Unit (COOP/SSE), works to advance decent work and poverty eradication via cooperative models[232]; UNDESA is piloting a project with ICA-Africa in Tanzania, Malawi, and Botswana to build climate-resilient agricultural cooperatives for smallholder farmers.[233] Additionally, ITC has partnered with ICA to help African producer cooperatives access global markets in Europe, America, and Asia, ensuring fair wages and decent work for farmers.[234]

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COOPERATIVE IMPACT ON SDG 17

Despite their significant and growing contributions, cooperatives remain underrepresented in national and global SDG implementation and monitoring. This is not due to a lack of capacity or ambition, but to systemic barriers that continue to limit their full potential.

One of the most pressing challenges facing cooperatives is the **persistent lack of supportive legal and regulatory frameworks**. In many countries, cooperatives still operate under outdated or inconsistent laws that fail to reflect the distinct nature of the cooperative model. Where cooperative legislation does exist, it is often poorly implemented or overshadowed by commercial enterprise laws, leaving cooperatives at a disadvantage in competing for resources, recognition, and policy support.[235] The absence of tailored legal definitions and enforcement mechanisms hinders the formation, operation, and scaling of cooperative enterprises, especially in sectors critical to SDG delivery such as agriculture, energy, finance, and health.[236]

Access to finance presents another major constraint. Despite their track record in mobilizing local savings, promoting financial inclusion, and reinvesting in communities, cooperatives frequently face difficulties in accessing development finance and capital markets. Many financial institutions do not recognize the cooperative model or consider it high-risk due to misconceptions about its governance or scale. Furthermore, most development financing instruments are not designed to accommodate cooperative structures, thereby excluding them from funding opportunities available to other private sector or NGO actors. This financial exclusion undermines their ability to innovate, expand services, and participate in larger public-private partnerships aligned with SDG implementation.

Additionally, **data and visibility gaps** significantly limit the inclusion of cooperatives in national and global SDG reporting. Cooperatives are often not adequately captured in national statistical systems, and where data exists, it is rarely disaggregated to reflect their unique contributions. This invisibility means that cooperative efforts, particularly in informal or rural economies, are overlooked in policymaking and resource allocation.[237] Without data, there is little incentive for governments or development partners to engage cooperatives strategically or measure their progress in advancing the Goals.

Finally, widespread misconceptions about the dual nature of cooperatives—as both enterprises and civil society actors—often lead to policy and market failures. In some cases, cooperatives are created through top-down approaches, such as financing schemes, rather than through genuine bottom-up community initiatives. These so-called "fake/pseudo cooperatives" dilute the credibility of the movement, compromise resilience, and obscure the transformative potential of authentic member-driven cooperatives.

LOOKING AHEAD: OPPORTUNITIES

These challenges, however, also open avenues for action. With the right legal reforms, tailored financing mechanisms, stronger statistical systems, and a renewed emphasis on genuine member-driven models, cooperatives can significantly expand their contributions to SDG 17. Recognizing and addressing these barriers will not only unlock the potential of millions of cooperatives worldwide but also ensure that inclusive, democratic, and resilient business models are at the heart of sustainable development strategies.

At the 2025 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), 35 countries submitted Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports, with 19 explicitly recognizing cooperative contributions to areas like employment, financial inclusion, women's empowerment, and climate resilience.[238] While promising, this recognition is often superficial—cooperatives remain largely absent from SDG planning, budgeting, and monitoring frameworks.[239]

Perhaps most significantly, cooperatives are still often excluded from policymaking spaces. Many VNR processes favor established private or civil society actors, limiting opportunities for cooperatives to influence national development priorities or advocate for supportive policies. Without a seat at the table, cooperatives cannot advocate for policies that reflect their values or showcase the scalable solutions they offer for sustainable, inclusive development.

RECOMMENDATIONS: SCALING COOPERATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO SDG 17

The cooperative model holds significant untapped potential to close implementation gaps and revitalize global partnerships. Realizing this requires deliberate policy, financial, and institutional measures through joint action by governments, development partners, and the cooperative movement.

1. Strengthen policy frameworks and institutional inclusion

Governments should embed cooperatives more systematically into national development plans, sectoral strategies, and SDG frameworks. Update and harmonize cooperative legislation in line with international standards, recognize their dual economic and social roles, and ensure legal clarity to distinguish genuine cooperatives from inauthentic entities.

2. Increase visibility in voluntary national reviews (VNRs)

Document cooperative contributions in VNRs and involve cooperative representatives in consultations to validate their role, promote peer learning, and ensure diverse perspectives are reflected. Japan's 2025 VNR, with over 60 references to cooperative impact, illustrates meaningful inclusion.[240]

3. Expand access to development finance

Create financing tools suited to cooperative governance and ownership structures, including guarantee schemes, blended finance, and impact investment frameworks. Strengthen national cooperative finance institutions and link them to the broader development finance ecosystem.

4. Invest in capacity building and digital transformation

Enhance cooperative leadership, systems, and digital tools to boost agility and resilience. Support peer learning, digital platforms for democratic participation, and training in youth engagement, gender equality, and climate adaptation. Initiatives such as the African Cooperative Leaders' Study Tour[241] and the #Coops4Dev programme demonstrate the value of regional exchange.[242]

5. Promote international partnerships & global advocacy

Cooperatives can scale their impact through formal collaboration with UN agencies, governments, and civil society to amplify advocacy and accelerate delivery. The International Year of Cooperatives 2025 demonstrates the power of such partnerships and should be carried forward, with the Second World Social Summit providing a platform to launch a global commitment plan. Continued engagement in forums like COPs, BRICS, G7, and G20 is key to embedding cooperatives in international policymaking.

As the global community prepares for the 2025 Second World Social Summit in Doha, there is a unique opportunity to position cooperatives as core partners in sustainable development. Recognition in the FFD4 Sevilla Declaration affirms their role in building equitable, people-centred economies, and this must now be matched with concrete action. Cooperatives are not merely beneficiaries of development but co-creators of it, bridging policy and practice, global frameworks and local realities, and economic growth with social inclusion. Scaling cooperative-led solutions will accelerate the SDGs and help rebuild trust in multilateralism at a time of deep uncertainty and fragmentation. The time to act is now.

Looking Ahead

FROM DEMONSTRATING IMPACT TO SHAPING WHAT COMES NEXT

As the 2030 Agenda enters its final phase, the cooperative movement must move from demonstrating impact to shaping what comes next. The evidence presented in this publication provides a strong foundation, but evidence creates change only when it informs policy, strengthens advocacy, and opens the door to participation. The years ahead are a critical opportunity for cooperatives to bring their experience, solutions and collective voice to the **2027 SDG Summit, Voluntary National Review processes, national development planning and the emerging post-2030 agenda**.

1. Prepare for the 2027 SDG Summit and the post-2030 agenda

The 2027 SDG Summit is an important opportunity to put cooperative solutions firmly on the global agenda. Cooperatives should start engaging their governments and go prepared with strong evidence, compelling case studies, and clear policy messages demonstrating their contribution across all 17 SDGs. But the horizon must extend beyond 2030. The post-2030 agenda is being shaped now, and the cooperative movement must be present in the discussions that will define future development priorities, advocating for a framework that recognises member-owned, democratic and people-centred enterprises as essential actors in sustainable development.

2. Get Involved in Voluntary National Reviews

VNRs are a critical entry point for visibility and influence. Cooperatives should actively participate in VNR consultations at **national and local levels**, bringing credible evidence of their contributions to SDG targets and development priorities. The objective should be clear: **cooperative contributions should not simply be mentioned; they should be documented, measured and reflected** in the VNR reports governments submit to the United Nations.

Cooperatives should work with **relevant ministries, national SDG platforms and statistical institutions** to ensure their contributions are captured across sectors and included in national development monitoring. VNRs are more than reporting exercises; they are an opportunity for cooperatives to shape the national development narrative and strengthen their role as implementation partners.

3. Document the impact and build the evidence base

What cooperatives are doing needs to be **seen, measured and communicated.**

Cooperatives and their representative organisations should systematically document their contribution to the SDGs through data, impact stories, case studies, member outcomes and community-level results. This publication provides a starting point and a practical model that can be adapted at national, regional and sectoral levels.

Every cooperative has a story to tell. **Document it. Measure it. Use it.**

Strong evidence can demonstrate impact, support accountability, strengthen communications and provide the foundation for effective engagement with policymakers, development partners and other stakeholders.

4. Engage governments as partners, not simply policymakers

Cooperatives should take their evidence directly to government and use it to advocate for inclusion in **national development plans, sectoral strategies and implementation programmes.** The message should be straightforward: cooperatives are already delivering development outcomes and have the reach, infrastructure, knowledge and community trust to do more. Governments should therefore involve cooperatives not only in consultation, but in the **design, implementation and monitoring of development strategies.**

This means seeking meaningful participation in national SDG platforms, sectoral policy processes, public programmes, financing initiatives and implementation partnerships.

5. Build from local impact to global influence

The strength of the cooperative movement lies in its ability to connect **local action with national and global priorities.** Cooperative organisations at every level can contribute to this effort by sharing evidence, learning from one another and building common advocacy messages.

The coming years offer an opportunity to move from documenting individual success stories to building a **strong, collective evidence base for the cooperative contribution to sustainable development.**

THE ROAD AHEAD

The next chapter is about more than recognition.
It is about **influence.**

- Document the contribution.
- Participate in the VNR process.
- Engage governments.
- Shape national development strategies.
- Prepare for the SDG Summit.
- Help shape the post-2030 agenda.

The cooperative movement has the evidence, experience, reach, and solutions. **Now is the time to ensure that cooperatives are at the table shaping the development agenda and recognised as partners in delivering it.**

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