

# Cooperatives and the Sustainable Development Goals: contributions in practice

*Las cooperativas y los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible: contribuciones en la práctica*

*As Cooperativas e os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável: contributos na prática*

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## Abstract

This article examines the contributions of cooperative organizations to advancing the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It seeks to provide a comprehensive, multi-scalar perspective that highlights the ways in which cooperatives generate social, economic, and environmental value while embodying principles of solidarity, democracy, and sustainability. The study addresses three interconnected levels: (1) the global and regional scale, through platforms and frameworks that promote advocacy, reporting, and visibility of cooperative contributions to the SDGs; (2) the national level, where apex organizations and large cooperative enterprises play key roles in policy dialogue, representation, and strategic alignment with sustainable development agendas; and (3) the local level, where grassroots cooperatives directly impact their communities through inclusive economic practices, social innovation, and environmental stewardship. Drawing on secondary data, institutional reports, and illustrative case studies, the article analyzes how cooperatives operationalize sustainable development in practice. It examines mechanisms of accountability, such as CoopImpacto platform, while also exploring challenges of visibility, policy integration, and financing. Besides, it emphasizes the relevance of multi-level governance and the articulation between cooperative networks and public institutions in fostering systemic change. Findings indicate that cooperatives are uniquely positioned to contribute to the SDGs by combining economic viability with social inclusion and ecological responsibility. Their multi-scalar presence enables them to act as bridges between local needs and global commitments, reinforcing the centrality of cooperative values in shaping just and sustainable futures. However, to maximize their impact, cooperatives require stronger support in terms of data, policy recognition, and resources for scaling their transformative practices.

**Keywords:** Cooperatives, Sustainable Development Goals, Social Economy, Global Case Studies, Community Empowerment

## Resumen

Este artículo examina las contribuciones de las organizaciones cooperativas al avance en la implementación de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS). Busca ofrecer una perspectiva comprehensiva y multiescalar que visibilice cómo las cooperativas generan valor social, económico y ambiental, al tiempo que encarnan principios de solidaridad, democracia y sostenibilidad. El estudio aborda tres niveles interconectados: (1) la escala global y regional, a través de plataformas y marcos que promueven la incidencia, el reporte y la visibilidad de los aportes cooperativos a los ODS; (2) el nivel nacional, donde las organizaciones de cúpula y las grandes empresas cooperativas desempeñan un papel clave en el diálogo de políticas, la representación y la alineación estratégica con las agendas de desarrollo sostenible; y (3) el nivel local, donde las cooperativas de base impactan directamente en sus comunidades mediante prácticas económicas inclusivas, innovación social y cuidado del medioambiente. A partir de datos secundarios, informes institucionales y estudios de caso ilustrativos, el artículo analiza cómo las cooperativas operacionalizan el desarrollo sostenible en la práctica. Examina mecanismos de rendición de cuentas, como la plataforma CoopImpacto, y explora los desafíos de visibilidad, integración en políticas y financiación. Asimismo, subraya la relevancia de la gobernanza multinivel y de la articulación entre redes cooperativas e instituciones públicas para impulsar cambios sistémicos. Los hallazgos indican que las cooperativas se encuentran en una posición única para contribuir a los ODS al combinar viabilidad económica con inclusión social y responsabilidad ecológica. Su presencia en múltiples escalas les permite actuar como puentes entre las necesidades locales y los compromisos globales, reforzando la centralidad de los valores cooperativos en la construcción de futuros justos y sostenibles. Sin embargo, para maximizar su impacto, las cooperativas requieren mayor apoyo en términos de datos, reconocimiento en las políticas y recursos para escalar sus prácticas transformadoras.

**Palabras clave:** Cooperativas; Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible; economía social; estudios de caso globales; empoderamiento comunitario.

## Resumo

Este artigo examina as contribuições das organizações cooperativas para o avanço na implementação dos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS). Busca oferecer uma perspectiva abrangente e multiescalar que evidencie como as cooperativas geram valor social, econômico e ambiental, ao mesmo tempo em que incorporam princípios de solidariedade, democracia e sustentabilidade. O estudo aborda três níveis interconectados: (1) a escala global e regional, por meio de plataformas e marcos que promovem a incidência, a prestação de contas e a visibilidade das contribuições cooperativas para os ODS; (2) o nível nacional, em que organizações de cúpula e grandes empresas cooperativas desempenham um papel-chave no diálogo de políticas, na representação e no alinhamento estratégico com as agendas de desenvolvimento sustentável; e (3) o nível local, onde cooperativas de base impactam diretamente suas comunidades por meio de práticas econômicas inclusivas, inovação social e cuidado ambiental. Com base em dados secundários, relatórios institucionais e estudos de caso ilustrativos, o artigo analisa como as cooperativas operacionalizam o desenvolvimento sustentável na prática. Examina mecanismos de responsabilização, como a plataforma CoopImpacto, e explora desafios de visibilidade, integração em políticas e financiamento. Além disso, enfatiza a relevância da governança multinível e da articulação entre redes cooperativas e instituições públicas na promoção de mudanças sistêmicas. Os resultados indicam que as cooperativas estão em uma posição singular para contribuir para os ODS, ao combinar viabilidade econômica com inclusão social e responsabilidade ecológica. Sua presença em múltiplas escalas lhes permite atuar como pontes entre as necessidades locais e os compromissos globais, reforçando a centralidade dos valores cooperativos na construção de futuros justos e sustentáveis. No entanto, para maximizar seu impacto, as cooperativas necessitam de maior apoio em termos de dados, reconhecimento nas políticas e recursos para ampliar suas práticas transformadoras.

**Palavras-chave:** Cooperativas; Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável; economia social; estudos de caso globais; empoderamento comunitário

## Tesauros

**Q01** Sustainable Development.

**P13** Cooperative Enterprises; Worker Cooperatives; Employee Ownership.

**O19** International Linkages to Development; Role of International Organizations.

## Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a comprehensive framework for addressing the world's most pressing social, economic, and environmental challenges. Central to this agenda are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which encompass objectives ranging from poverty alleviation and gender equality to climate action and sustainable economic growth (United Nations [UN], 2015). While governments and multilateral organizations play primary roles in SDG implementation, civil society actors, including cooperative organizations, have emerged as crucial contributors to achieving these global targets.

Cooperatives, defined as autonomous associations of people united voluntarily to meet common needs through jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprises, embody a governance model that prioritizes social responsibility, equity, and community engagement (International Cooperative Alliance [ICA], 2021). Their operational principles, including democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy and independence, education, information and training, cooperation among cooperatives, and concern for community, align closely with the ethos of the SDGs (Birchall, 2013). Beyond philosophical alignment, cooperatives demonstrate measurable impact and produce long-term positive effects by bridging concern for economic growth and the sustainable development of the affected local communities. Their dual nature positions them as effective intermediaries between global policy objectives and local implementation.

Despite the growing recognition of cooperatives' potential, research analyzing their contributions to the SDGs remains uneven. Much of the literature has focused either on macro-level policy advocacy or on localized community impacts, with limited integration across scales (Gómez-Pescador & Arzadun, 2025; Webb & Novkovic, 2014; Carini & Euricse, 2024). There is a clear need for a multi-level approach that captures the synergistic effects of cooperative activities at global, national, and local levels, allowing policymakers, practitioners, and scholars to understand how cooperative actions can be coordinated to maximize sustainable development outcomes. This study adopts such a multi-level perspective.

At the global and regional level, cooperatives engage in advocacy, standard-setting, and visibility campaigns through the ICA and its regional offices (Cooperativas de las Americas, ICA Asia-Pacific, ICA Africa, and Cooperatives Europe), the World Cooperative Monitor, and other regional cooperative networks that enable knowledge exchange, policy influence, and alignment with international development agendas. At the national level, apex organizations and large cooperative enterprises play pivotal roles in implementing sectoral programs that address SDG targets in diverse areas. Their capacity to mobilize resources, coordinate stakeholders, and influence public policy amplifies their impact beyond individual members or communities. At the local level, grassroots cooperatives operate directly within communities, delivering services, promoting social cohesion, generating employment, and implementing environmental initiatives that produce measurable outcomes in line with multiple SDGs.

The primary goal of this paper is to systematically examine how cooperative organizations contribute to the SDGs across these three interconnected levels, highlighting both their achievements and the structural challenges they face. By integrating literature review, empirical case studies, and secondary data analysis, this study

provides a comprehensive assessment of the mechanisms through which cooperatives advance sustainable development. This analysis is intended to inform both academic debates and policy strategies, offering practical insights for cooperative development, capacity building, and cross-sector collaboration.

Key research questions guiding this study include:

1. How do cooperatives influence SDGs implementation at the global and regional levels through advocacy, reporting, and visibility platforms?
2. In what ways do national apex organizations and large cooperative enterprises operationalize SDG objectives within national contexts?
3. How do grassroots cooperatives generate direct social, economic, and environmental impacts at the local level, and how are these impacts linked to broader SDG targets?
4. What are the challenges, limitations, and opportunities for enhancing the contribution of cooperatives to SDG achievement across scales?

By addressing these questions, the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the role of cooperatives as agents of sustainable development. Moreover, this multi-level perspective allows for the identification of policy interventions, strategic partnerships, and resource allocation mechanisms that can strengthen the capacity of cooperatives to contribute to the SDGs. Ultimately, this study emphasizes that the impact of cooperatives is maximized when their activities are coordinated across global, national, and local levels, creating synergies that link advocacy, policy, and practical action in communities worldwide.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundations of cooperative action are closely linked to broader debates on collective agency, social economy, and sustainable development. Grounded in principles of solidarity, mutualism, and democratic participation, cooperatives represent organizational forms that reconcile market efficiency with social justice and ecological responsibility. This framework draws on theories of collective action, institutional economics, and participatory governance to explain how cooperatives operate as hybrid organizations—simultaneously economic enterprises and vehicles of social transformation. By situating their contribution within the 2030 Agenda, this section provides a conceptual basis for understanding the cooperative sector's

potential to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across global, regional, national, and local scales.

## Cooperatives and Sustainable Development

Cooperatives embody a model that transcends purely profit-driven enterprises. Their commitment to community, equity, and sustainability positions them as unique actors within the broader landscape of organizations contributing to sustainable development. The seven internationally recognized cooperative principles—voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy and independence, education, information and training, cooperation among cooperatives, and concern for community—closely correspond to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including poverty eradication (SDG 1), gender equality (SDG 5), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), quality education (SDG 4), climate action (SDG 13), and sustainable communities (SDG 11) (Birchall, 2013; Novkovic & Miner, 2015). This alignment enables cooperatives to act as natural allies in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

Empirical studies further reinforce this alignment. Cooperative financial institutions extend credit to underserved populations, directly supporting financial inclusion (SDG 8.10) (Coordinación General de Finanzas Populares, 2025; Lal, 2018). Agricultural cooperatives enhance food security and sustainable production (SDG 2.3 and 2.4) by providing smallholder farmers with access to markets, technology, and training (ICA & FAO, 2019; Marambio-Tapia, 2025; Miño & Fernández Miranda, 2025). Worker cooperatives promote decent work and reduce labor exploitation (SDG 8.5) (Filippi et al, 2023), while energy cooperatives advance affordable and clean energy transitions (SDG 7.1 and 7.2) (Arzadun, 2025). Through these integrated approaches, cooperatives contribute to both sector-specific and cross-cutting SDG targets, often addressing multiple goals simultaneously. The second International Year of Cooperatives (IYC), declared in 2025 under the theme “Cooperatives Build a Better World,” highlights the sector’s essential role in sustainable development (UN, 2023a), while recent assessments indicate that deeper global implementation remains necessary (UN, 2023b).

The second International Year of Cooperatives (IYC), declared in 2025 under the theme “Cooperatives Build a Better World,” highlights the sector’s essential role in sustainable development (UN, 2023a). However, the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024 indicates that, as of mid-2024, only 17% of the targets are on track to be achieved by 2030, with nearly half showing minimal or moderate progress and over a third stagnating or regressing (UN, 2024). This underscores the urgent need for

accelerated global action to meet the 2030 Agenda, highlighting the importance of the role that cooperatives can continue to play in this context.

## Global and Regional Platforms

The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), as the global apex body for cooperatives, together with its regional offices, continues to demonstrate the relevance of the cooperative model for sustainable development. Through strategic efforts in visibility, advocacy, networking, and knowledge-building, the ICA highlights the global impact and potential of cooperatives. Despite their potential as key actors in international development, cooperatives have yet to receive full recognition for their contributions at global and regional levels. To enhance their visibility and influence, the European Commission and the ICA have established Framework Partnership Agreements, including the 2016–2020 initiative “Cooperatives in Development—People-Centered Businesses in Action” and the 2024–2028 agreement “People-Centered Enterprises for Sustainable, Democratic, and Inclusive Development.”

Strengthening the role of cooperatives in international development is essential for achieving the SDGs. Several political declarations and reports have formally recognized their contribution. The European Consensus on Development (adopted by the European Union in 2017) was formulated through extensive consultations with civil society organizations, in which Cooperatives Europe played a key role. The Consensus recognized cooperatives as instrumental partners in reaching marginalized populations and delivering lasting local impact, committing to ensuring their operational space for advancing sustainable development in alignment with Agenda 2030. The UN General Assembly Resolution 76/135 (United Nations General Assembly, 2021) similarly called on governments to adopt policies that enable cooperatives to flourish, recognizing their role in advancing social development and implementing the SDGs. Additionally, the UN Secretary-General’s Report on Cooperatives in Social Development (UN, 2023c) outlined key policies to support cooperatives in maximizing their SDG contributions, particularly in promoting decent work, reducing poverty, and supporting environmental sustainability. The SDG Summit Political Declaration (2023b) reaffirmed global leaders’ commitment to accelerate SDG progress and emphasized inclusive partnerships, offering a platform for cooperatives to highlight their role.

At both global and regional levels, knowledge-building, advocacy, and technical assistance provided by cooperative apex organizations serve as key mechanisms for disseminating sustainability-oriented ideas. These entities provide technical expertise to policymakers while establishing support systems that promote the “trickle-down”

effects of cooperative governance. Supporting cooperative start-ups and fostering their growth has become a recognized strategy for enabling individuals and communities to take ownership of their development processes. The cooperative movement also benefits from synergies with other cooperative bodies that, although not primarily focused on international development, contribute meaningfully to specific SDGs, such as gender equality through the ICA's Gender Committees.

Moreover, legal and economic frameworks that facilitate cooperative success are essential, and cooperative networks play an active role in advocating for such enabling environments (Cooperatives of the Americas, 2025). Partnerships among governments, civil society, private sector actors, and international organizations are particularly significant for cooperatives, in alignment with SDG 17. Cooperatives not only benefit from collaboration with one another but are also well-positioned to engage with a broad spectrum of civil society actors, public institutions, and grassroots networks. These partnerships are especially critical in contexts where progress on the SDGs has been limited, such as in food security, climate action, and inclusive education, and in strengthening community voices within policy-making processes. Through collaboration with local authorities, trade unions, and fair-trade organizations, cooperatives contribute to the creation of environments in which people are empowered to lead their development. In Latin America, experiences such as the impacts of regional integration through Mercosur on the cooperative sector illustrate this clearly. Equally illustrative is the joint work of Brazil's OCB System and the Parliamentary Front for Cooperativism in promoting regulatory advancements in the country (Cooperatives of the Americas, 2025).

Several examples of successful partnerships among a wide range of actors in Europe demonstrate the cooperative movement's significant contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals and its capacity to act as a multiplier by scaling up positive local initiatives and best practices at regional level. In Türkiye, under the EU-funded IPARD programme, rural cooperatives are improving agri-food competitiveness. Women-led cooperatives in the Eastern Black Sea region developed e-commerce platforms and secured geographical indication certifications with support from UN agencies. In parallel, energy cooperatives are working with municipalities to expand local solar power. In Armenia, Farm Credit Armenia (FCA) secured a €2.5 million loan from EIB Global to support youth and women entrepreneurs. The partnership contributes to the EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the Eastern Partnership, demonstrating how cooperative finance can unlock inclusive growth. On its part, CASES (Cooperativa António Sérgio for the Social Economy), as president of the Portuguese-speaking cooperatives network (OCPLP), is fostering South-South and

triangular cooperation with 31 cooperative federations. Through shared training platforms and bilateral partnerships, CASES supports peer learning and capacity-building in Lusophone countries. In Sweden, We Effect, together with housing cooperatives HSB and Riksbyggen, launched Sustainable Housing—A Right for All. This program supports cooperative housing development in East Africa and Latin America while creating international partnerships and business opportunities for Swedish cooperative actors (COPAC and ICA 2025).

Such synergies between cooperatives and international development actors are particularly impactful in crisis-ridden contexts. Most recently, the Ilian cooperative movement launched two solidarity initiatives in the Gaza Strip. Firstly, under the #CoopforGaza campaign, Ancc-Coop and Banca Etica mobilised €500,000 and coordinated fundraising to support Médecins Sans Frontières. In parallel, Legacoop and Halieus partnered with WeWorld-GVC and the Swedish Akelius Foundation to organise summer camps for children affected by the conflict (COPAC and ICA 2025).

## National initiatives from the cooperative movement to promote the SDGs

At the national level, cooperatives actively integrate SDGs into their operations, either through sustainability reporting, participation in national reporting frameworks, or the reassessment of production value chains. Large cooperative enterprises and apex organizations implement SDG-related objectives, generating “trickle-down” effects that enhance local governance and community impact. Three SDGs—gender equality (SDG 5), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and sustainable production and consumption (SDG 12)—demonstrate the alignment between cooperative principles and national-level initiatives.

Despite formal commitments to gender equality, women worldwide face systemic barriers in health, education, political participation, and labor markets. Cooperatives can address these challenges by ensuring women’s full participation, equal rights, and access to economic resources through democratic, participatory structures (Carini, 2025; Munhoz et al., 2025). In Uruguay, the Federation of Housing Cooperatives for Mutual Aid (FUCVAM) exemplifies these principles, promoting gender equity in housing cooperatives since its inception (González, 2013). Similarly, Guatemala’s Federation of Cooperatives of the Verapaces (FEDECOVERA) actively encourages women’s participation in top-level management across its 42 cooperatives, enhancing skill development and empowerment (Cooperatives of the Americas, n.d.). In Spain, the Confederation of Worker Cooperatives (COCETA) reports that nearly half of its members are women,

with 39% in leadership roles, illustrating a striking contrast to conventional enterprises (CICOPA, 2011). Morocco's Union of Women's Cooperatives "Tissaliouine" enables more than 1,200 women to gain stable income, vocational training, and social advancement, highlighting the role of cooperatives in empowering women economically and socially.

Cooperatives also contribute to economic inclusion, decent work, and sustainable livelihoods. In Chile, consumer cooperatives "possess a strong collaborative, critical, and potentially transformative component and are characterized by horizontal and collective management" (Marambio-Tapia, 2025, p. 102).

Cooperatives also contribute to sustainable production and consumption. In Argentina, solidarity intermediation has been consolidated as a sector with its own actors and a distinct identity within cooperativism. Solidarity intermediation seeks to promote solidarity markets (SM) as transformative spaces of exchange based on trust and reciprocity. These markets serve as a tool to articulate the economic circuit by de-commodifying relationships. In SMS, exchange goes beyond goods and services, holding the potential to transform social relations while countering competition, individualism, and speculation. They require the active involvement of associative actors, horizontal relationships, and networked structures, ensuring that growth is not confined to a single link but instead impacts the system as a whole, contributing to its sustainability. Although comprehensive data covering all actors across Argentina are not yet available—and despite the concentration of many initiatives in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (AMBA)<sup>1</sup>—recently, new experiences have emerged in different parts of the country and have been articulated through working networks (Miño & Fernández Miranda, 2025).

## Local initiatives from the cooperative movement to promote the SDGs

Local cooperatives exemplify the transformative potential of the cooperative model. By engaging directly with communities, cooperatives address poverty, hunger, and gender inequality. At the local level, cooperatives act as catalysts for community engagement and inclusive economic systems.

In Ethiopia, the Wabi Burkitu cooperative reduces poverty by providing training, improved seeds, machinery, and loans, particularly supporting women's economic

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1 The Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (AMBA) refers to the large urban agglomeration made up of The Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (the capital of Argentina) and 40 surrounding municipalities in the Province of Buenos Aires. It is the most populated region in Argentina, with over 15 million inhabitants (around one-third of the national population).

empowerment. In Palestine, the ESDC strengthens smallholder farmers through technical support and governance capacity-building, while Rwanda's Shalom Cooperative empowers women living with HIV/AIDS by improving access to inputs, training, and market opportunities. Malawi's Agricultural and Marketing Co-operative Societies facilitate women's participation in local markets, and Morocco's Ajddigue Women's Cooperative enables women to produce, package, and sell Argan oil, promoting income independence and social agency.

Europe's Resew Cooperative in Ukraine supports environmentally sustainable practices and vulnerable populations, and Italy's Stienta CAPA cooperative demonstrates women's leadership in the fashion sector. Italy's GOEL Cooperative Group fosters fair employment, social inclusion, and economic renewal across agriculture, health, tourism, and fashion sectors, integrating ethical business practices with community empowerment. France's Toutenvélo cooperative demonstrates low-emission urban delivery services, combining social inclusion with sustainable urban mobility solutions.

Italy's Ceramiche Noi cooperative combines green technologies and innovative production methods to minimize environmental impact while maintaining economic viability.

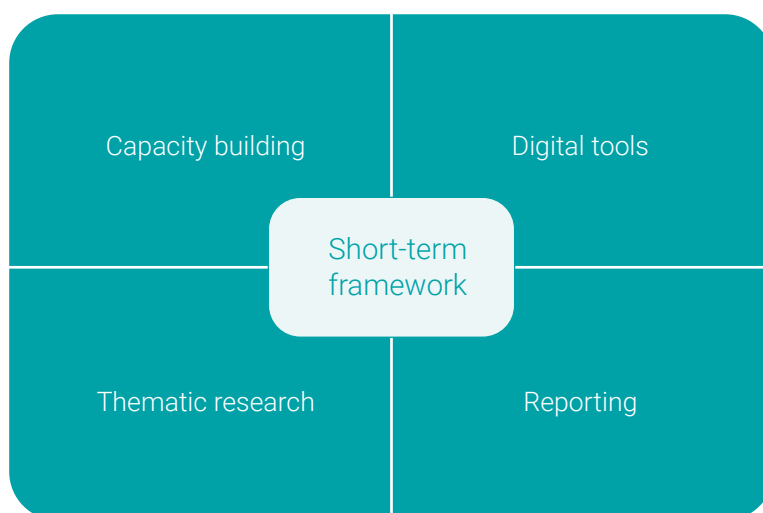
Costa Rica's "Casas de la Alegría" initiative provides migrant coffee pickers with training, social integration, and improved labor conditions, while Chile's Fundación Coopeuch promotes cooperative financing for social impact through its FondoCoop instrument.

Chile's Coopeuch and Finland's Metsäliitto Cooperative integrate environmental sustainability into core business operations, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, promoting biodiversity, and implementing renewable energy initiatives.

## Short-term framework for evaluating and reporting cooperative contributions to SDGs

Recognizing the vital role of cooperatives in sustainable development, the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) has developed a Short-Term Framework for Evaluating and Reporting Cooperative Contributions to the SDGs. This framework provides a standardized methodology for assessing cooperative impact, enabling organizations to communicate their contributions more effectively and participate in policy dialogues with governments, civil society, and international institutions. By offering methodological guidance, digital tools, and reporting standards, the framework allows

cooperatives to demonstrate how their governance model and community-centered practices advance the 2030 Agenda.



**Figure 1.** Evaluating and reporting cooperative contributions to SDGs: short-term framework

A key component of the framework is capacity-building. Workshops, seminars, and training sessions strengthen cooperatives' ability to evaluate and report on their contributions to the SDGs, capturing both qualitative and quantitative impacts. Digital platforms such as CoopImpact function as practical toolkits, enabling cooperatives to systematically measure and showcase their work in relation to SDG objectives. The framework also prioritizes thematic research, with particular attention to goals such as SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). In this context, Cooperatives of the Americas (2025) launched the publication *Evolution of the Cooperative Sector between the International Years of Cooperatives 2012–2025: Public Policies, Regulations, New Associative Forms, and Socioeconomic Initiatives*. This volume compiles contributions from researchers in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Paraguay, providing a regional perspective on the transformations within the cooperative movement since 2012. It examines changes in public policies, regulatory frameworks, associative dynamics, and socio-economic practices that have paved the way for the new International Year.

Finally, the reporting mechanisms compile cooperative achievements into comprehensive narratives, illustrating how cooperatives contribute to sustainable, inclusive, and equitable development. By situating this practical tool in the discussion, the framework highlights the tangible ways in which cooperatives can continue to play

a critical role in accelerating progress toward the SDGs, especially given the current global challenges in meeting the 2030 Agenda.

## Cross-cutting Results

Across global, national, and local levels, cooperatives demonstrate a virtuous cycle of impact. Global advocacy initiatives provide legitimacy, national apex organizations translate frameworks into actionable policies, and local cooperatives generate empirical evidence that reinforces global narratives. These efforts illustrate the transversal nature of cooperative impact: initiatives targeting gender equality strengthen economic development and poverty reduction, while environmental programs simultaneously support sustainable urban development and income generation. Local successes influence national policy priorities, creating measurable effects that feed back into global recognition and advocacy.

Despite their contributions, cooperatives face persistent challenges, including gaps in data collection, regional disparities, and limited inter-cooperative coordination. Addressing these challenges requires investments in statistical capacity, expanded regional collaboration, and strengthened visibility platforms. Recommendations for the future include enhancing data and reporting frameworks, expanding multi-sector partnerships, advocating for supportive policies, integrating cooperative principles into education and training programs, and leveraging the momentum of the 2025 International Year of Cooperatives to elevate the sector's visibility. By doing so, cooperatives can continue to maximize their role as drivers of inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development, translating local action into national and global impact.

## Discussion

The analysis of cooperative contributions across global, national, and local levels provides valuable insights into the complex role of cooperative organizations in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The findings highlight the multi-scalar nature of cooperative impact, which is simultaneously global in its advocacy, national in its institutional influence, and local in its tangible community-level results. This section discusses these findings in light of existing literature, identifies key challenges, and explores the implications for policy, practice, and future research.

## Cooperatives as Multi-scalar Actors in Sustainable Development

The results confirm the view that cooperatives are unique in their ability to operate across scales. As Birchall (2013) argues, cooperatives differ from investor-owned firms not only in ownership and governance but also in their embeddedness within communities and networks. This embeddedness allows cooperatives to link grassroots needs with broader policy and advocacy frameworks. The evidence presented here shows that global platforms such as the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) and regional bodies amplify cooperative visibility at the United Nations and other international fora, while apex organizations adapt global discourses into national contexts, and grassroots cooperatives deliver concrete social, economic, and environmental outcomes.

This multi-scalar positioning resonates with more recent analyses of *localization of the SDGs*, which highlight how global frameworks are reinterpreted and adapted by diverse local actors and institutions (Sever, Tok & Sellami, 2025). Cooperatives embody this dynamic by simultaneously grounding themselves in member needs and aligning with global development agendas. Their engagement with Agenda 2030 illustrates processes of *translation*, where international norms are operationalized through sectoral strategies and territorial practices (Lafont-Torio, Calderon-Monge & Ribeiro-Soriano, 2023; Carini, Delvecchio, & Götz, 2024). Furthermore, cooperative organizations have explicitly positioned themselves as key partners in realizing the SDGs, promoting enabling policy environments and multi-level partnerships (ICA, 2023).

## Advocacy, Legitimacy, and Policy Influence

The global-level results suggest that cooperative organizations have been effective in gaining legitimacy and recognition within international development frameworks. The inclusion of cooperatives in United Nations resolutions and the visibility provided by instruments such as the World Cooperative Monitor (Euricse & ICA, 2023; World Cooperative Monitor, 2021) mark significant achievements. Yet, as Chaves and Monzón (2018) note, recognition does not automatically translate into supportive national policies.

A key challenge is the “implementation gap” between advocacy and practice. While cooperatives are acknowledged as actors in the social and solidarity economy, many governments still lack coherent policies or legal frameworks to fully support them (Utting, 2015). This is particularly evident in countries where cooperatives are politically marginalized or viewed primarily as instruments of state policy rather than

autonomous actors. The discussion underscores the need to strengthen the policy translation process so that global recognition results in concrete national-level reforms.

## Balancing Scale and Cooperative Identity

At the national level, apex organizations and large cooperative enterprises demonstrate significant economic and policy impact. However, as the literature warns, the pursuit of scale can sometimes lead to a dilution of cooperative principles (Webb & Novkovic, 2014). For example, large cooperatives may adopt hierarchical management practices or prioritize market competitiveness over member participation, raising concerns of “mission drift.”

This tension reflects the broader debate about whether cooperatives can remain true to their identity while competing in globalized markets (Arzadun, 2012; Bretos & Marcuello, 2017). The findings suggest that successful apex organizations and large enterprises are those that consciously embed cooperative values into their governance and operations. Mondragón, SEWA, and FUCVAM provide examples of models that attempt to balance efficiency with solidarity. Yet the risks remain, particularly in sectors like banking and insurance, where market pressures are intense.

## Local Impact and the Cooperative Difference

At the local level, the results strongly confirm the cooperative difference. Grassroots cooperatives generate measurable impacts in poverty reduction, inclusion, gender equity, and environmental sustainability. This aligns with extensive empirical evidence showing that cooperatives provide social protection, improve livelihoods, and foster resilience in marginalized communities (ILO & ICA, 2014; Vieta, 2020).

What distinguishes cooperatives from other development interventions is their democratic governance. Members are not merely beneficiaries but co-owners and decision-makers, which enhances empowerment and accountability. This participatory dimension aligns with SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), which emphasizes inclusive governance. However, the discussion also reveals that grassroots cooperatives often lack access to finance, technology, and markets, limiting their scalability. Without the support of apex organizations and enabling policies, local cooperatives risk remaining isolated success stories rather than systemic solutions.

## Interconnections and Systemic Challenges

One of the most important findings is the interdependence of the three levels. Global advocacy enhances legitimacy, national apex organizations translate frameworks into policies, and grassroots cooperatives provide evidence of impact. This cycle suggests a systemic approach to cooperative development, where success depends on the alignment and reinforcement across levels.

Yet, systemic challenges persist. Data gaps limit the ability to demonstrate cooperative impact consistently across regions. Fragmentation among apex organizations weakens policy influence in some countries. Additionally, global reporting mechanisms often prioritize large cooperatives, overlooking the contributions of smaller, community-based ones. Addressing these challenges requires investment in cooperative statistics, better coordination between organizations, and inclusive frameworks that capture the diversity of cooperative experiences.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

The discussion points to several implications:

1. For international organizations: Recognition of cooperatives in UN frameworks should be matched with technical support, funding mechanisms, and integration into national development plans.
2. For governments: Enabling legal and policy environments are critical. Governments should update cooperative laws, support cooperative education, and ensure fair access to finance and markets.
3. For apex organizations: Strengthening capacity, fostering transparency, and promoting innovation will help apex bodies serve as effective intermediaries.
4. For grassroots cooperatives: Building alliances, investing in leadership development, and adopting sustainable business models are essential for scaling impact.

## Future Research Directions

Finally, the findings highlight the need for further research. Comparative studies across regions could illuminate how different institutional contexts affect cooperative contributions to the SDGs. Longitudinal studies are needed to track cooperative resilience over time, particularly in the face of crises such as climate change and

pandemics. Methodological innovations, such as participatory impact assessments, could also enhance understanding of the cooperative difference.

In sum, the discussion underscores that cooperatives are uniquely positioned as multi-scalar actors in sustainable development. They connect global advocacy with local realities, influence national policies, and empower communities. Yet challenges of scale, identity, and systemic coordination remain. To fully harness the cooperative potential for achieving the SDGs, stronger linkages, supportive policies, and robust data systems are required.

## Conclusions

This article has examined the contributions of cooperative organizations to advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at three interconnected levels: global and regional, national, and local. The findings confirm that cooperatives are not peripheral actors in sustainable development but central agents capable of influencing international agendas, shaping national policies, and transforming the realities of communities across the world.

At the global and regional level, cooperatives have successfully positioned themselves as legitimate stakeholders in the international development architecture. Through platforms such as the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), the World Cooperative Monitor, and CoopImpact, the movement has generated visibility, data, and advocacy tools that allow governments and international organizations to recognize cooperatives as drivers of sustainable development. The participation of cooperatives in United Nations and International Labour Organization processes illustrates their capacity to engage in high-level policy debates. However, challenges remain in translating recognition into consistent policy frameworks and financial support at the national level.

At the national level, apex organizations and large cooperative enterprises have demonstrated the ability to scale impact by influencing public policy, generating employment, and providing services to millions of people. Their capacity to act as intermediaries between global frameworks and grassroots needs is vital. Yet this level also reveals tensions: while scale can generate economic and political influence, it can also create risks of drifting away from cooperative principles, weakening democratic governance and member participation. Balancing growth with identity remains a central challenge for the movement.

At the local level, grassroots cooperatives clearly embody the cooperative difference. They contribute directly to poverty reduction, social inclusion, gender equity, and

environmental sustainability. Examples from agriculture, housing, energy, and worker cooperatives show how members collectively design solutions to their challenges, building resilience and empowerment. Still, local cooperatives often struggle with access to finance, markets, and technology. Their sustainability depends on supportive apex organizations and enabling public policies.

The analysis also highlights the interdependence across levels. Global recognition strengthens legitimacy, national frameworks institutionalize support, and local cooperatives provide the evidence and impact that justify advocacy. This circular dynamic suggests that the cooperative movement functions best when there is synergy and alignment across scales. Weaknesses in one level—such as insufficient data or fragmented national representation—can undermine the effectiveness of the entire system.

Based on these insights, several strategic recommendations can be made:

1. Strengthen cooperative statistics and impact measurement to ensure visibility and comparability across regions.
2. Promote enabling legal and policy environments that reflect the cooperative identity and support innovation.
3. Invest in capacity-building and education at all levels, with a particular focus on youth and women's leadership.
4. Enhance linkages between levels, ensuring that grassroots experiences inform global advocacy and that international recognition translates into local benefits.
5. Safeguard cooperative identity by reinforcing principles of democracy, participation, and solidarity, even in large-scale enterprises.

In conclusion, cooperatives are uniquely positioned to advance the SDGs by connecting global agendas with local realities, and by aligning economic performance with social justice and environmental sustainability. To fully realize this potential, greater coordination, stronger institutions, and renewed commitment to cooperative principles are required. The International Year of Cooperatives 2025 offers a historic opportunity to consolidate this vision, strengthen alliances, and reaffirm the role of cooperatives as essential partners in building a more sustainable and inclusive world.

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