



**International Year
of Cooperatives**

Cooperatives Build
a Better World



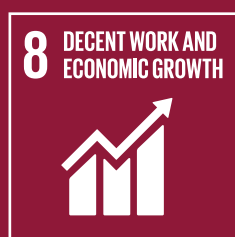
Committee for
the promotion
and advancement
of cooperatives



Building a Better World Together: Cooperative Contributions to the SDGs

**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.¹ 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.² 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 8³. In many regions, cooperatives also create pathways for informal workers to access social protection, enhance collective voice, and gain legal recognition.⁴ 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.⁵ 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): CIOCPA (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.

- 1 United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Retrieved from <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>
- 2 Eum, H. (2017). *Cooperatives and Employment: Second Global Report – Contribution of Cooperatives to Decent Work in the Changing World of Work*. CIOCPA. Retrieved from <https://ica.coop/en/media/library/cooperatives-and-employment-second-global-report>
- 3 International Labour Organization. (2002). *Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 (No. 193)*. Retrieved from https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0:NO:P12100_ILO_CODE:R193
- 4 International Labour Organization. (2015). *Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204)*. Retrieved from https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0:NO:P12100_ILO_CODE:R204
- 5 International Cooperative Alliance. (2018). *Cooperatives and the Future of Work: Position Paper*. Retrieved from https://ica.coop/sites/default/files/2021-11/ICA%20position%20on%20FoW_FINAL_07_05_2018.pdf

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.⁶

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.⁷



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.

⁶ Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA). (2019). *Report of Licensed Motorcycle Cooperatives as of June 2019*. Kigali, Rwanda. Retrieved from https://rura.rw/fileadmin/Documents/transport/statistics/Report_of_licensed_motorcycle_cooperatives_as_of_June_2019.pdf

⁷ World Bank. (2021, July 7). *Creating New Beginnings for Ex-Combatants in Rwanda*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2021/07/07/creating-new-beginnings-for-ex-combatants-in-rwanda>

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, Cangiarì, 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.⁸ 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.⁹



⁸ United Nations General Assembly. (2024). Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 19 December 2024 [A/RES/79/213] – *Promoting the social and solidarity economy for sustainable development*. Retrieved from <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/417/48/pdf/n2441748.pdf>

⁹ United Nations General Assembly (2024). International Year of Cooperatives, 2025, Resolution A/RES/78/289, adopted on 19 June 2024. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/78/289>



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.¹⁰



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.



This brief is part of the *Building a Better World Together: Cooperative Contributions to the SDGs* series, produced by the Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC) and the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA), together with its regional organizations and relevant sectoral associations, in support of the UN International Year of Cooperatives 2025 (IYC 2025). As the leading UN agency on decent work, the ILO's Cooperative, Social and Solidarity Unit also provided substantive input.

Under the theme *"Cooperatives Build a Better World,"* IYC 2025 aims to raise awareness, promote growth, and inspire leadership in the cooperative movement. This series explores how cooperatives drive progress toward the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by fostering economic inclusion, democratic participation, and social solidarity for over one billion members worldwide.

Established in 1971, the Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC) is a multi-stakeholder partnership that champions and supports people-centered and self-sustaining cooperative enterprises. Its current members include the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and the International Trade Centre (ITC).

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