Workshop on Cooperative Law and Public Policy
August 22 – 23, 2026, in Pula, Croatia | Hybrid

Exploring the Statement on the Cooperative Identity through group discussions and thematic sessions on the contemporary challenges and issues around practice and implementation of the cooperative principles[1] in cooperative legislation, and national policy frameworks.

Background

The Statement on the Cooperative Identity is a treasure shared by all cooperatives around the world. In the past, nowadays and in the future, this document will be the international reference that distinguishes cooperatives from the abundance of other types of enterprises recognized around the Globe. This identity can be considered, for each cooperative but also for their different categories and forms of grouping, as the backbone. Moreover, this document recognizes the International Cooperative Alliance as the custodian and a promoter of this distinctive identity.

Historically, through the World/International Cooperative Congress, whose mission is different from that of the ICA General Assembly of its member organizations, the cooperatives worldwide scrutinize and help evolve the cooperative identity. The current wording was adopted in the form of a Statement comprising a definition, a set of ethical and cooperative values, and 7 principles, at the ICA Centennial General Assembly in Manchester, United Kingdom, in 1995 when the ICA collectively represented approximately 700 million co-operators worldwide. Today, the global cooperative movement comprises around one billion cooperative members. Since the ICA General Assembly in Cancun, in 2011, the ICA has enabled through its global board, a committee on the Cooperative Principles (now called the ICA Board's Committee on the Cooperative Identity). As part of this, the ICA published the Guidance Notes[2] on the Cooperative Principles in 2015, following the publication of the ICA Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade – a 10-year strategy that placed cooperative Identity at the center of it, with Legal Frameworks, Sustainability, Participation, and Capital forming the 5 prioritized themes of the Strategy. The recently adopted ICA Global Strategy positions the Cooperative Identity as its Alpha, and an increased market share for cooperatives as its Omega. The 2021, World Cooperative Congress on Deepening our Cooperative Identity, in Seoul, Republic of Korea, initiated another global programme to survey cooperators worldwide, and through discussion, correspondence and articulation, deepen (and strengthen) the cooperative identity. Consequently, the ICA Board of Directors has set up an Advisory Group (CIAG) which acts as the ad hoc committee on the Cooperative Identity. CIAG has informed the ICA of its works and proposals, to the General Assemblies in Seville (2022) New Delhi (2024), Manchester (2025).

Theme

If the ICA performs a norm-setting function analogous to that of a legislature in a democratic system, it is equally important to identify how those norms are to be implemented, interpreted and safeguarded. In a State, implementation and enforcement ordinarily fall to executive and administrative institutions, while courts interpret the law, resolve disputes and provide remedies when conduct departs from established norms. ICA is not a State, and its normative instruments do not possess the same coercive force as legislation. At the same time, Law, is not created solely through formal legislative enactment. It may also develop through custom, accumulated

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, references in this document to the "cooperative principles," the "cooperative identity," or the "Statement on the Cooperative Identity" should be understood as referring to the same body of principles and values.

[2] ICA Guidance Notes EN.pdf

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practice and the gradual recognition of norms, that can be initially articulated by civil society or other non-State actors.[3] The ICA's Statement may be examined in this light: as a transnational normative corpus capable of influencing cooperative practice and, through its reception by States and legal institutions, contributing to the progressive development of cooperative law.

This comparison raises an important question: what institutional arrangements should support the consistent interpretation and implementation of the cooperative normative corpus?

Aim and Objective of the Workshop

This workshop is being organized in view of the attendance of the CIAG at the Third International Summer School on Cooperative Law at the Juraj Dobrila University in Pula, Croatia. The aim is to strengthen the idea that Cooperative Identity is the most crucial issue for the ICA and for the advancement of which, the incoming Board of Directors at the ICA GA in Panama (Sep 2026) must consider including it centrally in their 4-year work programme. The ICA's role as custodian and steward of the cooperative identity extends far beyond articulating the Statement. The workshop therefore seeks to identify emerging legal, policy and cooperative-practice issues and to deepen their analysis.

During the workshop, matters raised on the effective implementation of the cooperative identity will be addressed while exploring further diverse interactions between written norms and real practices. The second avenue is to explore the matter of interpreting the norm to guarantee concrete respect for this identity. This question is important since the cooperative identity cannot be reduced only to a showcase without concrete action by each cooperative and the global movement. Otherwise, there would be major risk that cooperatives would be considered as good in expressing their values but meager in acting.

In exploring these, the workshop will be guided by a selection of specific "matters for future consideration," a set of questions posed by the authors of the ICA Guidance Notes on Cooperative Principles (2015), that appear to warrant now, specific and internationally relevant/harmonious responses based on the international principles and practice.

Overall, we expect the exchanges in Pula to explore new avenues deeply linked with the cooperative identity. The exchanges in Pula not to be limited to the question whether the Statement needs amending. These discussions will lead into the Cooperative Identity Lab at the ICA Global Conference in Panama on 16 September 2026, expecting to open, especially for young co-operators, new fields of collective exchange and work on the cooperative identity - our living and ever so increasingly shared intangible cultural heritage.

[3] Article 38(1) of the Statute of the International Court of Justice identifies treaties, international custom—described as "evidence of a general practice accepted as law"—and general principles of law among the principal sources applied by the Court. Customary international law therefore requires both sufficiently general practice and its acceptance as legally required (opinio juris). Civil-society norms do not, by themselves, constitute international law, but they may influence State practice, shape legal expectations, inform legislation and judicial interpretation, and ultimately contribute to the emergence or crystallisation of legal rules.

Annexure (Topics to be Discussed in Groups on 23 August)

The matters written in plum will be included in the working sessions of the workshop. All other matters are equally important for the discussions and are meant to guide participants in articulating their analysis and presentations.

A. Principle 7 – Concern for Community

Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.

Publicising the challenges of sustainable development

Co-operatives have a special responsibility to alert their members and the public to the challenges of sustainable development locally and globally and contributing to the efforts to promote it in an effective way. the Alliance's "blueprint for a Co-operative Decade" sets out "sustainability" as one of the priorities to be addressed in the years to come. It states that:

"Co-operatives have always set out to enable people to have access to goods and services without exploitation. This has meant trading in accordance with a set of values based on what we would today call sustainability. By placing human need at their centre, co-operatives respond to today's crises of sustainability and deliver a distinctive form of 'shared value'. Quite simply, a co-operative is a collective pursuit of sustainability. Co-operatives seek to 'optimise' outcomes for a range of stakeholders, without seeking to 'maximise' the benefit for any single stakeholder. building economic, social and environmental sustainability should therefore be one of the over-arching motivations and justifications for a growing co-operative sector. It offers an answer to the question of why co-operatives are necessary and beneficial, at this historical juncture."

Setting goals of sustainable development

The blueprint also sets goals for attaining sustainability in the three areas of economic, social and environmental sustainability and indicates how these goals might be achieved by possible or indicative actions. Co-operatives are encouraged to give consideration to all the blueprint's recommendations that, when implemented, will ensure that the Alliance's vision is achieved "for the co-operative form of business, by 2020, to become the acknowledged leader in economic, social and environmental sustainability, the model preferred by people, and the fastest growing form of enterprise". Building from the local base, co-operatives can support not just wider policies on sustainability issues but also practical support for practical sustainable development projects both locally and through international development projects.

The gravity of global environment problems

The concern of co-operatives to address the increasing gravity of global environmental problems was shown during debates at the Alliance's General Assembly in Cancun, Mexico in 2011, as were positive exemplar actions by co-operatives regionally and globally to tackle threats to the global environment such as global warming, carbon emissions, use of pesticides, and destruction of rain forests. This engagement with global environmental issues is appropriate and to be encouraged but needs to be matched with local environmental actions. for example, concern for climate change should lead to a commitment by all co-operatives to audit their carbon emissions and seek to reduce dependence on fossil fuels. Also, any co-operative concerned about climate change and the destruction of rainforests needs to act locally too by ensuring that all timber used in construction and maintenance is certified as being sourced from sustainably managed forests.

Access to healthcare and other essential services

Access to health care and medical services is not the only aspect of global health promotion. Access to clean water, sanitation services, electricity for food refrigeration, and decent housing that is safe, secure and pest free is also vital for human health. Concern for community and the contribution co-operatives can make to wider civil society through supporting the attainment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals will also be important in the future.

Open-source IT software

Co-operatives should consider how best to support the development and use of open-source IT software to ensure that software that meets the needs of co-operatives is available to them at reasonable cost. This is particularly important for banking and insurance co-operatives and credit unions in emerging economies, but also for other co-operative sectors too.

Collaboration with other organizations

Co-operatives alone cannot attain the goal of the sustainable development of their communities; they have to enter into agreements with and collaborate with other organisations, including governments. Such collaboration is indispensable given the huge global challenges of achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Co-operatives need to collaborate with community organisations, private companies, volunteer groups, charities, and local, regional and national governments. In doing so they need to consider how to ensure that they can engage in collaborative ventures that promote sustainable development in accordance with the 4th Principle; that is, freely and on terms which ensure democratic control by their members is preserved, and that their co-operative's autonomy and independence is maintained.

Promoting global peace and social cohesion

Co-operatives have always played a significant role in promoting global peace and social cohesion. Application of the Co-operative values and Principles by co-operatives create a unique capacity to contribute to global peace and prosperity. All co-operatives should give consideration to the contribution they can make in their local communities and beyond to peace, social solidarity, social justice, and prosperity for all.

Helping to build civil society

All co-operatives should consider and develop the capacity they have to make a significant contribution to building civil society by the successful application of this 7th Principle. They do so by contributing to the sustainable development of their local communities and, more widely, to the sustainable development of the national, regional and global communities of which they are part. engaging members from local communities in co-operative enterprises creates new, engaged and responsible activists who drive the development of the co-operative movement forward into the future but who also, in a tradition that reaches back to the founders of this great global co-operative movement, become engaged in a much wider range of progressive organisations. Co-operatives have always made, and continue to make, a major contribution to the progress of civil society and democratic renewal.

B. Principle 3 - Member Economic Participation

Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-operative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the co-operative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any of the following purposes: developing their co-operative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefitting members in proportion to their transactions with the co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

Admission of public authorities to membership

Consideration should be given, in some types of co-operative particularly those which have wider public benefit objectives, or are based on assets transferred from the public sector, to permit admission into corporate membership national, regional, and local public authorities. the contribution made by these authorities should come from purchasing specific shares of amounts higher than those of individual co-operative members; indeed their financial contributions can be uncapped. Where this is permitted, the creation of a specific category of membership for public authorities will be advisable. this category of membership should not hold a blocking minority of voting

rights: the challenge is how to balance the power of this category of member with that of a co-operative's other members and without compromising the independence and autonomy of the co-operative, which must be respected.

Positioning of cooperatives in national and local tax regimes

Co-operatives promote the economic and social development of their members and the development of co-operatives and other socially responsible economic actors in the fabric of local economies. Many do so without aiming to make a financial profit, but aiming instead to develop and strengthen local economies for the benefit of their members and the wider community. The economic and social contribution of co-operatives to a local or regional economy is a social impact contribution benefitting the community and civil society. Co-operatives making such a contribution can be described as "managing common-wealth" to benefit the local community, its economy and society. Where this contribution is a dedicated objective and purpose of co-operatives, it is appropriate for it to be recognised by the public authorities by awarding them specific legal and tax treatment that recognise their wider contribution to tackling wealth inequality. this issue is worthy of discussion with national governments.

Cooperatives and equity capital investors

Some large well established co-operatives have raised additional capital by issuing equity shares to external non-member investors, which are listed and traded on stock markets. financial co-operatives which regulators require to increase their capital adequacy ratio to total risk-weighted assets may also need to seek equity capital investment as part of resolution plans to meet regulatory requirements. these arrangements create what, in effect, are hybrid co-operatives that merge two organisational models; a co-operative and investor ownership. Creating these hybrid co-operative/equity investor businesses challenges co-operatives to do so in a way that retains the key generic characteristics of a co-operative specified in the Statement on the Co-operative Identity and detailed in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Co-operative Principles. Consideration also needs to be given to, what, if any, are to be the voting rights of non-member equity shareholders and what caps and other controls are to be placed on them to ensure that equity investors do not usurp the democratic control of co-operative members. these are challenging issues but not insurmountable.

Cooperatives as owners of commercial business

Some successful co-operatives have purchased commercial investor-owned business enterprises, some in other countries, and integrated them into group business structures. the motivation for doing this varies, but on occasions it has simply been to gain the profits these commercial business create and increase surpluses for the benefit of members. this raises a number of significant ethical issues for co-operatives. the Alliance may wish to issue guidance on this matter in due course.

Accounting treatment of capital and indivisible reserves

Co-operatives need to continue to press for the consistent global accounting treatment of members' share capital and indivisible reserves to be treated as part of a co-operative's equity capital, not as a liability because this capital can absorb a co-operative's losses. In order to achieve this and strengthen the co-operative, co-operatives must ensure that members' share capital and indivisible reserves cannot be subject to any risk of distribution to current co-operative members. Indivisibility must remain the rule to prevent any appropriation or drift in the task of achieving this global accounting treatment.

Challenges of meeting regulatory requirements

Co-operatives face the challenge of meeting regulatory requirements imposed on them because of the lack of understanding of the nature and essence of a co-operative business that is different to the investor/capital owned joint stock company, which is the standard business model taught in business schools and most economic texts.

there is a need to develop greater understanding among governments and regulatory bodies of the co-operative form of business enterprise, its place in the modern economy and its capacity to be economically, culturally and socially transformational when they are able to-operate within an appropriate legal and regulatory regime.

C. Principle 4 - Autonomy and Independence

Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organisations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organisations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy.

Non-user and investor members

Co-operatives that accept non-user members or investor-members create a potential risk to a co-operative's autonomy and independence in addition to risking breaching the 3rd Principle of "limited compensation on capital subscribed as a condition of membership". this risk arises because such members inevitably will not have the same commitment to the long-term sustainable autonomy and independence of the co-operative as user- members have. this is particularly the case where non-user or investor-members are granted voting rights in a co-operative's general assembly or rights to appoint nominees to the board. As stated in the Guidance Note to the 3rd Principle, such arrangements may also create problems with regulators who may see the admission of investor-members as circumventing investment regulations designed to protect all investors. Co-operatives need carefully to consider the threat to their autonomy and independence and the risk of regulatory non-compliance before agreeing to such arrangements.

D. Principle 1 – Voluntary and Open Membership

Co-operatives are voluntary organisations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.

Trade with Non Members

the scale of non-member trade needs to be discussed in co-operatives that provide members with services and also trade with non-members. While improving the co-operative economy through non-member trade is acceptable, if non-member trade exceeds trading with members, the reasons for it should be examined, in particular whether the co-operative is applying this 1st Principle of open and voluntary membership in practice. If users of a co-operative's services are choosing not to become members, new approaches should be adopted to encourage them to become members. In accordance with Principle 5, co-operatives should educate people on the benefits of membership and develop exclusive advantages for members.

Similarly, if members are not users of a co-operative's services, the reasons for them not being users should be analysed and their right to remain members should be considered.

Maintaining the 1st Principle in larger cooperative groups

How do larger more complex groups, which may include other businesses as subsidiaries and trade with non-members, maintain the principle of open and voluntary membership? While such co-operatives have freedom of choice as to how this 1st Principle is applied, they need to consider how to account openly to their users and stakeholders for their application of the open membership and non-discriminatory provisions of this this 1st Principle.

E. Principle 5 - Education, Training and Information

Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operative. they inform the general public, particularly young people and opinion leaders, about the nature and benefits of co-operation.

Effective Use of Cooperative Heritage

An important theme running through co-operative education programmes is the effective use of co-operative heritage to inform and inspire today's and tomorrow's co-operators. the stories of how co-operators faced serious challenges and overcame them are one of the greatest educational resources available. It places a responsibility on all co-operatives: a responsibility to cherish and safeguard their heritage and to use it effectively in their learning programmes. the Stories.coop website is an example of how contemporary stories can be made easily available. Similarly, technology is now enabling heritage items to become more readily accessible. the pioneering work of the Co-operative heritage trust in the UK in safeguarding co-operative heritage is an exemplar of good practice that could easily be replicated and become a cornerstone of co-operative education.

Cooperative Education in National Curricula

A current challenge facing co-operative education is how to cope with the low recognition in curricula in elementary and secondary schools and universities. there exist some best practices as showcased in the good practice examples given in this guidance note, but co-operatives are rarely taught in mainstream business schools, law schools, sociology and other relevant areas of study. this problem needs to be addressed by co-operatives.

Supporting cooperative education in emerging economies

The United Nations sees the development of the co-operative economy in Africa as vital to eliminating hunger, improving healthcare, tackling poverty and achieving the UN's sustainable development goals. Co-operative education is essential in order to realise the potential of co-operatives in Africa and other developing economies as a means of achieving the UN's sustainable development goals. the global co-operative movement should consider how best it can support the educational needs of co-operatives in east Africa and other emergent economies.

the continuing significance of specialist co-operative education and training providers, such as co-operative colleges and departments of co-operation within higher education institutions needs to be considered and recognised. building stronger networks and consortia between co-operatives and specialist higher education institutes and facilitating greater collaboration between them is vital for the global future of co-operative education. the development of specific programmes for members and managers of co-operatives, such as master's degrees in co-operative business administration, is also to be encouraged.

The Importance of Academic Research

It is also vital to recognise the importance of co-operative education, training and information being informed by robust and detailed academic research and that academic research is supported by the Alliance and its members. the Alliance's Committee on Co-operative research fosters and sustains links between co-operative movements in member countries and higher education institutions in the field of research collaboration. the global co-operative movement needs to value and consider how to encourage and enhance this research collaboration.

Open Source sharing of knowledge and life-long learning

At the same time co-operative education has to look to the future: it should embrace a knowledge-based society that generates, processes, shares and makes generally available all knowledge, on an open-source basis, and which encourages life-long learning to improve the human condition. the contribution that co-operative education

can make to building a culture of civic participation and solidarity and as a tool for social transformation should be considered and developed.

Information Technologies and Big Data

the idea of the present-day knowledge-based society is founded on the vast increase in data creation and information dissemination that results from the information technologies. In a knowledge-based society, education is not restricted to school or higher education institutions. the advent of information and communication technologies (ICt) allows learners to seek information and develop knowledge at any time and in any place where access is available and unrestricted. In these circumstances, the skill of 'learning to learn' is one of the most important tools to help people acquire formal and informal education. In such circumstances, the ability to locate, classify and sort information is essential. equipped with this skill, the use of ICt becomes integral to literacy and life-long learning.

A new need also arises from 'big data'; the data about us that others collect and use through our use of more electronic devices which communicate via the internet and use internet services. how can co-operatives access and regain control over this data and use it to further develop the co-operative enterprise sector of the global economy?

Improving public understanding of the scale and significance of cooperative enterprise

It is evident, from the lack of wider public understanding of the scale and global economic impact of co-operative enterprise that more needs to be done to educate the general public and opinion leaders through the publication of co-operative economic data and employment statistics. every day the value and performance of investor-owned businesses are published online by stock markets and in newspaper reports. As evidenced by the study "Co-operatives and employment – a Global report"[2], co-operative employment statistics still lag far behind those of other enterprise sectors, but can be used strongly in advocacy for co-operatives when lobbying governments and international organisations. the fact that co-operatives are a major part of the global economy, helping to improve the living standards of half the world's population,[3] goes unnoticed. for example, there s no known co-operative enterprise registered in a tax haven to avoid paying tax in the country in which it generates its surplus or profit. this is not perceived or recognised by the public or politicians as one of the benefits of co-operative enterprise. the challenge of how the co-operative movement addresses this fundamental gap in public understanding needs to be grasped. this challenge was recognised in the 2014 Co-operatives of the Americas Declaration of Cartagena, which said that: "one of the main barriers faced by co-operatives in the Americas is increasing the awareness of their social and economic impact".