

# COOP DIALOGUE

**Cooperatives Build a Better World: Stories of Action**

Special Issue: International Year of Cooperatives 2025



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# IYC 2025, Asia and Pacific Highlights

## NATIONAL COMMITTEES

**7 National Committees** established in Australia, Fiji, Iran, Japan, Jordan, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia

## NATIONAL LEVEL EVENTS

**11 national events** held across Fiji, India, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan, Jordan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Iran

## ADVOCACY MILESTONES

### ***Japan's DIET adopted a resolution to promote cooperatives***

Fiji, China, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, India, Australia, the Philippines, and Jordan advanced advocacy for new or updated cooperative laws, policies, and regulations

## CREATIVE CAMPAIGNS ACROSS THE REGION

**Australia:** BCCM Icons campaign

**Nepal:** Launch of the Cooperative Anthem

**India:** Nationwide promotions through Commemorative stamp, Amul products, Government websites, and Railway tickets

**Jordan:** Commemorative stamp

**Philippines:** Collaboration with Metro Trains for public promotions

...and a lot more!

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# EDITORIAL

Dear Readers,

The International Year of Cooperatives 2025 marks a milestone of reflection and renewal. Proclaimed by the United Nations under the banner “Cooperatives Create a Better World,” it is more than a symbolic commemoration; it is a year of substance that is shaping how governments, institutions, and communities envision development through collaboration.

The Asia-Pacific region has collectively sustained this momentum. Governments are aligning policies and laws to strengthen the cooperative sector and ensure it plays a significant role in national development. In India, the National Action Plan emphasizes cooperatives in rural transformation and digital inclusion. In Japan, a resolution of the National Diet elevates cooperative identity as a national value system. New laws, funds, and policy dialogues linking cooperatives with inclusive growth have been introduced in Jordan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Iran. Taken together, these actions show that cooperation is not peripheral but a central driver of just and sustainable societies.

Just as compelling are the ground-level accounts that show how cooperative values take root wherever people embrace change. In Sri Lanka, digital banking and care cooperatives are reshaping community services. In Nepal, women entrepreneurs within social cooperatives are progressing from survival to growth. Similarly, in Iran and Jordan, cooperatives are advancing social empowerment while promoting environmental sustainability.

This issue of Coop Dialogue features more examples of action that show how values, law, and leadership work together to promote inclusion and sustainability. It also reinforces that the cooperative advantage lies not in size or capital but in purpose. When businesses are member-owned and guided by principles, they earn trust, and that trust becomes the currency of resilience.

The IYC is drawing to a close, yet its legacy rests in the continuing challenge of sustaining it. IYC 2025 will be successful if its momentum converts into enduring institutions, more effective leadership, and public participation built on trust. Governments should persist in fostering enabling environments, while cooperatives steadily enhance their capacity, visibility, and self-confidence.

In hard and uncertain times, cooperation is still our most dependable tool for progress. When people stand together, they make the economy more just, the community stronger, and bring a better world closer at hand.

Best wishes,  
**Coop Dialogue team**

## CARRYING THE IYC 2025 LEGACY FORWARD: ASIA-PACIFIC COOPERATIVES IN ACTION

*Dr. Chandrapal Singh Yadav, President, ICA-AP*



*ICA Board Members during the IYC 2025 flag raising at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi, India, November 2024*

### A Global Moment for Cooperatives

In 2025, cooperators of the world stood at a moment of historic importance as the General Assembly of the United Nations declared 2025 the International Year of Cooperatives (IYC 2025), only the second time that such recognition has been accorded. The year's celebration under the global theme "Cooperatives Build a Better World" emphasizes how the cooperative way of doing things is the answer to some of the complex issues of today. Cooperatives - enterprises that are owned and governed by their members - have remained by far the most enduring form of human endeavor in the world, numbering at least 12% of humanity as members and employing about 10% of all employed persons in the world. Bearing this pride, I feel the Asia-Pacific region is now bearing the mantle of change, inspired by the IYC 2025 to tell our stories of action and rally even greater momentum behind the cause.

The IYC 2025 was officially launched in New Delhi in November 2024 during the ICA General Assembly, uniting cooperators, policymakers, researchers, and youth to commit to a year of action. At the inauguration, the Prime Minister of India, Shri. Narendra Modi emphasized the vision of "prosperity through cooperation" (Sahakar se Samriddhi), underscoring the relevance of cooperatives in advancing inclusive growth. In Asia-Pacific region, the momentum carried into 2025 through country launches, regional dialogues, and campaigns led by cooperatives.

### Community Kindness: Local Volunteers Transforming Neighborhoods

The IYC 2025 has come at an opportune time. Climate emergencies, economic disruption, increases in inequality, and rapid digital transformation are among the transitions faced by the planet. Cooperatives have a people-centered model to negotiate these transitions. Hence, the UN theme for IYC 2025 puts a spotlight on how cooperative values of self-help, democracy, equity, and solidarity move from theory into practice to fast-track the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs). From the remotest village to huge metro cities, the cooperatives are working hard to find innovations to meet community needs while uplifting groups who are often left behind in mainstream development.

The Asia-Pacific launch of IYC 2025, held jointly with the IYC 2025 Japan Committee and International Labour Organization (ILO), Japan Office in Tokyo, stressed this importance, where global leaders and youth alike joined their voices in affirming cooperatives as a vehicle for building a fair and sustainable future. In my address, I highlighted that IYC 2025 offers a unique opportunity to amplify our cooperative voice, demonstrate our collective strength, and push for real change.



*Cooperative Leaders and Representatives from International organizations at Asia-Pacific Launch IYC 2025, Tokyo, February 2025*

## Reaffirming the Cooperative Identity: Values in Action

The cooperative identity, with its values and principles, forms the foundation of the whole movement. In our region, the identity in action holds strong through a large membership base and through the trust that cooperatives command at the grassroots. The region, being alive with cooperativism, boasts a large contingent of the world's cooperators. More than 500 million people have joined cooperative enterprises such as credit unions, dairy cooperatives, societies for retail consumers, and many others. The Indian cooperative sector comprises some 300 million members, covering nearly a quarter of the country's population, and contributes to 13% of direct employment, along with an additional 11% through self-employment. In Malaysia, in 2024, approximately 7.2 million people belonged to cooperatives, representing about 21% of the population and contributing around 3% to the GDP. Equally noteworthy is the involvement in smaller countries like Nepal, where 31,000 cooperatives serve over 7.3 million members, employing around 100,000 professionals. Such a wide membership base demonstrates not only the attractiveness of cooperative values but also the tangible economic and social impact that fosters people's trust in this model.

Reaffirming cooperative identity in 2025 means showcasing these values and successes more widely than ever before. Cooperatives are making their local roots a point of pride, distinguishing themselves from investor-led businesses through community ownership and democratic control. Across the region, cooperatives have launched campaigns during IYC 2025 to promote the cooperative message. National apex bodies and the ICA Asia and Pacific (ICA-AP) have encouraged year-long programs to "promote cooperative identity, highlight success stories, engage youth, empower women leaders, educate the public and policymakers." These initiatives put cooperative principles into practice, turning abstract values into concrete stories of impact. For instance, Cooperatives are focusing heavily on member education and community concern: rural cooperative banks impart financial literacy to farmers, while consumer cooperatives organize workshops on sustainability for their members, and agricultural cooperatives pass on sustainable farming techniques to farmers. Each story underscores the argument that the cooperative model, based on identity and principles, brings about tangible social and economic impact. Together, cooperatives are reclaiming their identity as businesses that put people above profits, in the cementing of a shared identity based on values for a better world.

## Enabling Supportive Policies

Cooperatives often start from very local needs, but how far they can grow really depends on the kind of laws and policies around them. Without supportive rules, even strong community efforts can struggle to expand. That is why, across the Asia-Pacific, governments and cooperative bodies have been trying to work more closely to set up policies that make growth possible. A big step in this direction was the 11th Asia-Pacific Cooperative Ministers' Conference, held in April 2024 at the Dead Sea in Jordan. Here, ministers and officials came together and agreed on what is now called the Jordan Declaration. These regional commitments are being



*Ministers and cooperative leaders during the 11th Asia-Pacific Cooperative Ministers' Conference, Dead Sea, Jordan, April 2024.*

matched by concrete policy action at the national level in 2025. India, home to the world's largest cooperative movement, has unveiled a National Cooperation Policy 2025, which aims to transform cooperatives into a pillar of inclusive growth. The Indian government's targets are bold: establishing at least one cooperative in every village and building on an already massive base of over 800,000 cooperatives nationwide. The new policy, backed by a dedicated Ministry of Cooperation and amended cooperative laws (such as the Multi-State Cooperatives Act of 2023), seeks to create a holistic "cooperative business ecosystem".

In May 2025, the ASEAN Cooperative Dialogue (ACD) in Malaysia brought together over 200 participants from across the region under the theme "Cooperatives Build a Better World." The Dialogue positioned cooperatives as critical actors in regional resilience and inclusive development, with a strong focus on promoting inter-cooperative trade, localization of value chains, and scaling up business innovation in finance, retail, and services.

The concurrent ASEAN Cooperative Product Showcase showed how cross-border cooperative trade can create solidarity partnerships while ensuring that economic benefits remain within communities.

Through platforms like ACO, cooperatives are gaining greater visibility in ASEAN's policy agenda and are being recognized as a pillar of regional economic integration.

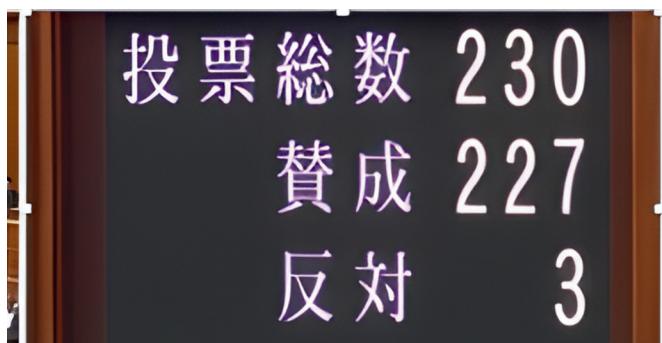


*Panel Discussion on Way Forward for Cooperatives in ASEAN during ASEAN Cooperative Dialogue 2025*

In May 2025, Japan's House of Representatives and House of Councilors both passed a resolution supporting IYC 2025. The resolution called on the government to promote cooperatives nationwide, uphold the ICA's Statement on Cooperative Identity, and recognize cooperatives as powerful actors in building sustainable local communities. This parliamentary endorsement signaled a strong political commitment to advancing cooperative values and principles, positioning Japan's cooperative movement as a central partner in achieving the SDGs.

All this clearly points in one direction: governments as well as cooperatives in the region are finding new avenues for partnerships to address pressing issues such as rural poverty, inequality, and digital divide. Countries are revising cooperative laws; establishing national IYC committees; and mainstreaming cooperatives into their development plans to enhance scale and reach. Such supportive policies are also directly aimed at empowering groups that are disadvantaged and left behind instead of being considered an opportunity for growth.

The region, thus, is striving to see that cooperative growth is not only robust but fair and inclusive as well—it should really rise from the margins by affirmatively involving those who are marginalized through enlightened policy. A cooperatively enabled sector, carried on by enlightened policies, can really be the engine for creating a more equitable economy, and Asia-Pacific is working earnestly to realize that dream.



*Overwhelming support for the resolution on cooperatives during Diet Session in May 2025*

## Developing Strong Leadership

Behind every successful cooperative is a group of dedicated people which include board members and managers, exercising strong leadership to drive the cooperative's mission. With cooperative societies looking into the future, there is a responsible requirement across Asia-Pacific to be engaged in encouraging leadership, especially among women and young people.

The regional demographic lends weight to this thrust: Over 50% of the world youth population is in Asia-Pacific, which in a way means the future cooperative leaders by and large will originate from here. Feeding their talent and commitment is an investment into the future of the movement. Cooperative organizations are also implementing mentorship programs, capacity-building workshops, and high-profile forums so that emerging cooperative leaders are provided with training, counsel, and practical opportunities. They must learn not only technical proficiency but also cooperative values at heart, so they can guide cooperatives to be true to their identity.

Young people bring fresh ideas, tech savvy, and passion – exactly what cooperatives need to navigate a fast-changing world. Recognizing this, cooperatives in Asia-Pacific are proactively engaging youth at all levels. Many cooperatives have set up junior boards or youth observer roles to involve younger members in decision-making.

(provisional translation)  
27 May 2025

## **Resolution calling for the promotion of cooperatives to mark the International Year of Cooperatives**

**House of Representatives  
National Diet of Japan**

The House of Representatives resolves as follows:

The United Nations General Assembly decided in December 2023 to designate 2025 as the International Year of Cooperatives to promote cooperatives and raise awareness of their contribution to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to overall social and economic development.

The Government of Japan also stated in its SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles that "Cooperatives and other private-sector entities that engage in public activities in which local citizens participate in the spirit of mutual aid are expected to contribute to the SDGs by building a humane society based on self-reliance and symbiosis, and revitalizing regional ties, in order to resolve the issues that are piling up in each region."

Therefore, the government should work on promoting cooperatives under the following basic principles:

1. In formulating and implementing policies concerning cooperatives, take into account the 2001 UN guidelines aimed at creating a supportive environment for the development of cooperatives and the International Labor Organization's Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation (2002) and respect the definition, values and principles of cooperatives as stipulated in the 1995 International Cooperative Alliance Statement on the Cooperative Identity;
2. Place great importance on how cooperatives operate, based on the spirit of mutual aid, for the sustainable development of local communities, and treat them as key players in sustainable community building; and
3. Place great importance on the role nonprofit, nonpublic organizations can play in the current Japanese economy and society and pay attention to the development of cooperatives, which are nonprofit private organizations democratically managed and controlled by numerous members.

At the regional level, ICA-AP's Committee on Youth Cooperation has been very active: it regularly hosts the Asia-Pacific Cooperative Youth Summit, a unique event where young cooperators came together to network and innovate. In August 2025, a special "We, the Youth" Asia-Pacific Cooperative Youth Dialogue was scheduled in collaboration with United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), aiming to connect youth voices with policymakers and the broader cooperative agenda.



**Youth Participants at Asia-Pacific Regional Youth Dialogue, part of International Forum "We, the Youth" (IFWY), Thailand, August 2025**

A centerpiece of leadership development has been empowering women leaders in the cooperative movement. Although women form a significant share of cooperative membership in many Asia-Pacific countries (for instance, women often make up the majority in savings and credit cooperatives), they have historically been underrepresented in top leadership. This is changing through the work of the ICA-AP Committee on Women. Across the region, cooperatives and governments are setting targets and launching programs to boost women's participation at decision-making levels.



**Women cooperative leaders during the Women CEOs Summit held in Vietnam in 2024**

A notable example lies in Vietnam, where armed with a strategy for national gender equality for the period 2021–2030, the government mandates that the number of directors or managers of cooperatives who are women shall reach at least 27% by 2025 and 30% by 2030. Progress can also be seen in countries like Thailand and the Philippines, where women now head large cooperative federations, and in Indonesia, where an increasing number of village cooperatives are chaired by women, pointing toward a more gender-balanced future for cooperative leadership.

## Building a Sustainable Future

Cooperatives have been addressing sustainable development as part of their DNA. The contributions of cooperatives to sustainable development are now not merely anecdotal but increasingly researched, documented, and recognized.

Cooperatives internationally generate over 280 million jobs, both direct and indirect, or, roughly, 10 percent of the world employed population—what a huge contribution towards decent work and economic growth (SDG 8)! From Asia-Pacific, cooperatives constitute a significant portion of this workforce, ranging from agricultural cooperatives providing decent livelihoods to millions of small farmers to worker cooperatives and social enterprises providing dignified jobs to youth in emerging industries. Cooperatives work toward alleviating poverty (SDG 1) by transferring economic power to the grassroots, promote gender equality (SDG 5) by enabling women entrepreneurs, foster reduced inequalities (SDG 10) through inclusive business models, and pursue climate action (SDG 13) via community-led sustainability initiatives. Cooperatives are already far along, if not in planning, in thinking about climate action and environmental factors to see the green future through.

The Asia Pacific region's cooperatives are taking the lead in strengthening local economies while advancing climate resilience. In Vietnam, cooperatives are predominantly active in agriculture, a sector that contributed 8.84 percent to national GDP in 2023 and employed nearly half of the workforce. Through initiatives such as the Strengthening the Climate Resilience of Agricultural Systems (CRAS) project in provinces like Son La, agricultural cooperatives are supporting farmers to adopt climate-smart techniques that help them cope with extreme weather.

In the Philippines, agricultural cooperatives in the Ilocos Region have promoted organic farming, water conservation, and diversified cropping to build resilience. These examples highlight how cooperatives generate measurable economic and environmental benefits for their communities. Energy cooperatives are emerging as powerful agents of change across the Asia-Pacific. In Japan, the Japan Consumers' Co-operative Union (JCCU), together with 12 member co-ops, has invested in solar and wind power projects to generate around 400 million kWh annually, ensuring that members can both produce and consume renewable energy locally.

In Australia, renewable energy cooperatives are becoming flagship initiatives, with cooperatives having membership sizes ranging from 1000 to 2000. Together, these initiatives demonstrate how cooperative-owned renewable energy can lower carbon footprints, strengthen energy security, and keep the economic benefits of clean power rooted in communities, even where policy barriers remain.



*A wind energy farm of Hepburn Community Wind Park Co-operative Ltd, Australia*



*A 7.5 MW Solar Power Plant by Osaka Izumi Co-operative Society in Japan*

## **Carrying the IYC Legacy Forward**

The IYC 2025 has shown that cooperatives are not just surviving in times of disruption; they are leading with solutions.

The IYC 2025 has shown that cooperatives are not just surviving in times of disruption; they are leading with solutions. Across the Asia-Pacific region, cooperatives have reaffirmed their identity, advanced supportive policies, nurtured new leadership, and demonstrated bold innovations for sustainability. From renewable energy and climate-smart farming to youth-led digital platforms and women's savings groups, the cooperative way has proven its relevance and resilience.

To me, the momentum built this year must carry forward. IYC 2025 is not an endpoint but a launchpad. Its legacy lies in ensuring that cooperatives remain central to addressing poverty, inequality, climate change, and digital transformation. We need to scale successful models without losing our identity, by strengthening enabling ecosystems, and continuously investing in youth and women as leaders.



*ToT on Climate Change and Action for Women Cooperators by ICA-AP Women's Committee, Indonesia, July 2025*

Asia-Pacific is at the heart of IYC 2025, from Palestine to India, Sri Lanka to Thailand, China to Japan, and the Philippines to the Pacific, and will remain a driving force in the years to come. With over 500 million members, the cooperative movement in this region holds both the scale and the diversity to drive global change.

Carrying the IYC legacy forward means staying true to our values of democracy, equity, solidarity, and concern for community. These values are not only the foundation of cooperatives; they are the foundation of a better world. As we look beyond 2025, let us continue to be everyday engines of inclusion, resilience, and sustainability, proving that indeed, cooperatives build a better world.

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## GOVERNMENTS PROMOTE THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF COOPERATIVES 2025: BUILDING A BETTER WORLD THROUGH POLICY, LAW, AND VISIBILITY

*Mr. Balasubramanian Iyer, Regional Director, ICA-AP*

When the United Nations declared 2025 the International Year of Cooperatives (IYC 2025), it invited governments not merely to celebrate, but also to develop supportive policies and regulatory frameworks that foster cooperative growth. In many capitals—from Tokyo to Tehran, Colombo to Canberra—governments have introduced new laws, institutionalized cooperative support, and publicly affirmed the important role of cooperatives. IYC 2025 is proving to be a platform where political will, legal updates, programmatic investment, and narrative power converge to accelerate cooperative development.

In India, the Ministry of Cooperation (MoC) launched a National Action Plan for IYC 2025, establishing a multi-tiered governance structure of national and state committees to coordinate cooperative development. At the official launch in New Delhi in November 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared, “In this International Year of Cooperatives, we will move forward with this cooperative spirit—empowered and prosperous.” He also added, “Cooperatives in India are not just economic entities but have cultural significance and are foundational to Indian values and lifestyle.” The MoC carried out initiatives such as Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies (PACS) modernization, the Cooperative Ranking Framework, and the National Cooperative Database. It collaborated with central government ministries, state governments, national/state cooperative federations, multi-state cooperatives, and other stakeholders at the state, district, and local levels.



*Launch of National Action Plan for cooperatives during IYC, January 2025*

### Community Kindness: Local Volunteers Transforming Neighborhoods

In Japan, the National Diet passed a resolution in May 2025 recognizing cooperatives' contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and calling on the government to promote cooperative education and innovation; the resolution urges respect for the definition, values, and principles set forth in the ICA Statement on the Cooperative Identity and positions cooperatives as key actors in the creation of sustainable local communities. After adoption in both Houses, Minister of State Junko Mihara stated that the government takes the intent of the resolution seriously and will work to further push forward initiatives by cooperatives aimed at addressing social issues. In Bhutan, the government marked IYC 2025 through national and local celebrations, including an Agri-Trade Fair and cooperative awards in Samdrup Jongkhar.



*Celebration of the International Year of Cooperatives and Agri-Trade Fair, Bhutan, November 2025.*

The Jordanian cooperative sector, through the Jordan Cooperative Corporation and the Ministry of Agriculture, aligned cooperative development efforts with IYC 2025 by introducing legal reform (Cooperatives Law 2025), launching a Cooperative Development Fund and a Cooperative Development Institute, and raising awareness through volunteer initiatives. Minister for Agriculture Khalid Al-Hunaifat said, “We are capable of achieving qualitative leaps in the agricultural and cooperative sectors by joining efforts, and working together to build a better future; and by adopting the slogan of IYC 2025, ‘Cooperatives Build a Better World,’ as a driver and motivator for all to achieve the desired renaissance in both agriculture and cooperatives.”

In China, the All China Federation of Supply and Marketing Cooperatives marked IYC 2025 with a nationwide campaign beginning with a May fitness-walk event in Beijing, distributing badges and awareness material on cooperatives.



*Participants during fitness-walk event marking the International Year of Cooperatives 2025 in Beijing, May 2025.*

On April 23, 2025, the Minister of Law in Indonesia issued Regulation No. 13/2025 on the legalization of cooperatives—replacing the 2019 rule and explicitly streamlining pathways for the new “Merah Putih” (Red-and-White) cooperatives. On July 21, 2025, President Prabowo launched 80,081 Merah Putih village/urban cooperatives, calling it “a historic day” and “a large strategic endeavor.” He stressed the program would be backed by real infrastructure—storage warehouses, cold storage, basic-goods outlets, pharmacies, logistics vehicles—and super-micro loan facilities to stimulate local economies. The new legalization rule and the credit-plus-infrastructure package create a state-backed pathway for cooperatives.

In Iran, the Iran Chamber of Cooperatives, in collaboration with the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare and with support from the United Nations in Iran, organized a national conference in September to mark the IYC. Speaking at the event, Minister Ahmad Meydari underlined the policy direction: “Cooperatives have a fundamental role in building economic resilience and realizing inclusive growth, and they should be at the center of our efforts.” He stressed that cooperative development requires a complete enabling ecosystem—from finance and legislation to judicial and administrative support—and highlighted youth as “the greatest force for transformation” who must be actively engaged in shaping the future of cooperation. He concluded by calling for practical measures that remove long-standing bottlenecks across sectors so that cooperatives can scale their impact nationwide.

In Malaysia, the government advanced a new Cooperative Bill to replace the 1993 Act, aiming to strengthen digital governance, deepen member participation, and provide clearer, more consistent regulation. Serving as ASEAN Chair in 2025, Malaysia also convened the ASEAN Cooperative Dialogue, bringing ministers, cooperative leaders, and development partners together to align strategies on digitalization, sustainability, and trade integration. Serving the ASEAN Chair in 2025, Malaysia also convened the ASEAN Cooperative Dialogue, bringing ministers, cooperative leaders, and development partners together to align strategies on digitalization, sustainability, and trade integration. As Minister Datuk Ewon Benedick put it: “Cooperatives ensure that economic growth benefits all segments of society and should be positioned as a key pillar of the ASEAN Economic Community.”

In Mongolia, which co-sponsored UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/78/289 proclaiming 2025 the IYC, the government launched the “New Cooperative – Wealthy Herder” campaign, creating thousands of herder-based cooperatives to strengthen rural livelihoods.



*Under the “New Cooperative, Wealthy Herder” campaign, cooperative membership in Mongolia has risen to 91,456 herders in 2025.*

In Fiji, Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka authored the official IYC 2025 launch statement: “With every cooperative we form, we are rewriting Fiji’s story of resilience and sustainability.” That public endorsement was paired with initiatives to expand cooperative education, microfinance access, and community-based enterprise networks in remote islands.

In the Philippines, the Cooperative Development Authority (CDA), together with the cooperative sector and Quezon City Government, launched IYC 2025 on 31 January 2025 at Quezon Memorial Circle, gathering nearly 5,000 cooperators and government partners for a solidarity statement signing.



**Solidarity Statement signing during the IYC 2025 national launch, Quezon City, Philippines.**

Institutional architecture and financing have reinforced these policy moves. In India, the government connected the National Cooperative Development Corporation (NCDC) and state institutions to the IYC committees, enabling policy alignment, budget provisioning, and cross-sector collaboration. Indonesia adopted mechanisms linking village- and sub-district cooperatives to state bank lending facilities for infrastructure, working capital, and logistics investments. Jordan's Cooperative Development Fund (enshrined in Law 13/2025) is designed to seed innovation, climate-resilient agricultural co-ops, and youth-led enterprises.

Vietnam tied its national "Coop Star Awards" to cooperative support, allocating preferential access to public procurement and market development for awardees. Regionally, Malaysia used the ASEAN Cooperative Dialogue to bring policymakers and movement leaders and reinforce the cooperative agenda as part of the ASEAN Economic Community. Targeted relief and practical enablers have helped co-ops keep investing. In Singapore, as announced by Minister of State Alvin Tan on 10 March 2025 at the Committee of Supply Debate, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) will waive the first-tier 5% CCF contributions for co-operatives in 2025. The waiver applies to co-ops' surpluses for financial years ending between 31 December 2024 and 30 September 2025—cash that can be put straight into members, resilience, and growth, without compromising access to CCF grants. In Sri Lanka, the Department of Co-operative Development (DCD) partnered with the ILO to kick-off a nationwide initiative to grow care cooperatives (eldercare, childcare, disability services). This included high-level launches and, by September, the release of model by-laws and a public commitment to promote care cooperatives across the country.

Public visibility, culture, and awareness have also been central to IYC 2025. India and Jordan released commemorative stamps to celebrate the year.



**Displayed on Indian Railways electronic tickets and Amul's daily milk packets with IYC logo**

The IYC logo was prominently displayed on Indian Railways electronic tickets and on cooperative product packaging—including daily milk packets by Amul—bringing the message into everyday life.

In Nepal, the National Cooperative Song was unveiled on the occasion of the 68th National Cooperative Day, with lyrics written by Byakul Maila (the poet who penned Nepal's national anthem); the song celebrates cooperative identity and values and links the movement to Nepal's national development goals ("decent cooperatives, prosperous society"). Star Awards honoured 100 exemplary cooperatives to spotlight quality co-op goods and stories in the press, pairing recognition with access to public procurement and market development. In Australia, BCCM launched the "Icons of Cooperation" initiative, highlighting how cooperatives and mutuals contribute to competition, fairness, and local reinvestment—reflected when Minister Andrew Leigh said: "Mutuals and co-operatives help make markets work better—they give consumers real choice and reinvest in communities."



**Cultural performance during National Launch of IYC 2025 in Nepal**

IYC 2025 will culminate at the UN World Social Summit in Doha, where already the Political Declaration has formally recognized cooperatives as 'key enablers of inclusive and sustainable development.' Across Asia and the Pacific, governments have demonstrated their interest to promote cooperatives. But the test of success is not in enactment—it is in continuity. In the years ahead, governments, movements, and communities must ensure that these policies are operationalized, monitored, and scaled.

This means funding cooperative development mechanisms, enabling a new generation to get interested in cooperatives, and keeping cooperative messaging fresh and credible. It also means moving away from top-down approaches and giving space for member-owned enterprises to lead—supporting awareness and sparking genuine public interest so that cooperatives are seen not only as community enterprises but as building blocks of better societies.

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## COOPERATIVES AND MUTUALS BUILD A BETTER WORLD: HOW AUSTRALIA'S COOPERATIVE SECTOR IS TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

*Ms. Kristin Sinclair, Digital Communications Consultant, BCCM, and  
Mr. Nick Hislop, Senior Consultant, BCCM, Australia*

Australia's cooperatives and mutuals are deeply embedded in the daily lives of most Australians. Eight in ten Australians are members of at least one cooperative or mutual. With over 37 million memberships nationwide – a number that exceeds the country's population – this diverse sector spans 1,834 active organisations<sup>1</sup> operating in finance, insurance, agribusiness, housing, motoring, retail, travel and social care.

While the largest sectors by turnover are financial services (27.8% of combined Top 100 revenues), health insurance (25%), agribusiness (15.8%), motoring (14%) and purchasing services (10.2%)<sup>1</sup>, some of the most innovative work is emerging in rural and regional Australia – areas where traditional market-based service models have struggled. Across these communities, cooperatives are filling critical gaps in care, employment, housing and essential services, giving local people the power to design solutions that work for them.

### Care Together: A national innovation in social care

The Care Together Program, delivered by the Business Council of Co-operatives and Mutuals (BCCM), was launched in 2023 with Australian Government funding to support the creation and growth of cooperatives and mutuals in aged care, disability, health and social services. With Phase Two now underway until August 2026, the program continues to strengthen community-owned models that put people, not profit, at the heart of care delivery. "Cooperatives and mutuals are member-owned businesses formed to benefit the people who use them or work in them, rather than shareholders," says Melina Morrison, CEO of BCCM. "In a co-op, people, not profits, are the beginning, middle and end purpose of the business."

Through co-design, shared services and peer learning, Care Together has helped communities establish sustainable, member-owned solutions to long-standing access and workforce challenges. Projects such as Co-operative Care Wagin in Western Australia, the Eurobodalla Community Care Co-operative in New South Wales and the Girudala Community Co-operative Society in Queensland are empowering regional residents to shape their own care systems and safeguard local services.

Program Director Gillian McFee captures the intent: "What began as a bold initiative has grown into a national movement of people, organisations and regions ready to lead change – and do it together." "The benefit for me is the sense of belonging," says Pei-Shan Wu, Founding Board Chair of Eurobodalla Community Care Co-operative. "It can be very isolating being an independent support worker. If people choose a support worker from a co-op, it's going to be a certain standard."



*ECCC Formation meeting - June 2025 - PC: Kylie Verdouw Photography*



*Members of Murrumbidgee Aged Care Network Co-operative during a discussion session*

### The Bunya Fund – growing the next generation of cooperatives

Beyond care, the BCCM is investing in the next wave of cooperatives through the Bunya Fund, Australia's first cooperative development fund. Established in 2022, it provides education, training and advisory support to help cooperatives tackle complex social, environmental and economic challenges. Over its first four rounds, more than A\$415,000 has been committed to projects spanning housing, health, disability, organic farming, employment and the arts.

One recipient, GNP360 Co-operative in Gnowangerup, Western Australia, has become a model for rural renewal. When the town lost its IGA supermarket, two banks and its hairdresser, a small group of residents formed a cooperative to restore vital services.

"The cavalry isn't coming – you're going to have to save yourselves," community-building expert Peter Kenyon told them. Inspired by that challenge, locals bought and reopened the supermarket, then launched new projects – from a physiotherapy clinic to the award-winning Horsepower Highway tourism trail.

"The Bunya Fund gave us not just the resources but also the confidence to think bigger and tackle challenges we might have otherwise shied away from," says Cassandra Beeck, GNP360 Director. The cooperative's next goal is the transformation of the historic Gnowangerup Hotel into a family accommodation precinct – a symbol of how local ownership can drive regional resilience.



*In the picture are Directors of GNP360*



*A mural over the wall of historic Gnowangerup Hotel,  
Courtesy: CBH Group*

## Measuring what matters – Mutual Value Framework

To articulate the full contribution of cooperatives and mutuals beyond financial metrics, the BCCM and Monash University developed the Mutual Value Framework, the world's first accredited framework for assessing total mutual value. Ten cooperatives in Australia and the UK have already achieved Mutual Value Accreditation, linking business purpose to measurable outcomes for members and communities. Andrew Haigh, CEO of the UK's Newcastle Building



*At the Newcastle Building Society AGM, Melina presented the Mutual Value Accreditation certificate as leaders reaffirmed their purpose and commitment to members and communities.*

Society, describes its impact: "Because mutuals exist for their members, commitment to a purpose-led approach with absolute clarity about what it aims to deliver for customers can work to great effect. The Mutual Value Framework has become a valuable strategic tool – helping us articulate our ambition, align our leadership, and provide a common language for value creation. That's what we call being powered by purpose."

By integrating mutual value into governance and reporting, cooperatives can better demonstrate how their decisions generate long-term social and economic benefit – a foundation for sustainable growth.

## Doing Business Together – reconciliation through cooperation

The Doing Business Together project builds partnerships between First Nations and non-Indigenous cooperatives, guided by the BCCM's Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) – the first sector-wide RAP in Australia. The initiative supports more than 200 existing First Nations cooperatives and mutuals and encourages collaboration through joint ventures, mentoring and procurement partnerships.

Rohan Mead, Chair of BCCM, notes: "We recognise that reconciliation is a journey that requires ongoing learning, reflection and action, and that it involves working collaboratively and respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to address the ongoing impacts of colonisation."

Melina Morrison, BCCM CEO, adds: "Since formation, the BCCM has worked to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cooperatives and mutuals. Our vision for reconciliation is that the broader cooperative and mutual sector works together with First Nations cooperatives and mutuals to create a future where First Nations peoples are valued and respected as the First Peoples of Australia, and where their cultures, knowledge and histories are recognised and celebrated."



*Mary Nirlungayuk, Uncle Ray Minniecon and Mark Love speak on empowering Indigenous communities at 2023 BCCM Leaders' Summit. Photo: Daryl Charles.*

## **ESG Community of Practice – leading with integrity**

The BCCM's ESG Community of Practice (CoP) brings together cooperative and mutual leaders to strengthen their sustainability and governance performance. The 2024–25 program featured global experts including Dr Victoria Hurth, Colin Melvin, Heidi Hauf and Jessica Wegener, exploring how ESG principles can be embedded within member-owned enterprises.

As BCCM's ESG leader Peter Watts cautions, sustainability communication must be authentic and evidence-based: "One welcome trend in the sustainability world has been the growing awareness of greenwashing. Cooperatives and mutuals have a natural advantage – they're already community-accountable – but transparency remains vital. Avoiding vague claims and ensuring third-party verification protects both our reputations and the trust our members place in us."



*Peter Watts*

To articulate the full contribution of cooperatives and mutuals beyond financial metrics, the BCCM and Monash University developed the Mutual Value Framework, the world's first accredited framework for assessing total mutual value. Ten cooperatives in Australia and the UK have already achieved Mutual Value Accreditation, linking business purpose to measurable outcomes for members and communities.

Through peer learning, shared frameworks and the Cooperative and Mutual Climate Commitment, this program is helping Australian cooperatives lead the transition to a low-carbon, values-driven economy.

## **Cooperatives and mutuals build a better world**

As the world marks the United Nations International Year of Cooperatives 2025, themed "Cooperatives and mutuals build a better world," Australia's cooperative and mutual sector is demonstrating this principle in practice.

From Care Together's new community co-ops to Bunya Fund projects revitalising rural towns, to organisations using MVM to measure their social impact, advancing reconciliation through Doing Business Together, and championing sustainable governance through the ESG Community of Practice, each initiative reflects a shared commitment to fairness, resilience and long-term prosperity. These efforts show how collective ownership and collaboration can bridge divides, empower communities and deliver lasting change – proving that cooperatives and mutuals truly do build a better world.



*The BCCM Icons Campaign is a year-long celebration of cooperatives during the IYC, using BCCM and IYC logos across platforms to promote cooperation.*

During the International Year of Cooperatives 2025, the BCCM has been showcasing co-ops and mutuals throughout Australia with two campaigns. The BCCM Icons campaign is a year-long celebration of the inspiring stories, achievements and impact of Australian co-operatives and mutuals. Through social media and our website, we are spotlighting icons that exemplify the co-operative spirit, proving that together, we build a better world. This campaign was amplified at three Icons events for parliamentary representatives and co-op and mutual stakeholders throughout the year. Through our Power of Co campaign, launching late October, we've worked with leaders to develop a social media campaign to get the message of cooperation out more widely. Proudly led by the BCCM, these campaigns shine a light on Australia's role in advancing the co-operative and mutual model.

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## COOPERATIVES AS CATALYSTS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN JORDAN

*Abdelfattah Al-Shalabi / Director General of the Jordan Cooperative Corporation*

The decision of the United Nations to declare 2025 as the International Year of Cooperatives, under the slogan "Cooperatives Build a Better World", for the second time after 2012, reaffirms the importance of cooperatives in the development process and their effective contribution to making a difference on the human level, moving people from a difficult lived reality to greater prosperity and well-being, and fostering a sense of both economic and social security.

As a development tool, cooperatives contribute to lifting marginalized and poor communities from a state of stagnation towards a productive economic cycle, decision-making, decent livelihoods, better work, justice for all, eradicating poverty and hunger to achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

For it is the human being who constitutes the central focus of this United Nations resolution, which aims at raising awareness and deepening the cooperative identity in local communities.

### Cooperatives in Jordan: A Developmental Vision

The Jordan Cooperative Corporation (JCC), a member of the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), views cooperatives as a vital mechanism to address poverty and unemployment in the region.

The Government of Jordan continues to reaffirm its commitment to supporting the cooperative movement as a key driver of inclusive and sustainable development, enhancing productivity, improving living standards, creating jobs, and protecting the environment.

As envisioned by His Majesty King Abdullah II, cooperatives act as incubators for entrepreneurship and innovation, working alongside the public and private sectors to build a stronger, more resilient Jordan.

### A Seven-Decade Journey of Cooperative Growth

It is necessary, in this article, to highlight the cooperative movement's journey in Jordan, and to reflect the historical milestones, whether on the legislation, education, training to strengthen the cooperative system in local communities and facilitate their communication with donor and lending institutions.

However, it should be noted that Jordan's journey in cooperative work extends back more than seven decades, beginning with the issuance of the first Cooperative Law in 1952, followed by the establishment of the first Agricultural Savings and Credit Cooperative in 1953, the Central Cooperative Union in the late 1950s, the Jordon Cooperative Organization in 1968, and the Cooperative Bank in 1970, including the establishment of the Jordan Cooperative Corporation by a decision of the Council of Ministers in 1997 as the legal successor of the Organization followed by the launch of the national Strategy for the Jordanian Cooperative Movement (2021–2025) in partnership with the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 2021, with the aim of development the cooperative sector, modernizing the legislative environment, and introducing new establishments; the Cooperative Development Fund and the Cooperative Development Institute to enhance cooperative movement. Finally, the issuance of the Cooperatives Law No. (13) of 2025, and the release of the commemorative stamp in celebration of the International Year of Cooperatives.



Displayed above is commemorative postage stamp marking IYC2025 by Jordan Post Company, Jordan

## Inclusivity and Social Empowerment

All practices are designed to broaden the participation of Jordanians in cooperative field including persons with disabilities. Cooperatives provide a strategic platform to confront pressing societal needs, such as youth unemployment, limited economic participation of women, including the improvement of living standards, and access to adequate housing.

In recognition of its vital role, Jordan Cooperative Corporation outlined its vision towards enhancing cooperative work and acting diligently to foster a cooperative culture rooted in self-reliance, collective effort concerning inclusive and sustainable development. Cooperatives have emerged as a key driver in empowering communities and responding to the growing need for resilient, sustainable participatory models that uphold the principles of equity and democratic governance.



## Facts and Figures: The Cooperative Landscape in Jordan

There are 1,477 cooperatives in Jordan, agricultural, women, youth, multi-purpose, tourism, housing, and handicraft, 24% of which are agricultural, creating over 25,000 permanent jobs especially in rural, desert, and peripheral areas, along with thousands of agricultural opportunities. Cooperators exceed 132,000 including 30,000 women.

Cooperatives contribute to achieving the 17 UN-SDGs, such as eliminating poverty and hunger, unemployment, driving economic growth, providing decent work, promoting gender equality, supporting innovation and entrepreneurship, empowering cooperators economically, reinforcing the principles of participation and democracy in election process, reducing economic and social disparities, enhancing social justice, preventing the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a limited groups and strengthening food security besides fortifying human values, social cohesion, self-responsibility, demonstrating resilience and flexibility in times of crisis as in COVID-19 pandemic proving ability to adapt and to ensure the supply chains.

## Economic, Social, Cultural, and Environmental Dimensions

It is worth noting that cooperatives are not only economic and social structures; but incubators of entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation as one of the key drivers in addressing various economic, social, cultural, and environmental challenges. Therefore, cooperatives act as a strategic option to achieve the interests of countries, cooperative members in the local communities.

As for the economic perspective, cooperatives work as a true engine of growth, contributing to job creation in agriculture field, food processing, handicrafts, services and strengthening food security system. On the other hand, cooperatives work socially in improving the principles of democracy, equality, participation, spreading cooperative values and thinking, and strengthening concepts of social solidarity achieving more cohesive and just societies, women and youth empowerment to take part in decision-making and management, combating poverty and improving members' living standards. Cooperatives, on cultural level, contribute to preserving the national identity and cultural heritage of Jordanian society by implementing traditional and folk handicraft and productive kitchen projects, and promoting community culture and traditions.

To help address environmental challenges, agricultural cooperatives work effectively through spreading environmental awareness among youth, adopting environmentally friendly practices such as organic and hydroponic farming, and modern irrigation methods, besides launching voluntary initiatives to organize plant reforestation, protect biodiversity, recycle and convert waste, and producing energy.

Jordan is very scarce in water resources, rainfall and rising temperatures due to climate change. Consequently, the country faces a grain reduction rate and an increased reliance on food imports.

To face such challenges, efforts were made on cooperative level to mitigate the negative environmental impacts affecting people's lives and food security system.

To address such challenges, in partnership with the National Agricultural Research Center, Jordan Cooperative Corporation has worked to produce improved drought-resistant varieties of wheat and barley seeds through the Seed Multiplication Project given the decline in annual rainfall, providing field crops to farmers annually each planting season at government-subsidized prices. Moreover, cooperation continues between both parties on developing and producing new types of improved seeds more resilient to the repercussions to climate change.



## Showcasing Successful Cooperative Models

It is worth pointing out that cooperatives adopt sustainable practices in Jordan and set a model of success building a better future for members of local communities.

In the context, the Jordan Cooperative Corporation has supported the establishment of youth and women's cooperatives active of hydroponics, modern irrigation, paper and plastics recycling, digital marketing, integrating people with disabilities which networks more sustainable economic, social, and environmental development practices. Many of those cooperatives have outlined a genuine success iconizing an aspiring journey crowned with achievements.

**Agricultural Engineers' Cooperative (Al Muhandis Al Zira'y):** established by a group of agricultural engineers in northern Jordan (the Northern Jordan Valley), has implemented projects in hydroponics and fish farming, creating employment opportunities for dozens of unemployed in an area classified as a poverty pocket.

**Tubneh Cooperative in the Koura District/Irbid:** established an environmental project to produce organic fertilizer from animal waste and recycle paper and cardboard collected from schools to be converted into other products, providing jobs for women in the local community.



**The Waste Recycling Cooperative in Irbid:** Established a regulatory framework for waste collectors, enabling more than 1000 workers to issue official permits to work in cooperation with the relevant authorities, especially the municipality, providing social protection and training, and integrating them into the organized economy.

**Kufr Som Pomegranate Producers Cooperative/Irbid:** organizes the interests of pomegranate farmers, empowers local women and Syrian refugees, economically and practically, through continuous training on cooperative work concepts and workshops on food manufacturing and smart agricultural practices.

**Iraq Al-Amir Women Cooperative/Amman:** a pioneering model in utilizing natural resources, producing paper and soap, creating jobs for more than 150 families, empowering women economically and socially, strengthening the concept of home economics, and consolidating environmental awareness.

**Beit Al Ward Women Cooperative/Aqaba:** a pioneering model for attracting tourists to the coastal city, integrating people with disabilities into the handicrafts industry.

Tourism and agricultural cooperatives are evidence to the partnership of local communities in managing natural resources and established projects in Dhana, Mujib, Humayma, Wadi Rum, and the Disi Basin investing local resources and harnessing the stunning nature effectively through constructing eco-lodges or adopting tourist routes taking into account nature conservation highlighting beauty of nature and rich heritage, not to mention the biodiversity and ecosystems.

Housing cooperatives have no less significance economically and socially within the development process in Jordan. They are considered an ideal option for low- and middle-income families given the high cost of real estate. This type is a practical solution promoting collective work, framing the purchasing power of cooperative members to buy land to build a house or own a residential apartment at affordable prices.

## Looking Ahead: Cooperatives in Jordan

In conclusion, the cooperative movement represents a significant economic pillar and contribution to achieving sustainable development goals worldwide. Consequently, it is vital to combine all efforts among countries, increase cooperation, develop methodologies, and strengthen partnerships at all levels. This will positively reflect on the development of our cooperative societies, leading to prosperous cooperatives and a better world.

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## COOPERATIVE IDENTITY IN ACTION: MALAYSIA'S COOPERATIVE MODELS BUILDING INCLUSIVE FUTURES

*Datuk Seri Dr. Abdul Fattah Abdullah, President of ANGKASA*

### Introduction: From National Strength to Regional Inspiration

The International Year of Cooperatives 2025 carries the global theme “Cooperatives Build a Better World”. For Malaysia, this moment is both celebratory and reflective, offering the chance to showcase how its cooperative movement—anchored by ANGKASA, the national apex body—has transformed local communities and inspired regional counterparts.

Malaysia's success rests on three distinct yet complementary cooperative models: school cooperatives, mosque community-based cooperatives, and halal ecosystem cooperatives. Each embodies the Cooperative Identity—notably Principle 5 (Education, Training and Information), Principle 6 (Cooperation among Cooperatives), and Principle 7 (Concern for Community)—not as abstract ideals but as lived practices shaping economic, cultural and social landscapes.

These models are no longer confined within Malaysian borders. Through deliberate sharing and adaptation, they are being introduced in neighbouring countries, where they are empowering marginalised groups, strengthening social solidarity, and creating pathways for inclusive development.

### Principle 5 in Action: Educating through School Cooperatives

Education lies at the heart of Malaysia's cooperative identity. Since their establishment in the 1660s, school cooperatives have become a defining feature of the Malaysian cooperative landscape. Today, more than 2,400 school cooperatives operate across the country, making Malaysia the only nation in the world where virtually every secondary school has a cooperative unit.

These school cooperatives serve as laboratories of democracy and enterprise. Students not only learn business management and financial literacy, but also internalise cooperative values—democracy, equity, and solidarity—at an early age. They manage small-scale businesses, from stationery supplies to canteens, and reinvest profits in school and community projects. This early exposure nurtures a new generation of cooperative leaders who see cooperation not just as theory, but as practice.

Critically, the school cooperative model is more than a training ground. It addresses structural issues in education by enhancing students' access to affordable goods and services, providing financial support for school activities, and embedding social responsibility through student-led initiatives.

The global relevance of this model is clear. In an era where youth often feel alienated from governance structures, school cooperatives demonstrate how active participation can be fostered through practical, values-driven engagement. This is Cooperative Identity in Action, shaping economically empowered and socially responsible citizens.



*Students at MRSM Transkrian learn cooperative entrepreneurship by running this laundry service for their school community.*

### Principle 6 in Action: Cooperation among Cooperatives through Mosque Community Cooperative

If schools embody Principle 5, mosque community-based cooperatives illustrate Principle 6—Cooperation among Cooperatives—in tangible and inclusive ways. Malaysia's experience demonstrates how faith-based institutions can serve as platforms for socio-economic empowerment, while remaining accessible across communities.

Through mosque cooperatives, local communities have access to affordable daily goods, micro-financing, and social services. ANGKASA's approach deliberately integrates Islamic social finance instruments such as zakat (alms) and infaq (voluntary contributions), directing these resources into cooperative development.

This synergy has created hybrid institutions that combine spiritual values with cooperative practices, proving that economic empowerment and religious institutions can work hand in hand.

Regional replication has been significant. In 2023, ANGKASA extended support to mosque cooperatives in the Philippines, channelling RM100,000 (USD 23,600) to cooperatives in Bulacan, Quezon City, and Mindanao. These funds enabled infrastructure upgrades, the acquisition of freezers for small-scale businesses, and the adoption of innovative urban farming technologies such as aquaponics. Similarly, in Cambodia, a programme was launched to coordinate zakat and infaq funds for school and mosque cooperatives, enhancing access to affordable goods and supporting women and youth entrepreneurs.



*Koperasi Kariah Masjid Bandar Sri Aman runs a hydroponic and fertigation farm, showing how mosque-based cooperatives can support local food systems and create livelihoods.*

These experiences demonstrate how Malaysia's model travels well: adaptable to diverse cultural and religious contexts, yet rooted in the same cooperative principles of solidarity, equity, and mutual aid. They also prove that cooperation among cooperatives is not just national but regional, strengthening ASEAN's cooperative ecosystem.

### **Principle 7 in Action: Concern for Community through Halal Ecosystem Development**

The third pillar of Malaysia's cooperative identity in action is the halal cooperative ecosystem. This model embodies Principle 7, "Concern for Community," by linking economic empowerment with cultural identity and ethical business practices. In January 2025, ANGKASA marked a milestone with the launch of a partnership with the Halal Cooperative Vietnam (COOPHVN) Halal Store and Restaurant in Hanoi, in collaboration with local partners.

The initiative not only provides halal food services but also creates employment opportunities and strengthens the inclusion of Muslim communities in Vietnam's socio-economic fabric. By doing so, it demonstrates how cooperatives can operationalize concern for community in multicultural contexts, fostering dignity and participation among minority groups.

The halal cooperative model has far-reaching implications: it provides reliable platforms for small-scale entrepreneurs to participate in halal supply chains, enhances food security and ethical consumption practices, and strengthens inter-cooperative collaboration by linking production, distribution, and retail within cooperative networks.

By sharing this model with regional partners, Malaysia is expanding the scope of cooperative action, showing how local roots can achieve global reach.

### **Critical Reflections: Identity as Compass, Not Slogan**

While Malaysia's cooperative models provide inspiring case studies, critical reflection is essential to avoid romanticising them. Three key challenges emerge:

- Sustainability of Funding Models: Reliance on zakat and infaq can be limiting if not matched by sustainable cooperative income streams. Ensuring financial independence while maintaining social impact is a delicate balance.
- Governance and Participation: School and mosque cooperatives face risks of elite capture or token participation if democratic processes are not consistently safeguarded. In Malaysia, the collective partnerships built by ANGKASA with relevant stakeholders help to strengthen the structure of the two models. Countries adopting the models must understand that building robust governance frameworks remains crucial.
- Scaling with Integrity: As models are exported regionally, adaptation to local contexts must preserve cooperative identity. The temptation to prioritise rapid growth over cooperative principles could undermine long-term impact.

These reflections highlight why Cooperative Identity matters. Principles 5, 6, and 7 are not rhetorical devices but practical compasses guiding cooperatives through complex realities. By consistently applying them, Malaysia demonstrates that cooperatives can be both economically viable and socially transformative.

## Conclusion

Malaysia's cooperative story is one of innovation, replication, and identity in action. School cooperatives nurture a generation of values-driven citizens. Mosque community cooperatives demonstrate the power of solidarity across borders. Halal cooperative ecosystems expand the boundaries of inclusion, embedding cultural values in economic life.

Together, these models show how cooperative principles can move from slogans to lived practice, proving that the Cooperative Identity is a tool for transformation. By sharing these experiences with regional partners in the Philippines, Cambodia, Vietnam, and beyond, Malaysia affirms its commitment to the global cooperative vision: building a world that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient.

As the International Year of Cooperatives 2025 unfolds, Malaysia's contribution offers a clear lesson: when cooperative identity is put into action, it not only strengthens local communities but also builds bridges across cultures and borders. In doing so, it demonstrates that cooperatives are not just economic entities—they are architects of a better world.

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## COOPERATIVES IN IRAN; BUILDING A BETTER SOCIETY THROUGH SOLIDARITY AND SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

*Ali Reza Banaeifar, Iran Chamber of Cooperatives (ICC)*



*Women Artisans of Golbarg-e-Zendegi women's cooperative*

### Introduction

In Iran, cooperation is not a new idea, it is an ancient way of life. Long before modern cooperative laws or ministries existed, communities in Iran practiced *ta'avon* (mutual aid) as part of daily living. Neighbors shared harvests, helped build each other's homes, and pooled resources during times of hardship. The spirit of collective support runs deep in Persian culture, reflected in proverbs, poetry, and local customs that value unity and shared purpose.

Today, as the world celebrates the 2025 International Year of Cooperatives under the theme "Cooperatives Build a Better World," Iran's cooperative movement stands as a living testament to how collaboration can shape not only economies but societies. Across villages, towns, and cities, cooperatives are helping people reclaim agency, dignity, and connection. They are creating jobs, yes — but they are also building trust, equality, and belonging in a world that needs all three more than ever.

### Empowering Communities: Cooperation as a Social Engine

The story of Iranian cooperatives begins in the heart of communities — among people who see cooperation not as charity but as shared responsibility. In the lush farmlands of Mazandaran Province, the Tavon Sabz-e-Shomai cooperative brings together small-scale farmers who once worked in isolation. By pooling savings and sharing tools, they built a collective irrigation system that transformed hundreds of hectares of farmland. What began as a practical partnership evolved into a social movement.

"We used to compete for water," says Ahmad, a farmer in his fifties, smiling as he watches the canal flow. "Now we plan, plant, and sell together. The cooperative taught us that we're not rivals — we're partners." In Isfahan, a teachers' housing cooperative turned an unused plot into a thriving neighborhood complete with green spaces and community centers. "We voted on everything," recalls Zahra, one of the founding members.

"The process took time, but what we built is more than a housing complex — it's a family." During the COVID-19 pandemic, cooperatives became beacons of resilience. The Mehr-e-Ta'avon consumer cooperative in Lorestan mobilized volunteers to deliver essential goods to hundreds of households. "We didn't wait for help — we helped each other," said one member, echoing a sentiment shared across the country.

From remote villages to industrial cities, Iranian cooperatives continue to act as social engines — connecting people, nurturing empathy, and strengthening the bonds that hold communities together.

### Inclusion and Empowerment: Women, Youth, and Marginalized Voices

The most transformative force of Iran's cooperative movement lies in inclusion — empowering those who have often been left behind.

### Women: From Participants to Leaders

In the sunlit villages of Kerman, the Golbarg-e-Zendegi women's cooperative began in 2015 with just 20 members seeking income from embroidery. Today, it employs over 150 artisans.

The cooperative also provides literacy training, financial education, and childcare — giving women the foundation for long-term empowerment. "Before, we worked alone at home. No one knew our names," says Fatemeh, one of the founders. "Now we have our own workshop, our own income, and our daughters see us as entrepreneurs."

In Gilan and Lorestan, similar cooperatives have blossomed around dairy production, beekeeping, and eco-tourism — proving that cooperation can turn traditional skills into sustainable social enterprises.

## Youth: Innovation with Purpose

For Iran's younger generation, cooperatives are a bridge between creativity and community impact. In Tehran, the Navin Tech Ta'avon youth cooperative connects programmers, designers, and start-ups to small businesses seeking digital transformation. By blending purpose and innovation, these youth are redefining what social enterprise means in the digital age. "We wanted a business that doesn't just chase profit but helps people grow together," explains Reza, a 26-year-old co-founder.

## Marginalized Communities: Dignity Through Self-Reliance

In Kurdistan and Sistan-Baluchestan, cooperatives are reclaiming social dignity for indigenous and underrepresented groups. The Zhivar Women's Cooperative teaches traditional weaving while introducing modern marketing and e-commerce. "Every carpet tells our story," says Shirin, a weaver from Sanandaj. "It's not just a product — it's our pride and our independence." Through such stories, Iranian cooperatives demonstrate that inclusion is not a slogan — it's a lived reality that changes families, neighborhoods, and futures.

## The Cooperative Identity: Social Justice, Culture, and the Future

At the heart of every Iranian cooperative lies a shared moral compass: *ta'avon bar adl* — cooperation based on fairness. This principle has guided the movement's growth, ensuring that social justice remains its foundation.

## Social Justice and Fair Access

Across Iran, cooperatives provide ethical alternatives to profit-driven systems. In Yazd, the Etemad Housing Cooperative helps teachers and public workers achieve home ownership through transparent cost-sharing and open voting. "It's not charity — it's fairness," says Ali, a member. "We build together, and we all benefit equally." In Khuzestan, agricultural cooperatives empower small farmers to negotiate fair prices, while savings cooperatives in Tehran provide equitable access to finance. Each initiative turns fairness into something tangible — a daily practice, not an abstract goal.

## Culture and Creativity in Cooperation

Iran's cooperatives are also cultural institutions. In Tabriz, the Honar-e-Ta'avoni network connects young artists with veteran craftsmen to produce traditional ceramics and calligraphy for global markets. "The old masters teach us patience," says Leyla, a 30-year-old artist.



*Artisans of Honar-e-Ta'avoni Cooperative in Tabriz collaborate to merge traditional design with modern marketing.*

"We teach them digital marketing. That's real cooperation." Similarly, in Yazd, textile cooperatives are reviving natural dyes and sustainable production, linking environmental awareness with cultural preservation. These efforts ensure that Iran's heritage remains not only alive but relevant to a modern, interconnected world.

## Education and the Future

In the sunlit villages of Kerman, the Golbarg-e-Zendegi women's cooperative began in 2015 with just 20 members seeking income from embroidery. Today, it employs over 150 artisans.

Education remains the backbone of the cooperative identity — the bridge that connects Iran's proud cooperative heritage with its ambitious future. Across the country, partnerships between universities, vocational centers, and cooperative unions are cultivating not only technical skills but the mindset of participation and shared responsibility. Young Iranians are learning that democracy is not confined to politics — it can live in everyday decision-making, in the governance of their own enterprises, and in how they choose to build their communities.

Through these initiatives, the Iran Youth Cooperative Network has emerged as a national hub for innovation and collective learning. It brings together students, start-up founders, and rural youth to exchange ideas on sustainability, water conservation, and digital inclusion. Mentorship programs organized under the cooperative model teach practical leadership — how to listen, compromise, and act for the common good.

At the University of Tehran and Sharif University of Technology, courses on cooperative management and social entrepreneurship are gaining traction. Professors describe how students trained in this model approach problems differently — they ask, "How can we grow together?" rather than "How can I get ahead?"

This subtle shift represents the true power of cooperative education: it transforms competition into collaboration and ambition into collective progress.

As Iran faces modern challenges — from climate change to youth unemployment — education will continue to shape the cooperative movement's renewal. The next generation of Iranian cooperators is being taught not just to run businesses, but to build communities grounded in trust, justice, and sustainability. In their hands, ta'avon is not an old tradition; it is a dynamic philosophy for the future.

### **Building a Better Iran, Together**

The story of Iran's cooperatives is, at its heart, the story of human connection — of people choosing unity over isolation, trust over fear, and purpose over profit. It is the story of farmers who turned competition into collaboration, transforming water-scarce lands into fields of shared abundance. It is the story of women who wove confidence into culture, proving that empowerment begins the moment voices are heard. It is the story of young Iranians who took innovation out of the classroom and into their communities, turning technology into a tool for inclusion and hope.

Each cooperative — whether in a mountain village surrounded by walnut groves, a small fishing town along the Caspian coast, or a vibrant suburb of Tehran — stands as a living testament to a simple truth: progress grows deepest when it grows together.

In these spaces, cooperation is not an abstract principle but a daily practice — a handshake between generations, a shared decision made around a wooden table, a promise that no one will be left behind.

As Iran joins the world in celebrating the 2025 International Year of Cooperatives, its movement carries a message that transcends borders:

### **To build a better world, we must first build better relationships**

The strength of a society is measured not by its wealth, but by its willingness to share it; not by the power of a few, but by the participation of many.

In every shared workshop, in every democratic vote, and in every act of mutual aid, the people of Iran are proving that ta'avon — cooperation — is more than a policy or a program. It is an enduring expression of humanity's best self:

The belief that together, we can create not only a better Iran, but a better world.



*Members of a rural cooperative in Lorestan share a meal after a community meeting — a symbol of solidarity and shared purpose.*

## FROM CAMPUS TO COMMUNITY: JAPANESE UNIVERSITY CO-OPS' INITIATIVES FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

*Tatsuya Nakajima, Managing Director, National Federation of University Co-operative Associations (NFUCA)*

### The Role and Challenges of University Co-ops as Workplace-based Co-ops

*Do university co-ops exist only on campus? In what ways do they engage with local society?*

Across countries, welfare services on university and junior college campuses are organized in diverse ways: operated directly by universities, delivered by public agencies (for national and public institutions), or outsourced to private firms. In Japan, many such services are provided by university co-ops organized under the cooperative model.

Japanese university co-ops are established by law as *shokuiki seikyō* (workplace-based cooperatives), with the university defined as the workplace. Membership is limited to people affiliated with the institution, and business activities are generally confined to campus. This framework orients co-ops toward improving members' cultural and economic life within the university. As membership-based entities, they are effectively closed to outsiders and can become inward-looking, paying relatively little attention to community issues. Yet it is unrealistic for university co-ops to remain detached from society. Students and faculty are already social actors, and universities themselves are embedded in their localities. Campus and community are, in practice, interdependent.

### University Co-ops and Engagement with Social Issues

Most university co-op members are students and graduate students—young people who are citizens before they are co-op members. Unsurprisingly, their interests extend beyond campus boundaries. A long-standing example is the peace movement, notably the Peace Now! campaign calling for a world without nuclear weapons, sustained for over 40 years by member engagement. More recently, the climate crisis has galvanized concern, reflecting the generational composition of co-op membership.

These activities show that students, graduate students, and faculty are not merely consumers of services but socially aware stakeholders who care about issues around their universities. In workplace-based co-ops, many initiatives arise from members themselves.

The International Year of Cooperatives stresses that co-ops should promote participation in local communities, help eradicate hunger and poverty, and include and support socially vulnerable people. This expectation applies not only to organizations but to members today. However, workplace-based co-ops are often seen—and often see themselves—as “closed organizations,” a view shared by staff as well as members. At the same time, relative poverty has become a serious issue in Japan, along with children’s poverty, loneliness, stress, and unequal access to education and experiences. One community response is the *kodomo shokudō* (children’s cafeteria): local initiatives offering meals and safe spaces for children in need, traditionally run by NPOs, social welfare corporations, religious organizations, and community co-ops. This article highlights university student initiatives that, working through university co-ops and leveraging campus facilities, human resources, and space, provide warm meals and safe places for local children—the “children’s cafeteria.”

### A Student-led Children’s Cafeteria and the University Co-op Collaboration Model: The University of Tokyo Co-op



*Children, student members of OIKOS Todai, and university co-op volunteers share lunch together at the University of Tokyo Cafeteria during a “Children’s Cafeteria” event on July 19, 2025.*

The University of Tokyo Co-op organized children's cafeteria events on June 28 and July 19, 2025, after receiving a single student email. A third-year student ("Student A") had spent three months in Greece observing food banks and soup kitchens supporting people facing economic and psychological hardship. Although Greece and Japan differ in context, he was struck by how communities upheld well-being through mutual support. On returning to Japan, he sought ways to address children's poverty, loneliness, stress, and unequal opportunities. He gathered ten like-minded students, consulted university support offices, and secured faculty cooperation. In April 2025, the student group OIKOS Todai was formed.

OIKOS Todai framed the children's cafeteria as community contribution, recognizing the campus as part of the local neighborhood. Their choice of the student cafeteria responded to national challenges facing children's cafeterias: limited space, aging organizers, and staff shortages. Students proposed mobilizing their own energy while using campus as a community hub.

The Hongo Campus student cafeteria is operated by the co-op under a welfare services contract with the university, using facilities leased from the institution. Because the cafeteria primarily serves university members, OIKOS Todai first sought and obtained official university approval. Early proposals were refined to meet operational reality and safety standards. An initial idea—to use a closed-day cafeteria with co-op staff preparing a fixed number of lunches—proved impractical due to staffing shortages. A second proposal—to let students bring ingredients and use the kitchen—raised food safety concerns and was rejected. Through further discussion, a workable model emerged: on Saturdays, participants would eat the same meals provided to university members during normal operations, then move to a closed section of the dining hall for activities. This approach ensured food safety and minimized operational burdens while allowing meaningful engagement.

The first event, held on June 28, 2025, hosted 11 children supported by 15 student volunteers; the second, on July 19, drew 30 children and 17 volunteers. Participants ranged from elementary to senior high school. From August 2025, the project became a regular activity held twice a month, with an average of 15 children and 10 students per session.



A reserved sign marks the "Children and Youth Cafeteria" table at the University of Tokyo Co-op, highlighting its role as a welcoming space for children, students, and volunteers.

Event days followed a simple rhythm: meet at 11:00 a.m., share lunch at 11:30, then move to the adjacent Agriculture Faculty area for activities until 4:00 p.m. Activities included drawing, origami, tag, table tennis, guitar, and board and card games. High school students sought study and career advice from university students—a unique strength of the program. Laboratories in the Agriculture Faculty also offered a small garden plot where children grew tomatoes, cucumbers, and watermelons, adding hands-on food education.

Children and student volunteers enjoy a gardening activity together after sharing lunch at the University of Tokyo's "Children's Cafeteria," adding hands-on food education to the day's program.

In short, the initiative became a model of student-driven community contribution, combining OIKOS Todai's energy with university facilities, space, and co-op meal services without overburdening any party. With public support covering meal costs at 700 yen per child, OIKOS Todai committed to continuing twice-monthly sessions and hopes to expand the model to other co-op campuses nationwide.



Children and student volunteers enjoy a gardening activity after lunch at the University of Tokyo's "Children's Cafeteria," adding hands-on food education to the day.

## A Pioneering Case of University Co-ops and Community Collaboration in Hokkaido

The Hokkaido Consumers' Co-operative Union (Hokkaido Co-op Union) is a federated body comprising local co-ops, university co-ops, and mutual-aid co-ops across Hokkaido. Long active on community issues such as consumer rights and peace, the Union has recently focused on initiatives that combine student support with community engagement.

COVID-19 severely impacted student life. An NFUCA survey in July 2021 identified three crises: an economic crisis as restaurant closures erased part-time jobs and income; a learning crisis as online classes raised concerns about educational effectiveness; and a connection crisis as about 30% of first-year students reported having fewer than five friends.

Responding to a request from RENGO Hokkaido (the regional Japanese Trade Union Confederation), the Hokkaido Co-op Union partnered with the Workers' Welfare Council and the University Co-op Business Federation to launch the Hokkaido Youth Support Project. In 2021, donations from individuals and companies across Hokkaido funded food assistance for around 16,000 students.



*Volunteers at Hokkaido University hand food assistance packages to students in need*

A 2022 follow-up survey showed persistent difficulties in building real-life connections and gaining diverse experiences. The project shifted toward creating participation opportunities in local communities, especially responding to the shortage of volunteers at children's cafeterias.

After consultations with Hokusei Gakuen University, Hokkaido University, and Tenshi University, the project secured support to frame participation as student growth. An online information session in December 2022 drew about 50 students; 21 formally joined.

In January 2023, the Hokkaido Youth Support Student Project launched; by April, partnerships with children's cafeterias were established and another 30 students joined, bringing the total to 50. Students volunteered four times a month for four hours (4:00–8:00 p.m.), assisting with meal preparation, study support, and interaction with children—motivated by personal development rather than financial reward.

As one participant reflected, "I started out wanting to create a place for children, but before I knew it, it became my place as well." Children's cafeterias functioned as intergenerational spaces while giving students meaningful social experiences. By March 2025, requests had expanded to 18 sites.

The project produced an explanatory video and established an online entry system, enabling participation from 102 students across 24 universities, colleges, and high schools in Hokkaido. Initially, the Union handled recruitment, publicity, and coordination; the project is now moving toward student-led management.

Two features were crucial. First, the federated structure enabled swift, region-wide collaboration with labor and welfare organizations. Second, the Union's secretary general—who had prior experience in university co-ops—brought practical knowledge of student circumstances, building trust and translating goals into workable arrangements that bridged campus and community.

## **The Importance of Collaboration and Awareness for the Future of Co-ops**

These two cases share a starting point: member initiative and expectations. Both also illustrate that collaboration is essential.

Organizations with long histories often rely on internal resources—a strength that can become inertia when external contexts shift. Collaboration requires opening to partners—universities, labor federations, welfare bodies, civic groups—and co-designing roles and safeguards. The University of Tokyo case shows how constraints (staffing, food safety) can generate an operational model that is both safe and sustainable. The Hokkaido case demonstrates how federated capacity and bridging leadership can scale participation across institutions.

Identity work also matters. Whether co-ops are regarded as reliable partners in solving social issues depends not only on external perceptions but on how members themselves view their co-ops. If workplace-based co-ops see themselves only as service vendors for members, collaboration will be sporadic. If they also see themselves as member-governed institutions embedded in communities, collaboration becomes integral to their mission.

The challenges of our time—climate change, food insecurity, conflict, and poverty—are complex and interdependent. No single co-op can address them alone; they demand solidarity across boundaries. Within their mandates, workplace-based co-ops can still innovate: schedule programs during normal operations, secure formal approvals, clarify responsibilities, and use transparent costing. Public subsidies can support accessibility without distorting co-op finances.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, member awareness is decisive. Members carry multiple roles—students, workers, family members, neighbors—and are the living bridge between campus and community. The awareness and actions of co-op leaders and staff—overcoming inertia, listening to members, and supporting their initiatives—will shape the cooperative movement's contribution to a sustainable, inclusive society.

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• Based on the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's (MEXT) 2024 School Basic Survey (as of May 1, 2024), as of April 2025 there are 813 four-year universities in Japan (including graduate universities) and 297 junior colleges.

• The breakdown is as follows: 85 national universities, 118 public universities (including 15 junior colleges), and 907 private universities (including 282 junior colleges).

• Among these, 79 of the 85 national universities (including 4 technical colleges) have 78 university co-ops. Of the 118 public universities, 43 (including 1 technical college) have 40 co-ops. Among private universities, 100 out of 907 institutions (including 4 vocational schools) have 87 co-ops.

• In addition, there are 5 intercollegiate co-ops in 5 prefectures that serve students enrolled in universities within those prefectures.

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## BUILDING FROM THE GROUND UP: HOW COOPERATIVES IN SRI LANKA ARE DRIVING INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

*Dr. Asanka Thilakarathna, CEO, NCCSL, Sri Lanka*

In January 2025, Sri Lanka joined the global celebration of the United Nations International Year of Cooperatives (IYC 2025) under the theme "Cooperatives Build a Better World." The recognition highlights the enduring contribution of cooperatives to inclusive economic, social, and cultural development.

For Sri Lanka, the cooperative movement has long been more than an economic model — it has been a social force woven into the nation's history. From the first thrift and credit societies that supported farmers in the early 1900s to today's technology-driven enterprises, cooperatives have empowered generations by ensuring that development begins and belongs within the community.

According to the Department of Co-operative Development (DCD, 2023), Sri Lanka has 9,289 registered cooperative societies, including 9,098 primary (village-level) societies, serving nearly 10 million members across the country. These organizations span diverse sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, banking, and services, representing one of the largest people-centered movements in the nation. The DCD and the National Cooperative Council of Sri Lanka (NCCSL) officially launched IYC 2025 on 7 January 2025 in Colombo, marking the start of year-long celebrations.

### National Launch of IYC 2025 and Strategic Vision

Under NCCSL's leadership, national programs are being implemented to strengthen cooperatives through digital transformation, governance reforms, and sustainability initiatives.



**Government officials and cooperative leaders participate in the soft launch of the United Nations International Year of Cooperatives 2025, Colombo, Sri Lanka**

By reinforcing democratic participation and collective ownership, Sri Lanka's cooperatives are positioning themselves as drivers of social and economic innovation.

### A Digital Turning Point

Cooperative Rural Banks (CRBs) remain the heartbeat of Sri Lanka's cooperative system. With more than 2,400 branches across the island, they provide access to credit and savings for millions in rural communities. For decades, these banks operated manually, relying on trust and personal relationships but lacking digital infrastructure.

The NCCSL has now embarked on an ambitious Core Banking System (CBS) project to connect all cooperative banks through a unified digital platform. This transformation will enable members to make transactions, apply for loans, and access accounts in real time, ensuring both efficiency and accountability.



**Sri Lanka's cooperative banks adopting integrated systems to improve efficiency, accessibility, and real-time financial services for members.**

For the cooperative movement, digitalization is not simply about technology; it is about survival, relevance, and youth engagement. The NCCSL views the CBS as a bridge between tradition and innovation that brings younger generations into the fold while strengthening the roots of community finance.

## Harvesting Hope through Farmers' Cooperatives

In Kurunegala, the agricultural cooperatives such as Rideegama MPCS and Kurunegala Organic Farmers' Cooperative have introduced climate-smart rice and spice cultivation, helping smallholders adopt water-efficient practices and improve yields while also focusing on sustainable organic practices. Collective marketing has secured better prices for members, proving that sustainability and profitability can go hand in hand.

Similar projects are flourishing nationwide, from organic spice farming in Matale to sustainable dairy production in the Central Province. Supported by local authorities, agricultural cooperatives continue to anchor Sri Lanka's food security while adapting to climate change through innovation and cooperation.

Women farmers are also actively engaged in such initiatives with support of cooperatives like Sri Lanka Women's Cooperative Society, which supports these women farmers training, resources, and market access. They also link its members with organic certification bodies and international buyers, enabling them to export their produce and earn higher incomes.

## Tides of Change

Along the southern coastline, women's cooperatives have become engines of both economic and environmental renewal. Between 2018 and 2022, NCCSL lead gender-based program supported by WeEffect that helped draft gender-inclusive governance policies and trained ten district cooperative councils. Over 2,800 women members were equipped to take on leadership positions across cooperative boards. Their growing participation in decision-making shows how Sri Lankan cooperatives are helping women move from the margins to the center of leadership.

## A Strong Foundation for the Future

The Government of Sri Lanka and NCCSL are working closely to modernize the cooperative sector through regular reforms. The reforms aim to modernize legal frameworks, create an online marketplace for cooperative products, develop a national digital financial platform, and link cooperatives more effectively to export markets.

Institutions such as the National Cooperative Development Institute (NICD) and the Cooperative Employees Commission are supporting these efforts through capacity building, governance training, and entrepreneurship development programs. Together, they are creating an enabling environment in which cooperation, innovation, and inclusion can thrive.

## Cooperation for a New Era

From digital rural banks to climate-smart farms, women-led green enterprises, and youth-run eco-tourism initiatives, Sri Lanka's cooperatives are redefining what progress means. They are modern yet human-centered, innovative yet grounded in shared values.

As Sri Lanka celebrates the IYC 2025, the movement stands as a living testament to what people can achieve when they act together with purpose and compassion. In every province and village, cooperatives continue to prove that collaboration is not only an economic strategy but also a way of life, that truly helps build a better world.

## Cooperative-Led Projects (2022–2025)

Between 2022 and 2025, Sri Lankan cooperatives have led diverse initiatives that embody innovation, inclusion, and sustainability. Agricultural cooperatives expanded organic spice and rice production while training farmers in climate-smart methods and collective marketing. Fisheries cooperatives in coastal regions improved group processing, value addition, and mangrove restoration, supporting resettled fisherfolk through Asian Development Bank (ADB)-backed programs. New care cooperatives, supported by the International Labour Organization (ILO), are creating decent jobs in home-based caregiving. Youth cooperatives have emerged in eco-tourism, agribusiness, and digital services. Environmental sustainability remains a cross-cutting theme, with co-ops investing in organic farming, solar irrigation, and biogas systems. Collectively, these projects demonstrate how Sri Lanka's cooperatives are building equitable livelihoods and community resilience through collaboration and innovation.



Officials from the Department of Cooperative Development and ILO staff at the launch of model by-laws for care cooperatives.  
Courtesy: Portia Kamps/ILO

## IYC 2025 in Sri Lanka

The United Nations has declared 2025 the International Year of Cooperatives (IYC), themed “Cooperatives Build a Better World”. Sri Lankan cooperators are planning major observances. In particular, Sri Lanka will host the ICA Asia-Pacific Regional Assembly in Colombo (24–28 Nov 2025) under NCCSL’s leadership. This event in partnership with ICA-AP and SANASA will feature thematic forums, seminars, and workshops on co-op development, culminating the year’s IYC activities.

## Other key initiatives by Government of Sri Lanka and NCCSL

The Sri Lankan government and NCCSL have recently moved to strengthen the coop sector. An ILO–government meeting in Oct 2025 identified priorities: revitalizing the cooperative legal framework, improving market access, and piloting innovative value-chain solutions for co-op sectors. The government plans to modernize co-op banking (exploring a single digital financial platform linking co-ops to banks) and create a national online marketplace for cooperative products. It is also developing subsector strategies in agriculture, fisheries, and livestock to align co-ops with export markets and public procurement. Parliament sessions (Feb 2025) included discussions on improving cooperative enterprises for better public service.

Sri Lanka’s cooperative movement is not emerging; it is already significant and impactful. We have both the mandate and the momentum. By focusing on concrete actions like those above rather than just background narrative, we can more fully showcase how cooperatives in Sri Lanka are actively building a better world—socially, economically, environmentally.



Parliament discusses improving Lanka Sathosa and cooperative enterprises, February 2025.

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## STRENGTHENING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR WOMEN'S COOPERATIVES IN NEPAL

*Prabin Gurung, Knowledge Management and Communication Manager, Heifer Nepal*

### Introduction

Social Entrepreneur Women's Cooperatives (SEWCs) in Nepal are redefining rural enterprise through women-led, production-driven models that move well beyond traditional savings and credit frameworks. Rooted in agro-livestock ventures such as goat farming, dairy production, vegetable cultivation, and spice processing, these Heifer supported SEWCs operate at the grassroots level to promote entrepreneurship and expand market access. While many cooperatives sell locally, an increasing number are reaching urban centers like Kathmandu. Some, like Galdha SEWC, have even entered international markets by exporting ginger and white beans to Europe. However, challenges such as price volatility, import competition, and inadequate infrastructure continue to constrain profitability.

### Methodology

This study used a mixed methods approach to assess the effectiveness, challenges, and opportunities of Heifer supported SEWCs in Nepal. Conducted in collaboration with Heifer International Nepal and the National Cooperative Federation of Nepal, the research covered 26 SEWCs across six provinces, selected for their diversity in geography, maturity, and value chain engagement.

**Data Collection:** A combination of field visits, structured surveys, stakeholder interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) was employed to gather both quantitative and qualitative insights. These methods explored SEWCs' governance, financial health, market access, and social impact.



*Farmers using the ozone vegetable washing facility in Palpa*

### Data Analysis

- Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends and performance gaps.
- Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were thematically reviewed to capture stakeholder perspectives and recurring challenges.
- A SWOT analysis was conducted to evaluate SEWCs' internal strengths and external risks, informing strategic recommendations.

### Limitations

The study faced geographic and time constraints, which limited access to some remote SEWCs and reduced the scope for long-term analysis. Despite these limitations, the findings offer a solid foundation for strengthening SEWC sustainability, governance, and market integration.

### Governance and Organizational Structure

SEWCs have matured into resilient, women-centric institutions deeply embedded in their communities. Most follow standard governance practices such as regular board meetings, annual audits, and internal supervision. Governed by 11-member boards, they reflect democratic structures with high female participation.

However, inconsistencies persist in documentation, supervisory committee functionality, and digital adoption, particularly the use of Cooperative and Poverty Management Information System (COPOMIS). While nearly all SEWCs adhere to cooperative norms, some lag in professionalizing their management systems. Notably, 92 percent own land and office premises, and most have essential equipment and vehicles. Yet, only 65 percent operate collection centers, revealing supply chain infrastructure gaps.

### Financial Status and Credit Access

SEWCs demonstrate strong internal financial sustainability, driven by active member savings and robust loan portfolios. Their ability to attract savings and maintain high repayment rates reflects deep community trust.

Despite this, 69 percent of SEWCs struggle to access external loans due to collateral demands and weak credit appraisal systems. Few have secured institutional credit or built financial partnerships. While most cooperatives operate with business plans and a clear vision, many lack diversified income strategies and sound investment planning. Heavy reliance on donor support, especially from Heifer International, poses risks to long-term viability. Strengthening financial literacy and strategic fund utilization is essential to reduce dependency and foster financial professionalism.

## Business Development and Market Linkages

SEWCs have developed enterprises primarily focused on agro-livestock production. Among the cooperatives surveyed, 18 are engaged in goat trading, 11 focus on seed and fertilizer sales, 9 operate in dairy production, and 7 specialize in vegetable farming. Other cooperatives are involved in ginger and turmeric cultivation, poultry farming, fishery, and livestock feed production, although these activities are less common.

Some SEWCs offer value-added services such as collection, sorting, and grading. However, many still lack a strong market-oriented strategy. The majority sell within local or district-level markets, and only a few have access to urban centers such as Kathmandu. Their ability to expand market access is constrained by several factors. These include price volatility, the dominance of middlemen, limited cold storage facilities, weak branding and packaging, and competition from Indian imports. In addition, informal and credit-based transactions continue to strain cash flow and limit reinvestment opportunities.

Although some branding and packaging initiatives are underway, standardized grading and labeling practices remain rare. This reduces product competitiveness. Only a small number of SEWCs have invested in retail outlets or digital platforms, which limits their visibility and engagement with broader consumer markets. To ensure long-term viability and growth, SEWCs must prioritize value addition, diversify their market strategies, and invest in infrastructure. Key areas for improvement include branding, cold chain logistics, and digital access.



*The Ghimire couple of Kamalamai Municipality celebrate the birth of Gamsa, Nepal's first pure-bred Holstein calf from cows gifted by South Korea under the Milky Way project*

## Heifer International's VBHCD Model

Heifer International's Values-Based Holistic Community Development (VBHCD) model integrates cooperative principles with sustainable livelihood strategies. It empowers women farmers by fostering social capital, financial access, and market integration.

The model integrates four interdependent pillars that reinforce each other to build resilient, inclusive, and self-sustaining cooperatives.

- **Social Capital and Women's Empowerment:** VBHCD builds social capital by organizing women into self-help groups that foster trust and collective action. Through leadership and financial literacy training, women gain the skills to govern SEWCs and make informed financial decisions. The model promotes gender equity, positioning women as active leaders and decision-makers. This approach transforms SEWCs into inclusive platforms for agency, voice, and community leadership.
- **Market-Oriented Development:** VBHCD strengthens SEWCs by shifting focus from savings to production, aligning cooperative activities with market demand. Through agriculture, livestock, and processing enterprises, SEWCs integrate into value chains and connect with private-sector buyers. Business planning and enterprise development support their transition into competitive market actors, boosting economic viability and regional impact.
- **Access to Finance:** VBHCD tackles financial exclusion by helping SEWCs build internal savings and loan systems, reducing dependence on external credit. Through financial training and improved access to microfinance and cooperative banking, members gain the tools to invest, grow their enterprises, and manage risks. This fosters financial autonomy and strengthens long-term sustainability.
- **Sustainability and Resilience:** VBHCD strengthens SEWCs by promoting climate-smart agriculture and diversified income sources like dairy, poultry, and vegetable farming. These practices conserve resources and reduce economic risk. Strong governance ensures adaptability, helping communities stay resilient amid environmental and market challenges.

Heifer's VBHCD model has significantly improved food security, income, and social empowerment in Nepal. SEWCs stand out for their transparency, member engagement, and organizational strength.



## Gender Representation in SEWC Staffing

Staffing patterns across SEWCs reflect a strong commitment to gender inclusion, shaped by local context and operational priorities. Female-led teams are prominent across several cooperatives. Suraksha SEWC in Morang leads with a team of 10 staff members, including 7 women. Jyoti SEWC in Mahottari employs two women on its staff. Women-only staffing is evident in Prajwalit SEWC in Pyuthan, Deeplagan SEWC in Bardiya, and Safal SEWC in Chitwan, reflecting a deliberate commitment to women's leadership and employment. Gender-balanced teams are maintained by Hamro Swalambhi SEWC in Jhapa, Janani SEWC in Banke, and Chautari SEWC in Morang, demonstrating inclusive hiring practices and a commitment to diverse skill sets. While female representation remains dominant across SEWCs, staffing diversity varies by region and cooperative maturity. These patterns highlight the adaptability of SEWCs in aligning gender inclusion with community needs and organizational goals.



*The Ghimire couple of Kamalamai Municipality celebrating the birth of 'Gamsa', Nepal's first pure-bred Holstein calf from the cows gifted by South Korea in December 2022, under the Milky Way project.*

## Capacity Building and Institutional Development

SEWCs benefit from regular training in governance, financial literacy, and business development. However, advanced topics such as branding, digital marketing, insurance, and value chain development remain underexplored. Limited participation in exposure visits and learning exchanges restricts innovation. Inactive Accounts and Supervisory Committees and lack of management software hinder operational efficiency. Despite promoting gender equality, women leaders face time constraints, unequal treatment by financial institutions, and gender bias in business negotiations.



*The Ghimire couple of Kamalamai Municipality celebrating the birth of 'Gamsa', Nepal's first pure-bred Holstein calf from the cows gifted by South Korea in December 2022, under the Milky Way project.*

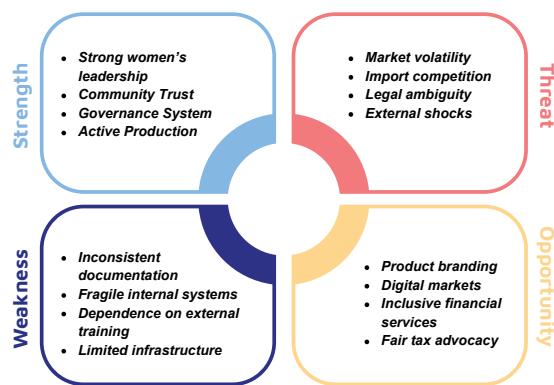
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## Challenges and Systemic Barriers

- **Legal Identity and Taxation:** SEWCs are taxed at the same rate as financial institutions (15 percent), rather than agricultural cooperatives (5 percent), as they lack formal legal recognition.
- **Credit and Insurance:** The absence of a Credit Information Centre and weak loan recovery systems increase financial risk. Few cooperatives offer livestock insurance.
- **Market Limitations:** Product perishability, market saturation, and lack of cold storage facilities continue to restrict growth.
- **Institutional Gaps:** Many SEWCs face challenges such as weak audit systems, outdated operational procedures, and limited integration into broader cooperative networks.
- **Gender-Based Barriers:** Financial discrimination and prevailing societal expectations continue to limit women's leadership opportunities.



Cooperative members manage operations at the Parishramik SEWC milk collection center in Rautahat

## Recommendations

- **Legal Recognition:** Establish a distinct legal identity for Social Entrepreneur Women's Cooperatives (SEWCs) to differentiate them from general cooperatives. This recognition would formalize their unique role in women-led enterprise development and unlock access to tailored policies, protections, and funding streams.
- **Tax and Subsidy Reform:** Align SEWCs with agricultural cooperative frameworks to ensure equitable access to government subsidies, tax exemptions, and support programs. This would reduce operational burdens and incentivize growth in production-based activities.
- **Credit Access:** Develop SEWC-specific financial instruments, including guarantee funds to reduce lending risk, dedicated loan schemes to meet cooperative needs, and a Credit Information Centre to improve transparency and creditworthiness. These tools would expand financial inclusion and enable strategic investment.
- **Capacity Building:** Institutionalize ongoing training for cooperative staff and members, focusing on governance, financial management, and enterprise development. Revitalize internal committees to ensure active participation and accountability, while promoting inclusive leadership that reflects gender and generational diversity.
- **Market Development:** Invest in infrastructure and branding to enhance SEWC competitiveness. This includes establishing collection centers, cold storage facilities, and digital platforms for marketing and e-commerce. Strengthening market access will improve income stability and value chain integration.
- **Partnership and Integration:** Support SEWCs in federating into higher-tier cooperative associations to amplify their collective voice, improve resource sharing, and influence policy. Integration at district, provincial, or national levels can unlock new opportunities for collaboration and scale.
- **Gender Empowerment:** Advocate for women-friendly financial policies, such as reduced collateral requirements and flexible repayment terms. Encourage male engagement in cooperative development to foster shared responsibility, reduce gender bias, and promote inclusive decision-making.

## Conclusion

Social Entrepreneur Women's Cooperatives (SEWCs) are emerging as dynamic catalysts for rural transformation in Nepal, blending women's empowerment with enterprise development in ways that challenge conventional cooperative models. Unlike traditional savings and credit groups, SEWCs are rooted in production-focused, community-driven approaches that prioritize agro-livestock ventures, value addition, and local innovation.

What distinguishes SEWCs is their dual commitment to economic resilience and social inclusion. By placing women at the center of enterprise creation, they foster equitable participation, challenge entrenched gender norms and create pathways for leadership that ripple across households and communities. However, despite their promise, SEWCs operate within a landscape marked by systemic barriers. Legal ambiguity surrounding their institutional identity leaves them without formal recognition, while taxation policies treat them as financial institutions rather than agricultural cooperatives, imposing disproportionate burdens on grassroots enterprises.

Unlocking the full potential of SEWCs requires a multi-pronged strategy. This includes policy reforms to clarify their legal status and align taxation with their agricultural focus, institutional support to strengthen governance, audit systems, and capacity-building, and strategic investment in cold storage, branding, digital access, and market linkages. Donor agencies, government bodies, and private sector actors all have a role to play in scaling these models and embedding them within broader rural development frameworks.

Recognizing the unique contributions of SEWCs is not merely a matter of equity. It is a strategic imperative for building resilient, women-led economies across Nepal. By addressing the structural challenges, they face and amplifying their successes, SEWCs can evolve into powerful engines of inclusive growth, sustainability, and systemic change.



## HOW COOPERATIVES IN FIJI ARE HELPING TO CREATE A BETTER FIJI

*Losefo Koroidimuri, Director Registrar Cooperatives, Fiji*

### Introduction

Cooperatives serve as the most practical vehicle for place-based development in Fiji by pooling resources, lowering unit costs, and creating market power for small producers who would otherwise face exclusion from profitable markets. In an island economy challenged by geographic dispersion, climate risks, and thin markets, cooperative networks transform community solidarity into scalable ventures that increase rural incomes, improve food security, and boost resilience. These efforts also advance the International Cooperative Alliance's Principle 6 (Cooperation among Cooperatives) and Principle 7 (Concern for Community).

### Fiji's Expanding Cooperative Movement

As of 2025, Fiji's cooperative movement continues to grow rapidly, with 837 cooperatives currently registered and the numbers steadily rising. These cooperatives operate across diverse sectors, contributing to economic empowerment, especially in rural areas. Notably, September 2025 saw the registration of Fiji's first-ever training cooperative, the Skills Academy Co-operative Limited based in Nadawa, Nasinu. This milestone represents the sector's diversification into education and skills development, further strengthening cooperatives as enablers of lifelong learning and workforce empowerment.

### Stories of Cooperation in Action

The islands are home to cooperatives that are showing the world how a collective effort can produce a good change. Local groups, through their combined resources, better logistics, and common marketing, are not only creating job opportunities and enlarging markets, but also lifting their members up. The examples that follow in this article are only a limited testimony of how everyday people are making cooperation a tool for community development.

### Women-led Cooperatives: From Local Enterprise to Lasting Impact

Cooperatives led by women are one of the major forces behind this progress.

They are stepping up from basic survival to semi-commercial scale by the. Total count of women-led co-operatives in Fiji is seventy-six, which indicates that the women's collective enterprise is not only transforming rural livelihoods but also making a noticeable impact on the inclusive growth. Here, in this section, we are going to take a quick look in some of the successful women cooperatives.

### Women in Taveuni: The Nasomo Ra Marama Co-operative

In the village of Somosomo situated in Taveuni, the Nasomo Ra Marama Co-operative Ltd has transformed oyster shells that were once thrown away into beautiful pieces of jewellery which are now available for sale to local people as well as tourists. The collaboration enables the partners to not only exchange raw materials and skills but also to enhance the quality of their products and thereby receive regular pay.

However, the cooperative's financial aspect is just one of the many benefits; it also acts as an incubator for building interpersonal relationships and self-esteem among the women. While one is always learning from the other, the co-operative indirectly supports the basic needs of the women's families with regard to education and health, and thereby, becomes a role model for others when it comes to starting a small business. The output of creativity among the Nasomo women is such that if shared, it becomes a source of empowerment for all.



*Women of Nasomo Ra Marama Co-operative Ltd create jewellery while building a network of support and empowerment for their families and community in Taveuni.*

## Women's Leadership in Ba: Marinitawa Rise Beyond the Reef

In Ba, the Marinitawa Rise Beyond the Reef Agricultural Co-operative Limited brings together 150 female farmers, who are moving from subsistence to semi-commercial agriculture. The support from Rise Beyond the Reef and the Ministry of Agriculture enables them to use climate-smart practices for their turmeric, ginger, and cassava crops.

The government provision of planting materials, organic manure, compost culture, and a refurbished tractor has increased productivity and lessened costs. The use of eco-friendly techniques has enabled these farmers to safeguard their land and raise their income simultaneously, thus demonstrating that technical assistance and female unity can empower women to be the drivers of Fiji's green economy.



*Women farmers of the Marinitawa Rise Beyond the Reef Agricultural Co-operative in Ba, supported by Rise Beyond the Reef.*

## Enterprise on Wheels: The Lako Yani You Co-operative

Established in 2019 in Tailevu, the Lako Yani You Co-operative Limited has a food stall that operates six days a week and is attended by 108 members. The recent handover of a new three-tonne Isuzu truck equipped with catering gear, tables, and chairs totally changed the way it operated.

In the past, unreliable transport had caused the loss of morning sales. The new vehicle, supplied through the Co-operative Development Fund and presented by Deputy Prime Minister Hon. Manoa Kamikamica, guarantees quick deliveries and a larger market.

The story of Lako Yani You is a clear demonstration of how sensible investment can transform a tiny local business into a vibrant community enterprise.



*Director and Registrar of Co-operatives, Mr. Iosefo Koroidimuri, standing in front of the Lako Yani You Co-operative tearoom.*



*Deputy Prime Minister Hon. Manoa Kamikamica presenting a truck to the Lako Yani You Women Co-operative Ltd.*

## Government Enablers for Growth

The Fijian government is moving on four big enablers to further bolster the cooperative sector:

### National Co-operative Policy

The Department of Co-operative Business is formulating the National Co-operative Policy (NCP) as a strategic framework to guide the sector's growth and ensure co-operatives contribute meaningfully to Fiji's economy and society. Closely aligned with the National Development Plan 2025–2029, the policy aims to strengthen rural enterprise, create jobs, and promote inclusive, sustainable development.

By embedding national priorities within co-operative principles, the NCP reaffirms Fiji's commitment to building a resilient, community-driven economy where co-operatives remain central to equitable growth and shared prosperity.

### Co-operative Act Modernization

Amendments to the Co-operative Act 1996 are a critical priority, currently under review to modernize the country's co-operative sector. The Department of Co-operative Business has prepared a Cabinet Paper and is actively conducting consultations.

These amendments will legalize electronic meetings and filings, clarify board duties, strengthen audit and reporting, and streamline formation and exit processes. The goal is faster decision-making, lower compliance friction, and higher member participation, especially for rural and women-led cooperatives.

## Co-operative Development Fund

The Co-operative Development Fund provides crucial financial assistance tailored to cooperatives' development projects, playing a vital role in fostering growth and sustainability. Cooperatives in operation can apply for funds up to \$43,935, provided they meet specific criteria, including financial and tax compliance, FNPF contributions, and the ability to co-fund one-third of the project cost. The CDF supports a wide range of project types, enabling cooperatives to enhance production, diversify offerings, improve operational efficiencies, and expand infrastructure. This fund helps overcome capital constraints, facilitating job creation and economic empowerment at the community level. The Deputy Prime Minister, Hon. Manoa Kamikamica, has actively participated in handing over assets to cooperatives that are recipients of the CDF, showcasing its tangible impact.



*Deputy Prime Minister Hon. Manoa Kamikamica presenting a delivery van to KY6 Co-operatives, this year's recipient of the Co-operative Development Fund (CDF).*

## Pacific Island Co-operative Network (PICON)

Fiji is leading the formalization of the Pacific Island Co-operative Network (PICON) to address shared challenges such as fragmented legal frameworks, limited access to finance, weak data systems, and inconsistent training. The initiative aims to establish a permanent coordination platform to strengthen collaboration across Pacific economies. A Cabinet Paper proposes Fiji as the convener, with the inaugural roundtable to be held alongside the ICA-AP Regional Dialogue in Nadi in January 2026. PICON will:

- align model by-laws and training modules;
- aggregate demand for finance/inputs to reduce costs;
- establish a shared data and M&E backbone; and
- coordinate export-readiness pathways for priority sectors (agriculture, fisheries, eco-tourism)

## How the CDF Translates to Impact

The Co-operative Development Fund directly translates into tangible outcomes for cooperatives, aligning grant types with specific impacts:

- **Machinery:** Funds for manufacturing machines enable value-adding processes, leading to increased value-addition margins.
- **Storage:** Investment in warehouses or storage facilities extends product shelf-life and reduces post-harvest losses. e.g., a 3-ton truck ensures on-time delivery of products to markets.
- **Diversification & Technology:** Support for product development and new technologies enhances export compliance and opens new market opportunities.

## The Co-operative College of Fiji (CCF)

The Cooperative College of Fiji (CCF) is undergoing renovations to foster a more conducive learning environment. The Department of Cooperative Business is focused on updating and modernizing the college, with the goal of eventually upgrading to a level that allows regional cooperatives to attend training here in the near future.

The CCF is a key institution dedicated to providing training and capacity building for cooperatives in Fiji. Established originally as a training center in 1960 and formally registered under the Fijian Higher Education Commission in 2018, the College has been instrumental in supporting the cooperative movement for over 50 years. Its core objective is to develop, promote, and strengthen cooperatives and the small business sector through quality training programs.



*Cooperatives undertaking training on roles and responsibilities of members*

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## SONALI: THE FORGOTTEN DREAM OF WORKERS' OWNERSHIP IN THE DOOARS

*Mr. Anurag Dang, Deputy Director, National Cooperative Union of India*

In the rolling tea gardens of North Bengal's Dooars, a remarkable experiment once rewrote the meaning of ownership and dignity. What became known as the Sonali Cooperative was not simply about producing tea—it was a movement that placed control of land and labour into the hands of those whose sweat had long nurtured it. Though short-lived, its story remains a timeless lesson for cooperatives globally: people's power can build a better world, but sustaining it demands protection and solidarity.

### From Abandonment to Ownership

The Sonali Tea Estate was like many others in the Dooars – owned by absentee landlords and worked by tribal communities, who lived in poverty despite generations of toil. In September 1973, the owner fled, leaving behind debts, unpaid wages, and a factory in disrepair. For the workers, the closure meant starvation.

But desperation turned into determination. Gathering under the slogan "Khoon paseena jiska, bagan uska" (whose blood and sweat built it, owns it), hundreds of workers marched barefoot across the Teesta river to Jalpaiguri to demand their right to run the garden. Against all odds, they were permitted to pluck and sell tea leaves directly. Soon after, with support from trade unionists, academics, and cooperative officials, they resolved to form their own cooperative.

On 4 September 1974, the Saongaon Tea and Allied Plantation Workers' Cooperative Society Ltd. was officially born—the first of its kind in India's plantation sector. For the first time, workers were not "coolies" but owners.

### A New Model of Work and Dignity

Once the cooperative began, the old hierarchy of managers, sardars, and supervisors disappeared. There was no morning whistle, no overseer shouting orders. Instead, women workers devised collective systems of labour allocation, later adopted by the men.

Wages became equal for men and women—a groundbreaking decision that preceded national legislation by several years. Incentives for extra plucking were set higher than other gardens, and welfare benefits such as umbrellas, aprons, and quilts were chosen collectively. Productivity soared. Within three years, production rose from 850,000 kg to over 1,043,000 kg of tea.

The cooperative purchased its own vehicles and tractors, repaired neglected roads, and even launched a small dairy unit. Perhaps most importantly, it instilled confidence. As one visitor noted, absenteeism was unheard of—workers treated the garden as their own. For once, dignity matched labour.



### Challenges and Suppression

The Sonali experiment, however, unsettled entrenched powers. Former owners sought legal means to reclaim the estate. Banks pursued unpaid loans not of the workers' making. Political leaders, wary of a successful worker-owned model that might spread across the Dooars, withheld protection.

By 1978, court battles and heavy police intervention placed the cooperative under receivership. Leaders were harassed, cases were filed against workers, and eventually the cooperative was dismantled. Though the High Court once ruled in favour of the workers, the Supreme Court later overturned the decision. By the early 1980s, the cooperative's golden era was over.

What followed were decades of instability, shifting ownership, and continued distress for workers. Even as recently as the 2010s, closures, wage arrears, and protests remained common in the estate. The promise of Sonali was lost—but not forgotten.

## Lessons for Today's Cooperatives

The story of Sonali is not one of failure, but of foresight. At a time when cooperatives were rarely discussed in plantation sectors, tea workers of Dooars proved that collective ownership could be efficient, equitable, and humane. They demonstrated:

- Democracy at work: Women played central roles in decision-making, and all members had a voice.
- Equality in practice: Equal wages and shared benefits challenged exploitative traditions.
- Sustainability through self-reliance: Despite scarce resources, the cooperative improved productivity and invested in long-term assets.

Its suppression was not due to inefficiency but to systemic resistance from those threatened by empowered workers. That makes Sonali more relevant than ever.

As the world marks the International Year of Cooperatives 2025, the memory of Sonali urges us to ask: *What structures do we need to protect cooperatives from hostile forces? How can laws, finance, and policy create enabling ecosystems, so that "people's enterprises" not only emerge but endure?*

## Building the Better World We Want

Today, Sonali's legacy reminds us that the essence of cooperation lies in reclaiming dignity. Ownership is not only about shares or profits—it is about people believing that their work matters, their voice counts, and their future is their own to shape.

The workers of Sonali did not merely run a tea garden. They imagined a new social contract in which labour and life were valued equally.

In celebrating IYC 2025 under the global theme "Cooperatives Build a Better World", let us remember Sonali—not as a forgotten experiment, but as a call to action: to ensure that no cooperative that rises from the margins ever falls again for lack of protection and solidarity.



## BIRTHING THE DJÄKAMIRR CO-OP IN NORTHERN TERRITORY, AUSTRALIA

*Ms. Molly Kendall, Mr. Jen Kumnick, Ms. Sarah Ireland, Ms. Rosemary Gundjarranbuy, Ms. Helen Guyupul, Ms. Wunungumurra, Ms. Elaine Läwurrrpa Maypilama, The Co-op Federation, Australia*

In Australia, on Yolŋu Country in remote North East Arnhem Land, an inspiring journey towards cultural reinvigoration, self-determination and empowerment for First Nations people is taking place.



*Photo credit: Patrick Josse. Galiwin'ku, Yolŋu Country, Northern Territory, Australia*

The research project Born Upon a Pandanus Mat, led by Yolŋu scholar Professor Elaine Lawurrrpa Maypilama, has been working alongside the First Nations community of Galiwin'ku to redesign maternity services and bring birth back to the island—back under Yolŋu care and control. Central to this redesign is the creation of the Djäkamirr maternity workforce: First Nations doulas who draw on the wisdom of Yolŋu culture together with Western medical knowledge to walk with women through pregnancy, birth, and early parenting. As childbirth care is not offered on the island, this means the djäkamirr support women during birth in faraway hospitals. In a region marked by some of the poorest perinatal outcomes in Australia, this model of care offers hope because continuity of care is known not only to improve health outcomes, but also to nurture women's confidence and satisfaction in their birthing journeys.

The project came to an abrupt halt when it collided with legislative barriers around industrial relations—rules that made it impossible to remunerate the djäkamirr for the companionship and care they offered to women.

But out of this impasse grew an innovative, values-aligned solution. A co-operative was formed, offering the flexibility to honour Yolŋu kinship protocols and uphold the principles of self-determination, ensuring the work of the djäkamirr could continue on Yolŋu terms.



*Photo credit: Sarah Ireland. DJÄKAMIRR Co-op Ltd Yolŋu directors L-R: Helen Guyupul Wunungumurra, Rosemary Gundjarranbuy and Elaine Läwurrrpa Maypilama.*

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And now, thanks to the formation of DJÄKAMIRR Co-op Ltd, their remarkable work and the fostering of ancestral wisdom can continue for future generations. Collaborating with Yolŋu Knowledge Authorities, employment lawyer Danny King, and The Co-Op Federation's own Sam Byrne FAICD, these women have innovated a care model that is compliant to both Yolŋu kinship laws and Western legislative frameworks. It upholds the internationally recognised rights of First Nations People to self-determine, use their languages, revitalise ancestral care systems, access culturally safe health care and improve their economic conditions.

First Nations co-operatives continue to reaffirm that the co-op model is the best approach for recognising First Nations ways of organising for economic development. This is especially true in Australia, where communities are impacted by colonisation and facing systemic exclusion and marginalisation, yet continue to demonstrate strength, self-determination, and resilience.

Two examples are the Tranby National Indigenous Adult Education and Training Co-operative and the Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture Co-operative. Since 1957, Tranby has offered vocational and educational courses for First Nations students, owned and run by First Nations people. Muurrbay exists for language preservation and publishes a wide range of resources on Aboriginal language and culture, including dictionaries for seven Aboriginal languages, stories, teaching materials, and online courses for First Nations students, owned

and run by First Nations people. Muurrbay exists for language preservation and publishes a wide range of resources on Aboriginal language and culture, including dictionaries for seven Aboriginal languages, stories, teaching materials, and online courses. New co-operatives continue to emerge, such as an Indigenous-owned and controlled employment co-operative in Kowanyama, Far North Queensland. The Co-op Federation is proud to support these co-operatives and looks forward to continuing this journey alongside DJÄKAMIRR Co-op Ltd as it grows and flourishes.

With groups such as these paving the way forward, we see proof that co-ops provide unique solutions for Indigenous communities to rise from the margins, in a true integration of cultures and a collective positive outcome for building a better world.

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