

Editorial



Cooperatives as pillars of equity and progress during the International Year of Cooperatives

Las cooperativas como pilares de equidad y progreso en el Año Internacional de las Cooperativas

As cooperativas como pilares da equidade e do progresso no Ano Internacional das Cooperativas

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This edition of the Cooperativismo y Desarrollo journal is dedicated to highlighting the importance of the multidimensional impact of the global cooperative sector in the economic, social and environmental spheres, reinforcing the human being as its *raison d'être*. This edition takes on even greater importance, as 2025 has been proclaimed by the United Nations Organization as the International Year of Cooperatives in order to highlight the role of these enterprises in accelerating the fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as entities committed to sustainability, which reinforces and enhances the central theme it promotes: "Cooperatives build a better world", reflecting their impact on contemporary society.

In a global scenario marked by economic inequalities, environmental crises and social exclusion, the cooperative model flourishes as a glimmer of trust and collective action. When in 2012 the United Nations proclaimed it the International Year of Cooperatives, it not only recognized its historical contribution, but also urged us to reflect on its potential to build fairer and more sustainable

economies. This year, more than a commemoration, is a call to rethink how the cooperative movement should develop in pursuit of its intertwining with the SDGs and harnessing its potential.

The Rochdale Pioneers Society, founded in 1844 in Manchester, England, is recognized as the turning point of cooperativism. Constituted as a consumer cooperative, it was established as the first experience that distributed among its members the surpluses generated in the collective, laying the foundations of the modern cooperative movement, it is recognized for its organizational capacity, the conception and systematization of a set of principles of cooperation assumed by modern associative entities and later developed in the heat of the boom of the movement and its international organizations.

To consolidate this collective bet, the Rochdale Pioneers took as a basis the ideology of the precursors of cooperativism, who, despite their limitations, planted the seed for the further development of the organizations and the platform for what constitutes the contemporary theory of cooperativism. This movement emerged in the challenging context of the time and proved to be an innovative response to the precarious conditions faced by the working class (Labrador Machín, 2024).

Cooperatives are not simply economic entities, they are embodiments of universal principles: mutual aid, participatory democracy and equitable distribution of benefits. From Rochdale in the 19th century to modern digital cooperatives, this model has demonstrated that it is possible to reconcile efficiency and effectiveness with social responsibility.

Cooperatives have been characterized by common efforts for almost two centuries of existence and constitute the largest socioeconomic movement in the world. Cooperative members have the peculiarity of a collective conscience nourished by utopias, supported by a special intuition and by values and principles that guide their actions. According to Bastidas Delgado (2021), this awareness has allowed the movement generated by them to develop genuine experiences and a series of common features whose synergy allows building what could be called the cooperative identity, thanks to which, as their common denominator, cooperatives are clearly distinguished from other organizations and their actors, cooperators can communicate, share concerns and carry out specific activities in any corner of the planet, while building a movement with local, regional, national and even global dimensions.

Without knowing them, the author himself states, it is impossible to determine the reality of numerous societies, including those with an obvious dominance of capitalist relations. Unfortunately,

they are not very visible to the eyes of the common man due to the disregard of governments and their own associates who must make efforts to have their figures and contributions included in the national accounts systems.

Cooperativism stands as a movement that is not satisfied with merely managing a cooperative enterprise well, but feels that it has a commitment to the society of which it is a part. It is not indifferent to what happens in the society of which it is a part. This transforming cooperativism thinks of a fairer, more solidary, more equitable world with regulations and laws that allow the development of the weakest, that tend to equalize in a world society that goes in the opposite direction, emphasizes Heller (2023); the above confirms the idea that good management is a necessary condition for a cooperative enterprise to prosper, but not enough to fulfill its social mission and therefore coherence with its socio-economic essence and its own identity continues to be a challenge.

The resilience and impact that cooperatives have shown in times of crisis as bastions of stability is evident. During the Covid period many maintained jobs and wages, deployed multiple socially responsible and humane initiatives, contrasting with the deregulated financial situation and its consequences for members of other organizations. They are inherently aligned with the SDGs: they combat poverty (SDG 1), promote gender equality (SDG 5) and encourage responsible consumption (SDG 12).

The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) describes that more than 12% of the world's population are cooperative members of the 3 million cooperatives in the world, the 300 largest cooperative and mutual enterprises have a turnover of \$2.4 trillion and provide employment to 10% of the employed population (ICA, 2024).

Bastidas Delgado (2024) refers to multiple international cooperative experiences and their impact on health, food, education, employment and working conditions, housing conditions, social security and human rights. They are an example of how to face the multiple needs of the communities, through actions to develop and maintain them with acceptable environmental conditions, strengthening the cooperative ecosystem.

It also highlights successful experiences such as the case of the Mondragon Cooperative in the Basque Country (one of the largest cooperatives in the world), exemplifying how collective decision-making strengthens business resilience, with outstanding effects on the distribution of profits, high levels of efficiency and effectiveness that combine with its social management.

Other examples are the services of the emblematic Raiffensen Bank in Germany; dairy production in France and its financial system, which provides 25% of agricultural credit. In Japan, 91% of agricultural producers are members of cooperatives, which together have an annual turnover of more than 90 billion dollars; in Kenya, they have a 45% share of the country's gross domestic product and manage 31% of national deposits and savings. In addition, they produce 70 % of coffee, 76 % of dairy products and 95 % of cotton.

In Latin America, Costa Rica stands out for its health, agricultural, savings and credit and energy generation cooperatives; in Argentina, cooperatives are present in activities such as electricity generation, water services, in the agricultural sector; in the Colombian case, credit cooperatives stand out with the presence of the Cooperative Bank that responds to the interests of members and other members of the solidarity sector of the economy. Similarly, in the Dominican Republic, agricultural cooperatives have emerged in recent decades as a palliative to the situation of rural areas of the country, ethical finance or renewable energy, cooperatives empower communities, protect the environment and generate decent jobs; special mention should be made of cooperativism in Puerto Rico, which covers all spheres of the economy and society, savings and credit, insurance, health services and housing, with an outstanding work in youth cooperativism.

About 80% of agricultural production in Cuba is carried out in cooperatives and in entities of other sectors of the economy, they are in charge, to a considerable extent, of such important items as construction, gastronomic services, mini-industry, among others. Cuban cooperativism is facing new perspectives for the sake of its integration with the rest of the actors of society, strengthening its role in the municipalities, starting from the process of territorial decentralization. There could be countless examples of cooperative sector organizations worldwide, hence the recognition of their enormous efforts throughout their history.

Despite their virtues, cooperatives face obstacles such as competition with traditional enterprises, limited access to financing, modernization needs, conditional legal frameworks and a public vision that still underestimates their value. It is urgent for governments to facilitate public policies that promote their growth and for communication to make their successes visible.

However, the outlook for cooperatives invites to reflect on their future: it is necessary to deploy the capacity for technological innovation, new forms of collaboration, review the role of governments in the promotion and support of cooperatives, including favorable legislation structured in a manner

consistent with the peculiarities of the sector, assess forms and programs of financing for investment and development, transform the education and training process to form leaders and the essential generational replacement, establish strategies that transverse gender equity and equality, create networks and alliances among cooperatives to strengthen the movement at the local and international level, carry out actions that promote sustainable practices and environmental protection.

In this same sense, cooperatives must adapt to new digital tools and platforms to improve their efficiency, for which they must assume the technological change through the formation of organizational competencies. Without adequate training, members do not assimilate their rights and responsibilities, and this leads to inefficiency. To address these challenges, cooperatives need to adopt innovative strategies, promote continuing education among their members and seek alliances that will increase their visibility and competitiveness. Innovation, in turn, requires organizations to use information technologies not only to manage, but also to create, store, transform, apply and leverage organizational knowledge (Chatterjee et al., 2020).

The impacts of cooperativism reflect the actions of its members throughout its history which, according to Bastidas Delgado (2024), can be summarized in its ethics, as a synergy of values and principles guiding its daily actions aligned with the concept of sustainability in its three fields of action: economic, social and environmental, its link to the local level thanks to the double socio-economic anchoring by its double dimension association-company, its capacity for progressive increase of impacts and territorial extension thanks to inter-cooperation and integration through centrals, unions, federations, confederations and other formulas that allow them to cover larger territories, add associates and communities, among other aspects.

The International Year should not remain in memory and celebration, it is urgent to insist on the urgent challenges such as achieving the consolidation of a socioeconomic movement with its own identity and institutionalization that tends to increase inter-cooperation among cooperatives, between them and the communities, with local governments and with society as a whole (Labrador Machín, 2024). It is necessary to support local cooperatives, educate about the cooperative model in schools and universities, integrating its study in academic programs appropriate to the particularities of the sector, achieve legislation that recognizes their uniqueness and provides them with tools for scaling up.

Cooperatives are not an alternative, but a compass for the future. In a world crying out for inclusive solutions, their philosophy of cooperation and solidarity is more relevant than ever. May the International Year of Cooperatives be the starting point for a global movement that puts people and the planet at the center of the economy. Consistent with what Pope Francis expressed, addressing the theme: "The cooperative economy must promote a healing economy in the insidious sea of the global economy, an authentic economy, promoted by people who have only the common good in their hearts and minds, taking them to the new frontiers of change"; it is the path we have to follow, let us make 2025 a year of changes, results and fulfilled dreams, turning cooperativism into a way of life.

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