

Cooperatives and the Sustainable Development Goals:

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in facilitating SDG implementation
at global, national and
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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that cooperative organisations have a key role to play in facilitating Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) implementation at the global, national and local levels. From the view of the practitioner, it will look at both the practical and theoretical contributions that cooperatives are making to the SDGs, with a tri-partite framework of analysis and a focus on SDGs of particular relevance for cooperatives. Firstly, at the global and regional level, it will discuss the role of cooperative umbrella organisations and how their key tools and initiatives facilitate a ‘trickle-down’ effect throughout the cooperative movement, highlighting examples such as regional development platforms and their policy linkages. Secondly, at the national level, it incorporates a brief analysis of large national cooperative enterprises and apexes (such as examples from the World Co-operative Monitor) and their substantial contribution to sustainability. Finally, through an action analysis of local cooperatives, we demonstrate the major role that these cooperatives are playing to foster inclusive and sustainable development at the grassroots level. We conclude by arguing that cooperative actors are particularly well placed to facilitate an articulation between these three levels, due to the specific features of the cooperative model, including the values of democracy and solidarity, as well as the principles of cooperation among cooperatives and concern for community. Strong partnerships between and within cooperative organisations can be instrumental in improving the emerging role for the cooperative movement as a pivotal actor in SDG implementation.

INTRODUCTION

More than three years after the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (hereafter SDGs) and leading global climate commitments such as the 2015 Paris Agreement, the topic of sustainable development and how we go beyond 'business as usual' have become central to the global policy agenda.¹ In parallel, key figures within the cooperative movement have highlighted the model's relevance for sustainable development against a backdrop of shifting political landscapes, war, rising inequalities, demographic changes and environmental degradation.² Although a mainstreaming of the SDGs into policy approaches and business strategies appears to signal progress, recent warnings from international institutions on the pace of climate change suggest that significant strides in policy practice and implementation are now required.³ This paper argues that cooperative organisations, as value and principle based, people centred businesses, have a growing role to play in facilitating present and future SDG implementation at the global, national and local levels.

This paper falls within the scope of the knowledge building activities undertaken within the partnership for international development signed between the European Commission and the International Cooperative Alliance in 2016, to strengthen the cooperative movement and its capacity to promote international development worldwide.⁴ As SDG implementation seeks to address core issues worldwide, including in - but not limited to - the global South, such as a stable economy, energy supply, a lack of access to healthcare, education, or technology; we argue that cooperatives can offer an alternative approach to meeting a range of human and societal needs. This paper seeks to outline in concrete terms this practical and theoretical contribution from the point of view of the practitioner, utilising a tripartite framework of analysis with a focus on SDGs of high relevance for cooperatives. As a practitioner perspective taken from the heart of ongoing work towards SDG implementation from both a policy and operational perspective, we hope to provide a complimentary account that will be useful for cooperative stakeholders, including scholars and decision makers.

After outlining the theoretical links between cooperative values and principles and featured SDGs, we first discuss the role of cooperative organisations in relation to the SDGs at a global and regional levels. At this level, we argue that key tools and initiatives facilitate a 'trickle-down' effect throughout the cooperative movement, highlighting key examples such as regional cooperative development platforms and their policy linkages. Secondly, at the national level, we incorporate an analysis of large national cooperative enterprises and apexes (such as examples showcased in the 2018 World Cooperative Monitor⁵) and their growing contribution to sustainability. Finally, through an action analysis of local cooperatives at the grassroots level, we demonstrate the major role that these cooperatives are playing to foster sustainable development. We suggest that participation of cooperatives in these three levels, with a special attention to the local and the national level, are crucial to SDG implementation.

1 Harvey, R. (2018) 'Co-ops must act to save the planet, Lord Adebawale tells Practitioners Forum', Coop News, 22 November 2018, Accessed 8 January 2018.

2 Voinea, A. (2018) 'Joseph Stiglitz proposes co-op models as an alternative to trickle-down economics', Coop News, 12 October 2016, Accessed 8 January 2018.

3 World Meteorological Organization, IPCC Summary for Policymakers (2018) 'Global warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty', Geneva, Switzerland, pp.1-32.

4 More information available at <https://www.ica.coop/en/our-work/international-cooperative-development>

5 ICA and EURICSE (2018) *World Cooperative Monitor, Exploring the Cooperative Economy, Report 2018*

We conclude by arguing that cooperative actors are particularly well placed to facilitate an articulation between these three levels of action, due to the specific features of the cooperative model, including the values of democracy and solidarity, as well as the principles of cooperation among cooperatives and concern for community. We propose that strong partnerships between and within cooperative organisations can be instrumental in improving the emerging role for the cooperative movement as a pivotal actor in SDG implementation.

Theoretical framework: what makes the cooperative model well suited to sustainable development?

As key stakeholders such as the United Nations, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the International Co-operative Alliance have argued, the cooperative model is very well placed to address the challenges posed by transitions to sustainability, including those such as poverty, gender inequality or economic and social exclusion.⁶ Three main lines of thought can support this argument. Firstly, the original cooperative values and principles stand in a close and harmonious relation to the aims and objectives set out in the 17 SDGs and 169 indicators. Second, in a similar way, cooperatives can act along what Simel Esim, Manager of the Cooperatives Unit at the ILO in Geneva, has termed a 'triple-bottom line': as social organisations, environmental actors, and economic actors, cooperatives often meet these goals simultaneously. Third and in addition to the triple bottom line, cooperatives also address challenges of governance, by fostering member economic participation and facilitating education and training, ways in which they can solve common problems and enable people to take charge of their own development. In the following brief theoretical section, we first outline the cooperative values and principles that are deeply interlinked with the SDGs, before establishing the interrelation of the triple bottom line to the sustainable development goals, providing a useful starting point to support concrete examples of cooperatives' contributions to the SDGs subsequently outlined in the Paper.

The cooperative values and principles: hardwired for sustainable development

What makes the cooperative model well suited to sustainable development? The first clear relation is at the very root of the definition provided by the International Co-operative Alliance, which defines a cooperative as 'an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.'⁷ A key component implicit is that in their very DNA, cooperatives meet a *diversified* set of needs, which go beyond profit generation or shareholder return. The wide range of needs identified, whilst not specifically clarifying an environmental aim in this case, continue to acknowledge that people, in order to voluntarily achieve well-being, require more than simple economic well-being. The emphasis on the commonalities suggests that one's need does not necessarily lead to the detriment of another, and links strongly to the cooperative value of solidarity.

⁶ International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the International Cooperative Alliance (2014) Joint Paper, *Cooperatives and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Contribution to the Post-2015 Development Debate*

⁷ International Co-operative Alliance (2015), *Guidance Notes to the Co-operative Principles*

The cooperative movement has indeed considered the role of environmental protection as having an implicit recognition within its values and principles. The most recent addition to the cooperative principles, ‘*Concern for community*’, was adopted at the Manchester Congress in September 1995, and included strong debate over the links between the cooperative movement and environmental protection.⁸ The principle reads; “*While focusing on member needs, cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities...*” Cooperatives, therefore, have a tangible relation to the communities within which they are based. Not only do cooperatives arise from a genuine need, when compared with the frequent manufacturing of consumer needs by conventional capitalist companies, but profits stay within and are reinvested by the community. There are incentives therefore, both economic and social, to ensure this investment, in order for a community to come together to meet their needs through the formation of democratically accountable, member-based organisations.

In addition, two more features that solidify the case for sustainability include cooperative longevity (permanence and resistance to short-termism) and cooperation among cooperatives. With respect to longevity, permanence is a concept that links to the discussion of concern for community—as cooperatives are not driven to pack up and move to an alternative location in times of economic hardship.⁹ Though recent critiques of larger cooperatives (such as Mondragon) have focused on the case of expansionism and non-member subsidiaries, it is indeed clear that cooperatives have a strong resilience in the face of economic crisis. They have proven to act according to member’s needs in the long term, rather than push like investor-owned companies to respond to logics of expansionism, economic externalities or shareholder value.¹⁰ Moreover, *cooperation among cooperatives* is a further cooperative principle that makes the cooperative movement uniquely suited to solving problems linked with sustainability, such as climate change, which supersede national governance structures. Exchanges between organisations that share the same cooperative values and principles are more likely to take into account concern for the community and thus sustainability concerns; and it is frequent that they cooperate together to that end through sharing of experience or joint trainings.¹¹ When cooperation takes the shape of coop-to-coop business, cooperatives’ value-based and people-centred approach raise the chances that the value chain will benefit both sides, including smaller suppliers in Southern countries (contrary to many conventional firms’ transactions).

By supporting the growth of the cooperative movement through this principle, cooperative federations can help the values of equality, honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others to become instrumental in the debate on SDG implementation. We argue that these values and principles are closely interlinked with the objectives in the SDGs.

⁸ Hoyt, A. (1996) *And then there were seven: Cooperative Principles Updated*, Cooperative Grocer, University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives.

⁹ Archerd, E. (1996) *Concern for Community*, [Cooperative Education Column](#), Co-op Consumer News












¹⁰ Flecha, R., Ngai, P. (2014) *The challenge for Mondragon: Searching for the cooperative values in times of internationalization*, *Organization*, 21(5), pp. 666-682.

¹¹ See the past [trainings](#) conducted by Swedish cooperative organization *We Effect* for small farmers in East Africa on Climate Change Adaption. For further information see the report; Cooperatives Europe Development Platform (CEDP) (2017) *Good practices in international cooperative development: Why creating a knowledge sharing culture is key for international cooperative development work* Cooperatives Europe, November 2017.










The sustainable development goals

The sustainable development goals were negotiated in light of the missed targets of their immediate predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). They are unique in their commitment to all countries contributing toward their achievement, rather than just low to middle income nations. The SDGs, through a large number of indicators, cover all components of economic activity (agriculture, industry, housing, health, education, production, consumption etc.), and address a wide range of key global concerns (poverty, equality, employment, gender, climate change, peace etc.). Cooperatives can contribute to all SDGs, both because they are involved in the very diverse economic sectors concerned, and because their impact contributes substantially to the global objectives pursued. Of course, a number of SDGs and their indicators may be more particularly well suited to the cooperative identity, for example SDG1 on reducing poverty (in line with their endeavour to meet members' social and economic needs), SDG 8 on decent work (supported by cooperatives' democratic and member-based approach, coupled with their concern for community), SDG 12 on responsible production and consumption and SDG 17 (upheld among others by the principle of cooperation between cooperatives). To highlight this overlap, a short table (Table 1) highlighting the links between the selected SDGs and the cooperative identity and actions is below.¹²

Table 1: Links between cooperatives and the sustainable development goals

SDG	Type of cooperative	Some key contributions
 1 No poverty	All Credit Insurance Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — 10% of world employment — Micro-credit to the poor — Micro-insurance to the poor — Employment for disadvantaged people
 2 Zero hunger and food security	Agricultural Fishery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Estimated 32% of food products market share; providing food security; enhancing diversified agricultural production
 3 Good health and wellbeing	Consumer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Providing quality foodstuff at lower prices
 4 Quality education and lifelong learning	Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Health services including HIV/AIDS to over 100 million patients
 4 Quality education and lifelong learning	All Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Education as one of founding principles — Providing practical training on how to run a cooperative for children and teenagers
 4 Quality education and lifelong learning	Worker / social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Imparting education (in particular through around 2700 cooperatives)
 4 Quality education and lifelong learning	Credit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Providing educational micro-lending and financial education
 4 Quality education and lifelong learning	Consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Providing consumer education
 5 Gender equality	All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — High ratio of women's inclusion in membership and elected positions as shown in several studies
 5 Gender equality	Worker / producers'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Important cooperative networks are exclusively dedicated to women
 6 Clean water and sanitation	Water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Safe water filtration and distribution
 7 Affordable and clean energy	Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Energy channelled to rural and remote areas; generation of renewable energy
 8 Decent work and economic growth (including sustainable tourism)	All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — 10% of world employment; decent, stable and resilient work; market access; more value in hands of members
 8 Decent work and economic growth (including sustainable tourism)	Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Providing employment to disadvantaged people
 8 Decent work and economic growth (including sustainable tourism)	Worker / social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Sustainable tourism, cultural heritage
 8 Decent work and economic growth (including sustainable tourism)	Producers' / freelancers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Providing shared services and social protection
 9 Industry, innovation and infrastructure	Worker / social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Virtually all industrial activities, maintaining enterprises in their communities
 9 Industry, innovation and infrastructure	Agricultural (agro-industries)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Innovating in new business forms and democratizing online platforms
9 Industry, innovation and infrastructure	New types (multi-stakeholder, community, platform etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Promoting energy, water and internet
9 Industry, innovation and infrastructure	Water, energy &	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Promoting energy, water and internet

12 Table Author; ICA (2018) *Cooperatives for 2030: Cooperative initiatives to achieve a more sustainable future for all*, Online Brochure, p. 11.

	10 Reduced inequalities	All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Redistribution of surplus to members, reinvesting in communities, lower wage gap than average Financial inclusion
	11 Sustainable cities and communities	Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upgrading slums and providing affordable housing for a significant part of the population in a number of countries, either through ownership or rental
		All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resilience to disaster and contribution to after-disaster measures
	12 Responsible consumption and production	Agricultural Consumer New food coops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Networks between agricultural and consumer cooperatives increasingly promote responsible consumption, including organic food, food chain and fair trade products, limiting food waste, promoting circular economy
	SDG	Type of cooperative	Some key contributions
	13 Climate action,	Worker / social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Green jobs, protecting natural spaces, dealing with waste recycling
	14 Life below water and	Fishery	
	15 Life on land	Agricultural	
	16 Peace, justice and strong institutions	All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key role after several armed conflicts, participation in reconciliation processes
		Social / worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing involvement in welcoming refugees and addressing their plights
	17 partnerships	All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International development cooperation developing within the cooperative movement and with other actors, including South to South cooperation

+ Cooperatives' role after disasters

Building on the previously highlighted links between cooperatives and the sustainable development goals, and the overlap between the cooperative identity, values and principles and the objectives of sustainable development, the next section addresses actions conducted by cooperative organisations at the global and regional levels that strongly advance the SDGs, employing a practitioner perspective on their policy and knowledge-sharing activities.

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL INITIATIVES FROM THE COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT TO PROMOTE THE SDGS

At the global and regional level, cooperatives do not yet receive full recognition of their ability to be strong players in international development. The recent Framework Partnership Agreement signed between the European Commission and the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) for the period 2016-2020, entitled "Cooperatives in Development - People centred businesses in action", is designed to enhance the profile of cooperatives in development. In coordination with its four regional offices, the ICA, as the global apex for cooperatives, is working hard to demonstrate and communicate the relevance of the cooperative model for sustainable development, through several activities towards visibility, advocacy, networking and knowledge building. By raising the profile of cooperatives as actors in this field, the cooperative movement can become key in implementing the SDGs. At the EU level, a number of political declarations have successfully highlighted the relevance of international cooperative development. For example, within the 2017 European Consensus on Development, a key framework document guiding EU development policy, cooperatives have three distinct mentions which highlight their importance as key actors in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

In the Consensus, the EU recognised that “cooperatives have become instrumental partners in reaching the most vulnerable and marginalised people”, alongside other actors, and there is a pledge of the EU to promote and defend the “space where these development actors can operate safely (...) for achieving sustainable development.”¹³ The EU is further committed to “promote the creation of farmers’ organisations and cooperatives, to address among others, better productivity of family farms, land use rights and traditional farmer-based seed systems”¹⁴, underlining the role cooperatives are playing in poverty eradication and food security. The EU also expresses its commitment “to promote private sector initiatives and social enterprises, cooperatives, and women and youth entrepreneurs, to boost the provision of local services as well as inclusive and green business models”, acknowledging the unique democratic and inclusive nature of the cooperative model.¹⁵

In addition to this, the resolution of the European Parliament on the Consensus on Development calls for “specific EU development strategies to better target, protect and support vulnerable and marginalised groups” such as, among others, small producers and cooperatives... “in order to offer them the same opportunities and rights as everyone else, in line with the principle of leaving no one behind.”¹⁶ At the global level, the United Nations General Assembly has declared 2012 as the International Year of Cooperatives, highlighting the contribution of cooperatives to socio-economic development, particularly their impact on poverty reduction, employment generation and diverse forms of social integration.¹⁷

Building on political recognition through collaborating in international platforms to foster sustainable development

Such recognitions are evidence of the role cooperatives are already playing. In addition to statements at the political level by the United Nations and the European Union, the ICA-EU partnership has cemented the establishment and operation of international and regional platforms bringing together organisations active in international cooperative development. Established in 2008, the Cooperatives Europe Development Platform (CEDP) is a European network of ten cooperative organisations working on development policy and implementation and members of Cooperatives Europe, the European regional office of the International Co-operative Alliance.¹⁸ Similar initiatives have been set in other regions, such as the Cooperatives of the Americas Platform for Development, launched in October 2018, which gathers member organisations from seven Latin American countries. At the international level, the recently established International Cooperative Development Platform (ICDP) has been recognised since 2017 as the global thematic committee on international development within the ICA. The ICDP brings together experts from Cooperative Development Organisations (CDOs) based all around the world, and regularly meets to exchange around themes of common interest and strengthen global collaboration on international cooperative development.¹⁹

¹³ European Union Statement (2017) *The New European Consensus on Development - 'Our world, our dignity, our future'*, Joint Statement by the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States Meeting Within the Council, The European Parliament and the European Commission, June 2017. Pp 1-55.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.29.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.26.

¹⁶ European Parliament (2016) *'Revision of the European Consensus on Development European Parliament resolution of 14 February 2017 on the revision of the European Consensus on Development'*(2016/2094(INI)), Accessed 8 January 2018.

¹⁷ See United Nations General Assembly (2009) [A/RES/64/136, Cooperatives in social development](#), 18 December 2009, Accessed 8 January 2018.

¹⁸ For more information see <https://coopseurope.coop/development/>

¹⁹ See International Cooperative Alliance (2018) *'Cooperative Development Organisations take a new step in Buenos Aires'*, News, ICA Website, 30 Oct 2018.

The benefits of these platforms are multiple. The Cooperatives Europe Development Platform, for example, has been instrumental in improving best practices, through knowledge sharing between partners expert in international cooperative development. Its members outline a key distinction between 'traditional' international development and international cooperative development (ICD)²⁰, which is an enterprise tool that fosters economic, social and environmental sustainability. Workers and practitioners share collective knowledge for business activities, as well as hands-on cooperative approaches with partners in developing countries, with the aim of creating wealth and reducing poverty in a sustainable and participatory way. Cooperative development moves away from a more paternalistic approach of projects merely based on aid and focuses on building people's capacity to work together to strengthen livelihoods and build communities. Guided by the cooperative model and principles, this approach has demonstrated an ability to promote democratic decision-making, shared ownership and solidarity within communities, thereby becoming a tool for sustainable development that can operate effectively in many different contexts and settings.

We argue that at the global and regional level, knowledge building, advocacy and technical support activities of cooperative organisations and apexes act both as a transmitter of ideas that are favourable to sustainability, especially by providing valuable input and expertise to policymakers, and as a centralised support network that can create 'trickle down' effects of cooperative governance. In addition, supporting the start-up and growth of cooperatives is becoming an established way to enable people to take charge of their own development. Working towards a conducive legal and economic environment for cooperatives is also a vital area to which cooperative networks are contributing. On a smaller scale, cooperatives in an incubatory stage, or those who may be further developed, can look to the cooperative movement as a source of support and a partner for knowledge exchange, as innovative practices in cooperation are developed and disseminated in response to sustainability challenges. There can also be a multiplier effect when these platforms are supported through synergies with the work of other cooperative bodies, not dedicated specifically to international development but impacting specific SDGs, such as the Gender Committees existing both at the global and regional levels within the ICA network.

Reflecting on the previous points, SDG 17, which focuses on partnerships and brings together national governments, the international community, civil society, the private sector and other actors, proves of particular relevance for the cooperative movement, reinforced by the aforementioned international platforms. Not only is it important for cooperatives to partner with one another, but they are also well placed to engage with other civil society actors and their own networks so as to achieve sustainability targets. This is particularly important in areas in which progress on the SDGs is lacking (such as food and agriculture), or in channelling and democratising local communities' views towards policymakers, among other valuable advocacy and networking functions. Partnerships with actors such as local authorities, fair trade organisations, or trade union movements, can be instrumental in working together to facilitate the conditions for people to take charge of their own development. These collaborations can be facilitated by the existence of adequate structures that foster exchanges and dialogue both within and outside the cooperative movement.

²⁰ For further information, see Cooperatives Europe Development Platform (CEDP) (2017) *Good practices in international cooperative development: Why creating a knowledge sharing culture is key for international cooperative development work* Cooperatives Europe, November 2017.

Monitoring and pledging at the global and regional levels

The international cooperative movement has also provided different spaces for cooperatives to track progress and to pledge further action on the SDGs. One of the data sources currently available is the World Cooperative monitor, developed with the support of the European Research Institute on Cooperative and Social Enterprises (EURICSE), which reports on the world's largest cooperative and mutual organisations, providing a ranking of the Top 300 and sectorial analysis based on financial data.²¹ The 2018 report includes an additional section on sustainability, analysing how the largest cooperative enterprises and mutuals in the world are moving towards achieving the SDGs in a diversity of sectors, examining documents reported to the UN Global Compact project and Global Reporting Initiative (GRI).²² The decision highlights the growing role that mainstreaming the SDGs play in larger enterprises, providing an excellent overview on the different ways cooperatives are currently engaged in this task and a potential source of inspiration for others. While the reports emphasize the actions that the enterprises want to communicate, not all actions that are highlighted will be fully implemented. By the same token, what has been fully implemented may not necessarily be reported. The following section of this paper discusses cooperatives contributions at this level, many of which have been enacted through pledging a commitment to concrete actions related to the SDGs' targets and indicators, via the Coops for 2030 campaign.

Co-ops for 2030 is a campaign for cooperatives to learn more about the SDGs, commit to pledges to contribute to achieving the SDGs (often through initiatives that are already in place) and report their progress. To these aims, a dedicated website was launched by the ICA in 2016, where cooperative organisations can directly provide data on their commitments to specific SDGs and targets, information then made publicly available to all site visitors. This helps both to raise awareness on cooperatives' SDG contributions toward external audiences, and to assess internally the progress of the movement in that field.²³ It is certainly argued that many cooperatives, particularly the larger cooperative enterprises, may have a lack of awareness on the transformative potential of the cooperative model for the SDGs.²⁴ There is a strong need to communicate interlinkages of cooperative values and principles and the SDGs, as this section on global and regional action on the SDGs demonstrates. In the following section, we discuss the concrete ways this action is being operationalised by large-scale cooperative organisations in different countries.

COOPERATIVES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL AND COMMITMENTS TO SUSTAINABILITY

At the second level of analysis, cooperatives play a role in contributing to sustainability at the national level in a number of different ways. Both cooperative apexes and larger cooperative enterprises, through the contributions of their members, are actively considering how to streamline the SDGs into their activities. For larger cooperative enterprises, as above, this can be in the form of reporting or monitoring, national sustainability reports, or through analysis and reassessment of value chains in production, for instance in annual sustainability reports. For cooperative apexes, integrating objectives championed by the SDGs such as gender and economic solidarity into their member-based structures creates a 'trickle-down' effect, whereby SDG implementation can take place across multiple levels of governance, including at the local level. Before discussing the local level in the following section, this segment assesses contributions at the national level in more detail, in particular with regard to gender equality, sustainable production and consumption, and decent work, three of the key SDGs interlinked with the cooperative values and principles.

²¹ ICA and EURICSE (2018) *World Cooperative Monitor, Exploring the Cooperative Economy*

²² See International Cooperative Alliance (2018) *World Cooperative Monitor: new ranking of the world's 300 largest cooperatives*, News, ICA Website, 23 October 2018.

²³ More information is available at <http://www.coopsfor2030.coop/en>

²⁴ International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the International Cooperative Alliance, Joint Paper (2014), p. 2.

SDG 5 Gender equality

Despite commitments in many international agreements and treaties²⁵ to the principle of gender equality, women worldwide continue to face oppression and discrimination in health, education, political representation, labour market, etc. – with negative consequences for the development of their capabilities and their freedom of choice. Gender inequality is not perpetuated exclusively through control over material resources, but gender norms and stereotypes are reinforced by gendered identities and constrain the behaviour of women and men in unequal ways²⁶. SDG 5 seeks to end all forms of discrimination against women everywhere. It is a particularly important goal, to ensure that other SDGs do not fail to reach half of the world's population. Cooperatives can make a concrete contribution to gender equality by ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities as well as equal rights to economic resources, through their participatory democratic and egalitarian structures.

Such implementation can be found in Uruguay, where the Uruguayan Federation of Housing Cooperatives for Mutual Aid (FUCVAM) which won the World Habitat Award from the Building and Social Housing Foundation, represents more than 22,000 families (2% of households). Since its inception, FUCVAM has pursued the equal role of men and women, reaffirming the concept of gender equity, maintaining that everyone has the same rights and obligations. In the most recently established cooperatives, the secondary role of women is beginning to revert and the election for positions is based on aptitude and includes women on an equal footing. FUCVAM have also released a recent guide addressing the issue of violence against women, which acts as an important educational source.²⁷

Another example is FEDECOVERA, a second-tier co-operative based in Guatemala. Its main activities include working with farmers to improve the quality and increase the production, enhance competitiveness, and provide funding and training for technical support. In 2016, FEDECOVERA had 43 member cooperatives and 33 organized groups, including more than 25,000 small producers. 75% of the activities of the plant nursery are carried out by women. In addition, FEDECOVERA encourages the participation of women in the top-level management of cooperative organisations, developing their skills. Thanks to growth and reinvestment, the members of the Santa Maria Cooperative decided to buy a new production area in 2010 to develop their own business, produce more and diversify their income. As such, incorporating gender equality within a cooperative structure can be seen to lead to both direct and indirect social and economic benefits.

In the region of Africa, the Nigerian Co-operative Federation of Nigeria (CFN) has also committed to SDG 5 by conducting interactive meetings and consultations with both Federal and State departments of Co-operatives, which play a large role in facilitating women's participation in cooperatives. A CFN representative described how this would be achieved, stating: "*We will meet with women leaders of the States. We have women leaders of political parties who are good mobilizers that I will work with to achieve the involvement of women in cooperative societies*". Members claim that this can be taken further and involve leadership of the cooperative unions and apexes in sensitization, in collaboration with some selected State Departments of cooperatives in the field of advocacy.

25 The most relevant are: the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1979; the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993; the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA), 1995; the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, 2000, which recognises women's role in peace building and the impact of armed conflict on women. There are also several regional agreements that commit governments to action: the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará), 1994; the Maputo Protocol, adopted by the African Union in 2003; the Istanbul Convention, 2011.

26 Ridgeway, C. (2011). *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World*. Oxford University Press.

27 See FUCVAM (2017) *Guía contra la violencia sobre la mujer*.

SDG 12 Sustainable production and consumption

Decoupling economic growth from resource use is one of the most complex challenges facing humanity at present, with many academics such as Jason Hickel arguing that a post-growth society and economic redistribution programmes are crucial to address the twin challenges of climate change and environmental degradation.²⁸ Cooperatives can make concrete contributions to a reformed approach to production and consumption by ensuring the equitable management and efficient use of natural resources through their democratized structures. At the local level, cooperatives support economic localization and the reinvestment of surplus within communities, and at the level of the larger cooperative enterprises or cooperative apexes, cooperatives implement and replicate cooperative values and principles across global value chains. In Europe, this can take the form of cooperative supermarkets, which attempt to source products from the global South in a sustainable manner. At the national level, we discuss diverse examples of cooperative apexes making a difference in their countries, selected from around the world.

Based in Brazil, the cooperative network *Justa trama* is made up of workers organized in solidarity economy projects. The core focus of the activity of the cooperatives is a production chain, a process that begins in the agro-ecological sowing of cotton right up to the commercialization of pieces of clothing. *Justa trama* has 600 members and partners from five states, and the experience was carried out in accordance with the principles of solidarity economy and fair trade. The network is made up of eight economic solidarity enterprises - cooperatives, associations and groups of self-managed workers - distributed in various regions of Brazil and motivated by the search for an alternative income and decent work. Members are working to be committed to environmentally sustainable management practices and with the guarantee of decent working conditions and gender equality. The *Justa trama* network offered professional training and the improvement of the quality of life of the family farmers and workers who are part of it. The impact of this is reflected in the increased income of network participants and ultimately in the preservation of natural resources and social inclusion.

In the region of Asia-Pacific, sustainable production and consumption is also addressed through cooperatives, with a key example of the Maldives Fishermen's Association. The Association are professionalising the Maldivian fishery industry by educating and certifying 30% of Maldivian fishing skippers targeted by the end of 2020 for the sustainable development of the fishery industry. Their initiative is in line with target 12.3 to halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer level and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses, by 2030. In addition to actions on ground which impact the value chain, reporting and monitoring also plays a key role in measuring progress on SDG 12. Further afield, a key example of sustainability reporting is the CBH Group in Australia, which commits to including sustainability aspects into their annual performance reports to all members. This is in line with the global goals' target 12.6; to encourage companies, especially large and trans-national companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle.

This reporting practice is also largely implemented by European cooperative organisations, such as Confcooperative in Italy and the UK Cooperative Group Ltd, who release annual sustainability reports. For the UK cooperative group, they wish to continue a longstanding commitment to Fairtrade, measuring and monitoring the sales of Fairtrade products. For Confcooperative, the sustainability reports contain the scope, results and objectives of its activities supporting cooperatives who act to build a more responsible, fair and sustainable society. Another key role played by cooperatives in Europe in favour of sustainable production and consumption is providing outlets for smallholder cooperatives from the South to sell their products at a fair price, sourced with decent and fair conditions. The well-known Divine Chocolate, of the Kuapa Kokoo cocoa farmers' co-operative in Ghana, is one example of

²⁸ Hickel, J. (2017) *The Divide*, London: Penguin Random House.

this, having been stocked by large retailers in the United Kingdom and other EU member states. The rise of cooperative supermarkets in European Member States have been a recent development in this regard, and their popularity is growing as traditional consumers become more aware of inequalities within the global food value chain. At the other end of the value chain, a recent Oxfam report has shown how such smallholders can command a higher share of the consumer price (up to 26% increases) when organised into producer cooperatives.²⁹

In addition to monitoring and reporting, labelling and certification is another important step to responsible consumption and production. In Africa, Oromia Coffee Farmers' Cooperative Union (OCFCU), Ethiopia is a smallholder coffee grower owned cooperative union. Members of OCFCU are the growers, processors, and suppliers of high quality, organic Arabica coffee for the direct export. OCFCU promotes Fairtrade for socially and environmentally sustainable techniques and long-term relationships between producers, traders, and consumers. Oromia Coffee Farmer's Cooperative Union aims to help small-scale coffee farmers to take advantage of the Fairtrade coffee market. Such an example demonstrates the important role that cooperative apexes can play in facilitating access to markets for small-scale producers, which simultaneously has beneficial impacts on employment and decent work, another key SDG relevant for the national level.

SDG 8 Decent work

SDG8 aims to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. Cooperatives, through the cooperative principles of voluntary and open membership and democratic member control, have been instrumental in shaping working conditions which are aligned to the values of decent work agenda, supported by international organisations such as the ILO, who outline, through Recommendation 193, the central role that the cooperative model occupies in this regard.³⁰ Through the provision of a collective voice and negotiation power for their members with the public authorities, or by providing decent work opportunities through training and education programmes, cooperatives make a strong contribution to economic and social rights.

In the region of Asia Pacific, for example, Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative Limited (IFFCO) has pledged on the Coops for 2030 platform to implement afforestation projects on waste lands in 29,419 hectares, which will also generate employment for rural populations. This will contribute towards target 8.5; to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value by 2030. In a similar way, the National Cooperative Bank Limited (NCBL) in Nepal³¹ intends to raise awareness about SDGs by incorporating them into their training activities. They also facilitate skill development training to linkup with micro finance, self-employment loan to create and increase employment, expand financial access and inclusion. The initiatives taken under this action area strongly impact target 8.3; viz. to promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small-and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services.

²⁹ Willoughby, R. & Gore, T. (2018) *Ripe for Change, Ending Human Suffering in Supermarket Supply Chains*, Oxfam International, June 2018. p. 82.

³⁰ International Labour Organization (ILO) and 'Recommendation 193 of 2002 concerning the promotion of cooperatives', International Labour Conference, Geneva.

³¹ National Cooperative Bank Limited (NCBL) (2017) [Annual Report](#), Nepal, NCBL Website.

Returning to the African region, in Nigeria, the ICA member Odua Cooperative Conglomerate Limited registered a Coop Food trademark for food processing in Nigeria. They have ventured into production of plantain flour and a range of related products to provide healthy and nutritious food. The farm will not only provide food to Nigerians Locals only but also eyeing the international market, enhancing Nigerian industry access to international markets, as well as food security and safety in Nigeria and globally. Contributing also to SDG 8, the plantain farm will create secure employment and encourage entrepreneurship among women as well as young people. They intend to source raw materials from the immediate environment and farms across the region.

As outlined by these examples across different regions, cooperative apexes play an important role as an interlocutor for their members, providing invaluable services through knowledge sharing, capacity building, networking and training, support on cooperative governance, or technical support. By acting as a central hub, apexes fulfil an important cooperative principle of cooperation among cooperatives, bringing the cooperative movement together to tackle challenges such as poverty, gender discrimination, social exclusion or environmental degradation. This section has assessed the national level and the possible contributions of larger cooperative enterprises to the SDGs, focusing on three key SDGs and demonstrating a number of examples. The following section will look at another key operative level for cooperative governance, the local level.

COOPERATIVES AND THE LOCAL LEVEL: COMMUNITY ACTORS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Cooperatives may arguably be at their most effective at the local level, where they form and bring together local communities through daily interactions with members and non-members. The cooperative model also lends itself very well to localised economic models, due to the reinvestment of surplus and member-based economic participation. A further cooperative principle, concern for community, also lends itself to the local level, as cooperatives can invigorate the spaces in which they are based when they focus on activities within the community. Cooperatives at this level often take the form of primary cooperatives and depending on the sector and the type of cooperative (user, producer, worker, or multi-stakeholder), these activities can take the form of community investment, community education, or the provision of services and employment. This section discusses the impact of cooperatives at the local level, utilising examples from the network of the ICA with a particular focus on SDGs 5, 1 and 2.

SDG 5 Gender equality

In addition to the examples highlighting cooperatives' contribution to gender equality at the national level, two examples in the African region include cooperatives in Malawi and in the north African country of Morocco. In Malawi, Agricultural and Marketing Co-operative Societies (AMCOS) are demonstrably powerful local networks of economic, social and political empowerment for women in Malawi. As group-based ventures, AMCOS bring to their members the benefits of joining forces with others. Their central aim is to provide services for smallholders unable to access international markets. Apart from being able to access economies of scale as providers of services, producers or as consumers, participating in AMCOS as a member, elected leader or manager also brings with its enhanced status and voice in the community and society in general. With this mandate, AMCOS have been a route to promoting gender equality in Malawi, through ensuring the greater economic and social participation for Women.

Another key example of local cooperatives contributing to gender equality includes the Ajddigue Women's Co-operative in Morocco. Ajddigue in Amazigh (the Berber language) is the word for flower. The women, who are members, produce, package and sell Argan oil together, with the cooperative helping over 100 women. The numerous health benefits of Moroccan Argan Oil are well known, and Ajddigue is one in a network of up to thirty cooperatives, with positive social and environmental impacts focused upon women's empowerment and reductions in deforestation.³² This economic participation has been a counter to traditional gender roles, as women in Morocco were often prevented from working outside of their homes and were dependent on the income of their spouses. Argan has become a sector of high national and international interest and heritage, not only for the unique and valuable product but also due to its socio-economic importance. The rise of the women's cooperatives is seen as an opportunity and example for emancipation, independency and development of the rural women. Ajddigue has gained a certificate for Fairtrade and organic production. The women produced 16 tonnes of Argan oil last year and had a turnover of 1.7m dirhams (156,000 Euros). Profits are shared between the cooperatives' 60 women according to the amount of oil they produced, ensuring the cooperative practice of dividends relative to interactions with the organisation.

SDG 1 Eradicating poverty

Poverty is a multi-dimensional phenomenon with complex and interlinked causes. Authors such as Amartya Sen and international institutions such as UNDP agree that it refers to more than simply a lack of income, incorporating the capacity to live a dignified and fulfilling life, including protective economic, political, socio-cultural, human, and economic dimensions.³³ SDG 1 calls for an end to poverty in all its manifestations by 2030. It also aims to ensure social protection for the poor and vulnerable, increase access to basic services and support people harmed by climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters. Cooperatives can play a crucial role in poverty reduction, and cooperative scholars have often claimed, with differing levels of agreement, that cooperatives have the advantages of identifying economic opportunities for the poor, empowering the disadvantaged to defend their interests, and providing security to the poor by allowing them to convert individual risks into collective risks.³⁴ It's an approach which is highly relevant in poorer regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, although the provision of services and welfare in the global North can also have an impact on poverty reduction. It's important to note that these impacts are greater if cooperative values and principles are respected and implemented.

A key example of cooperatives tackling poverty concerns *Wabi Burkitu*, a cooperative in Ethiopia, where a joint UN programme provides training in agricultural techniques, improved seeds and time-saving machinery, while also granting loans and encouraging saving. Most women from the Oromia region in Ethiopia have grouped themselves into cooperatives, to leverage on the cooperative model's added advantage to curb hunger. Through joining women's saving and credit cooperatives, they save small amounts of money which after some time, allow them to obtain loans. With the loans, they have improved their farming methods to uses of oxen to till the land, making use of the improved seeds they get from the cooperative to plant. One woman describes how this demonstrates a positive feedback loop; "Now that we are getting surplus crop, I harvest and prepare the produce to sell in the market. I go to the market three times a week, and each time I make about 1,000 Birr (EUR 31).

³² Hicks, C. (2016) 'Free, local and special': argan oil co-ops booming in Morocco' *The Guardian*, Trade & Development, 7 June 2016, Accessed 8 January 2018.

³³ Afranaa Kwapong, Nana & Hanisch, Markus, (2013) *Cooperatives and Poverty Reduction: A Literature Review*, Journal of Rural Cooperation, Hebrew University, Center for Agricultural Economic Research, vol. 41(2), pp. 1-34.

³⁴ International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the International Cooperative Alliance, Joint Paper, '[Cooperatives and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Contribution to the Post-2015 Development Debate](#)', April 2014

Today we have one cow, one ox, which we rent in return for crops, as well as 10 sheep and two donkeys. We eat what we like and sending my son to school is not a problem. We can access bank services and we know of opportunities to improve our lives. For me, even the ability to go out, work outside the house and be an active member of a women's working group is new, and it means a lot." In addition to poverty reduction, *Wabi Burkitu* is also contributing to gender equality through such methods.

Concerning collective risk and financial security, the credit union model has been instrumental in bringing people out of poverty, particular in regard to tackling debt and usury. The initial roots of the credit union model came from thinkers such as Raiffeisen, a pioneer of savings and credit cooperatives. Facing dire living conditions in rural areas and exploitation from landowners and moneylenders, the members of these cooperatives collectively managed their savings and anyone who needed money and support was able to borrow at advantageous rates from the cooperative. A key example of such a network today is found in Kenya, with Kenya Savings and Credit Co-operatives (KUSCCO). With a well-founded need to provide housing as a basic need and worthwhile investment, many credit and savings societies in Kenya have facilitated the purchasing of plots of land for their members. By offering friendly payment terms, the SACCOs have made it possible for ordinary members to own parcels of land for the construction of residential homes. Unfortunately, insufficient funds, and inability to qualify for long term loans and mortgages, have rendered most of the members incapable of developing the plots. It is against this background that KUSCCO Housing Fund was conceptualized in 1996 to serve SACCOs and SACCO members, showing the ability of the model to adapt to changing needs in favour of poverty alleviation.

SDG 2 Ending hunger

Recent evidence continues to signal that the number of hungry people in the world is growing, reaching 821 million in 2017 or one in every nine people, according to *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018*.³⁵ Limited progress is also being made in addressing the multiple forms of malnutrition, ranging from growth defects in children to obesity in adult life, with multiple negative impacts upon human health. SDG 2 aims to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture by 2030. Conflict and extreme weather events linked to climate change are among the key factors causing this reversal in progress, despite previous gains in food security and nutrition since the 1990s.

Cooperatives can be a solution to these drivers of food insecurity. With regard to extreme weather events and the development of resilience within the agricultural sector, the cooperative model provides a unique form of collective insurance and the collective management of risk, including benefits for food security for smallholder farmers in the form of access to markets, the ability to reinvest in smallholdings, and higher shares of the consumer price.³⁶ In addition to climate change adaption or mitigation, the restructuring of the global food system, including the sustainability of value chains, could have a positive impact on food security and by extension on reducing world hunger. The cooperative model is strongly represented within the agricultural sector, meaning it is uniquely suited to meet these aims.

35 [FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO \(2018\) *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018, Building climate resilience for food security and nutrition*, Rome.](#)

36 See International Cooperative Alliance (2018) '[Small-scale farmers achieve a 26% higher share of consumer price when organized in cooperatives an Oxfam report states](#)', News, ICA Website, 29 August 2018 and FAO, IFAD & WFP (2012), '[Agricultural cooperatives: paving the way for food security and rural development](#)' 2012 International Year of Cooperatives.

In the Middle Eastern region, such cooperative enterprises dedicated to improving food security include the Economic and Social Development Center of Palestine (ESDC)³⁷, which is committed to strengthening the resilience and adaptive capacity of small-scale farmers through improving service delivery capacity of cooperatives and building cooperatives' production, business, institutional capacity and technical aspects of their livelihood and business. It contributes to target 2.1 to end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round by 2030.

In the African region, an additional example is the Shalom Co-operative in Rwanda, where Agriculture Co-operatives are helping smallholder producer members (women living with HIV/AIDS), to access inputs, markets at better prices, training and technology through the power of the collective effort. Cooperatives bring people together to help themselves and bring their resources together in one basket and in return this creates economic opportunities that promotes the standards of living of the members. With a gender dimension, the Shalom Co-operative is also contributing to SDG 5. Evidently, through examples such as the those outlined here, local cooperatives at the grassroots level are taking an emerging role as actors for sustainability, and as critical actors in international development objectives.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that cooperatives at every level of governance are already working towards the objectives and targets indicated by the sustainable development goals. Whilst there is further work to be done, both in implementing the sustainable development goals and communicating the relevance of the cooperative model for sustainability, this paper has sought to demonstrate the different ways in which the cooperative movement does, and can continue to, work toward these aims. From the view of the practitioner, we have covered at both the practical and theoretical level a number of examples of contributions that cooperatives are making to the SDGs, with a tri-partite framework of analysis and a focus on SDGs of highest relevance for cooperatives, namely gender equality, decent work, sustainable production and consumption, ending hunger, and eradicating poverty. However, this selection does not imply that other SDGs cannot be successfully tackled by cooperatives, as demonstrated for instance by an upcoming research report from the Cooperative's Europe Development Platform, regarding peacebuilding and SDG16 Peace, justice and strong institutions, which highlights how cooperatives can act as a source of trust and build bridges between groups in conflict.

In addition, SDG 17 discusses the strength of partnerships. Through cooperation among cooperatives, a core cooperative principle, we propose that strong partnerships between and within cooperative organisations can be instrumental in improving the emerging role for the cooperative movement as a pivotal actor in SDG implementation.

We see this reflected at the global and regional level, where we have argued that key tools and initiatives facilitate a 'trickle-down' effect throughout the cooperative movement, highlighting key examples such as regional cooperative development platforms and their policy linkages. Not only is it important for cooperatives to join forces, but external stakeholders such as civil society and Fairtrade organisations, or Local Authorities, also represent valuable partners for many activities, including to democratically channel the views and needs of individuals towards policymakers and advocate for an enabling environment for people-centred businesses. Secondly, at the national level, we incorporated a brief analysis of large national cooperative enterprises and apexes (such as examples from the Coops for 2030 campaign) and their growing contribution to sustainability, which in turn has positive fallouts

37 FAO (2018) [Country Programming Framework for Palestine 2018-2022](#), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Jerusalem.

for their membership, as well as a potential for replication at a lower level. Further, through an action analysis of cooperatives at the grassroots level, we demonstrated the emerging role that these are playing as actors for sustainability, particularly to foster development benefitting local communities.

We argue that cooperative actors are particularly well placed to facilitate an articulation between the three levels demarcated in this paper, due to the specific features of the cooperative model, including the values of democracy and solidarity, as well as the principles of cooperation among cooperatives and concern for community. Through a discussion of each of these interlinked levels of governance and the theoretical relevance of cooperative values and principles to sustainability, including the 'triple-bottom line', we aim to show why the cooperative movement represents a particularly strong actor for the implementation of the sustainable development goals. Strong partnerships between and within cooperative organisations can therefore become instrumental in strengthening the role for the movement as a crucial actor in SDG implementation.

Starting from this promising perspective, there is much to be enhanced. Local cooperatives can reach out at the higher levels of governance for greater support and knowledge sharing. National and larger cooperative enterprises can reassess strategies for sustainability to ensure that the SDGs are streamlined within operating procedures. Both types of organisation can commit to pledges that will ensure a significant contribution to reaching the sustainable development targets. At the apex level, significant work remains to be done in supporting the start-up and growth of cooperatives as an established way to enable people to take charge of their own development. Working towards a conducive legal and economic environment for cooperatives is also a vital area in which more efforts are needed. At the practitioner level, better communication of the links between the SDGs and cooperative values and principles, particularly in emerging fields of thinking such as post-growth or going beyond GDP, is also an area of interest. In all of these areas, the cooperative movement will continue to work to ensure that human needs and capabilities can be met and will continue to champion its quintessential values and principle in a democratic and participatory way.

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