



International Year
of Cooperatives
Cooperatives Build
a Better World



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International
Cooperative
Alliance
130 YEARS

Information Note and Provisional Programme

International Symposium on Cooperatives and International Law

Peace, Social Justice and Sustainable Development

24 October 2025



09h30 – 16h30 CET

The Peace Palace, The Hague, Netherlands

Hybrid event organized in cooperation with International Cooperative Banking Association and the ICA-EU Financial Framework Partnership Agreement

I. Are Cooperatives actors of International Law?

A cooperative is an autonomous associations of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise. Cooperatives are regulated by national cooperative laws, which themselves are grounded in the universally accepted cooperative principles articulated by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) through its General Assembly representing 700 million cooperators¹ in 1995. These principles, are consistently referenced and applied across jurisdictions and are gradually acquiring normative weight at the international level. Under Article 38(1)(c) of the Statute of the International Court of Justice, general principles of law recognized by civilized nations constitute a source of international law, and the cooperative principles arguably fall within this category as they shape legislation, policy, and practice worldwide. Though established under domestic legislation, their function as actors in international law has been increasing with the potential to assist in achieving the principle of sustainable development. Furthermore, intergovernmental bodies such as the International Labour Organization and the United Nations acknowledge cooperatives as essential stakeholders in achieving global objectives, particularly in sustainable development, social and environmental justice, and labor rights.

Notably the ILO Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation (No. 193) that includes the cooperative principles in its text, and the corresponding obligations of ILO Member States enshrined in Article 19 of the ILO constitution, provide sound legal grounds for cooperatives and their international movement to play an important role in promoting international law and advancing genuine cooperation internationally. Additionally, the *Idea and Practice of Organizing Shared Interests in Cooperatives* has been inscribed in the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage² (ICH) by UNESCO in 2016, thus safeguarding the fundamentals of the cooperative type through the UNESCO ICH Convention³ of 2003, evidencing that cooperatives are as international an actor, as they are local.

¹ The Constitution of the ILO includes a reference to the term “cooperators” in its Article 12 on Relations with International Organizations. ILO set up its Cooperative Unit in 1920, a year after its formal inception in 1919, as a means to liaise with the cooperative movement and its own constituents. A cooperator is understood to be anybody who holds a membership of a cooperative. The number of cooperative memberships today is estimated to be approximately 1 billion.

https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=1000:62:0::NO:62:P62_LIST_ENTRIE_ID:2453907:NO

² <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/idea-and-practice-of-organizing-shared-interests-in-cooperatives-01200>

³ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>



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II. The intersection of Sustainable Development and International Law, and Cooperatives

The international community stands at a crossroads on several matters concerning multilateralism, international law, peace and sustainable development. 2025 happens to be the International Year of Cooperatives proclaimed by the UN General Assembly for the second time. The reliance of the international community in upholding the values and principles of cooperatives of all types and in all nations, through this proclamation which is perhaps unique to cooperatives as an enterprise type, affirms the role that cooperatives play in addressing the aforementioned concerns of the international community. In its judgments and advisory opinions, the International Court of Justice has consistently reinforced sustainable development as a foundational principle of international law, most famously in the *Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros* case, where the Court emphasized that joint resource utilization must reconcile economic use with environmental protection, reflecting the core of sustainable development as the balanced integration of development and environmental stewardship. More recently, in the July 23, 2025 advisory opinion on states' obligations regarding climate change, the ICJ significantly deepened this concept. It affirmed that states have binding obligations, not only under key climate treaties such as the UNFCCC, the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement, but also under customary international law, to take "appropriate, substantial, rapid, and sustainable" measures to prevent transboundary environmental harm. The opinion explicitly invoked sustainable development, along with principles such as common but differentiated responsibilities, intergenerational equity, the precautionary approach, and equitable burden-sharing, as guiding norms in interpreting and applying international environmental obligations.

Cooperatives are unique economic and social enterprises governed by values of self-help, solidarity, and democratic participation. Unlike conventional corporations that primarily pursue profit maximization, cooperatives prioritize the well-being of their members and communities. The law plays a central role in shaping and safeguarding this distinct identity. At the national level, cooperative law provides the legal frameworks that determine how cooperatives are formed, managed, and regulated. Legal provisions concerning membership rights, governance structures, financial reporting, taxation, and dissolution ensure transparency and accountability while preserving autonomy. Beyond domestic frameworks, there is growing recognition of the need to harmonize cooperative laws with principles of international law. Such alignment enables cooperatives to transcend borders, engage in cross-national trade, and participate in global efforts to achieve sustainable development goals. In this sense, law is not merely an instrument of regulation but a facilitator of cooperative growth, ensuring that cooperatives remain both competitive in the global economy and faithful to their social mission.

Public international law traditionally governs relations among states. However, in the 21st century, non-state actors such as cooperatives are increasingly relevant in shaping transnational norms. Cooperatives, rooted in local communities, are uniquely positioned to address global challenges such as poverty, inequality, and climate change. Their contributions are closely aligned with the principles enshrined in international legal instruments, including the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Cooperatives embody international law's concern with dignity, justice, and solidarity. They serve as vehicles for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in areas such as decent work, affordable housing, financial inclusion, responsible consumption, and quality education. The ILO Recommendation 193 provides a normative framework that integrates cooperative principles into international labor standards. This illustrates how public international law not only recognizes cooperatives but also affirms their role as agents of peace and social justice.



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Against this backdrop, we invite you to mark your calendars for the **International Symposium on Cooperatives and International Law**, a gathering that bring together policymakers, legal experts, cooperative leaders, academics, and advocates on the day that marks the entry into force of the Charter of the United Nations in 1945,. This event will provide a timely platform to explore the evolving role of cooperatives within the framework of international law, highlighting their potential to foster peace, advance social justice, and contribute to sustainable development worldwide.

III. Framing the issues

The topics to feature in the symposium begin with “public international law” and the role of the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, the International Court of Justice and further explore the “interaction of cooperatives and their laws with international law”. At the same time, also to feature is the “real life or the local application of cooperative law”. Other topics include, the law and reality about “education and cooperatives”, international legal advocacy on “regulating the platform economy”, a mention of the recent oral hearings concerning the protection of the Right to Strike with the scope and meaning of the ILO Convention 87 (1948), reflections on the UN Digital Compact and Pact for Future, “global perspectives on cultural heritage with lens of the legal safeguardings the designated elements have”, “cooperatives and capital, taxation, and banks” and of course, “regional harmonization of cooperative law” which will feature in part, the ICA-EU funded Legal Framework Analysis.

A special highlight of the event will be the launch of the CHI–ICA International Legal Research Analysis Initiative (ILRAI) on Housing Cooperatives, the first comprehensive global analysis of laws and policies governing cooperative housing. The report examines key legal dimensions such as governance, member rights, financing, taxation, dispute resolution, and regulatory frameworks providing valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners.

In addition to the place to exchange of knowledge, the Symposium will also act serve as a platform to frame the issues that matter most to cooperatives, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges they face in today’s evolving economic and social landscape. By bringing together policymakers, legal experts, and cooperative leaders, the discussions will underscore how better-designed legal frameworks can strengthen the cooperative enterprise model, ensuring it remains resilient, inclusive, and competitive.

Central to the dialogue is the recognition that cooperatives rooted in democratic governance and community benefit require supportive regulatory environments that enable innovation, access to finance, and fair participation in markets.

Participation: Register before 20 October 2025

Online Registration Link: https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_zVeSBL6yQiu_72sa2Qt0dQ

Onsite Registration Link: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf_D95SAUkA7J2PdlI2oThq0h8TGqV1sQ8pRzIDXFzeBS-m3Q/viewform

Solidarity Partner of the International Symposium on Cooperatives and International Law



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