



**International Year
of Cooperatives**

Cooperatives Build
a Better World



Committee for
the promotion
and advancement
of cooperatives



Building a Better World Together: Cooperative Contributions to the SDGs

Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels





SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 16 (SDG 16) LIES AT THE HEART OF THE UN 2030 AGENDA, RECOGNIZING THAT PEACE, JUSTICE, AND INCLUSION ARE BOTH ENDS IN THEMSELVES AND ESSENTIAL ENABLERS OF ALL OTHER DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES.

The [2025 Global Progress Report on SDG 16](#) offers a sobering but important picture of where the world stands on peace, justice, and inclusion. Its central message is clear: progress exists, but it is uneven, fragile, and far too slow to meet the 2030 Agenda¹. The report stresses that no **SDG 16 target is fully on track**, and that setbacks in peace, justice, and inclusion continue to undermine broader sustainable development. At the same time, the report highlights meaningful gains in areas such as access to information on laws and justice systems and the spread of independent national human rights institutions. These advances show that progress is possible, but only when supported by sustained political commitment, stronger institutions, and better data systems.

Nevertheless, global peace and security conditions have deteriorated significantly². According to the [OHCHR SDG 16 Progress Report](#), forced displacement has reached unprecedented levels, with over 120 million people displaced from their homes worldwide, more than double the number recorded in 2015, driven by conflict, instability, and climate-related pressures. Conflict dynamics are intensifying and spreading into more densely populated areas, amplifying human suffering. In 2024 alone, at least 48,000 conflict-related deaths were recorded, reflecting a sharp escalation in violence. These trends are compounded by increasing risks to civic space: 502 human rights defenders, journalists, and trade unionists were killed across 44 countries, alongside 123 enforced disappearances, underscoring the direct relationship between violence, weakened institutions, and declining accountability.

Beyond conflict, violence remains pervasive. According to the IEP Global Peace Index (2024) reports, the world is witnessing the highest number of active conflicts since the Second World

War, alongside a sharp rise in battle-related deaths³. While global homicide rates have declined modestly, they remain far from the SDG target of a 50 percent reduction by 2030. These patterns point to a broader erosion of safety and security, both within and outside conflict settings⁴.

This moment calls for a deeper understanding of what “peace” truly entails. As articulated by peace scholar Johan Galtung, peace is not simply the absence of violence, what he terms “negative peace”, but also the presence of justice, inclusion, cooperation, and equality, or “positive peace.”⁵ The global efforts have largely focused on reducing visible forms of violence, but far less attention has been given to building the social, economic, and institutional conditions that sustain long-term stability. The current state of SDG 16 reflects this imbalance: formal frameworks may exist, but the lived experience of justice, trust, and inclusion remains uneven and, in many contexts, is deteriorating.

Access to justice remains severely constrained and unevenly distributed. In 2023, approximately 3.7 million people, or 31 percent of the global prison population, were held in pretrial detention without sentencing, representing a deterioration from 2015 levels and indicating persistent inefficiencies in judicial systems. Institutions themselves are under growing strain as civic space is shrinking, with attacks on journalists and human rights defenders continuing at alarming levels; on average, one killing or disappearance every 14 hours. Corruption remains widespread, and public trust in institutions is fragile⁶. At the same time, SDG 16 suffers from significant data gaps, with fewer than 30 percent of indicators supported by sufficient trend data, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings. This weakens governments’ and stakeholders’ ability to design targeted and effective responses.

These failures are not simply statistical. They reflect a deeper **breakdown of positive peace** – the social justice, trust, and cooperation that Galtung argued are needed to prevent violence in the first place. Instead of narrowing inequalities and building shared institutions, today’s trends are widening rifts between communities and states in line with the observed global rise in militarisation and escalating cross-border conflicts.

Taken together, the [2025 Global Progress Report on SDG 16](#) is both a warning and a roadmap. The warning is that SDG 16 is drifting off course: violence is rising in some areas, access to justice is still too limited, and inclusion remains incomplete. The roadmap is that progress is possible where states invest in accountable institutions, protect human rights, expand legal identity, strengthen data systems, and create space for real participation. The report’s deeper message is that peace, justice, and inclusion are inseparable. None can be achieved

1 The 2025 Global Progress Report on SDG 16: <https://www.undp.org/publications/global-progress-report-sustainable-development-goal-16-indicators-peaceful-just-and-inclusive-societies>.

2 OHCHR SDG 16 Progress Report: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/hrindicators/2025sgovernments_and_stakeholders_abilitydg16reportmedium.pdf

3 The IEP Global Peace Index (2024) report: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/highest-number-of-countries-engaged-in-conflict-since-world-war-ii/#:~:text=There%20are%20currently%2056%20conflicts%2C,most%20since%20the%20GPI%E2%80%99s%20inception>

4 UN DESA Statistics Department: SDG 16 Report: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025/goal-16/#:~:text=per%20cent%20in%202024%2C%20with>

5 Journal of Peace Research: https://www2.kobe-u.ac.jp/~alexroni/IPD%202015%20readings/IPD%202015_7/Galtung_Violence.%20Peace.%20and%20Peace%20Research.pdf

6 Ibid

in a lasting way without the others, and all depend on human rights being placed at the center of implementation.

Despite grim indicators, there are avenues for renewal. The very organizations and mechanisms that underpin SDG 16: strong institutions, inclusive laws, and responsive governance, must be reformed in more participatory forms. As UNDESA emphasises, “Urgent action is needed to protect lives and restore trust through peacebuilding, justice reform and accountability. This requires strengthening institutions,

promoting inclusive governance, protecting civic space, and addressing root causes of conflict and injustice. Sustained political will and enhanced international cooperation are essential to drive lasting change.”⁷ This means investing in institutions that people see as fair and effective, and rooting out corruption and illicit power flows that erode peace. Cooperatives offer that model.

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE: ADVANCING PEACE, ACCOUNTABILITY AND INCLUSION

Cooperatives offer a distinct model of enterprise that embeds democratic governance, accountability, and social cohesion at its core. Built on the principle of **one member, one vote**, they align decision-making with members’ and the community’s needs rather than external profit interests. In this sense, cooperatives are not only democratic institutions; they are also **schools of democracy**, where people practice participation, deliberation, voting, and collective responsibility in their everyday economic lives. This regular experience of democratic engagement helps build the habits, skills, and expectations that sustain more open, inclusive, and resilient societies. It strengthens transparency, participation, and collective oversight, directly advancing SDG 16.7 (inclusive decision-making) and SDG 16.6 (effective, accountable institutions).

The cooperative model has long been associated with peaceful development. Since the 19th century, cooperatives have been grounded in the values of self-help, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity, promoting the idea that progress can be achieved through collective and peaceful action. This commitment is reinforced by **Principle 7: Concern for Community**, which calls on cooperatives to address structural drivers of conflict, such as inequality and exclusion, thereby contributing to SDG 16.1 (reducing violence)⁸. As schools of democracy, cooperatives also deepen civic culture from the ground up, making participation normal, shared power practical, and exclusion harder to sustain.

This peacebuilding role has been progressively articulated within the global movement, from the 1984 ICA Congress in Hamburg to subsequent reflections on cooperative values in Stockholm (1988) and Tokyo (1992), culminating in the 2019 ICA Kigali Declaration on **Positive Peace**⁹. This

declaration recognises cooperatives as contributors not only to the absence of conflict, but to the presence of justice, inclusion, and trust, the core foundations of peaceful and resilient societies.

Cooperatives also contribute to the realization of positive peace through the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage, understood here as the shared social practices, democratic traditions, values, and knowledge systems of outstanding universal value that communities inherit, sustain, and pass across generations. Established during the International Year of Cooperatives 2025, the [ICA’s Cooperative Cultural Heritage \(CCH\)](#) programme builds upon UNESCO’s 2016 inscription of the “Idea and practice of organizing shared interests in cooperatives” on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity under the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage¹⁰. In recognizing cooperatives as living social practices passed from one generation to the next, UNESCO acknowledged their role in fostering social cohesion, solidarity, democratic participation, and peaceful cooperation through everyday forms of collective self-organization.

This understanding closely reflects the principles set out in the United Nations Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace (A/RES/53/243), which affirms that sustainable peace depends not only on the absence of violence, but on the promotion of human rights, democratic participation, inclusion, dialogue, and social justice. In this respect, cooperatives function not simply as economic enterprises, but as civic institutions through which communities exercise shared governance, accountability, and peaceful cooperation in daily life.

The preservation of cooperative cultural heritage also engages core international human rights commitments. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), particularly Articles 13 and 15, protects participation in cultural life and the transmission of cultural practices, while the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), including Articles 19, 21, 22, and

7 UN DESA Statistics Department: SDG 16 Report: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025/goal-16/#:~:text=per%20cent%20in%202024%2C%20with>

8 Ibid

9 ICA Declaration on positive peace through cooperatives: <https://ica.coop/en/media/library/ica-declaration-positive-peace-through-cooperatives>

10 ICA Cooperative Cultural Heritage Programme: <https://www.culturalheritage.coop/>

25, safeguards the freedoms of expression, association, assembly, and democratic participation that are intrinsic to cooperative organization. ICA CCH aims at preserving democratic institutional traditions that sustain social trust, inclusion, and peaceful coexistence, reaffirming cooperatives as culturally rooted and legally significant models of participatory, peaceful, and socially just organization that directly advance the normative foundations of SDG 16.

Evidence from practice demonstrates how cooperatives translate these principles into tangible outcomes.

Cooperatives Europe's research "[Cooperatives and Peace: Strengthening Democracy, Participation and Trust – A Case Study Approach](#)," showcases twenty case studies from more than fourteen countries, covering different types and stages of conflict.¹¹ It highlights that cooperatives can act as **safe spaces for dialogue**, enabling cooperation across divided communities. In Cyprus, bicomunal cooperative initiatives have brought together Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot members, fostering trust and collaboration despite longstanding divisions. In the Western Balkans, agricultural cooperatives have supported post-conflict recovery by rebuilding livelihoods and encouraging interethnic cooperation, helping address root causes of conflict and reinforcing SDG 16.1 and 16.3 (peaceful societies and non-violent dispute resolution).

Cooperatives also address economic exclusion, one of the key drivers of instability. Worker and social cooperatives promote fair labour conditions, shared ownership, and inclusive economic participation, strengthening institutional trust. In Italy, social cooperatives integrate migrants and vulnerable groups through employment and service delivery, contributing to SDG 16.3 (inclusive access and justice) and SDG 16.7 (inclusive governance). Their governance structures further enhance transparency and reduce incentives for corruption, supporting SDG 16.5 (reducing corruption and bribery).

In fragile and conflict-affected settings, cooperatives play a critical role in stabilization and recovery, aligning competitiveness and fair and sustainable value chains in war and post-war conditions. In Colombia, worker cooperatives have been integrated into post-conflict development strategies, providing employment pathways for reintegrated populations and contributing to social stabilization efforts in regions affected by armed conflict¹². In Rwanda, cooperative federations have been used to formalize agricultural markets and reduce intermediary exploitation, increasing transparency in pricing and market access for

smallholder farmers.¹³ These experiences demonstrate how cooperatives can simultaneously strengthen social cohesion and accountability.

Solidarity across the cooperative movement further extends this impact. The Co-operative Group has supported cooperative development initiatives in Gaza, helping sustain livelihoods in a highly fragile and conflict-affected context¹⁴. Coop Alleanza 3.0, a member of Coop Italia and the largest Italian consumer cooperative with over 2 million members, 350 stores, and over 16,000 staff, has shown that consumer cooperatives can do so. The experience of the cooperative "[Insieme](#)", founded by a group of wives and mothers in the aftermath of the Srebrenica massacre, highlights the cooperative contribution to territorial and economic valorisation, even in precarious situations. Leveraging local harvests, local producers came together and began producing jams and juices under the label 'Fruits of Peace', which Coop Alleanza 3.0 and other cooperative partners bought and stocked on their supermarket shelves, gaining high consumer appeal. Another example is the [Project MEAN](#) (European Movement of Nonviolent Action). Started in Italy by the network "For a new welfare", created by the Sale della Terra cooperative Consortium together with 35 other organizations, MEAN promotes peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance in Ukraine. Since the war of aggression in Ukraine, the consortium has been sharing this social agriculture approach to support berry and honey producers as well as women in small rural areas across Ukraine through twinning activities between Italian and Ukrainian municipalities. The project has both a political commitment, supporting Ukraine's path to the EU, and a socio-economic one, by stimulating the local microeconomics.¹⁵ By reinforcing community-based economic structures, such efforts contribute to resilience, social cohesion, and local accountability, advancing SDG 16.1 and SDG 16.6.

As locally embedded institutions, cooperatives often remain functional even where state capacity is limited. In Nepal, for example, cooperatives played a key role in post-disaster recovery by mobilizing resources, coordinating aid, and ensuring inclusive participation in rebuilding processes¹⁶. In southern Tanzania, the Building Resilience with Trees project by Food and Forest Development Finland (FFD) focuses on building their institutional capacity, governance, and service delivery.¹⁷ Working with farmer-based organisations and their unions, such as the Tanzania Tree Growers Associations Union (TTGAU) and the Njombe Agricultural Development Organization (NADO), the project promotes a farmer-led

11 Cooperatives and Peace: a report on cooperatives' contributions to peacebuilding and conflict resolution: <https://coopseurope.coop/publication/cooperatives-and-peace-report-cooperatives-contributions-peacebuilding-and-conflict-resolution/>

12 Coops in Colombia Peace Process: https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/stories/social-and-solidarity-based-economy-reintegrating-former-combatants-and-building-peace-colombia_en

13 CoopsEurope Report 2019: https://coopseurope.coop/wp-content/uploads/files/COOPS%26PEACE_research_2019_Cooperatives%20Europe-WEB_0.pdf

14 Supporting the Middle East Humanitarian Appeal: <https://www.coop.co.uk/blog/supporting-the-middle-east-humanitarian-appeal#~:text=Colleague%20fundraising%20for%20Medical%20Aid,number%20of%20Co%20Dop%20stores.>

15 Cooperatives Europe (2025). "Cooperatives for the Reconstruction of Ukraine's Agri-Food Sector"

16 Co-ops developing a flood damage rehabilitation programme for Nepal: <https://ica.coop/en/media/news/co-ops-developing-flood-damage-rehabilitation-programme-nepal>

17 Food and Forest Development Finland – FFD's project is part of the AgriCord FORI program: <https://www.agricord.org/en/fori>

research approach, including training, participatory tools, and peer learning approaches. A key achievement has been the development of **Climate Resilience Action Plans by farmer organisations**, then endorsed by local government authorities, turning their needs into formal decision-making and planning processes at the local level. The project has also facilitated the creation of multi-stakeholder platforms, bringing together farmers organisations and cooperatives, research institutions, and government actors, towards better dialogue, accountability, and institutional trust in rural areas. Such actions show that by mobilising local actors through organised groups, supporting democratic participation and strengthening links with public authorities, cooperatives contribute to building inclusive and responsive local institutions. It demonstrates how well-functioning cooperatives and farmer organisations can act as key actors in governance systems, ensuring that smallholder farmers have a voice in decisions that affect their livelihoods.

These functions demonstrate how cooperatives can complement formal institutions while strengthening SDG 16 at the community level. In the current global context marked by rising inequality, declining trust, and deepening social fragmentation, the cooperative model offers a practical and tested pathway to rebuild the foundations of positive peace. By strengthening solidarity, widening participation, and addressing structural inequalities, cooperatives contribute in tangible ways to reducing the drivers of violence (SDG 16.1), expanding access to justice (SDG 16.3), promoting transparency and integrity (SDG 16.5), reinforcing accountable and effective institutions (SDG 16.6), and enabling more inclusive and representative decision-making (SDG 16.7). In doing so, they help translate the ambition of SDG 16 into lived realities, advancing more peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.



CASE STUDIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD



Africa

In Rwanda, cooperatives have proven to be more than just economic entities. They have served as platforms for reconciliation, accountable governance, and protection of rights. By creating employment opportunities, facilitating access to credit, promoting gender inclusion, and strengthening community dialogue, these cooperatives contribute directly to building peaceful, inclusive societies and stronger local institutions in post-conflict Rwanda.

Specifically, cooperatives in Huye District, like the [Koakaka Cooperative](#) brought together farmers from previously divided communities and created spaces for collaboration, dialogue, and shared economic opportunity. The cooperatives operate through Coffee Washing Stations (CWS), where members collectively process and market coffee. Beyond economic activities, these cooperatives provide extension services, training, access to agricultural inputs, and linkages to financial institutions. Membership is tied not only to coffee production but also to participation in peacebuilding clubs and community initiatives. This model creates a structured environment where farmers collaborate regularly, share responsibilities, and engage in collective decision-making

Through collective coffee production, peacebuilding activities, and community initiatives, members were able to rebuild trust, reduce social divisions, and strengthen inclusion. The cooperatives also created employment, particularly for women and young people, while improving household incomes and

supporting access to basic needs such as education, healthcare, and housing.

The Umugenge cooperative in North Rwanda was also established after the genocide to pioneer a [Mushroom Project](#) in order to address the growing socio-economic and agricultural needs of the local community and promote peacebuilding and reconciliation. Members of any income level in the community could purchase affordable mushroom mounds and spores to farm, harvest, eat, and sell at the market.



Americas

The Cooperative Pact for Non-Violence on Gender from the Confederación Cooperativa de la República Argentina (COOPERAR, Argentina) is a regional initiative that unites Latin American and Caribbean cooperatives around a shared commitment to prevent, address, and eradicate gender-based violence within their organizations and communities. It promotes a culture of equality by encouraging cooperatives to adopt internal protocols, strengthen gender policies, and implement educational processes that raise awareness about discrimination, harassment, and all forms of violence. Through this collective action, the pact seeks to transform cooperative environments into safer, more inclusive spaces where women and gender-diverse individuals can participate fully and exercise their rights.

COOPERAR also serves as a platform for dialogue, cooperation, and exchange of good practices among cooperative actors, public institutions, and civil society organizations. By fostering alliances, providing technical guidance, and mobilizing the cooperative movement's values of solidarity and

mutual support, the pact contributes to broader efforts to achieve gender equality and sustainable development in the region. Its approach underscores that eliminating gender-based violence is not only a human rights imperative but also essential for strengthening democratic participation, economic resilience, and social cohesion within the cooperative movement.



Cooperative Academy UA

Europe - Molochna Rika Cooperative (Ukraine)

Founded in 2013, the *Molochna Rika* cooperative has overcome numerous challenges – from fluctuating markets to the disruption of war. When the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in 2022, the cooperative was forced to suspend milk collection as processors canceled contracts. Yet the members – primarily women-led family farms (33 in total, 16 of which were under the age of 35) – remained united, determined to sustain production for their communities. Through the *Cooperative Economic Support Program (ESP)*, supported by [the WeProsper Project](#) and [the Coop Academy](#), the cooperative received equipment for small-scale dairy processing, business and governance training through the Coop Academy, and later a 4-ton milk truck to relaunch milk collection. Since restarting in 2023, *Molochna Rika* has collected over 920 tonnes of milk from members and small producers, and has reestablished a contract with one of the largest dairy plants in the Dnipropetrovsk region. With many men mobilized, women members took over the management of family farms, ensuring steady income for their households and a reliable milk supply to the cooperative even in frontline areas.

The cooperative now serves as a model of resilience and innovation in Ukraine – combining dairy and horticultural production, engaging young members in cooperative governance, and maintaining transparent management and strong community trust.



Asia and the Pacific

When Landless Women Built an Institution the State Could Not Ignore: The Kalika Cooperative, Nepal

In Sehari Tole (“place of rest” in the Rana Tharu language, spoken by an indigenous farming community of far western Nepal), sixty households lived on unregistered government land with no legal tenure, no state recognition, and

no recourse. The community included Dalit families (communities subjected to hereditary caste based exclusion across South Asia, historically denied rights and access to public life), indigenous Rana Tharu people, and other ethnic minorities. Without land certificates, government subsidies and legal protections did not reach them. Women managed farms and households year-round while servicing informal debt at five percent interest, sometimes for amounts as small as four dollars.

In 2007, the National Land Rights Forum and the Community Self-Reliance Center began organising residents through collective savings of under one dollar per member monthly. Over six years, twenty-five women registered the Kalika Land Rights Agriculture Cooperative Ltd. in 2013, overcoming a solvency requirement of \$375 against an initial fund of \$120, negotiating fee reductions, and making ten consecutive three-hour walks to the government office against a discriminatory policy, until recognition was granted.

Today, the cooperative has 49 members, 46 of whom are women, from Dalit, Rana Tharu, and other caste communities. Democratic assemblies govern all decisions. A binding Code of Conduct prohibiting corruption, domestic violence, and caste-based discrimination institutionalises the principles of Sustainable Development Goal 16, specifically targets 16.1, 16.7, and 16.8, at the community level.

Outcomes are concrete. Rice yields tripled. Member-led mediation restored a blocked school road, cutting children’s daily walk from one hour to fifteen minutes. Cooperative loans have enabled some members to establish a tailoring enterprise now employing other women in the community. Applications before Nepal’s National Land Commission mark the community’s first formal assertion of long-denied land rights.

The Kalika Cooperative was not discovered by policy. It was built despite it. Replicating this model at scale is not an aspiration. It is a policy debt long overdue.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COOPERATIVES IN ADVANCING SDG 16

Despite cooperatives being structurally aligned with the objectives of SDG 16 and the broader dimensions of **positive peace**, including social cohesion, inclusive institutions, and trust, their potential is constrained by persistent systemic, legal, and contextual barriers. Nevertheless, these constraints also reveal clear entry points for strengthening cooperatives as agents of peace, justice, and inclusion.

Structural and Enabling Environment Constraints

A primary constraint is the uneven and often weak enabling environment for cooperative development. In many contexts, legal and regulatory frameworks do not fully recognize cooperatives as distinct governance and economic actors capable of contributing to public service delivery, inclusive governance, or justice-related functions. Where cooperative legislation exists, it is frequently outdated, restrictive, or subordinated to investor-owned enterprise models. This limits cooperative autonomy, innovation, and their ability to

scale beyond local initiatives, weakening their contribution to inclusive institutions and accountable governance.

From a positive peace perspective, this represents a structural deficit in the “institutions of trust” that underpin stable societies. As highlighted in peacebuilding literature, sustainable peace depends not only on the absence of violence but on the presence of legitimate, participatory institutions. Weak legal recognition of cooperatives, therefore, constrains one of the most locally rooted mechanisms for building such institutions.

Financial and Scaling Constraints

Cooperatives also face significant financial barriers. Unlike investor-owned firms, they are often limited in their ability to raise equity capital, resulting in underdeveloped cooperative financial ecosystems. This restricts investment in long-term, socially oriented activities such as community mediation, participation in local governance, or anti-corruption initiatives. This financing gap is particularly significant in SDG 16 domains, where returns are primarily social rather than financial and often accrue over long time horizons. As a result, cooperatives remain strong in localized interventions but struggle to achieve systemic impact at scale. This limits their

capacity to contribute fully to **SDG 16.1 (violence reduction)** and **SDG 16.5 (anti-corruption and transparency)** at national or structural levels.

Institutional Exclusion and Governance Gaps

Despite their participatory nature, cooperatives are often excluded from formal governance and policy processes. This reflects a broader participation deficit identified in the [Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025](#), in which large segments of the population report having limited meaningful influence over decision-making. However, cooperatives, arguably one of the most established grassroots governance mechanisms, are rarely integrated into formal policy design or institutional reform processes. From a positive peace perspective, this represents a missed opportunity to strengthen “horizontal trust” between citizens and the state. The [Cooperatives for Peace report](#) evidence base demonstrates that cooperatives function as **bridging institutions**, creating spaces for dialogue, negotiation, and shared decision-making across social divides. Their exclusion from formal governance, therefore, weakens a key pathway to inclusive and resilient institutions.

Conflict, Fragility, and Operational Risk

The most severe constraints emerge in contexts of conflict and fragility, where deficits in SDG 16 are most acute. Rising levels of violence, displacement, and institutional collapse directly undermine the formation and sustainability of cooperative structures. The [2025 Global Progress Report on SDG 16](#) evidence highlights increasing conflict-related deaths and large-scale forced displacement, both of which erode social cohesion and disrupt local economic systems.

In such environments, cooperatives face heightened risks to continuity, democratic participation, and member engagement. Yet these are also the contexts where their potential contribution to positive peace is greatest. As

[research on cooperatives and peace](#) shows, cooperatives can help rebuild trust and the social fabric in post-conflict settings by providing a shared economic purpose and structured interaction among previously divided groups. However, without targeted support, their stabilizing potential remains underutilized.

Emerging Opportunities

Despite these constraints, significant opportunities exist to strengthen the role of cooperatives in advancing SDG 16 and positive peace outcomes.

First, cooperatives can serve as **local infrastructure for peace**, particularly where state legitimacy is weak. Their embeddedness in communities enables them to rebuild trust, facilitate dialogue, and support reconciliation processes, as evidenced in post-conflict contexts such as Rwanda and the Western Balkans.

Second, cooperatives offer a practical mechanism to advance **inclusive economic participation** by addressing one of the root causes of violence identified in positive peace frameworks: structural inequality. By distributing ownership and decision-making, they reduce exclusion and strengthen social cohesion.

Third, there is growing potential for **policy integration**, where cooperatives are formally recognized as partners in delivering SDG 16-related outcomes, including access to justice, anti-corruption initiatives, and civic engagement platforms. This would directly strengthen **SDG 16.6 and 16.7**, while anchoring governance reform in community-based institutions.

Finally, strengthening cooperative ecosystems, including finance, legal recognition, and federation structures, can enable scaling from local impact to systemic influence. This aligns closely with the positive peace emphasis on building resilient institutions that sustain trust over time.

CALL TO ACTION: ADVANCING SDG 16 THROUGH POSITIVE PEACE

The current trajectory of SDG 16 is both a warning and a turning point. Rising conflict, deepening inequality, and declining trust are not isolated challenges; they reflect a broader erosion of the foundations of positive peace. At the same time, the [ICA Declaration on Positive Peace](#) through Cooperatives affirms that peace is built through democratic participation, social justice, and inclusive economic systems that respond to people’s needs and aspirations. Urgent, coordinated action is therefore required not only to reduce

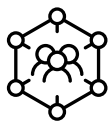
violence but also to rebuild trust, strengthen institutions, and address the structural drivers of instability.

Five priority actions emerge:



1. Elevate SDG 16 as a cross-cutting national priority

Governments should place peace, justice, and institutional trust at the center of development strategies, with clear targets, financing, and accountability mechanisms aligned across sectors.



2. Institutionalize cooperatives as partners in peacebuilding and governance

Recognize and integrate cooperatives into public policy frameworks, recovery strategies, and local governance systems as trusted, community-based institutions that strengthen participation and cohesion.



3. Accelerate justice reform and protect civic space

Expand access to justice, reduce prolonged pretrial detention, and safeguard the role of journalists, human rights defenders, and civil society as essential actors in accountability and peacebuilding.



4. Invest in inclusive economic systems to address the root causes of conflict

Support cooperative development and other inclusive models that reduce inequality, expand opportunities, and strengthen social cohesion; core pillars of positive peace.



5. Strengthen SDG 16 data systems and accountability mechanisms

Improve the availability and quality of disaggregated data to better track violence, exclusion, and institutional performance, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

These actions are mutually reinforcing and move beyond managing symptoms to address the underlying conditions that sustain peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. They also reaffirm a central insight: durable peace cannot be delivered by institutions alone; it must be built through systems that people trust, participate in, and benefit from.

The United Nations General Assembly's designation of 2025 as the [International Year of Peace and Trust](#) further underscored the urgency of advancing this agenda. The resolution called on the international community to strengthen dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding as pathways to sustainable peace, while reinforcing a global culture of peace grounded in inclusion, human rights, and shared responsibility.

As we are currently experiencing growing uncertainty and fragmentation, the path forward is not only about restoring order but about rebuilding the social contract. This requires institutions that are not only effective but also legitimate; economies that are not only productive but also inclusive; and societies that are not only stable but also cohesive. Cooperatives, grounded in democratic values and collective action, offer a practical bridge between these ambitions and everyday realities. Investing in such models is not peripheral to SDG 16; it is central to delivering the positive peace on which all sustainable development depends.



This brief is part of the ***Building a Better World Together: Cooperative Contributions to the SDGs*** series, produced by the [Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives \(COPAC\)](#) and the [International Co-operative Alliance \(ICA\)](#), together with its sectoral and regional organizations: [Cooperatives Europe](#), [ICA Africa](#), [ICA Americas](#), and [ICA Asia Pacific](#).

This series aims to raise awareness, promote growth, and inspire leadership in the cooperative movement. This series explores how cooperatives drive progress toward the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by fostering economic inclusion, democratic participation, and social solidarity for over one billion members worldwide.

Established in 1971, the Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC) is a multi-stakeholder partnership that champions and supports people-centered and self-sustaining cooperative enterprises. Its current members include the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and the International Trade Centre (ITC).

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