

Panama set to host the world's largest cooperative summit, with peace as the central theme of the global debate

From 13-18 September, representatives from more than a hundred countries will gather in Panama City to demonstrate that cooperation is a concrete tool for building peace, strengthening democracy, reducing inequalities, and promoting sustainable development.

In an international landscape marked by armed conflicts, political polarisation, the climate crisis, and growing inequalities, the global cooperative movement will arrive in Panama with a clear message: peace is also built through the economy.

From 13-18 September, the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) and Cooperatives of the Americas will host the 2026 ICA Global Conference and the movement's World and Regional General Assemblies in Panama City – under the theme *Building Bridges: Cooperative Contributions to a Peaceful World* – alongside the Regional Congress and International Symposium on Cooperative Law.

The gathering will bring together cooperative leaders, specialists, academics, policymakers, and representatives of international organisations from all continents to discuss how cooperative enterprises can provide concrete solutions to some of the most urgent challenges facing humanity.

The conference is supported by PROMTUR (Visit Panama) and Panamanian cooperative organisations, the Panamanian Autonomous Cooperative Institute (IPACOOOP) and the (Cooperativa Profesionales), who will turn Panama into the main meeting point for the global cooperative movement during the week.



An economy that builds peace

Unlike other business models, cooperatives arise from people organising democratically to address common needs through mutual aid. This approach to building the economy, based on participation, inclusion, equity, and democratic management, also serves as a way to prevent conflict and foster more cohesive societies.

This is not just an ethical aspiration. For the international cooperative movement, peace is part of its very identity.

The International Co-operative Alliance notes that cooperatives have a long tradition of working for peace and social justice, recognizing that lasting peace can only be built upon the foundation of social justice and is an indispensable condition for the sustainable development of communities.

Although cooperatives have their roots in local communities, their members are global citizens, and "conflict is the antithesis of cooperation."

That commitment was reaffirmed in 2019, when the ICA General Assembly, meeting in Kigali (Rwanda), approved the Declaration on Positive Peace through Cooperatives, calling upon the entire global movement to deepen its contribution to more peaceful, democratic, and inclusive societies.

Today, against an international backdrop marked by wars, geopolitical tensions, economic crises, and environmental challenges, that conviction takes on renewed relevance.

Panama, a bridge between continents and cultures

The choice to host the event in Panama carries strong symbolic significance.

Situated at the meeting point of North and South America and globally renowned for its Canal and the Bridge of the Americas, the country is a natural setting to bring together voices from diverse regions and cultures around a common goal: strengthening cooperation as a path to peace.



Throughout the week, meetings of the International Co-operative Alliance's governing bodies, the global Elective General Assembly, the Elective Regional Assembly of Cooperatives of the Americas, and the World Conference will take place, alongside a Cooperative Law Congress, an international cooperative exhibition (Coop EXPO), workshops, keynote speeches, networking sessions, and visits to Panamanian cooperatives and iconic sites across the country.

A global voice facing the crises of the present

The President of the International Co-operative Alliance, Dr. Ariel Guarco, highlighted the responsibility the cooperative movement has today in the face of the international context.

"We have a long tradition of respecting the autonomy of each community, to which we add, at both regional and global levels, our tireless efforts to build bridges for peace. Today, we see how violence is the path chosen by some to resolve various types of conflicts in many parts of the world. We remain committed to peace and are convinced that wherever there is cooperation, there lies a seed of peace, democracy, inclusion, and equity—one that we must cultivate so that it may grow and multiply across all regions."

For his part, the President of Cooperatives of the Americas, Dr. José Alves de Souza Neto, noted:

"We are pleased to welcome cooperative friends from around the world to our region. We look forward to receiving you in a place of great significance, for here in Panama, the Bridge of the Americas connects us from north to south and symbolises unity in diversity across our continent. We trust that this conference will be fruitful, enabling us to continue building bridges for peace worldwide—just as cooperative members have been doing for decades."



An agenda looking to the future

In addition to analysing the current state of the cooperative movement, the conference will serve to devise new strategies for international advocacy at a time when the United Nations has once again recognised the contribution of cooperativism to sustainable development—through the observance of the International Year of Cooperatives and the movement's growing prominence in debates on economic democracy, social inclusion, the ecological transition, and institutional strengthening.

The Global Conference in Panama will seek to demonstrate that cooperatives not only generate employment, production, and territorial development, but also build trust, strengthen communities, promote dialogue, and create the conditions necessary for lasting peace.

About the organisers:

International Co-operative Alliance

The International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) is an independent non-governmental organisation that unites, represents, and serves cooperative organisations worldwide.

It currently comprises 331 organisations from 106 countries, representing nearly one billion people. Through its regional offices in the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia-Pacific, it drives the global representation of the cooperative movement, promotes cooperative identity, and strengthens the development of its member organisations.

More information: <https://ica.coop/es/quienes-somos/alianza-cooperativa-internacional>

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Cooperativas de las Américas

Cooperatives of the Americas is the regional organisation of the International Co-operative Alliance for the Americas.

Based in San José, Costa Rica, it works to strengthen the cooperative movement in the region by promoting cooperative identity, fostering business development, building human resource capacity, and facilitating cooperation networks among organisations across the continent. It also implements decisions adopted by regional governing bodies and develops projects aimed at the growth and strengthening of the cooperative movement in the Americas.

More information: <https://aciamericas.coop/>

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