



THE COOPERATIVE IDENTITY LAB

16 September 2026 | 14:45-18:00

Protecting Cooperative Identity with and Beyond Norms: Ensuring Cooperative Identity Remains Relevant, Resilient and Resonant

Concept note | Programme

Session in brief

The Cooperative Identity Lab is a structured, participant-led multilogue under the ICA Global Conference theme of peace and building bridges. It asks a practical legal and policy question: as cooperative forms, capital structures and technologies evolve, what must remain legally protected for an enterprise to retain its cooperative character?

There are no formal presentations. Resource persons make concise interventions to frame each issue, after which participants test the proposition against different legal systems and cooperative realities.

Purpose

- Identify the legal, regulatory, governance and cultural conditions that protect cooperative identity - and the principal routes by which it may be weakened or captured.
- Test a limited set of minimum legal safeguards for cooperative identity, without proposing a uniform model law or displacing legitimate national diversity, while proposing harmonization of the legal principles governing the cooperative type.
- Generate propositions for further comparative work through the Principles of International Cooperative Law, the global cooperative-law commentary/handbook, inspired by the results of the ICA-EU Legal Framework Analysis 2026-2028.

How the lab works

Each table/cluster brings together cooperative practitioners with lawyers, policymakers, development institutions, and educators. The aim is to test normative propositions against lived cooperative practice.

For each theme, a resource person offers a four-minute intervention:

- An opening remark' the main concern; one concrete example; the safeguard or institutional response that may be required; and one opportunity for collective action through the ICA.
- An open table discussion follows.

Resource persons are listed under each thematic question below.

Co-moderators: Paula Arzadun, Education, Training and Research Officer, ICA-EU Programme, Cooperatives of the Americas; Santosh Kumar, Director of Legislation, International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) and Secretary, ICA Cooperative Law Committee.

Co-discussants: Hanan El-Youssef, Former ICA Director of Strategy and Project Manager for the ICA Guidance Notes to the Cooperative Principles; Dulce S. Bustamante, Executive Director, Union of Legitimate Service Contracting Cooperatives (Philippines), and Chairperson, ICA Asia and Pacific Committee on Youth Cooperation.

Co-facilitators: Dr Ajibola Anthony Akanji, Barrister and Solicitor of the Supreme Court of Nigeria, Lecturer, Lead City University, and Member, ICA Cooperative Law Committee; Cecilia Córdoba, lecturer in cooperative management and development, Universidad Autónoma de Entre Ríos (UADER), Argentina.

Questions guiding the two multilogue rounds

Across the two rounds, each table examines one assigned theme. The aim is to identify where legal safeguards are indispensable, and where cooperative self-regulation or education could be most useful.

Each four-minute intervention should address four points:

- 1) the issue or risk;
- 2) a concrete example;
- 3) the legal or institutional safeguard that may be justified; and
- 4) an opportunity for the cooperative movement, including possible ICA follow-up.

PROGRAMME AT-A-GLANCE		
14:30–14:45	Arrival & Convening	Badges & table allocation
14:45–14:50	Framing the Dialogue	Purpose, method & key questions
14:50–15:20	Identity, Law & Peace	Opening speech & dialogue
15:20–16:10	Multilogue I: Realities & Safeguards	Legal Responses and comparative perspectives
16:10–16:25	Break	
16:25–17:50	Multilogue II: Realities & Safeguards	Legal Responses and comparative perspectives
17:50–18:00	Conclusions and Actions	ICA priorities
18:00 onwards	Identity as Living Heritage	2025 CCH recognition

DETAILED PROGRAMME	
Cooperatives as enterprises of and for peace (15") Amb. Dr David Fernández Puyana, Ambassador and Permanent Observer, UN-mandated University for Peace (UPEACE)	
<i>Why cooperative identity matters in law and public policy - and how the cooperative legal form can institutionalize peaceful, democratic and solidaristic economic relations? (15")</i> Prof. Hagen Henry, Chair, ICA Cooperative Law Committee; Adjunct Professor of Comparative Law, University of Helsinki Prof. Dante Cracogna, Chair, Cooperative Law Committee, Cooperatives of the Americas; Professor of Commercial Law, University of Buenos Aires (tbc)	
A. Meaningful membership and protection of the cooperative name (15")	
What legal and governance arrangements help ensure that membership is real rather than nominal - connecting the member to use, participation, information, responsibility and democratic control? What minimum conditions should attach to the protected use of the cooperative name, at primary and apex level, and how should law address entities that use the label without satisfying the substance of cooperative identity?	Resource persons: Rose Marley, Chief Executive, Co-operatives UK; Dr Rose Karimi Kiwanuka, Regional Director, ICA-Africa; Violetta Nafpaktiti, CEO, DotCooperation LLC (DotCoop)
B. Public-authority membership (20")	
When can membership by a municipality or other public authority strengthen a cooperative without changing the character of the enterprise? What limits on voting rights, board representation, vetoes, appointment powers, capital and exit arrangements are needed to preserve member control and the autonomy and independence of the cooperative?	Resource persons: Giuseppe Guerini, President, Cooperatives Europe and ICA Vice-President for Europe; Aicha Errifaai, Director General, Office du Développement de la Coopération (ODCO), Morocco; Nora Gabriela de Aracama, Board Member representing the cooperative movement, National Institute of Associativism and Social Economy (INAES), Argentina. Osamu Nakano, Vice Executive Director of Japan Workers' Co-operative Union (JWCU)

C. Capital, taxation, accounting and risks of external capture (20")	
Which distinctive cooperative features - including the member-user relationship, mutual transactions, patronage returns, limited remuneration of capital and indivisible or collective reserves - should tax law recognise, and on what legal basis? What forms of member, public or external capital can be admitted without transferring effective control away from members or converting the cooperative into an investor-driven enterprise? At what point can public support, investor finance, donor conditions or dependence on a digital platform compromise cooperative autonomy? Where should legislation or bylaws set limits on appointment powers, veto rights, funding conditions, data ownership and other forms of external influence over member decision-making? How should accounting rules treat members' withdrawable share capital, and what consequences can classification as equity or liability have for cooperative stability, prudential treatment and access to finance? How should law recognise, build and protect indivisible or collective reserves during the cooperative's life, transformation and dissolution, including against demutualisation or private appropriation?	Resource persons: Prof. Marina Aguilar Rubio, Professor of Financial and Tax Law, University of Almería; Shona N. Smartt, Human Resources and Administrative Manager, Guyana Public Service Co-operative Credit Union Ltd.; Doug O'Brien, President and CEO, NCBA CLUSA; CPA Bhima Subrahmanyam, President, International Cooperative Banking Association (ICBA) and Managing Director/CEO, NAFSCOB (India); Ivan Asiimwe, General Secretary/CEO, Uganda Cooperative Alliance; Verónica Morales, Director of Digital Transformation and Strategic Planning, Cooperativa Riobamba (Ecuador), and Board Member, COFIA;
D. Cooperative education and culture (20")	
To what extent should cooperative law require education and training on cooperative identity, rights, responsibilities, governance and history - and who should bear the corresponding duty? How can public policy support cooperative education for members, young people, regulators, officials and the wider public while preserving the movement's autonomy over the content and transmission of cooperative identity?	Resource persons: Tiago Luiz Schmidt, Chairperson, ICA Working Group on Cooperative Cultural Heritage, and President of the Board of Directors, Sicredi Pioneira (Brazil); Dr Mathias S. Nkuhi, Senior Lecturer and Head, Department of Law, Moshi Co-operative University (Tanzania); Colombia Pérez Muñoz, National Director, Institute of Social Economy and Cooperativism (INDESCO), Universidad

	Cooperativa de Colombia, and Chairholder, UNESCO Chair on Social and Solidarity Economy; Nicolás Jacquet, President, Regional Youth Committee and Board Member, Cooperatives of the Americas; Professor of Cooperative Law (Argentina).
E. Cooperation among cooperatives (15")	
Can cooperatives cooperate internationally, including in and amid war-torn realities? What legal structures best enable cooperatives to pool finance, services, infrastructure, knowledge, data and mutual support across sectors and borders, including in fragile or crisis contexts? What minimum legal infrastructure should enable federations, unions, groups, consortia, shared-service arrangements, cooperative finance and trade, while preserving voluntary affiliation and the autonomy of participating cooperatives?	Resource persons: Akram Al-Taher, Director General, Economic and Social Development Center of Palestine (ESDC); Prof. Carlos Vargas Vasserot, Professor of Commercial Law and Director, Chair in Social Economy, University of Almería (Spain); Hanan El-Youssef, Program Manager, Cooperative Development Foundation (USA); former ICA Director of Strategy and Project Manager for the ICA Guidance Notes to the Cooperative Principles.
F. Democratic control in digital cooperatives (30")	
What safeguards preserve meaningful democratic member control in large, federated, multi-stakeholder and platform cooperatives, where participation may be mediated by technology? What rules are needed for digital notice, deliberation and voting; identity verification; accessibility and inclusion; transparency of automated systems; data rights; cybersecurity; and effective review or challenge of decisions?	Resource persons: Dr. Morshed Mannan, Lecturer in Global Law and Digital Technology, Edinburgh Law School, University of Edinburgh; Akkanut Wantanasombut, Head, Innovation for Social Solidarity and Inclusive Economy in Asia (ISSIE), Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University (Thailand), and Founder, Tamsang-Tamsong; Anne-Laure Degris, Co-Chief Executive, Smart (Belgium); Balasubramanian (Balu) Iyer, Regional Director, ICA Asia and Pacific (tbc)

Expected outputs

- A prioritised map of legal and institutional threats to cooperative identity, with examples of how they arise in practice.
- A participant-tested matrix of possible minimum legal safeguards, together with areas where flexibility, bylaws, supervision, education or self-regulation may be preferable to legislation.
- A short set of follow-up actions for ICA bodies, regions, sectors, members and partners, each linked to an identifiable first step and a question for further comparative legal work.

Action Call for the ICA

The Lab builds on the International Workshop on Cooperative Law held in Pula in August 2026 and connects with the IX Continental Congress on Cooperative Law in Panama. Its conclusions will be treated as working propositions, not final rules. They will inform the next comparative phase of work on the Principles of International Cooperative Law and the development of a global cooperative-law commentary/handbook, drawing inter alia on the ICA-EU Legal Framework Analysis 2026-2028. The objective is to move from general invocations of cooperative identity toward legally intelligible safeguards capable of protecting it across different legal traditions, while preserving the flexibility necessary for cooperative innovation.



COOPERATIVE CULTURAL HERITAGE

People
Places
Practices
A Stronger
Cooperative Tomorrow

Following the conclusion of the **Protect – Cooperative Identity** breakout session, a short ceremony will be held to honour the custodians of sites inscribed on the inaugural 2025 ICA Cooperative Cultural Heritage List.

The ICA Cooperative Cultural Heritage Programme seeks to identify, recognise and promote places, practices and traditions that embody the history, identity and values of the cooperative movement. The 2025 List marked the inaugural global recognition of such cooperative heritage.

Commemorative plaques and certificates recognising these sites and their contribution to preserving and promoting cooperative heritage will be presented by **Mr. Tiago Schmidt**, on behalf of the ICA Cooperative Cultural Heritage Working Group and Programme.

Ceremony: 18h00 onwards | 16 Sep 2026 | Panama Convention Centre

This activity is organized under the ICA-EU Partnership (2024-2028) **#coops4dev**, co-funded by the European Union.

Coop International Cooperative Alliance | Co-funded by the European Union | Cooperative Cultural Heritage Ambassador | Sistema OCB

The Global Investiture of Cooperative Cultural Heritage Sites (2025)