



Annual report

June 2023 | May 2024

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## A cooperative year in review





Director

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**Agnes Mathis**

## Welcome Message

As we navigate through a period marked by prolonged insecurity and heightened economic and social challenges, the impact is felt globally. However, Europe faces unique pressures that test not only its market competitiveness but also its commitment to democratic values. While impacted by these challenging conditions, cooperatives also offer a powerful vehicle to counter negative trends by fostering a sustainable, inclusive economy and promoting a community-centered vision for Europe.

Cooperatives Europe has used its influence within various expert groups, such as the SME Envoy and GECES on social economy, to advocate for cooperative perspectives. This effort has been bolstered by strategic institutional engagements designed to ensure a fair operating environment for cooperatives while preserving their unique business models. Notably, the focus on

sustainable business and the invitation by the European Commission to deliver President Susanne Westhausen's keynote speech at the 2023 SME Assembly highlighted the organization's successful advocacy efforts.

Participation in projects in education like SE4Ces Erasmus+ has expanded the organization's network, bringing in support from universities and broadening its reach to new cooperative networks. This initiative complements the ongoing support for the Young European Cooperators Network (YECN), revitalized in 2022, which continues to grow and inspire.

Furthermore, as the movement strengthens and evolves, Cooperatives Europe has solidified its strategic direction. The engagement and support of board members have catalyzed successes, including the

launch of a significant call to action on cooperatives and education.

The forthcoming European elections occur just days after the General Assembly. In alignment with its members, our organization actively promotes democratic engagement and advances policy objectives through its manifesto, setting the stage for the recognition of cooperatives in future European strategies.

This report embodies the collective achievements of a vibrant movement dedicated to defending and promoting democratic values within economic activities. The strength of this community ensures that it can face the future with confidence.

Enjoy the read.

The voice of cooperative  
enterprises in Europe





Our members

67

Countries

32

Cooperative

250,000

Employees

5m

Members

141m



# 1

## A unified voice for a unified Europe

### **1.1 Pushing the Coop Agenda in the EU elections - #CoopsForEurope**

Cooperative values are the bedrock upon which a just and equitable Europe can be built. Recognizing this, Cooperatives Europe, in collaboration with its members, has crafted a vision that underscores the cooperative difference – a “blueprint for a Europe” where cooperation and community-led initiatives pave the way for prosperity.

#### **A cooperative blueprint for Europe**

### **1.2 Cooperatives Promote Democratic Action**

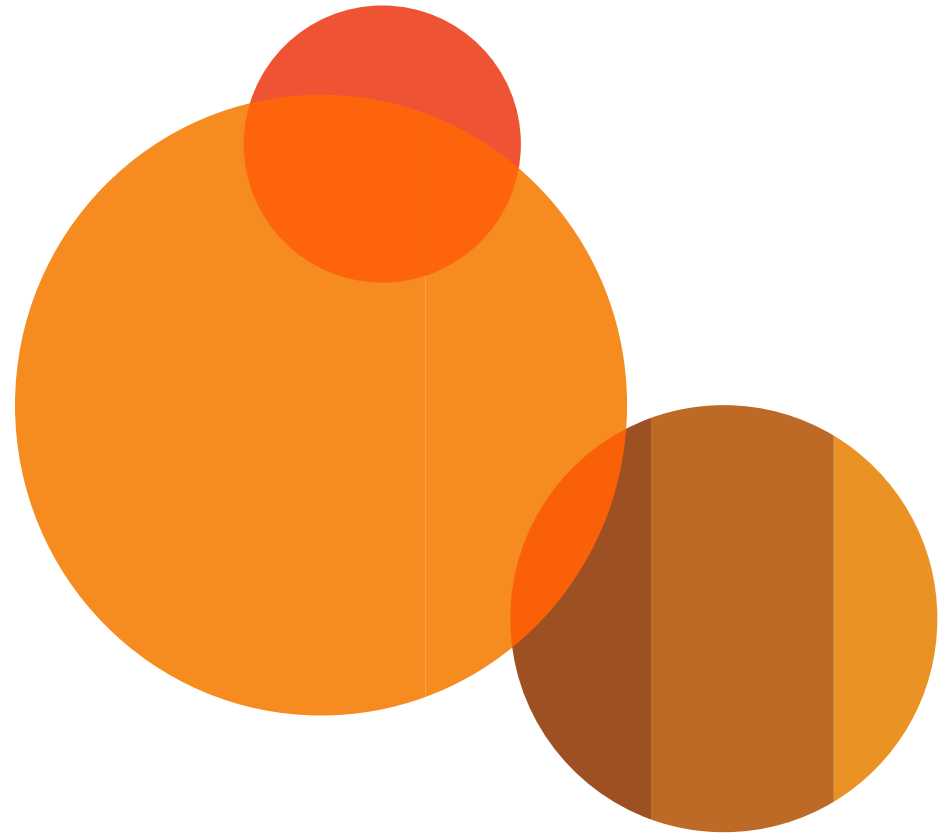
Enlargement has been at the heart of Cooperatives Europe’s work this year. In September, the organisation joined the European Economic and Social Committee’s

Civil Society Platforms with Ukraine, Moldova, and Armenia. These bilateral bodies between the EU and the enlargement countries provide a platform for civil society to monitor the implementation of the Association Agreements and make recommendations to EU policy makers and the political authorities of the partner country. Through these platforms, Cooperatives Europe has pointed out the role of cooperatives as a driving force for democracy, good governance and civil dialogue, while at the same time deepening the economic integration of their country. On the occasion of the EESC’s Civil Society Week in March 2024, we put the enlargement process in the spotlight with an event co-organized by us and featuring, among others, the Turkish cooperative Needs Map.



As Europe stands at the crossroads of significant societal transformation, the upcoming 2024 European elections and accession agreements emerge at a decisive moment. In this time of change, cooperatives represent a foundational pillar, embodying the principles of democratic participation and sustainable development. They are an essential pillar in democratic development.

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# 2

## Promoting entrepreneurship

Our main focus this year has been on promoting entrepreneurship policies and recognizing the cooperative dimension within these frameworks. The European Commission has introduced various programs under both SME and social economy policies that provide a supportive framework at European and national levels. Notably, the 'SME Relief Package' gave new impetus to meet the needs of SMEs and enhance their competitiveness. Our advocacy ensured that these measures consider the unique aspects of cooperatives, particularly in financing and reporting.

For the social economy specifically our efforts centered on the Council Recommendation on Framework Conditions for Social Economy entities and to ensure its proper implementation

across EU Member States.

Throughout the year, Cooperatives Europe engaged in numerous dialogues with the European Commission's Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs (DG EMPL) and for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship, and SMEs (DG GROW). These discussions facilitated a regular exchange of ideas and allowed us to address challenges faced by our members, celebrate successes such as on the Transition Pathway and Single Digital Gateway, and plan future collaborations on issues like taxation for social economy entities and social criteria in public procurement. Furthermore, involvement in the Youth Entrepreneurship Policy Academy highlighted innovative cooperative practices and the challenges faced by younger members.





- The Social Economy Conferences in San Sebastian and Liège organised by the Spanish and Belgian Presidency respectively. The latter on “Social Economy at the Core of the Transition Pathways”, attracted over 600 delegates. Both conferences were an opportunity to confront European strategies with realities on the ground, and for organisations like Cooperatives Europe to promote their actions and verify their role as go-between between politics and entrepreneurial action.
- Conference “Access to Finance for SMEs: Assessment and Perspectives” organised in the scope of the Belgian Presidency of the Council in Brussels: Cooperatives Europe attended this event which consisted of a series of high-level panels on the theme of SME financing and discussed issues such as the need to fight against late payments, to reform insolvency rules, to facilitate access to sustainable finance and diversify funding sources for greater stability.
- SME Assembly in Bilbao: The SME Assembly is a yearly focal point for entrepreneurs, public authorities, and SME networks. Cooperatives Europe’s president opened this event, alongside Commissioner Breton, advocating for a level playing field that respects the unique values and principles of cooperatives. The assembly also featured a workshop organised by Cooperatives Europe on “Cooperatives: Is the Fringe Becoming Mainstream?”, fostering a dynamic dialogue about the regulatory framework and interaction between traditional enterprises and cooperatives. The event was a step towards better promoting understanding and integrating cooperative models in mainstream business practices.

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## Key events



- The SME Envoy Network, chaired by the European Commission, comprises national SME ambassadors and SME representatives. It serves as a policy advisory body, focusing on topics that align with EU initiatives affecting SMEs. This year, discussions predominantly revolved around the SME Relief Package and its proposed measures. These discussions offered Cooperatives Europe an excellent platform to present its cooperative approach, emphasizing aspects such as financing, establishing voluntary standards for non-listed companies, and enhancing skills. The challenges associated with the twin transition were also a significant focus, underscoring the ongoing adjustments needed in the face of technological and environmental changes. This engagement has proven crucial for linking Cooperatives Europe with the broader social economy, highlighted by numerous references to social enterprises during our interactions.

Additionally, the SME Envoy Network facilitates vital coordination with other business organizations and representatives from member states, enhancing our collaborative impact.

- Within the European Parliament, our participation in the SME Intergroup has been particularly active. We have engaged in critical discussions concerning the Late Payment Directive and initiatives supporting women entrepreneurs. These meetings have been instrumental in broadening the European Commission's understanding of cooperative actions, directly benefiting our initiatives aimed at gender equality and inclusion. These interactions not only help in policy formation but also ensure that the unique perspective of cooperatives is integrated into broader economic strategies.

- Chaired by the European Commission, the GECES (European Expert Group on Social Economy and Social Enterprises) represents a wide array of social economy actors. This expert group is a vital instrument for dialogue, knowledge sharing, and advising the Commission on strategies to support the development of social economy enterprises. The discussions within GECES are closely tied to the Social Economy Action Plan (SEAP), with particular focus on issues such as the implementation of labels and certification schemes. These meetings also provide a valuable opportunity for members to exchange views on the varied positions and priorities of different stakeholders in the social economy, fostering a comprehensive understanding and collaborative policy environment.

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## Expert groups



# 3

## Levelling the playing field

One of Cooperatives Europe's primary goals is to ensure a level playing field for cooperatives throughout Europe. We advocate for the recognition and incorporation of the cooperative business model across all EU policies, ranging from entrepreneurial initiatives to competition law. Our efforts also extend to promoting an enabling regulatory framework that supports the growth and sustainability of cooperatives. This year, we have engaged in several critical areas.

### **3.1 Fit for Future Platform**

Chaired by the Vice-President of the Commission, this platform focuses on simplifying and reducing regulatory burdens, as well as addressing new challenges in EU legislation.

As a voice for member states and European civil society organizations, Cooperatives Europe has presented recommendations on various topics. These include enhancing the social economy's access to finance, applying the SME test, and developing a future-proof regulatory framework for the Single Market. Currently, the platform is implementing a new annual program that includes reporting obligations for SMEs and sustainability disclosure in the financial sector.

### **3.2 SBA Follow-Up Meetings**

Alongside the SME Envoy meetings, Cooperatives Europe participates in SBA Follow-up meetings with key stakeholders. These gatherings, which include Commission representatives

and other business organizations, allow us to discuss ongoing issues and their potential impacts on cooperatives. Topics have ranged from the Single Digital Gateway and data spaces to market obstacles facing SMEs.

### **3.3 Corporate Sustainability and Reporting**

In our ongoing effort to create equitable conditions for all cooperatives, Cooperatives Europe has focused on EU corporate sustainability and sustainability reporting. Building on our involvement in last year's consultations, we followed developments in the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CS3D). We advocated for modifications such as removing directors' duties and limiting



the trickle-down effects on SME cooperatives within value chains. We also participated in consultations on the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS), advocating for a set of voluntary standards tailored for SMEs (VSME).

### **3.4 Collaborative Advocacy Efforts**

In collaboration with our members and partners, Cooperatives Europe has actively advocated on multiple fronts. We were instrumental in co-signing a joint letter concerning the revision of the EU Waste Framework Directive, which emphasized protecting the role of social economy enterprises, including cooperatives, in the management of used and waste textiles. In partnership with the Italian Cooperative Alliance

and CECOP, we responded to the consultation on the BEFIT proposal (Business in Europe: Framework for Taxation). Our joint response urged the Commission to revise the tax regime rules concerning cooperative reserves and dividends to better align with their unique nature and objectives.



# 4

## Fostering an inclusive and diverse cooperative ecosystem

Following the work done in the previous General Assembly, the Gender Equality Lighthouse focused this year on consolidating its activities, including improving a gender balanced participation and collecting good practices in specific topics such as diversity in management.

In line with the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and the 2022 Directive on gender balance in corporate boards, the lighthouse has therefore decided to further the work achieved in this regard and organised a webinar on 13 May on “Improving the gender balance in boards: cooperatives actions and opportunities”. This digital workshop was an opportunity for Cooperatives Europe Members who are dealing with gender (in) balance in their governance or boards to discuss common solutions, good practices and to learn from each other.

Cooperative Europe also raised awareness about the need to further include vulnerable populations such as minority groups, economically disadvantaged, people with disability, youth and elderly, immigrants, rural residents in all policies in the next political term during several consultation rounds organised by political parties at the occasion of the European Elections.



# 5

## Catalyzing cooperative learning and innovation

Despite the growing interest among the young generation in sustainable business practices, cooperatives are still not a standard component of entrepreneurship education curricula and business courses. To address this gap, Cooperatives Europe is undertaking efforts to increase the visibility of cooperatives, build connections, and strengthen existing networks to advance their inclusion in education and research. Some of these efforts are carried out in the “education lighthouse” committee, which is chaired by Anu Puusa, a board member and Vice President. Within this committee objectives and actions were defined over the past months that include mobilizing our members to promote European action at the national level.

To further this cause, Cooperatives Europe has launched a call for the inclusion of the cooperative model in European educational

initiatives. This call specifically advocates for integrating cooperative-related issues into higher education curricula to support a more inclusive educational system and suggests including cooperative experts in various EU advisory groups concerning education. An article by our President promoting this call and its importance was recently published in the EESC Civil Society group bulletin, particularly timely ahead of the European Elections.

Additionally, we have launched a brief survey among our members aimed at mapping the current landscape of cooperative education and awareness throughout Europe. The results of this survey will help establish a network among prominent cooperative universities. At the ICA Research Conference, we participated in a plenary session titled “Innovating in Cooperative Governance. Cooperatively Governing

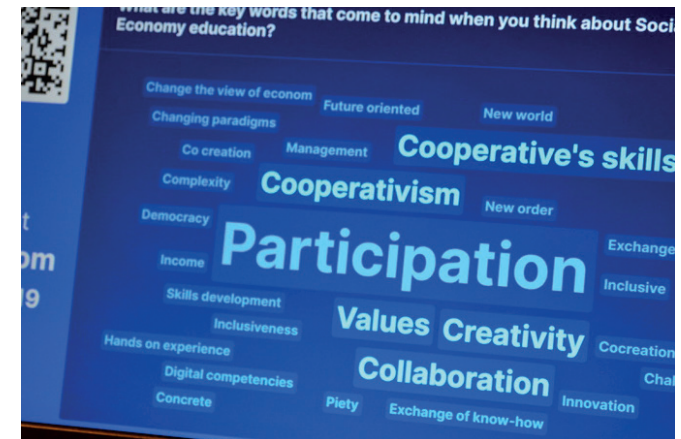
Innovation,” which aimed to stimulate academic exchange and policy discussions on the role of cooperatives in promoting innovation. Here, it was emphasized that while cooperatives should champion and protect their governance models, they must strive to extend their influence beyond niche boundaries.



### SE4Ces Erasmus+ project

The SE4Ces project concluded after 3 years with the conference “From Blueprint to Reality: Educating the Next Generation of Social Entrepreneurs” at the European Economic and Social Committee on January 29th. Cooperatives Europe co-organized this event with FEBEA, engaging policymakers, educators, social economy stakeholders, and youth in a vibrant discussion on Social Economy Education and the project’s outcomes. All project materials, including the educational modules developed by partners, are accessible on the website of the SE4Ces Project.

Following this success, all partners are now dedicated to launching the first joint Master’s program in Social Economy for which our collaboration continues in the coming years.





### **CO-FRESH Horizon project**

This year we closed the CO-FRESH project. Cooperatives Europe hosted the Co-Fresh final conference “Co-creating the Future of Agrifood Value Chains” in collaboration with Eurocoop and the sister project FOODRUS on March 14th in Brussels. The event attracted a diverse group of stakeholders, including farmers, food producers, cooperatives, consumers, researchers, and policymakers, showcasing seven pilot cases that explored sustainable innovations across the fruits and vegetables value chains.

The final management meeting also provided an opportunity to visit and explore CoHop, a cooperative brewery located in the heart of Brussels.

All results from the project are available on the website of the CO-FRESH project.



# 6

## Empowering youth cooperativism

This year, the Young European Cooperators Network (YECN) has significantly advanced its work programme while strengthening its network and expanding its presence across Europe. A key initiative was launching a survey to comprehensively map the youth cooperative scene. This survey aimed to identify existing youth networks at the national level, and pinpoint areas where such networks are absent.

To enhance engagement with its members and boost its public profile, the YECN developed a visual identity and ramped up its social media activities through Instagram. This strategic update has facilitated better communication and interaction with the cooperative youth community.

The network has also been active on the ground, collaborating with national movements to foster greater cooperation and share insights. Noteworthy activities

included co-organizing a workshop with the UK Youth Cooperative Network (YCN) during the National Youth Summit in Birmingham, and participating in the assembly of the Italian youth network, Generazioni, in Naples.

Internationally, the YECN maintained regular engagement with the International Cooperative Alliance's Youth Committee, reinforcing its global connections and influence.

Moreover, the YECN is set to organize its own assembly this year, coinciding with the General Assembly of Cooperatives Europe. This event will provide a platform for further dialogue, sharing best practices, and promoting the cooperative model among European youth.







# 7

## International development

This year, in collaboration with other ICA regions and the global office, we devoted substantial effort to solidifying our second partnership in international development with the European Commission. Following thorough discussions, a proposal crafted by ICA and its regions was officially endorsed by the Commission, initiating on April 1st. This initiative, titled “People-centered Businesses for Sustainable, Democratic, and Inclusive Development,” is designed to bolster ICA and its regional bodies, promoting cooperative development within and beyond the EU through actions spread across five strategic workstreams. We are actively establishing the necessary frameworks for coordination, organization, and detailed planning of activities.

Despite the demanding nature of this initiative, we have successfully sustained our active engagement on the global stage, contributing to various international

development actions. Our participation in the EU Policy Forum on Development allowed us to engage directly with the Commission and other stakeholders on EU development cooperation strategies. Additionally, we took part in the Plenary of the Global Innovation Cooperative Summit, focusing on ‘A Circular and Digital Future: The Cooperators’ Way.’



The EU-ICA Framework explained:

The EU-ICA Framework Partnership represents a strategic collaboration between the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) and the European Union, aimed at advancing cooperative development globally. This partnership is built on the foundation of mutual goals of promoting sustainable, democratic, and inclusive economic growth through cooperative enterprises. By leveraging the strengths of cooperatives in fostering community-focused development and resilience, the partnership seeks to implement innovative projects and initiatives that align with the EU's broader development cooperation goals. The agreement underlines the commitment of both entities to harness the potential of cooperatives to contribute meaningfully to addressing global challenges.

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## Key events

# 8

## Amplifying the Cooperative Voice

This year, Cooperatives Europe has made significant progress in enhancing our communication and operational frameworks. We have further improved our digital platforms, with new content for the website and continuous improvements to ensure security, accessibility and relevance.

This year our website received necessary security upgrades after transferring last year to a new web development partner and host for our sites. The infrastructure has been cleaned and updated completely. We have also produced several new pages on the sites with content such as new webpages on the cooperative principles, the European elections, the cooperative ecosystem and our organization itself.

We have also done several campaigns aimed at fostering a cohesive cooperative narrative across Europe. For example we coordinated with our members for the International Cooperative Day and the European Elections. The former was a video campaign where we disseminated impactful stories from within our community to highlight the cooperative model's effectiveness in sustainable development and social equity. The latter was a campaign coordinated with the sectors to voice cooperatives' priorities for the European Elections across all sectors.

Recognizing the critical importance of structured communication, we have started developing at the end of this year a comprehensive strategy for the coming years to boost visibility and engagement across our network. Our commitment to member-centricity has driven us to tailor communications to meet the diverse needs of our members, enhancing engagement and reinforcing our value proposition.



## Followers



## Subscribers



Average opening rate of our newsletter is 33,9% (1,3% higher than last year (32,6%), and 5,4% higher than in 2022 (28,4%) and almost 9,9% higher than Mailchimp's global average opening rate (24%).

# 9

## Governance and membership

As a people-centered and a membership-based organization, our governance relies on exchange, discussion, and collective decision-making. Despite the convenience of online meetings, we strive to maintain a balance between face-to-face and virtual interactions. This balance is crucial for fostering a bottom-up approach, ensuring that decisions align with both the short-term and long-term needs of our members

### 9.1 General Assembly and Board

The 2023 General Assembly took place in Ski, Norway, hosted by Norsk Landbrukssamvirke. This event brought together members from across Europe to discuss key issues such as the education landscape and climate change. It was a prime opportunity to assess our collective progress, gather ideas for future initiatives,

and engage in strategic discussions within the framework of our developing strategy, thanks to the active involvement of our board members. This interaction provides valuable insights for the board as we jointly address these global challenges.

Furthermore, the board has continued to refine Cooperatives Europe's strategy under the guiding principle that 'Cooperatives Europe exists to inspire and support members to magnify the transformative power of the cooperative movement.'

This strategy focuses on developing three main areas: education, gender and youth, and entrepreneurship. Additionally, the board assists the secretariat in implementing the working program and offers recommendations to the ICA Board through our President.





## 9.2 Impact through collaboration

Cooperatives Europe maintains a diverse membership that spans across and beyond EU borders. Regular interactions with our members, irrespective of their size or sector, are crucial for understanding their needs and challenges, informing them about our activities, and collaborating on joint initiatives. This year, we had the pleasure of meeting several members, either in Brussels or at their respective offices. Notable meetings included visiting the Presidency of Alleanza Cooperative Italiane in Rome and hosting a delegation from our Finnish member SOK in Brussels.

Additionally, we took the opportunity during the EESC Civil Society Platform meeting in Moldova to connect with our member MOLDCOOP and tour their facilities. Our

collaboration with various sectors on the European Elections also led us to present the sectoral agenda to Cogeca's members at their Cooperative Coordination Committee meeting.

Furthermore, Cooperatives Europe regularly holds online meetings with the EU Cooperative Coordination Committee (EUCC), involving both national and sectoral members. These meetings focus on strategizing important EU files, ensuring our collective voice is heard and our interests are advanced at the EU level.

### **9.3 Contributing to international activities**

As the European Region of the International Cooperative Alliance, Cooperatives Europe actively participates in numerous ICA global committees, working groups, and campaigns. We contribute our expertise and insights through various channels, including committees focused on youth and gender issues, and through our involvement in the governance of the ICA, particularly at board meetings.

Recently, Cooperatives Europe has also begun to engage with the ICA's global management team, an initiative launched under the direction of the new General Director, Jeroen Douglas.

Additionally, we have played a significant

role in the ICA's #Coopsidentity campaign, offering insights and reflections based on a survey conducted among our Board members, which helps identify emerging trends.





# Account

## Incomes



Membership

77%

Project incomes

12%

Donation

2%

Others

9%

# Expenses



Personnel

65%

Project expenses

7%

Travel & office

13%

External services – IT

8%

Meetings & other

7%



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