COOPERATION AMONG COOPERATIVES AS AN INTER-COOPERATIVE LEARNING CAPABILITY: EVIDENCE FROM CROSS-CASE SYNTHESIS

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ABSTRACT

This article reframes Principle 6 as an inter-cooperative learning capability and synthesizes how cooperation architectures convert solidarity into measurable economic and social value. Using secondary data, the study integrates a structured review of cooperative identity and policy guidance with cross-case synthesis of six widely documented cooperation models; evidence was triangulated from ICA, ILO, UN, the World Cooperative Monitor 2025, and publicly available organizational reports. Five recurring learning pathways emerge: purchasing and shared services; benchmarking and peer advisory systems; federation-enabled standard setting; joint ventures and platform cooperation; and capability building through training and mentorship. Pathways perform best when governance preserves member autonomy, uses transparent redistribution, and institutionalizes learning roles. Cooperation among cooperatives operates as a learn-and-scale system that strengthens governance, innovation, resilience, and SDG delivery. Limitation: reliance on secondary, publicly available evidence. Subsequent research should test the Inter-Cooperative Learning Capability framework with primary and longitudinal data.

Keywords: *Capability Building; Cooperative Networks; Inter-Cooperation; Organizational Learning; Resilience*

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INTRODUCTION

International Co-operative Alliance (2025) defined Cooperatives as member-owned and democratically governed enterprises created to meet shared economic, social, and cultural needs. The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) codifies this identity through seven principles, including Principle 6: Cooperation among Cooperatives (de Miranda, 2022). Principle 6 asserts that cooperatives strengthen both their members and the wider movement by working together through local, national, regional, and international structures. While often presented as a values-based norm, Principle 6 also functions as a strategy for scale, learning, and resilience in markets where small and medium member-owned firms must compete against large investor-owned corporations (Fici, 2015; ICA, 2015). The macro-scale of cooperative enterprise underscores why inter-cooperation is not peripheral. ICA facts and figures commonly cited across cooperative policy discourse indicate that there are roughly three million cooperatives worldwide, involving more than 12% of humanity, and providing jobs or work opportunities to around 280 million people (about 10% of the world's employed population) (ICA, 2024). At the upper end of the cooperative economy, the World Cooperative Monitor (WCM) 2025 reports that the Top 300 cooperatives and mutuals generated approximately USD 2.79 trillion turnover in 2023 (ICA & Euricse, 2025). These headline indicators point to a large, diverse, and systemically relevant sector whose performance increasingly depends on ecosystem-level capabilities.

The policy window for ecosystem strengthening widened with the United Nations General Assembly resolution proclaiming 2025 as the International Year of Cooperatives (IYC 2025), with goals that include public awareness, ecosystem strengthening, supportive policy frameworks, and youth leadership (United Nations General Assembly, 2024). The International Labour Organization (ILO) linked IYC 2025 to its long-standing normative work on cooperative promotion, including Recommendation No. 193, and emphasized the need for enabling legal and institutional environments. (ILO, 2002). These agendas implicitly require cooperation among cooperatives: ecosystem strengthening is difficult to achieve without shared institutions for finance, training, standard setting, procurement, and joint advocacy. In addition, the ICA's 2026–2030 strategy (Practice, Promote and Protect) explicitly prioritizes reinforcing cooperation among cooperatives and strengthening competitiveness through innovation, indicating a movement-wide shift toward ecosystem capability building. (ICA, 2025b)

Despite this importance, scholarship still frequently treats cooperatives as stand-alone firms and evaluates performance at the enterprise level. General research on alliances and networks shows that inter-organizational collaboration can improve innovation and performance when partners have complementary resources and robust governance (Belderbos et al., 2004; Faems et al., 2005). However, applying this literature directly to cooperatives is incomplete because cooperative identity creates distinctive design constraints and opportunities. Inter-cooperation must respect local democratic control and autonomy (Principle 4), distribute benefits in ways consistent with member orientation, and remain credible to members who evaluate value not only through profit but through member benefits and community outcomes(Meira & Ramos, 2019; Zhong et al., 2018).

This article addresses this gap by reframing Principle 6 as an inter-cooperative learning capability: a system of routines, structures, and governance safeguards through which cooperatives create, share, and apply knowledge and resources at scale. The study asks three research questions: (RQ1) What learning pathways are most consistently used in

successful inter-cooperative arrangements? (RQ2) What governance design features enable learning and scale while preserving autonomy and member control? (RQ3) What outcome domains (governance, innovation, resilience, SDG contributions) are most consistently associated with these arrangements?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Principle 6 in Cooperative Identity and Policy Guidance

Principle 6 is frequently interpreted as a movement-building norm: cooperatives should support each other because solidarity is part of cooperative identity. ICA Guidance Notes emphasize that cooperation among cooperatives improves members' services and strengthens the movement by building cooperative-friendly markets, shared institutions, and coordinated development activities (ICA, 2015; Kanli, 2019). From this view, inter-cooperation is not discretionary charity; it is a constitutive feature of the cooperative model that supports competitive survival and movement growth.

Policy and legal guidance also highlight that cooperation must be designed to preserve autonomy and democratic control. Comparative cooperative law scholarship, including Principles of European Cooperative Law (PECOL), emphasizes that cooperative cooperation should avoid structures that effectively eliminate member self-governance or convert cooperatives into de facto subsidiaries of centralized entities (Meira, 2022) Instead, the enabling idea is coordination with safeguards: mechanisms that pool resources and capabilities while leaving ultimate control with member cooperatives. (Fajardo et al., 2012; Fajardo-García et al., 2017) These interpretations anticipate a central analytical tension in Principle 6: cooperation is valuable precisely because it can generate scale and standardization, but it must be governed in ways that do not undermine cooperative independence or member voice (Azeredo et al., 2024).

Theoretical Lenses: Inter-Organizational Learning and Network Governance

Inter-cooperative arrangements can be analyzed as learning systems (Jeon & Jang, 2025). Inter-organizational learning theory explains how organizations acquire, transfer, and integrate knowledge through alliances, networks, and communities of practice (Miric, 2012). In educational psychology, cooperative learning refers to structured interdependence where participants' outcomes are linked, while collaborative learning refers to joint meaning-making with looser structures (Johnson & Johnson, 2019). Translating these concepts, cooperative enterprise ecosystems rely on both modes: structured arrangements such as purchasing consortia and accreditation systems (cooperative learning), and flexible peer exchange and project collaboration (collaborative learning) (Dillenbourg, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 2020)

Network governance theory clarifies why some cooperative networks scale successfully and others remain symbolic (Novkovic & Rodrigues, 2025). Networks create value when coordination costs are manageable, opportunism is controlled, and shared standards reduce uncertainty. Cooperative networks face distinctive challenges: member democracy can slow decision-making; heterogeneity of member needs can create distributive conflict; and centralization can trigger fears of mission drift. (Beyers & Leventon, 2021; Maldonado Ibarra et al., 2025; Windsperger et al., 2013) However, cooperative identity provides governance assets: trust, reciprocity, and norms of fairness can reduce

contracting costs and support long-term collaboration. (Brummer, 2018; Windsperger et al., 2018)

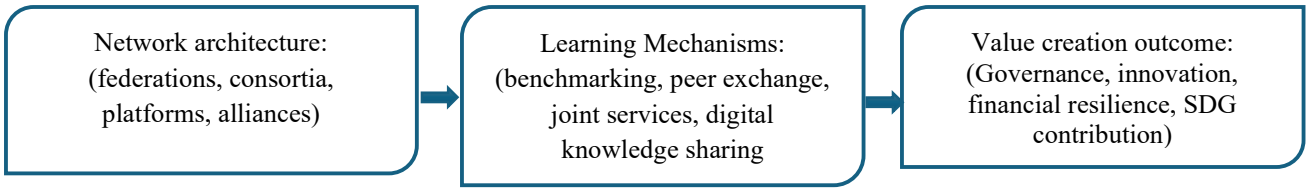
Empirical alliance research finds that collaboration can improve performance, although outcomes depend on partner fit, knowledge complementarities, and governance (Belderbos et al., 2004; Faems et al., 2005). Research on cooperative resilience similarly argues that cooperative features, member orientation, long-term horizons, and stakeholder trust, can support crisis response and survival (Birchall, 2013). Yet cooperative-specific work often addresses resilience at the enterprise level rather than examining how inter-cooperation builds resilience through shared services, internal solidarity mechanisms, and collective capability building. Classic evidence on cooperative resilience during crises also highlights how federations and networks can stabilize liquidity and employment through mutual support mechanisms (Birchall & Ketilson, 2021)

Research Gap, Novelty, and Analytical Framework

Literature therefore offers useful components but leaves three gaps relevant to publication-quality cooperative scholarship. First, Principle 6 is rarely operationalized as a set of observable practices; it is often treated as background context rather than a construct that can explain variation in performance. Second, cross-sector learning is limited: studies typically focus on agriculture or finance, while contemporary cooperative growth is also visible in health, retail, and technology ecosystems. Third, research frequently describes inter-cooperation outputs (shared procurement, federations) without specifying the learning mechanisms that connect cooperation to outcomes, limiting replicability and theory-building(Hernández-Espallardo et al., 2010; Ratten et al., 2018; Rubio, 2021).

This study's novelty lies in reframing Principle 6 as an inter-cooperative learning capability (ICLC). The ICLC framework links three elements: (a) network architecture (federations, consortia, platform alliances, integrated cooperative groups); (b) learning mechanisms (benchmarking, peer advisory, shared services, joint ventures, digital knowledge sharing, training); and (c) value creation outcomes (governance quality, innovation, resilience, and SDG contributions). The framework is designed to be replicable: each element can be measured using secondary indicators in annual reports and institutional documents, enabling future mixed-method and quantitative studies.

The framework yields five propositions for future research and for evaluating practice. P1 (Standardization proposition): inter-cooperative arrangements that codify shared standards and operating procedures will exhibit stronger quality and compliance outcomes. P2 (Autonomy safeguard proposition): governance rules that explicitly protect local member control will be associated with higher participation and long-term stability. P3 (Redistribution proposition): transparent solidarity and redistribution mechanisms will improve resilience and reduce member exit under shocks. P4 (Learning infrastructure proposition): investment in shared learning roles and institutions will accelerate diffusion of best practice and innovation. P5 (Complementarity proposition): cooperation portfolios that combine shared services with project-based collaboration will better balance scale and flexibility, supporting both operational efficiency and innovation. These propositions are synthesized in Fig. 1, which depicts how the cooperation mechanisms map onto recurring learning pathways, governance design features as well as capability outcomes



Source: Author's own illustration, 2026

Figure 1
Inter-Cooperative Learning Capability (ICLC) framework

METHOD

The study uses secondary data to produce a transparent synthesis of how cooperation among cooperatives operates as a learn-and-scale system (Kelly et al., 2024). Secondary-data designs are suitable for cooperative scholarship because many cooperative groups and federations publish annual reports, governance documents, case profiles, and sector reviews that contain measurable indicators (membership size, turnover, service coverage, learning programs, and governance structures) (Bodenstein Fouché & Polo-Garrido, 2024; Kelly et al., 2024). Moreover, institutional publications (ICA, ILO, UN) provide definitional clarity and policy benchmarks that support construct validity. The research design combines (i) structured review of authoritative cooperative identity and policy guidance with (ii) cross-case synthesis of prominent cooperation models, enabling analytical generalization around pathways and governance design rather than statistical generalization.

The sample in this study comprises cases and documents rather than individual human participants. Case selection followed purposive logic aimed at maximizing variation across sectors, geographies, and cooperation structures while ensuring sufficient documentary evidence for triangulation (Wan, 2019). Six cases were selected because they are frequently cited in cooperative sector materials and because they represent distinct cooperation architectures: (1) Mondragon, a multi-sector worker-cooperative federation with shared institutions; (2) Unimed, a federated health cooperative system in Brazil; (3) National Co+op Grocers (NCG), a purchasing and shared-services cooperative supporting retail food cooperatives; (4) FACTTIC/Cooperativa de Software Libre, a technology federation supporting project collaboration; (5) Lok Swasthya SEWA Mandali, a women-led health cooperative embedded in the SEWA ecosystem; and (6) SCIAS–Hospital de Barcelona, a multi-stakeholder health cooperative model. These cases provide cross-sector variation (multi-sector industry/retail/finance; health services; food retail; technology; community health) and demonstrate multiple cooperation architectures (federations, shared-service entities, multi-stakeholder governance, and project-based consortia). The contribution is a practical, publication-ready framework that helps scholars operationalize Principle 6 and helps practitioners design cooperation portfolios that are compatible with cooperative identity (Cracogna, 2021).

The documentary corpus includes: (a) ICA cooperative identity resources and Guidance Notes; (b) UN and ILO publications on cooperative promotion, IYC 2025, and cooperative statistics; (c) the World Cooperative Monitor 2025 report and methodological materials for macro-level benchmarking; and (d) organizational annual reports, case studies, and credible sector reports for each case. Triangulation was used to reduce reliance on any single narrative source, especially for membership and performance claims (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024). Table 1 summarizes the six-case sample, that including sector and geography, the dominant cooperation architectures, and the core sources used for this cross-case synthesis

Table 1
Case Sample Overview and Core Sources

Case	Sector	Geography	Cooperation architecture	Illustrative sources
Mondragon Corporation	Multi-sector (industry, retail, finance, knowledge)	Spain	Federation / cooperative group with shared institutions	Mondragon annual report; credible sector coverage
Unimed System	Health services / insurance	Brazil	Federated system of medical cooperatives	IHCO health-sector report
National Co+op Grocers (NCG)	Retail food	United States	Purchasing and shared-services cooperative	NCG background documents; purchasing co-op guidance
FACTTIC / Cooperativa de Software Libre	Technology services	Argentina	Federation of worker co-ops; project collaboration	ICA Principle 6 case note; ILO article; recent research
Lok Swasthya SEWA Mandali	Community health	India	Women-owned health cooperative with networked delivery model	Lok Swasthya documents; WIEGO profile
SCIAS–Hospital de Barcelona	Healthcare services	Spain	User- and worker-owned cooperative governance model	ICA case study; IHCO report; UN/IHCO materials

To support replicability, the study used a structured data-extraction matrix and a coding protocol aligned with the ICLC framework (Xiao et al., 2025). The matrix captured: (i) network architecture (membership composition, decision rights, and shared institutions); (ii) learning mechanisms (peer forums, benchmarking systems, training, shared services, joint projects, digital platforms); (iii) governance safeguards (autonomy clauses, voting rules, accountability and transparency mechanisms); and (iv) outcomes (financial scale, service reach, documented innovations, resilience practices, and SDG-related impacts).

Because secondary sources vary in detail and quality, each extracted claim was tagged by source type (official organizational report, institutional publication, peer-reviewed research, or credible sector media) and checked for corroboration where possible. The protocol also included a field for challenges and tensions (coordination costs, heterogeneity, mission drift risk, and autonomy concerns) to avoid a one-sided success narrative.

Data collection proceeded in three steps. First, authoritative definitional and policy sources were collected to anchor constructs, including ICA Guidance Notes (ICA, 2015), the UN resolution on IYC 2025 (United Nations General Assembly, 2024), and ILO materials on cooperative promotion and statistics (ILO, 2025b). Second, World Cooperative Monitor 2025 materials were collected to provide macro-level benchmarking and to situate inter-cooperation within the global cooperative economy (ICA & Euricse, 2025). Third, case-specific materials were collected from organizational websites, annual reports, sectoral reports, and institutional case studies (e.g., ICA and IHCO health-sector publications).

Search terms combined 'cooperation among cooperatives', 'cooperative federation', 'purchasing cooperative', 'shared services cooperative', 'platform cooperative federation', and 'cooperative resilience', alongside case-specific terms. Preference was given to primary organizational documents and institutional reports, with media sources used only where they reported on published figures or summarized official results. Documents were retained when they provided verifiable information on cooperation mechanisms, governance arrangements, or outcomes relevant to the ICLC framework.

Data analysis proceeded in two cycles, guided by our ICLC framework. First-cycle coding categorised all documentary evidence into the deductive framework categories: network architecture, learning mechanisms, governance safeguards, and outcomes. Second-cycle analysis involved inductive, thematic synthesis within each category and rigorous cross-case pattern matching (Ghazinoori et al., 2024). We constructed a comparative matrix to systematically examine how each case illustrated the ICLC elements and to identify recurring configurations and causal pathways linking governance designs to outcomes. This pattern-matching approach is central to explanatory case study logic, testing whether the empirical patterns align with the propositions derived from our theoretical framework (Prabhu, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented in two layers: macro-level evidence on the cooperative economy and why inter-cooperation matters and cross-case findings on learning pathways and enabling governance features.

Macro Context: Cooperative Scale and the Ecosystem Imperative

WCM 2025 reports that the Top 300 cooperative and mutual enterprises generated approximately USD 2.79 trillion turnover in 2023, with agriculture and insurance among the most represented sectors by turnover and trade also accounting for substantial scale (ICA & Euricse, 2025). This macro evidence reinforces two practical points. First, many large cooperative groups operate as systems of cooperatives (federations and groups) rather than as single primary cooperatives; their scale often reflects coordinated ecosystem architectures. Second, the competitive environment is increasingly shaped by capital intensity, digital capabilities, and compliance obligations, which makes shared services, joint investment, and collective learning more strategically valuable (Zhu et al., 2018).

Broader cooperative statistics reinforce the ecosystem imperative. ICA's global figures commonly cited in cooperative policy discussions indicate that cooperatives involve over a billion members globally and provide work opportunities to around 280 million people (ICA, 2024). In 2025, the ILO also released new measurement publications aimed at advancing cooperative statistics and comparability across countries, signalling that

evidence-based cooperative policy is becoming more data-driven (ILO, 2025a). Improved measurement strengthens the case for moving from isolated project support to ecosystem-level interventions, including shared institutions and inter-cooperative collaboration.

Recurring Learning Pathways Across Cooperation Models

Across the six cases, five learning pathways occur. These pathways represent observable mechanisms through which Principle 6 converts solidarity into scale, learning, and resilience.

- *Pathway 1:* Purchasing and shared services. Purchasing cooperation is a classic and widely transferable mechanism: it centralizes procurement and shared functions while keeping ownership and local retail decisions at the member level. National Co+op Grocers (NCG) provides an example of a purchasing and shared-services cooperative designed to strengthen independent food cooperatives by improving purchasing terms, supporting merchandising, and providing training and operational support (National Co+op Grocers, 2023) Purchasing cooperation reduces unit costs, improves vendor terms, and can standardize product and service quality. Importantly for cooperative identity, it can achieve these benefits without converting member cooperatives into branches, because decision rights over community engagement, local staffing, and member participation remain decentralized (de Miranda, 2022).
- *Pathway 2:* Benchmarking and peer advisory systems. Beyond procurement, inter-cooperation enables structured knowledge transfer through benchmarking, peer visits, and advisory systems. NCG's peer support, store visits, and coaching functions illustrate how tacit operational knowledge is converted into transferable practices across member cooperatives (National Co+op Grocers, 2023). Mondragon similarly relies on shared reporting, group-level coordination, and ecosystem institutions that allow cooperatives to compare performance and coordinate investments. Mondragon's public reporting shows that the corporation achieved sales above EUR 11 billion with a workforce above 70,000 people in 2023, signalling a scale where internal learning and coordination become essential management functions (Mondragon Corporation, 2024)
- *Pathway 3:* Federation-enabled standard setting. Federation structures create shared rules, service standards, and governance templates that reduce quality variance and strengthen reputational trust. In healthcare, standard setting is especially critical because safety and continuity of care require consistent protocols. The IHCO health-sector report describes the Unimed system in Brazil as a large health cooperative system with shared structures and accredited hospital networks, illustrating the role of inter-cooperation in coordinating service delivery at scale (International Health Cooperative Organization, 2022). Similarly, in Spain, SCIAS (owner and operator of Hospital de Barcelona) is highlighted as a user- and worker-owned cooperative with very large member participation, demonstrating how multi-stakeholder cooperative governance can institutionalize accountability and quality improvement (International Health Cooperative Organization, 2022)

- *Pathway 4:* Joint ventures and platform cooperation. Technology federations demonstrate how cooperatives pool specialized skills and compete for larger contracts through project collaboration and joint ventures. ICA documentation describes how Cooperativa de Software Libre participates in FACTTIC, a federation that enables engagement with other cooperatives and delivery of services to cooperative enterprises and government organ. (Fici, 2015; ICA, 2015). Recent research on Argentine free software cooperatives also emphasizes the importance of networking and knowledge management in technology cooperative ecosystems, supporting the argument that cooperation among cooperatives is a capability for competing in knowledge-intensive markets (Brest & Baruzzini, 2025). In platform contexts, federated models can also protect democratic governance while enabling shared digital infrastructure and brand coordination.
- *Pathway 5:* Capability building through training and mentorship. Many inter-cooperative arrangements invest directly in human capital. Lok Swasthya SEWA Mandali provides a women-led community health cooperative model where frontline health workers are trained to deliver health information and connect members to services, illustrating how cooperative learning is embedded in service delivery systems (Devenish, 2019). Organizational documents describe growth from an early shareholder base to a broader membership of women owners, indicating that cooperative structures can institutionalize capability building alongside service provision. (Alves et al., 2016) Mondragon likewise invests in knowledge and training through ecosystem institutions, reinforcing the idea that learning infrastructure is central to cooperative competitiveness and resilience (Mondragon Corporation, 2024).

Table 2 consolidates five recurring learning pathways identified across those cases, specifying their illustrative mechanisms, the cases where each pathway is very prominent, as well as the outcome domains most frequently reported.

Table 2
Cross-Case Learning Pathways and Associated Outcomes

Learning pathway	Illustrative mechanisms	Cases where prominent	Outcome domains frequently reported
Purchasing and shared services	Joint procurement; shared logistics; shared analytics; shared marketing	NCG; Mondragon (shared services); Unimed (system functions)	Cost reduction; quality consistency; operational learning
Benchmarking and peer advisory	Peer visits; coaching; dashboards; peer forums	NCG; Mondragon; FACTTIC (peer exchange)	Faster diffusion of best practice; governance learning
Federation standard setting	Common protocols; accreditation; governance templates	Unimed; SCIAS; Mondragon	Quality assurance; compliance; reputational trust

Joint ventures/platform cooperation	Consortium bidding; shared digital tools; co-production projects	FACTTIC; cooperative technology ecosystems	Innovation; market access; scaling capacity
Capability building	Training; mentorship; leadership development; community worker models	Lok Swasthya; Mondragon; NCG	Human capital; inclusivity; service reach

Governance Design Features Enabling Learning while Preserving Autonomy

Across cases, three governance design features appear to function as enabling conditions for inter-cooperative learning: (i) explicit autonomy safeguards, (ii) transparency in redistribution and accountability, and (iii) specialization for learning roles and institutions.

- *Autonomy safeguards:* A consistent design principle is to centralize only what must be centralized (procurement, standards, shared services) while keeping member control of core democratic decisions. This design aligns with cooperative-law guidance emphasizing that cooperation should not eliminate autonomy or reduce members to passive stakeholders (Fajardo et al., 2012). Purchasing cooperatives are illustrative: members retain local ownership and governance while benefiting from pooled bargaining power. In federated healthcare systems, standards and shared accreditation can be centralized while clinical decisions and member governance remain accountable to local cooperative entities.
- *Transparency and solidarity mechanisms:* Cooperative groups that redistribute resources or coordinate investments must ensure transparency to sustain legitimacy. Mondragon's public reporting emphasizes group-level coordination and shared institutions, suggesting that accountability and transparency help sustain solidarity mechanisms across diverse cooperatives (Errasti et al., 2016). In multi-stakeholder health models such as SCIAS, democratic governance mechanisms that include consumer and worker members are documented as supporting patient-centered improvements, reflecting how transparency and participation can translate into service innovation (ICA, 2025a; ICA & Euricse, 2025)
- *Learning roles and institutions:* Effective ecosystems institutionalize learning rather than leaving it to informal goodwill. NCG's structured advisory functions are examples of specialized roles that convert experience into transferable practice (National Co+op Grocers, 2023) At larger scale, cooperative groups invest in shared training, research, or development institutions, enabling continuous improvement and innovation. These structures operationalize Principle 6 as a capability: they create durable routines for knowledge creation, diffusion, and application.

Theoretical Implications and Novelty

The findings support the central argument that Principle 6 is best understood as a learning-and-governance capability rather than solely a solidarity norm. The five learning pathways identified map to complementary functions: purchasing and shared services generate scale efficiencies; benchmarking diffuses practice; federation standard setting reduces quality variance and strengthens reputational trust; joint ventures enable innovation and market

access; and capability building develops human capital and leadership. Together, these pathways form a cooperation portfolio that balances the cooperative movement's dual demands: maintaining local democratic control while competing in markets shaped by scale and technology. Consequently, the ICLC framework addresses a central paradox in cooperative growth: how to achieve collective scale without sacrificing the local autonomy and member-centricity that define cooperative identity.

The principal novelty and research contribution is the Inter-Cooperative Learning Capability (ICLC) framework, which improves construct clarity for future empirical research. Instead of treating inter-cooperation as descriptive context, the framework specifies observable mechanisms and governance safeguards that can be measured through secondary indicators (e.g., existence of shared-service units, benchmarking systems, codified standards, training institutions, and formal redistribution mechanisms). This is directly relevant to scholarly publication criteria such as significance, originality, and replicability: it offers a theory-informed but practice-grounded structure for operationalizing a core cooperative principle.

Managerial and Policy Implications

For cooperative leaders, the synthesis suggests that effective inter-cooperation requires deliberate design rather than ad hoc solidarity. First, leaders should diagnose which constraints are binding (procurement costs, data capabilities, compliance, innovation capacity, talent) and then select cooperation pathways that directly address those constraints. Second, governance should be designed around autonomy-preserving decision rights: centralize functions that benefit from scale while maintaining member control over mission-critical decisions, member participation, and local community accountability. Third, learning should be institutionalized through roles (coaches, peer advisors), infrastructure (shared analytics, training), and routines (benchmarking cycles, peer forums) (Alves et al., 2016; Guo & Liu, 2022)

For policymakers and development partners, the analysis implies that cooperative support programs should shift from isolated cooperative funding toward ecosystem-level capability building. This aligns with IYC 2025 objectives and with ILO Recommendation No. 193's emphasis on enabling environments. Enabling policies include: legal recognition of federations and shared-service entities; proportional regulation suited to member-owned firms; access to patient capital compatible with cooperative governance; and data and statistics programs that make cooperative contributions (ILO, 2025a). By supporting inter-cooperation infrastructure (training centers, digital shared services, accreditation systems), policymakers can amplify cooperative contributions to decent work, inclusion, and SDGs.

This approach is also consistent with ILO policy work emphasizing cooperatives' contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals and the importance of enabling ecosystems for inclusive development (ILO, 2024).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study analyzed Cooperation among Cooperatives (Principle 6) through inter-organizational learning and network governance lenses. Using secondary evidence from institutional guidance, global monitoring reports, and six cross-sector cases, the study identified five recurring learning pathways and three enabling governance design features. The results indicate that inter-cooperation is a learn-and-scale capability that strengthens

governance, innovation, resilience, and SDG contributions while preserving cooperative identity when properly governed (Alves et al., 2016).

The article's main contribution is the Inter-Cooperative Learning Capability framework, which operationalizes Principle 6 through observable mechanisms and governance safeguards. For practice, the framework supports cooperative leaders in designing cooperation portfolios compatible with democratic control and local responsiveness (Sacchetti & Tortia, 2016). For policy, it supports ecosystem-level interventions consistent with IYC 2025 objectives and evidence-based cooperative promotion. Future research should extend measurement, test propositions with mixed methods, and evaluate how inter-cooperation supports inclusive development under different institutional and regulatory environments.

As a secondary-data synthesis, this study has limitations. The analysis depends on the availability and quality of public documentation and cannot estimate causal impacts of specific cooperation mechanisms. Successful cases may also be overrepresented in public narratives, which can bias inference toward positive outcomes. Future research can strengthen causal inference by combining this framework with primary data (surveys of member cooperatives, network governance assessments, and interviews with federation managers) and with quantitative designs (panel data on cooperative performance, matched comparisons of cooperatives with and without shared-service participation).

Future empirical work can also test the propositions derived from the ICLC framework. For example, researchers can measure standardization and autonomy safeguards in federations and examine associations with service quality, compliance outcomes, or member retention. Technology cooperative ecosystems provide a particularly timely context for research on platform cooperation, shared digital infrastructure, and governance models that balance innovation with democratic control. Finally, expanding evidence across regions, including Africa and Asia, will improve external validity and inform policy frameworks for cooperative ecosystem strengthening.

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