Platform Cooperatives and Kerala's State-supported Knowledge Economy through the Realm of Sustainable Development Goals

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Preface – Channelising Cooperation for Addressing Kerala's Development Challenges

The platform cooperatives model proposed in Kerala, guided by the principles of the International Labor Organization (ILO), presents a transformative approach to addressing unemployment and fostering sustainable development. Despite Kerala's high Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.794, youth workforce participation remains low, with 42.63% engaged in employment, education, or training. The Kerala Knowledge Economy Mission (KKEM) under the Kerala Development and Innovation Strategic Council (K-DISC) aims to convert Kerala into a Knowledge Society by leveraging private sector opportunities in employment and enhancing innovative local economic development. Through initiatives like the Digital Workforce Management System (DWMS), KKEM also facilitates remote work and freelance opportunities along with regular jobs, having secured over 103,108 placements, and provided skill training to 18,075 individuals by March 2024. The open economy characterized by task-based employment regulated by platform-specific terms faces significant challenges, including a lack of labor protections, unstable income, and exploitative practices. In response, KKEM's proposed platform cooperatives model combines cooperative principles with digital platforms, promoting democratic governance, shared ownership, and equitable profit distribution. This model enhances employability through targeted skilling and generates local economic value through diversification and aggregation of the petty production system in the state through ethical collaboration and superior application of technology. Drawing on global examples, such as the EU's Directive on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions and the UK Supreme Court's ruling on Uber drivers, KKEM's approach prioritizes legal recognition, fair treatment, and benefits for open talent workers. By integrating community-based initiatives and local resources, KKEM's platform cooperatives aim to create a more equitable and sustainable open economy ecosystem, contributing to the advancement of sustainable development goals.

Background and context of Kerala's Cooperative Movement

Workforce Participation in Kerala

As per the India Employment Report 2024, 83% of the country's unemployed are youth (aged 15-29), indicating a significant disparity between their career aspirations and available opportunities. India, aiming to become the world's third-largest economy, must address unemployment by tailoring strategies to each state's unique context. Kerala, with one of the highest rates of educated youth unemployment, sees only 42.63% youth workforce participation, ranking 19th among 22 states, despite its higher human development index (0.794 vs. the national average of 0.724). About 19.26% of males and 40.80% of females among Kerala's youth are not engaged in employment, education or training in the state(3). This underscores the importance of leveraging the state's long cooperative history in the three sectors – agriculture, industry and service.

Kerala's History of Collectivization for Equity and Sustainability

Panapayattu or *Kurikalyanam* existed in the northern part of Kerala, known as the Malabar region, as early as the 19th century to meet the economic compulsion of the society, such as marriages or the construction of houses. Panapayattu evolved from combining two words – *Panam* means money, and *Payattu* means working hard at something. The system operates on a simple premise: if a person needs money, he will invite a close set of friends and family members on a day and treat them with a light meal. In return, the guests contribute money according to their means. The recipient must repay the principal amount or more when the guest hosts their *Panapayattu*, even if they are not invited. This interest-free financial helping system embedded in the cultural context is based on generous trust and cooperation. The members involved have a symmetrical relationship with each other, basically rooted in social relationships like friendship, which means reciprocity is the basis of *Panapayattu*(4–6).

In the early 20th century, Mannathu Padmanabhan, the founder of the Nair Service Society (NSS), utilised an innovative fundraising method to support establishing and maintaining NSS schools. He encouraged Nair families to plant coconut trees and dedicated the income generated from these trees to the NSS for educational purposes. The income from a single coconut tree could significantly contribute to educational expenses, as coconut farming was a reliable source of revenue in Kerala due to the region's favourable climatic conditions. By mobilising the community in this manner, Mannathu Padmanabhan effectively combined agricultural practice with social and educational upliftment(7).

During the late 1930s, a crucial period for developing the communist movement in Kerala, P. Krishna Pillai, a prominent leader in the Indian Communist movement, demonstrated his support for trade unions in various innovative ways. One notable example was the planting of coconut trees at Communist Party branch offices. This gesture represented a commitment to workers' welfare and the sustainable development of local resources(8).

The palliative care movement in India began in Kerala in the late 1990s with the involvement of volunteers from the community(9). Since then, palliative care has evolved into a silent revolution in healthcare in the state. People with serious health related suffering in Kerala are now receiving palliative care in their homes through the active collaboration of volunteers, local self-governments and multidisciplinary healthcare teams. This approach exemplifies a more humanised and compassionate form of healthcare in our modern, technology-driven era.

Micro-financing through the largest self-help group of women, the *Kudumbasree*, which started in 1998 in the state, aims at eradicating poverty and promoting gender equity. Renowned for its innovativeness and extensive reach, Kudumbasree is at the local self-government level. The collective empowerment of women, with the aid of government programs, has fostered a sense of agency among the Kudumbasree members. This is evident from the 31,261 micro-enterprises by individuals and groups belonging to *Kudumbasree*(10,11).

The local communities in Kerala protected sacred groves as part of their cultural and religious practices. However, the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel Report in 2011 provides a framework for the system to protect the sacred groves to conserve the existing biodiversity without compromising the local communities' cultural and religious practices, promoting sustainable development(12).

In 2018, Kerala witnessed the worst flood in the century. However, the state was able to reduce the havoc caused by the flood and recover in a short time with the collective efforts of its public

and the government. This is not restricted to any specific public group; for instance, the college-going students steered up by WhatsApp groups ensured the rehabilitation works and supplies were on time, and the fishermen communities with their fishing boats stepped into the rescue operations. The state realised that the collective effort of its people forms the cornerstone of its resilience(13–15).

Labor Workers in Kerala

The United Credit Cooperative was formed in Kerala in 1922 by Kerala Aatmavidhya Sangham, determined to find their means of life and labour with dignity and stability, which were denied by the influential upper caste then. They initiated a labour contract cooperative society to provide labour and income to the natives by contracting local constructions. Later, they were renamed the Uralungal Labour Contract Cooperative Society (ULCCS), and the first project they undertook was the rebuilding of bunds of farmlands that collapsed in the 1924 flood. In 2024, the ULCCS was the recipient of the Best Performer award by the National Highways Authority, competing with leading construction companies in the country. ULCCS has completed more than 7500 diverse projects; the cooperative and initiative model of ULCCS is recognized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as a model Cooperative. ULCCS owes its success to participatory democracy. Workers elect the board of directors, and site leaders are chosen from among the workers based on managerial ability. A board member oversees each work site. ULCCS operates in a non-credit manner and promotes gender equality. According to the Economic Review 2023, State Planning Board, Government of Kerala, there are 16,352 cooperative societies in the state, of which 12,241 are functional. Among them, the majority are consumer cooperatives (4,629), followed by credit cooperatives (3,751) and women's cooperatives (1,248). ULCCS is a notable example in the cooperative sector for its inspirational and evolving strategy(16,17).

From *Panapayattu* to ULCCS, Kerala's cooperative movement has consistently demonstrated optimism for a more productive economy despite numerous challenges. Kerala has now initiated an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable model to address challenges and foster opportunities. This is a continuation of its unique and unparalleled development strategy focusing on the overall human development of the masses with an emphasis on equity and sustainability, contrasting the national model of local employment growth and widening disparities among the haves and have-nots. The state identifies three key domains: the public sector, which generates up to 1,40,000 jobs annually, enterprises including startups, and the private sector excluding jobs created in local knowledge industries. However, the ILO reports a steady decline in permanent core jobs in various industries due to three primary factors. Firstly, the rapid evolution of technology makes it difficult to maintain a permanent workforce with up-to-date skills, necessitating a more flexible workforce. Secondly, industries requiring creative talent find it challenging to keep permanent staff due to the need for diverse and intermittently needed skills. Lastly, many organisations are adopting contingent work arrangements to avoid the costs of providing social security and other benefits associated with permanent employment, offering them greater flexibility and reduced financial obligations(3). There is a need to address the shrinking of core jobs and the denudation

of rights of employees around lifelong contracts and formal workplace framework and keep growing the job opportunity creation process.

Kerala Knowledge Economy Mission – An Innovative Initiative by Kerala

Initiatives like the Kerala Knowledge Economy Mission (KKEM) under the Kerala Development and Innovation Strategic Council (K-DISC) aim to transform Kerala into a Knowledge Society by leveraging private sector opportunities. KKEM aims to create employment opportunities for two million educated individuals, focusing on women re-entering the workforce, marginalised communities, and people with disabilities. The focus is also on social and behavioural change communication to address youth preference for public sector jobs. The Digital Workforce Management System (DWMS) employs a platform of platforms model, incorporating AI technology to transform career profiling. It offers personalised guidance and tools to align workforce skills with market demands, focusing on promoting remote work and freelance opportunities(18). As of March 2024, KKEM and partners secured 103,108 placements and provided skill training to 18,075 individuals.

The Current Landscape of Work

Since the work and the workplace landscape is undergoing a profound transformation driven by technological advancements, globalisation, and changing societal expectations, remote work, flexible schedules, and collaborative digital platforms have become integral to the modern work environment. This shift has prompted organisations to redefine traditional workplace structures, fostering a more adaptable and inclusive approach to work. As employees increasingly seek a balance between professional and personal life, employers are adapting by embracing innovative work models that prioritise both productivity and employee well-being(18). The booming open economy in India illustrates this shift (table 1)(19). Open talent work significantly diverges from traditional employment relationships, which typically involve long-term employer-employee bonds, salaries or wages, benefits, and protection under minimum wage and anti-discrimination laws(20).

In contrast, open talent workers are hired for specific tasks or set durations, often project-based or temporary. These workers, known as "independent contractors," "freelancers," or "self-employed," are regulated primarily by platform-specific terms of service rather than standard labour laws. Platform work falls into two categories: "crowd work," performed online and remotely, and "work-on-demand via app," which is location-based. Studies reveal that open talent workers face challenges such as a lack of labour and social protections, unstable income, poor working conditions, and low bargaining power, as they cannot unionise, increasing their long-term vulnerabilities (box 1). Platform-mediated open talent work also faces challenges such as exploitative algorithmic management, high commission fees by the platform, significant wage gap between workers in developing (lesser) and developed countries and between women (earn lower) and men, inability to cancel/refuse work without negative impacts and account deactivation(20). Recognizing the evolving needs of open talent workers, KKEM is also undertaking a concerted effort to create work-near-home infrastructure. This involves developing co-working spaces, digital hubs, and collaborative environments that provide open talent workers with convenient and productive spaces close to their residences. Such infrastructure enhances the efficiency of open talent workers and contributes to the overall development of local communities by fostering a sense of entrepreneurship and community engagement. From January 2022 to mid-May 2024, the DWMS platform facilitated open talent work for 0.10% of the 35,840 jobs secured by employees. Most of these open talent workers, 67.57% (N=37), were men. Another similar initiative is the Kerala Savari App which emerged as a homegrown

alternative to traditional ride-sharing services like Uber. Providing a unique and localised experience, Kerala Savari app caters to the specific needs of the region's commuters. The platform gained attention for its user-friendly interface, competitive pricing, and commitment to supporting local drivers, offering a distinctive alternative to global ride-sharing giants based on exploitative algorithms.

Platform Cooperative Model under Kerala's Knowledge Economy Mission

KKEM Employers Portal
Picture Credits: KKEM

In this context, platform cooperatives put forth by KKEM offer an alternative to the traditional open economy model by combining the principles of cooperatives with the digital platform economy. The proposed model is a digital platform owned and governed by its workers, who collectively make decisions about the enterprise. This model adheres to cooperative principles such as democratic governance, shared ownership, and equitable distribution of profits(21). According to KKEM, platform cooperatives refer to *any collective or any form of collective enterprise that follows the cooperative principles and values irrespective of its legal form of registration and is not limited to the regular definition of 'cooperatives,' which falls under the state's cooperative act. The entity may be registered as a limited liability partnership collective or cooperative based on the relevant statutes.* The KKEM model uses skilling to enhance industry-relevant employability and individuals' intellectual capabilities, skills, and professional growth. Additionally, it views skill addition as a method for generating local value in Kerala, initially aiming to provide 60% external and 40% local opportunities on the platform. This balance will shift towards more local opportunities as a high-value ecosystem develops.

Solutions that KKEM can implement through the proposed model are the following:

A. **Proactively leveraging rising freelance opportunities**
   a. Connecting jobs and skilled workers – workers will have access to a wide range of small and big jobs/project works, which are validated and easily accessible to skilled workers located in Kerala.
   b. Upskilling and improving employability – KKEM can upskill the registered knowledge workers in relevant skills, future technologies, and associated and auxiliary skill sets that improve the employability of the individual, which could be proactively linked to plans for domestic knowledge enterprise creation.

B. **Devising systems for fair payments on the platform**
   a. An independent third-party evaluator - can be appointed to evaluate the quality of deliverables and work parameters.
   b. Arbitrator – to look into disputes arising from open talent-work contracts and services between employers/employees/platforms and amicably and swiftly solve them.
   c. An independent ombudsman can be appointed to look into disputes arising from open talent contracts.

d. Escrow Account mechanism **–** Payments for open talent jobs will be made to an escrow account, which will be released only after successful and satisfactory completion. The escrow account mechanism also prevents exploitation of the worker and non-payment. (similar to the model followed in Uruguay and other countries)
e. Rating mechanism **–** A rating mechanism for employers and open talent workers will be developed as part of the platform architecture.

C. Providing additional Value through a Social Security Framework based on insurance and volumes
a. *Provision of Social Security* - KKEM can benefit open talent workers, as the strategy paper outlines.
b. *Existing Social Security schemes* - The DWMS platform can explore linking existing social security schemes and the seamless delivery of benefits directly to the beneficiaries without leakages and delays.
c. *Reduce Exploitation* - The Knowledge Economy Mission through the DWMS platform would reduce exploitation by providing oversight, dispute resolution, and norms to ensure open talent workers' quality of work and deliverables.
d. *Collective bidding* – The formation of collectives and platform cooperatives would help bid for larger projects, which would otherwise have been difficult for an individual or sole independent contractor.
e. *De-risking the individual* – The formation of collectives of knowledge workers, through collective contribution, can de-risk the individual's inputs in the event of an unforeseen circumstance such as a health issue or a personal emergency.
f. *Division of labour* – Within a collective or a platform cooperative, the division of tasks and labor about various aspects of a project can be easily divided (rather than the burden being taken up by one individual). For example, a collective can also comprise diverse skills and divide various aspects, such as IT and software development, business proposal development, marketing, sales, design, and testing, amongst themselves.

D. Creating Collectivization as an instrument for equity and collaboration
a. *Mobilisation of workers into collectives and platform cooperatives* – Knowledge workers can be mobilised into collectives and platform cooperatives based on their common interests and collective skill sets. For example, a platform cooperative of IT workers, a collective of graphic designers, or trainers can all collectively bid for projects and divide the work between them.
b. *Provisioning Social Security and Skilling through Collectives and Platform Cooperatives* – These collectives and platform cooperatives, comprised of skilled knowledge workers, can be the conduits for skilling based on niche domains and specific skill sets relevant to taking up open talent jobs. They can also act as vehicles for provisioning social security benefits. A knowledge worker can be part of many collectives simultaneously, and the social security provided to him/her can be accrued based on the work she undertakes both individually and while being part of a collective organisation.
c. *Collectives as potent vehicles for bidding on larger projects* – Skilled workers with similar and diverse skills can come together to form a collective or a platform cooperative to collaborate and bid for larger projects, which, as individuals, they usually would not have been able to do.

Three key factors enabling the seamless operation of the KKEM platform for non-exploitative open talent job provisioning are:

- Blockchain-Based Traceability
- Escrow Account for Open talent-Work Payments
- Independent Ombudsman for Dispute Resolution

The platform integrates these components with the concept of collectives and a microservice-based architecture, forming its backbone (figure 1). This aligns with the New Labour Code by the Government of India, which envisages the provision of social security for open talent workers in all sectors(22).
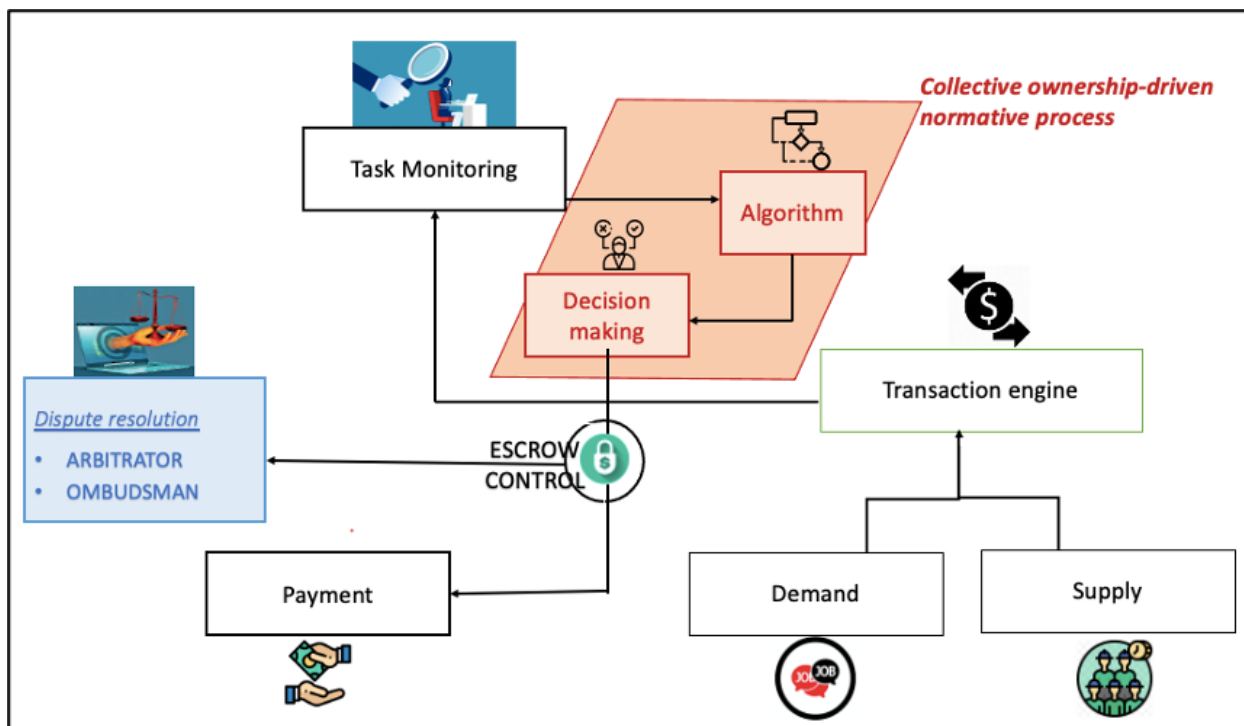
Proposed State-supported platform architecture with non-exploitative, collective-owned algorithmic process

Lessons from Global Response

In the European Union, the Directive on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions aims to provide open talent workers with more precise terms of employment, advance notice of work schedules, and protection against unfair dismissal(23). In the United Kingdom, the Supreme Court ruled in 2021 that Uber drivers are workers, not independent contractors, entitling them to minimum wage, holiday pay, and other benefits(24). Additionally, California in the United States passed Assembly Bill 5 (AB5) in 2019, which requires many open economy companies to reclassify their workers as employees, granting them access to benefits such as health insurance and paid leave(25). These examples demonstrate a global trend toward enhancing the rights and protections of open talent workers through legislative and judicial measures. China's recent revision of labour laws, notably the amendment to the Trade Union Law, signifies a significant stride towards protecting and enabling unionisation among open talent workers. By officially acknowledging the rights of open talent workers to join and form trade unions, China sets a

precedent for ensuring social security and representation for this expanding workforce segment(26). Meanwhile, in Vietnam, ongoing debates about the legal status and rights of app-based drivers emphasise the critical need for formal recognition and protection within the open economy. Despite the absence of concrete regulations, acknowledging the employment relationship between drivers and platforms underscores the importance of defining and safeguarding open talent workers' rights(27,28).

Drawing from these global experiences, the proposed platform cooperatives model by KKEM can integrate several vital lessons. First, prioritise legal recognition and protection of open talent workers' rights within labour laws and regulations, similar to China's amendment to the Trade Union Law. Second, clearly define employment relationships within the open economy to ensure fair treatment and access to benefits for workers, as illustrated by Vietnam's discourse on app-based drivers. Third, recognize the economic potential of the open economy and explore opportunities for cost savings and efficiency, as seen in the widespread utilisation of open talent workers in the ASEAN region. Finally, embrace community-based initiatives and local resources to foster collaboration and shared prosperity, mirroring Cuba's approach to the sharing economy despite infrastructural challenges (14,15). Incorporating these lessons can ensure the success of proposed platform cooperatives, contribute to developing a more equitable and sustainable open economy ecosystem, and pave the way to achieving sustainable development goals(29).

Conclusion

The integration of platform cooperatives in Kerala's economy represents a transformative approach to sustainable development, addressing unemployment and promoting equitable growth. The Kerala Knowledge Economy Mission (KKEM) combines cooperative principles with digital innovation, enhancing employability while ensuring fair treatment and benefits for open talent workers. This model tackles open economy challenges such as lack of labour protections and unstable income through democratic governance, shared ownership, and equitable profit distribution. Learning from global best practices, KKEM emphasises legal recognition and protection of open talent workers' rights, skill development, and local economic value creation, contributing to a resilient and inclusive economy. Key solutions include escrow account mechanisms, independent dispute resolution, and a robust social security framework to prevent exploitation and ensure sustainability. By fostering collectivization, the model enables platform cooperatives to bid for larger projects and provide comprehensive social security. Ultimately, Kerala's adoption of platform cooperatives aligns with its sustainable development goals, creating a fairer open economy and ensuring opportunities for all workers.

Table 1: Estimations and projections for the open talent and platform sector

No	Element	Estimation	Source/Details
1	Current estimated Size of the open economy (India)	77 lakh (7.7 million) For the Year 2020-21	NITI-Aayog report (June 2022)
2	Estimated Size of open economy in 2029-30 (India)	2.35 crore(23.5 million)	NITI-Aayog report (June 2022)
3	Estimated Size of the open economy by 2029-30 (India)	USD 250 billion (1.25% of GDP)	NITI-Aayog report (June 2022)

		47%-medium-skilled jobs, 22%-high skilled, 31%-low skilled jobs.	Data for the year 2019-20 NITI-Aayog report (June 2022)
4	Skill-based division of open talent jobs (Presently)	47%-medium-skilled jobs, 22%-high skilled, 31%-low skilled jobs.	Data for the year 2019-20 NITI-Aayog report (June 2022)
5	Platform-based open talent workers(from major 11 platforms) in India	30 lakhs (3 million)	Fairworks Open talent Work Report,2021
6	Present Size of the global open economy	USD 347 billion	Brodmin.com, Open economy Case study

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Box 1: Specific challenges of open economy

·   **Swelling Workforce**: Technology platforms often onboard more open talent/freelance workers than needed, particularly knowledge workers.

·   **Driven Down Labor Costs**: Big technology platforms leverage many workers to reduce labor costs steeply.

·   **Easy Hire and Fire Culture**: The oversupply of labor leads to under-utilization, idle time, and a hire-and-fire culture.

·   **Imbalance of Power**: Platform owners benefit from high labor availability, making demand-based choices, while workers face limited work, severe information asymmetry, and lack of choice.

·   **Trade Restriction Clauses**: Some platforms include exclusion clauses in worker contracts, restricting trade.

·   **Conflict Resolution Issues**: There needs to be more explicit conflict resolution mechanisms and more apparent jurisdiction for legal redressal, especially with cross-country work allocation.

·   **Lack of Social Security**: Open talent job platforms hold power, with no obligation to retain workers, provide social security, or prevent client exploitation.

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Call For Articles: COOP Dialogue 7

Theme: Cooperatives in the Social and Services Sector

The International Cooperative Alliance Asia and Pacific (ICA-AP) is delighted to announce the call for submissions for the seventh edition of COOP Dialogue, focusing on the role of Cooperatives in the Social and Services Sector. This issue aims to explore the contributions of social and services cooperatives to sustainable development, social equity, and economic resilience.

Social and services cooperatives play a crucial role in fostering sustainable development and promoting social equity by providing essential services and enhancing local economies. COOP Dialogue 7 seeks to examine the impact of these cooperatives on community development and social inclusion, analyse the legal frameworks and governance models that support or hinder their growth, and explore innovative practices that enhance their sustainability and effectiveness. This edition aims to identify the key challenges faced by social and services cooperatives, document success stories, and assess their role in addressing crises and integrating tools for improved efficiency.

We welcome submissions on the following topics, among others:

- **Impact:** Evaluating the social, economic, and environmental impacts of social and service cooperatives.
- **Policy and Governance:** Analysing the enabling policies and governance models that support or hinder the growth of cooperatives.
- **Innovative Practices:** Showcasing innovative approaches and best practices in the management and operation of cooperatives.
- **Challenges and Opportunities:** Identifying the key challenges faced by social and services cooperatives and exploring potential solutions.
- **Case Studies:** Documenting success stories and lessons learned from cooperatives in the Asia-Pacific region.

The seventh edition of COOP Dialogue will be released in November 2024 and the office invites articles, research papers, opinions, case studies, stories, and short video stories on the selected theme from anyone interested in cooperatives, labour, social and the services sectors from the Asia and Pacific region. You may use this platform to publicise your work, enhance your visibility, and communicate your best practices and views with diverse stakeholders.

Submission Guidelines

- **Submission of Interest and Abstract:** Please submit a 300-word abstract by 15 July 2024.
- **Complete Written Material:** Submit your complete articles (1,500 to 2,500 words excluding references) along with pictures in .jpg/ .jpeg/ .png formats (size between 500 Kb and 5 Mb) by 30 August 2024. Articles can also include graphics, images, and graphs for illustration purposes and hyperlinks to additional information, documents, or videos.

- **Complete Videos:** Submit videos of 3-5 minutes (in .mp4 format, max size 500 Mb) by <mark>30 August 2024</mark>.
- **Language:** English
- **Format:** Word file only
- **Originality:** Authors are encouraged to submit original articles to avoid copyright issues.

For any queries, please contact the COOP Dialogue team at coopdialogue@icaap.coop.