

Cooperatives: Present but Not Visible Evidence from Voluntary National Reviews

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Abstract: Cooperatives^[1] as people-centred organisations with sustainable development at their core have been recognised as important players in the implementation of the 2030 agenda. This paper reviews the voluntary national reviews submitted by countries from the Asia-Pacific region at the United Nations high-level political forum and analyses how cooperatives have been reflected in them. The paper uses a conceptual framework to look at the engagement of cooperatives and their representative organisations in the voluntary national review consultative process, contributions of cooperatives to specific sustainable development goals, and alignment with national development strategies. The paper also reflects the views of representative organisations from countries mentioned in the voluntary national reviews, on their role in the process and in highlighting the role of cooperatives with agencies responsible for preparing these reviews. The paper makes the case that, post covid-19, the world is looking at alternatives to the current market driven, consumption-led, inequality widening, and environmentally depleting models. Cooperatives with their values of democracy and solidarity, as well as principles of cooperation among cooperatives and concern for community need to make their presence visible by promoting the cooperative identity, showcasing work of cooperatives on the sustainable development goals, involving themselves actively in national consultations, developing strong partnerships to advocate for cooperatives, and ensuring cooperatives are included by agencies responsible for measuring and reporting.

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Goals (SDGs). Each year, we contact members in countries which are planning to submit Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and encourage them to actively engage with key stakeholders and ensure the inclusion of cooperatives in the VNR. Irrespective of whether there is a mention or not, members continue to be focused on implementing the SDGs. We would like to thank them for their continuing efforts.

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Keywords: Cooperatives; Sustainable Development Goals; Voluntary National Reviews; High-Level Political Forum; Partnerships; Identity

Introduction

What makes the cooperative model well suited to sustainable development? The first clear relation is found in the definition provided by ICA, which defines cooperatives as, "people-centred enterprises owned, controlled and run by and for their members to realise their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations" (ICA, n.d.). Cooperatives meet a diversified set of needs, which go beyond profit generation or shareholder return. Cooperatives arise from genuine needs within the community, as compared with the manufactured consumer needs by conventional investor-owned companies. They ensure there are economic and social incentives for a community to come together in a democratic and accountable manner and that investments stay within.

Two of the ICA Principles further solidify the case for cooperatives as sustainable enterprises: Principle 6, cooperation among cooperatives; and Principle 7, concern for community. Principle 6 is associated with the value of solidarity, ensuring cooperatives work together to attain expertise and scale, enabling their sustainability and ensuring their impact. Principle 7 combines the values of self-help and self-responsibility and ensures cooperatives are rooted in the communities in which they conduct their business. Their continuity and success are based on their ability to support communities to develop in a sustainable way. Their response to the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate change reinforces the need to place 'concern for community' at the core of development.

The ICA Blueprint for a Cooperative Decade makes the case for cooperatives as builders of economic, social and environmental sustainability. As member-owned economic enterprises, cooperatives are less likely to compromise on quality in pursuit of short-term profit, focusing more on longevity. As social actors, they are inclusive and build the stock of social capital on which successful societies and economies thrive. As participatory organisations, concerns about future environmental outcomes are voiced democratically by members, without needing to be calculated in terms of return on investment (ICA, 2013).

In times of economic crises, "cooperatives are not driven to pack up and move to an alternative location" (Archerd, 1996, as cited in Moxom et al., 2019). Cooperatives have proven their resilience during the financial crisis of 2008 and are doing the same during the current pandemic. "They have proven to act according to members' needs in the long term, rather than push like investor-owned companies to respond to the logic of expansionism, economic externalities and shareholder value" (Flecha and Ngai, 2014, as cited in Moxom et al., 2019).

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In September 2015, Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by the United Nations (UN) to build on the work begun in 2000 by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The 2030 Agenda is a commitment from all countries to address key global concerns (poverty, inequality, unemployment, gender equality, climate change, peace, etc.) and cuts across all sectors of economic activity (agriculture, industry, housing, health, education, production, consumption).

Cooperatives are recognised as important partners to achieve the 17 SDGs, given their involvement in diverse economic sectors. A number of SDGs and their indicators are well aligned with the Cooperative Identity. For example, SDG 1: Reducing Poverty, is in line with the endeavour to meet members' social and economic needs; SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, is supported by a democratic and member-based approach, coupled with concern for community; SDG 12: Responsible Production and Consumption, is promoted by the principle of concern for community and the value of equity; and SDG 17: Partnerships, is upheld by the principle of cooperation among cooperatives.

The 2030 Agenda, adds an element of reporting, the voluntary national review (VNR), as an important innovation, which was lacking in the MDGs. The MDGs were seen as devoid of consultations with all stakeholders; their monitoring perceived as a top-down exercise; missing targets for decent work, governance, peace and security; and not delivering on commitments to global partnerships (UN, 2012). The 2030 Agenda takes into account the weaknesses in the MDGs and "introduces a new approach that is country led and that takes into account national realities, recognising that country ownership is central to the implementation of the Agenda" (UN 2015, para 74, as cited in Fukuda-Parr et al., 2018). Moreover, the approach is to be voluntary, transparent and participatory, while based on robust evidence. The process is intended to facilitate learning from national experiences and promote accountability to citizens. The VNR is presented at the annual UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development in the Ministerial segment and provides an opportunity for countries to share their experiences in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

UN member states have shown great interest in the VNR process. In 2016, the first year of implementation, 22 countries presented VNRs; 43 countries in 2017; 47 in 2018 and 2019. "The process has also generated interest on the part of diverse stakeholders" (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2018) with some contributing to the preparation of VNRs and others commenting on the report.

About this paper

The objective of the paper is to explore the visibility of cooperatives in VNRs. This is important for cooperatives as it presents a political opportunity for cooperatives to get involved in and be recognised in the highest form of reporting on SDGs. While cooperatives enjoy a long and rich presence in the development landscape of countries, our analysis shows that their visibility, especially in VNRs and national development plans remains minimal. This stems from limited acknowledgement of cooperatives and their role in implementing SDGs which can be attributed to the limited awareness about their contribution to SDGs and national development in general.

Promotion of the cooperative identity is one of the strategic priorities of ICA and the international cooperative movement. We view the process of VNR formulation, as a channel to promote the cooperative identity and the work of cooperatives to local and national governments, and other relevant stakeholders. This paper falls within the scope of knowledge building activities undertaken within the Framework Partnership Agreement between the ICA and European Commission for the period 2016-2020, on 'Cooperatives in Development: People-Centred Business in Action'. Known also as the #coops4dev project, this partnership seeks to strengthen the cooperative movement and its capacity to promote international development.

In this paper, we present the cooperative model as an alternative approach to meeting a range of socio-economic needs. Cooperatives not only contribute effectively towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, but also have a vital role to play in the overall national development of countries. Even before the 2030 Agenda became a milestone in institutionalised development, cooperatives have been instruments of change and community development, and continue to be so. They are also recognised as a strategic pillar for development in many countries.

For the period 2016 to 2019, 36 countries from the Asia-Pacific region presented their VNRs. Of these, there were 25 countries where ICA has a member and 11 non-ICA member countries. Cooperatives are mentioned in the VNRs of 14 countries; in 11 ICA member countries: Indonesia, Japan, Kiribati, Malaysia, Nepal, New Zealand, Palestine, Philippines, Thailand, Timor Leste, Vanuatu; and in three non-ICA member countries: Afghanistan, Lao PDR and Saudi Arabia. Cooperatives are mentioned in eight countries where an apex body representing cooperatives is present; these are - Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, New Zealand, Philippines, Thailand, and Timor Leste. The active role of government departments overseeing cooperatives also influences the mention about cooperatives. Cooperatives are largely mentioned in relation to SDG 1, SDG 2: Zero Hunger, SDG 8, and SDG 13: Climate Action. This is a reflection of the number of cooperatives working in agriculture and in rural areas. The frequent reference to cooperatives in SDG 8 shows that governments expect them to play their role in promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work. Of the 14 countries which mention cooperatives in their VNR, 13 have national development plans (except New Zealand). Cooperatives are mentioned in 12 of the 13 countries with national development plans (not mentioned in Saudi Arabia).

SDGs are important milestones for the survival and welfare of humanity. They are enacted for nation states and not explicitly for businesses. For cooperatives to be adequately recognised in national development frameworks and reporting, it is imperative that apex and representative cooperative organisations, departments responsible for cooperatives, play a proactive role in increasing visibility of cooperatives' contributions and their alignment with national development frameworks and SDGs. Further, our analysis of the VNRs indicates a correlation between cooperatives being mentioned in national development plans and their reflection in the VNRs.

Driven by the above proposition and gaps, this paper comprises the following sections: (1) Role of cooperatives in implementation of SDGs; (2) What is VNR and why is it important?; (3) Why is reporting on SDG performance of cooperatives in VNRs important?; (4) Findings: Analysis of VNRs and member responses; (5) How can cooperatives better engage in the VNR reporting process?; and (6) Conclusion.

Role of cooperatives in SDG implementation

As people-centred enterprises, cooperatives play a crucial role in sustainable development. Their importance to contribute effectively in sustainable development is widely recognised by many international and intergovernmental institutions such as the UN, International Labour Organisation (ILO), and EU. There is a widely-held consensus among many actors, including the UN, ILO, and ICA, that the cooperative model is most suited to address all dimensions of poverty and exclusion. "The way cooperatives help reduce poverty is important. They identify economic opportunities for their members, empower the disadvantaged to defend their interests, provide security to the poor by allowing them to convert individual risks into collective risks, and mediate member access to assets that they utilise to earn a living" (ICA and ILO, n.d.).

At the global level, the UN General Assembly declared 2012 as the International Year of Cooperatives. This declaration recognised the "contribution of cooperatives to socio-economic development and their impact on poverty reduction, employment generation and social integration" (UN, n.d.). "The 2030 Agenda recognises the contributions of cooperatives and calls on them to work together with the international community in achieving the SDGs, by acknowledging the role of the diverse private sector, ranging from micro-enterprises to cooperatives to multinationals, civil society organisations and philanthropic organisations in the implementation of the new Agenda" (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), n.d.). Similarly, "the ILO views cooperatives as important in improving the living and working conditions of women and men globally, as well as making essential infrastructure and services available, even in areas neglected by the state and investor-driven enterprises" (ILO, n.d.).

In the 2017 Consensus on Development, the EU recognised that "cooperatives have become instrumental partners in reaching the most vulnerable and marginalised people", alongside other actors, and the EU pledges to promote and defend the "space where these development actors can operate safely...for achieving sustainable development" (Council of the EU, 2017 as cited in Cooperatives Europe, 2017). The #coops4dev Project being implemented by ICA is designed to enhance the profile of cooperatives in development. One such medium to pursue this is the Coops for 2030 Campaign, launched to encourage ICA members to learn about the SDGs, pledge their contributions to the successful implementation of the SDGs and report their progress. For example, the Japanese Consumers' Co-

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operative Union (JCCU) in 2018 had pledged to reduce their CO₂ emissions by 40% compared to 2013 levels, by 2030. As of March 2020, it is roughly estimated that JCCU and its member cooperatives have reduced CO₂ emissions by about 20% as compared to 2013.^[2] Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative Ltd. (IFFCO) has pledged towards a number of goals, including SDG 13 by undertaking afforestation projects on waste lands in over 30,000 hectares. IFFCO has also pledged towards SDG 1 by ensuring adequate returns to members on their investments by marketing of products through the cooperative network, diversification in profitable areas, and entrusting handling and transportation of fertilisers to member societies. iCOOP from South Korea has pledged towards SDG 2 by committing to having at least 3% of its annual turnover through fair trade business. In another instance, National Cooperative Bank Ltd. from Nepal has pledged to raise awareness of SDGs by incorporating them into their training activities and supporting SDG activities of cooperatives in their network.

Besides this, within the international cooperative movement, there are many diverse examples to show the contributions of cooperatives to SDG implementation. For example, National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) in Singapore through its various cooperative businesses, including supermarkets, food courts and hawker centres, pre-school education, adult learning, insurance, senior care, dental and family medicine clinic, is addressing societal concerns related to cost of living and healthcare, ageing, and social mobility. In doing so, these cooperative businesses are improving lives holistically by contributing to SDG 1; SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities; SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being; and SDG 4: Quality Education (Singapore National Co-operative Federation (SNCF), 2018). In Nepal, Nepal Agricultural Cooperative Central Federation Ltd. (NACCFL) is actively implementing SDG 10 and SDG 5: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment at the grassroots by ensuring social and economic inclusion of small and marginalised farmers. Specifically, NACCFL strives to ensure that both male and female small-scale farmers have access to credit and finance; people from indigenous backgrounds and marginalised castes are integrated into the cooperative movement for their social and economic transformation; the capacity of women entrepreneurs to start and manage their own agricultural enterprises is built; and that women are given equal opportunities for learning and representation at leadership and managerial positions (NACCFL, 2019).

In the current scenario when the world is facing the COVID-19 pandemic, cooperatives continue to provide all the necessary support to their members, people at large, and the government. Their response to COVID-19 reflects their concern for community which is intrinsic to their model and also shows how their work directly relates to various SDGs. A few notable examples are listed below:

- (1) The network of milk cooperatives in India ensured a seamless supply of milk to households during the national lockdown of over 70 days due to COVID-19. These cooperatives procured milk directly from producers at source, thereby securing livelihoods of many at the grassroots (SDG 8), as well as, ensuring an uninterrupted supply of milk for daily consumption and well-being (SDG 2 and SDG 3) (Business Standard, 2020).
- (2) Similarly, the National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India (NAFED) supported the Government of India by exporting 4,000 metric tonnes of food grains to Lebanon during COVID-19 as part of ensuring uninterrupted supply of food and essential items from India to West Asia (SDG 2) (Singh, 2020). It also distributed 6 lakh metric tonnes of pulses [a lakh is 100,000] to 20 crore households in India [a crore is 10 million] during the national lockdown due to COVID-19 under the provisions of a central government scheme and National Food Security Act of India (ICA-AP, 2020).
- (3) Cooperative banks have taken multiple measures to reduce the financial implications of the pandemic on their communities (SDG 10). The Norinchukin Bank, JA Bank, JF Marine Bank and Rokin Banks of Japan are providing low-interest loans and consultations on repayments to support their members and the local economy. They have also established an emergency fund to combat COVID-19. Cooperative banks in India granted a moratorium of 3 months on payments of instalments on loans between 1st March-31st May 2020. The Cooperative Commission of Malaysia considered applications for deferment of loan repayments by cooperatives impacted by COVID-19 (ICA-AP, 2020).

- (4) Cooperatives such as DEKOPIN in Indonesia, Rah-e-Roshd in Iran, iCOOP, HeW cooperative in Japan, Central Cooperative Society in Myanmar, and Nepal Agricultural Cooperative Federation in Nepal are among many cooperatives which are directly supporting their communities and governments through the provision of essential and healthcare goods and services such as Personal Protective Equipment, ventilators, awareness drives on sanitisation for good health and wellbeing of people during COVID-19 (SDG 3) (ICA-AP, 2020).
- (5) Cooperatives have also gone beyond local and national boundaries to assist cooperatives in other countries. For instance, the All China Federation of Supply and Marketing Cooperatives (ACFSMC) provided necessary equipment to assist staff of the Sri Lanka Consumer Cooperative Societies Federation Ltd. (SDG 3) (ICA-AP, 2020).

What is VNR and why is it important?

The VNR is a voluntary assessment of the progress of SDG implementation in a country and is part of the follow-up and review mechanism adopted in the 2030 Agenda. As noted in paragraph 84 of the 2030 Agenda, “regular reviews by HLPF on sustainable development are to be voluntary, state-led, and undertaken by both developed and developing countries” (Division for Sustainable Development Goals, n.d.). The aim of the VNR is to strengthen “accountability to citizens as well as facilitate the sharing of experience, including successes, challenges and lessons learned” through implementation of the SDGs (Fukuda-Parr et al, 2018).

A distinct feature of the 2030 Agenda is that, even though it assigns a universal characteristic to SDGs, it also recognises that countries differ in challenges and resources. Thus, even though there is no country in the world where SDGs are not applicable, there is flexibility in prioritising certain SDGs as per the relevant national circumstance. Countries are free to develop nation specific agendas for sustainable development. This also creates room for flexibility and autonomy in how countries report the progress on different SDGs. In this context, while guidelines for preparing the VNRs have been issued, they are intended to be flexible and allow for adaptation to national circumstances (UNDESA, 2019). As a result, VNRs prepared by different countries vary according to a country’s “thematic focus, the use of indicators, the details of policy descriptions and the inclusion of civil society or private sector perspectives, among others” (Fukuda-Parr et al, 2018).

The VNR framework is built around a “process that tracks the progress on SDGs; is open and participatory for stakeholders; focuses on people with particular attention to human rights and the people furthest behind; takes a long-term perspective; and is rigorous and evidence based” (UN 2015, para 74 as cited in Fukuda-Parr et al, 2018). “The main responsibility for follow-up and review of SDGs lies with national governments. However, to reinforce vertical coherence and complement the VNR process, local and regional governments are increasingly engaging in voluntary local review, which has proved useful for cities to understand where they are located in the big picture and demonstrate local governments’ capacity and commitments” (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2019).

The HLPF encourages member states to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels (Division for Sustainable Development Goals, n.d.). Countries are expected to participate in voluntary review at least twice in the 15-year cycle (Food and Agricultural Organisation of the UN (FAO), n.d.).

In recent years, “more and more countries have started volunteering to report their progress towards achievement of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs through VNR at HLPF, taking place in New York in July” (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2019). The growing number of VNR submissions at HLPF every year shows its importance. Some of the reasons why VNR is important and gaining popularity are as follows:

- (1) “Through the VNR exercise, countries can revise national development goals and targets; assess and strengthen the adequacy of national policies and institutions; and mobilise multi-stakeholder support for the achievement of SDGs, enhancing awareness around the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda” (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2019).
- (2) “The scope of the review is expected to be broad, reflecting on national priorities and circumstances, reporting on actions taken to advance implementation and progress

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made...Increasingly, countries are adopting the principle of Leaving No One Behind as a lens through which to analyse achievements towards sustainable development.” Youth groups, academia, volunteers, the private sector, civil society organisations and local governments are all cited as contributors to effective implementation” (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2019).

- (3) “VNR reports are expected to show what steps a country has taken to implement the 2030 Agenda and provide an assessment of the results on the ground including successes, challenges, gaps in implementation, possible solutions and emerging issues” (Tap Network, 2019).
- (4) “The preparation process for drafting the report mobilizes all parts of government and extends to the whole of society to implement the 2030 Agenda in an inclusive manner.” Moreover, VNR preparations provide the opportunity to anchor sustainable development at the highest possible political level under the guidance of key ministries or even heads of government, ensuring ownership for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2019).
- (5) “In a number of countries, VNR is an opportunity to rethink their international development cooperation. It gives them an opportunity to look closely at what developing countries are identifying as priorities in their VNR, and areas where they need support” (UNDESA, 2019). “As a tool for accountability, the VNR process can strengthen national ownership of the SDGs, promote transparency, inclusiveness and participation in reporting on the SDGs, and support more effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Given the 2030 Agenda’s voluntary nature, a VNR may be seen as a norm-building process, in which individual countries’ best practices may persuade others to follow suit and set standards for the international community” (UN Development Group Guidelines, 2017 as cited in Tap Network, 2019).

Why is reporting on SDG performance of cooperatives in VNR important?

As a people-centred enterprise model that is more than a century old and in existence for almost as much time in countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, India, Japan, and South Korea, cooperatives are intrinsically intertwined with the development of people and hence, nation states as a whole. Irrespective of whether the cooperative movement in the region was born as a result of administrative policies of colonial governments, economic turmoil created by World Wars, influence from the West, or transitions in national markets and economies, the cooperative model has emerged as a need-based model whose success and sustainability have withstood the test of time. For example, first established in the early 20th century, cooperatives in South Korea continue to play a vital role to drive community-based initiatives to strengthen the rural and urban economy. Post 2000, the government of South Korea has even recognised the role of cooperatives, along with social enterprises, as a means to ensure jobs and reduce dependency on the welfare economy (ICA-AP, 2019). Similarly, in Japan, the roots of the cooperative movement date back to the early 1800s but cooperatives continue to be the mainstay of the Japanese rural economy through their dominant presence in agriculture, fisheries and the forestry sector (ICA-AP, 2019). Most recently, the efforts of the Japan Workers’ Co-operative Union (JWCU) have led to the draft ‘Worker Cooperatives Act’ being submitted to the Diet^[3] with support from all political parties and factions. It is 42 years since a new Cooperative Act in Japan has been considered. The last was in 1978 when the Forestry Cooperative Act was enacted. The Worker Cooperatives Act, when passed, will contribute to “the realization of sustainable and vibrant communities through the activities of worker cooperatives” (JWCU, 2020).

Apparent from their contribution to the socio-economic and environmental development of their countries, cooperative business enterprises continue to be driven by a social mission yet ensure that they contribute to national development effectively. In some countries, cooperatives contribute more than 10% of the GDP^[4] such as in New Zealand (19%, 2018) and Thailand (13%, 2017) (ICA-AP, 2019). Regardless of their economic classification,^[5] countries continue to benefit from the presence of cooperatives that have the capacity and experience in reaching out to the masses, marginalised, and most vulnerable, beside others. Some countries have also officially recognised cooperatives as the third pillar in national development policies along with the public and private sector; and some have even enshrined their importance in the national Constitution, such as in Nepal and Iran.

The inclusion of cooperatives in VNRs is a recognition of the value added brought about by cooperatives historically and to date. The reporting on SDG performance of cooperatives in VNRs is important for two main reasons.

- (1) First, as a globally recognised political document, the significance of including cooperatives in VNRs goes beyond mere reporting. It translates into recognition of cooperatives as one of the actors that have a role in the implementation of development agendas. By mentioning cooperatives explicitly as they are, and not within the ambit of other organisational identities (such as community-based organisations, civil-society organisations, producer organisations, social enterprises or the social solidarity economy), the cooperative identity remains preserved and acknowledged. The way the contributions or potential of cooperatives is mentioned, brings encouragement and opens up opportunities to do more. Specifically, it becomes an important tool to promote the adoption of a formal SDG framework and monitoring mechanisms within the large network of cooperatives, so that moving forward, data collection and reporting on cooperatives' SDG performance and impact becomes systematic and robust.
- (2) Second, the inclusion of cooperatives in VNRs requires more than monitoring and measurement of cooperatives' impact on sustainable development. The process of formulating VNRs is long and involves consultation with many organisations. The reporting on SDG performance of cooperatives in VNR requires involvement of cooperative apex bodies in this consultation process, above anything else. For this to happen, as much as the responsibility is on the national statistical agencies and government bodies to engage with the cooperative sector, at par with others, it is also a responsibility of cooperative organisations, especially apex bodies to be aware of VNRs, show interest in advocacy with the government, and actively engage with them to ensure that cooperatives are not left out. It thus requires active networking, dialogue and advocacy with those who are responsible to implement a VNR and being involved in the process in some way or another.

Findings: analysis of VNRs

The Handbook for the preparation of VNRs, developed by UNDESA, outlines the building blocks and the basic, practical information on the steps that countries may take when preparing VNRs (UNDESA, 2020).

The VNRs are most apt “when they involve an inclusive, participatory, transparent and thorough review process at the national and sub-national levels; when they are evidence based, produce tangible lessons and solutions; and when they are followed by concrete action and collaboration” (UNDESA, 2020).

In order to make this possible, the Handbook recommends the following (UNDESA, 2020):

- (1) **Coordination structure:** “An entity within the government responsible for the overall coordination of the VNR...and collaboration with other relevant government ministries, agencies and relevant stakeholders is needed in order to provide information and data...All sectors and levels of government, civil society, private sector, trade unions, members of parliament and national human rights institutions, should be considered”.
- (2) **Multi-stakeholder participation:** “One of the founding principles of the 2030 Agenda is the requirement for all implementation and follow-up processes to be participatory and inclusive, including all levels and sectors of government, civil society and the private sector, members of parliament, national human rights institutions, among others”.
- (3) **Institutional Mechanism:** “To engage stakeholders, which can be used for future involvement in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda...The institutional mechanism should remain relevant across political cycles” and ensure that the institution's work extends to “current and future decision makers and political parties”.
- (4) **Ownership of the SDGs:** “Awareness raising and dissemination of information about the SDGs throughout all branches and levels of government and among stakeholders is a crucial and ongoing dimension of creating an enabling environment, and participatory and inclusive processes...” and “ownership”.

- (5) **Incorporation of the SDGs into national frameworks:** “The effective implementation of the SDGs depends on their incorporation into all relevant national frameworks. The VNR needs to analyse how well the frameworks are aligned with the SDGs and determine whether there are critical gaps”.
- (6) **Means of implementation:** “Discuss how means of implementation are mobilised, what difficulties are being encountered, and what additional resources are needed to implement the 2030 Agenda, looking at the full range of financing sources (public/private, domestic/international) and non-financing means of implementation, such as capacity development and data needs, technology, and partnerships...The review could indicate how financial systems, statistical data and resource allocations are being aligned to support the realization of the 2030 Agenda and its pledge to leave no one behind”.

Methodology adopted in this paper

A two-step process was adopted to collect data: (1) Review of VNRs of 36 countries from 2016 to 2019. These included 25 ICA member countries and 11 non-ICA members countries from the Asia-Pacific region and (2) E-interviews with five ICA members from Asia and Pacific countries that mentioned cooperatives in their VNRs.

(1) Review of VNRs from Asia and Pacific

VNRs from 2016 to 2019 were reviewed to see how cooperatives are mentioned, keeping some points from the above process in view. The focus was on the Asia-Pacific region and 36 countries were covered, of which 25 were ICA member countries and 11 non-ICA member countries. The countries reviewed, where ICA members are present were: Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Fiji, India, Indonesia (2017 and 2019), Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kiribati, Malaysia, Maldives, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, Palestine, Philippines (2016 and 2019), Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor Leste, UAE (2017 and 2018), Vanuatu and Vietnam. The non-ICA member countries reviewed were Afghanistan, Bahrain, Cambodia, Iraq, Lao PDR, Palau, Qatar (2017 and 2018), Tonga, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Saudi Arabia (used to be an ICA member till 2018).

The data from the review of 36 VNRs was analysed to see whether cooperatives were mentioned both in general terms and with reference to specific SDGs, and the way they compared against the building blocks in the Handbook for the preparation of VNRs, developed by UNDESA. These included engagement with a coordination structure; participation in consultations; ownership of the SDGs; and, incorporation of the SDGs and cooperatives into national frameworks, in the institutional mechanism and means of implementation. (The detailed analyses of the VNRs have not been included in the paper. They can be made available upon request.)

(2) E-interviews with ICA members from Asia and Pacific

Following the review of the VNRs, five ICA members were contacted from countries where cooperatives found mention in the VNRs to find out their involvement in the VNR process. The members contacted were the Business Council of Cooperatives and Mutuals (BCCM), Australia; Economic and Social Development Center (ESDC), Palestine; National Association of Training Centers for Cooperatives (NATCCO), Philippines; National Cooperative Federation (NCF), Nepal; and Office of Registrar of Cooperatives and Business Development Services (ORCBDS), Vanuatu.

The e-interviews with members were analysed to look into their engagement in the consultation process; ways in which they presented the role of cooperatives; benefits seen in their engagement; and efforts being made to make central the role of cooperatives in the VNRs and the national development processes. (The detailed member responses have not been included in the paper. They can be made available upon request.)

Findings from the review of VNRs

The review of VNRs shows that most countries have presented a qualitative account of their experience and progression in the realization of SDGs. While reporting on an SDG, countries have showcased a variety of work being pursued at local and national level through examples and case studies of exemplary initiatives by the government and non-governmental organisations. In some cases, countries have presented a way forward on many SDGs that are important to their local social, economic, cultural and political context.

(1) Engagement with coordination structure and participation in consultations

The members mentioned in the VNR were from Australia (BCCM), Kiribati (Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Cooperatives, MCIC), Nepal (NCF), the Philippines (NATCCO) and Singapore (SNCF). These were largely the apex organisations representing cooperatives in the country. BCCM (Australia) and SNCF (Singapore) contacted the Focal Points early in the VNR process and made submissions on the role played by cooperatives in implementation of the SDGs. NCF (Nepal) and NATCCO (Philippines) were involved in the consultative process as part of engagement with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

(2) Mention about cooperatives

Table 1 and 2 below show that cooperatives are mentioned in the VNRs of 14 countries; in 11 ICA member countries: Indonesia, Japan, Kiribati, Malaysia, Nepal, New Zealand, Palestine, Philippines, Thailand, Timor Leste, Vanuatu; and in three non-ICA member countries: Afghanistan, Lao PDR and Saudi Arabia. While ICA members from Australia (BCCM) and Singapore (SNCF) are mentioned in their respective VNRs, there is no specific mention of cooperatives. Cooperatives are mentioned in eight countries where an apex body representing cooperatives is present; these are - Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, New Zealand, Philippines, Thailand, and Timor Leste. The active role of government departments overseeing cooperatives also influences the mention of cooperatives.

Table 1
Mention of cooperatives in the VNRs of countries where ICA has members

	Country	Year VNR presented	Cooperatives mentioned in VNR	ICA member mentioned in VNR	National development plans mentioned in VNR	Cooperatives mentioned in national development plans
ICA member countries						
1	Australia	2018	N	Y	N	N
2	Bangladesh	2017	N	N	Y	Y
3	Bhutan	2018	N	N	Y	N
4	Fiji	2019	N	N	Y	Y
5	India	2017	N	N	Y	N
6	Indonesia	2017	Y	N	Y	Y
7	Japan	2017	Y	N	Y	Y
8	Jordan	2017	N	N	Y	Y
9	Kazakhstan	2019	N	N	N	N
10	Kiribati	2018	Y	Y	Y	Y
11	Malaysia	2017	Y	N	Y	Y
12	Maldives	2017	N	N	N	N
13	Nepal	2017	Y	Y	Y	Y
14	New Zealand	2019	Y	N	N	N
15	Pakistan	2019	N	N	N	N
16	Palestine	2018	Y	N	Y	Y
17	Philippines	2016	Y	Y	Y	Y

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	Country	Year VNR presented	Cooperatives mentioned in VNR	ICA member mentioned in VNR	National development plans mentioned in VNR	Cooperatives mentioned in national development plans
18	Singapore	2018	N	Y	N	N
19	South Korea	2016	N	N	Y	N
20	Sri Lanka	2018	N	N	Y	Y
21	Thailand	2017	Y	N	Y	Y
22	Timor Leste	2019	Y	N	Y	Y
23	UAE	2017	N	N	Y	N
24	Vanuatu	2019	Y	N	Y	Y
25	Vietnam	2018	N	N	Y	Y

Table 2
Mention of cooperatives in the VNRs of countries where ICA has no members

	Country	Year VNR presented	Cooperatives mentioned in VNR	Cooperatives involved in VNR process	National development plans mentioned in VNR	Cooperatives mentioned in national development plans
Non-ICA member countries						
1	Afghanistan	2017	Y	N	Y	Y
2	Bahrain	2018	N	N	Y	N
3	Cambodia	2019	N	N	Y	N
4	Iraq	2019	N	N	Y	Y
5	Lao PDR	2018	Y	N	Y	Y
6	Palau	2019	N	N	N	N
7	Qatar	2017	N	N	Y	N
8	Saudi Arabia	2018	Y	N	Y	N
9	Tajikistan	2017	N	N	Y	Y
10	Tonga	2019	N	N	Y	N
11	Turkmenistan	2019	N	N	Y	N

(1) Cooperatives and specific SDGs

Cooperatives are largely mentioned in relation to SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 8, and SDG 13. This is not surprising, given the number of cooperatives working in agriculture and in rural areas. The frequent reference to cooperatives in SDG 8 shows that governments expect them to play their role in promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work.

The 2017 VNR report of Nepal identifies the cooperative sector as one of the three pillars of economic development in the country, making the sector a key stakeholder in creating an enabling environment, with strong contributions towards SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 (Gender Equality), 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), 8, 10 and 17 (VNR, Nepal, 2017). The “development and promotion of cooperatives” have been noted as one of the measures to “promote decent employment and economic growth” (SDG 8) in the 2018 VNR report of Palestine (VNR, Palestine, 2018). The 2017 VNR report of Indonesia mentions, for example, the “promotion of cooperative establishment within the framework to protect small-scale farmers” (SDG 14: Life Below Water) (VNR, Indonesia, 2017). New Zealand’s VNR report for 2019 brings forward Fonterra’s (New Zealand’s largest dairy

cooperative) contributions in accelerating sustainable dairying, restoring freshwater habitats, reducing nutrient pollution, and building ecosystem resilience (VNR, New Zealand, 2019).

(2) *Ownership of the SDGs*

The overarching aim of governments as listed in the VNRs to reduce poverty, empower weaker members of society, provide opportunity, and treat with fairness and equality resonates well with cooperatives. Some of the priority areas mentioned in the VNRs are agriculture (climate smart, improve value added and sustainable development), communities (become stakeholders in the development of their community and integrate local projects with mainstream development agendas, health and energy), entrepreneurship (create ecosystem to improve productive capacity), gender (equality and representation), youth (technical and vocational education). The priority areas of governments match with the interests of cooperatives and there is need for both to work on awareness raising, sharing of experiences and dissemination of information to ensure an enabling environment, and participatory and inclusive processes and ownership.

(3) *Incorporation of the SDGs into national frameworks*

In most countries, there is a national policy whose timeline matches that of the SDGs. As stated in the Handbook, the effective implementation of the SDGs depends on their incorporation into all relevant national frameworks.

Of the 14 countries which mention cooperatives in their VNR, 13 have national development plans (except New Zealand). Cooperatives are mentioned in **12** of the 13 countries with national development plans (not mentioned in Saudi Arabia). In addition, in **seven** countries, cooperatives are mentioned in the national plans (Bangladesh, Fiji, Iraq, Jordan, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan and Vietnam) but not in the VNRs. Cooperatives figure in close to 50% of the countries and are reflected in VNRs and national plans. There is correlation between cooperatives being mentioned in the national plan and their being reflected in the VNRs. This shows the need for apexes and departments responsible for cooperatives to show how the work of cooperatives is aligned with the national framework and the need to reflect their work in the VNRs.

The Government of Nepal has identified the strong potential and power of cooperatives to contribute towards “poverty reduction, service delivery, gender equality and good governance.” The cooperative sectors’ contributions to the country’s GDP are equal to that of Nepal’s tourism sector, which is 4% of the GDP (UN Development Programme (UNDP), n.d.). The Philippines has also recognised the role of NATCCO and other cooperative members in building SDG awareness and ownership, and their involvement in social security and financial access programmes for the informal sector. Vanuatu has recognised the role of cooperatives in promoting broad-based growth by strengthening primary production, and linkages between tourism, infrastructure, agriculture and industry in rural areas. The Government of Kiribati emphasized the need for development of a National Cooperative Policy to strengthen cooperatives and credit unions as part of its key objective to strengthen national governance systems to promote principles of good governance including accountability, transparency and inclusiveness.

(4) *Institutional mechanism and means of implementation*

Cooperatives are not part of any institutional mechanisms that are meant to get the views of government and nongovernmental stakeholders. While cooperatives are actively engaged in implementation, their financial and non-financial contributions do not get reflected. Cooperatives also are not part of the institutional mechanisms to collect and report data against targets and indicators. Partnerships are seen as an effective vehicle to implement the SDGs and there is need for more active engagement of cooperatives.

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Perspective from ICA members

Q: Were you approached by the agency responsible for preparing your country's VNR?

NCF in Nepal was invited to be part of the consultative process while BCCM in Australia and NATCCO in the Philippines approached the Focal agencies. BCCM made a written submission to the Focal Point; in the case of the Philippines and Nepal, the members were able to put across the work of cooperatives in the consultative discussions. The ORCBDS was not directly involved but contributed indirectly through their business plan, annual performance reporting and M&E.^[6]

Q: How was the role played by cooperatives highlighted to the agency preparing the VNR?

BCCM prepared a submission to a Parliamentary Inquiry on the SDGs which included case studies of how Australian cooperatives and mutuals contribute to different SDGs. BCCM also submitted a number of case studies directly to the Department of Health as part of their Departmental consultation on the SDGs. The NCF and National Planning Commission in Nepal highlighted cooperatives as effective partners to localize implementation, and fill the gaps in access, especially financial. NATCCO highlighted the contribution of their network in financial inclusion by providing access to finance especially to the marginalized, the role in financial education especially with their partnership with the Department of Education in the implementation of Aflatoun, and the role in digital literacy and shift to digital money with their Kaya Payment Platform. In Palestine, the role of cooperatives in decent work was highlighted. 'The Vanuatu National Sustainable Plan or the People's Plan 2030' recognises cooperatives under the economic pillar and sets a target to increase agricultural production. In addition, the government budget priorities and trade policy framework have specific targets for cooperatives.

Q: Do you see any benefit in cooperatives being mentioned in the VNR and how do you use this?

According to ESDC, "mention highlights the sector as important contributor in sustainable development and increases the opportunities to bring out issues and to create an enabling environment for the cooperative sector, since the VNR is a reference for all Palestinian sectors and organisations". The benefits of being mentioned in the VNRs were: recognised work of cooperatives, identified as key player, invited to discussions, and increased contributions. NCF in coordination with the Ministry of Cooperatives and Poverty Alleviation and UNDP prepared comprehensive guidelines to include cooperatives and presented their progress paper at the 'United Nations Workshop on Cooperatives and Sustainable Development Goals: Ensuring that No One is Left Behind', held in Brazil in 2017. The ORCBDS sees mention in the VNR as a help to gain more attention from the government to cooperatives. In the 2021 budget, the government has allocated additional resources to support cooperatives and the apex body representing cooperatives. Mention in the VNR also helped them sign MoUs^[7] with several stakeholders (Department of Customs; Department of Agriculture, Livestock, Fishery, Forestry, and Biosecurity; Department of Energy; Department of Industry; Reserve Bank of Vanuatu; National Bank of Vanuatu; Vanuatu National Provident Fund) to establish partnerships. The strong awareness also helped in updating the Cooperative Act of Vanuatu.

Q: Are you working to include cooperatives in the national data collection process?

In Australia, the first recommendations of the 2015 Senate inquiry into cooperatives and mutuals was that the Government of Australia should collect data on cooperatives. This remains part of BCCM's policy platform and it continues to fund and carry out national data collection on cooperatives to produce the annual National Mutual Economy report. As part of this research, they are seeking to expand collection of data on the overall economic and social impacts of cooperatives (for example, more data on their donations and sponsorship of community causes). In Nepal, the Central Bureau of Statistics is responsible for overall data collection, refinement and dissemination which is also applied in SDGs. In case of data relating to cooperatives, the Department of Cooperatives (DoC) is responsible and NCF is a coordinating partner of DoC to collect data. The Government of Nepal's Cooperative and Poverty related Management Information System is the platform to collect disaggregated data about the cooperative sector, and is being implemented at the local, provincial and federal level. In Vanuatu, the Department of Strategic Policy, Planning and Aid Coordination (DSPPAC) is responsible for M&E. The ORCBDS uses the targets set by DSPPAC in their business plan to guide performance and meet the targets.

Q: Are you continuing to engage with the Focal Point? How do you see your role in future VNRs?

Members stressed the need to be proactive in being in contact with the Focal Points and continue engagement with the VNR process. Most countries plan to submit VNRs and being engaged ensures that cooperatives will be called on and their contributions recognised. In the Philippines, NATCCO plans to develop formats where progress on targets can be uploaded and regularly forwarded to the body preparing VNRs. The ORCBDS plans to continue engaging with Focal Point and play a more regulatory role in the future rather than facilitation.

Q: Do you have suggestions for members in other countries who want to engage in the VNR process?

How can cooperatives better engage in the VNR reporting process?

The 2030 Agenda makes a strong case for shifting global priorities towards an alternative, inclusive and sustainable model, such as the cooperative business model. The COVID-19 crisis has revealed deep-rooted systemic biases in the current socio-political-economic model, creating an opportunity for a model that is inclusive and environmentally sustainable. As a social-solidarity economic model, cooperatives in the region and around the world are already implementing many of the SDGs. However, despite the size, potential and significant contributions of the sector locally and globally, their visibility in national and international development agendas, monitoring and reporting, remains minimal. Cooperatives are often left out of key national and international documents that are centred on the sustainable development discourse (Schwettmann, n.d.).

The VNR is not a one-time activity. It has been adopted by countries to be carried out every two to three years, up until 2030, with some countries reporting every alternate year as well. The VNR is also not a stand-alone document but a reflection of national priorities and alignment with national development agendas. Despite the limited inclusion of cooperatives from the region in the VNR process, it remains a good platform to invest time and resources in to increase the involvement and visibility of cooperatives.

This paper, after the review of VNRs across 36 countries and inputs from ICA members, advocates reinforcing identity, measuring contributions, getting involved in national development plans, engaging stakeholders and participating in the VNR process to increase the visibility of cooperatives.

Reinforcing identity

Cooperatives, while working on all the SDGs, neither reflect nor incorporate the SDG language. For example, agriculture cooperatives contribute to zero hunger, but they rarely mention SDG 2 and any of its associated indicators. Many members of cooperatives are unaware of the goals and their own contributions to any of the targets. Cooperatives need to incorporate the goals in their messaging, record their contributions, communicate and engage with stakeholders.

Cooperatives have played an important role in addressing the needs of their members and communities. During the COVID-19 crisis, their roles have ranged from distribution of essential commodities, providing information to access stimulus packages and contributing to relief funds and, in the process, they have contributed to SDG1, SDG 2, SDG 3, SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation, SDG 10, and SDG 17. Cooperatives in the Philippines contributed medical, protective and hygiene equipment to local hospitals and communities; distributed food and other basic necessities; and made direct and indirect financial contributions in excess of PHP 6 million. SNCF in Singapore collaborated with Singapore Statutory Boards Employees' Cooperative and GP+ Cooperative to purchase and distribute over 10,000 surgical masks to migrant workers and fund sponsorship towards initiatives to support migrant workers stranded in Singapore. NTUC FairPrice Cooperative was involved in the supply of food and daily necessities and the NTUC LearningHub conducted online training and education to help individuals transition to new roles. Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative (IFFCO) in India, contributed US\$ 3.6 million to the PM CARES Fund (ICA-AP, 2020). The Government of India has publicly applauded the invaluable role and contributions of the cooperative movement towards creating an inclusive society which leaves 'no one behind' (Outlook, 2020). Cooperatives in Australia, Japan, Indonesia, Iran and Malaysia have made enormous contributions to ensure social, economic and environmental stability, directly and indirectly contributing to almost all goals. While these contributions continue during 'normal' times, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the key role played by cooperatives as a social solidarity business model.

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ICA has focused on an SDG every year, since 2016, to celebrate the International Day of Cooperatives (IDC). The theme for 2016 was ‘Cooperatives: The Power to Act for a Sustainable Future’ to emphasise cooperatives’ contribution to the SDGs. The theme for the 2017 IDC was: ‘Cooperatives Ensure No One is Left Behind’ to show that globalisation should be done through a set of values such as those of the cooperative movement. The theme for 2018 was ‘Sustainable Consumption and Production’ (SDG 12) to show that efficient management of natural resources, reduction of waste and sustainable patterns of consumption can help achieve food security and make the shift towards a resource efficient economy. The theme for 2019 was: ‘Decent Work and Economic Growth’ (SDG 8) to show that cooperatives are people-centred enterprises characterised by democratic control that prioritise human development and social justice within the workplace. The 2020 celebration of IDC will focus on ‘Cooperatives for Climate Action’ (SDG 13). Given the ravages of COVID-19, the focus on this theme is to commit to climate actions and achieve a fair, green and just transition for all communities, leaving no one behind.

Measuring contribution

Apex cooperative organisations from five ICA member countries highlighted the absence of direct communication and engagement with their national organisations and departments that are involved in consultation, data collection, and reporting for the VNRs. Cooperatives in many countries are not monitored by the national statistical agencies and line departments responsible for cooperatives. They are neither clued in to the SDGs nor do they respond in a timely fashion.

The lack of data and visibility is a common weak link across many sectors and countries. However, this gap also creates an opportunity for the cooperative sector to raise its voice for inclusion in national data collection and statistics. With a global presence of over one billion members (ICA, n.d.), the scope and potential of the cooperative sector to implement and achieve the SDGs is very high. Inclusion of cooperatives in national data collection and development planning will enable more inclusive and positive outcomes for implementation of SDGs.

The Government of Nepal has identified the strong potential and power of cooperatives to contribute towards “poverty reduction, service delivery, gender equality and good governance” (UNDP, n.d.). As noted by Mr. Keshab Badal, ex-Chairperson of NCF, “I don’t believe there is a single one out of the 17 SDGs that doesn’t apply to cooperatives, in some form or the other.” NCF used the recognition to work with the government and UN agencies to ensure they are recognised in the national plan and included in monitoring. Table 3 below from the Status and Roadmap 2016-2030 prepared by the National Planning Commission, Government of Nepal provides an example of the target where cooperatives are mentioned. The table shows that while the percentage of households (within 30-minute walk) with access to cooperatives was 54% in 2015, the number rose to 60.9% in 2019; and the estimate increase by 2022, 2025 and 2030 is 66.1%, 71.3% and 80%, respectively.

Table 3
Nepal Sustainable Development Goals-Status and Roadmap 2016-2030

Targets and Indicators		2015	2019	2022	2025	2030
Target 8.3 Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services						
8.3.1	Proportion of informal employment in non-agriculture employment, by sex	70 ^b	54	42	30	10
1	Contribution of Micro-, Small-, and Medium-scale enterprises in GDP (%)					
2	Access to Financial Services					
3	Access to Cooperatives (% of households within 30 min walk)	54 ^a	60.9	66.1	71.3	80

In a similar vein, apex across the region need to interact with the national statistical agencies to ensure that the work of cooperatives is tracked and reported, their contribution to the SDGs highlighted and their visibility enhanced.

National development

The VNR is a state-led process to report on a country's achievement of the SDGs from their national perspectives and priorities. "They are indicative of SDG inclusion into national development plans and strategies, and each country's achievements against their nationally determined contributions towards the SDGs" (UNDESA, 2016). This synthesis of the SDGs with national development plans is reflected in our analysis of the VNRs of 36 countries: 29 of the 36 VNRs reviewed emphasise the inclusion of the 2030 Agenda with their various national plans and agendas. The Government of Bangladesh has synthesised the 2030 Agenda with its Perspective Plan (2020-2021), 7th Five Year Plan (2016-2020), 8th Five Year Plan (2021-2025), and 9th Five Year Plan (2026-2030) (Bangladesh VNR, 2017). Kiribati has a special SDG Task Force as part of its Development Coordination Committee and has integrated the mid-term review of its Development Plan (2016-2019), with its VNR (IISD, 2018). Almost 60% of indicators in Lao's 8th National Social-Economic Development Plan are linked to the SDG indicators (IISD, 2018). Qatar has also aligned its National Development Strategy (2018-2022) with the 2030 Agenda. Saudi Arabia has prioritised alignment of its state programmes and strategies with the SDGs and indicators. Sri Lanka has mainstreamed SDGs in institutional plans as a strategy towards achieving the SDGs, with its National Budget (2018) focusing on a 'Blue Green Economy' (IISD, 2018).

Mainstreaming of the cooperative sector in national development plans and strategies is an important step towards its inclusion in the VNRs. Country VNRs which highlight the role of cooperatives in implementing the SDGs, have also included cooperatives as a key sector within their national development agendas. For instance, Nepal's VNR strongly highlights the role of the cooperative sector in implementing various SDGs, especially linked to SDGs 1, 2, 5, 8 and 10. This reflects recognition of the cooperative sector as the 'Third Pillar' in the Constitution of Nepal. The VNR of Japan (2017) identifies cooperatives as an important stakeholder, with the sector included in the consultative process; however, it doesn't include cooperatives in its national development plans. Indonesia identifies the significant role of cooperatives in providing protection to small-scale fishermen in the context of MSMEs^[8] (Indonesia VNR, 2017); the role of cooperative banks in financial inclusion; and that of local cooperatives in climate change mitigation and environmental management (Indonesia VNR, 2019). This recognition is reflected in the country's National Medium-Term Development Plan (2004-2009; and 2015-2019), where cooperatives are included in the national agenda for further empowerment, economic development, and enhancement of the welfare of people.

Engaging stakeholders

The review of SDGs calls for active consultations among stakeholders; cooperatives need to be around the table where decisions are taken on actions, progress and impacts. The success of cooperatives relies on healthy member-based cooperatives, as well as good governance, but expansion and further advancement is grounded in communities and supported by strong and strategic partnerships with respective governments and international and national organisations. Partnerships are key to ensure there is an enabling environment for cooperatives, recognition accorded to work done by cooperatives and supporting agencies speaking for cooperatives. Apex and national cooperative bodies need to form linkages with government departments to enhance data collection of the sector's actions and contributions. As mentioned earlier, cooperatives need to leverage the support extended by the EU, FAO, ILO and UNDESA. In addition, in Asia and the Pacific region, regional bodies such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Central Asian Cooperation Organisation, Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC), Pacific Islands Forum and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) can play a key role in enhancing the voice of cooperatives. There needs to be active engagement of cooperatives with stakeholders in order to give voice and visibility to cooperatives in the implementation of SDGs.

Participating in the VNR process

Apex cooperatives, as representatives of primary and secondary cooperatives within a region or country, are well placed to identify member needs, consolidate member actions across sectors, and form a strong cohesive lobby to advocate with their respective national governments. In order to bring cooperatives into the VNR process, the following are some of the steps that could be taken:

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- (1) Understand the VNR in terms of process, timelines, and requirements.
- (2) Engage with the Focal Point for VNR early in the preparation process.
- (3) Make a submission on the role of cooperatives and SDGs to the Focal Point. The submission by BCCM to the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade on 'Cooperatives and the UN Sustainable Development Goals' (BCCM, 2018), and SNCF's submission on how Singapore's cooperatives help contribute to SDGs to the respective Focal Point (SNCF, 2018), helped put across the contribution of cooperatives.
- (4) Coordinate with the Line Ministry/department responsible for cooperatives in the country to ensure the work on SDGs is communicated.
- (5) Participate actively in the VNR consultation process and engage in civil society platforms.
- (6) Engage with UN bodies and international agencies to advocate for cooperatives and for inclusion in key documents. ICA can play a role in communicating with focal points and international agencies, bringing in experiences from across the region, facilitating dialogue with key players and building capacity of members.
- (7) Follow-up to know about the consultation process and communicate work being carried out by cooperatives.

Conclusion

Cooperatives in the Asia-Pacific region are actively working towards the objectives and targets indicated in the SDGs. With SDGs as its foundation, this paper focuses on the role of cooperatives in national development and their inclusion in VNRs. The paper analyses VNRs from 36 countries to understand the presence of cooperatives in the international political instruments. The advantage of the cooperative model is its strong and broad outreach at the ground level to millions of vulnerable people, its emphasis on economic participation, and its eye towards sustainability. From covering a wide range of examples related to SDGs of the response of cooperatives to COVID-19, the paper showcases their ongoing contribution towards the welfare of people. Despite a rich history and significant economic role, the potential of cooperatives is yet to be fully harnessed and recognised.

This paper shows the different ways in which the cooperative movement does and can continue to, work towards implementing the SDGs and communicating the relevance of the cooperative model for sustainability. We systematically make the case that while cooperatives have a long and vast presence, they are not visible enough. Enabling the visibility of cooperatives in national and international domains has an underlying importance, i.e., to maintain, protect and enrich the cooperative identity. Post COVID-19, the world will be looking at alternatives to the current market driven, consumption led, inequality widening, and environmentally depleting models. Cooperatives with their values of democracy and solidarity, as well as principles of cooperation among cooperatives and concern for community need to make their presence visible.

The review of VNRs shows that most countries have presented a qualitative account of their experience and progression in the realisation of SDGs. While reporting on an SDG, countries have showcased a variety of work being pursued at local and national levels through examples and case studies of exemplary initiatives by the government and CSOs. In some cases, countries have presented a way forward on many SDGs that are important to their local social, economic, cultural and political context. Cooperatives are mentioned largely in relation to SDGs 1, 2, 8 and 13. This is not surprising, given the number of cooperatives working in agriculture and in rural areas. The frequent reference to cooperatives on SDG 8 shows that governments expect them to play their role in promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work.

There is a correlation between cooperatives being mentioned in national development plans and their being reflected in the VNRs. This indicates the need for apexes and departments responsible for cooperatives to show how the work of cooperatives is aligned to the national development strategies and the need to reflect their work in the VNRs. The active role of government departments overseeing cooperatives also influences the mention of cooperatives. The priority areas of governments match with the interests of cooperatives and both need to work on raising awareness, sharing experiences and disseminating information. This requires an enabling environment, a process that is participatory and sense of ownership.

The inclusion of cooperatives in the national development plans and SDG reporting processes, will increase the visibility of cooperatives as a socially, environmentally and economically sustainable model. This mainstreaming can also pave the way for an enabling legal and policy environment for cooperative businesses at the local and national levels, while also enhancing the scope for collaboration with government, CSOs, and private sector organisations. Through cooperation among cooperatives, a core cooperative principle, we argue that strong partnerships between and within cooperative organisations can be instrumental in enhancing the role of cooperatives as a pivotal actor in SDG implementation. External stakeholders such as civil society, Fairtrade organisations, local authorities, and international organisations will prove to be valuable partners for many activities, to channel the views and needs of individuals towards policymakers and advocate for an enabling environment for people-centred businesses. Finally, cooperatives need to be actively engaged in the VNRs by understanding the process, engaging with stakeholders and enhancing the visibility of their work.

Local cooperatives need to educate their members on the role they play and ways in which they contribute to the SDGs. They need to reach to the higher levels of cooperative governance and cooperative federations for support and knowledge sharing. National and large cooperative enterprises can reassess strategies to ensure the SDGs are streamlined within their operating procedures. Both types of organisations can commit to pledges that will ensure their contributions in achieving the sustainable development targets. At the apex level, significant work remains to be done in communicating the links between the SDGs and cooperative values and principles.

The visibility of cooperatives, especially in VNRs can be enhanced by promoting the work of cooperatives on SDGs, involving cooperatives actively in national consultations, developing strong partnerships to advocate for cooperatives, and ensuring that cooperatives are included by agencies responsible for measuring and reporting. These steps will enhance cooperative visibility, involvement and contributions towards achieving the SDGs.

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Notes

- [¹] A common term ‘cooperatives’ has been used in this paper to represent both cooperatives and mutuals.
- [²] The final results of their CO₂ emission evaluation will be available at the end of financial year 2021.
- [³] In Japan, Diet refers to the National Legislature.
- [⁴] Gross domestic product.
- [⁵] Low income, middle income and high-income countries.
- [⁶] Monitoring and evaluation.
- [⁷] Memorandum of Understanding.
- [⁸] Micro, small and medium enterprises.