SEDLEX

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Sustainable Economies Due diLigence: good EXamples and the role of social dialogue

Project nr. 101126464

SUMMARY OF THE FINAL CONFERENCE

Cooperatives and social economy: perspectives for corporate sustainability
8 October 2025
9:30 – 16.30
COPA-COGECA (Hybrid event)
Rue de Trèves 61, 1040 Brussels, Belgium

The Final Conference titled "Cooperatives and Social Economy: Perspectives for Corporate Sustainability" was held on 8 October 2025 at the headquarters of COPA-COGECA in Brussels, bringing together policymakers, researchers, cooperative leaders, and social economy practitioners. The public event was attended by over 25 participants, both online and in person, including invited guests and speakers from **DG EMPL**, **DG GROW**, **ETUC**, **CECOP**, **ESS Forum International**, **IGMetall**, **Fremia**, **Spanish Ministry of Social Economy and Corporate Social Responsibility**, as well as major cooperatives such as **Alleanza Coop 3.0. Cams Group and Cajamar.** All three co-partner organisations - **DIESIS Network** (Belgium), **KU Leuven** (Belgium), and **innova eG** (Germany) — were represented. Throughout the day, participants examined how cooperatives embody long-term responsibility, democratic governance, and community-based innovation in a period of ecological, digital, and social transformation.

Summary of the presentations and the discussions:

Opening Session

The event was opened by **Melinda Kelemen,** SEDLEX Project Manager (Diesis Network), who welcomed both in-person and online participants and explained the conference's hybrid format. In her introduction, she outlined that SEDLEX explored how large cooperatives are adapting to the upcoming EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CS3D) while preserving their democratic governance and community values.

Welcoming Addresses

Gianluca Pastorelli, Executive President (Diesis Network), delivered the first keynote address. He framed the event as the conclusion of an innovative research journey and the beginning of a broader European conversation on cooperative-led sustainability. Pastorelli reminded participants that the social economy is not a marginal alternative but a crucial force in shaping a more inclusive and resilient Europe. He stressed that cooperatives—accounting for a large share of social-economy enterprises—demonstrate that it is possible to scale without losing values. Their success, he said, lies in democratic ownership, member engagement, and long-term vision.

Leonardo Pofferi, Vice-President (COPA-COGECA), followed with a comprehensive address representing more than seven million farmers and over twenty-three thousand agri-food and fishery cooperatives. He emphasized that cooperatives sustain rural livelihoods and support Europe's green and digital transitions. Pofferi noted that true sustainability rests on three interdependent pillars: environmental, economic, and social. He warned that a food system unable to provide fair income to farmers is inherently unsustainable, regardless of its environmental performance. Pofferi also voiced concern over reduced rural-development funding in the new EU budget, calling for a stronger financial commitment to cooperative-led territorial resilience. He concluded that cooperatives are agents of sustainability precisely because they embody solidarity, long-term responsibility, and community trust.

Presentation of SEDLEX Research

Anne Guisset, Senior Researcher (KU Leuven), presented the main findings of the SEDLEX project. She explained that the research analyzed fourteen large cooperatives across five European countries—France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and The Netherlands—covering three key sectors: agri-food, retail, and financial services. The study examined how cooperatives are already implementing sustainability practices consistent with as well as going beyond the EU's emerging regulatory framework. Guisset described the project's conceptual pillars: corporate sustainability and due diligence, social dialogue and democratic governance, and cooperative business models.

She revealed that cooperatives are often 'ahead of the curve,' embedding sustainability within their governance systems rather than treating it as external compliance. Cooperatives consistently demonstrated proactive measures: guaranteeing job stability, ensuring gender balance in leadership, promoting community development, and implementing transparent sustainability reporting. Guisset highlighted how employee participation and trade union involvement at board level enhance decision-making during critical transitions such as mergers or internationalization. She concluded that cooperative governance provides a comparative advantage in implementing sustainability obligations because it institutionalizes participation, accountability, and long-termism.

Policy Debate and Institutional Perspectives

The policy roundtable moderated by Anne Guisset assembled four distinguished speakers: Michael Ristaniemi (Legal and Policy Officer, European Commission, DG GROW), Diana Dovgan (Secretary General, CECOP), Joël Le Déroff (Policy Officer, European Commission, DG EMPL), and Marina Monaco (Senior adviser, ETUC). Their dialogue connected research findings to the broader European policy context.

Michael Ristaniemi commended SEDLEX for capturing the diversity of cooperative organizational cultures, emphasizing that stakeholder engagement and participatory management are integral to responsible business conduct. He encouraged cooperative stakeholders to contribute to the Commission's forthcoming studies on impact-driven business models and to help design future policy incentives for sustainable enterprises.

Diana Dovgan underlined that sustainability reporting must remain proportional and relevant to cooperative realities. She presented historical examples from Italy, France, Poland, and Spain where cooperative audits, certifications and social balance tools had long measured social impact and accountability, predating corporate ESG standards. She warned, however, against the excessive administrative burden of duplicative reporting.

Joël Le Déroff provided an institutional overview of ongoing EU initiatives, including the Pact for European Social Dialogue and the upcoming Quality Jobs Roadmap. He noted that the Commission views job quality as inseparable from competitiveness, and that cooperatives exemplify how democratic workplaces can enhance both. He also referenced the forthcoming second Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights, expected to deepen commitments to fair wages, participation, and equal opportunities.

Marina Monaco offered a complementary trade-union perspective, emphasizing that environmental and social transitions must advance in tandem. She stressed that the social dimension of sustainability - especially decent work, fair wages, and workers' participation - remains underdeveloped in current frameworks. She urged policymakers to integrate these aspects into due diligence directives and to ensure that workers' voices are central in governance reforms.

The lively exchange revealed a shared conviction that cooperatives represent a living laboratory for sustainable enterprise models. Participants agreed that to fully leverage this potential, EU and national institutions must ensure coherent policies that reward long-term responsibility and inclusive governance.

National Experiences: A Shared Commitment to Sustainability

The midday session, moderated by **Amaya Delgado** (COCETA), explored national developments under the theme 'State of the Art in Selected Countries.'

Aicha Belassir, Spain's Director General for Social Economy, appeared via video message, describing her country's strong institutional commitment to promoting cooperative enterprise. She highlighted Spain's pioneering national strategy for the social economy, which integrates cooperatives into sustainable development and job creation policies. Belassir noted that continuous collaboration between government, cooperatives, and regions has produced measurable results in innovation and employment. She concluded that Spain's model demonstrates how long-term public support and legal recognition can strengthen the visibility and resilience of the social economy sector

Walter Vogt (IG Metall) began by presenting the perspective of industrial relations in Germany, focusing on the long tradition of co-determination and employee participation in works councils as well as in supervisory boards. He explained that these mechanisms enable employees to request economic and now also sustainable information and use it in a strategic manner in the social partner dialogue.

Then he referred to the German Supply Chain Act and addressed in addition the weaknesses of the significant diluting of CSRD and CSDDD that came with the omnibus bill, which calls into question the hoped-for significant improvement in employee participation rights. Nevertheless, he presented the remaining options for trade union action.

Regarding the cooperative legal form, Vogt emphasized that cooperatives in Germany serve as a testing ground for democratic corporate governance and fair employment practices in industrial change. He argued that this participatory model not only protects workers' rights but also promotes productivity and innovation in all industries.

Anthony Ratier (ESS Forum International) described France's mature and structured social-economy ecosystem emphasising that the social and solidarity economy is a fundamental component of the human rights economy. He detailed how cooperatives in France play a central role in regional development, circular economy initiatives, and local service provision. Ratier emphasized that national policies, including social-economy labeling and access to impact finance, have fostered professionalization and visibility for cooperatives. He concluded that the French experience demonstrates how consistent public recognition and partnership with local authorities can sustain cooperative growth and innovation.

Gordon Hahn (Coompanion, Fremia) shared the Nordic perspective on cooperative innovation. He highlighted Sweden's strong culture of trust and collaboration, where cooperatives address local needs in areas such as renewable energy, care services, and education. Hahn illustrated how community-based entrepreneurship and digitalization are driving the modernization of Sweden's cooperative movement. He noted that this model shows how local empowerment and technological innovation can reinforce both sustainability and social cohesion.

The session demonstrated that despite institutional differences, European countries converge around similar challenges - access to finance, generational renewal, and the need to professionalize governance structures while staying true to cooperative values.

Enterprise Experiences and Sectoral Practice

In the afternoon, the focus shifted from national systems to enterprise-level practices. Moderated by **Samuel Barco Serrano** (Senior expert, Diesis Network), the panel 'Large Cooperatives and Selected Sectors' featured four prominent speakers: Ignacio Atance Muñiz (Director of Study Services, CAJAMAR), Giorgio Benassi (Sustainability Manager, Alleanza Coop 3.0), Gianluca Cristallo (Head of Innovation, Camst Group), and Giampaolo Bonfiglio (Vice-President, AGCI). Each showcased how large cooperatives integrate sustainability into daily operations.

Ignacio Atance Muñiz, presented the cooperative bank's pioneering approach to sustainable finance within the agri-food sector. He explained how CAJAMAR promotes innovation, environmental adaptation, and community development through its member-oriented financial model. Atance underlined that the cooperative's long-term vision allows it to reinvest profits into local ecosystems, supporting green technologies and fair economic growth. He concluded that CAJAMAR's success proves that financial institutions grounded in cooperative values can be both competitive and socially responsible.

Giorgio Benassi described how Italy's largest consumer cooperative integrates sustainability into its entire organizational strategy. He emphasized transparency, ethical supply chains, and responsible consumption as key elements of the cooperative's mission. Benassi highlighted how participatory governance ensures that environmental and social objectives are shared by all members, not imposed from above. He noted that Alleanza Coop 3.0's example demonstrates how scale can amplify social impact when guided by democratic accountability.

Gianluca Cristallo shared how Camst combines digital transformation with circular-economy practices in catering and facility management. He explained that sustainability at Camst is achieved through waste reduction and resource efficiency. Cristallo pointed out that digital tools enable better monitoring of food waste and carbon emissions while empowering staff to propose creative solutions. He also highlighted the launch of the new RE-COOPERIAMO platform by Legacoop Produzione e Servizi, developed in collaboration with several Italian cooperatives - with Camst as product manager - to create a B2B marketplace for buying, selling, and donating unused equipment and assets, thereby promoting circular economy principles and industrial symbiosis among cooperatives. He concluded that Camst's success lies in viewing innovation not just as a technological goal, but as a collective journey driven by cooperative.

Giampaolo Bonfiglio provided an overview of the Association's efforts to strengthen collaboration and advocacy among Italian cooperatives. In this framework he explained that due diligence is a strategic driver of transparency, competitiveness and legitimacy, now increasingly used in the field of ESG. Buonfiglio highlighted how AGCI large cooperatives internalise due diligence, democratise sustainability and amplify social and territorial resilience and that supporting their role means investing in an economy based on shared value, and sustainable economic transformation.

Speakers collectively illustrated that large cooperatives can scale responsibly by maintaining democratic accountability, using participatory management, and embedding environmental and social criteria in business decisions.

The session closed with reflections on the need for tailored financing, training, and impact-measurement frameworks to help cooperatives expand their societal contribution.

Concluding Reflections

The closing discussion synthesized the insights from all sessions into a shared roadmap for the future. Participants emphasized that sustainability cannot be reduced to regulatory compliance - it must become a culture of governance. The SEDLEX project demonstrated that cooperatives already operate according to the principles now being legislated at EU level. Their experience offers policymakers concrete evidence that democratic ownership and economic performance are mutually reinforcing.

Three overarching conclusions emerged. First, policy coherence across industrial, labor, and sustainability domains is indispensable for mainstreaming cooperative practices. Second, scaling up cooperative enterprises requires supportive ecosystems that align patient capital, capacity-building, and education with long-term goals. Third, quality of work must be recognized as central to sustainability, since fair employment and participation directly strengthen resilience and innovation.

The final words from the project leaders - Gianluca Pastorelli, Melinda Kelemen, and Anne Guisset—expressed gratitude to the speakers, partners, and participants. They reaffirmed that cooperatives are strategic actors in Europe's pursuit of sustainable prosperity. The conference closed on an optimistic note, emphasizing that the lessons of SEDLEX would guide ongoing research, cross-sector collaboration, and policy innovation in the years ahead.

In conclusion, the Final Conference illustrated the power of collective intelligence and democratic enterprise. It reaffirmed that the cooperative and social-economy models are not peripheral but central to Europe's capacity to build a fair, competitive, and environmentally responsible future.

(The summary is available on the project website.)