

Costa Rican Co-operatives Excelling at Sustainability

Brief

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**Saint Mary's
University**

Centre of Excellence in
Accounting and Reporting
for Co-operatives

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The co-operative sector in Canada has much to learn from the co-operatives in Costa Rica around embracing and implementing sustainability practices. From co-operatives taking the lead in rainforest conservation to incorporating environmental practices into their operations and providing employment opportunities for youth, Costa Rican co-operatives have demonstrated a strong commitment to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In November 2022, CEARC's Executive Director Daphne Rixon and Research Fellow Fiona Duguid had the great pleasure to travel to Costa Rica to work with La Universidad FUNDEPOS, the first university in Costa Rica to offer a Master's degree in Business Administration. They were hosted by Professor Jorge Arturo Campos, who served as their guide, travel consultant, co-op liaison, and more. The purpose of the tour was twofold: to strengthen the connection between CEARC and FUNDEPOS in order to advance the reporting and measurement of the SDGs within the co-operative movement, and to gain insight into how Costa Rican co-operatives are achieving the SDGs. Not only did the tour successfully accomplish these objectives, but it also provided them with a captivating experience of the Costa Rican countryside, its people, and its cuisine, while highlighting the profound commitment of Costa Rican co-operatives to the SDGs.



Photo: Jorge Atruro Campos, Daphne Rixon and Fiona Duguid at Universidad FUNDEPOS, San Jose, Costa Rica.

They visited various regions of Costa Rica, which allowed them to explore a wide range of co-operatives serving different industries, including electricity, healthcare, groceries, pharmacy, and savings and loans. They also had the opportunity to visit co-operatives involved in coffee production, sugarcane cultivation, souvenir manufacturing, palm oil production, agriculture products, dairy products, and aeronautical supplies.



Sustainability means meeting our own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.¹ We can think about an embedded understanding of sustainability wherein the economy is monitored by our social interactions, which are limited by our planetary boundaries. As a result, sustainable development calls for concerted efforts towards building an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future for people and planet.² The SDGs are a framework by which sustainable development and sustainability can be pursued, measured, and reported, enabling an understanding of the impact on the planet and people. With this in mind, according to the UN, the SDGs represent a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere.

While each co-operative CEARC visited engages with sustainability and the SDGs in different ways, importantly they have proactively and strategically aligned themselves with sustainability practices. Sustainability is not merely an add-on for Costa Rican co-operatives; rather, it lies at the heart of their decision-making processes and serves as a fundamental pillar in shaping their role within the economy, the communities they operate in, and their environmental footprint.



Photo: Fiona, Daphne and Jorge tour CoopSilencio.

While the level of engagement with sustainability and the SDGs is remarkably high, there is an opportunity to standardize the measurement and reporting of the SDGs within the co-operative movement in Costa Rica. With greater standardization, co-operatives could proudly demonstrate their national impact on the SDGs. Members, managers, employees, and board members of co-operatives met with Daphne and Fiona to discuss their achievements, challenges, aspirations, and visions for their respective co-operatives. Almost always these could be aligned with the SDGs.

¹ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>

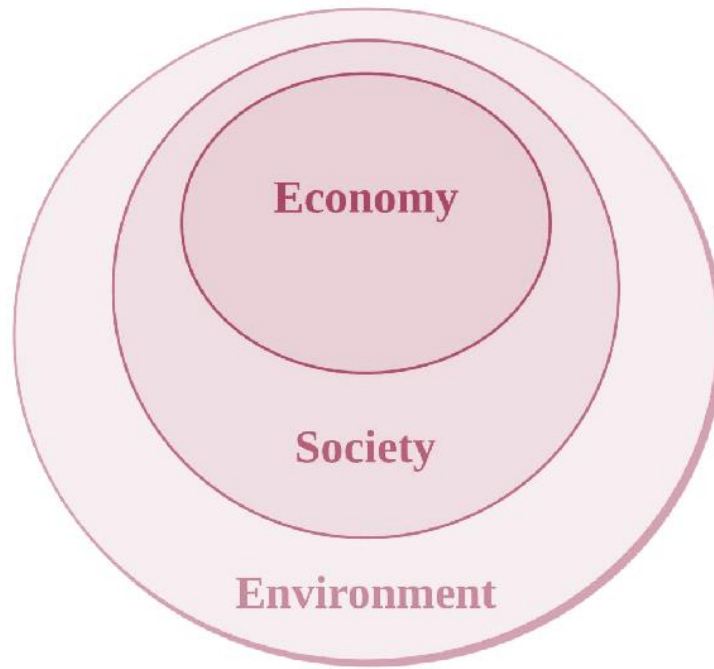
² <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>



Photo: Hilltop restaurant overlooking Lake Arenal.

Daphne and Fiona express their sincere gratitude to the co-operatives that warmly welcomed them into their boardrooms, factories, fields, and shops. They anticipate sharing case studies that highlight the co-operatives' work on the SDGs. The success of the tour would not have been possible without the support of CENECOOP, an organization with a national mandate to provide education, research, promotion, and training within the co-operative sector in Costa Rica. CENECOOP fulfills this mandate with great enthusiasm and rigor. Jorge's boundless energy and enthusiasm were invaluable, and without his presence, the tour would not have been as enjoyable or fruitful. Daphne and Fiona look forward to future collaborations with Jorge, FUNDEPOS, CENECOOP, and other co-operatives as they continue to explore and share the expertise that co-operatives are building in relation to the SDGs in the coming years.

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