Cooperatives in Costa Rica
The Costa Rican cooperative movement is one of the most developed in Central America, and cooperative structures to support the organization of farmers, workers and artisans have existed since the 19th century. In 1943, legislation on cooperatives was introduced with law 49 and the creation of the Department of Cooperatives by the Banco Nacional de Costa Rica to organise and support agricultural and industrial production cooperatives.
Recognised in the Costa Rican Constitution as a means to ‘provide better living conditions for workers’, cooperatives are today governed by law 4179, which was enacted in 1968. Law 4179 sets out strict rules for the formation and operation of cooperatives and establishes the National Council of Cooperatives (Consejo Nacional de Cooperativas, CONACOOP) and the National Institute of Cooperative Development (Instituto Nacional de Fomento Cooperativo, INFOCOOP) as the drivers of public policies on cooperatives. These agencies collaborate to promote, train and support cooperatives, as well as produce statistics on the movement.
The types of cooperatives under law 4179 include consumer, production, marketing, supply, savings and credit, housing, services, school, youth and transport. Two cooperative types are specifically defined in separate sections of the law: worker cooperatives (‘cooperativas de autogestion’) and co-management cooperatives (‘cooperativas de cogestion’).
How are statistics on cooperatives generated in Costa Rica?
The Ministry of Labour and Social Security is responsible for registering cooperatives, excluding school and student cooperatives, which are overseen by the Ministry of Education. INFOCOOP maintains a database of active and inactive cooperatives through its Department of Supervision.
The main source of statistics on cooperatives is the Cooperative Census undertaken by INFOCOOP. Information covers economic, financial, social, productive and administrative aspects, as well as the contribution of cooperatives to Costa Rican society. The Census is taken every four years, with the most recent in 2012 (the 2016 Census has been postponed). Data for this 4th Cooperative Census was collected from basic questionnaires sent to all cooperatives, specific questionnaires according to economic sector of activity (agriculture/hunting/forestry, industry, service, fishery,
The service category includes financial, transport, energy and health services cooperatives. School and student cooperatives were contacted through phone interviews.

INFOCOOP completed the 4th Cooperative Census through a collaboration with the State of the Nation Programme (Programa Estado de la Nación, PEN) of the National Council of Rectors (Consejo Nacional de Recores, CONARE), which is composed of Costa Rica’s four public universities. PEN is a research and training programme on sustainable human development.

What statistics are available?

The registries maintained by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security and INFOCOOP are not publicly available. The summarised results of the Cooperative Census are published on INFOCOOP’s website. The Census includes all core information recommended by the Resolution concerning further work on statistics of cooperatives, adopted at the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians, including data on number of cooperatives, principal economic activities, membership (gender disaggregated), governing bodies, employment (gender disaggregated and differentiated between member- and non-member workers), services to the community, financial information and information on cooperative strengths, weaknesses and future outlook.

There is no official statistical definition for cooperatives, so only cooperatives registered according to Law 4179 are covered in the Cooperative Census.

Reflections on the approach of Costa Rica to cooperative statistics

Costa Rica has embraced the suggestions of the 19th ICLS Resolution which has resulted in strong population coverage, representativeness, breadth of variables and accuracy. Though the Census uses the International Standard Industrial Classification (ISIC) for cooperatives, comparability with data on other businesses is limited by the fact that the data are not drawn from the same database.

A nationwide statistical definition and legal form for cooperatives could be instrumental in improving the inclusion of cooperative data in the activities of the national statistics office (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, INEC). Currently, cooperatives are mentioned in the National Household Survey, as an option in the question on affiliation with social organisations, and are part of the data collected on companies, though data are not disaggregated.

Contact information

Cooperatives Unit
Enterprises Department
International Labour Office (ILO)
4, route des Morillons
1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland
tel: +41 22 799 7095
coop@ilo.org

Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC)
c/o International Co-operative Alliance
1775 Eye Street NW, 8th Floor
Washington, DC 20006, USA
copac@copac.coop