

Role of farming cooperatives on the social sustainability of rural livelihoods in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims at assessing the role of agricultural cooperatives in maintaining the social sustainability of rural livelihoods in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study helps to identify the role of agricultural cooperatives in enhancing social capital and enhancing the quality of life of the rural population. This study also seeks to explain how agricultural cooperatives impact on social sustainability with emphasis on equity, inclusion, collective well-being and enhancement of rural livelihoods. **Methodology:** This research is based on qualitative method in which 15 board members of different levels of agricultural cooperatives in the province were chosen purposefully. Semi-structured interviews were administered and the data collected was analyzed using the thematic analysis approach. **Findings:** the study findings show that the agricultural cooperatives in KwaZulu-Natal contribute to the improvement of social sustainability through empowerment, equality, communication, and conflict resolution but are challenged by political interference and structural barriers which hampers the realization of the cooperatives' potential of benefiting the poor and therefore calling for governance protection. **Implications:** the study recommends the improvement of the governance systems and the protection of the independence of the agricultural cooperatives in the region. **Originality:** this study contributes in increasing the inclusion, developing the mechanisms of conflict resolution, and the need to address structural barriers and the encouragement of partnerships with NGOs, government and the private sector for development.

Keywords: *Agricultural cooperatives; Disadvantaged groups; Equality; Rural livelihoods; Social sustainability*

INTRODUCTION:

Agricultural cooperatives are one of the most important forms of social economy as they perform the functions of meeting community requirements and initiating changes in the society. According to Novkovic (2022), cooperatives are the result of social innovation which aims at addressing specific social needs of the local community and bringing about social change. Unlike investor-owned firms (IOFs), which prioritize profit maximization for shareholders, cooperatives are inherently "people-centered enterprises," owned, controlled, and operated by members to address shared economic, social, and cultural challenges (Papilaya et al., 2021). This participatory approach identifies cooperatives as key players for social sustainability in the rural environment. Cooperatives are social enterprises which aim at achieving the goals and objectives of members, at the same time ensuring that everyone is in harmony with each other.

Moon and Lee (2020) opine that cooperatives are usually the first organizations that react to local challenges and then mobilize resources to tackle the challenges in question.

Cooperative have globally helped improve the standard living of the rural people through meeting their social and economic needs. Schwettmann (2022) states that a large number of African households are involved with cooperatives in one way or another thus making the cooperative movement the biggest NGO in Africa. The United Nations has identified cooperatives as important stakeholders in the local community development and an enabler for participation in economic and social activities (UN, 2017). Also, the International Labor Organization (ILO) has identified cooperatives as crucial in the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with emphasis on eradication of poverty, promotion of gender equality, food security, decent employment and creation of sustainable and equitable economic growth (Wanyama, 2016).

In African economies, cooperatives especially the agricultural ones have been instrumental in generating employment and fighting poverty and famine. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP) have pointed out that agricultural cooperatives allow smallholder farmers to access better prices, inputs, and markets due to their collective strength (Moon & Lee, 2020). These cooperatives help to protect the farmers' rights and provide them with access to agricultural inputs and decent prices which in turn boosts the community's food security and resilience (Carmen et al., 2022).

As such, agriculture cooperatives has been identified to have positive impacts on the social sustainability of rural livelihoods through encouraging community mobilization, optimal resource utilization and creation of income generating activities (Saz-Gil, Bretos & Díaz-Fonce, 2021). In KwaZulu-Natal where poverty, unemployment and food insecurity are common among the rural population, agricultural cooperatives have been identified as key players in the process of development (Mathenjwa, 2023). However, there is scarce research regarding how these cooperatives affect the social aspects of sustainability, equity, inclusion and well-being of the collective. This paper aims at exploring the effects of agricultural cooperatives on the livelihoods of the rural communities and the role of the cooperatives in enhancing social resilience as well as the improvement of the quality of life in the rural areas.

Purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to assess the part played by farming cooperatives in improving the social sustainability of rural livelihood in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It intends to establish how agricultural cooperatives help in solving problems such as poverty, food insecurity, and social integration and the marginalization of various groups in the society through embracing democracy (ICA, 2005). Through this understanding of their effects on sustainable development, this research wants to establish how these cooperatives can be improved. Recommendations will guide policymakers and stakeholders in reducing South Africa's high cooperative failure rate of 65% (DTI, 2018).

Literature review

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) which is a framework that was developed by Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) (Chambers and Conway, 1992). SLA identifies the five capacitors which are human, financial, social, natural, and physical and how these capacitors interact with institutional processes such as those provided by agricultural cooperatives in order to enhance rural livelihoods (Jackson, 2021). This approach is especially useful for the analysis of the role of farming cooperatives in social sustainability since it focuses on the cohesiveness of the community, its ability to develop and socio-economic independence.

Through the SLA, it is possible to understand how agricultural cooperatives help to enhance the well-being of the rural poor (Farisani, 2023). Through the management of resources and coordination of members, cooperatives can help to reduce effects of poverty and increase the ability to cope with social and environmental risks. In the case of KwaZulu-Natal, this framework helps in explaining how cooperatives contribute to improving the social sustainability of the rural areas by addressing systemic barriers, ensuring people's inclusion and through group action.

Agricultural cooperatives

Agricultural cooperatives are voluntary economic entities that pool resources to produce, process, and market goods and services for their members (Okem & Stanton, 2016). Acting as rural service centers, these cooperatives provide farming inputs, credit, and market access, enhancing agricultural productivity and sustainability. They empower marginalised farmers, alleviate poverty, and foster rural development by promoting self-reliance and modern farming techniques. Schwettmann (2022) highlight their role in disseminating agricultural knowledge and facilitating community cohesion. These cooperatives support social sustainability through emphasize core values such as solidarity, cooperation, and mutual support, which are crucial for sustainable social development.

The social function of cooperatives

The decisions made by farmers to become members of agricultural cooperatives are not only based on monetary return but also other social and economic factors. Papilaya et al. (2021), and Novkovic (2022) have established that agricultural cooperatives play an essential role in enhancing members' knowledge, skills, and capacity hence promoting the overall growth of both the economic and social sectors. For women and youth smallholders, joining a cooperative helps in improving market access, sales price and quantity as well as empowering the members through skills development (Shangase, 2022). Theeuwens et al. (2021) highlight the fact that cooperatives offer so called non-financial advantages which include improvement in decision making and negotiation power. In addition, the cooperatives with strong social capital, which are defined as the set of values and mutual beliefs that bind people together and allow for group co-operation, may help to enhance the application of chemical inputs in farming (Saz-Gil et al., 2021). This ensures the production of safe and sustainable food and also benefit the farmers and the consumers. Hence, agricultural cooperatives are seen as mechanisms of social inclusion and development which also support members' socio-economic well-being.

The social effects of cooperative enterprises go hand in hand with the economic effects but are not limited to the members of the cooperative, it includes other members of the society and the general development of the community. Schwettmann (2022) argue that cooperative efficiency should incorporate societal impacts, which include services and assistance provided to non-members. Mnguni and Mdiniso (2024) reinforce this perspective, highlighting how cooperatives influence the rural sector holistically by leveraging local resources to foster training, technical support, and community development. Hagedorn (2014) provides evidence from Slovakia, where cooperatives deliver social benefits to members while contributing to local infrastructure and economic resilience. Similarly, Bulgarian cooperatives serve as safety nets in disadvantaged rural areas, offering essential services such as childcare, sports facilities, and affordable groceries while maintaining public infrastructure like streets and highways (Marinova & Nenovsky, 2019). These findings underscore cooperatives' dual role as economic and social institutions, fostering sustainability and enhancing the quality of life in rural communities.

Social capital

Social capital which is a major non-tangible asset, is an important factor that determines the performance of agricultural cooperatives. Billiet et al. (2021) social capital is the network of social bonds, norms and institutions that facilitate cooperation and co-ordination for the common good. In cooperatives, social capital helps members to communicate and share information, and thus enable them to ensure each other's performance in commercial activities and establish each other's accountability (Rivera, Knickel, Díaz-Puente & Afonso, 2019). This interaction affects individual and collective behavior as well as how contextual factors such as social and environmental influences affect members of a group thus improving on the cooperative process and sustainability. Social capital works on different levels: individual, group, and institutional and consists of ties, norms, and networks (Boadu, Koomson & Ntiri, 2024). In cooperatives it provides a base for the development of trust, commitment and reciprocity among the members as this is very vital for the co-operative to survive and operate. According to Billiet et al. (2021), cooperatives create social capital in the course of offering ownership, interaction, training and information sharing. Such activities enhance members' trust and reciprocity that in turn enhances members' commitment and collective achievement.

The relationship between social capital and cooperative action is bi-directional. While social capital enhances collective action by improving trust, communication, and shared objectives, participation in collective activities, in turn, strengthens social capital. Boadu et al. (2024) highlight a feedback loop where collective action can create, modify, or even destroy social capital, depending on the nature of interactions

within the group. Social capital enables individuals to leverage networks and resources to achieve goals, reduce risks, and accumulate information. This dynamic underscores the importance of social capital as both an input and an output of cooperative activities, particularly in rural agricultural settings. At the individual level, elements of social capital, such as trust and norms of reciprocity, foster reputation-building, which can help reduce transaction costs in environments characterized by information asymmetry (David, Yang, Bianca & Getele, 2021). These norms also enable individuals to coordinate collective action effectively, providing a framework for managing risks, accessing services, and making informed decisions. Rivera et al. (2019) assert that cooperatives, through their commercial structures, naturally integrate social consciousness, promoting people-centered progress and community empowerment.

Agricultural cooperatives facilitate community trust and networking by pooling economic, social, and political resources while drawing on external resources. This pooling process enhances community cohesion, enabling members to act collectively to address challenges and achieve shared goals (Farisani, 2023). Ultimately, social capital and collective action form a mutually reinforcing cycle, driving long-term sustainability and improving the socio-economic conditions of cooperative members and their communities.

Methodology

To comprehensively understand the subject, a qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to study agricultural cooperatives and their influence on the environmental sustainability of rural livelihoods in KZN province. This approach allowed for an in-depth investigation by adopting the foundational assumptions of phenomenological studies. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select leaders of agricultural cooperatives, chosen for their extensive experience and representative roles. Bougie and Sekaran (2019), highlight that focusing on specific demographic groups helps collect specialised data and reduces the margin of error. The target population consisted of 1,877 board members from 362 primary agricultural cooperatives, eight secondary cooperatives, one tertiary cooperative, and the National Apex Cooperative in KZN province. To ensure diverse perspectives, the sample included leaders from all cooperative levels. Interviews were conducted with 15 participants, aligning with Maarouf (2019) recommendation of 5 to 25 participants for phenomenology investigations.

Interviews, primarily semi-structured and face-to-face, were conducted at convenient locations for the interviewees. A notable mix of genders ensured almost equal representation of males and females (Bataneh et al., 2024). Proximity challenges were addressed by allowing participants to choose interview locations, emphasising quiet settings to minimise distractions. Interviews lasted between forty minutes to an hour, depending on the participants' ability to provide detailed explanations. With consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis (McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl, 2019). Thematic analysis was employed to analyse qualitative data.

Ethical clearance was also obtained from UKZN research committee. According to Naidoo (2019) “the focal point of ethics in research is to protect the respondents from harm and safeguard their dignity, anonymity, and confidentiality”. The limitation of the study is that respondents were selected exclusively from members of agricultural cooperatives who also served on management committees within KwaZulu-Natal province. Members of other types of cooperatives not directly involved in or working within the agricultural sector were excluded from the study.

Results and discussions

From the members of cooperative perspective, this study aimed at understanding the role of agricultural cooperatives on social sustainability. The results, derived from thematic analysis, revealed one main theme: Community support, communication, unity, and shared values, accompanied by three social practices or activities: empowerment of disadvantaged groups, communication and conflict resolution, and equality and inclusion. These practices or activities were identified from interviews with the members of agricultural cooperatives leaders and were identified as the most important elements of the social sustainability of rural livelihoods. In the field interviews, the participants were quite keen to present their cooperative initiatives showing their commitment towards the formation of strong community links. This section throws light on the numerous ways in which the agricultural cooperatives are contributing to the social cohesion and sustainable governance of the rural communities in the region with the view of understanding the role of the cooperatives in the social sustainability of the rural livelihoods.

Empowerment of disadvantaged groups

This sub-theme aimed at identifying how agricultural cooperatives have strategies for empowering women, single parents, widows, youths and people with disabilities. The participants were very proud, happy and satisfied of being able to empower people who have little chance to improve their lot. According to the interviewees, cooperatives help to enhance the financial and social capital of the underserved people by giving them a chance to engage in farming activities. They provide avenues for skill development and provide practical lessons and examples which are evident in their linkages with NGOs, learning institutions and development agencies. For instance, one participant echoed:

We began as single parents especially women. Thus, it was noted that not only women were in need, but other people in the community who lead a simple life, including people with disabilities. Also, the cooperative model is effective in providing skills development opportunities and practical experiences to its members (Coop member, Interviewee 5).

This is in consistent with Mnguni and Mdiniso (2024) who found that cooperatives are one of the tools that the government can use to help the marginalized or the excluded South African indigenous people to partake in the economic development of the country. Rena (2021) notes that cooperatives in South Africa have historically been a way through which the economically marginalized have been empowered. Through the participation of the community members such as the ones described by the participants, it is clear that cooperatives are meant to be inclusive of people who could have been excluded from the normal socioeconomic activities. Raniga (2021) also states that cooperatives are a way of bringing together groups that are needy and helpless in the society, through the mutual cooperation and support, which is crucial in the development of such groups.

Communication and conflict resolution

Another crucial finding that can be associated with rural agricultural cooperatives is the adherence to the communication and conflict resolution issues among the members. The majority of participants underlined the importance of the communication and the fact that every member of the community has to meet regularly in order to discuss various problems. Some of the participants said that the cooperative members often meet to discuss different issues that affect the members in order that all the sides can express their view. Some of the participants stated that cooperatives are organizations that are legally recognized by the law. They believed that due to being formal structures, cooperatives are subjected to laws of the land as well as international laws. One interviewee stated:

Whenever there is a challenge, we sit down and talk about it. We have open communication channels with the community and our members. Yes, we have meetings every month. Also, cooperatives are legal entities and they are governed by certain values and principles (Coop member, Interviewee 3).

The study is in consistent with the existing literature on cooperative governance and conflict resolution. According to Boadu, et al. (2024), effective communication is very important for the prevention of conflicts within cooperatives as it gives an opportunity to the members to report any matter and find a solution. Rena (2021) asserts that communication plays a significant role in building trust and harmony among the cooperative members as this is important for the sustainability of the cooperative. The participants' account of the monthly meetings and the discussion sessions indicate that there is a high level of commitment towards the full involvement of all members and full disclosure within the cooperative. For instance, Ortmann and King (2017) established that the formation of cooperatives is based on integration, communication, and a strong governance system that ensures the consensus of all participants. As noted by Rena (2021), by ensuring that the cooperatives adhere to the laws and principles of honesty and cooperation, conflicts are well managed. This is in consistent with David et al. (2021) who state that internal governance structure that is informed by the law and regulation is crucial in managing conflict as well as fostering cooperation among members. Similarly, ICA (2005) stated that the cooperative structure and design evolve through experimentation and are influenced by societal norms, the industrial context and legal requirements.

However, some of the participants mentioned that conflicts arising from outside the cooperative are a major threat which is hard to manage. The participants stated that the remained conflicts can be attributed to individuals who are self-serving and have personal agendas that they are pursuing. Accordingly, one participant indicated that:

The some conflict are usually caused by government officials and such conflicts are hard to solve. These are some of the challenges that we encounter as a cooperative and therefore one member can be a liability to the cooperative (Coop member, Interviewee 13).

This finding is however different from the ideal definition of cooperatives. In their study Papilaya et al. (2021) highlight that cooperatives are self-governing entities that are owned and controlled by the members. Where external forces influence the internal dynamics, this affects the autonomy of the cooperative and presents a problem with the concept of harmony. Shangase (2022) also found out that cooperatives are not immune to external influences especially from politically influential people and this can throw the cooperative into crisis and worsen the conflict situation, a proof that there is need for enhanced governance mechanisms to protect the autonomy of cooperatives. In the same manner, ICA (2005:n.p) and DTI (2014: 7) defines a cooperative as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common social, economic and cultural needs as well as their aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise”.

Equality and inclusion

This was one of the sub-theme that tried to understand how different people are treated in agricultural cooperatives. All the participants believed in equality and equality of opportunity for women and men in the cooperative. They also emphasized on the importance of providing equal chances for the persons with disabilities and including them in the decision making processes. Some of the participants also noted that cooperative movement in South Africa is unique as it is designed to be inclusive of anyone who has a passion to be part of an agricultural cooperative. One interviewee commented that:

That area is doing well at the moment as we can touch on equality for men and women, who are treated equally. We also have people living with disabilities who are members of cooperatives. Also, the cooperative model has a low entry requirements that allow anyone to form or join a cooperative (Coop member, Interviewee 1).

This is in agreement with Papilaya et al. (2021) who found out that cooperatives are different from investor-owned firms in that, cooperatives are run on principles of equality where each member has one vote. This democratic governance model assist in preventing discrimination of the marginalised groups and ensure that all members participate actively irrespective of their gender or physical status. Also, the accessibility of the cooperatives by low entry fees and grants as identified by the participants is a way of ensuring that the poor in the rural areas are included. According to Boadu et al. (2024), cooperatives eliminate the barriers that exist in form of financial and social to entries into the system thus allowing people from the disadvantaged backgrounds to join. As noted by Theeuwien et al. (2021), eliminating the financial barriers is crucial in enhancing the participation of the poor rural people. The South African Cooperative Development Policy and other policies such as the Cooperatives Act No. 14 of 2005 has been of great help in the promotion of the cooperative movement in the country. The government grants also help in enhancing the cooperative model as a viable means of shared ownership and responsibility.

However, some participants expressed their perception that the agricultural cooperative landscape does not support the black poor citizens of South Africa adequately. The participants said that the wealthy and well-connected people are the ones who gain most from the cooperative activities. This is confirmed by the following participant:

I think the agriculture sector in South Africa is still dominated by few players. The ones that benefited from the past system are the ones who are still dominating the sector, the input production up to the entire value chain. They also have associations with very stringent conditions that are very difficult to meet by these poor oriented cooperatives (Coop member, Interviewee 14).

This is in consistent with the findings of Boadu et al. (2024) who pointed out that cooperatives faced challenges including mismanagement, political interference and limited access to markets. These factors led to low productivity and work rates thus making it unattractive for the poor to engage with the cooperatives. A number of challenges exist within the cooperative sector especially for the black community and the poor and vulnerable persons who are not able to benefit from cooperative operations. Sebhatu et al. (2021) also found out that cooperatives in Ethiopia had problems of poor management and political interference which made it difficult for the poor to be involved. As noted by Shangase (2022), in South Africa, cooperative model is hijacked by elite, thus, excluding the poor and unable to empower them through cooperative enterprises. This is a typical case where the structural factors weaken the ability of

cooperatives to bring change, especially in sectors like agriculture where access to market and resources is still a preserve of the well-off.

CONCLUSION:

The findings show that the agricultural cooperatives play an important role in the social sustainability of rural livelihoods in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Cooperatives have a potential of empowering women, single parents, youth and people with disabilities through employment, skills development and community mobilization. They encourage equality through democratic systems, affordable entry and subsidies, which ensure that all individuals irrespective of their social status can partake in the cooperatives. Moreover, cooperatives are excellent in ensuring that there is proper communication as well as conflict resolution and thus the unity of the members is ensured. However, external conflicts particularly those that are advanced by politically powerful people are a major challenge and hinder the proper handling of conflict within cooperatives. Although cooperatives are establishments that are based on the principles of equality and inclusion, structural inequalities exist in the agricultural sector and hence the benefits do not reach out to the poor and the marginalized citizens. The control of the elites in the value chains hinders the realization of the changes that the cooperatives can bring. To address these structural issues and protect the cooperative governance from political interference is recommended to enhance the cooperatives' social sustainability.

Recommendations

In order to improve the social sustainability of agricultural cooperatives in KwaZulu-Natal, it is essential to strengthen governance structures and safeguard cooperative autonomy from external political interference. This can be done by putting in place strong governance mechanisms and frequent training of cooperative executives and members on democratic practices and responsibilities. Other measures that can be taken include ensuring that the cooperatives embrace everyone including women, the youth and people with disabilities. Some of the measures that can be taken in this regard may include skill development programmes, mentorship schemes and easy access to capital for the proper participation of all the individuals in cooperative activities.

Also, it is crucial to enhance the conflict resolution systems in order to manage internal and external conflicts effectively. This way the members of the cooperatives can be equipped with mediation and negotiation skills that can help in enhancing unity within the cooperatives. In order to address structural inequalities, the policies should aim at eliminating the hurdles that hinder access to market and resources and ensure that the weaker economic entities get their fair share. Therefore, promoting linkages with NGOs, government departments and the private sector can help leverage on resources and create sustainable systems that will enable cooperatives to enhance their impacts and improve the standard of living of the rural populace.

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