

Understanding the Institutional Conditions Linking Member Participation to Economic Efficiency and Socio-Economic Development

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between democratic governance and socio-economic performance in cooperatives by bringing together research on member participation, board structures, cooperative principles, organizational efficiency, member welfare, resilience, inclusion and territorial development. The literature indicates that cooperative democracy extends beyond formal voting arrangements and depends on trust, social capital, information exchange, representation and meaningful participation in organizational decisions. At the same time, democratic governance interacts with professional management, leadership capabilities and incentive systems in shaping financial and productive performance. The evidence also shows that cooperative outcomes cannot be assessed exclusively through profitability or technical efficiency. Member income, market access, employment quality, organizational resilience, social inclusion and environmental contributions constitute additional dimensions of performance. Research on agricultural, financial, worker and renewable-energy cooperatives further demonstrates that governance outcomes remain sensitive to organizational size, member heterogeneity, institutional conditions and territorial relationships. The paper therefore argues for a multidimensional understanding of cooperative performance in which democratic governance and socio-economic outcomes are examined jointly. Cooperative structures can generate economic and social benefits, but these benefits depend on the capacity to combine participation and representation with competent management, institutional support and organizational adaptation.

Keywords: Cooperatives; Democratic governance; Member participation; Socio-economic performance; Organizational resilience
JEL classification: J54; L21; P13; Q13; R11

Introduction

Cooperatives occupy a distinctive position among organizational forms because their economic activities are combined with collective ownership, member participation and democratic decision-making. Unlike investor-owned firms, in which voting power is generally related to capital ownership, cooperatives are commonly organized around principles of member control and collective accountability. This institutional architecture gives governance a particular importance



because members are simultaneously users, owners and, in many cases, participants in organizational decisions. Existing research consequently emphasizes that cooperative democracy cannot be reduced to formal voting rights. Participation may involve monitoring, information exchange, deliberation, representation and direct involvement in strategic choices. Trust and social capital also determine whether members effectively exercise these rights. Liu et al. (2024), Buang and Abu Samah (2021), Kinikli and Yercan (2023) and Liang et al. (2015), for example, associate participation with satisfaction, organizational trust, social capital and coordination. Other studies show that access to participation may remain unequal because members differ in time, socioeconomic resources, networks and organizational influence. Democratic governance therefore represents a practical organizational process whose quality depends on both formal institutional arrangements and the conditions under which members participate.

The economic implications of this governance model have generated an extensive literature covering financial performance, productive efficiency, household welfare, member loyalty, resilience and territorial development. Cooperative governance may strengthen accountability, commitment and collective action, but it can also generate coordination costs when organizations become larger or memberships become more heterogeneous. Research therefore does not support a simple assumption that more democratic participation automatically produces greater economic efficiency. Instead, studies indicate that socio-economic outcomes depend on interactions among governance structures, professional management, cooperative principles, member characteristics and external institutional environments. This perspective is particularly relevant because conventional performance measures can underestimate cooperative outcomes when member services, social objectives or community benefits are treated merely as organizational costs. Evidence from agricultural cooperatives shows improvements in yields, market access, technology adoption and household income, while studies of worker and energy cooperatives emphasize employment quality, resilience, citizen participation and territorial sustainability. The purpose of this paper is therefore to examine how democratic governance contributes to cooperative socio-economic performance while identifying the organizational and institutional conditions that shape this relationship.

1. Democratic Governance Architecture in Cooperatives

1.1. Member Participation, Democratic Engagement and Organizational Trust

Liu et al. (2024) show that member participation in cooperative governance can significantly increase satisfaction, indicating that democratic involvement produces organizational effects extending beyond formal voting rights. Their findings also reveal unequal participation benefits across member categories, suggesting that cooperative democracy may remain uneven when some groups possess greater political or social resources. Buang and Abu Samah (2021) reinforce this perspective by defining participation broadly through voting, monitoring, information exchange and involvement in organizational decisions rather than attendance at general meetings alone. Kinikli and Yercan (2023) add that organizational trust encourages participation and that incorporating members' opinions into decision-making can strengthen legitimacy and belonging. Liang et al. (2015) further demonstrate that social capital facilitates participation, which subsequently contributes to coordination and cooperative performance. Taken together, these contributions imply that democratic governance depends on both formal participation mechanisms and the social conditions enabling members to use them effectively. Cooperative organizations therefore need to strengthen information access, trust and opportunities for meaningful involvement while ensuring that participation is not concentrated among already influential members. Democratic effectiveness should consequently be assessed through the



breadth and quality of engagement as well as through its contribution to satisfaction, accountability and collective organizational functioning.

Morfi et al. (2021) demonstrate that members' social embeddedness and personal networks can substantially influence their willingness to participate in cooperative governance, implying that engagement is partly formed outside formal organizational structures. Zeng et al. (2023) reinforce this relational perspective by showing that both contractual and relational governance strengthen member commitment, with trust and informal relationships displaying particularly strong effects. Ranville (2025) adds that active participation results from combinations of motivations, socioeconomic resources, available time and organizational opportunities rather than from any single determinant. Kinikli and Yercan (2023) similarly identify organizational trust as an important condition for members' involvement in cooperative decision-making. Together, these contributions imply that democratic participation cannot be generated solely through statutes, voting procedures or formal accountability mechanisms. Members require social relationships that facilitate trust and information exchange, but they also need sufficient resources and realistic opportunities to participate. Governance arrangements should therefore combine formal rights with relational mechanisms and accessible participation channels. Such an approach recognizes that cooperative democracy is embedded in both organizational rules and members' everyday social environments, while also reducing the risk that participation becomes limited to individuals possessing greater time, networks or socioeconomic resources.

Pek (2023) argues that large cooperatives may retain formal democratic structures while experiencing weak member involvement, and proposes deliberative mini-publics as a means of expanding participation beyond conventional electoral mechanisms. This contribution implies that democratic quality should be assessed according to inclusiveness and deliberation rather than voting participation alone. Huang et al. (2015) provide a complementary caution by showing that participation indicators do not necessarily produce statistically significant improvements in measured economic performance. Buang and Abu Samah (2021) nevertheless demonstrate that weak engagement can undermine accountability and cooperative identity, suggesting that participation may generate governance benefits that are not immediately reflected in financial indicators. Liu et al. (2024) further show that participation can increase member satisfaction even when participation opportunities and influence remain unequally distributed. Considered jointly, these contributions imply that the value of cooperative democracy cannot be reduced to short-term financial performance. Participation may strengthen legitimacy, oversight, satisfaction and organizational continuity even when direct economic effects remain limited. Cooperatives should therefore develop more inclusive deliberative mechanisms and evaluate democratic governance through multiple outcomes, including accountability, member voice, satisfaction and the distribution of influence across different membership groups.

1.2. Boards, Representation and Democratic Leadership

Hakelius (2018) shows that cooperative board effectiveness depends less on mechanically reducing board size or appointing external directors than on directors' knowledge of cooperative characteristics, educational capabilities and effective interaction with chief executives. This implies that boards must combine strategic competence with accountability to members. Franken and Cook (2019) reinforce this contingency perspective by demonstrating that some conventional corporate-governance recommendations apply to agricultural cooperatives while others transfer only weakly from investor-owned firms. Ghosh and Ansari (2018) similarly show that board size does not produce uniform financial effects across cooperative banks, with outcomes varying according to institutional and regional conditions. Yamori et al. (2017) add that larger boards may reduce efficiency while outside directors can strengthen disciplinary control, high-

lighting a persistent tension between representation and managerial effectiveness. Taken together, these contributions imply that cooperative governance cannot be designed through a universal structural formula. Board composition must balance democratic legitimacy, sector-specific knowledge, strategic competence and monitoring capacity. Governance reform should therefore focus not only on the number or status of directors but also on whether boards possess the capabilities and organizational arrangements required to represent members while exercising effective control over management.

Périlleux and Szafarz (2015) demonstrate that women's leadership can influence the social orientation of financial cooperatives, suggesting that board composition affects which organizational objectives receive priority. Hernández-Nicolás et al. (2019) reinforce this perspective by showing that female representation on agricultural cooperative boards is associated with differences in financial outcomes, operating risk and indebtedness, including lower debt levels. Esteban-Salvador et al. (2019) extend the issue of representation by examining women's access to the presidency of cooperative governing boards rather than merely their numerical presence. Their findings imply that formal equality in membership does not necessarily eliminate unequal access to leadership positions. Chareonwongsak (2017) further shows that board performance depends on motivation, authority, skills, transparency and meeting quality, indicating that representation must be accompanied by sufficient capacity and incentives to govern effectively. Together, these contributions imply that inclusive cooperative governance involves both who occupies leadership positions and how those leaders exercise their responsibilities. Greater diversity can affect financial and social priorities, but its developmental value depends on whether representatives possess meaningful authority, competencies and opportunities to influence strategic decisions.

Anund Vogel et al. (2016) show that cooperative governance can be understood as a form of collective self-governance in which members establish rules, monitor shared resources and maintain common assets over time. This perspective broadens cooperative democracy beyond formal board structures and emphasizes the institutional conditions supporting collective responsibility. Hakelius (2018) complements this view by showing that board members must remain closely connected to cooperative characteristics and member interests while interacting effectively with professional management. Yamori et al. (2017) add that representative governance can generate coordination and efficiency costs when organizational structures become excessively cumbersome. Franken and Cook (2019) further demonstrate that cooperative ownership creates governance requirements that differ from those of investor-owned firms. Considered jointly, these contributions imply that cooperative governance requires continuous reconciliation between collective participation and efficient organizational control. Democratic legitimacy depends on maintaining member representation and shared rule-making, while organizational sustainability requires competent boards, effective monitoring and manageable decision processes. Cooperative institutions should therefore preserve mechanisms of collective accountability while adapting governance structures to organizational scale, sector and operational complexity rather than importing corporate models without adjustment.

1.3. Cooperative Principles, Governance Models and Institutional Identity

Guzmán et al. (2020) show that adherence to cooperative principles can contribute positively to organizational performance, both directly and through entrepreneurial orientation. Their findings suggest that democratic and solidarity-based values need not weaken competitiveness and may instead support commitment, innovation and market performance. Ajates (2020) reinforces this interpretation by arguing that agricultural cooperatives combine economic activity with political and social functions, making democratic identity a substantive organizational re-

source rather than a purely legal characteristic. Camargo Benavides and Ehrenhard (2021) further describe cooperatives as hybrid enterprises in which economic, social and member-oriented objectives coexist, demonstrating why profitability alone provides an incomplete measure of success. Michaud and Audebrand (2022) add that these organizations are characterized by persistent tensions among economic efficiency, collective ownership, member democracy and social objectives. Taken together, these contributions imply that cooperative performance should be understood through the interaction of economic and democratic dimensions rather than through a simple opposition between them. Cooperative principles can strengthen organizational effectiveness when they are incorporated into governance practices, but their contribution depends on how institutions manage competing objectives. Performance assessment should therefore include financial results, member benefits, democratic quality and social outcomes within the same evaluative framework.

Grashuis (2020) demonstrates that governance mechanisms introduced to reduce agency problems can themselves generate organizational costs, meaning that stronger monitoring does not automatically improve cooperative performance. Board size, management structure and CEO independence may strengthen control while simultaneously increasing coordination burdens. Höhler and Kühl (2018) complement this perspective by showing that differences among members in farm size, objectives, investment horizons and other characteristics can complicate collective decision-making despite formally equal voting rights. Jamaluddin et al. (2023) reinforce this contingency interpretation by finding that governance effects vary across board characteristics, leadership strategies, cooperative principles and social or human capital rather than producing uniformly positive outcomes. Michaud and Audebrand (2022) further argue that cooperative governance is inherently shaped by organizational paradoxes that cannot simply be eliminated. Together, these contributions imply that democratic governance requires the management of trade-offs between control, representation and organizational efficiency. Additional structures may improve accountability but can also create costs or slow decision-making when membership interests are highly heterogeneous. Effective governance therefore depends on designing mechanisms suited to cooperative size, member composition and strategic context rather than applying standardized prescriptions intended to maximize monitoring or representation independently.

Kyazze et al. (2017) show that monitoring rights and innovation are positively associated with social performance, whereas some formal mechanisms of ratification or policy compliance display weaker relationships. This implies that governance becomes consequential when it shapes actual accountability and organizational responsiveness rather than merely satisfying formal requirements. Mathuva et al. (2017) reinforce this broader interpretation by demonstrating that stronger cooperative governance is associated with greater social and environmental disclosure, thereby connecting governance with institutional legitimacy toward members and external stakeholders. Camargo Benavides and Ehrenhard (2021) add that the social consequences of cooperative ownership remain insufficiently measured, which can obscure important outcomes generated by member-oriented governance. Jamaluddin et al. (2023) further demonstrate that cooperative performance results from interactions among governance structures, managerial capabilities, cooperative principles and social capital. Considered jointly, these contributions imply that governance quality should be evaluated through observable organizational and social outcomes rather than formal structures alone. Cooperative performance frameworks should therefore examine accountability, disclosure, member benefits, legitimacy and economic sustainability simultaneously. Such multidimensional evaluation makes it possible to determine whether democratic governance translates into substantive social and organizational benefits rather than remaining primarily procedural.

2. Democratic Governance and Economic-Organizational Performance

2.1. Financial Performance, Productive Efficiency and Organizational Capacity

Favalli et al. (2020) show that stronger governance in Brazilian credit unions is associated with higher financial efficiency, with representativeness, participation, strategic leadership, management and supervision contributing jointly to organizational performance. Their findings imply that democratic control and financial discipline do not necessarily conflict when governance mechanisms are coherently designed. Mäkinen and Jones (2015) reinforce this conclusion by showing that cooperative banks can display favorable efficiency characteristics relative to other banking forms, challenging assumptions that member ownership inherently produces weaker economic performance. Liu and Li (2018) add that the human and social capital of cooperative leaders influences management performance, indicating that democratic legitimacy must be accompanied by managerial knowledge, networks and organizational competence. Gezahegn et al. (2020) further demonstrate that community-initiated agricultural cooperatives can achieve higher technical efficiency, while professional arrangements such as paid employees or compensated committee members may strengthen operational capacity. Taken together, these contributions imply that cooperative efficiency depends on the interaction between democratic foundations and professional management. Member participation can support legitimacy and endogenous collective action, but effective implementation also requires competent leadership and organizational mechanisms capable of transforming collective preferences into efficient operations.

Ishak et al. (2020) show that the performance of smallholder agricultural cooperatives combines organizational efficiency and effectiveness with the fulfillment of member expectations. This distinction implies that conventional accounting indicators provide only a partial representation of cooperative success because member-oriented services may remain important even when they do not maximize short-term financial returns. McKillop et al. (2020) reinforce this perspective by showing that cooperative financial institutions possess member-centered ownership structures and objective functions that influence both their business models and their broader contributions to economic activity. Yobe et al. (2020) add that agricultural cooperatives display substantial differences in financial efficiency, demonstrating that cooperative status alone cannot explain performance and that internal organizational determinants remain important. Hemrit (2020) similarly finds that governance and organizational variables affect financial performance conditionally, with some board arrangements producing no systematically positive effects. Together, these contributions imply that cooperative performance should be evaluated through a multidimensional framework combining financial efficiency, organizational effectiveness and member-oriented outcomes. Governance mechanisms become meaningful when they support organizational viability without weakening the services and benefits that justify cooperative ownership. Comparative assessments should therefore distinguish between cooperatives that are financially efficient and those that also fulfill their broader member-centered economic functions.

Skevas and Grashuis (2020) demonstrate that technical efficiency in grain-marketing cooperatives is influenced not only by internal characteristics such as age, liquidity, differentiation and membership size but also by spatial spillovers from surrounding organizations. Their findings imply that cooperative performance is partly embedded in broader territorial and competitive environments. Gezahegn et al. (2020) complement this contextual perspective by showing that

endogenous formation can strengthen technical efficiency, although member heterogeneity may create coordination difficulties that reduce these gains. Hemrit (2020) further demonstrates that the effects of governance characteristics vary according to organizational conditions, reinforcing the absence of a universal governance-performance relationship. Favalli et al. (2020) add that representativeness and participation can coexist with strategic leadership and effective supervision in financially efficient cooperative organizations. Considered jointly, these contributions imply that cooperative efficiency emerges from combinations of internal governance, professional capacity and external economic conditions. Democratic structures should therefore not be evaluated independently from organizational scale, member composition or territorial context. Cooperative policy should support managerial professionalization and effective member representation while recognizing that performance differences may also reflect market environments and interorganizational relationships beyond the direct control of individual cooperatives.

2.2. Member Economic Returns, Household Income and Welfare

Ma and Abdulai (2016) show that cooperative membership can increase farm yields, net returns and household income, with particularly relevant effects for smaller producers facing stronger market and resource constraints. Their findings imply that cooperatives can improve welfare by modifying members' access to productive and commercial opportunities rather than merely redistributing existing income. Chagwiza et al. (2016) reinforce this interpretation by demonstrating that dairy cooperatives can facilitate technological change and commercialization even when price effects remain limited. Wossen et al. (2017) further show that cooperative membership supports technology adoption, productive assets and household welfare, especially when combined with access to formal credit. Ofori et al. (2019) add that cooperative participation may improve access to technology, credit, information and training before clear income effects become observable. Taken together, these contributions imply that cooperative performance should be understood through the institutional functions that connect smallholders with markets, knowledge, finance and production technologies. Household income remains an important outcome, but it may emerge only after members have accumulated complementary capabilities and productive resources. Cooperative impact assessment should therefore consider intermediate mechanisms such as service access, commercialization and technology uptake alongside immediate changes in farm revenue or household income.

Alho (2015) demonstrates that farmers value cooperative membership partly because it provides stable marketing channels and reduces uncertainty, particularly for farms seeking expansion. This implies that cooperative benefits cannot be measured solely through higher commodity prices. Munch et al. (2021) reinforce this perspective by showing that dairy farmers may accept lower prices in order to retain cooperative membership, suggesting that stability, services, voice and other organizational benefits contribute to members' overall utility. Donkor and Hejkrlik (2021) add that members who are more actively committed to their rice cooperatives obtain greater economic benefits than passive participants, indicating that formal membership alone does not guarantee equivalent outcomes. Sofoluwe and Yinusa (2021) further find higher income among cooperative members while also emphasizing that participation is selective and influenced by household characteristics. Together, these contributions imply that member-level performance depends on both the bundle of services provided by cooperatives and the extent to which members actually engage with those services. Evaluations should therefore incorporate market security, uncertainty reduction, participation and organizational commitment rather than relying exclusively on price differentials or nominal membership status.

Ahado et al. (2024) show that participation in supported cooperative groups can increase farm revenue and net returns, demonstrating that collective organization can generate economic

benefits even where cooperative institutions are undergoing significant transformation. Their findings also underline the importance of organizational and institutional support during cooperative formation. Ofori et al. (2019) complement this perspective by showing that membership may initially strengthen access to credit, information, training and technology without producing immediate income gains. Chagwiza et al. (2016) further demonstrate that cooperatives can promote commercialization and technological transformation through mechanisms extending beyond price improvements. Donkor and Hejkrlik (2021) add that economic gains depend partly on the intensity of members' commitment and participation. Considered jointly, these contributions imply that cooperative effects are neither automatic nor instantaneous. Their socio-economic contribution develops through organizational support, member engagement and gradual accumulation of capabilities that improve production and market participation. Cooperative policy should therefore combine institution-building with measures that encourage active use of collective services, while impact evaluation should distinguish short-term financial outcomes from longer-term changes in productive capacity, commercialization and member resilience.

2.3. Incentives, Member Loyalty and Organizational Success

Wang and Wang (2024) show that property-rights reform, leadership, social capital and collective action contribute to the economic performance of rural collective-owned cooperatives, with leadership and social capital operating partly through collective action. This implies that governance and social relationships can become productive resources when they strengthen members' capacity to coordinate economic behavior. Mann and Stoinescu (2021) reinforce this multidimensional perspective by distinguishing profitability, member benefits and social capital as separate but positively related dimensions of cooperative success. Ferreira et al. (2021) further demonstrate that technical assistance can strengthen member loyalty, suggesting that commitment develops partly through reciprocal relationships in which cooperatives provide services that members perceive as economically valuable. Hadiani et al. (2022) add that participation can be positioned within a broader chain linking cooperative partnerships and organizational performance to farmers' income. Taken together, these contributions imply that cooperative success cannot be reduced to financial returns or democratic procedures considered separately. Economic performance emerges through interactions among collective action, service provision, participation and social capital. Cooperative governance should therefore strengthen the organizational mechanisms through which members obtain recognizable benefits while simultaneously creating conditions for sustained commitment and coordinated collective activity.

Barry and Rousselière (2022) demonstrate that appropriately designed quality-based incentives can reduce free-riding and opportunistic behavior within agricultural cooperatives, indicating that solidarity and common ownership do not eliminate the need to align individual incentives with collective objectives. Benos et al. (2016) complement this argument by showing that market and brand orientation display stronger relationships with cooperative performance than several formal structural characteristics. This suggests that governance reform produces limited benefits when it is disconnected from strategic capabilities. Wang and Wang (2024) further show that leadership and social capital can strengthen performance through collective action, while Ferreira et al. (2021) indicate that valuable organizational services such as technical assistance can reinforce member loyalty. Together, these contributions imply that cooperative performance depends on combining democratic ownership with strategic management and carefully designed incentives. Collective structures need mechanisms that encourage members to contribute to shared objectives while leaders develop capabilities in markets, branding and service provision. Governance should therefore move beyond formal institutional architecture and examine how rules, incentives and strategic orientation influence actual member behavior.



Democratic control becomes economically effective when organizational arrangements reduce opportunism, reinforce reciprocity and translate member commitment into stronger competitive and productive outcomes.

Yu and Huang (2020) show that cooperative efficiency rankings change when non-economic societal outputs are incorporated into performance assessment, demonstrating that member services may reduce conventionally measured technical efficiency while generating benefits valued by members and communities. Altman (2015) reinforces this broader interpretation by arguing that cooperative ownership can combine economic growth with a more equitable distribution of income when organizational productivity is maintained. Ayoub et al. (2025) provide a complementary empirical qualification by showing that cooperative membership has a positive but relatively modest average effect on productive performance after accounting for publication bias, with substantial heterogeneity across studies. Mann and Stoinescu (2021) further demonstrate that profitability, member benefits and social capital are empirically distinct yet positively connected dimensions of cooperative success. Considered jointly, these contributions imply that cooperative performance should neither be idealized nor evaluated exclusively through investor-owned-firm criteria. Productive gains may be positive without being large, while some organizational resources are deliberately allocated toward social or member-oriented objectives that conventional efficiency measures treat as costs. Multidimensional evaluation is therefore required to determine whether cooperatives successfully balance productivity, distributive objectives, member services and social capital over time.

3. Cooperatives and Broader Socio-Economic, Inclusive and Territorial Performance

3.1. Rural Welfare, Poverty Reduction and Cooperative Development

Verhofstadt and Maertens (2015) show that agricultural cooperative membership can increase income and reduce poverty among Rwandan farmers, while also demonstrating that these effects vary considerably across categories of households. This heterogeneity implies that cooperative development should not be evaluated exclusively through average welfare gains. Ahmed and Mesfin (2017) reinforce this perspective by finding positive effects on household wellbeing after accounting for selection into membership, but they also emphasize that access to cooperatives may itself be uneven. Mojo et al. (2017) similarly identify gains in income and assets among Ethiopian coffee-cooperative members while showing that social networks influence entry and that poorer households may face weaker participation opportunities. Zou and Wang (2022) add that cooperative membership can raise average household income without generating equally strong benefits across the income distribution. Taken together, these contributions imply that cooperative expansion can support poverty reduction while still reproducing inequalities in access and benefit distribution. Rural-development policy should therefore distinguish between the effectiveness of cooperatives for existing members and their accessibility to disadvantaged households. Assessing inclusiveness requires attention to who joins, who remains excluded and whether lower-income members obtain gains comparable to those enjoyed by better-resourced participants.

Bachke (2019) demonstrates that membership in farmers' organizations can increase marketed surplus, production value and household income, particularly among households strongly dependent on agriculture. This suggests that collective organization can influence rural welfare through interconnected production and commercialization mechanisms rather than through income redistribution alone. Abdul-Rahaman and Abdulai (2018) reinforce this productive pathway by showing that farmer-group participation improves yields and technical efficiency among rice producers through better coordination and information. Borda-Rodriguez et al. (2016) add



that resilient rural cooperatives depend on combinations of member capabilities, networks, governance skills, innovation and relationships with government, indicating that sustained developmental effects require more than short-term economic gains. Teixeira et al. (2021) further show that higher member income can emerge from different configurations of governance and gender characteristics rather than from a single universally effective organizational feature. Together, these contributions imply that cooperatives contribute to rural development when collective structures strengthen productive capacity, commercialization and organizational resilience simultaneously. Policies should therefore support governance, market access, member capabilities and institutional linkages as complementary dimensions rather than treating cooperative registration or membership growth as sufficient evidence of developmental success.

Wynne-Jones (2017) shows that cooperation is continuously produced through everyday relationships, emotional attachments and interactions among members rather than guaranteed by formal organizational structures. This relational perspective implies that durable collective action depends on the capacity to reconcile individual interests with shared objectives over time. Borda-Rodriguez et al. (2016) reinforce this interpretation by demonstrating that cooperative resilience requires networks, member engagement and governance capabilities alongside innovation and institutional support. Teixeira et al. (2021) add that favorable income outcomes emerge from different combinations of organizational and social characteristics, indicating that cooperative performance is configurational rather than driven by isolated mechanisms. Mojo et al. (2017) further show that social networks influence both membership and economic outcomes, linking relational structures directly to rural welfare. Considered jointly, these contributions imply that cooperative socio-economic performance rests partly on forms of social organization that conventional financial indicators do not capture. Trust, engagement, everyday interaction and network structure can influence who participates, how collective decisions are implemented and whether members remain committed. Rural-development strategies should therefore evaluate cooperatives not only through income, production and market indicators but also through the relational capacities sustaining collective action and long-term organizational continuity.

3.2. Worker Democracy, Organizational Resilience and Social Inclusion

Billiet et al. (2021) show that cooperative characteristics such as member centrality, community embeddedness and organizational networks can strengthen resilience during major disruptions. Their findings imply that democratic governance can become an adaptive resource when organizations mobilize member relationships and stakeholder commitments rather than focusing exclusively on short-term profitability. Prushinskaya et al. (2021) reinforce this perspective by demonstrating that worker cooperatives facing COVID-19-related losses often prioritized worker safety and wellbeing, indicating that democratic ownership can alter organizational responses to crisis. Berry and Bell (2018) add that worker cooperatives may improve employment quality and worker agency in sectors characterized by precarious conditions and weak employee voice. Lambert (2017) further shows that democratic ownership changes decision rights and organizational structures without eliminating managerial differentiation or coordination requirements. Taken together, these contributions imply that cooperative resilience should be evaluated through both organizational continuity and the protection of members and workers. Democratic governance does not remove the need for effective management, but it can influence whose interests receive priority when organizations face pressure. Socio-economic performance should therefore incorporate employment quality, worker participation, safety and adaptive capacity alongside conventional indicators of financial survival.

Langmead (2016) demonstrates that democratic practices in worker cooperatives are not automatically preserved by formal ownership structures but must be continually reproduced

through organizational processes that reconcile individual autonomy with collective objectives. This interpretation is reinforced by Bretos et al. (2018), who show that international expansion can strengthen managerial control and weaken direct employee participation when cooperative governance is not reproduced across foreign subsidiaries. Palmer (2019) adds that worker cooperatives are economically viable across diverse sectors while generally remaining relatively small, highlighting the challenge of expanding scale without weakening democratic characteristics. Billiet et al. (2021) further indicate that member-centered governance and community relationships can themselves support organizational adaptability. Together, these contributions imply that growth and democracy should not be treated as automatically compatible or inherently contradictory. The central issue concerns the governance arrangements through which expansion is organized. Worker cooperatives can preserve democratic identity as they develop, but doing so requires deliberate institutional mechanisms that maintain meaningful participation despite increasing organizational complexity. Scaling strategies should therefore be assessed not only according to revenue, employment or geographical expansion but also according to whether decision-making rights, worker voice and member-oriented priorities remain substantively protected.

El Hamidi et al. (2021) show that institutional trust, perceived institutional quality and favorable regulation can strengthen intentions to formalize among Moroccan informal economic actors, providing relevant contextual evidence on the institutional conditions surrounding entry into recognized economic structures. This should not be interpreted as direct evidence on cooperative governance, but it suggests that collective enterprises may also depend on credible institutions for legitimacy and sustainable participation. El Hamidi (2023) similarly provides contextual evidence that perceived quality, certification, packaging and marketing influence purchase intentions toward regional products in Marrakech-Safi, indicating the importance of territorial valorization and market recognition for local producers. Palmer (2019) complements this market-oriented perspective by showing that democratic worker enterprises can achieve economic viability despite continuing limitations of scale. Bretos et al. (2018) further demonstrate that economic expansion can create governance tensions when competitive growth is not accompanied by democratic replication. Considered jointly, these contributions imply that cooperative development occurs within broader institutional and territorial environments. Formal recognition, market access and regional differentiation may support economic viability, but cooperative expansion remains distinctive only when such external opportunities are combined with internal mechanisms preserving democratic ownership and meaningful member participation.

3.3. Energy, Environmental and Territorial Transitions

Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. (2018) show that renewable-energy cooperatives can provide citizen-oriented alternatives within electricity markets dominated by large incumbent firms by allowing consumers to become collective producers and organizational participants. Their findings imply that cooperative governance can contribute simultaneously to market participation, environmental objectives and community mobilization. Brummer (2018) nevertheless demonstrates that formal democratic rules do not always determine actual influence, since expertise, social capital and organizational growth can shift decision-making power toward more specialized actors. Capellán-Pérez et al. (2018) reinforce the importance of institutional conditions by showing that participatory ownership arrangements can support energy transition while unfavorable regulation constrains expansion. Hentschel et al. (2018) further demonstrate that cooperative models can be adapted to complex industrial settings where collective ownership may help coordinate stakeholders and mobilize investment. Taken together, these contributions im-



ply that democratic energy cooperatives possess substantial transformative potential but require governance arrangements capable of preserving member influence as technical and organizational complexity increases. Their contribution to sustainability therefore depends not only on renewable-energy production but also on whether participation, collective investment and decision-making remain substantively embedded within organizational development.

Schmid et al. (2020) demonstrate that renewable-energy cooperatives achieve greater territorial influence when they establish strong relationships with municipalities and operate within supportive institutional environments. Local autonomy, access to resources and national policy frameworks therefore shape the capacity of citizen organizations to contribute to energy transition. Wagemans et al. (2019) reinforce this relational perspective by showing that local cooperatives can mobilize residents, mediate between communities and governments, provide context-specific expertise and increase the social acceptance of sustainability initiatives. Tosun et al. (2019) extend this role beyond local project implementation by demonstrating that energy cooperatives can participate directly in wider governance processes and represent citizen interests in energy policy. Capellán-Pérez et al. (2018) further show that regulatory arrangements can either enable or restrict the expansion of cooperative energy initiatives. Together, these contributions imply that the socio-economic performance of energy cooperatives cannot be understood independently from public governance. Democratic organizations become more influential when municipalities and higher-level institutions recognize them as legitimate partners rather than treating them solely as market actors. Supportive policy frameworks can therefore strengthen both cooperative viability and the territorial legitimacy of energy transitions by integrating citizen participation with public decision-making.

Hoppe et al. (2019) show that participation in renewable-energy cooperatives can contribute to household energy-saving behavior, although the additional effect of cooperative membership remains relatively modest. This result suggests that democratic participation may influence environmental practices beyond the direct purchase or production of renewable electricity, while cautioning against attributing broader behavioral change exclusively to cooperative membership. Wagemans et al. (2019) complement this perspective by showing that cooperatives can promote socially accepted change through citizen mobilization and locally embedded governance. Tosun et al. (2019) further demonstrate that cooperative participation can extend from internal decision-making toward engagement in broader public-policy processes, while Schmid et al. (2020) show that strong municipal relationships can reinforce territorial influence. Considered jointly, these contributions imply that renewable-energy cooperatives generate value through several interconnected channels: energy production, citizen participation, behavioral change and institutional mediation. Their performance should therefore be assessed through economic, democratic, environmental and territorial outcomes rather than through electricity generation alone. Cooperative energy initiatives become more significant when internal participation is connected with community engagement and external governance relationships capable of embedding sustainability objectives within wider territorial transformation.

4. Discussion

The literature first suggests that democratic governance contributes to cooperative performance when participation is substantive rather than exclusively procedural. Liu et al. (2024) associate member participation with greater satisfaction, while Kinikli and Yercan (2023) emphasize the role of organizational trust in encouraging participation and strengthening legitimacy. Liang et al. (2015) similarly connect social capital, participation and cooperative performance. These findings indicate that democratic institutions can produce organizational benefits by improving information circulation, member commitment and collective coordination. However, such relationships should not be interpreted as mechanically positive. Huang et al. (2015)

show that participation indicators do not necessarily generate statistically significant improvements in economic performance, while Pek (2023) observes that large cooperatives may preserve formal democratic procedures despite declining member engagement. Governance must therefore be evaluated through several outcomes rather than through profitability alone. This interpretation is consistent with Guzmán et al. (2020), who show that cooperative principles may contribute to performance directly and through entrepreneurial orientation, and with Michaud and Audebrand (2022), who emphasize continuing tensions between collective ownership, democracy, economic efficiency and social objectives. Democratic governance consequently appears most effective when institutional participation is supported by trust, organizational capabilities and mechanisms ensuring that different categories of members can meaningfully influence collective decisions.

A second result concerns the relationship between cooperative governance and economic performance. Evidence indicates that democratic ownership is compatible with productive and financial efficiency when organizations possess sufficient managerial capacity. Favalli et al. (2020) find that representativeness, participation, strategic leadership, management and supervision contribute jointly to financial efficiency in credit unions, while Mäkinen and Jones (2015) demonstrate that cooperative banks can achieve favorable efficiency outcomes relative to alternative banking structures. Gezahegn et al. (2020) likewise show that community-initiated agricultural cooperatives can perform efficiently while benefiting from professional arrangements such as paid employees and compensated committee members. These results suggest that democracy and professionalization should be treated as complementary rather than opposing principles. At the member level, Ma and Abdulai (2016), Chagwiza et al. (2016) and Wossen et al. (2017) provide evidence linking cooperative membership with improvements in yields, commercialization, technological adoption, assets or household welfare. Nevertheless, the magnitude and timing of these effects differ considerably. Ofori et al. (2019) show that access to credit, information and technology may improve before measurable income effects emerge, while Ayoub et al. (2025) identify a positive but relatively modest average productive effect across the broader empirical literature. Cooperative economic performance is therefore conditional, multidimensional and dependent on organizational as well as member-level mechanisms.

The third implication is that cooperative performance extends beyond internal organizational efficiency to broader questions of inclusion, resilience and territorial development. Verhofstadt and Maertens (2015), Ahmed and Mesfin (2017) and Mojo et al. (2017) show that cooperative membership can improve income, assets and household wellbeing, although access and benefits remain uneven across rural populations. This qualification is important because average positive effects do not establish that cooperative development is automatically inclusive. Organizational resilience presents a similar pattern. Billiet et al. (2021) associate member centrality, community embeddedness and organizational networks with greater resilience, whereas Prushinskaya et al. (2021) demonstrate that worker cooperatives often prioritized worker safety and wellbeing during the COVID-19 crisis. Cooperative governance may therefore influence not only organizational survival but also whose interests are protected during periods of disruption. Research on renewable-energy cooperatives extends this reasoning to territorial and environmental outcomes. Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. (2018), Schmid et al. (2020), Wagemans et al. (2019) and Tosun et al. (2019) show how citizen participation, municipal relationships and public governance can reinforce local energy transitions. These studies collectively indicate that the socio-economic contribution of cooperatives emerges through interactions between internal democratic structures and broader institutional, social and territorial environments.

Conclusion



This paper shows that democratic governance and socio-economic performance in cooperatives are closely related but that their relationship cannot be represented through a simple causal assumption. Member participation, representative boards, cooperative principles, trust and social capital can improve accountability, commitment and collective coordination. However, their effects depend on organizational scale, member heterogeneity, leadership capacity and the quality of managerial arrangements. The literature consequently rejects both the assumption that democratic governance necessarily reduces efficiency and the opposite assumption that greater participation automatically improves organizational performance. Cooperative institutions appear to perform more effectively when democratic mechanisms are combined with professional management, appropriate incentives and sufficient organizational capabilities. Moreover, conventional financial indicators capture only part of cooperative performance. Studies examining agricultural and financial cooperatives demonstrate the importance of productive efficiency and financial viability, while research on member welfare emphasizes income, market access, technological adoption and reduced uncertainty. Worker cooperatives additionally draw attention to employment quality, participation and resilience. These results support an integrated approach in which the economic performance of cooperatives is assessed together with the benefits generated for their members and the institutional characteristics through which those benefits are produced.

The broader implication is that cooperative performance should be evaluated through a multi-dimensional framework capable of incorporating economic, democratic, social and territorial outcomes. Cooperative success cannot be established solely through profitability, productivity or organizational growth if these achievements are accompanied by declining member participation or concentration of decision-making power. Conversely, strong democratic procedures cannot compensate indefinitely for weak financial viability or inadequate organizational capacity. Sustainable cooperative development therefore requires an institutional balance between member control and managerial effectiveness. Public policies can contribute to this balance by supporting training, access to finance, organizational professionalization, cooperative networks and institutional environments that preserve meaningful member participation. Particular attention should also be given to inequalities in membership access and benefit distribution because evidence shows that cooperative gains are not necessarily shared uniformly among households or members. Finally, experiences in renewable energy and territorial development demonstrate that cooperatives can operate as intermediaries between citizens, markets and public institutions. Their socio-economic contribution consequently extends beyond the organization itself, provided that economic expansion and professionalization remain compatible with democratic accountability, collective ownership and substantive member participation.

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