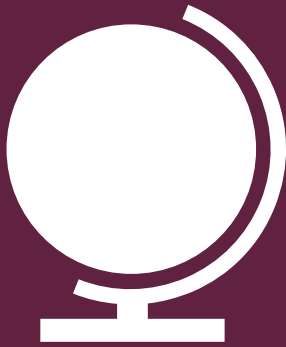




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Centre of Excellence in
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International Journal of

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Vol. 9 No. 1

Letter from the Editors	2
Editorial Board	3
Organisation Development for Cooperatives' Alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals	4
<i>Luis Camilo Oyarzún, Christopher J. Rees</i>	
Systematic Review of Cooperative Contributions to Global Food Security	17
<i>Karen Q. Custodio, Maria Theresa M. Castro</i>	
Indigenous Co-operatives in Australia: History and Role in Self-Determination	35
<i>Thomas Levick, Dr Sidsel Grimstad, Dr Liam Phelan, and Dr Branka Krivokapic-Skoko</i>	
Applying Adult Learning Theory to Strengthen Co-operative Education in the Workplace	57
<i>Nicole McKeag</i>	

Letter from the Editors

IN THIS ISSUE OF IJCAM we are pleased to feature four thought-provoking papers that explore the diverse ways co-operatives contribute to sustainable development, food security, Indigenous self-determination, and workplace learning.

We begin with "Organisation Development for Cooperatives' Alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals", by Luis Camilo Oyarzún (Global Development Institute, University of Manchester, UK), Christopher J. Rees (Global Development Institute, University of Manchester, UK), and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Their paper examines how organisation development can support co-operatives in aligning their practices with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The second paper continues the sustainability theme through the lens of food systems. In "Systematic Review of Cooperative Contributions to Global Food Security," Karen Q. Custodio and Maria Theresa M. Castro, both from the Institute of Cooperatives and Bio-Enterprise Development, College of Economics and Management, University of the Philippines Los Baños, present a comprehensive review of the important role co-operatives play in advancing global food security.

Our third paper, "Indigenous Co-operatives in Australia: History and Role in Self-Determination," brings together Thomas Levick, Dr Sidsel Grimstad, Dr Liam Phelan,

and Dr Branka Krivokapic-Skoko. Drawing on expertise from leading Australian institutions, the authors examine the historical development of Indigenous co-operatives and their continuing significance in supporting Indigenous self-determination and community empowerment.

The fourth paper, "Applying Adult Learning Theory to Strengthen Co-operative Education in the Workplace," is written by Nicole McKeag, a recent graduate of the Master of Management in Co-operatives and Credit Unions (MMCCU) program. Her paper explores how adult learning theory can enhance workplace education and strengthen learning within co-operative organizations.

Call for Papers

General Call for papers on co-operative accounting and management topics.

- Submissions accepted on a continual basis.

Papers related to management topics should be submitted to Peter Davis: dissentingvoice1947@gmail.com and those focusing on accounting and reporting should be submitted to Daphne Rixon: daphne.rixon@smu.ca.

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Organisation Development for Cooperatives' Alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals

Luis Camilo Oyarzún, Global Development Institute, University of Manchester, UK

Christopher J. Rees, Global Development Institute, University of Manchester, and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

Abstract: Cooperatives are value-driven organisations whose principles strongly resonate with the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Nevertheless, a persistent gap remains between the values cooperatives promote and the ways sustainability is articulated and enacted in practice. This paper examines how value alignment between cooperatives and the SDGs can be better understood through the lens of Organisation Development (OD), a humanistic and systemic approach to organisational change. The paper develops a conceptual alignment model that integrates OD values, cooperative principles and SDG themes, proposing OD as a theoretically grounded framework for supporting cooperatives in embedding sustainability within their organisational identity. To illustrate the relevance of this model, a qualitative review of mission, vision and values statements from 100 Chilean cooperatives is presented. The analysis reveals limited and uneven references to cooperative principles and sustainability, highlighting the persistence of a values-practice gap. These illustrative findings underscore the need for intentional value alignment processes and demonstrate the conceptual relevance of OD for cooperatives seeking to engage more meaningfully with the 2030 Agenda. The paper contributes by refining the OD values framework, proposing an integrated model of OD-cooperative-SDG alignment, and identifying opportunities for OD-informed approaches to strengthen sustainability integration in cooperative organisations.

Luis Camilo Oyarzún Ibarra is a PhD candidate in Development Policy and Management at the Global Development Institute, University of Manchester. His work focuses on cooperatives, organisation development, and their contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals. Currently, he is leading the development of the Cooperatives' Observatory of Sustainability in Chile.

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Keywords: cooperatives, sustainable development goals, SDGs, organisation development, OD.

1. Introduction

In 2015, during the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, 193 member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, often described as one of the most comprehensive global political efforts in the history of sustainability governance (Eisenmenger et al., 2020). The agenda is structured around 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, seeking to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, social justice, and environmental protection by 2030 (Meier, 2023; UNGA, 2024).

The implementation of this agenda depends not only on governments and international institutions but also on the active engagement of organisations whose strategies, governance, and everyday practices shape development outcomes. Literature increasingly shows that many organisations explicitly mention SDGs in their reports and public communications while offering limited evidence of concrete strategies, indicators, or governance mechanisms to

support them (Ferrero-Ferrero et al., 2023; Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2022; Scott & McGill, 2018). This suggests the existence of a values-practice gap in sustainability: organisations may symbolically adopt SDG language without fully integrating sustainability into their business models, decision-making processes, or accountability systems.

Within this broader landscape, cooperatives represent a distinctive organisational form whose principles and values are strongly aligned with many SDG themes, including democracy, equity, decent work, and community development (Bhowmik, 2021; Fernandez-Guadagno et al., 2020; García-Parejo et al., 2023; Lafont et al., 2023). Their member-owned structure and historical concern for community position them as potentially powerful actors in advancing the 2030 Agenda (Moxom & Dave, 2019). However, recent research also suggests that cooperatives may experience tensions between promoted values and organisational practices, particularly when navigating market pressures, policy incentives, and resource constraints (Díaz de León et al., 2021; Godfrey et al., 2017). Understanding how cooperatives articulate and enact sustainability is therefore crucial for assessing their contribution to the SDGs.

Organisation Development (OD) offers a useful lens for examining these questions. OD is commonly defined as a planned, systemic, and values-driven approach to organisational change that seeks to enhance both organisational effectiveness and the quality of working life (Burke, 2022; Cheung-Judge & Holbeche, 2015). Rooted in humanistic and democratic values, OD emphasises value alignment, participation, learning, and evidence-based interventions (Burke & Noumair, 2015; Yoon et al., 2021). These characteristics make OD particularly relevant for organisations that aspire to integrate sustainability and the SDGs into their identity and strategy yet face ongoing challenges in translating broad commitments into coherent practices.

The purpose of this paper is therefore twofold. First, it develops a conceptual framework that integrates OD values, cooperative principles, and the SDGs, thus proposing OD as a theoretically grounded approach for strengthening value alignment within cooperatives. Second, drawing on an illustrative qualitative review of mission, vision, and values statements from 100 Chilean cooperatives, the paper examines the extent to which public-facing cooperative discourse reflects alignment with SDG-related themes. The empirical component serves as an illustrative case that reveals the kinds of value-practice gaps that are conceptually significant for the OD framework developed in this paper.

The paper contributes to both cooperative studies and OD scholarship in three ways: (1) Conceptually, it updates and synthesises OD values and highlights their relevance for SDG-oriented organisational change. (2) Empirically, it documents how cooperatives present sustainability and cooperative identity in their mission, vision, and values statements, revealing patterns of limited or partial alignment with the SDGs. (3) Practically, it introduces an OD-informed alignment model that connects OD values, cooperative principles, and the SDGs, offering a starting point for cooperatives and OD practitioners who seek to embed the 2030 Agenda into organisational purpose, governance, and strategy.

To contextualise these issues, the following section examines the SDGs and their relationship to organisational values and sustainability practices, with particular attention to cooperatives.

2. Cooperatives, Values and Sustainability

The 2030 Agenda structures its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into five broad pillars: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnerships. These pillars are intended to guide organisations in articulating development pathways that integrate social, environmental and economic concerns (Ferrero-Ferrero et al., 2023; Morton et al., 2017). This guiding structure enables organisations to connect their internal values with their strategic commitments to sustainable development.

2.1 *The SDGs and the role of organisations*

Although organisations worldwide are increasingly referencing the SDGs, research suggests that their actual integration remains inconsistent and often quite shallow. Studies reveal that many organisations use SDG terminology symbolically, especially in mission and sustainability reports, without embedding these goals in operational strategies, internal processes or measurement frameworks (Ferrero-Ferrero et al., 2023; Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2022; Scott & McGill, 2018). Such findings reinforce concerns that organisations may be engaging

in SDG washing, that is, adopting the language of sustainability without aligning their practices to the values underlying the 2030 Agenda.

At the same time, several authors highlight structural challenges that constrain progress towards the 2030 Agenda. The COVID-19 pandemic has widened inequalities and disrupted financing flows, particularly in countries already facing high poverty rates (Saxena et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2021; Song & Jang, 2023). Others point to tensions between the Agenda's emphasis on economic growth and the need to reduce material resource use, as well as to the voluntary, non-binding character of the SDGs and the complexity created by their numerous targets and indicators (Eisenmenger et al., 2020; Li, 2023; Morton et al., 2017; Spangenberg, 2017). These concerns underline the importance of governance arrangements and organisational capabilities that can translate broad global goals into context-sensitive strategies.

2.2 Cooperativism and its link with SDGs

Cooperatives operate on a value-based framework governed by principles such as democracy, equity, solidarity, and community concern (ICA, 2024). These guiding principles closely align with several SDG themes, positioning cooperatives as organizational structures capable of integrating sustainability into economic and social practices (Alarcón & Álvarez, 2020; Bhowmik, 2021; Ghauri et al., 2022; Lafont et al., 2023). Consequently, cooperatives are well-placed to contribute significantly to the advancement of these objectives at local, national, and global levels (Moxom & Dave, 2019).

Nevertheless, the relationship between cooperatives and the SDGs is not inherent. Studies show that cooperatives vary in how they enact their principles and articulate their social purpose. Some adopt cooperative forms opportunistically, responding to external incentives rather than internalised values (Godfrey et al., 2017). Other studies show that cooperatives tend to contribute to specific SDGs depending on their sector and member priorities (Díaz de León et al., 2021; González & Alonso, 2022; Martinez-Leon et al., 2020).

Several studies have attempted to connect cooperative principles with specific SDGs across diverse contexts. For example, research in India's handloom weaving sector, Colombian cooperatives, Nova Scotian cooperative networks and Andalusia's olive oil cooperatives all identify relationships between particular cooperative principles and selected SDGs, most commonly those related to poverty reduction, gender equality, decent work, responsible production and community development (Bhowmik, 2021; Díaz de León et al., 2021; González & Alonso, 2022; Shen et al., 2019). Although these studies illustrate the potential for cooperatives to contribute to the SDGs, their findings tend to be sector-specific and fragmented, which limits the development of a more holistic framework for assessing alignment. Bibliometric work by Lafont et al. (2023) suggests that different cooperative types collectively contribute to all 17 SDGs, but their findings also reinforce the need to better understand how these contributions are distributed across sectors and organisational models.

These literature-driven contributions make possible a clearer connection between the actions of cooperatives, guided by their values and principles, and the accomplishment of the SDGs. At the same time, they point to the need for mechanisms capable of assessing whether cooperatives' stated values and missions translate into sustainability-oriented practices. Analysing mission statements and organisational narratives provides one way of exploring how cooperatives represent their purpose and identity in relation to sustainable development (Shen et al., 2019). Yet these analyses often reveal gaps between promoted values and actual practice, which reinforces the need for tools that can support cooperatives in aligning their identity and strategies with the SDGs.

Given these challenges, evaluating cooperatives' alignment with the SDGs requires understanding how values are embedded in organisational culture and daily practice. This provides a foundation for considering Organisation Development (OD) as a framework that can assist cooperatives in addressing value alignment challenges and translating their principles into sustainable development outcomes. Building on these insights, the next section examines OD as a values-driven approach that offers conceptual and practical tools for strengthening coherence between cooperative identity, organisational practice and the SDGs.

3. Organisation Development and Cooperatives

Having established the conceptual connections and challenges linking cooperatives and the SDGs, it becomes necessary to consider frameworks that can support value-driven organisational change. Organisation Development (OD) offers one such framework. OD is grounded in humanistic and democratic values and provides tools for aligning organisational identity, practices and strategy with broader social purposes. As Rogers and Hudson (2011) argue, sustainability requires changes in thinking and practice at every level of the organisation, drawing on shared experiences and collective learning.

OD's foundations help address the values-practice gaps noted in the previous section by emphasising planned, systemic and participatory approaches to organisational change. The approach is built on the premise that organisational sustainability requires coordination across the economic, social and environmental dimensions of performance. It is therefore useful for supporting cooperatives wishing to integrate the SDGs into their principles, values, business models and management practices.

One of the earliest conceptualisations underpinning OD is the triple bottom line framework (Elkington and Rowlands, 1999), which proposes that sustainable performance depends on balancing environmental, economic and social considerations (Keller, 2012; Laszlo & Castro, 2011; Rogers & Hudson, 2011; Sala, 2020). The environmental dimension draws attention to resource limits and ecological resilience. The economic dimension highlights the importance of preserving natural, social and financial capital. The social dimension focuses on equity and the cultivation of socially responsible behaviour within and beyond organisations. This framework reinforces the idea that sustainability requires multi-level integration across organisational systems.

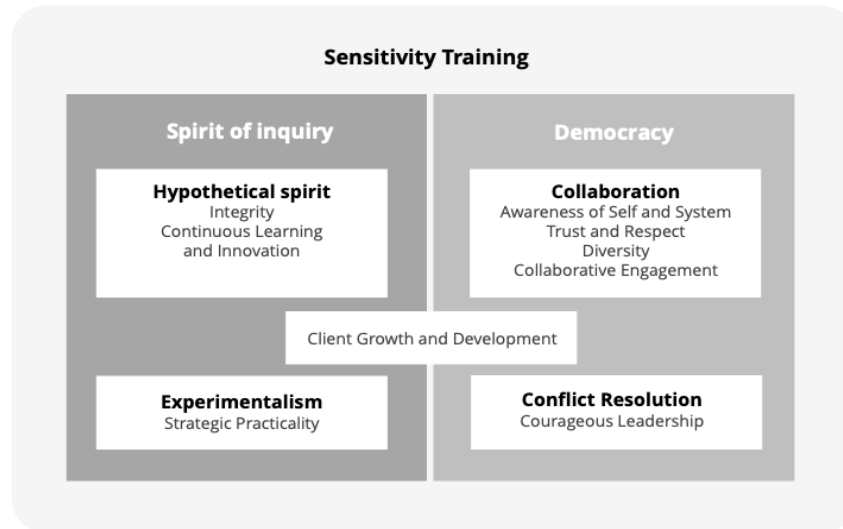
Some may argue that existing approaches such as Human Resources Management (HRM), Total Quality Management (TQM), business process re-engineering or lean production could also be used to integrate sustainability in organisations. However, these models have often prioritised efficiency, cost reduction and shareholder value at the expense of humanistic considerations (Foster, 2013). Scholars of HRM highlight tensions between organisational efficiency and care for employees, noting that many HR practices are shaped by performance-oriented logics rather than underlying values (Foote, 2001; Holden & Napier, 2013; HRM, 2024; Mariappanadar, 2012; Rees, 2026; Valecha, 2022). This limits their suitability for addressing sustainability as a values-driven endeavour. In contrast, OD offers a more holistic and balanced approach, integrating economic and social dimensions and emphasising organisational learning, participation and long-term development (Mohd Shukree et al., 2023).

OD is commonly defined as a planned change process that encompasses the organisation as a whole, placing particular emphasis on culture and leadership (Burke, 2022). Its core purpose is twofold: first to assist leaders in addressing specific organisational needs for change and second to increase member participation in decisions that affect their work. Built on a long tradition of applied and values-driven interventions, OD draws on multiple theories and approaches that support sustained organisational transformation (Burke & Noumair, 2015; Cheung-Judge & Holbeche, 2015; Kwon & Kwon, 2023). These foundations are reflected in OD's core values, which emphasise inquiry, collaboration and democratic participation as mechanisms for strengthening organisational culture and decision-making. Drawing on the legacy of sensitivity training, Burke (2015) identifies four central values that characterise OD practice: the hypothetical spirit (ongoing questioning and testing of assumptions), experimentalism (learning through action), collaboration (participatory approaches to change) and conflict resolution (constructive engagement with differences). Complementing these, Yoon et al. (2021) identify nine contemporary OD values: awareness of self and system, continuous learning and innovation, integrity, courageous leadership, trust and respect, diversity, collaborative engagement, strategic practicality and client growth and development. Together, these values express a coherent and humanistic orientation that remains foundational to OD work.

Integrating these perspectives allows for a holistic view of how OD values interact in practice. The model presented in Figure 1 synthesises Burke's foundational values with the more recent values identified by Yoon et al. (2021), showing how core humanistic principles provide the basis for contemporary organisational development priorities. This integrated framework highlights the continuity of key themes in OD, including learning, participation, integrity

and systemic awareness, and provides a foundation for analysing how OD can support cooperatives in aligning their principles and practices with the SDGs.

Figure 1. Proposal of OD Values Framework



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Burke (2015); Yoon et al. (2021)

Value alignment has long been recognised as central to organisational change. Burnes and Jackson (2011) argue that successful change depends on the alignment of three elements: the individuals involved in the intervention, the objective guiding the intervention and the approach used to enact it. Barrett (2017) expands this perspective by identifying four conditions necessary for cultural change: personal alignment, where individuals' behaviours are consistent with their values; structural alignment, where organisational policies and procedures reflect stated values; values alignment, where employees' personal values resonate with organisational values; and mission alignment, where individuals experience coherence between their sense of purpose and their roles. This aligns closely with the challenges identified in the previous section, where cooperatives may express strong value commitments yet struggle to embed them systematically across organisational structures and practices.

As noted in earlier sections, cooperatives often articulate strong normative commitments, yet their practices may not always reflect these values consistently. Building on the OD values framework, the alignment between OD values, cooperative principles and cooperative values can be mapped by identifying shared themes and underlying intentions (see Table 1). This mapping underscores the conceptual compatibility between OD and cooperative identity, positioning OD as a suitable framework for supporting cooperatives in integrating the SDGs into their organisational practices. As Trottier and Chinoperekweyi (2022) observe, organisations today must pursue social and ecological purpose alongside economic goals, a balance that OD is well equipped to support.

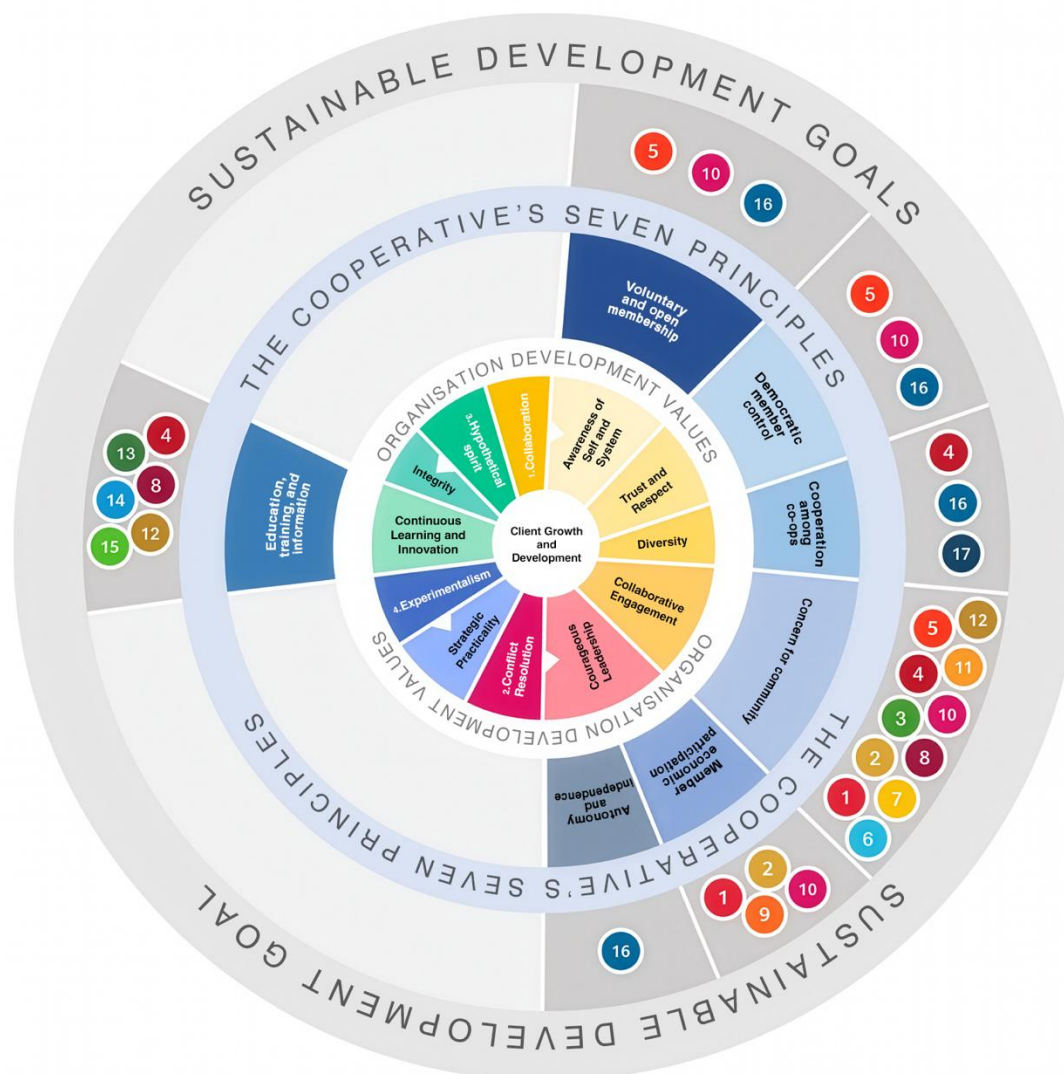
Table 1. OD values and Cooperatives principles & values alignment.

	OD Values	Co-ops Seven Principles	Co-ops Values
Spirit of Inquiry	Hypothetical spirit		
	Integrity		
	Continuous Learning and Innovation	Education, training, and information	
	Experimentalism		
	Strategic Practicality		
	Client Growth and Development*		
Democracy	Collaboration		
	Awareness of Self and System	Voluntary and open membership	Self-help and self-responsibility
	Trust and Respect	Democratic member control	Democracy
	Diversity	Cooperation among co-operatives	Equality and equity
	Collaborative Engagement	Concern for community	Solidarity
	Conflict Resolution		
	Courageous Leadership	Member economic participation Autonomy and independence	

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Burke (2015); Yoon et al. (2021)

Figure 2 illustrates the relationships between OD values, cooperative principles and SDG commitments. At the centre of the model is organisational growth and development, a core aspect of OD that connects and informs the other values. The overlap among the different value sets reflects the complexity and interconnected nature of organisational change, emphasising that no single value operates in isolation. The SDGs are positioned within the model according to the primary value themes they relate to, including human development, organisational learning, democratic participation and community well-being. The model suggests that a comprehensive understanding of these values is necessary for cooperatives to implement the SDGs effectively.

Figure 2. OD Values, Cooperatives Principles and SDG alignment



Source: Authors' elaboration based on De la Casa (2021); Yoon et al. (2021); Shen et al. (2019); Burke (2015)

However, conceptual alignment between OD, cooperative values and SDGs does not guarantee that cooperatives will consistently embody these values in practice. As discussed previously, some cooperatives may adopt cooperative status opportunistically or face pressures that lead to value dilution (Godfrey et al., 2017). In such cases, organisational sustainability values must be cultivated at all levels in order to meaningfully engage with new initiatives and development objectives (Vargas-Hernández, 2021). OD can therefore serve not only as a framework for supporting cooperatives in intentionally engaging with the SDGs but also as a means of helping cooperatives realign with their foundational values when these have been weakened by external or internal pressures.

If cooperatives aim to integrate the SDGs into their mission, vision and strategic practices, the values alignment framework developed here offers a useful guide for designing and implementing effective OD interventions. The following section examines these issues empirically through a qualitative review of mission, vision and values statements from 100 Chilean cooperatives, based on Shen et al.'s (2019) approach.

4. Illustrative Analysis: Insights from 100 Chilean Cooperatives

To illustrate the types of value-practice gaps discussed in the previous sections, an exploratory qualitative review was conducted of mission, vision and values statements from 100 Chilean cooperatives. The purpose of this analysis is illustrative rather than comprehensive: it examines how cooperatives publicly communicate their organisational identity and whether their self-descriptions reflect alignment with cooperative principles and sustainability themes associated with the SDGs.

4.1 Approach

Cooperatives with publicly accessible websites were identified through the official Chilean Cooperative Registry. Mission, vision and values statements were extracted and coded thematically with NVivo, focusing on explicit and implicit references to cooperative principles, sustainability and SDG-related themes. This approach captures how cooperatives position themselves through their public discourse. Because the analysis draws only on website statements, the findings speak to discursive commitments rather than internal operational practices.

4.2 Key Patterns in SDG-Related Discourse

A striking initial observation was that none of the 100 cooperatives made explicit reference to the SDGs or the 2030 Agenda in their mission, vision or values statements. This mirrors broader international trends in which organisations symbolically engage with sustainability while overlooking specific targets or governance mechanisms.

When implicit themes linked to individual SDGs were examined, just over half of the cooperatives (61 percent) referenced at least one SDG-related theme. These references tended to cluster around goals such as good health and wellbeing, responsible consumption and production, and poverty reduction. However, the depth of these references was limited: most statements mentioned broad aspirations, such as community wellbeing or environmental care, without specifying actions, indicators or strategic commitments. Only one third of the cooperatives explicitly mentioned any aspect of sustainability at all, and such mentions were typically general rather than connected to recognised sustainability frameworks.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that while some cooperatives articulate concerns that overlap with SDG themes, sustainability is not consistently integrated into their organisational identity or public narrative.

4.3 Representation of Cooperative Principles

A similar pattern emerged regarding the seven cooperative principles. Only around one third of cooperatives referenced any principle in their public statements, and explicit mention of the term “cooperative principles” appeared only once. References tended to focus on principles that are most visible in members’ daily experiences, such as education and training, cooperation among cooperatives and concern for community. By contrast, principles related to governance or economic participation were largely absent, likely because these operate mostly through internal structures rather than external communication.

These findings suggest a fragmented representation of cooperative identity, where some values are foregrounded rhetorically while others remain implicit or unarticulated. This uneven representation raises questions about whether all cooperative principles are consistently embedded in organisational culture and practice.

4.4 Interpretation

Across both sustainability and cooperative identity, the findings reveal notable gaps between the theoretical alignment established in the literature and the values communicated by cooperatives themselves. The absence of explicit SDG references, the limited depth of sustainability discourse and the partial representation of cooperative principles all point to a broader issue: cooperatives may express value-laden intentions yet struggle to articulate or operationalise these commitments coherently.

These patterns echo previous research indicating that cooperatives can drift from their foundational identity under market pressures or policy incentives. They also reinforce the argument developed in earlier sections: value

alignment is neither automatic nor guaranteed, even within organisational forms that are structurally predisposed toward social purpose.

Importantly, these findings do not reflect deficiencies unique to cooperatives but illustrate the kinds of value-practice gaps that the OD-cooperative-SDG alignment framework is designed to address. By revealing inconsistencies in how cooperatives articulate purpose, identity and sustainability, the illustrative analysis underscores the relevance of OD as a mechanism for supporting more intentional value alignment and for strengthening the integration of the SDGs into cooperative strategy and practice.

5. Discussion

Taken together, the illustrative results confirm the persistence of a values–practice gap in how cooperatives publicly communicate their identity and commitments. Although the literature highlights substantial theoretical alignment between cooperative principles and the SDGs (Bhowmik, 2021; Fernandez-Guadaño et al., 2020; García-Parejo et al., 2023; Lafont et al., 2023; Shen et al., 2019), such alignment is meaningful only when it is enacted in organisational practices and embedded in daily activities. Without this translation from principle to practice, cooperatives are unlikely to generate significant contributions to the 2030 Agenda.

The absence of explicit SDG references in all 100 mission, vision and values statements examined reflects this misalignment. This pattern mirrors broader findings showing that organisations often engage superficially with global sustainability agendas (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2022). Several explanations may account for this absence. Some statements may have been formulated prior to the launch of the SDGs in 2015, which would make their omission structurally understandable. Others may reflect a lack of awareness or clarity about the SDGs among cooperative leaders. A third explanation, suggested by the literature on cooperative identity, is that some cooperatives may be experiencing a drift from their foundational principles. These possibilities are not mutually exclusive and collectively highlight a broader challenge of embedding sustainability into organisational identity.

Implicit SDG-related themes were present in some statements, but unevenly and with limited depth. Only 61 percent of cooperatives referenced at least one SDG-related theme, and only one third mentioned sustainability explicitly. This suggests that sustainability remains peripheral rather than central to how cooperatives narrate their purpose. A similar pattern emerged with respect to cooperative principles. Only a minority referenced them directly, and foundational principles such as voluntary membership or member economic participation were rarely mentioned. This may reflect the internal nature of these principles: they structure governance and economic participation but are less visible in daily interactions or external communication. By contrast, principles such as concern for community or cooperation among cooperatives were mentioned more frequently because they are part of outward-facing identity work. This uneven representation indicates that some cooperative values are more readily articulated than others.

These patterns illustrate the central challenge addressed by the OD-Cooperative-SDG alignment model developed earlier in this paper. The model is premised on the idea that alignment between organisational values, identity and practice is neither automatic nor guaranteed, even in organisations founded on strong normative commitments. The illustrative findings show how cooperatives may express broad aspirations related to community or wellbeing yet struggle to articulate or operationalise these values in ways that align with cooperative principles or the SDGs. They also demonstrate how gaps in public discourse can signal deeper issues related to organisational culture, leadership coherence and strategic direction.

Rather than interpreting these gaps as deficiencies, we argue that they point to opportunities for intentional organisational development. OD provides tools for diagnosing and strengthening value alignment, facilitating reflective dialogue, redesigning structures and supporting leadership practices that reinforce sustainability-oriented identity. In this sense, the empirical illustration does not aim to generalise beyond the sample but to demonstrate the types of misalignments that OD interventions are equipped to address. The findings therefore reinforce the conceptual model by showing why value alignment is necessary and why OD offers a suitable framework for supporting cooperatives seeking to integrate the SDGs more meaningfully into their mission, governance and practice.

6. Conclusions

6.1 Cooperatives, SDGs and OD Alignment

This paper set out to examine how cooperatives can strengthen their contribution to the 2030 Agenda by aligning their identity, practices and values with the SDGs. Prior research has emphasised both the global relevance of the SDGs (Eisenmenger et al., 2020; Ghauri et al., 2022; Helfaya & Bui, 2022; Meier, 2023; UNGA, 2024; Wymer, 2023) and the participatory ethos underlying their formulation (Shulla et al., 2021). Scholars consistently highlight that organisational engagement is essential for achieving the SDGs, and that leadership commitment and value alignment are key determinants of meaningful implementation.

Cooperatives have long been recognised as value-driven organisations grounded in democratic governance, solidarity and concern for community (Fernandez-Guadagno et al., 2020; Miribung, 2020; Moxom & Dave, 2019; Ratner, 2013; Woodin, 2023). These characteristics suggest a strong conceptual resonance with the SDGs and position cooperatives as important actors in advancing sustainable development locally and globally (Alarcón & Álvarez, 2020; Bhowmik, 2021; Lafont et al., 2023; Shen et al., 2019). However, despite multiple scholarly attempts to link cooperative principles with the SDGs, there remains no widely adopted framework to guide cooperatives in assessing or planning their contributions.

This study argues that OD provides a compelling theoretical and practical foundation for addressing this gap. OD is a values-driven, participatory and systemic approach to organisational change, and its core values closely align with the normative foundations of cooperativism and the SDGs (Chinoperekweyi & Trottier, 2022; Foster, 2013; Lawler, 2017; Mohd Shukree et al., 2023). By highlighting the congruence between these three domains, we propose that OD offers a promising pathway for helping cooperatives integrate the 2030 Agenda into their mission, governance structures and daily organisational practices.

6.2 Implications for Theory and Practice

This paper makes three main contributions. First, it updates and synthesises the OD values framework, showing how OD's humanistic and democratic foundations align with sustainability and SDG-oriented organisational change. This contributes to OD scholarship by reaffirming the relevance of OD values in contemporary debates on organisational purpose and sustainability.

Second, it introduces an alignment model (Figure 2) that conceptually integrates OD values, cooperative principles and the SDGs. Rather than offering a prescriptive intervention method, the model provides a conceptual foundation from which new OD-based tools and methodologies can be developed. It also offers a lens through which cooperatives can reflect on the degree of alignment between their stated identity and their sustainability ambitions.

Third, the paper offers an illustrative analysis of 100 Chilean cooperatives' mission, vision and values statements. The findings reveal partial and inconsistent references to sustainability and cooperative principles, indicating a persistence of the values–practice gap. This empirical illustration strengthens the argument that intentional OD interventions may help cooperatives more effectively articulate and enact their sustainability commitments.

Overall, this study positions OD as an integrative framework capable of supporting cooperatives in aligning their organisational identity with the SDGs. By foregrounding value alignment as a prerequisite for meaningful sustainability engagement, the paper opens new avenues for research on OD-informed cooperative development and offers practical insights for cooperative leaders seeking to embed the SDGs within their organisations.

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Systematic Review of Cooperative Contributions to Global Food Security

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Abstract: This study presents a systematic review of empirical literature examining how cooperatives contribute to food security across six interrelated dimensions: availability, access, utilization, stability, sustainability, and agency. Drawing on 39 peer-reviewed studies published between 2004 and 2025, the review synthesizes findings from diverse geographical contexts to identify key mechanisms, impacts, and gaps in current knowledge. Evidence shows that cooperatives enhance food access and availability by facilitating collective marketing, improving input provision, and expanding financial services. Some studies also highlight positive effects on dietary quality and sustainability through nutrition education, resource-sharing, and climate-adaptive practices. Cooperatives further promote agency by fostering participatory governance and enabling marginalized groups, particularly women, to influence food system outcomes. However, the literature remains uneven in its geographic focus and lacks consistent theoretical grounding. The review also underscores the need for deeper exploration of underexamined dimensions such as utilization and agency and calls for greater integration of cooperatives into food policy and development planning. By mapping cooperative impacts across multiple dimensions, this review contributes to a broader understanding of cooperatives' role in fostering inclusive, resilient, and sustainable food systems.

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Keywords: cooperatives, food security, food access, sustainable food systems, zero hunger, systematic review

Introduction

Food insecurity remains one of the most persistent global challenges despite decades of interventions, policy reforms, and institutional efforts. The urgency of achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2 or "Zero Hunger" by 2030 is underscored by recent figures showing that over 700 million people are undernourished, and more than 2.8 billion experience moderate or severe food insecurity globally (Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) et al., 2024). Progress has been uneven across regions, with stagnation in Asia, worsening trends in Africa, and persistent inequalities in food access even in high-income countries.

Addressing food insecurity requires more than increasing food supply or upgrading market infrastructure. It also entails fostering inclusive institutions that empower marginalized populations to access resources, exercise agency, and participate in decision-making. Cooperatives, as member-based organizations built on democratic governance, are increasingly recognized as key actors in this regard (International Labor Organization (ILO), 2022). Operating across diverse sectors of food systems, cooperatives offer economic and social services such as access to markets, credit, agricultural inputs, and training, among others (Kalogiannidis et al., 2024; Olumeh & Mithöfer, 2024).

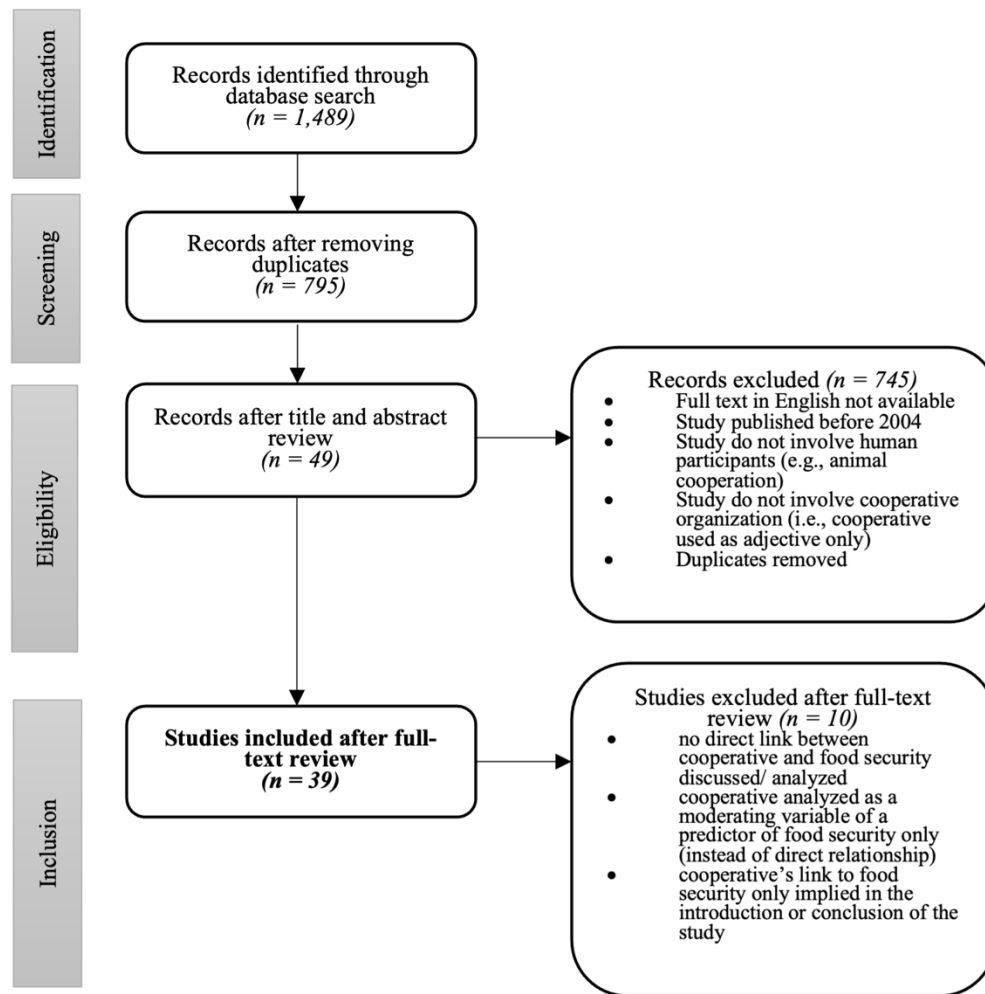
The literature consistently suggests that cooperatives can play transformative roles in addressing food insecurity (Manlosa et al., 2023). However, empirical research on this topic remains limited and fragmented. While many studies highlight the socioeconomic benefits of cooperatives, few directly examine their impact on specific food security dimensions or outcomes. For instance, several works explore intermediary outcomes, such as crop diversification (e.g., Adesiyan & Kehinde, 2024), market access (e.g., Jebessa et al., 2024 and Mukaila, 2024), and technology adoption (e.g., Jena & Tanti, 2023), which are predictors of food security. Yet, these studies often stop short of directly linking cooperatives to food security indicators, treating such variables merely as moderating factors.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by conducting a systematic review of existing literature that investigated the contributions of cooperatives to food security. By synthesizing the findings from these studies, this paper aims to (1) identify the theoretical foundations underpinning the relationship between cooperatives and food security, (2) map the roles and contributions of cooperatives across the food security dimensions; and (3) identify knowledge gaps and implications for theory, policy, and future research.

Data and Methods

This systematic review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (2015) framework to identify and synthesise empirical evidence on the role of cooperatives in food security. The review was guided by the question: *What roles and contributions do cooperatives make in enhancing food security across various contexts?* A structured search strategy was applied using Boolean logic to combine “cooperative” with terms like “food security,” “nutrition security,” and “food sovereignty.” Searches were conducted in Web of Science, Scopus, and EBSCOhost for English-language peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and books published between 2004 and March 2025. Grey literature like unpublished theses, project reports, and other non-peer-reviewed papers were excluded to ensure consistent academic quality of the studies. A two-stage screening process was undertaken based on titles, abstracts, and full texts, following predefined inclusion/exclusion criteria. Figure 1 illustrates the process flow, including the number of records retrieved and excluded at each stage.

Figure 1. Result of the Systematic Review Process Using PRISMA



Only studies with explicit and substantive analysis of the cooperative–food security relationship were retained. Studies were excluded if they (1) focused on non-human subjects, (2) did not study cooperatives and only used “cooperative” descriptively, (3) failed to provide substantive analysis of the direct cooperative–food security link, or (4) examined the relationship of cooperatives with a variable that was only implied to be associated with food security but did not explicitly define such variable as a food security indicator.

A total of 39 studies were included in the systematic review after the screening process. Data were extracted using a structured matrix covering country, methodology, cooperative type, food security dimensions addressed, and key findings. Although formal quality appraisal was not conducted, peer-reviewed status and methodological transparency were considered in assessing reliability. A narrative synthesis was conducted, thematically organizing the studies according to the six dimensions of food security (availability, access, utilization, stability, sustainability, and agency) to identify patterns, gaps, and theoretical and policy insights.

Results and Discussion

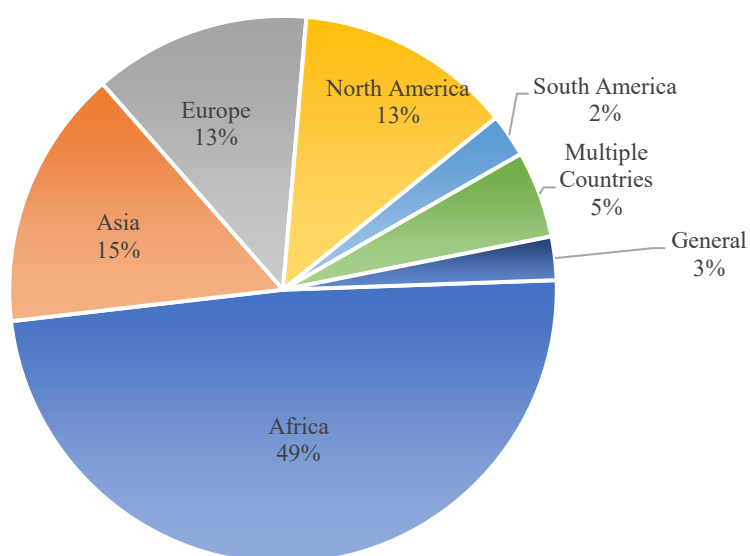
This study offers a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the contributions of cooperatives to improving food security by synthesizing the findings from the 39 studies included in the systematic review. In this section, an overview of the reviewed studies, the food security definitions, the related theories and concepts, the roles and influences evidenced in the studies are discussed.

General Characteristics of the Reviewed Studies

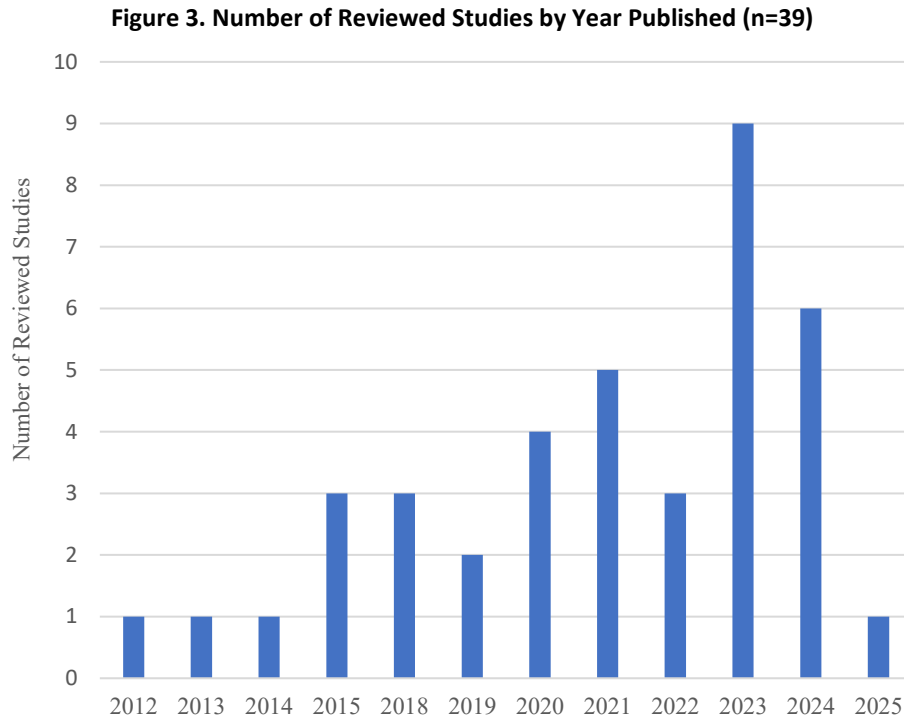
Most of the studies are peer-reviewed journal articles (90%) while the rest are book chapters (10%). In terms of regional distribution, the majority of the papers focused on Africa (49%), with Ethiopia alone accounting for 37% of the reviewed African studies (Figure 2). Other geographic regions represented include Asia, Europe, North America, and South America. The majority of the studies are country-specific with multi-country studies comprising only 5%.

The studies present a relatively balanced mix of statistically driven and contextually grounded investigations. Quantitative studies account for 44%, followed by qualitative studies (41%), with only a few using mixed methods (10%) or being conceptual papers (5%). Although the review covers the period from 2004 to 2025, the earliest included study was published in 2012 (Figure 3). Scholarly attention has gradually increased, peaking in 2023. Nonetheless, the limited and fragmented body of literature highlights the need for more empirical research across varied contexts.

Figure 2. Geographic Scope of the Reviewed Studies (n=39)



Note: *Africa* – Ethiopia (7), Nigeria (4), Ghana (1), Malawi (2), Rwanda & Kenya (1), Burkina Faso (1), Ivory Coast & Senegal (1), South Africa (1), and Zambia (1); *Asia* – India (2), Indonesia (2), China (1), and Malaysia (1); *Europe* – Belgium (1), Greece (1), Italy (1), Romania (1), and Spain (1); *North America* – Nicaragua (3), Cuba (1), and United States (1); *South America* – Brazil (1); *Multiple countries* – Ethiopia, Philippines, Indonesia (1), and Spain, Portugal, Cambodia, Vietnam, Bangladesh (1)



Food Security as Defined in the Cooperative Literature

The concept of food security has evolved over time, but most of the studies continue to draw on the widely accepted definition by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which states that “Food security exists when all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences and can thus live an active and healthy life” (FAO, 1996 , p.1). FAO (2009) later elaborated this definition by identifying four core dimensions: availability, access, utilization, and stability. These pillars remain central in the literature but recent scholarship has expanded the framework to include sustainability and agency—dimensions that highlight ecological responsibility and the ability of individuals and communities to influence food systems. Despite their relevance, these additional dimensions are explicitly addressed in only a few studies (e.g., Ajates, 2023; Brogan et al., 2023).

Alongside these conceptual developments, an increasing number of studies also emphasize nutrition-focused food security descriptions. Rather than focusing solely on food quantity, these perspectives highlight the importance of dietary quality, cultural appropriateness, and health outcomes. For instance, Kolog et al. (2023) cited the Ghanaian Ministry of Food and Agriculture’s definition, which emphasizes access to nutritious, hygienically packaged, and acceptable food throughout the year. Similarly, Shumeta and D’Haese (2018) argued that food security encompasses not only physical availability but also economic access to nutritionally adequate foods. Swaminathan (2013) also proposed that the food security dimensions must be supported by nutrition-sensitive agriculture and social protection systems. This nutrition-oriented perspective was further reinforced in the recent studies of Hartatik et al. (2023) and Liao et al. (2024), which link cooperative membership to improved dietary diversity, food preparation knowledge, and health-related behaviors at the household level.

Beyond these operational definitions, several authors have highlighted the socio-political underpinnings of food insecurity. Bernaschi and Crisci (2018), for instance, emphasized the importance of entitlements and institutional conditions (i.e., access to land, credit, and labor) in shaping food access. Boone and Taylor (2016) and Liao et al. (2024), on the other hand, drew attention to the concept of food sovereignty or the communities’ rights to define their own food systems and governance structures. These studies argued that through participatory governance and local knowledge, cooperatives are well positioned to advance food sovereignty and challenge inequitable food regimes.

Some scholars have also stressed the importance of examining food security at the household level. Hartatik et al. (2023) and Aweke et al. (2022) contended that food and nutrition security must be assessed not only through national production and distribution metrics but also through the lived realities of vulnerable households. In Guyalo & Ifa (2023) and Aweke et al. (2022), household-level definitions emphasized a family's ability to produce or access adequate food, as well as the resources needed to secure nutritious diets.

It is also noteworthy that while some studies provide explicit definitions of food security, this study found that most of the papers approach food security as a multifaceted outcome, focusing more on defining its dimensions and measurement, missing a detailed conceptual framing.

Theoretical Foundations for Examining the Cooperative–Food Security Nexus

The literature draws on a diverse range of theories to explain how cooperative models can address food insecurity through collective, inclusive, and sustainable mechanisms. At the core of these discussions is the notion of cooperatives as people-centered, value-driven enterprises, defined by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA, n.d.) as organizations owned and controlled by members to meet their shared economic, social, and cultural needs. Complementing this, the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2022) situates cooperatives within the broader social and solidarity economy, recognizing their role in delivering social and environmental outcomes beyond profit. These institutional principles of voluntary cooperation, mutual aid, democratic governance, and prioritizing people over capital frame the foundational values through which cooperatives contribute to food security.

From the reviewed studies, six explicitly identify theories to explain the mechanisms through which cooperatives operate to improve food security. These theories highlight how cooperatives optimize resource allocation, reduce transaction costs, foster collaboration, and build institutional and social resilience. Specifically, Ku and Kan, 2020 used social economy and social work theory to describe how cooperatives operate within rural development frameworks. They argued that cooperatives serve as mechanisms for integrating individuals into socio-economic systems through egalitarian and bottom-up approaches. Cooperatives, in this view, form networks of rewards and sanctions that support mutual profitability and community well-being, addressing structural inequalities and local food system challenges.

Another foundational theory is the theory of collective action, originally articulated by Olson (1965) and further developed by Ostrom (2007). This theory explains why and how individuals cooperate to achieve shared goals, even in the presence of self-interest. In the cooperative context, collective action facilitates resource pooling, reduces transaction costs, and enhances operational efficiency, leading to improved household incomes and food security (Olumeh & Mithöfer, 2024; Kalogiannidis et al., 2024). Olumeh and Mithöfer (2024), for example, demonstrated how collective bargaining in cooperatives improves market access and stabilizes incomes, which are key components in addressing food access.

Institutional theory, as referenced in Manlosa et al. (2023), provides further insight by framing cooperatives within formal and informal rules that govern social interactions. According to this framework, institutions, whether cognitive, normative, or regulative, influence access to and control over food resources. Manlosa et al. (2023) demonstrated how gender norms and land use regulations, shaped by institutional structures, directly affect food security outcomes. The application of institutional theory in this context reveals how power dynamics and structural constraints intersect with cooperative activities.

In addressing collective behavior and shared resources, game theory also appears as a valuable lens. Liao et al. (2024) applied game-theoretic models to illustrate how cooperatives function as collective insurance regimes, enabling communities to manage public goods like nitrogen pollution and food availability. This study highlighted how cooperation can emerge even among actors with divergent interests, providing a conceptual foundation for understanding collaborative food security governance.

Social network theory and social capital theory offer complementary perspectives. Liu et al. (2019) defined social networks as structures through which trust, information, and resources flow, all of which are vital to cooperative success. Kalogiannidis et al. (2024) argued that strong social ties within cooperatives enhance innovation, knowledge

sharing, and community resilience, and consequently support food system sustainability. Similarly, drawing from Bourdieu (1986), Brogan et al. (2023) showed how social capital embedded in cooperatives promotes adaptability and diversifies resource access.

Other theories referenced in the literature are consumer behavior theory, cited by Brogan et al. (2023) to demonstrate how cooperatives influence consumer perceptions and food preferences through cultural engagement and social norms, ultimately contributing to improved food utilization and nutrition; and transaction cost economics (Coase, 1937), which according to Kalogiannidis et al. (2024), provided a powerful explanation of how cooperatives function as institutional responses to market inefficiencies. The authors argued that cooperatives reduce the costs of accessing inputs, marketing produce, and coordinating transactions, thereby addressing systemic barriers in food supply chains. Through integrated activities and economies of scale, cooperatives can correct market failures and improve food availability and affordability.

Cooperative Contributions Across Food Security Dimensions

The six dimensions of food security: availability, access, utilization, stability, agency, and sustainability, offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of food systems. Cooperatives, as member-driven socio-economic organizations, are widely recognized for their potential to reduce food insecurity by improving access to agricultural inputs, financial services, markets, and information. They also function as platforms for collective action, resource-sharing, and participatory governance, empowering communities to address structural inequalities in food systems. This section synthesizes evidence from the 39 reviewed studies, highlighting cooperative impacts across each food security dimension.

Cooperatives' role in increasing food availability

Food availability refers to the physical presence of adequate food, made possible through robust agricultural production, reliable input systems, and efficient market mechanisms (Barrett, 2010; FAO, 2008). Across the reviewed literature, cooperatives contribute to this dimension by helping smallholders overcome production constraints through improved access to inputs, production support, technology adoption, and stronger collective bargaining. Although the specific mechanisms vary across country contexts, the evidence from seven studies consistently shows that cooperatives function as enabling institutions that enhance farm productivity and contribute to more stable and resilient local food supply chains.

In the Romanian context, Dumitru et al. (2022) found that smallholders have increasingly turned to cooperatives in response to systemic challenges posed by large-scale agribusinesses. These cooperatives help consolidate fragmented farm resources, allowing small producers to access inputs and markets more effectively, thereby improving overall productivity and regional food availability. Schultz (2012) likewise demonstrated how cooperatives enabled farmers to continue food production amid the food crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union. By providing access to idle state lands, cooperatives supported the Cuban government's decentralized food production strategy and national food security goals. In the same vein, Swaminathan (2013) showcased how India's dairy cooperative model allowed smallholders to overcome scale-related disadvantages through decentralized production paired with centralized processing and marketing, thereby expanding national food supply.

In Indonesia, Village Unit Cooperatives (*Koperasi Unit Desa*) have been instrumental in providing fertilizer, credit, and marketing services. Hartatik et al. (2023) observed that cooperative membership reduces farmers' dependence on exploitative lending practices and enables more stable production outcomes, ultimately strengthening local food systems. Sedana (2020) similarly illustrated how Subak cooperatives improve production efficiency through collective input management, including shared access to fertilizers and certified seeds, subsequently improving food availability in local communities.

Additional studies highlight that cooperatives promote technology access and improved production practices. Kalogiannidis et al. (2024) and Sedana (2020) showed that cooperatives facilitate adoption of modern farming technologies by ensuring access to high-quality seeds, fertilizers, and training. These efforts reduce production costs and enhance overall efficiency. In Ethiopia, Shumeta and D'Haese (2018) found that cooperative members benefit from increased crop yields through access to affordable inputs and improved agricultural techniques. Their study

further showed that cooperative participation supports more consistent food production and improved food security outcomes compared to non-members.

Moreover, cooperatives support productivity gains through collective bargaining. By negotiating better terms with suppliers and buyers, cooperatives strengthen the economic position of smallholder producers. Kalogiannidis et al. (2024) found that such bargaining power increased farm incomes in Greece and contributed to better household food security. Higher income allows farmers to reinvest in production and sustain food supply consistency and availability.

Cooperatives' role in improving food access

Food access refers to the ability of individuals and households to obtain sufficient food through economic, physical, or social means (FAO, 2008). The studies show that cooperatives improve food access through several interconnected mechanisms, including increased household income, reduced transaction costs, expanded market participation, improved dietary diversity, and enhanced access to affordable credit. Eighteen studies document that cooperative membership is associated with stronger food security outcomes, such as lower Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) scores, higher dietary diversity, and greater purchasing power, highlighting the significant contribution of cooperatives to this dimension of food security.

In Ethiopia, Guyalo and Ifa (2023) found that cooperative members had significantly lower scores in the Household Food Balance Model and the HFIAS, as well as higher calorie intake than non-members. These results align with Mncube et al. (2023), who reported that cooperative-member households in South Africa experienced better food access, indicated by lower HFIAS scores. In Zambia, Ng'ombe et al. (2025) showed that dairy farmer cooperatives enhanced household food security by reducing transaction costs and increasing service access, as reflected in improved Food Insecurity Experience Scale scores.

In Malawi, Olumeh and Mithöfer (2024) found that cooperative-organized baobab collectors exhibited higher dietary diversity and more stable food consumption due to improved market access and quality control. Similar evidence from Ethiopia by Aweke et al. (2022) and Derso et al. (2021) demonstrated that cooperative participation enhanced dietary diversity and food consumption frequency, with access to agricultural inputs and better marketing support serving as key drivers.

Additional studies highlight that bundled services within cooperatives improve household food access. Zeweld et al. (2015) linked cooperative membership to higher food expenditure, noting that services such as credit, agricultural inputs, and basic business infrastructure help households meet food needs more reliably. Using the Freedom from Hunger scale, Kassy et al. (2021) documented similar findings in Nigeria. In India, Swaminathan (2013) emphasized that dairy cooperatives enhance income and food access, particularly for women and marginalized households, by providing stable income opportunities and improving nutrition at household level.

Cooperatives' role in supporting food access is also seen in urban contexts, with DePasquale et al. (2018) documenting how worker and consumer cooperatives in New York provided stable employment and reduced food costs. Examples such as Park Slope Food Coop and the South Bronx Food Coop show how consumer cooperatives expand food access for underserved communities by offering affordable, below-market food prices.

Market access through cooperative structures. A significant portion of the literature highlights cooperatives' role in strengthening market access for smallholder agricultural producers. Improved market access enhances income and economic resilience, thereby expanding households' ability to purchase food. Cooperatives facilitate efficient, localized supply chains that reduce transportation costs, mitigate postharvest losses, and improve food safety while lowering transaction costs (Ajates, 2023; Dumitru et al., 2022). Through coordinated marketing, cooperatives strengthen producers' bargaining power, reduce reliance on intermediaries, and stabilize prices. Such collective engagement supports a transition from subsistence-oriented to more commercially viable production systems (García-Lorenzo et al., 2021).

In coastal and fishing communities, cooperative and community-based fisheries organizations have supported both food supply and economic development. García-Lorenzo et al. (2021) documented cases across Europe and Asia

showing that these organizations sustain local food availability while improving livelihoods through coordinated marketing and sustainable resource use. Similarly, Manlosa et al. (2023) showed that multipurpose cooperatives in Ethiopia help create more equitable market conditions by reducing power imbalances between producers and dominant buyers, offering essential services such as price information, aggregation, and collective sales. Gebru et al. (2019) emphasized that multipurpose and savings-and-credit cooperatives foster social capital, enabling smallholders to participate more effectively in high-value vegetable markets, and improve both income and food security outcomes.

Romanian cooperatives further illustrate how integrated models, which combine production, processing, and marketing, help smallholders navigate markets traditionally dominated by large agribusiness firms (Dumitru et al., 2022). In Brazil, Dantas (2020) found that agricultural cooperatives empower family farmers by providing new channels for direct sales and enabling more equitable market participation. Cooperatives also frequently serve as intermediaries between farmers and government agencies, NGOs, and other development stakeholders, reinforcing their role in facilitating market integration (Bacon et al., 2014).

Access to credit and other financial support. The literature also underscores the importance of cooperatives in improving access to credit for both agricultural and non-agricultural households. Cooperatives provide low-interest loans and financial services that help households invest in productive activities, meet consumption needs, and reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. In Nigeria, Oke et al. (2023) found that farmers who accessed cooperative-provided loans were more food-secure than those without such support. These households reported higher incomes and greater capacity to secure adequate food, as measured by the USDA Food Security Survey Module.

In Nicaragua, Bacon et al. (2014) showed that cooperative members experienced less seasonal food insecurity than those dependent on informal lenders. Cooperative interest rates (15%–18%) were substantially lower than those of informal lenders, which exceeded 35%, highlighting cooperatives' role as protective financial institutions during periods of agricultural or economic uncertainty. Ng'ombe et al. (2025) similarly emphasized that cooperatives facilitated access to credit and subsidized inputs in Zambia, improving purchasing power and market access.

Cooperatives' role in improving food access also extends to urban, non-farming populations. DePasquale et al. (2018) demonstrated that worker cooperatives in the United States contributed to food security by increasing members' purchasing power through fair wages and reliable employment. They also facilitated collective investment schemes and affordable food outlets, supporting wealth accumulation among low-income workers and enhancing overall food security.

Cooperatives' role in enhancing food utilization

Food utilization refers to how effectively individuals and households use the food available to them to meet dietary and nutritional needs, including considerations of food safety, nutrient content, and preparation practices (FAO, 2006). This review finds that food utilization is the least directly examined dimension of food security, with only five studies addressing it explicitly. However, these studies, along with others using dietary diversity as a proxy, show that cooperatives can influence nutritional outcomes through indirect pathways. These include improvements in dietary diversity, increased access to nutritious foods, community-based nutrition education, and cooperative-led efforts that promote food justice. Together, the evidence suggests that cooperative participation can meaningfully shape the quality and nutritional value of household diets.

Several studies, including Aweke et al. (2022), Derso et al. (2021), Ng'ombe et al. (2025), and Olumeh and Mithöfer (2024), used tools such as the Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS) and the Food Consumption Score (FCS) to assess dietary quality and consumption variety. These indicators reflect the range of food groups consumed and the nutritional adequacy of diets (FAO, 2013). Across these studies, cooperative membership is associated with more diverse and frequent food consumption, implying that cooperatives may positively influence dietary choices and overall nutritional well-being.

The literature also highlights the role of cooperatives in supporting nutrition education. Brogan et al. (2023) documented how East African artisan cooperatives provide targeted programs for women aimed at improving

knowledge of balanced diets and appropriate nutrition practices. These educational initiatives enable members to make more informed food choices, contributing to better household-level nutritional outcomes.

Scholars further argue that food justice is integral to nutrition. DePasquale et al. (2018) examined urban consumer cooperatives and demonstrated how these organizations enhance food utilization by improving affordability and access to nutritious foods, particularly in underserved neighborhoods. Similarly, Chandra (2021) examined the Amma Unavagam (Amma Canteens), which is a subsidized food program initiated to combat urban food insecurity and rising food inflation in Tamil Nadu, India. Operated by women's self-help groups and governed through cooperative management practices such as democratic participation and shared responsibilities, the canteens provide hygienic and nutritious meals at extremely low cost. By offering healthier food alternatives at reduced prices, these organizations play a dual role in improving both the economic and nutritional conditions of their members.

Cooperatives' role in fostering agency

Agency is the capacity of individuals and communities to make informed, autonomous choices about their food systems and actively engage in shaping food-related policies (HLPE, 2022). As evidenced in nine of the reviewed studies, cooperatives play a critical role in strengthening this dimension by promoting democratic participation, enabling collective decision-making, fostering social inclusion, and empowering marginalized groups. Through shared governance structures and solidarity-based practices, cooperatives create platforms that allow members to articulate their needs, engage in local food-system strategies, and influence policy and resource allocation.

Building social solidarity and inclusion. Social solidarity refers to individuals from diverse social and economic backgrounds working together to build inclusive and sustainable food systems (Fourat et al., 2020). Cooperatives facilitate this through mutual support, shared decision-making, and collaboration toward common goals such as food security and community resilience.

Bacon (2015) demonstrated how the Promoter of Cooperative Development in the Segovias (PRODECOOP), a farmers' cooperative in Nicaragua, fostered solidarity through practices such as seed sharing, input exchange, and environmental conservation. Ajates (2023) similarly found that cooperative collaboration helps households align their food production practices with cultural preferences and dietary needs. Schultz (2012) highlighted the Cuban experience, noting that state-supported cooperatives strengthened food sovereignty by advancing farmer autonomy and participatory governance.

Social networks embedded in cooperatives enhance both resilience and agency. Brogan et al. (2023) and Dantas (2020) emphasized that cooperatives serve as hubs for cohesion and knowledge exchange, enabling members to access resources, build mobility, and improve food outcomes. Mustafa et al. (2020) further showed that when cooperatives collaborate with government agencies, NGOs, and private actors, they help integrate broader development initiatives, bridging institutional gaps and expanding the reach of food security interventions.

Empowering women and marginalized groups. Women's participation in cooperatives is strongly associated with improved food and nutrition outcomes due to increased autonomy over food-related decisions. Brogan et al. (2023) observed that artisan cooperatives in East Africa offer spaces for peer learning, resource sharing, and awareness-building around sustainable diets. These opportunities support women in making informed food choices that benefit both themselves and their households. Chandra (2021) showed that participation in cooperative-led food provisioning programs such as Amma Unavagam, enhance women's agency by offering livelihood opportunities and involving them directly in food distribution and service decision-making. These dynamics highlight cooperatives' broader role in advancing gender equity in food systems.

Beyond gender, cooperatives also promote the inclusion of other vulnerable groups. The Barikamà cooperative in Italy provides an example of how cooperative structures create economic and social opportunities for migrants and previously excluded populations (Bernaschi & Crisci, 2018). Through participation in cooperative governance and community activities, members gain access to livelihoods, build networks, and strengthen local democratic processes, contributing to both food security and social integration.

Cooperatives' role in strengthening stability and sustainability

Stability and sustainability are interrelated dimensions of food security. Stability concerns the consistency of food access over time despite shocks, while sustainability emphasizes environmentally responsible practices that safeguard food systems for future generations (FAO, 2006; HLPE, 2020). In the reviewed literature, cooperatives consistently emerge as key actors that help communities adapt to climatic, market, and socio-economic disruptions. Through collective governance, shared resources, and coordinated action, cooperatives promote sustainable production, strengthen resilience, and support long-term food system stability. The following subsections outline how cooperatives advance these goals through sustainable farming, collaborative partnerships, and localized resource governance, as demonstrated in 11 reviewed studies.

Promoting sustainable practices and technology adoption. Encouraging the adoption of sustainable farming practices is central to building long-term food stability, and cooperatives play an important role in expanding these practices among members. In Cuba, Schultz (2012) showed how state-supported cooperatives were instrumental in rebuilding a self-reliant food system after periods of food insecurity. Through the promotion of agroecological approaches favoring local inputs, soil conservation, and ecological diversity, cooperatives helped reduce dependence on input-intensive models and address environmental degradation.

Diversification of production is another mechanism emphasized across the studies. Ajates (2023) and Boone and Taylor (2016) demonstrated how cooperatives support diversified farming and homegardening systems that reduce vulnerability to pests, seasonal shortages, and crop failures while improving nutrition and income. Nicaragua's ADECOOP cooperative, for example, promotes biodiversity-rich homegardens that serve as buffers during agricultural shocks (Boone & Taylor, 2016). Similarly, Taye et al. (2024) found that livelihood diversification through cooperatives increases household resilience to market volatility and climate-related disturbances.

Cooperatives also facilitate the uptake of sustainable technologies. In Brazil, Kalogiannidis et al. (2024) documented how cooperatives integrate modern, efficiency-enhancing technologies to support both productivity and ecological sustainability. Kone and Uzmay (2024) likewise observed that cooperatives in Burkina Faso accelerated technology adoption that improved food availability, access, and overall system stability. All these studies illustrate how cooperatives contribute to building climate-adaptive and environmentally sound food systems.

Facilitating collaboration for resilient food systems. Beyond farm-level practices, cooperatives function as platforms for broader collaboration aimed at tackling systemic food stability and sustainability challenges. Bacon et al. (2014) highlighted a multistakeholder initiative involving the Community Agroecology Network (CAN) and the Nicaraguan cooperative PRODECOOP, which brought together cooperatives, NGOs, and farmers to improve market access, secure fair pricing, and distribute climate-resilient seeds. This demonstrates how cooperative-led networks can strengthen resilience and equity across the supply chain.

Further evidence from China illustrates the collaborative potential of cooperatives. Ku and Kan (2020), through participatory action research in Pingzhai, showed how cooperatives supported inclusive food production and consumption systems, strengthened social cohesion, and increased household incomes. These community-level collaborations enhanced the collective capacity to pursue sustainable agriculture and respond to food system vulnerabilities.

Strengthening community governance for managing resources and climate risks. Cooperatives also strengthen localized governance systems that manage shared resources and mitigate climate risks. Bacon (2015) underscored how cooperatives coordinate member participation to oversee forests, water, and land while ensuring equitable access and conservation, helping maintain the ecological foundations necessary for sustained food production.

In Ethiopia, Zeweld et al. (2015) found that cooperatives supported land rehabilitation and drought-resilient practices that addressed soil degradation and water scarcity, resulting in improved agricultural productivity and food access. Cooperatives further act as buffers during climatic shocks. Liao et al. (2024) highlighted cooperative food banks (CFBs) as governance systems that reduce vulnerability during extreme weather by facilitating cooperative food storage, equitable distribution, and reduced nitrogen pollution. These initiatives enhance both environmental sustainability and community-level food security.

Systematic Review of Cooperative Contributions to Global Food Security

Cooperatives' role in providing information access across food security dimensions

The reviewed literature shows that cooperatives contribute to food security not only through direct improvements in availability, access, utilization, agency, and stability, but also through a cross-cutting function of facilitating access to information. Information access emerges as an essential enabler across all food security pillars, particularly in contexts where smallholders and low-income households face constraints in acquiring technical, market, or nutrition-related knowledge. Positioned as community-based learning platforms, cooperatives provide members with technical, entrepreneurial, and nutritional information that strengthens both immediate food access and long-term resilience.

Several studies (i.e., Chivundu-Ngulube & Li, 2019; DePasquale et al., 2018; Ibrahim et al., 2023; Kalogiannidis et al., 2024) consistently describe cooperatives as information hubs that promote learning, collaboration, and improved practices. As organizations guided by the cooperative principle of “concern for community,” they offer education and training that enhance members’ capacity to navigate markets, adopt technologies, and make informed livelihood and consumption decisions. For example, DePasquale et al. (2018) showed that worker and consumer cooperatives help build market awareness and entrepreneurial skills that strengthen economic access to food. In Malawi, agricultural cooperatives improve members’ production and business competencies, contributing to better yields and more stable local food systems (Chivundu-Ngulube & Li, 2019).

Information sharing also underpins improvements in household dietary outcomes. In Nigeria, Ojo et al. (2022) and Ibrahim et al. (2023) found that cooperative members benefit from continuous knowledge exchange on sustainable agricultural technologies, which enhances productivity, food diversity, and overall food security. Similarly, Brogan et al. (2023) illustrated how artisan cooperatives in East Africa deliver nutrition education for women, enabling informed dietary choices that improve household nutritional well-being.

The role of cooperatives in information dissemination also intersects with livelihood diversification and climate resilience. Taye et al. (2024) highlighted how knowledge-sharing within cooperatives supports diversified livelihood strategies that strengthen economic access and stability. Evidence from Greece (Kalogiannidis et al., 2024) indicated that cooperatives enhance members’ understanding of food security and sustainability challenges, while studies from Indonesia (Sedana, 2020) demonstrated how cooperatives facilitate the adoption of sustainable technologies through structured training and peer learning.

Non-Positive Effects of Cooperatives on Food Security

While most of the reviewed studies affirm the positive contributions of cooperatives to food security, a few highlight conditions under which cooperative membership may not yield the expected benefits or may even exacerbate food insecurity. For example, Kolog et al. (2023) found that in Ghana, some cooperative members experienced worse food security outcomes than non-members. The authors attributed this to poor adherence to cooperative values, governance lapses, and inadequate delivery of member services. Such negative outcomes underscore the importance of governance and member accountability. DePasquale et al. (2018) noted that without effective democratic participation and transparent operations, cooperatives may fail to function as intended. Weak leadership, mismanagement, and lack of active member engagement can severely hinder their impact.

Further evidence is provided by Kpadé et al. (2023), who compared active and inactive cooperatives in Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal. Their findings reveal that poorly functioning cooperatives are associated with higher food insecurity, while well-managed, participatory cooperatives are more successful in improving members’ access to food and related resources. These findings reinforce the notion that cooperatives must be supported by strong institutional frameworks, internal cohesion, and accountability mechanisms to deliver on their food security potential.

Theoretical and Policy Implications

Theoretical Implications

This study highlights significant theoretical insights into the role of cooperatives in addressing food security. Albeit limited, the reviewed studies demonstrate that theoretical frameworks are essential for unpacking the complex pathways through which cooperatives contribute to food security. The findings reinforce the relevance of

institutional theory, which frames cooperatives as organizations shaped by both formal rules and informal norms. They affirm that well-functioning cooperatives can reduce barriers such as lack of credit, poor market access, and regulatory constraints, thus supporting food security outcomes. Conversely, poorly governed cooperatives may exacerbate food insecurity, as shown in studies from Ghana and West Africa (e.g., Kolog et al., 2023; Kpadé et al., 2023). These insights underscore North's (1990) and Ostrom's (2005) assertions that institutional quality critically shapes organizational performance.

The study also affirms collective action theory by showing how cooperatives enable members to pool resources, coordinate production, and collectively manage risks. These collective action practices align with Ostrom's (2007) principles for effective collaboration. Additionally, findings support social capital theory's (Bourdieu, 1986), emphasis on how trust-based networks generate tangible benefits. Cooperatives were consistently shown to foster social cohesion and peer learning, particularly among women and marginalized groups, thereby increasing dietary diversity, knowledge on nutrition, and food-related agency. These results suggest that food security outcomes are not solely determined by economic inputs, but also by relational dynamics cultivated through cooperative participation.

At the same time, this review identifies some theoretical perspectives that seem to be overlooked across the literature. Cooperatives' roles in fostering democratic participation and social inclusion, as documented in studies by Brogan et al. (2023), Schultz (2012), and Chandra (2021), point to the value of integrating agency and justice-based frameworks, including food sovereignty, participatory governance, and gender empowerment, into future theoretical development. For instance, future studies may prioritize examining how women's participation affects cooperative governance, performance, and food security outcomes. Similarly, investigating how cooperatives engage with marginalized groups, including migrants, indigenous populations, and landless farmers, can provide valuable insights into fostering socially just and inclusive food systems. These perspectives can help advance theories that more accurately reflect the diversity of cooperative experiences and their equity-oriented impacts.

Policy Implications

This review highlights several policy insights to better harness the contributions of cooperatives to food security. Findings from the reviewed studies underscore that cooperatives are most effective when operating within supportive institutional environments, particularly those that address constraints related to access to credit, input markets, and infrastructure. To this end, policies that promote enabling environments tailored to the structural realities of cooperatives are essential. These may include targeted financial incentives, legal recognition, and investment in capacity-building initiatives that strengthen cooperative governance, value chain integration, and sustainable agricultural practices.

Several studies also demonstrated that cooperatives serve as key platforms for disseminating technical, nutritional, and market-related information (e.g., Ibrahim et al., 2023; Brogan et al., 2023). Building on this, policy support should prioritize the integration of cooperatives into agricultural extension services, digital knowledge platforms, and food system education programs. Special attention must be given to expanding access in underserved rural areas, where cooperatives often serve as the sole conduit for information and services.

With the literature (e.g., Chandra, 2021; Swaminathan, 2013) demonstrating how cooperatives facilitate collective agency and social inclusion to enhance food security, policies must go beyond economic support and explicitly foster participatory and inclusive governance within cooperative frameworks. Initiatives that enhance women's leadership, protect the rights of marginalised members, and encourage co-ownership models can reinforce food-related agency and equity. Embedding these equity principles in national food security plans can increase the legitimacy and sustainability of food system interventions.

Moreover, the review affirms that resilient cooperatives are closely linked with sound internal governance and management capacity. Training programs focused on strategic planning, financial literacy, and democratic decision-making should therefore be institutionalized to support long-term cooperative viability and alignment with development goals. Lastly, cooperatives are well positioned to address systemic food insecurity by linking social protection, livelihood support, and community-based food distribution. Policies that empower cooperatives to

participate in local procurement schemes, food assistance programs, and school feeding initiatives can reinforce their role as trusted, community-embedded actors that promote affordable and nutritious food access.

Limitations and Future Research Agenda

This review acknowledges several limitations that present opportunities for further inquiry into the role of cooperatives in enhancing food security. A primary limitation concerns the scope of literature, which excluded gray literature (i.e., theses, project reports, and other unpublished sources), which may offer more context-specific and practice-oriented insights. Thus, future systematic reviews would benefit from incorporating a broader range of sources to capture local experiences, community-level interventions, and policy-relevant evaluations that may not be reflected in peer-reviewed literature.

Another limitation pertains to the review's thematic focus. While the analysis synthesizes the contributions of cooperatives to food security, it does not systematically engage with the challenges, policy implications, or recommendations identified in individual studies. Further research could explore how specific policy environments shape cooperative performance and identify reform strategies that align cooperative operations with national food security objectives. Comparative assessments of policy frameworks across countries may also uncover structural enablers and constraints that influence cooperative effectiveness.

The methodological diversity of the reviewed studies also remains underexplored. This review does not examine in depth the analytical approaches or the specific food security indicators employed across the literature. While a comprehensive methodological assessment was beyond the scope of this review, its importance for evaluating study quality and comparability is recognized. Future research should therefore address this gap directly by synthesizing the range of methodologies and measurement tools used across cooperative-food security studies, identifying best practices for impact assessment, improving scale consistency, and enhancing cross-study comparability. Such work would significantly strengthen the evidence base and enable more robust evaluations of cooperative initiatives in food security contexts.

Future research should also consider integrating theoretical frameworks more explicitly into empirical studies. Although several of the reviewed articles reference conceptual models, the application of theory to explain the mechanisms linking cooperatives to different dimensions of food security remains limited. A more theory-informed approach could deepen explanatory insights and guide policy development. In particular, underexplored dimensions such as food agency and utilization warrant closer examination. Studies that investigate how cooperatives influence food sovereignty, food justice, and the nutritional quality of diets could offer a more holistic understanding of their role in food systems. Additionally, while many studies assess agricultural productivity, few explicitly connect these outcomes to food security indicators. Future work should more directly examine how increases in production translate into improved availability and stability of food access.

Moreover, the prevailing household-level focus in existing studies limits understanding of the macro-level impacts of cooperatives. There is a need for research that investigates their contributions to national food policies, regional food systems, and broader structural challenges such as supply chain disruptions and systemic inequities. The emphasis on agricultural cooperatives also signals a significant gap in the literature on other cooperative forms like consumer and marketing cooperatives, particularly within urban contexts. Broadening the analytical scope to include these models can enhance understanding of their contributions to food security in diverse environments.

Finally, the geographical concentration of the current literature presents another limitation. Research remains disproportionately focused on Africa, while studies from Asia, despite high levels of food insecurity in the region, are relatively sparse. Comparative and multi-country studies could generate more generalizable findings and support the design of context-sensitive interventions that reflect regional variations in cooperative practice and food system challenges.

Conclusion

This systematic review synthesized evidence from 39 peer-reviewed studies to examine how cooperatives contribute to food security across six dimensions: availability, access, utilization, stability, sustainability, and agency. The study

findings demonstrate that cooperatives consistently function as enabling institutions that strengthen food system outcomes through collective action, resource pooling, and democratic governance.

Across the food availability dimension, cooperatives reduce production constraints by improving access to inputs, technologies, and bargaining power, enabling smallholders to sustain and expand agricultural output. In terms of food access, the studies show strong and consistent evidence that cooperatives enhance household income, market participation, and access to credit, while also lowering food costs in both rural and urban settings. Although fewer studies directly address food utilization, the available evidence indicates meaningful contributions through improved dietary diversity, nutrition education, and equitable access to healthy foods.

Cooperatives also support long-term stability and sustainability by promoting agroecological practices, facilitating technology adoption, and strengthening community-based responses to climate and market shocks. In agency context, cooperatives expand opportunities for participation and empower women, migrants, and marginalized groups through collective decision-making and inclusive governance. Additionally, information access emerges as a foundational and cross-cutting mechanism that enhances capabilities, supports informed decision-making, and reinforces gains across all pillars of food security.

Synthesizing these findings reveals that cooperatives operate not as isolated service providers but as multidimensional institutions whose roles intersect economic, social, and environmental domains. This underscores the need for future research to adopt more integrative frameworks that capture these interdependencies rather than treating each food security dimension as analytically separate. Moreover, the methodological gaps identified, particularly the limited assessment of analytical approaches, food security indicators, and utilization pathways, highlight the importance of strengthening methodological rigor in cooperative-food security research.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that enabling environments that support cooperative formation, strengthen governance capacities, and expand access to finance, technology, and information can magnify cooperative impacts on food security. Future efforts should also prioritize marginalized populations, promote gender-responsive cooperative development, and integrate cooperatives into broader food system and climate resilience strategies.

Overall, the evidence affirms that cooperatives hold significant potential to advance inclusive, equitable, and resilient food systems. Realizing this potential will require theoretically grounded research, methodologically robust evaluations, and policies that recognize cooperatives as strategic partners in national and local food security agendas.

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Indigenous Co-operatives in Australia: History and Role in Self-Determination

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Abstract: There is around the globe a growing awareness of co-operative, mutual and community-controlled enterprises (CMEs) functioning as effective organisational strategies for service provision and community development. A key reason for this is the democratic governance models embedded within CMEs that give members their own voice in decision-making processes, whether through direct representation or by a member-elected Board. For Australia's Indigenous peoples, these models have proven to be effective vehicles for building self-determination by embedding decision-making power into their communities and providing Indigenous peoples with means to build social, cultural and economic wellbeing on their own terms.

The purpose of this paper is to document and analyse the Indigenous co-operative sector and to investigate the capacity of the co-operative model in facilitating (economic) self-determination. Using historical research and data in addition to figures obtained from the cooperatives registrar's data bases, this article seeks to assemble and gain more knowledge about and provide more insights into the history of Indigenous CMEs, their origins and resilience, and the barriers, challenges and opportunities they have been faced with. This in turn is also expected to provide insights into the changing status of Indigenous people in the Australian society, and how this has been reflected in legislation and institutions that were supposed to strengthen Indigenous self-determination.

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Cultural Warning: Indigenous people are advised that this article contains mention of people who have passed away.

1. Introduction and objectives for the study

The study of Indigenous-owned Cooperative and Mutual Enterprises (CMEs) in Australia, as distinguished from private businesses or state enacted institutions, is of crucial importance in recording the journey of Indigenous self-determination. For the first half of the 20th century, Indigenous communities continued to suffer widespread exploitation through oppressive labour, land and social relations through race-based legislation. Against this backdrop of systemic exclusion and dispossession, Indigenous communities began to seek collective mechanisms through which they could reclaim control over their economic and social lives. In this context, Indigenous-led organisations, particularly co-operative and mutual enterprises (CMEs), offered a solution to the marginalisation experienced in mainstream Australian society. This is evident in the Indigenous co-operative story, as co-operatives provided a springboard for community-led development, returning some autonomy to Indigenous communities and acting as a 'vehicle for working through trauma' associated with the legacy of the Settler state (Joyce Clague MBE, 22 October 2020, personal communication).

Indigenous-owned CMEs deliver a diverse range of services through a holistic, integrated model that includes medical and community services, housing, arts and cultural programs, childcare, aged care, education, and financial assistance (Krivokapic-Skoko et al., 2018). Their co-operative structure effectively positions them to address community-specific challenges, including capability building and the advancement of local self-determination. Operating beyond the interests of individual members, these co-operatives aim to generate income, opportunities, and broader social value for the entire community, thereby contributing significantly to local social capital.

The existing literature predominantly examines housing co-operatives and Indigenous community-controlled organisations operating in the health, housing, and social-service sectors, many of which are not explicitly classified as Indigenous co-operatives (Panaretto et al., 2014; Grimstad et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the analytical frameworks and empirical findings within this body of work align closely with core co-operative principles, including collective ownership, member benefit, and democratic governance, and therefore remain highly relevant to the study of Indigenous co-operative and mutual enterprises. Scholarship focusing explicitly on Indigenous co-operatives in Australia remains limited, highlighting the importance of drawing on a diverse evidence base, including grey literature and sector reports, to strengthen empirical and conceptual analysis. Notably, Krivokapic-Skoko et al. (2018) constitute one of the few empirical studies that directly examine Indigenous co-operative enterprises. Given the frequent overlap between co-operatives and Indigenous community-controlled organisational forms, integrating insights from both co-operative studies and Indigenous-controlled service-delivery literature provides a robust and appropriate analytical approach for this study.

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that combines grounded theory with a focus on Indigenous self-determination, allowing patterns and themes to emerge inductively from the historical and contemporary data. By situating the analysis within this framework, the research seeks to understand how Indigenous communities have exercised agency in establishing and sustaining co-operative and mutual enterprises. Using historical data in addition to figures obtained from the cooperatives registrar's data bases, this article seeks to provide more insights into the

history of Indigenous CMEs, their origins and resilience, and the barriers, challenges and opportunities they have been faced with. This, in turn, is also expected to provide insights into the changing status of Indigenous people in the Australian society, and how this has been reflected in legislation and institutions that were supposed to strengthen Indigenous self-determination.

2. A Brief History of Indigenous Co-operatives in Australia

It is broadly accepted that, whilst Indigenous Australian communities held deep co-operative values in their self-management of community and livelihoods, their visibility and capacity as distinct economic units suffered from the violent and expanding European colonial presence (Newhouse, 2003). The earliest formal Indigenous co-operative enterprises in Australia can be traced to the late nineteenth century, particularly among Torres Strait Islander pearling and fishing communities, which operated with support from Christian and industrial organisations and were often motivated by resistance to state control (Patmore et al., 2024). But the emergence of formally recognised Indigenous organisations, including co-operatives, brought paternalistic oversight from the Australian state and thus a reconfiguration in the locus of decision-making authority, as Indigenous organisational autonomy was mediated through state regulatory and administrative control. The introduction of mission-based co-operatives, such as those at the Indigenous community of Lockhart River, reflected aspects of co-operative organisation, but remained under European control. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that fully Indigenous-initiated and governed cooperatives emerged, most notably the Aboriginal Cooperative Society founded in Melbourne in 1957 (Patmore et al., 2024).

The emergence of co-operative enterprises within Indigenous communities was characterised by a simultaneous expansion of collective economic organisation and the persistence of paternalistic control (Wolfe, 2006; Altman, 2009). While Indigenous communities were able to mobilise their labour into collective enterprises that generated economic and social benefits, these organisational forms were often established within, and constrained by, mission and state-administered systems that exercised extensive authority over Indigenous lives (Rowse, 2000; Sullivan, 2007). As a result, early Indigenous co-operatives cannot be understood solely as expressions of self-determination, nor merely as instruments of state control. Rather, they reflect an inherent tension between Indigenous agency and the co-optation of Indigenous labour within settler-colonial governance structures. This resists straightforward resolution and underscores the complexity of Indigenous economic organisation under conditions of colonial domination. Indigenous co-operatives can also be understood as representing a constrained reconfiguration of Indigenous economic activity within assimilationist governance structures that limited Indigenous autonomy, consistent with the broader settler-colonial 'logic of elimination' (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388).

A number of Indigenous co-operative enterprises were founded during the mid-20th century, many with the assistance of Indigenous organisations such as the Aborigines Advancement League and Trade Union Committee on Aboriginal Rights, Indigenous community leaders such as Kevin Cook and Daisy Bindi, and non-Indigenous allies such as Rev. Alf Clint and Don McLeod. These often struggled to survive in a legislative environment that followed a 'tutelary monocultural approach of individual "advancement"' within assimilationist policy (Scrimgeour, 2016, p. 16). The intended goal was the long-term integration of Indigenous labour (regarded at the time as highly mobile and prone particularly to racialized exploitation) into the Australian economy through Mission-based management – a form of 'guided assimilation' (Loos & Keast, 1992, p. 290). By 1952, several experimental cases such as the Papuan Co-operative Movement in New Guinea had shown the benefits of co-operative governance, and this, accompanied by structural faults in the Mission system, encouraged the presiding Australian Board of Missions (ABM) to experiment with the adoption of the co-operative model for the organisations under its remit (Loos & Keast, 1992).

In the period 1973-1996, Indigenous CMEs flourished as a result of the political landscape of the Indigenous civil rights movement, and the Whitlam Government's expansion of the Office of Aboriginal Affairs to a fully resourced Department, birthing the era of Indigenous self-determination through policy reform (Perche, 2024). This saw the emergence of hundreds of Indigenous-owned CMEs engaged in commerce as well as providing services such as health, education and training, legal and financial services across the continent. These not only provided direct services to their communities but represented an attempt at the re-construction of Indigenous institutions from the ground up. The late political activist, Yaegl elder, and co-founder of the Nungera Co-operative Society Ltd, Joyce Clague MBE, stated that the preference of the co-operative model over associations and corporations was 'because

we want to have an equal say, we want to share the responsibility, and we want to work together to improve our living conditions and our life chances' (Co-operatives Federation of New South Wales & RDA Mid North Inc., 2013, p. 25).

Land rights through the Native Title process (beginning with the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*) made gains for Indigenous wealth and commerce; in conjunction with increased access to financial support, the rights allowed many Indigenous communities to return to their traditional homelands to live autonomously. These communities developed and managed their own local economies through the revival of traditional practices such as fishing, hunting and gathering, in what Altman, Buchanan and Biddle labelled the 'hybrid (three-sector) economy' or 'customary sector' (Altman, 2007; Altman et al., 2006). Out of this suite of cultural and economic practices has emerged the Indigenous Land Management model, comprising innovative responses to environmental management and economic development, including carbon sequestration, biodiversity protection, natural resource management and eco-tourism (Zeppel, 2006).

Despite the proliferation of community-controlled organisations and growing advocacy for Indigenous self-determination, the establishment of state-designed institutions – including Local Aboriginal Land Councils in 1983 and Native Title Corporations in 1993 – was undertaken with limited meaningful input from Indigenous communities (Bauman et al., 2013). While these institutions provided marginal gains in self-governance, they simultaneously introduced tension within the organisational landscape, as representative authority shifted away from community control toward the administration of Indigenous affairs according to the Australian state's frameworks and procedures (Sullivan, 2018). At the same time, the corporation model became more practical for funding opportunities (due in part to a policy erasure of alternative models including CMEs), and this came at the expense of community control.

Capacity for self-determination was effectively tied to increasingly paternalistic funding guidelines, and this found Indigenous organisations competing for their existing funding against non-Indigenous equivalents (Page, 2018). After a period of comparative freedom, the trajectory of Aboriginal Affairs policy, Page states, thus became animated by 'a narrative of top down, undemocratic, racist and unaccountable programming by the Commonwealth' (2018, p. 186).

Throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s the impact of neoliberalism on the wider co-operative economy came in two phases; changes in political economy that saw policy and legislative reforms sideline co-operative economics, and consequent marketplace changes that have facilitated the transition into a more aggressive environment for co-operative enterprises. Reduced visibility of co-operative and mutual management within policy, education and research compromised the perceived legitimacy of CME models, which contributed to the successive waves of incorporation and dissolution of enterprises. Internationally, lack of education and skills training specifically for co-operatives and mutuals (Kalmi, 2007) has led to a systemic lack of co-operative expertise in law, accounting and management, leaving co-operatives and mutuals alienated from adequate sector-specific support and thus affecting not only productivity but confidence in the model (Adams & Deakin, 2017).

The Indigenous sector experienced another radical policy change with the election of the Coalition government in 2013, with severe and wide-ranging cuts to Indigenous-specific programs and funding opportunities. With this came a highly competitive tendering process that explicitly prioritised corporations in its framework. For Indigenous organisations, the corporate model (established under the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006) became increasingly more practical for grant funding due in part to the policy erasure of alternative models such as co-operatives and mutuals (Page, 2018). The threat this posed to Indigenous CMEs in funding their service provision has been compounded by concerns that community control will evaporate from within in favour of management expertise sought from outside the Indigenous sector. This study seeks to redress these issues of confidence and capacity by investigating how social and cultural values inform the governance mechanisms of Indigenous co-operatives, and how these mechanisms facilitate self-determination. As co-operative governance has been observed as a method for protecting cultural tradition for ethnic communities, understanding the current landscape of Indigenous co-operatives would bring visibility to a sector of Indigenous employment and provide a platform for stories of Indigenous self-determination (Dana & Light, 2011).

2.1 Indigenous Organisations and Self-Determination

The guiding principle of self-determination involves not only the self-management of health, housing or community services, but the reproduction of all aspects of life. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) asserts the rights of Indigenous peoples in practicing self-determination ‘by virtue of which they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development’ (Assembly, 2007, p. 2). It then follows that a genuine project of self-determination would involve all aspects of life, including health, education, culture, and pertinently for many Indigenous peoples, language. Indigenous ways of conceptualising genuine self-determination are reflected in the UNDRIP, in that the scale at which we measure self-determination is most effectively realised at the community level (Porsanger, 2010, p. 437).

Collectively, Indigenous-owned CMEs employ hundreds of people and service thousands nationally (Patmore et al., 2024). Yet, for several decades, little academic attention has been paid to their role in Indigenous self-determination or their capacity for community development. There has been little focus in the literature on co-operatives and mutuals in Australia for decades, but this is changing, with several Australian researchers engaging (to varying degrees) in this field presently (Collins et al., 2016; Crabtree et al., 2019; Cutcher & Dale, 2022; Grimstad et al., 2021; Patmore et al., 2024; Phelan et al., 2012). Co-operative and Corporations Legislation has recently changed, providing a more consistent legislative environment for CMEs across Australia (NSW Government, 2024). This will have implications for CME development; with the legal changes having the potential to bring certainty and confidence to CME members. Whilst little research has been conducted on Indigenous co-operatives specifically, there have been promising outcomes of recent studies engaged in the wider Indigenous CME movement. As part of a series of research projects on community contributions among Indigenous enterprise, Krivokapic-Skoko et al., (2018) conducted an analysis of 68 Indigenous private, community-owned, and co-operative businesses across Australia. Using a qualitative questionnaire, data was collected to measure the extent to which each enterprise contributed to their local community. The results indicated that, compared to private and community-owned enterprises, co-operative enterprises were more frequently and intensely involved in community activities than either alternative, represented in terms of volunteer hours, goods and services provision and investments in sponsorship. Unpaid advice was found to be positively impacted by embeddedness in community and negatively impacted by entrepreneurial innovativeness and formal training in business management. This speaks to the issue of Western economic and organisational values penetrating Indigenous communities, as part of the wider neoliberal turn in which self-determination has become individualised. Predicated on individual power and mobility, the prioritisation of educational attainment represents a double-edged sword for Indigenous peoples; it ostensibly opens up doors for personal development, but may potentially disrupt the fabric of Indigenous cultural and political values.

While existing accounts provide detailed insight into the individuals and organisations involved in the establishment of early Indigenous co-operatives, less attention has been given to the operational characteristics of these enterprises. Early Indigenous co-operatives in Australia were typically established to deliver essential goods and services that were otherwise inaccessible to Indigenous communities, including housing, retail supply, employment generation, credit provision, and community infrastructure. Membership was generally drawn from local Indigenous communities, with eligibility often linked to kinship, residence, or community affiliation, reflecting collective rather than individualised economic objectives.

Governance arrangements varied considerably across time and place. In some cases, co-operatives were governed and managed directly by Indigenous members through elected boards and collective decision-making structures, consistent with co-operative principles of democratic control. In other instances, particularly during earlier periods, non-Indigenous actors – including missionaries, government officials, and advocacy organisations – played a significant role in establishment, administration, or oversight. While such involvement was often framed as supportive or facilitative, it also reflected the broader settler-colonial constraints imposed on Indigenous economic participation. Importantly, even where external support was present, these co-operatives frequently operated as practical instruments of Indigenous self-determination, enabling communities to exercise collective authority over economic resources, labour, and service provision, and to incrementally expand Indigenous control over organisational governance within restrictive institutional environments.

3. Indigenous CMEs: Legislative Models and Self-Determination

The Indigenous CME sector consists of several enterprise and incorporation models (see Table 1); enterprises incorporated under the *Corporations Act 2001*; *Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006*; *Incorporated Associations Acts* (of relevant State/Territory) and the recent *National Co-operative Law* legislation (of relevant State/Territory) (Australian Uniform Co-operative Laws Agreement, 2024). This has changed over time as well, with a number of enterprises having transitioned from co-operative to corporate status but maintaining levels of community control. The mutual sector now entirely comprises enterprises incorporated under three Acts: *The Corporations Act 2001*; *the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006*, and the relevant State/Territory iterations of the *Incorporated Associations Act*. These legislative changes have ostensibly reduced the administrative and regulatory barriers that were historically characteristic of the CME sector.

Table 1. Overview of different organisational types available to Indigenous enterprises, their governance model and incorporation/registration.

Organisation Type	Governance Model	Legislation	Incorporation
Corporation	Mutual	<i>Corporations Act 2001</i>	Corporation
		<i>Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006</i>	Indigenous Corporation
		Incorporated Associations Acts (State equivalent)	Incorporated association
	<i>Indigenous Corporation</i>	<i>Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006</i>	Indigenous Corporation
Co-operative	Multi-stakeholder co-operative	State Co-operative Acts and <i>Co-operatives (Adoption of National Co-operative Law) Act 2012</i>	Co-operative
	Enterprise co-operative		

Australia's legislative landscape for Indigenous CMEs reflects both federal fragmentation and the historical marginalisation of Indigenous economic initiatives. State and territory co-operative laws were originally designed for agricultural, credit, and consumer co-operatives, with little attention to Indigenous governance or collective cultural obligations. As a result, Indigenous CMEs often navigate multiple legal regimes while striving to maintain community-led decision-making, inclusive membership, and culturally embedded accountability practices.

Indigenous CMEs are governed under a combination of state co-operative legislation and, in some cases, federal corporations law. The Co-operatives National Law provides some harmonisation of registration, governance, and reporting standards, but significant variation remains across jurisdictions. Statutory frameworks emphasise financial compliance and conventional corporate governance, which may not reflect Indigenous models of collective ownership, kinship-based membership, or community accountability. This highlights the need for legislative flexibility that recognises Indigenous governance forms and supports enterprises in exercising self-determination while meeting statutory obligations.

From an accounting and management perspective, these legislative conditions have direct implications for Indigenous CMEs. Multi-service, community-oriented enterprises pursue social, cultural, and economic objectives simultaneously, yet existing reporting frameworks remain financially focused, potentially obscuring the broader value generated. Greater recognition of Indigenous governance structures would enable contextually appropriate

accountability mechanisms, supporting transparency, community trust, and sustainable resource management. Such reforms would strengthen the capacity of Indigenous CMEs to exercise self-determination and provide co-operative scholars with richer insights into governance, performance, and accountability in culturally grounded enterprises.

The legislative framework governing the establishment and operation of CMEs is dispersed across federal, state, and territory laws, creating administrative complexity. This fragmentation has been partially addressed through the adoption of the National Co-operative Law across all jurisdictions as of 2020 (NSW Fair Trading, 2020). However, several states and territories – including Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, and the Northern Territory – do not provide public access to information on registered co-operatives. This gap could be addressed by implementing a uniform requirement for all jurisdictions to maintain publicly accessible directories, similar to those in New South Wales, Victoria, and Western Australia (Apps, 2016).

Against a backdrop of fragmented legislative models, Indigenous co-operatives provide critical opportunities for tangible self-determination. The following two sub-sections provide illustrations of self-determination in two key sectors.

3.1 Indigenous Health and Community Control

Contemporary studies have illustrated the ways in which Indigenous communities build alternative assemblages for production (Bargh, 2012; King & Cormack, 2024) and alternative institutions for service provision (MacArthur & Matthewman, 2018). Many of the community-owned organisations that now comprise the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS) or Aboriginal Medical Services (AMS) sector, in the words of the late Puggy Hunter, emerged 'through a process of Aboriginal community struggle in response to the perceived failure of mainstream health services to meet health care needs' (as cited in Couzos & Murray, 2008: p.vi). For decades ACCHSs have administered holistic and culturally informed healthcare to Indigenous communities, particularly in regional and remote areas.

Recent Australian studies on ACCHSs have highlighted their considerable contributions to improving Indigenous health in Australia (Lavoie et al., 2010; Campbell et al., 2018; Coombs, 2018). Whilst research on the topic is comparatively limited, available evidence supports the claim that ACCHSs have played a crucial role in improving the health of Indigenous people (Coombs, 2018). ACCHSs operate more effectively than conventional health services due in part to their provision of culturally appropriate care. This is particularly evident in rural and regional areas where healthcare services are far less accessible than in urban areas, and where centralised (top-down) frameworks typically fail or produce friction when applied contextually within the diverse range of cultures and language groups that comprise Australia's First Nations (Panaretto et al., 2014; Coombs, 2018).

In regional and remote areas, ACCHSs account for around 50% of total Indigenous patients, indicating strong community trust in the model as a 'practical embodiment of Indigenous self-determination' (Coombs, 2018, p. 39). Similarly, research conducted by the Lowitja Institute highlighted the considerable capacity for ACCHSs in addressing the mental health needs of Indigenous communities, an outcome of their emphasis on cultural care and efforts to develop 'a greater level of trust and cultural credibility with their clients and local community' (Lowitja Institute, 2018).

However, since the election of the Coalition Government in 2013, federal policy has diminished the role of ACCHSs in their own field, most significantly through the implementation of the Primary Health Network (PHN) initiative. Coombs (2018) describes the political nature in which the PHN initiative came about; in essence a de-funded and consolidated version of Labor's Medicare Locals, the PHN initiative was originally targeted at assessing primary healthcare issues and identifying service gaps across the sector as 'third party payers' (Wade, Smith, Peck & Freeman, 2006, p.3, as cited in Coombs, 2018, p. 39)).

Presently the PHN initiative describes its key objectives as 'increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of medical services' and 'improving coordination of care' (DOH, 2020a) but the cost of consolidating the existing Medicare Local system was 'estimated to be as high as [AUD] \$200 million' whilst the PHNs resemble 'either consortia of former Medicare Locals or have a former Medicare local as lead partner' (Coombs, 2018, p. 3). Indigenous health is one of

the seven key priority areas of the PHN initiative, with specific attention on intersecting health issues such as social and emotional wellbeing, suicide prevention and alcohol and other drug services (DoH, 2016).

However, as Coombs (2018, p. 41) illustrates, the PHN guiding framework seems to contradict several key pieces of existing Government policy relating to Indigenous health (as well as ignoring recommendations from the Closing the Gap Steering Committee), leading to confusion and frustration among ACCHSs. The current guidelines stipulate the PHNs must establish Community Advisory Committees working in tandem with GP-led Clinical Councils with the responsibility of communicating locally relevant clinical and consumer issues to the PHN Board. Of these bodies, 'it is expected' Indigenous health organisations and their workers will be represented, but this is not required (DOH, 2016, p. 8). In some cases, this textual vagueness resulted in lack of engagement with appropriate ACCHSs by some PHNs (Coombs, 2018, pp. 41-43). As ACCHSs build upon decades of locally specific knowledge and trust, as well as long-standing relationships with communities and the resulting social capital, this lack of engagement regarding PHNs can potentially create institutional amnesia within the sector. In this instance, institutional amnesia can directly compromise service delivery by 'disrupting routines of behaviour or by robbing agents of the capacity to reinterpret policy when faced with uncertainty' (Stark & Head, 2019).

The evaluation of the PHN Program identified several unmitigated weaknesses of the policy, including a centralised bureaucracy with little connection to local communities and a hierarchical funding model that constrains the capacity for Indigenous self-determination and breeds conflict through competition for funds. Coombs argues that the increasing reliance on the PHN program has meant 'the project of self-determination appears to have been abandoned' and argued that the PHN Program 'fundamentally undermine[s] the principle of Indigenous self-determination' (Coombs, 2018, p. 41).

The service model developed for the PHN initiative thus leaves little room for genuine community consultation. PHNs embrace a particularly hierarchical structure, with assessment, procurement and funding responsibilities vested exclusively within the commissioning body (the PHNs). This leaves services providers (i.e., ACCHSs) with little oversight or control, which can be particularly detrimental to communities that build trust relationally over time.

With the Covid-19 pandemic, the ACCHS sector was posed with a threat and an opportunity. An article by Darumbal and South Sea Islander woman Amy McQuire (2020) appearing in *The Saturday Paper* delineated the journey that the sector has embarked upon since the first signs of a pandemic appeared. The sectors' capacity for gathering and disseminating information has proven incredibly effective, communicating not only between local communities and across state and territory boundaries, but as far away as the First Nations of Canada. This arguably stands as a testament to the adaptability of ACCHSs in the face of complex challenges and, as McQuire writes, the sector has made considerable groundwork in responding to past health issues such as H1N1 swine flu in 2009. One of the primary factors at work in the sector's responsiveness is its awareness of its community and the specific forms of care that their community require. For this reason, despite chronic underfunding and the legacies of racialized health inequality, the sector sees increasing demand for its services every year, reflecting the satisfaction of community-controlled health on the ground.

In this context, two themes have emerged out of the Covid-19 pandemic and the response by the ACCHS sector and the wider health community. Firstly, the pressure elicited in Indigenous organisations in their efforts to protect their communities has highlighted the fundamental value in sovereignty. Indigenous sovereignty over their lands remains a contested issue, with Native Title and associated legislative concessions having allowed some communities to exercise only a small measure of autonomy. Critical to this is the question of resource allocation, and the ACCHS sector has endured chronic underfunding amidst increasingly aggressive marketisation of social services, compounded by the vacuum in which Indigenous representation continues to be left. McQuire (2020) points to the paternalistic discourse that reinforces the notion that Indigenous lives are 'simply a "problem" to be solved, a "gap" to be filled'.

Secondly, Indigenous community-controlled healthcare operates on a holistic model, with services embedded in the localities they serve. This allows communities to directly shape the services provided by their organisations, resulting in highly efficient resource allocation. So it was that by the time Australia had its first confirmed case of Covid-19,

Indigenous health organisations such as the Apunipima Cape York Health Council were already producing public health information (in local languages and vernacular), sourcing equipment and discussing border closures (Finlay & Wenitong, 2020).

3.2 Indigenous Finance and Community Control

Globally, financial CMEs are the largest providers of microfinance services to poor and marginalised communities. This is often attributed to their capacity to contribute to wealth generation through local ownership and control of capital, which facilitate and protect investment within local communities (Pomeroy, 1995). In global terms, CMEs represent 78 million clients living below USD \$2 per day, and in South Asia alone, provide finance to 54.4% of those living under the extreme poverty line (MacDonald et al., 2013, p. 112). In the state of Kerala, India, co-operatively owned finance has played a pivotal role in providing economic mobility to women and developing food security (Reed et al., 2012). CMEs can provide a crucial service for marginalised communities by generating economic mobility and facilitating financial inclusion (Ghosh, 2013).

In Australia, up until the 1980s, credit unions were subject to their own legislative requirements and were afforded tax incentives. Not being subject to the same strict reporting requirements as the large mainstream banks and benefiting from reduced taxes helped sustain a wide range of credit unions that serviced discrete memberships. However, a range of structural changes, most notably demutualisation of consumer and producer co-operatives, privatization of the public sector, and deregulation of the financial services sector made it increasingly difficult for smaller credit unions to survive. There were also major issues of unprofessional handling of members' money, and the sector itself accepted that it needed to be regulated to improve their reputational standing in communities. The result was a raft of amalgamations, which saw credit union numbers fall from 549 in 1983 (Lewis, 1996) to 88 in 2013 (APRA, 2013). However, whilst amalgamations and incorporations reduced the total number of credit unions, the remaining credit unions underwent a process of professionalisation, thus maintaining the trust of customers, and saw their customer bases endure with many increasing. The sectoral makeup of credit unions and mutuals changed considerably with the professionalisation and marketisation reforms of the 1980s and 1990s with many changing from credit unions for members of a specific profession or workplace, to becoming Mutual Banks open to all customers.

Demutualisation and corporatisation of large agricultural, consumer and other rural co-operatives were popularised by new incentives for private companies and a systemic lack of CME expertise in accounting and management sectors, leaving the sector without adequate administrative and financial support. Often the primary cause of demutualisation came from those unfamiliar and/or unskilled in CME management:

In most cases, demutualisation is caused by the choices of the cooperative executives, with the support of outside consultants and with the acquiescent consensus of the boards of directors; very rarely is it a product of pressure from the members. (Barberini, 2009, in Co-operatives Australia, 2010, p. 2)

There does remain, however, a sizable portion of the CME sector that chose not to expand through concentration of ownership, but by re-investing in human capital through education and training, community building and sponsorship, and responding to their own communities' specific needs (MacDonald et al., 2013; MacPherson, 2007, 2008).

Catturani and Cutcher (2015) provide the example of Traditional Credit Union (TCU) the first fully Indigenous-owned credit union in Australia. As self-described 'First Nations banking specialists' the TCU provide financial services in thirteen remote communities and two urban centres across the Northern Territory (NT). These offices are complemented by twenty-five ATMs across the NT, as well as up-to-date mobile and internet banking services developed to allow members to access services without needing to leave their community.

TCU invests their surplus into staff training and development because:

- This maintains accreditation and compliance requirements

- This reduces stigmatisation of and within communities by providing professional services (Collard et al., 2003)
- People with a history of (financial) marginalisation are more wary, less trusting, and respond most effectively to professional services even if it comes at a higher cost (Jones, 2008; Catturani & Cutcher, 2015)

In conjunction with their financial services, TCU also provides financial literacy programs in their communities.

4. Methodology and Approach

Given the absence of a comprehensive and authoritative register of Indigenous co-operative and mutual enterprises in Australia, this study adopts an inductive analytical approach that moves from empirical evidence toward the development of broader organisational and sectoral insights (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Foley, 2010). Grounded theory is employed to systematically engage with available data in order to generate conceptual understandings of the structural characteristics, governance arrangements, and service orientations of Indigenous co-operatives, mutuals, and community-controlled organisations. This methodological approach supports the development of analytically robust insights that are appropriate for strategic and policy-relevant analysis in a context where established theoretical and empirical frameworks remain limited.

This analysis provides an estimate of the number and distribution of Indigenous Co-operative and Mutual Enterprises (CMEs) in Australia, disaggregated by State and Territory and by primary service sector. Its purpose is to present a nationally consistent, evidence-based overview of Indigenous CMEs. The analysis is designed for strategic, policy, and sectoral understanding rather than regulatory or compliance use.

The primary data source for this work is the Business Council of Co-operatives and Mutuals (BCCM), particularly its 2021 *Indigenous Inclusion in the Co-operative and Mutual Sector* report, which provides the most widely cited national estimates of Indigenous CMEs and their distribution across states and territories. This material was supplemented by the Care Together Co-operative and Mutual Enterprise Directory, academic and sector research on Indigenous community enterprises, and publicly available information from state co-operative registries and Indigenous community-controlled organisation reporting. No single dataset provides a complete enumeration of Indigenous CMEs; therefore, this methodology synthesises the most comprehensive and credible sector-level evidence currently available.

For the purposes of this analysis, an Indigenous Co-operative and Mutual Enterprise is defined as an organisation that is Indigenous-owned, Indigenous-controlled, or Indigenous-community-governed; operates on co-operative, mutual, or collective principles such as member or community benefit and shared governance; and is recognised in sector research as part of the co-operative and mutual economy. Organisations are included regardless of whether they are incorporated under the Co-operatives National Law or alternative legislative frameworks, including co-operative-like entities operating under other legal forms. This definition reflects BCCM's sector classification approach and acknowledges the diversity of legal structures used by Indigenous organisations.

Each enterprise was assigned to a single primary service sector, based on its dominant activity. Where organisations deliver multiple services, classification was determined by reference to the organisation's primary purpose as stated in governing documents or its core service emphasis in public reporting. The sector categories used throughout the analysis are Health and Medical Services; Community and Family Services; Arts, Culture and Creative Industries; Education and Training; Employment, Business and Economic Development; Housing and Community Infrastructure; Sport, Recreation and Youth; and Multi-service or Unclassified. Assigning a single dominant sector avoids double-counting and reflects standard practice in sectoral economic and social analysis.

Organisations were allocated to a single State or Territory based on their principal place of operation or registration. Where organisations operate across jurisdictions, allocation was determined by the primary service footprint. State and Territory totals were reconciled to national totals to ensure internal consistency across all tables.

All figures presented are best-available estimates rather than exact counts. Numbers are rounded to whole organisations, and sector and state totals reconcile exactly to a national total of 224 Indigenous CMEs, consistent with BCCM reporting. No statistical weighting or extrapolation beyond documented sector distributions was applied.

Several limitations should be noted. Australia does not maintain a single official register of Indigenous Co-operative and Mutual Enterprises. Some Indigenous organisations operate under the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006 or other legal frameworks and may not be consistently classified as CMEs across datasets. Service sector classification necessarily simplifies the activity of organisations that operate holistic, multi-service models. In addition, small, remote, or recently established enterprises may be under-represented in publicly available data sources. For these reasons, the figures should be interpreted as conservative, sector-level estimates suitable for strategic planning and policy analysis rather than precise enumeration.

Despite these limitations, the methodology reflects the most authoritative national sector research available, applies consistent classification across jurisdictions and service sectors, and makes transparent assumptions that can be replicated or refined as new data emerges. As such, the analysis provides a credible and defensible national picture of Indigenous Co-operative and Mutual Enterprises in Australia.

4.1 Self-Determination as a Guiding Framework

Self-determination comprises the accumulated totality of human development; social, cultural, political and economic rights are interdependent and inextricably linked. The concept of self-determination cannot be reduced to simply political or economic rights, as Moses (2000) and Muehlebach (2003) argue. Rather at the core of all conceptualisations of self-determination lie two key themes: consent and control (Porter et al., 2017).

Indigenous CMEs provide a practical response to the marginalisation and disempowerment created by settler-colonial policies, including land dispossession, restrictive labour regimes, and exclusion from mainstream economic and political institutions. By enabling communities to collectively own and manage resources, deliver housing, health, and social services, and make decisions through culturally grounded governance structures, these enterprises allow Indigenous people to exercise self-determination in tangible ways. Indigenous CMEs are not merely symbolic; they structure economic activity and community decision-making to restore autonomy, support social cohesion, and counter the ongoing effects of historical dispossession. Analysing these organisations therefore reveals how governance, membership, and service provision intersect as mechanisms through which Indigenous communities assert agency and rebuild authority over their economic and social futures.

The emergence of Settler Colonial Studies two decades ago marked a new development in the discussion on coloniality and decolonisation within the conceptual landscape of colonialism, supplementing the considerable work by Indigenous scholars living under settler colonialism collectively regarded as Indigenous Studies. Veracini (2011, p. 3) in their introduction to the inaugural issue of the journal *Settler Colonial Studies*, argues that there exists an academic obligation to disentangle colonialism from settler colonialism due to the fundamental distinctions innate in each politico-historical process. Veracini asserts that whilst both systems are prescribed by displacement and unequal relations, it is in the specific spatial nature and the established hierarchical distinctions that most distinguishes the two forms and their impact on Indigenous communities; colonialism sought to absorb the dispossessed communities into its economic machine, whilst settler colonialism sought to deny the existence of any community at all; put simply, ‘if I come and say: ‘you, work for me’, it’s not the same as saying ‘you, go away’ (Veracini, 2011, p. 1).

Patrick Wolfe (2006) situates Indigenous dispossession within the broader framework of settler colonialism, describing it as governed by a “logic of elimination” (p. 388). Unlike the franchise-colonial relationships of the British Raj or the Dutch East Indies, settler-colonialism is not primarily extractive; rather, it seeks to replace Indigenous populations on their land with an imported labour force that extracts surplus value from the colony’s resources (Wolfe, 2006, p. 868). This perspective highlights how Indigenous populations are systematically marginalised, dispossessed, and incorporated into economic systems in ways that are both structural and enduring. Understanding these dynamics provides a conceptual foundation for analysing the specific historical and contemporary experiences

of Indigenous peoples in Australia, where settler colonial institutions shaped the emergence, governance, and limitations of Indigenous co-operative and mutual enterprises.

In this context, Indigenous self-determination can be understood as both a political and economic response to the enduring structures of settler-colonialism. While Wolfe's analysis highlights the systemic dispossession and exploitation that underpinned the establishment of settler societies, Indigenous communities have consistently sought to assert control over their social, cultural, and economic affairs despite these constraints. Self-determination encompasses the capacity of Indigenous peoples to organise collectively, manage resources, and make decisions that reflect community priorities and cultural values, rather than being subordinated to externally imposed governance or economic systems. In the Australian context, mechanisms such as co-operatives, mutual enterprises, and community-controlled organisations have provided practical avenues through which Indigenous communities can exercise this agency, reclaim autonomy over service delivery, and pursue development pathways aligned with local knowledge, collective wellbeing, and intergenerational sustainability. These structures demonstrate that self-determination is not merely a legal or rhetorical principle but a materialised form of governance, economic participation, and cultural continuity that directly counters the ongoing legacies of dispossession described by Wolfe (2006).

4.2 Data collection methods

A scoping review was conducted using secondary source material – this comprised registry data from State Government co-operative registries, the BCCM co-operative and mutual directory, and University of Western Australia's Australian Co-operative and Mutual Enterprise Index (Mazzarol et al., 2015; BCCM, 2024b).

Due to the structural similarities between co-operative and mutual models – and the recent history of co-operatives transferring to the mutual model – this article analyses both mutual and co-operative enterprises in Australia today, referring to them thus as CMEs. Several challenges in the collation of (particularly Indigenous owned) CMEs in Australia have presented themselves; namely, the range of registrations applicable to the enterprises, the lack of up-to-date databases owing to the fluctuating nature of the CME sector, difficulty identifying the nature of CME ownership, and the lack (or unreliable nature) of online resources for many enterprises.

Regarding the range of registration requirements, these comprise separate federal, state and territory-based legislation; this has been somewhat mitigated with the establishment of the National Co-operative Law legislation across all States and Territories as of 2020 (NSW Fair Trading, 2020), but some States and Territories (Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, and Northern Territory) do not provide public access to co-operatives within their jurisdiction, making cross-references and identification difficult. This could easily be mitigated by a uniform requirement for States and Territories to provide freely accessible directories of their registered co-operatives similar to those in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia.

In terms of access and analysis of contemporary data, several issues persist. Firstly, very few people have sought to tabulate data specifically on Indigenous CMEs, and of those, the primary aim has typically not involved investigating the Indigenous CME sector specifically, but rather the overall CME sector (the exceptions being Collins et al., 2016; Collins et al., 2017; Mazzarol, 2017; Krivokapic-Skoko et al., 2018, Krivokapic-Skoko, 2018). Secondly, whilst annual returns are required for each organisation within its State, this data is not freely accessible, as aforementioned, and thus would involve a burdensome length of time and resources for organisations or individuals to maintain complete and contemporary records. As well as this, some organisations tend to submit their returns late which would further complicate third-party data collection, as this can be perceived as evidence of insolvency and/or dissolution. Thirdly, CMEs have been converting to corporations in considerable numbers over the past two decades, and this has been no different for Indigenous CMEs.

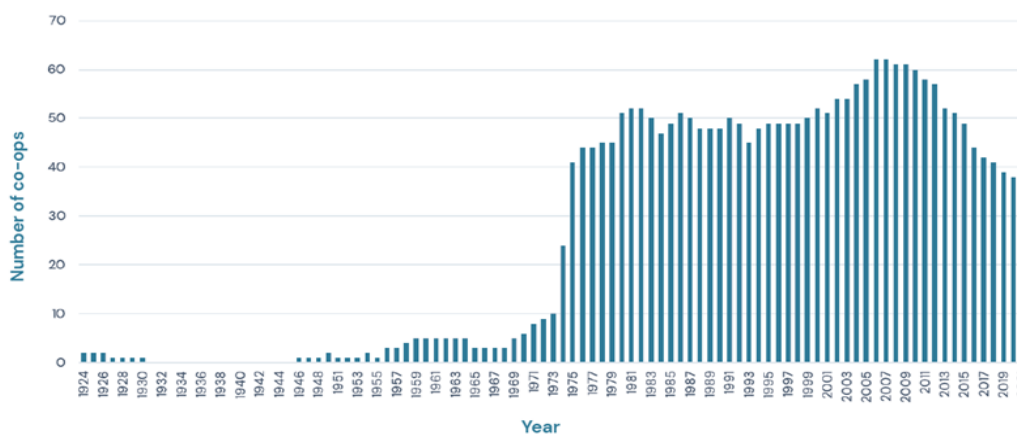
This paper has also benefitted from historical records over Indigenous Co-operatives collected as part of the Visual Historical Atlas of Australian Co-operatives research project (Patmore et al., 2024). Acknowledging the aforementioned difficulties in providing accurate statistics for CMEs, current approximations conclude the number of co-operatives in each State/Territory are as follows in the next section.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Indigenous CMEs in Australia over time

The vast majority of Indigenous co-operatives still in operation have their roots in the early 1970s – specifically the 3-year period coinciding with the Whitlam Labor Government (1972-1975). There seem to be two key reasons for this plateau post-1977. Firstly, the Whitlam Dismissal and consequent Fraser Government represented a considerable loss for the struggle for self-determination. Under the new federal slogan of ‘self-management’ the relatively new Department of Aboriginal Affairs saw a 43% budget cut – of this, funding reserved for Indigenous enterprises had \$8 million cut of its AUD \$10 million annual budget (The Canberra Times, 1976). Secondly, *Commonwealth Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act* 1976 introduced a simplified form of incorporation for Indigenous organisations, providing an alternative to the co-operative model popular during the first half of the 1970s.

Figure 1. Number of Indigenous Co-operatives and Mutuals in Australia



Source: Patmore et al., 2024

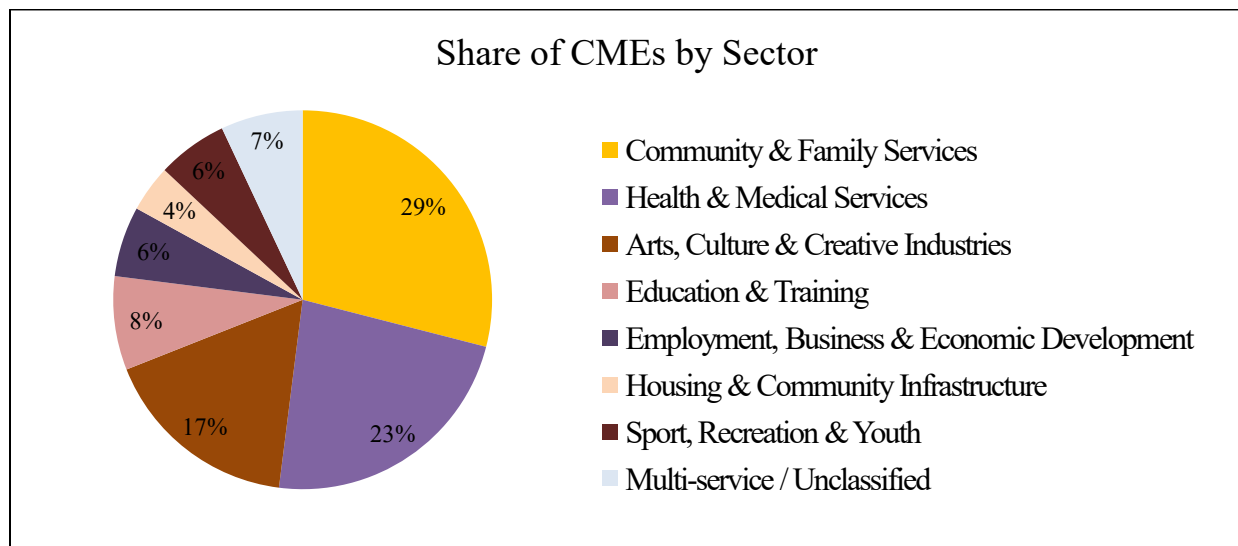
There was a continued growth of Indigenous co-operatives, reaching a recorded peak in the Visual Historical Atlas of Australian Co-operatives (VHAAC) of 95 in 2007. A significant example was the Traditional Credit Union (TCU), which was founded by East Arnhem Land elders in the NT in 1995, concerned that financial exclusion, which was being exacerbated by the closure of bank branches in regional and remote communities, would increase the socio-economic disadvantage of Indigenous communities. By October 2009 the TCU had a head office at Casuarina, a Darwin suburb, and ten full-service branches in remote Indigenous communities. It offered a financial literacy education program for its members and sponsored community festivals, sporting events and university scholarships. Indigenous co-operatives became involved in legal struggles to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians with the Bur-del Co-operative Advancement Society, at Ayr, Queensland, acting against the state government in 1979 under the federal Racial Discrimination Act for its refusal to allow a caravan park lease (Cutcher & Dale, 2022, p. 2; Patmore & Westcott, 2021, p. 54).

Table 2. Verified State/Territory count of Indigenous CMEs with a sector allocation based on industry distribution trends from sector data

State / Territory	Health & Medical	Community & Family	Arts & Culture	Education & Training	Employment & Economic	Housing & Infrastructure	Sport & Youth	Multi-service / Unclassified	Total
NSW	14	18	10	5	4	3	4	8	66
QLD	12	14	8	4	3	3	3	8	55
VIC	8	10	6	3	2	2	2	8	41
NT	9	10	5	2	2	1	2	6	27
WA	5	7	6	2	1	1	2	6	20
SA	3	4	2	1	1	0	1	0	12
ACT	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
TAS	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Australia	52	65	37	17	13	10	14	16	224

Table 2 and Figures 2 and 3 present the geographic and sectoral distribution of Indigenous CMEs across Australian States and Territories, revealing significant variation in scale and service focus. New South Wales and Queensland exhibit the highest concentrations, reflecting both larger Indigenous populations and more established histories of Indigenous community-controlled organisations. Victoria, the Northern Territory, and Western Australia show moderate but diverse presence, while South Australia, the ACT, and Tasmania have comparatively few CMEs, highlighting uneven national development.

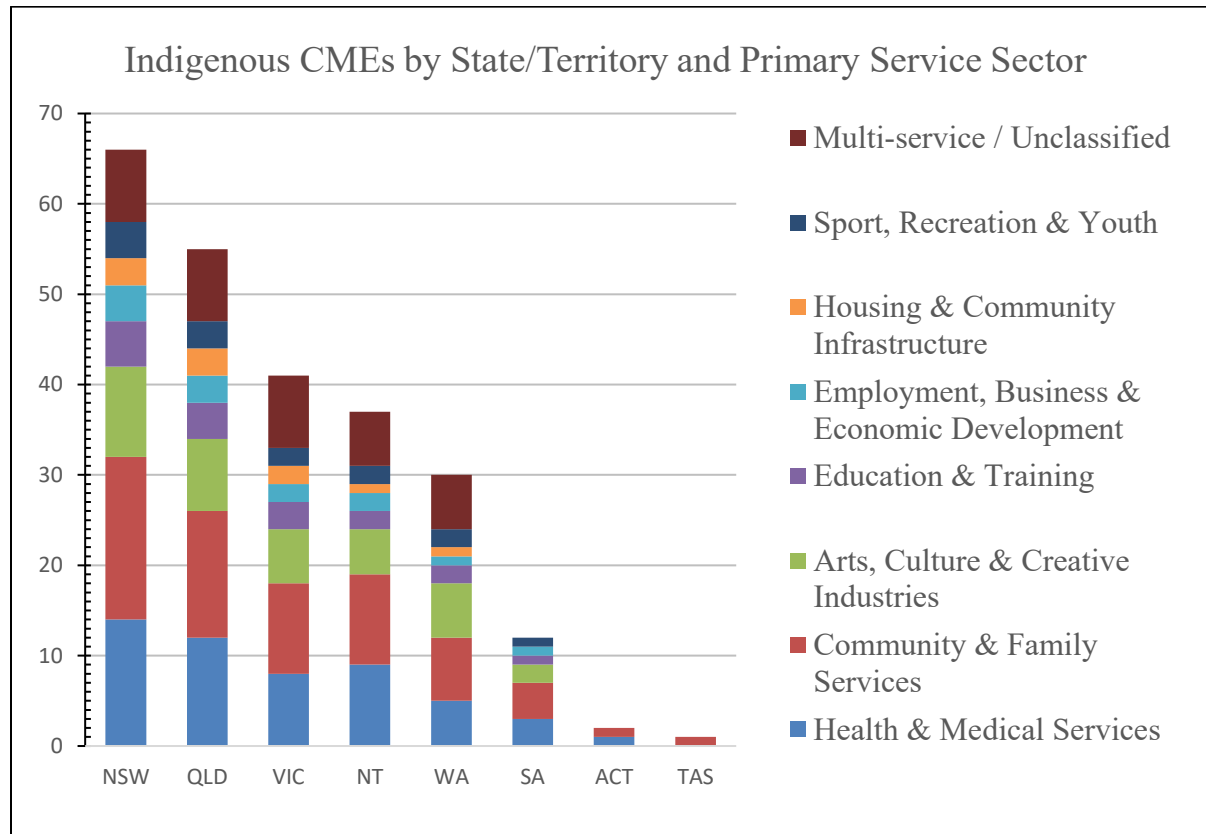
Figure 2. Indigenous CMEs by Primary Service Sector based on industry distribution trends from sector data



Across jurisdictions, CMEs predominantly operate within community and family services, health and medical services, and arts, culture, and creative industries, emphasizing collective wellbeing, cultural continuity, and social

reproduction over purely commercial aims. Education and training, employment and economic development, and housing and community infrastructure are less prominent, often embedded within multi-service models. The notable presence of multi-service or unclassified CMEs underscores their multifunctional nature and the limitations of conventional industry classifications when applied to Indigenous-controlled enterprises.

Figure 3. Indigenous CMEs by Primary Service Sector across States/Territories based on industry distribution trends from sector data



From a governance and self-determination perspective, this sectoral profile suggests that Indigenous CMEs serve as vehicles for communities to exercise collective authority over service delivery, resource allocation, and decision-making. The integration of diverse services within single organisations reflects place-based governance and locally defined priorities. For accounting and management, such multifunctionality complicates standard performance measurement and accountability frameworks, as Indigenous CMEs pursue social, cultural, and community outcomes beyond financial metrics. These complexities necessitate analytical approaches that accommodate the hybrid economic and social objectives characteristic of Indigenous co-operatives, reinforcing the importance of context-sensitive frameworks within co-operative accounting and management scholarship.

5.2 Historical trajectory – Analysis and Discussion

Co-operative and mutual models have suggested promise as effective vehicles for a diverse range of political, economic and social functions. Recent studies in innovation and sustainability transitions have highlighted the capacity for co-operative firms to influence change within dominant socio-technical configurations, addressing challenges of eco-system degradation. Under the appropriate conditions co-operatives have acted as ‘intermediary negotiating organisations’ to facilitate landscape management (Franks, 2016) and connected workers to collaboratively regulate resource extraction (Griffith, 2008; McCay et al., 2014).

Of the presently registered Indigenous co-operatives, their provided services are diverse and multifunctional; for example, medical co-operatives not only provide relevant medical advocacy and support services, but very often also provide social and community services; housing co-operatives often provide legal and community services. This speaks to the holistic nature of these organisations; as they are community controlled, their services provision reflects the direct needs of their local members.

Neoliberal public management renewed pre-existing race-based discrimination through the bureaucratisation of cultural imperialism, criticised by one of Sullivan's Indigenous interviewees as 'part of a larger scheme to downgrade community control of resource agencies and the role they play' in providing value for their communities (2018, p. 207). Preliminary research into the registrations of Indigenous businesses provides an insight into the substantial share of co-operatives that have incorporated over the past two decades. A study in 2015 established the number of registered co-operatives at seventy-six (Mazzarol, 2015). As of 2020, approximately forty-three remain (active) registered co-operatives; the shortfall attributed to incorporation, dissolution and amalgamation. Understanding this process and its impact on community control and self-determination would be a potential outcome of this work.

There remains a chronic shortage of specialist accounting, legal and planning advice for Indigenous CMEs. This forces CMEs to employ services of professionals with appreciation for neither Indigenous nor co-operative governance. Through this process arises the risk of the Rochdale cul-de-sac, a process of co-operative restructuring by which the responsibilities of management and service provision are removed from the membership and ascribed to (external) managerial agents. By employing non-Indigenous professionals, a (racialized) principal-agent relationship may develop, in which the community becomes de-tethered from management and decision-making mechanisms.

5.3 Current status – Organisational Diversity and Self-Determination

In Australia and around the world, there is a returning focus on co-operative, mutual and community-controlled enterprises (CMEs), particularly in functioning as effective organisational vehicles for service provision and community development. A key reason for this is the democratic governance models embedded within CMEs that allow members their own voice in decision-making processes, whether through direct representation or by a member-elected Board. For Australia's Indigenous peoples, these models have proven to be effective vehicles for building self-determination by embedding decision-making power into their communities and providing Indigenous peoples with means to build social, cultural and economic wellbeing on their own terms.

Indigenous co-operatives, mutuals, and community-controlled organisations in Australia exhibit considerable diversity in their organisational forms, reflecting differences in size, service focus, membership structures, and governance arrangements. For example, some Indigenous CMEs operate as housing co-operatives, providing affordable and culturally safe housing managed collectively by community members. Others focus on health and social services, such as Aboriginal medical services or family support organisations, governed through community-elected boards. There are also arts and cultural enterprises, including Indigenous arts co-operatives, which combine economic activity with cultural preservation and community engagement. This heterogeneity has significant implications for governance and self-determination, as organisational form shapes decision-making processes, accountability mechanisms, and the degree of community control exercised. Multi-service or integrated co-operatives often incorporate kinship-based representation and culturally embedded decision-making practices, enhancing local agency, while smaller or single-purpose enterprises enable targeted community-directed outcomes. Recognising this diversity is crucial for co-operative accounting and management, as conventional reporting frameworks may not fully capture the hybrid social, cultural, and economic objectives embedded within Indigenous enterprises, and underscores the ways organisational form can strengthen self-determination.

As co-operative governance has been observed as a method for protecting cultural tradition for ethnic communities, understanding the current landscape of Indigenous co-operatives would bring visibility to a sector of Indigenous employment and provide a platform for stories of Indigenous self-determination.

As Indigenous enterprises are known to play crucial social and economic roles within Indigenous communities (including income generation, employment, and community development) many have argued for them to be essential to any plan to Close the Gap (Hunter, 2015; Collins et al., 2017). The growing body of empirical data on

Indigenous entrepreneurship has offered insight into the vital role community plays in economic development and challenged the nascent race-based stigma that continues to accompany Indigenous (entrepreneurs and) communities in Australia (Mazzarol & Reboud, 2020).

5.4 Self-Government and Self-Governance

A pertinent point of difference is in what self-determination means in the political sense – self-government or self-governance. ‘Government’ comprises jurisdictional control over a space, whereas ‘governance’ comprises processes and institutional capacity to be able to exercise that control through sound decision-making. The discursive difference is considerable. Governance is a conditional practice afforded to a group, comprising concessional autonomy. Governance is transitory; good ‘governance’, on the other hand, comprises the means to establish this with the ultimate aim of achieving the social, cultural, and economic developments sought by citizens. If this is the aim of good governance, then the questions that follow are:

- How do we know when this is accomplished?
- What information is required to establish this?
- What data are available to assist in answering these questions?
- Who is involved in the evaluation?

Over the past decade, interest in co-operatives and mutual enterprises (CMEs) in Australia has grown significantly, driven by their capacity to support inclusive, community-led economic development. This trend is well-documented in the annual *National Mutual Economy* (NME) Reports by BCCM, based on the Australian Co-operative and Mutual Enterprise Index (ACMEI) led by Professor Tim Mazzarol at the University of Western Australia (BCCM, 2024a).

Today, there are approximately 222 Indigenous-owned and controlled CMEs in Australia, with a combined turnover of approximately AUD \$1.3 billion (BCCM, 2021). These organisations operate primarily in healthcare, social services, cultural education and employment, and are recognised for fostering community empowerment and local economic development (BCCM, 2024c).

The 2024 NME Report shows that the top 100 CMEs generated AUD 43.2 billion in revenue in 2022–23, a 16.1% increase on the previous year. Net profits more than doubled to AUD 1.83 billion, and assets (excluding superannuation funds) totalled AUD 191.6 billion (BCCM, 2024a). The 2025 report confirms continued growth, with revenue reaching AUD 47.7 billion by June 2024, up 38.6% from FY2021 (BCCM, 2025a).

The sector also has a substantial social and economic footprint. In 2023, CMEs employed approximately 89,000 people and supported more than 68,000 small business members (BCCM, 2024b). BCCM member organisations alone represent over 14.4 million individuals and around 60,000 businesses (BCCM, 2025a).

BCCM’s research extends beyond financial metrics to include social inclusion. Its 2021 report *Doing Business Together* highlighted cultural parallels between Indigenous values and co-operative principles, including community control and democratic governance (BCCM, 2021). This led to the development of a Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) aimed at supporting Indigenous participation in the sector (BCCM, 2022).

However, structural barriers persist. Under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, only entities incorporated under the *Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006* are eligible for large grants (above AUD \$500,000), excluding many co-operatives from critical funding opportunities (Senate Economics References Committee, 2016). This limitation pressures some Indigenous organisations to abandon co-operative structures despite their alignment with cultural values.

To address these challenges, BCCM has introduced targeted initiatives such as the *Care Together* program and the *Bunya Fund*. These aim to support co-operative development in social care and regional services, including in Indigenous communities, through funding and technical assistance (BCCM, 2025b).

Similarly, the regulatory environment for co-operatives and mutuals in Australia has undergone significant reform, with two primary developments shaping the sector: the introduction of the Co-operatives National Law (CNL) and

the 2019 amendments to the *Corporations Act 2001 (Cth)* through the *Treasury Laws Amendment (Mutual Reforms) Act 2019*.

The CNL, first adopted by New South Wales in 2014 and subsequently implemented across most Australian jurisdictions, created a harmonised legal framework for co-operatives (BCCM, 2024a). This eliminated the need for dual registration across states, reducing compliance costs and enabling co-operatives to operate more efficiently across borders (NSW Fair Trading, 2020). The framework also simplified governance and reporting requirements, particularly for small co-operatives, thereby supporting grassroots and regional enterprise growth (Fressoli et al., 2014).

The Mutual Reforms Act 2019 marked the first substantive legislative recognition of mutual entities under federal corporate law. It provided mutuals – particularly customer-owned banks, health funds, and motoring clubs – with a mechanism to raise investment capital without compromising their member-owned structure (ICMIF, 2019). Prior to this, mutuals were disadvantaged in capital markets due to the lack of a legal framework distinguishing them from shareholder-owned firms (ICA, 2020).

These reforms enhanced sectoral legitimacy and competitiveness. They also aligned the regulatory framework more closely with international cooperative standards, as advocated by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA, 2020). Furthermore, BCCM has argued that these changes were instrumental in stimulating growth and diversification in the sector (BCCM, 2024a).

Despite these gains, challenges remain. The BCCM's 2025 report *Modernising Australian Co-operatives Regulation* identified structural inefficiencies in the current regulatory regime, including delays in rule approvals, outdated model rules, and the lack of mechanisms such as asset-lock provisions and digital governance tools (BCCM, 2025). The report recommended a suite of reforms aimed at enhancing regulatory flexibility, strengthening transparency, and modernising cooperative governance in line with corporate best practices.

Western Australia has recently acted on some of these issues. In 2024, the WA Parliament passed amendments to the Co-operatives Act 2009 and the Associations Incorporation Act 2015 to enable hybrid and virtual meetings, improve member privacy protections, and clarify rules around proxies and electronic signatures (WA Government, 2025). These changes are expected to improve accessibility and participation, particularly in remote and regional communities.

The reforms over the past decade at both the national and state levels have reduced regulatory barriers, increased operational flexibility, and provided mechanisms for sustainable capital raising. However, further modernisation is needed to ensure the sector remains competitive and inclusive in a rapidly evolving economic landscape.

6. Conclusion and Future Research

A scoping review of existing datasets reveals significant structural and data-related barriers to accurately mapping the Indigenous CME sector in Australia. While resources such as the BCCM directory and the ACMEI provide a foundation, a lack of consistent, accessible, and up-to-date registry information – especially across states like Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, and the Northern Territory – makes comprehensive identification difficult. These challenges are exacerbated by the diversity of registration pathways, delays in annual returns, and the ongoing trend of CMEs converting to corporate models. Moreover, most research has not focused specifically on Indigenous CMEs, leading to a scarcity of targeted, reliable data. Without uniform public reporting standards across jurisdictions and sustained investment in culturally informed data collection, the visibility and understanding of Indigenous CMEs will remain fragmented. This has implications for policy, funding, and Indigenous economic development, as accurate data is crucial to supporting the sector's growth and sustainability.

From the 1970s onward, Australia's approach to Indigenous affairs underwent major shifts, from Whitlam-era policy of self-determination to Fraser-era emphases on self-management, to the later dominance of neoliberal public management. Early initiatives allowed some Indigenous communities to return to traditional lands and build local economies through what became known as the 'hybrid economy'. However, this momentum was disrupted in the

1980s and 1990s by increasing state intervention, corporatisation, and policy-driven restructuring that eroded community control. Many Indigenous co-operatives either dissolved or restructured under pressure to conform to funding and governance models that marginalised culturally aligned forms like CMEs. In recent years, however, there has been renewed interest in CMEs for their alignment with Indigenous values, their capacity to promote self-determination, and their growing recognition in sustainability transitions globally. Indigenous medical and housing co-operatives now provide not only essential services but also act as holistic community hubs. Yet significant challenges remain, including limited access to culturally informed legal and financial expertise, which risks disempowering communities through external management. For co-operatives to support Indigenous self-determination meaningfully, structural reforms must ensure these enterprises remain rooted in community control while equipped with appropriate, culturally competent support.

The privileging of the corporate model, due to restrictive funding policies and the marginalisation of alternatives like co-operatives and mutuals, have further weakened Indigenous autonomy. In contrast, the recent resurgence of interest in CMEs, supported by organisations like the BCCM, reflects a renewed recognition of their alignment with Indigenous values such as collective ownership, democratic decision-making, and community empowerment. While legislative reforms and sector growth have enhanced the legitimacy and capacity of CMEs, structural barriers – including limited funding eligibility for Indigenous co-operatives – continue to constrain their potential. Achieving meaningful self-determination requires not only governance capacity but also regulatory and financial frameworks that recognise and support Indigenous-led co-operative models on their own terms.

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Applying Adult Learning Theory to Strengthen Co-operative Education in the Workplace

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Abstract: Adult learning states that adults learn differently than children and therefore require learning experiences that meet their specific needs. This paper explores the impact that existing adult learning theory and concepts have on enhancing co-operative education for co-operative enterprise employees. The initial research focuses on adult learning theory from adult learning theorist, Malcolm Knowles, and his theory of andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners. The research also explores how different organizations, both co-operative and non-cooperative, are using adult learning theory to enhance workplace education for adults. The paper concludes with key insights that share why all co-operative organizations should be applying adult learning theory to their educational programs to ensure that their organization is effectively supporting the International Co-operative Alliance's (ICA) 5th Co-operative Principle, Education, Training and Information.

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Keywords: co-operative education, adult learning theory, andragogy, workplace education, 5th Co-operative Principle

1. Introduction

This research explores adult learning theory and how it can be applied to enhance co-operative education for employees within co-operative organizations. The paper also shares examples of how both co-operative and non-co-operative organizations have designed learning experiences based on the six characteristics of adult learners created by Malcolm Knowles to enhance employee education within the workplace. Recommendations are then provided with ways to enhance existing training and education in a variety of co-operative organizations.

Figure 1. Six Characteristics of Adult Learners



Source: Malcolm Knowles, 1978

2. Research and Methodology

2.1 Research Question

The research addresses the following question: What adult learning principles can be used to support and enhance co-operative education at co-operative enterprises so that employees engage with the co-operative principles and values and can apply them to their work?

2.2 Significance of Research

Research conducted on adult learning theory is important because it provides evidence that learning experiences need to be designed based on andragogical principles rather than pedagogical principles. Despite evidence that workplace learning needs to be designed for the specific needs of adult learners, there is still workplace learning based on pedagogical methodology.

Research into corporate adult learning can lead to increased motivation and employee retention. As Marko Radovan (2024) argues, effective employee learning “is a crucial mechanism for retraining and upskilling individuals across various sectors, serving a dual purpose: keeping pace with the changing world and empowering individuals to thrive” (p. 2). Without research showing why and how co-operative education needs to be enhanced, co-operative employees, managers, members and internal learning and development teams may not see anything wrong with the training currently being delivered.

2.3 Adult Learning Theory to Enhance Employee Education

A critical component missing from existing workplace education is the consideration of adult learning theory, specifically around Malcolm Knowles’s principles of andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners. Despite knowledge and theories that prove that adults learn differently than children, many organizational courses and programs continue to be developed on pedagogical principles where the teacher is the center of the learning instead of the learner, which Wendy Conaway and Barbara Zorn-Arnold (2015) argue is not an “approach suitable for adults” (p. 41).

As such, the purpose of this research is to explore the impact that adult learning theory can have on co-operative education for employees of co-operative enterprises. The research conducted focuses on journal articles and media that discuss adult learning theory and the importance of considering the principles of andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners when designing workplace education for adult learners. The research also explores effective adult learning being delivered within the workplace to employees at both co-operative and non-co-operative enterprises, providing insight into the recommendations made at the end of this paper.

2.4 Research Implications

The practical implications of the research are that the findings can be applied to enhance existing co-operative workplace educational programming. The paper concludes with recommendations on how co-operative enterprises can use adult learning theory to create engaging co-operative education, that increases employee knowledge of the co-operative model. Redesigning existing co-operative education with consideration of adult learning theory will not only increase employee knowledge within co-operative organizations but will help support a strong co-operative culture. For employees to embody and speak to the co-operative values in the decisions they make, they need to be involved in more learning experiences, including simulations, games and case studies which would allow employees to engage with the learning and connect it to their lived experiences and knowledge involving co-operatives, rather than passively hear about the co-operative difference (Audebrand et al., 2017 p. 108).

2.5 Methodological approach

Answering the research question entailed exploratory qualitative research on adult learning theory and co-operative learning being delivered to employees at a large consumer co-operative in North America and within other organizations. Through the first stage of research, secondary sources were collected that focused on adult learning theory, effective workplace learning experiences in co-operative organizations, and effective adult learning being delivered in other organizations. On a smaller scale, secondary sources on effective adult education delivered outside of the western world were reviewed. Qualitative primary research was completed through three informal

discussions with employees at a large consumer co-operative in North America. These discussions provided insight into the quality of co-operative education being delivered to employees in a co-operative organization.

3. Background

3.1 Adult Learning Theory

If the only learning provided within organizations is passive and presentation based, then knowledge retention decreases (Fazey & Marton, 2002). Studies show that when people are involved in learning experiences and have opportunities to apply what they learn and collaborate with others, knowledge retention increases from 10% to 70% (Ghoshal, 2024). For those who have studied andragogy and the theory of adult learning, this information should not be surprising. For decades, theorists like Malcolm Knowles, and many others, have created models and promoted the benefits of experiential learning and learner-centered education, specifically designed for adults. While the methods and theories created by Knowles and other theorists may not be applicable to all organizations, these models can be used as a starting point to evaluate if the co-operative education currently being delivered to employees is effective.

3.1.1 The History of Andragogy

While Malcolm Knowles did not coin the term andragogy, his theory of andragogy “evolved into a sort of movement within academia” (Bouchrika, 2025). Malcolm Knowles challenged the idea that pedagogical methods were appropriate for adult learners by “drawing from knowledge provided by a number of prominent learning and developmental theorists” (Conaway & Zorn-Arnold, 2015, p. 38). Knowles further developed the theory of andragogy by building on two key points, that “an acknowledgement of the knowledge and experience gained by adult learners and the idea that the learner – rather than the instructor – is central to the process” (Conaway & Zorn-Arnold, 2015, p. 38).

Figure 2: The history of the theory of andragogy



Source: Bouchrika, 2025

3.1.2 Characteristics of adult learners

Knowles' (1978) six characteristics of adult learners are:

- **Experience:** Adults learn from their previous experiences. Adults have been through more experiences that they can use to support their learning.

- **Need to Know:** Adults want to understand why they are learning something and how it will benefit them before engaging in the learning experience.
- **Self-Directed:** Adults want to participate in deciding what and how they learn.
- **Readiness to Learn:** Adults want to learn material that is relevant to their lives
- **Orientation to Learning:** Learning for adults should be problem centered. They want to solve the problem rather than simply be told about a subject.
- **Intrinsic Motivation:** Learners engage in learning because of internal factors rather than external rewards.

3.2 Adult Learning Theory and Co-operative Education

Reviewing Knowles' (1978) work on andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners could inspire co-operative organizations to reflect on whether their current programming meets the needs of the learners. If it does not, then organizations need to find ways to create learning that does. Without effective and engaging co-operative education, co-operative enterprises may start to prioritize profits over people in the face of isomorphic pressures to be competitive with non-co-operative businesses within their industry. As many co-operative organizations are following the 5th principle, Education, Training and Information, in different ways, it is critical to research the importance of ongoing and beneficial co-operative education for employees and to see what adult education is being used to support knowledge of the co-operative difference within different organizations.

Figure 3. The seven co-operative principles



Source: Agro Global Bank, n.d.

Research into how adult learning theory can enhance co-operative education and support commitment to the 5th principle will also contribute to organizations making decisions that are committed to the co-operative difference and put people ahead of profits instead of making decisions that align with capitalist organizations. As one of the research interviewees put it, if proper education that is intentionally designed for adult learners is ignored and we don't proactively fight against isomorphism, "there's a real fear that the Co-operative difference at co-operative enterprises will erode".

3.3 The learner-centered approach

There is a lot of pressure on organizations to provide effective and engaging learner-centered education for adults to increase operational efficiencies and support employee development. Unfortunately, many adult educators

develop learning in the way they were taught, which is a pedagogical approach used through elementary, secondary and post-secondary education. This style of learning focuses on the facilitator instead of the learner and has proven to be a mostly ineffective way for adults to learn (Knowles, 1978, p. 9). Knowles (1978) argued that “in conventional education the student is required to adjust himself to an established curriculum; in adult education the curriculum is built around the students’ needs and interests” (p. 10). He noted that while adult education should be built around the learner, often it is not. There are a variety of reasons for this, for example, building learning that is centered around the needs of each learner requires more time, more money and more creativity compared to throwing together a passive presentation or an eLearning module that includes a few knowledge check questions to test the learner’s retention of the required material. However, more time and money need to be invested so that learners can share their experiences with others and learn from being included in the learning event rather than simply being a passive participant. To create an experience that engages learners, educators need to promote and support co-operative education within their organizations and all co-operatives need to ensure they are considering the needs of their learners when designing and implementing their programs. If the needs are not considered, adults will not be motivated to attend future learning events. Providing opportunities for learners to engage in decision-making processes, to interact with other co-operatives and to discuss the co-operative difference with other people can all be effective ways to support the ICA’s 5th principle of Education, Training and Information (ICA, n.d.).

3.4 Co-operative Principle 5 – Education, Training and Information

According to the ICA, the 5th principle requires co-operatives to “provide education, and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives” (ICA, n.d.). While the principle is effective and shares the importance of education within co-operative organizations, there is little information provided on what impactful and effective education looks like within a co-operative enterprise.

Figure 4: The ICA’s 5th Principle, Education, Training and Information



Source: Garland, Light & Power Co., October 2020

The lack of information leaves the interpretation of effective education open to each individual business. In some cases, like the partnership between Co-operatives of the Americas and the confederation of Co-operatives of Paraguay, co-operative education has been a priority within their co-operative organizations and educational programs have been designed to raise “awareness of co-operative values and principles among co-operative employees, members of the boards and members of co-operatives” (ICA, 2014). To effectively raise awareness and continue to promote and implement co-operative education, “the two organizations signed an agreement to elaborate a common methodology on co-operative education for the organizations members” (ICA, 2014). While some organizations have committed to creating continuous co-operative educational programs, other organizations have not.

3.5 Co-operative education at a consumer co-operative

Interviews conducted with employees at a consumer co-operative indicated that employees attend a short presentation about the co-operative difference when they first join the organization. This presentation includes an overview of the co-operative values and principles along with a brief history of co-operative decision making within the organization. While there is valuable content within the presentation, this content “only goes so far” in educating employees about the co-operative difference according to one interviewee.

An interviewee noted that another challenge with hosting a live presentation is that even though it is mandatory for all employees “the participation rate is currently sitting at 50% for employees” . With no additional mandatory education provided for employees, this means that 50% of employees at this organization have likely received no co-operative education. With minimal to no education about the organization’s co-operative difference, it is not surprising that employees have felt a decline in the co-operative culture. An interviewee observed that, in recent years, this decline has been publicly recognized in conversations between employees and leadership. While enhanced education may not be the only solution to bring back the co-operative culture within this organization, it is a strong starting point to ensure employees, leaders and members all understand the co-operative difference and how they can contribute to ensuring the co-operative principles and values are followed.

3.6 Different co-operative education being delivered

The two previously discussed examples of a consumer co-operative organization in North America and Co-operatives of America demonstrate that while many organizations state they are following the co-operative values and principles there are significant differences between co-operative organizations who are actively prioritizing the values and principles, particularly around education, information and training. Many organizations like the ICA and The International Co-operative and Mutual Insurance Federation (ICMIF) work to provide education for co-operative organizations by posting media and blog articles and hosting advanced management courses, biennial conferences and a young leaders forum (Tarbuck, 2024). Despite these available offerings, many co-operative organizations are not participating in these events and are not utilizing these resources to enhance co-operative education for employees within their own companies.

3.7 Existing problems with Workplace Education

3.7.1 Passive learning

The interviews with employees from a large consumer co-operative, suggested that passive learning provided to employees is common even though this type of learning has been proven to be an ineffective way to educate adult learners. Worth and Stephens (2011) argue that “returning adult learners come into the learning environment with reasonable clear educational goals accompanied by murky expectations of how the learning experience has changed since their last exposure” (p. 23). When individuals begin their careers at a co-operative enterprise, like the employees interviewed, many are simply asked to attend a presentation or complete independent online learning with no opportunity provided for application, reflection, feedback, or discussions about the content. New employees should learn about the co-operative difference by participating in robust educational experiences. Instead, they are given learning that resembles every other tedious learning experience that they have had throughout their lives. To create motivated and passionate employees, co-operative organizations should be looking at adult learning theory and implementing educational programs that create opportunities for employees to experience the co-operative difference.

3.7.2 Lack of continuous education

Another problem involving the existing workplace co-operative education is that it is not always continuous. Learning needs to be consistently reinforced for the learner. Without constantly hearing about the importance of the organization's co-operative identity, it is easy to forget the values and principles when deadlines are approaching and pressures to increase profits arise. To enhance their commitment to the co-operative principles, particularly to the ICA's 5th principle, co-operative enterprises of all sizes need to prioritize the creation of new learning opportunities for employees whilst promoting existing events, offered through other co-operative organizations, like ICA and ICMIF. ICMIF offers plenty of collaborative learning opportunities like Advanced Management Courses open to any of the members of these organizations (Tarbuck, 2024). Attendance will allow employees to engage in a variety of learning experiences through different stages of their careers.

4. Analysis/Discussion/Results

4.1 *Andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners*

There are multiple theories that study the ways adults learn and process new education. Arguably one of the most famous adult learning theorists is Dr. Malcolm Knowles. Malcolm Knowles is well-known for supporting and promoting the theory of andragogy (Henschke, 2012, p. 44). The theory of andragogy focuses on the unique ways that adults learn and calls for adult educators to design programs built around the needs of the learners as opposed to conventional education where "the student is required to adjust himself to an established curriculum" which is common practice for education that is built for children (Knowles, 1978, p.10). Knowles (1978) argued that adults bring experiences and previous knowledge to their learning events and therefore need to have the opportunity to relate their learning to their experiences (p.10). He said that traditional teaching practices seen in elementary classrooms like, "authoritative teaching, examinations which preclude original thinking" and "pedagogical formulae have no place in adult education" (p. 11). Not only is Knowles accredited for his work on promoting and developing the theory of andragogy, he also developed six characteristics of adult learners (Figure 1) that help educators understand the need to develop learner-centered educational experiences that differentiate from traditional classroom approaches where the facilitator is at the center of the learning experience. The "six principles upon which Knowles (1984) constructed his formal andragogical concept are: the role of experience, self-directedness, the learner's need to know, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and intrinsic motivation" (Conaway & Zorn-Arnold, 2015, p. 38). Understanding such adult learning theory provides adult educators an opportunity for reflection. Recognizing that adults learn differently than children can lead educators to reflect on existing programming and look for ways to redesign their programs to ensure they are engaging and achieve the objectives of the learning program.

4.2 *The importance of learner centered education – beyond Knowles*

Malcolm Knowles is not the only adult education academic that has spoken out for the need for unique, engaging and interactive education for adult learning. Many individuals who study the adult learning process have shared their thoughts on creating engaging adult learning. David Cotton (2004), who writes about his experiences with adult learners, shares that, "unless you are an absolutely riveting speaker, able to engage the masses with your sparking wit and repartee, avoid featuring yourself speaking as the principal attraction" (p. 3). Many adult educators and those who have studied adult education agree that it is only under very rare circumstances, like being a riveting speaker, where the learning should be centered on the facilitator and not the learner. Even in these cases the learning still needs to include an application component or an opportunity for the learners to engage with each other and share their own experiences as "adults need consideration of their prior experience. The instructor should acknowledge this prior experience.

"Adults need to connect new knowledge to past events" (Knowles, 1978, p. 11). When learners are not at the center of instruction there is a risk of reduced knowledge acquisition and a decline in motivation to attend future learning events (Fazey & Marton, 2002). Wendy Conaway and Barbara Zorn-Arnold (2015) share that despite the understanding of the need for learner centered design for adult students "traditional college courses continue to develop curricula based on pedagogical principles, but this approach is not suitable for adult learners" (p. 41). Not only is this happening at a college level, it is also seen throughout many organizations.

4.3 Arguments against Knowles

While most of the research explored in this paper aligns with Knowles' beliefs about the theory of andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners, there were a few criticisms. Timothy Clapper (2010) highlighted some critiques Knowles received for assuming that all adult learners learn in the same way, ignoring systems of oppression and the effects of culture on learning and development" (p. 8). Gary McLean (2006) also questioned Knowles' beliefs by arguing that one adult learning theory to categorize all adults is impossible as "we are all a mix of several cultures—national, family, religious, ethnic, local, gender, and so on. We each bring this mix to the workplace when we learn. Insofar as it is possible, and it is difficult to do, each adult learner must be treated as a unique learner with unique needs and unique processes that work best for him or her." (p. 419). These criticisms are valid because it is difficult to group a cohort of people and discuss how they learn when they have all had different previous learning experiences. As adult educators, it is important to consider the differences among the learners when building and developing co-operative adult education in school systems and in the workplace.

Another critique Knowles received is that his theory of andragogy creates a black and white divide between pedagogy and andragogy (Clapper, 2010, p. 9). Ian Moll (2024) clearly shows the distinction between Knowles' definitions of pedagogy and andragogy in the table below (Figure 5). In the arguments against creating a clear divide between andragogy and pedagogy, many academics believe that like adults, children would also benefit from less teacher-centered learning approaches where they have more opportunities to participate in discussions around their learning and share their experiences on the topics. Timothy Clapper (2010) does not distinguish between the way children learn and how adults learn and instead shares that all learners, regardless of age, need to "organize the learning experience into a transformative process based on experiential learning and reflection that might lead to more meaning making and understanding" as opposed to simply projecting "some slides on the wall and have learner's practice a particular skill" (p. 13).

Figure 5: The Distinction between Andragogy and Pedagogy

Table 1
Knowles' distinction between andragogy and pedagogy

Psychological state	Andragogy	Pedagogy
Self-concept	Adults are self-directed learners, moving towards independence.	Children are dependent beings; teachers are responsible for their learning.
Learning process	Adult learning is generated by past experience, and therefore ideally problem-centred.	Children's learning is based on the instruction of unfamiliar subject content.
Readiness	Adults want specific learning about their work and other roles in society.	Children need generic learning to prepare them for the future.
Orientation	Adults are interested in "just-in-time" learning immediately related to their lives. They learn what they want to learn.	Children's learning is "just-in-case" preparation for an adult future. They learn what society expects them to learn.
Motivation	Adults are internally motivated.	Children are externally motivated.

Note. Contents distilled from Knowles (1968, 1973); adapted from Moll (2023).

Source: Moll, 2024

4.4 Adult Learning in the workplace

Researching how adult learning theory has contributed to successful workplace learning is important as this information can be utilized when building co-operative specific education within co-operative organizations. Many organizations are researching andragogy and the characteristics of adult learning to enhance knowledge retention and increase motivation towards participating in learning events by building learning that is learner-centered and not simply a passive presentation with minimal application. One reason that companies are investing time and resources into new and engaging educational programs is because “adult education has emerged as a crucial mechanism for retraining and upskilling individuals across various sectors, serving a dual purpose: keeping pace with the changing world and empowering individuals to thrive” (Radovan, 2024, p. 1). Investing in adult learning has multiple benefits not only does it teach a specific skill but as Radovan (2024) argues, “it contributes to a more skilled and competitive workforce, which in turn stimulates economic growth, fosters innovation, enhances social cohesion, and supports personal development” (p. 1).

4.5 The Non-Western Perspective

While the research for this paper largely focuses on the western theories of adult learning created and promoted by Malcolm Knowles, Henschke and Han (2008) share a “need for more research on helping students from non-western cultural backgrounds become more interculturally competent and successful” in their adult learning experiences in Canada and the US (p. 28). Not only does researching non-western adult learning theory and strategies help non-western learners, but it also provides new and engaging ideas that could support enhanced, diverse, and inclusive co-operative education in the workplace for all adult learners. For example, Frederick Nafukho (2006) shares the positive impacts that applying the African principle of Ubuntu has had on education in African countries. The principle of Ubuntu encourages people to “expose ourselves to others, to encounter the differences of their humanness in order to inform and enrich our own” (Nafukho, 2006, p. 410). This principle “refers to the willingness to learn from others as a way of building our own knowledge base and wisdom” (Nafukho, 2006, p. 410). While there are similarities to western strategies, there is a stronger emphasis on community support and caring for others which aligns with the beliefs of co-operative organizations.

In another example, Sebastian Koren Francis (2008) shares how studying Indigenous communities and their commitment to lifelong learning sheds more light on the theories of adult learning (p. 87). In his findings, Francis (2008) concluded that “as a person matures, he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource of learning” which supports Knowles’ (1978) theories about the six characteristics of adult learning. However, Francis (2008) discovered that there was a greater focus on not just individual growth through adult learning, but also a greater consideration for development and growth of the entire community (p. 87). Researching adult learning theories outside of the western world can encourage growth and development as a group rather than on an individual basis. More research about non-western learning strategies would be beneficial to co-operative organizations who hold similar beliefs about strengthening communities through cooperation.

4.6 Effective co-operative education in the workplace

4.6.1 Business Example 1: Co-operative Education in a Non-Co-operative Organization

While research on effective formal co-operative education is limited, there are multiple articles that contain examples on how both co-operative and non-co-operative organizations are supporting and designing co-operative learning that is built around the needs of adult learners. As a way to teach the benefits of paradoxical thinking in management education, Audebrand et al. (2017) share how one non-co-operative business used the co-operative business model as an example, as “co-operatives have as a central feature the democratic principle—often defined as the “one member = one vote” principle—which is not systematically implemented in other types of organizations. This principle generates several paradoxes, including the tension between economic efficiency and democratic participation, or between direction and empowerment.” (p. 218). This learning was effective as it went beyond a basic PowerPoint presentation, to learn about the co-operative business model (Audebrand et al., 2017, p. 218).

To effectively teach the co-operative paradox, this organization focused on four learning methods that met the needs of most adult learners to ensure they understood the co-operative model and the importance of paradoxical thinking in management.

The four learning methods were:

1. Case method
2. Games
3. Simulations
4. Service learning

In case method, learners were actively engaged in discussions with other employees and had “an opportunity to experience and work out particular aspects of management practice” (Audebrand et al., 2017, p. 231). Using the games method, rather than creating a new game, learners played Co-opoly which teaches about the co-operative business model in a game similar to Monopoly (Audebrand et al., 2017, p. 232).

Learners also engaged in simulations where they were responsible for running and operating their own co-operative. The simulations were effective because “the intense, hands-on experimentation of running a co-operative forces student to leave their comfort zones and think in new ways. One of the major shifts they make is related to the actualization of their co-operative’s mission: In contrast with typical firms, a worker co-operative’s mission is to maximize working conditions rather than profit” (Audebrand et al., 2017, p. 233). Such transformative learning is rarely achievable without actively engaging with and experiencing the concepts being taught (Spencer & Lange, 2014, p.77).

The final type of learning involved service learning which consisted of visiting co-operative businesses and presenting solutions to existing problems the businesses were facing “to the co-operative’s board of directors” (Audebrand et al., 2017, p. 234). The service learning was beneficial because as “students expose their findings; they frequently encounter the shock between theory and practice. Real-life situations display much richer intricacies and contradictions than they expect: What appears to be theoretically the best solution might not be supported by the co-operative’s general assembly” (Audebrand et al., 2017, p. 234).

The example of a non-co-operative business teaching paradoxical thinking through learning about co-operatives demonstrates the importance of continuous learning that is designed around the principles of andragogy and how adults learn. In this example of effective workplace learning, all of the learning focused on the needs of learners and their experiences. Malcom Knowles (1978) argues that “the resource of highest value in adult education is the learner’s experience. If education is life, then life is also education” (p. 10). The experiences involved in teaching paradoxical thinking in management through learning about the co-operative business model exemplify how impactful education can be when the needs of the participants are met, and the learning goes beyond passive presentations and basic knowledge checks.

4.6.2 Business Example #2: Informal education within a worker co-operative

While formal, ongoing adult learning about the co-operative difference is critical to the continuous development of adult learners in the workplace, research shows that informal education can also help support co-operative learning for employees. In Argentina, Marcello Vieta (2014) shared that some of the most effective learnings came out of conversations between employees who took over troubled firms and converted them into worker co-operatives. When these businesses were first converted to worker co-operatives, not many employees knew what a worker co-operative was, as the workers characterized it “they became co-operative in the act of ‘doing’ self-management” (p.186). The workers shared that they “learned cooperativism...on the path of doing” (p.187). The experiences shared by Vieta show the importance of partnering non-formal education with formal learning experiences.

In large organizations it can be difficult to provide informal learning to large groups of people. To support continuous informal learning outside of formal learning events, employees should be encouraged to continuously talk about the co-operative differences with their teams, in brainstorm sessions, meetings and in casual conversations. Simply asking questions like “how does this decision impact our members” or “how does this decision support our co-operative principles and values” can spark a debate which can enhance the learning of all employees in the room.

4.7 Research Analysis: Key Insights

- **Researching and applying adult learning theory leads to successful employee learning.** Researching adult learning theory and redesigning existing programs require more time and resources. However, if the investment is not made in designing education that meets the needs of the learners, there is a risk of reduced knowledge acquisition and a decline in motivation to attend future learning events (Fazey & Marton, 2002).
- **Consider the theory of andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners in every learning experience designed for adults.** One way to check if a learning experience designed for adults meets the learning needs of the intended audience is to reference theory of andragogy and the six characteristics of adult learners. Every program should consider the experience of the learner, their need to know, readiness to learn, intrinsic motivation, orientation to learning and whether the learning includes self-directed elements.
- **Multiple learning methods are effective.** To effectively engage and teach adult learners through the application of adult learning theory, multiple methods should be considered like simulations, games, discussions, and case studies. These formal methods of learning should also be accompanied by a strategy to promote informal learning opportunities that encourage employees to continue to talk about the co-operative difference and share the formal learning they have been involved in to promote continuous co-operative learning, after the formal event.
- **Non-Western Strategies can further enhance learning experiences for employees in the western world.** There is a need for further research on enhancing workplace learning experiences for employees that come from different areas of the world. This learning not only benefits people from different cultures, but it also provides an opportunity to create engaging and diverse and inclusive education for all learners! Many learning theories that exist in Africa, Asia and Indigenous communities are based on the principles of learning together and prioritizing community development and strength, which align with the beliefs of the co-operative model. Utilizing non-western adult learning theory and strategies to enhance co-operative education within the workplace can teach employees the importance of community, caring for others and cooperation.

From these insights, what follows is a series of recommendations that support the development of enhanced co-operative education that can be applied in multiple co-operative organizations.

5. Recommendations

The recommendations in this section are a sequential step-by-step plan to enhance co-operative education within a co-operative enterprise.

A Redesigned Co-operative Learning Program for Co-operative Organizations

1. **Start from the beginning.** To properly equip employees to make decisions that consider the co-operative principles and values, co-operative organizations should start from the beginning and create a new learning program for their employees. Existing learning needs to be evaluated to ensure that the program provides employees with an opportunity to engage in discussions about what it means to be a co-operative organization and allows them to share their experiences working in and learning about co-operative organizations.
2. **Create a dedicated learning team.** To ensure that the learning program is designed with the considerations of the learners, a project team should be formed. Prior to designing any co-operative education, it is critical for this project team to complete research and training and have a discussion about adult learning theory, andragogy, and the six characteristics of adult learners to ensure that the new co-operative educational programming will consider the needs of the learners and move away from designing programs in the passive way they were designed in the past.

3. **Make a plan.** The learning team should build a full learning path where employees continue to enhance and refresh their knowledge of the co-operative model and the importance of considering their organization's co-operative identity through mandatory learning events required during different stages of an employee's career. To keep the audience engaged and to ensure the learning is impactful, the learning should use a variety of different engaging learning strategies, like playing co-operative games and going on field trips to visit some of businesses of other co-operatives within their communities. More variety would also be beneficial such as by having learners engage in role-play and simulations where they participate in decisions, similar to how worker co-operatives operate, where there is a strong emphasis on employee democracy.
4. **Immediate opportunities to enhance co-operative education.** While a complete redesign of existing co-operative education could take a long time, in the interim organizations should look into different learning opportunities offered by ICMIF and the ICA. Having more employees involved in seminars like the ICMI Advanced Management Course and The Young Leaders Forum will help fill the need for immediate and enhanced co-operative education (Raboy, 2024).
5. **Creating effective learning experiences.** Each learning event should be properly evaluated to determine how effective the learning is and to identify what modifications are needed. Creating a brand-new co-operative education program that is based on the principles of andragogy requires resources, time and money. However, without dedicating time to enhancing employee knowledge around the 5th principle of education, training and information, co-operative organizations could be at risk of losing their co-operative advantage.

6. Conclusion

Not only is enhancing education within co-operative enterprises important because of the co-operative value and principles, it is critical to the success of the organization. As Nagore Ipiña (2022), Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Education Sciences of Mondragon University, argues: "education can be key to rebuilding, the co-operative culture within an organization" (p. 1). In the face of isomorphic pressures, it can be difficult to continuously prioritize and discuss an organization's co-operative identity. However, education that is designed based on adult learning theory reminds employees why they started working for a co-operative and helps guide them to make decisions that put people ahead of profit when competitors are focusing on profit maximizing for their shareholders. To resist isomorphic pressures, engage the workforce and create a strong co-operative culture, new co-operative education, designed specifically based on the needs of the employees, needs to become a priority for all co-operatives.

6.1 Future Research Ideas

There are many different adult learning theorists with different methods and ideas that can be effectively used to enhance adult education within co-operative organizations aside from the theories of Malcolm Knowles. More exploratory research should be conducted on the theories of other adult learning strategies in both the western and non-western worlds. Learning from effective workplace education in other countries can enhance education by diversifying the learning experience so that more of the individual needs of the participants are met during the learning experiences.

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