

Voices from the Fields: Decolonizing Narratives of Smallholder Farmers in Rural Zambian Cooperatives

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Abstract

This qualitative study, "Voices from the Fields: Decolonizing Narratives of Smallholder Farmers in Rural Zambian Cooperatives," investigated the nuanced realities of smallholder farmers' engagement with agricultural cooperatives. While cooperatives are widely promoted for rural development, the subjective experiences of their members in contexts like rural Zambia remain underexplored. Employing an interpretive phenomenological approach, the research delves into farmers' perceptions of fairness, participation in decision-making, access to markets, and the overall impact of cooperative membership on their livelihoods. Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 30 smallholder farmers from 3 diverse agricultural cooperatives in rural Zambia, supplemented by key informant interviews. The study provides a rich, insider's perspective, shedding light on the social, cultural, and economic factors shaping cooperative effectiveness from the members' viewpoint. The findings offer critical insights for policymakers and development practitioners seeking to foster more equitable, farmer-centric, and sustainable cooperative models in Zambia and similar developing economies.

Keywords: Agricultural cooperatives, smallholder farmers, lived experiences, rural development, cooperative development, Zambia.

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1. Introduction

Rural Zambia is characterized by tremendous agricultural potential which has continued to be a bastion for smallholder farmers. These individuals, frequently operating with constrained resources, constitute the foundation of the nation's food security. In pursuit of enhanced livelihoods, many individuals have sought agricultural cooperatives, entities frequently promoted as drivers of growth. However, beyond the commitments and regulations, what are the genuine lived experiences of these farmers? This qualitative study aimed to reveal the intricate reality, daily successes, and ongoing difficulties encountered by smallholder farmers entrenched in Zambia's agricultural cooperative framework.

Agricultural cooperatives provide a collaborative avenue for market access, resource sharing, and enhanced negotiating leverage. For Zambian smallholders, membership in such a cooperative can provide access to high-quality inputs at lower prices, collective marketing of their products, and financial services. Nevertheless, the theoretical benefits do not consistently manifest as practical enhancements.

This investigation extended beyond statistical data to examine the human narratives that characterize cooperative participation. Farmers were engaged in their residences, agricultural fields, and cooperative assemblies, attentively absorbing their stories. The study sought to comprehend their personal experiences and shared ambitions through comprehensive interviews and targeted group discussions.

The principal domain of the investigation encompassed the perceptions of justice and equity in the allocation of advantages and disadvantages within the cooperative. Are choices made with transparency, and do all members perceive that their opinions are acknowledged and esteemed, regardless of their production capacity or social status? Comprehending these interactions is essential for evaluating the genuine inclusivity of cooperative structures.

Further, the study encompassed the decision-making procedures and member involvement to establish the degree to which the smallholder farmers are authentically engaged in the strategic and operational decision-making

processes of their cooperatives. This component illuminates the democratic concepts involved and their practical implementation in cooperatives. Moreover, the study sought to establish the integration of market access and value chain, trying to find out the ways cooperative membership has influenced farmers' access to wider and more profitable markets for their products. Finally, the study sought to establish the influence of cooperative membership on the entire quality of life for smallholder farmers and their families, regarding food security, increased access to education and healthcare, or diminished susceptibility to external shocks.

This research seeks to offer an in-depth, insider's perspective on the cooperative movement in rural Zambia. Amplifying the voices of smallholder farmers provides crucial insights into the strengths and flaws of current cooperative arrangements. The findings enhance the academic discourse on farmer empowerment and inclusive development while providing practical recommendations for cooperative practitioners, policymakers, and support organizations aiming to cultivate more equitable, sustainable, and genuinely farmer-centric agricultural cooperatives in Zambia and similar developing contexts.

2. Literature Review

Agricultural cooperatives have historically been regarded as fundamental to rural development and poverty alleviation, especially in emerging nations. Their theoretical advantages, including increased market access, economies of scale, augmented negotiating strength, and collaborative access to resources and information, are broadly recognized (Birchall, 2004; World Bank, 2007). Nonetheless, the tangible implementation of these advantages, particularly from the viewpoint of the smallholder farmer, continues to be a multifaceted and much overlooked domain. This literature review consolidates current research on agricultural cooperatives, emphasizing their effects in developing regions such as Zambia, and highlights the deficiency in comprehending the lived experiences of their smallholder farmer members.

The potential of agricultural cooperatives in developing nations

Multiple studies underscore the capacity of agricultural cooperatives to tackle systemic issues encountered by smallholder farmers. Through resource aggregation, farmers can surmount constraints in obtaining financing, high-quality inputs (seeds, fertilizers), and contemporary technologies (Cook, 1995; Shiferaw et al., 2014). Collective marketing, an essential feature of numerous cooperatives, is posited to diminish transaction costs, empower farmers to get improved pricing, and alleviate hazards linked to market volatility (Bernard & Spielman, 2009; Fischer & Qaim, 2012). In addition to economic advantages, cooperatives are regarded as vehicles for social capital development, knowledge dissemination, and the empowerment of underprivileged populations, especially women, through the promotion of collective action and mutual assistance (Fulton & Giannakas, 2004; Quisumbing & Pandolfelli, 2010; Sikalumbi, 2022).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Zambia, the significance of agricultural cooperatives has garnered fresh focus as governments and development organizations pursue sustainable avenues for rural economic advancement (Sitko & Jayne, 2012; Tschirley et al., 2015). Initiatives that promote cooperative development frequently seek to convert subsistence agriculture into financially viable firms, thereby incorporating smallholders into national and global value chains (Minot & Roy, 2007).

Obstacles and constraints of cooperative models

Although they possess potential, agricultural cooperatives in developing nations frequently encounter substantial operational and structural obstacles that may impede their efficacy. These factors encompass inadequate governance frameworks, absence of transparency and accountability, deficient management capabilities, and vulnerability to elite capture, resulting in disproportionate gains for a select group of influential individuals (Holloway et al., 2005; Francesconi & Heerink, 2011). External constraints, like insufficient legislative support, restricted access to credit for cooperatives, inadequate infrastructure, and volatile market pricing, might intensify these internal deficiencies (Ortmann & King, 2007; Tadesse & Godefroi, 2012).

Moreover, the notion of communal action might be problematic in environments characterized by individualism, skepticism, or established social hierarchies. Disputes about resource distribution, benefit allocation, and governance frequently arise, resulting in disengagement or the eventual dissolution of cooperatives (Markelova et al., 2009). Barham and Chitemi's (2009) research on African agricultural cooperatives highlight that internal disagreements and insufficient member commitment might jeopardize collective endeavors.

The disparity: comprehending the actual experiences

A significant amount of literature explores the economic performance and structural issues of agricultural

cooperatives; yet there is a conspicuous gap in qualitative research focusing on the lived experiences of smallholder farmers. A significant portion of the current research depends on quantitative impact measures (e.g., income variations, yields) or overarching evaluations of cooperative frameworks and programs (Stockbridge et al., 2003; Poulton et al., 2010). Although beneficial, these methods may inadequately represent the intricate, subjective realities, views, and daily challenges faced by farmers within these organizations.

Limited research has thoroughly examined farmers' perceptions of fairness, their sense of agency in decision-making, the non-economic advantages or disadvantages of membership, and the social and cultural dynamics affecting their participation and satisfaction, with some exceptions focusing on gendered experiences, such as Mudege et al. (2016), though often still centered on specific outcomes. The disparity is especially evident in Zambia, where studies on cooperatives typically emphasize market connections or policy ramifications, rather than the complex personal and communal experiences of the smallholder members (Chirwa et al., 2014; Sikalumbi, 2021).

Comprehending these lived experiences is essential. It transcends evaluating the benefits cooperatives provide to farmers, focusing instead on farmers' perceptions of their cooperative, its integration into their daily lives, and its alignment with their objectives and beliefs. This qualitative method can elucidate the fundamental causes for success or failure that quantitative data alone may not disclose, offering a more nuanced and context-specific comprehension of the cooperative model's effectiveness and sustainability from the viewpoint of its intended beneficiaries.

3. Methodology

Research design and approach

This qualitative study utilized an interpretive phenomenological methodology to investigate the lived experiences of smallholder farmers in agricultural cooperatives in rural Zambia. This methodology was appropriate as it sought to comprehend subjective interpretations and impressions, rather than measuring actual reality. The study employed a case study design, concentrating on 3 intentionally chosen agricultural cooperatives in various rural areas of Zambia (Eastern, Luapula, Central provinces) to guarantee geographical and agricultural diversity. The criteria for selecting cooperatives encompassed: a minimum operational duration of 3 years, a diversified membership base (inclusive of women and youth), and participation in several agricultural value chains (such as maize, soyabeans, groundnuts, and horticulture).

Participants and Sampling

A total of 21 smallholder farmers (7 from each cooperative) were intentionally selected for participation. The selection criteria were based on active membership in the cooperative for a minimum of four years, broad demographic representation (including gender, age group, and scale of farming activities), and a willingness to share personal experiences. Key informant interviews were done with 3 cooperative leaders and 6 representatives from support institutions, the Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprise Development and Cooperative Federations in each province to furnish contextual perspectives.

Data Collection Methods

Comprehensive semi-structured interviews served as principal data source and were performed individually with smallholder farmers. The interview guide was adaptable, enabling participants to articulate their experiences regarding their motivations for joining the cooperative, perceptions of equity, engagement in decision-making, encountering challenges, obtained benefits, and the cooperative's influence on their livelihoods and well-being. Interviews ranged between 20 to 50 minutes.

Additionally, 3 focus group discussions (FGD) were held in each chosen province, divided by gender where culturally suitable (one FGD for women and one for men and one combined) to facilitate candid dialogue regarding shared experiences, common challenges, and views on the cooperative's role in the community. Each focus group discussion consisted of 6-8 people and lasted between 50 - 90 minutes.

Data Management, Analysis and Ethical Considerations

All interviews and focus group discussions were digitally recorded with participant approval and later transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were integrated into qualitative data analysis software, NVivo. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: data familiarization, initial code generation, topic identification, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production. The analysis concentrated on recognizing recurring patterns, contrasting viewpoints, and developing insights pertaining to

farmers lived experiences.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, assuring their comprehension of the study's objectives, confidentiality measures, their right to withdraw at any time, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Anonymity and confidentiality were upheld by the implementation of pseudonyms and secured data storage protocols. The research was executed with cultural sensitivity, honoring local customs and conventions.

4. Findings and Discussion

In the previous literature review, the potential of agricultural cooperatives to promote rural development and alleviate poverty in developing countries was highlighted. This potential is widely accepted. Nevertheless, it is a significant indication that there is a deficiency in the comprehension of the actual experiences that smallholder farmers have within these cooperative systems. To bridge that gap, the purpose of this debate is to contextualize the complexity of cooperative membership specifically within rural Zambia. This is accomplished by drawing upon the underlying socio-economic, cultural, and political environment of the nation.

According to Sitko and Jayne (2012), the agricultural sector in Zambia is primarily defined by smallholder farmers. These farmers make up most agricultural producers and make a substantial contribution to the country's food security. Throughout the course of Zambia's history, the government has, on multiple occasions, advocated for cooperative development as a method for agricultural transformation, frequently but not always with favorable outcomes. While the legacy of state-led cooperative initiatives in the post-independence era aimed at empowering farmers, it occasionally resulted in reliance and limited actual farmer ownership (Chirwa et al., 2014) in a broader regional context, demonstrates such patterns. Farmer empowerment was the goal of these movements. A diverse environment is presented now because of a renewed emphasis on market-led and farmer-owned cooperatives, which are frequently supported by non-governmental organizations and development partners.

With that being said, the study reveals that the daily reality of Zambian smallholder farmers within these contemporary cooperative structures are significantly affected by several contextual elements, including the following:

Traditional and social structures continue to exert a lasting influence

Rural communities in Zambia are frequently characterized by strong traditional leadership systems and social norms that are strongly embedded at the community level. Although these can help to strengthen community solidarity and collective action (as is the case with traditional chilimba or silk or nsimbi cooperative labor), they can also pose difficulties for formal cooperative governance. The voices of women, youth, or members with less influence remain marginalized inside cooperatives due to the possibility that pre-existing hierarchies will have an impact on the decision-making process within cooperatives. The purpose of this qualitative investigation is to investigate how farmers traverse the two systems of official cooperative regulations and informal community norms, as well as to determine if the cooperative democratises decision-making or merely repeats the power dynamics that already exist within the village. The findings indicate that power dynamics at village scope still remains at the centre stage of cooperative governance where the males are favoured. However, its dominance keeps on getting eroded slowly with stakeholder involvement in educating the public. In the context of benefit distribution, for example, the concept of "fairness" may be understood via the conventional lenses of seniority or reciprocity, rather than through the lens of contributions that are only based on economic considerations (ICA, 2017)

Access to Informative Resources and Educational Opportunities

Most of the respondents indicated inadequate availability of comprehensive information and agricultural extension services presenting a substantial obstacle for many smallholder farmers in rural Zambia. It is possible that this will have a direct impact on their comprehension of cooperative principles, their rights and obligations as members, and the market dynamics that their cooperative team intends to address. The erosion of trust among farmers can result in disengagement from the cooperative (Ortmann & King, 2007). This can occur when farmers do not have a clear grasp of the cooperative's financial health or decision-making procedures. In some instances, pieces of information are made available, but the literacy and language obstacles prevent the cooperators from participating fully and trusting management decisions. This creates the unhealthy gap between cooperative management and the members.

Deficits in Infrastructure and Market Linkages

The purpose of this investigation was to establish how farmers see the infrastructural impediments that are affecting their cooperative capacity to deliver on their promise of enhanced market access, as well as the creative coping techniques. Despite the policy announcements that have been made, rural Zambia continues to struggle with inadequate infrastructure. This study documents poor road networks, limited access to dependable energy, and inadequate number of storage facilities. The effectiveness of agricultural cooperatives is substantially impacted by these external forces, regardless of the collective qualities that exist inside the cooperatives themselves. The difficulties of transportation to far-off markets, post-harvest losses owing to a lack of cold storage, or unpredictable energy for processing severely harm the profitability of the smallholder farmers' cooperatives, even if some cooperatives are effective in pooling their produce (Minot & Roy, 2007).

Resilience and the Climate Change Imperative

Zambia, like many other developing nations, is becoming increasingly exposed to the effects of climate change, which include irregular rainfall, droughts, and floods. Resilience is the ability to withstand these effects. According to Shiferaw et al. (2014), these climate shocks pose a direct danger to agricultural productivity as well as the livelihoods of smallholder farmers. A pathway to increased resilience might pragmatically be offered by agricultural cooperatives. This could be accomplished through collective risk management, diversification, and access to climate-smart farming practices. The findings reveal that smallholder farmers are making strides to effectively operate as a buffer against climate variability. This is because of the recent government support of agriculture loans (Sustainable Agriculture Finance Facility) to foster crop diversification, irrigation systems and farm implements. Consequently, as of 2024, only applicants who applied for crop diversification were funded. The government has further removed import tax from all solar power and irrigation equipment to foster resilience among the farmers during climate change. Smallholder farmers still have difficulties in accessing adaptive technology to foster resilience amidst climate change. This affected their productivity during the 2023-2024 farming season when there was a drought that led to the declaration of the national disaster by the President of the Republic of Zambia.

Youth Engagement and Diversification

Zambia is seeing a growing young population of more than 60%, many of whom are looking for significant economic prospects that go beyond the traditional subsistence farming. Even though agriculture continues to be an important industry, innovations are required to entice and keep young people engaged in farming, through cooperatives. Among these are the incorporation of technology, the diversification into crops and animals with a greater value, and the participation in agribusiness activities along the value chain. The research reveals that younger generations do not find the current cooperatives appealing. Young people face challenges in attempting to attain leadership or ownership within traditional cooperative structures. Many indicated that they do not perceive cooperatives as a feasible business career path in rural areas.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Although the theoretical advantages of agricultural cooperatives in developing nations such as Zambia are well acknowledged, the intricate realities, everyday successes, and ongoing difficulties encountered by smallholder farmers within these frameworks sometimes go unrecognized. This research has offered an in-depth understanding of farmers' conceptions of equity, their involvement in decision-making, their experiences with market access, and the overall effects on their livelihoods, thereby elucidating the dynamics of cooperative operations in rural Zambia.

The discussion framed these experiences within the Zambian context, emphasizing the substantial impact of traditional and social frameworks, ongoing challenges of restricted access to information and education, widespread infrastructure deficiencies, the growing necessity for climate change resilience, and the urgent requirement for youth involvement. The viability and sustainability of agricultural cooperatives in Zambia are intricately linked to the social, cultural, and environmental contexts of the communities they serve, rather than being entirely reliant on their economic models or governance structures.

This research emphasizes that a comprehensive understanding of cooperative impact transcends just quantitative indicators by prioritizing the perspectives of smallholder farmers. It includes subjective experiences of empowerment, disempowerment, trust, distrust, communal efficacy, and individual aspiration. The findings

elucidate the extent to which cooperatives align with the daily reality and requirements of their members, as well as identify any discrepancies. This study enhances the understanding of farmer-centric development, guiding methodologies that are both theoretically robust and authentically attuned to the realities of those crucial to Zambia's agricultural industry.

Recommendation

Considering the outcomes from this qualitative investigation of the experiences of smallholder farmers in agricultural cooperatives in rural Zambia, the following recommendations are suggested to promote more effective, egalitarian, and sustainable cooperative models.

Emphasize Governance and Transparency Centered on Members

Cooperatives ought to actively cultivate participatory governance frameworks that empower all members, including marginalized groups such as women and youth, to engage in decision-making. Transparency in financial administration and benefit allocation must be of utmost importance. This will require government support to help cooperatives to establish consistent, comprehensible financial reporting for members that can include visual aids and explanations in the local language. Therefore, training sessions should be facilitated focusing on cooperative governance, member entitlements, and democratic procedures. Varied leadership that mirrors the demographic composition of the cooperative should be encouraged.

Customize Communication and Information Distribution

The cooperatives need to recognize and accommodate the varied educational backgrounds and communication preferences of smallholder farmers. Data regarding cooperative operations, market trends, and agricultural methods must be readily available and culturally relevant. To implement this, cooperatives would need to employ local languages in all communications. This requires utilising conventional communication methods like village assemblies, churches, community radios among others in conjunction with formal channels. Further, there is a need to create streamlined instructional resources and facilitate frequent, engaging sessions to ensure farmers comprehensively understand intricate cooperative principles.

Allocate resources towards targeted capacity enhancement

Cooperatives need to create training programs tailored to the distinct challenges and opportunities encountered by Zambian smallholder farmers in their local environment, incorporating both technical agricultural competencies and cooperative management abilities. There is a need for cooperatives to collaborate more with agricultural extension services and local NGOs to provide practical training in climate-smart agriculture, value addition, post-harvest management, and fundamental business administration. Mentorship programmes should be established for emerging cooperative leaders.

Enhance connections with vital support services:

There is a need to enhance cooperatives' access to essential external support services, such as financial institutions, quality input suppliers, and agricultural research organizations. The study recommends that the government and development partners ought to optimize procedures for cooperatives to obtain finance and assistance. Collaborations between cooperatives and research institutions to foster pertinent, localized agricultural ideas should be promoted. There is a need to establish explicit channels for cooperatives to engage with larger purchasers and processors.

Foster inclusivity and examine social dynamics

There is need to proactively identify and address social impediments that may obstruct the complete engagement of specific demographics within cooperatives, especially women and adolescents. The study recommends the development of gender-sensitive policies and initiatives in cooperatives to guarantee women equal chances in leadership, training, and resource access. Targeted youth participation strategies should be formulated, including initiatives inside cooperatives that address their interests in technology, diversification, and agribusiness.

Incorporate climate resilience strategies

Considering Zambia's susceptibility to climate change, it is imperative to assist cooperatives in adopting climate-smart farming methods and implementing collective risk management techniques. This will require enhancing accessibility to climate data and early warning systems. Additionally, cooperatives need help in agricultural diversification, adoption of drought-resistant cultivars, and the use of water harvesting techniques. The government should foster collective insurance programs or contingency funds to mitigate climate-related

disruptions.

By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders, including the Zambian government, non-governmental organizations, and cooperative federations, can advance the establishment of more resilient, responsive, and genuinely empowering agricultural cooperatives. This would promote sustained rural development and ensure that the voices from the fields foster decolonising the narratives of small farmers through effective cooperative models to enhance livelihoods and instill a sense of ownership among smallholder farmers throughout rural Zambia.

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