

Article

Exploring fisherfolk community readiness for cooperative engagement in the Global South

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Abstract: Cooperatives have become significant contributors to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals No. 1: No Poverty. Transitioning associations to cooperatives is crucial for promoting sustainable economic development, empowering communities, and enhancing collective well-being. This research assessed the readiness of Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF) communities in the Global South to form a cooperative. This research employed an exploratory research approach in six coastal Barangays of Batad, situated in the 5th District of Iloilo Province. The findings indicated that respondents have a slight level of awareness with regard to the advantages and economic advantages associated with becoming part of a cooperative. On the other hand, there was a clear difference in members' perceptions of the benefits and financial returns that comes with belonging to a cooperative. According to the study, females are more likely to support the association's move towards a cooperative structure, especially younger individuals. The main issue highlighted was the lack of skilled officers and inadequate resources and training for association members. A lecture on Cooperative Awareness and capability trainings on financial management, bookkeeping, and credit management should be organized in order to increase associations readiness to be a cooperative.

Keywords: cooperative formation; SSF associations; Global South; no poverty

1. Introduction

In coastal communities across the globe, the fisheries sector stands as a vital economic and social pillar, providing sustenance, livelihoods, and cultural identity to millions of individuals. In the Philippines, where fisher folks associations' form the bedrock of coastal communities, the prospect of transitioning towards cooperative structures represents a potential paradigm shift in socioeconomic empowerment.

Cooperatives have become significant contributors to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. These independent groups of people, coming together voluntarily to address their shared economic, social, and cultural needs and goals, have proven their capacity to promote sustainable development through different means. Cooperatives are pivotal in promoting Goal 1: No Poverty by offering economic prospects and lessening income disparities. With their inclusive approach, cooperatives empower marginalized individuals and communities by establishing sustainable livelihoods and guaranteeing equitable distribution of income (Amorós Molina et al., 2023).

The establishment of cooperatives in small-scale fisheries communities is vital for promoting sustainable economic development, empowering communities, and improving collective well-being (Quimby et al., 2023; Tabares et al., 2022) Small-scale fisheries play a crucial role in providing food security, nutrition, cultural values,

healthy ecosystems, and livelihoods for millions of people (Garcia and Rosenberg, 2010; Oloruntuyi et al., 2023). According to Food and Agriculture Organizations of United Nations the voluntary guidelines for securing sustainable small-scale fisheries in the context of food security and poverty eradication were established as a global instrument in 2014. Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the interrelated concepts of sustainability, social equity, and the resilience and endurance of small-scale fishing operations (Bennett et al., 2022; Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2021).

The SSF (Small Scale Fisheries) Guidelines suggest that establishing formal organizations and other types of collective action within small-scale fisheries can be utilized to enhance long-term advantages for communities, counteract threats arising from mismanagement of fisheries address livelihood insecurity, and mitigate the challenging effects of poverty in numerous small-scale fisheries worldwide (Rivera et al., 2017). The guidelines emphasize the significance of formal organizations and collective action in small-scale fisheries for maximizing community benefits, addressing threats from mismanagement, reducing livelihood insecurity, and alleviating poverty within these fisheries (Okeke-Ogbuafor and Gray, 2021).

Cooperatives play a crucial role in driving economic and social development by providing a sustainable financial model and fostering community involvement. The structure of cooperatives enables clear distribution of income and a flexible financial model to effectively address economic issues (Wu and Ding, 2018). Furthermore, these cooperatives can stimulate entrepreneurial initiatives, enhancing members' opportunities to enhance their quality of life. These advantages collectively contribute to enhanced economic stability and higher earnings for members within the cooperative system, thereby creating an atmosphere conducive to progress and community development in the Philippines (Haniza Mohamad and Hamzah, 2013). The impact of cooperatives on economic and social development can vary depending on various factors such as the characteristics of cooperative members (Nguyen et al., 2014).

Transitioning associations to cooperatives holds significant importance in fostering sustainable economic development, empowering communities, and promoting collective well-being. By embracing the cooperative model, associations can align their activities with the values and needs of their members, enhancing ownership, engagement, and decision-making processes (Majee and Hoyt, 2011). This transition not only strengthens the associations themselves but also contributes to the broader cooperative movement, driving positive change in various sectors and communities (Elsler et al., 2023).

This study is motivated by the significant economic and social benefits that cooperatives provide to their members. However, the impact of cooperatives on economic and social development can vary depending on various factors such as the characteristics of cooperative members (Nguyen et al., 2014), thus, bringing awareness to SSF communities on the importance of cooperatives and capacitating them to form a cooperative will greatly benefit the SSF communities. Determining the SSF communities' readiness for cooperative engagement and underpinning their financial literacy, problems encountered as well as areas that needs training and capability building workshop will shed light to the vital needs of SSF to transition to cooperative engagement.

By bridging the gap between theory and practice, this study aspires to catalyze sustainable socioeconomic growth, strengthen community resilience, and foster equitable prosperity within Batad and similar coastal communities in the Global South.

2. Methodology

The study employed a descriptive design using a quantitative method to gather and analyze data from six coastal barangays in the Municipality of Batad, located in the 5th District of Iloilo Province. This approach emphasizes the collection of fresh data pertinent to the research problem from a large population. The quantitative method involves numerical analysis but tends to overlook individual emotions, feelings, and environmental context (Elsler et al., 2023; Rahi, 2017).

2.1. Population and sample

The respondents were randomly selected members of the fisherfolk associations in the barangays of Banban, Salong, Binon-an, Alinsolong, Embarcadero, and Tanao. They voluntarily consented to participate in the study and to have the results published, with the assurance that their identities would remain confidential.

2.2. Data collection tools

A modified researcher-made questionnaire was utilized for data collection. This questionnaire was structured to assess respondents awareness of cooperatives benefits, their willingness to be a cooperative and their financial practices that evaluated their financial management, bookkeeping, and credit management.

Respondents' awareness and willingness were measured using a 5-point Likert scale.

2.3. Focus group discussions (FGD)

To delve deeper into the common challenges faced by the cooperatives and to identify potential support from government, non-government organizations, and civil groups, focus group discussions were conducted with selected members of the associations. In addition to the quantitative approach, an exploratory method was employed with 20 identified association officers to triangulate the quantitative data findings. This method, which gained prominence through the work of John W. Tukey, aims to uncover new insights and generate hypotheses about a subject or phenomenon (Bhattacharya, 2012). By adopting an exploratory mindset, researchers can gain a deeper understanding and uncover unexpected patterns or relationships (Leinhardt and Wasserman, 1979).

A Structured interviews were conducted with the association officers to assess their commitment to associations, transparency of transactions, accountability and adaptability to technology.

This comprehensive methodology, combining quantitative data collection, focus group discussions, and exploratory research, aimed to provide a thorough understanding of the fisherfolk associations' awareness, readiness for financial practices, and the challenges they face. The structured approach ensured a robust analysis while respecting the participants' rights and confidentiality.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Level of members awareness on the privileges and economic benefits of a cooperative

Table 1 shows a grand mean of 3.20 verbally interpreted as slightly aware. This means that household heads respondents had average knowledge on the benefit and privileges that a cooperative gives. It is worth to note that the lowest awareness of the respondents is on the rights of the member as owner of the cooperative. Lower awareness levels might create an unequal playing field, where those less informed may not fully utilize the potential benefits of cooperative membership or might even be marginalized within the cooperative’s decision-making processes.

Table 1. shows the level of awareness of the members on the priveledges and economic benefits of a cooperative.

As member of cooperative I am aware that I should...	Score
Attend the pre-membership education seminar?	4
Attend and participate in the deliberation of all matters during the General Assembly?	3
Pay the installment of my share capital subscription?	3
Participate in the capital build-up?	3
Pay my membership fee?	3
Patronize the cooperative’s business/products?	3
Patronize the cooperative’s services?	3
Participate in the membership education programs?	3
Participate in the cooperatives activities and affairs?	3
Observed and obey all lawful orders, decisions, regulations adopted by the Board of Directors and the General Assembly.	3
Participate and vote on all matters deliberated upon during General Assembly.	4
Seek any elective or appointive position in the cooperative.	3
Grand Mean.	3.2

Table 2. Level of members awareness when classified as to sex and educational attainment.

Categories	SD	Mean	Description	Sig.
Entire group	0.6052	4.291	Fully Aware	
Sex				0.0415
Male	0.6958	3.952	Fully Aware	
Female	0.5467	4.215	Fully Aware	
Educational attainment				0.0021
Elementary level	0.4245	3.382	Aware	
High school level	0.6173	3.102	Aware	
High school graduate	0.4958	3.291	Aware	
College level	0.8857	3.2	Aware	
College graduate	0.514	3.8	Fully Aware	

Note: 1.00–1.80—fully not aware, 1.81–2.60—not aware, 2.61–3.40—slightly aware, 3.41–4.20—aware, 4.21–5.00—fully aware.

Table 2 shows the Level of members Awareness on the privileges and economic benefits of a cooperative when classified as to sex and educational attainment.

Significant Difference in the Awareness of the members of the privileges and economic benefits of a cooperative. A significant difference is noted when respondents were grouped according to their sex and educational attainment. Female respondents has a greater mean of 4.2 as compared to their male counterpart of 3.9, therefore, female has higher level of awareness compare to the male respondents. Those who reached tertiary level of education are more aware with a mean of 3.8 as compared to their elementary level and secondary level counterparts.

3.2. Level of willingness of the association to elevate into a cooperative

Table 3 Shows the Level of association members willingness to be a cooperative member.

Table 3. Willingness of the association members to be a cooperative.

Members Willingness to be a Cooperative	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
I will contribute to the conversion of association to cooperative	4.7	Very much willing
I will become an accountable and responsible officer	3.9	Willing
I will pay my membership contribution	4.6	Very much willing
I will attend the Pre-registration seminar	4.6	Very much willing
I will attend the general assembly	4.5	Very much willing
I will exercise my right to vote for the cooperative officers	4.6	Very much willing
I will patronized the product and services of the cooperative	4.6	Very much willing
I will attend educational training conducted by the cooperative	4.6	Very much willing
I am willing to be a member when we will apply to be cooperative	4.7	Very much willing
Grand Mean	4.6	Very much willing

The respondents rated the level of willingness to become cooperative in the Municipality of Batad a grand mean of 4.6 verbally interpreted as very much willing. Among the criteria asked, the highest mean were the willingness to contribute to the conversion of association to cooperative (4.7). However, the willingness of the association members to become an accountable and responsible officer got the lowest mean of (3.9) verbally interpreted as willing. Result simply shows that association members are willing to be a cooperative, however, only a few wanted to be accountable officer and do all the necessary requirements to transition to a cooperative.

High overall grand mean of 4.6 indicates that the majority of the respondents in the are very eager to transition their association into a cooperative. Their willingness to contribute to this transformation process is particularly strong with a mean score of 4.7. However, a significantly lower mean score of 3.9 for the willingness to become an accountable and responsible officer highlights a specific area of concern. This suggests less enthusiasm among members to take on the more demanding roles of cooperative governance compared to other aspects of cooperative formation and function.

Results implied that there is a need for more initiatives aimed at developing leadership skills and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of cooperative officers.

Potential officers may require more encouragement or incentives to step into these roles to ensure that the cooperative has capable and willing leaders, which is key to its long-term success and sustainability.

3.3. Significant difference in the level of willingness of the respondents to become a cooperative

The observed disparity in willingness among association members to transition to a cooperative, when categorized by gender, age, and education, carries significant implications for the potential transformation of the association. Notably, females exhibit a greater inclination, as indicated by a higher mean (4.2) compared to males (3.9), suggesting a stronger desire among female members for the association’s transition to a cooperative structure. This finding underscores the importance of considering gender dynamics and ensuring equitable participation and representation in decision-making processes regarding cooperative formation.

Furthermore, the mean score of 4.2 among respondents aged 26–40 suggests a notable willingness within this demographic cohort to support the elevation of the association to cooperative status. This age group’s openness to cooperative engagement may reflect their recognition of the benefits and opportunities associated with such a transition, highlighting the potential for generational shifts in organizational preferences and aspirations.

Additionally, individuals who have attained tertiary education, as evidenced by the mean score of 4.1, demonstrate a particularly favorable perception of the advantages offered by conversion to a cooperative. Their higher level of education likely equips them with the knowledge and understanding of cooperative principles and practices, enabling them to appreciate the potential benefits of cooperative structures, such as increased collective bargaining power and access to resources. This underscores the importance of educational initiatives and capacity-building programs aimed at enhancing awareness and understanding of cooperative models among association members, thereby fostering greater support for cooperative conversion.

Table 4 shows the significant difference in the willingness of the respondents to be a cooperative member.

Table 4. Significant difference in the willingness of the respondents to become a cooperative.

Particulars	Mean	Sig.	Interpretation
Sex			
Male	3.9	0.002	Highly Significant
Female	4.2		
Age			
18–25	3.9		
26–40	4.2		
41–60	4.1		
Above 60	4.0		
Education			
Elementary Level	3.9	0.000	Highly Significant
Secondary Level	4.0		
Tertiary Level	4.1		

3.4. Readiness of the association to be cooperative in terms of financial practices

Financial practices of the associations were determined using a researcher made questionnaire that includes three key areas namely financial management, record keeping and credit management.

Financial Management practices have a mean of 2.94, this suggests that financial management practices are utilized by the officers of the associations “sometimes”. A specific practice within this category, recording every transaction, scored a mean of 3.2, indicating it is done more regularly than other financial practices. In contrast, comparing financial performance to objectives is less commonly done with a mean of 2.5, suggesting a less frequent practice.

Record Keeping has the lowest score among financial practices, with a mean of 1.78, the overall practice of record keeping is “rarely practiced” by the associations’ officers. Within this area, recording of sales scored a 2.3 mean, which is a little higher but still falls under “rarely practiced”. Two critical aspects of record keeping such as updating the stock book (mean of 1.5) and using computers or gadgets for recording (mean of 1.0)—are significantly low, pointing to a severe lack of consistency in using modern technology and maintaining accurate inventory records.

Credit management activities, on average, are “rarely practiced” by the officers, indicated by the mean score of 2.2. However, some practices within this area are more common than others, such as checking for government grants (mean of 3.0, which is “sometimes practiced”). Yet, obtaining loans from commercial banks is infrequently done, with a mean score of 1.4, reflecting a rarity of this activity among the officers.

A grand mean of 2.32 across all financial practices suggests that the fisherfolks associations’ officers rarely engage in sound financial practices. This low mean value points to an overall minimal engagement with industry-standard financial management, record keeping, and credit management practices, which could imply a need for improvements, potentially through targeted financial literacy and capacity-building initiatives.

Figure 1 depicts the financial practices of the associations in terms of financial management, record keeping and credit management.



Figure 1. Financial practices of associations.

3.5. Leadership behaviors and organizational commitment

Leaders of the different associations were interviewed and ask for their

commitment to the association, their transparency of transactions, accountability and ability to adopt to the technology.

Result shows that majority of the leaders can adapt to the new technology (17) and are transparent (16). More than half of them (12) says that they are accountable for the success or failure of their associations. When further asked why they have not used any computers or gadgets in recording their transactions, they answered that they do not have facilities available and they added that even if they have, they are not trained how to do it. This simply implied that lack of resources and trainings also affects the leadership skills of the associations' officers.

Figure 2 is a pie chart of leadership qualities of association leaders.



Figure 2. Leadership qualities of association leaders.

Leadership skills play a crucial role in the success and effectiveness of a cooperative (Gutiérrez et al., 2011; Udensi et al., 2014). Cooperatives rely on the cooperation and mutual understanding of their members, making strong leadership skills essential, to promote greater cooperation and mutual understanding among members, cooperatives should conduct skills trainings and education programs for empowerment and encourage participation in decision making (Woldesenbet, 2019).

3.6. Common problems encountered by the association

Respondents considered the lack of knowledgeable, active and responsible officers to run the organization as ranked 1 problem. Other problems identified is the lack of skills and trainings for the association members that can contribute to the betterment of the association. No start up capital to run the association as there are no concrete support coming from the government or even NGOs (Non-Government Organizations).

The association based on the focus grouped discussion encrypted that the associations need livelihood trainings on household products that could easily be disposed and consumed in the community. Trainings on product development involving fish products and meat products has also been of interest to the respondents. Bread and pastry production is also of importance to them as oftentimes fisherfolks bring with them bread when they go fishing.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The fisherfolks association members are slightly aware of the benefit and privileges that a cooperative would bring to the community and its members. They are not even aware what a cooperative is all about or how it works but they only heard that a cooperative lends money. However, respondents are very much willing to elevate their association to become a cooperative.

The lowest awareness is on their rights as cooperative members, can lead to inequalities within the cooperative. Those who are less informed may not fully capitalize on the benefits of cooperative membership and could be marginalized in the cooperative's decision-making processes. To address these challenges, it is crucial to implement educational initiatives that enhance members' understanding of their rights and the full spectrum of cooperative benefits.

A lecture on Cooperative Awareness should be conducted to the association members to encourage them to apply to be a cooperative and make them understand that it will offer a pathway towards greater inclusivity, resilience, and shared prosperity, highlighting the transformative potential of cooperative principles in shaping a more equitable and sustainable future.

The observed gap in willingness among association members to transition to a cooperative, categorized by gender, age, and education, carries significant implications for the association's potential transformation. Notably, females show a greater inclination toward this transition. This suggests a stronger desire among female members for the association's conversion to a cooperative structure, emphasizing the need to consider gender dynamics and ensure equitable participation and representation in decision-making processes.

Additionally, respondents aged 26–40 exhibit a notable willingness to support the transition, this age group's openness to cooperative engagement may reflect their recognition of the benefits and opportunities associated with such a shift, indicating potential generational shifts in organizational preferences and aspirations.

Furthermore, individuals with tertiary education demonstrate a particularly favorable perception of the advantages offered by converting to a cooperative, evidenced by a mean of very much willing. Their higher level of education likely equips them with a better understanding of cooperative principles and practices, enabling them to appreciate benefits like increased collective bargaining power and access to resources.

These findings underscore the importance of educational initiatives and capacity-building programs aimed at enhancing awareness and understanding of cooperative models among association members. By fostering greater support for cooperative conversion through these programs, associations can ensure more informed and enthusiastic participation across diverse demographic groups, ultimately contributing to the cooperative's success and sustainability.

Respondents shows the highest enthusiasm in their willingness to contribute to the conversion process. However, a notable concern is the low willingness to become an accountable and responsible officer. This disparity suggests that while association members are eager to support the transformation into a cooperative, fewer are inclined to take on the demanding roles of governance. This highlights a potential challenge in

ensuring that the cooperative will have capable and willing leaders. In the focus group discussion, one of the reasons pointed out by existing association leaders why they are not willing to be an accountable officer if they will become cooperative is their low financial literacy particularly on basic financial management, bookkeeping, and credit management. This concern is evident in the result of the study that reveals that officers of associations rarely engage in sound financial practices. This low level of engagement points to a significant need for improvements in their financial management, record keeping, and credit management practices. To address these deficiencies, targeted financial literacy and capacity-building initiatives are recommended. These efforts could help enhance the associations' financial practices, leading to better financial health and sustainability.

A financial literacy training tailored to the specific needs of fisherfolks could therefore enhance their skills. The bookkeeping training should also be pattern in the Financial Statements of a cooperative to enable them to be familiar with the Cooperative Development Authority required format.

The need for additional source of income due to fishing interruption due to bad weather and also because of closed season policy is a major concern raised during focus group discussion. Respondents air their willingness to attend livelihood trainings on household product production that can be easily disposed and consumed within the community particularly the do-it-yourself dishwashing liquid. Product development training on fish and meat processing is also important to give added value to their catches as well as bread and pastry production training, which is particularly important as fisherfolks often take bread with them when fishing. Shell-craft making is also considered due to the abundance of shells in the community.

To ensure sustainability of the livelihood programs extended to the associations, there is a need to established an ecology that will continually help the associations until they will be recognized and profitable cooperative. Seeking the support of government programs and NGOs that can provide subsidies or grants for capacity building in financial literacy, leadership capability building and other livelihood trainings is crucial to the association's progress into a cooperative.

Finally, to ensure associations transitioning to cooperatives a consultancy services can be entered with NGAs, NGOs and academic institution that will provide continuous monitoring and evaluation to ensure compliance with standard financial practices. This is crucial in supporting the long-term viability and impact of associations, as they navigate the challenges and opportunities of the evolving global landscape.

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