

The Development of Agricultural Cooperatives in Ethiopia: History and a Framework for Future Trajectory

Dagne Mojo¹, Terefe Degefa² and Christian Fischer³

Abstract

Cooperatives have been playing important roles in the socio-economic lives of communities for a long time during which they have also encountered challenges and weaknesses. These have made countries to have their own distinct histories of the development of cooperatives and of course sometimes having similarities. Based on a critical review of literature and analysis of secondary data, this article presents a brief history of the development of the Ethiopian cooperatives with a focus on agricultural cooperatives. It indicates that although modern cooperatives have rapidly increased and positively contributed to community development, several weaknesses and challenges still remain being rooted in the economic, social, institutional, political and environmental settings. Due to the importance given to agricultural cooperatives in contributions of cooperatives to members and the larger community becomes vital that deserves policy making based on the key findings, the article proposes a framework that can help integrate sustainability principles into a cooperative structure right from the setup stage, as a future trajectory in the development of cooperatives in Ethiopia.

Keywords: agricultural cooperatives, collective action, developing country, Ethiopia, sustainable development, framework

¹ Postdoc Research Fellow, UN Environment - International Ecosystem Management Partnership (UNEP-IEMP), C/O Institute of Geography and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), Beijing, China; Email: dagnemojo@yahoo.com.au

² Associate Professor, Center for Population Studies, College of Development Studies, Addis Ababa University

³ Faculty of Science and Technology, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Bolzano, Italy; Email: Christian.Fischer@unibz.it

mainstream social, economic and environmental considerations when establishing agricultural cooperatives, and carry out evaluations to check cooperative performances and impacts in the future. Regarding method, literatures required to achieve the aim of this article were collected from academic journal databases using relevant key words in the internet based search engines, while secondary data and published reports were obtained from the Federal Cooperative Agency (FCA) of Ethiopia. Secondary data were analysed and interpretations were made to reveal the empirical basis of, for instance, the development of primary cooperatives and trends and status of primary cooperatives in Ethiopia. Leading theories and literature were utilized to construct the Sustainability Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (SPME) Framework.

The remaining sections of the article are organized as follows. Next section presents the reviews of historical evolution, legal frameworks, types, trends, and status of modern cooperatives in Ethiopia. While the third section recapitulates some findings about the economic, social and environmental impacts of agricultural cooperatives, section four highlights strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the cooperative movement in the country. The penultimate section proposes a Sustainability Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (SPME) framework that can help integrate sustainable development principles into a cooperative system beginning from the setup stage. The last section presents concluding remarks.

The Development of Cooperatives in Historical Setting

This section presents a brief historical note on cooperative development in Ethiopia. The logical step towards that direction is to assess how successive Ethiopian regimes have advocated the notion and practice of cooperation in the country.

Cooperatives during Emperor Haile-Selassie I (1932–1974)

Since ancient time, Ethiopians are used to carrying out agricultural activities, trade and military operations through the traditional types of cooperative efforts (Veerakumaran 2007). However, the modern cooperatives in Ethiopia had not evolved unfortunately from their predecessor traditional associations, but rather modified from the Western cooperative philosophy and were first introduced during the Imperial era (Bernard et al. 2010, Veerakumaran 2007). They were first informally introduced during the Italian invasion (1936–1941), and later the American Peace Corps volunteers established (FCA 2014a).

Subsequently, the first formal legislative Farm Workers Cooperatives Proclamation No.44/1960 was declared in 1960. The major mentioned causes for the establishment of a legal framework were an increased unemployment rate, rural

For instance, membership was neither open nor voluntary; cooperative establishment was top-down (not based on a community initiative) and, in particular, producers' cooperatives m Hence, they failed to survive in the succeeding regime.

Cooperatives during the *Derg* (Committee) Regime (1974–1991)

The Military Government known as the *Derg*, noted as socialist regime, abolished all types of formal cooperatives (except the urban saving and credit cooperatives) established during the Imperial era. Subsequently, the regime organized new types of cooperatives based on the Marxist principles aimed at ending the exploitation of the peasantry by the Monarchical feudal system (Kodama 2007 and Bernard et al. 2010). Moreover, the cooperative ideology of the *Derg* regime was also different from the modern cooperative principles (Kodama 2007). The *Derg* regime gave special attention to cooperatives as instruments for mass movement, equitable resources mobilization and distribution (as part of land reform), for the purpose of constructing a particular brand of socialism in the countryside (Abebaw and Haile 2013). Generally, the *Derg* regime used cooperatives to organize peasants, control the prices of commodities, levy taxes, and extend government control to the local level (Teka 2011).

Similar to the Imperial regime, the *Derg* also enacted different cooperative proclamations to realize its philosophy. The first legalizing proclamation that clearly stated the objectives, powers and duties of cooperatives was proclamation No. 71/1975 on the base of which three types of rural associations were established. These are: (1) Peasant Associations—the lowest administrative structures where membership was obligatory for farmers; (2) Agricultural Producer Cooperatives—established to provide preferential treatment to smallholders; and (3) Service Cooperatives—marketing and purchasing cooperatives that handled modern inputs, credits, milling services, c o

Since the first proclamation (No. 71/1975) was only targeting agricultural cooperative societies, Cooperative Societies Proclamation No. 138/1978 was enacted to include other types of cooperatives, like housing, thrift and credit, handicrafts and others. In fact, the major aims of this proclamation were to bring about “Socialist Agricultural Transfer Marketing System” in both rural and u efforts were made to restructure cooperative movement based on these proclamations, the government rather ended up with further direct control of cooperatives and turning them into government political use instead of making them development instruments (Veerkumaran 2007 and Teka 2011).

During this centrally controlled economy, a large number of cooperatives

leaders to strengthen their understanding and leadership skills through sharing the experiences of the neighbouring countries. By the mid-1990s the government's view of cooperatives had changed and policymakers generally accepted the meanings and principles of cooperatives given by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) in 1995 (FCA 2015). These efforts led to the establishment of cooperative legislations that consequently opened up a room for the flourishing of modern cooperatives in Ethiopia.

The Legal Framework of the Current Ethiopian Cooperative System

The new era of the cooperative movement in Ethiopia started with a new Agricultural Cooperative Society Proclamation No 85/1994 in 1994 (Abeba and Haile 2013). This proclamation states that “the government creates convenient conditions for the peasants living in rural areas to be organized freely and willingly to jointly solve their economic and social problems through pulling their resources.” Unlike the past two regimes, it provided space to organize cooperatives voluntarily, democratically and within a market setting.

Though this proclamation (No. 85/1994) helped to reorganize farmers on a voluntary basis to establish new cooperatives or to reorganize and strengthen the old ones, the organizers had a hard time convincing farmers to join cooperatives due to the bad image of the cooperatives of the *Derg* regime (Holmberg 2011). As further indicated by this same source, the initiators started with demonstration projects where the members started sharing dividends after a year that somehow helped to promote the benefit of the cooperatives to change the attitude towards them.

Similar to the past two regimes, the first cooperative society proclamation (No 85/1994) of EPRDF was also only targeting the agricultural cooperatives and lacks sufficient details. Hence, the government enacted the second proclamation (No. 147/1998) in 1998. This proclamation outlined the layers of organizational structure of the cooperatives into primary cooperatives, unions, federations, and cooperative leagues that can foster broader growth of the movement (FDRE 1998 and Kodama 2007). The proclamation also specified related organs of the cooperatives that include members, a general assembly, a special resolution, and a management committee with clear roles and responsibilities. Besides, it indicated the possible formation of an appropriate authority, such as a government organ⁵ established at federal, regional, or a local bureau level. This government organ

⁵This government organ was first established in 2002 by Proclamation No. 274/2002, and was called the Federal Cooperative Commission (FCC) and later named the Federal Cooperative Agency (FCA). Until now, FCA is in charge of promoting cooperatives in Ethiopia.

rate of members, poor governance, and low economic performance. In addition, the majority of the cooperatives have been initiated by the government, which indicates its strong interest in cooperative movement, including cooperative governance which by itself raises questions of cooperative independence.

Types, Trends, Current Status and Distributions of Modern Cooperatives

Despite the existence of modern cooperatives in all the sectors throughout Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 147/1998 underscores, specifically targeted sectors, including Agricultural, Housing, Industrial and Artisans Producers, Consumers, Savings and Credit, Fishery, and Mining Cooperative Societies (FDRE 1998). This proclamation, in fact, allows individuals to be organized according to their interests, as long as their targets are to overcome social and economic problems in the -rural economy". Consequently, such as *Idir* (particularly in big towns and cities), have also been legally registered under this proclamation. Regardless of the socioeconomic focus of the proclamation, the modern cooperatives have currently been involved in the area of environmental and natural resource management to overcome related problems in their vicinity.

While several cooperative types are listed in the FCA database, a slight inconsistency in record keeping (regarding the type and number of cooperatives at regional and federal levels) has been observed. This is mostly, due to the existence of some overlapping among some categories has not been used uniformly across regions. The FCA data show that in the categorization of cooperatives by specific products (e.g. coffee, fish, etc.), and sometimes based on general activities that cooperatives undertake. For instance, a broad category, agricultural product marketing can overlap with specific product types, such as milk and milk products, coffee, fruits and vegetable producing cooperatives. Similarly, multipurpose cooperatives are also mainly engaged in cereal production and marketing.

To handle these limitations, the types of cooperatives are summarized (Table 1) based on the categories given under Proclamation No. 147/1998. Table 1 also shows the proportion of each type; for instance, agriculture and multipurpose cooperatives which take the largest share (27% of all primary cooperatives and 65% of all members). As a suggestion, the FCA may also need to reconsider the categorization of cooperatives that would be applicable and consistent across the regions of the country.

number and capital. When the first proclamation of the EPRDF regime was introduced in 1994, only limited active rural and urban cooperatives, which were established during the *Derg* regime, were present. Though some of these rural cooperatives were reorganized, following proclamation No. 85/1994, the biggest increase followed the enactment of proclamation No.147/1998. The government plan to expand cooperatives by establishing at least one primary cooperative in each village and one union per district has also further enhanced the development of cooperatives (Emana 2012). As a result, the total number of cooperatives increased by about 64% between 2006 and 2013 (Figure 1). In general, the longitudinal analysis of the total number of cooperatives shows an increasing trend over time (Figure 1).

Similarly, Table 2 shows the total number of primary cooperatives of all regional states at the end of 2013 being about 56,044 with about 9.2 million individual members. This number of cooperatives has risen to more than 60,000 in 2015. More than 2.2 million (24%) of the cooperative members were also women, the number showing an increasing trend. The Oromia region is the largest in terms of number of members and primary cooperatives, and second largest in capital (next to Addis Ababa). As a whole, cooperatives have been increasing in terms of both number and capital in all regions.

Some highlights on the Impacts of Agricultural Cooperatives in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, the agricultural sector generally accounts for about 40% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (NBE 2014) and is dominated by smallholder farmers who remain important for economic development and poverty reduction. Yet, agricultural land degradation and deforestation, drought and unreliable weather, poor infrastructure and market imperfection are among important problems constraining the agricultural sector and rural livelihood development. Agricultural cooperatives, among others, are premeditated to overcome these constraints through rendering many services such as input/output marketing, expanding financial services in rural areas, purchasing agricultural machinery, equipment and implements and leasing them to farmers as well as establishing small agro-processing industries (FDRE 1998). They are also expected to establish various social institutions to provide different social services. Based on the existing literature and data obtained from the FCA, some examples of the economic, social and environmental impacts of agricultural cooperatives in Ethiopia are assessed and presented as follows.

Economic Impacts

Evidences indicate that cooperatives in Ethiopia have been creating enormous socioeconomic benefits to members through distributing agricultural inputs, providing improved technologies, and encouraging farmers to produce high value crops. For instance, cooperatives imported and distributed a total of 906,220 tons of fertilizers from 2005–2008, which is about 70% of the total fertilizers the country imported each year (FCA 2014a). The same source shows that although cooperatives have not been directly importing fertilizers since 2009, they have been distributing 95% of the fertilizers imported through a centralized Agricultural Input Supply Corporation (AISCO); and they distributed 692,781 tons of fertilizers in 2013/14 alone. Generally, compared to private traders, input supply through cooperatives has created an easy access to the farmers at a reasonable price (Emana and Nigussie 2011).

In addition, cooperatives are involved in the distribution of improved seeds, farm implements (such as water pumps), pesticides and herbicides, modern beehives and other agricultural inputs. For instance, in the 2012/13 cropping season, cooperatives distributed about 110,578.4 tons of improved seeds of different types (FCA 2014a). Moreover, they also play important roles in non-agricultural input supply such as construction materials, and consumable and agricultural products in a good quality, quantity, and at reasonable prices.

Cooperatives are also involved in output marketing, creating market opportunities and in serving as a market channel. Coffee, sesame, grains, animal

Social Benefits

Different reports, such as Emanu and Nigussie (2011) and FCA (2015) indicate that agricultural cooperatives also perform a wide range of social activities. They contribute to the development of community health by providing training on family planning, HIV prevention, and on personal and environmental hygiene. They also involve in building public infrastructure, such as health centres, clean water, schools, roads, bridges, etc. They support the youth, children and women, the homeless and disabled individuals and ensure their participation in the economy. Cooperatives also participate in awareness creation, provision of good social protection for employees and in creating a joint voicing mechanism for the rural and scattered people.

The economic benefits of cooperatives discussed earlier have also their share in contributing to social benefits, as the income earned from cooperatives could be invested in children's education and provision being one of the objectives of cooperatives, both primary cooperatives and cooperative unions (should) spend about 5% of their profits as investment in social services (EPRDF 1998). This has also long-term economic benefits to the cooperatives, since it can help to increase the social capital of the community. Some empirical studies also indicate that cooperatives have significantly positive impact in creating social and human capital (Majee and Hoyt 2010; Mojo et.al. 2015b). Despite their potential however, only a few cooperative unions are currently undertaking such activities of contributing to the social wellbeing.

Natural Resources Management and Environmental Benefits

Agricultural cooperatives are, in nature, organizations that engage in natural resource management activities, environmental protection and care for the community. They are expected to provide financial and material support for environmental protection, soil and water conservation, forest, wildlife, water and air protection activities. Despite the expected all-around roles of cooperatives - potential organizational vehicles for sustainable development (Wanyama 2014), both qualitative and quantitative studies are scanty regarding the environmental impacts of cooperatives in Ethiopia.

Nevertheless, some studies report that cooperatives have been negatively contributing to environmental sustainability in Ethiopia (Stellmacher and Grote 2011 and Mojo, et al., 2015b). These authors argue that improvements in farm gate prices (due to better markets created by cooperatives) motivate the farmers to further increase their yields through intensifying production encroaching onto forestlands and consequently utilizing the natural resource unsustainably. Conversely, cooperatives should not only be economically viable and socially equitable, but also environmentally sustainable so long as they are guided by principles of the International Cooperative Alliance. Furthermore, Rodrigo (2013)

Table 3. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) of Ethiopian cooperatives

Internal factors	External factors
<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supply agricultural inputs at fair prices; • Enable members to get higher prices for outputs; • Create market alternatives/ serve as competitors with private traders; • Create economic benefits for members through entering into value addition process. 	<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government special attention and support to cooperatives; • Presence of oversight/regulation structures from federal down to district level; • Government special emphases to infrastructure development that can ease cooperative access to market; • The current high demand of agricultural products that can create an opportunity for cooperatives to increase their capital; • Availability of training colleges and universities specialized in cooperatives; • Availability of different development collaborates (NGOs and government organizations) that can enhance cooperative performance.
<p>Weaknesses</p> <p>Management-related:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak leadership and management capacity; • Limited capacity to use modern technologies; • Lack of transparency of cooperative management bodies; • Limited budget and unwillingness to higher professional managers of cooperatives; 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of comprehensive cooperative policy and strategy document, and inconsistency between national and regional cooperative society proclamations, rules and regulations; • Inconsistency between cooperative bylaws and local practical situation, in some cases; • Absence of fully fledged cooperative promotion package and extension system; • Absence of regular audit, inspection and monitoring services; • Unstable institutional setting of the cooperative

a parameter on the corporate and social responsibility agenda, due to moral obligation, reputational risk or regulatory requirements. Since the notion of sustainable development came in to existence, these parameters have grown from an original focus on economic and social dimensions to including ecological aspects (Rapacioli et al. 2011). This inclusion of social, economic and ecological aspects into a business transformed the traditional net-income based performance evaluation to sustainable performance evaluation, i.e. a shift from a single-bottom-line to a triple-bottom-line approach. Consequently, over the last few decades, many enterprises, including some cooperatives (e.g. Canadian Cooperative Associations, UK Cooperative Groups, etc.) have been reporting the sustainability performance of their enterprises using different sustainability reporting frameworks, such as Global Reporting Initiatives (GRI). Among other business models, the cooperative model that puts people at the centre (instead of capital) has been typified as an appropriate one for sustainability (Toit and Buys 2013).

The aim of this article is, therefore, not only limited to reviewing the development of agricultural cooperatives in Ethiopia, but also proposing the social, economic and environmental considerations when establishing agricultural cooperatives, and evaluating their performance and impacts in due course of time. Hence, the article puts forward a potential sustainability planning, monitoring, and evaluation (SPME) framework (Figure 2) that includes the elements to be considered when establishing, monitoring, and evaluating agricultural cooperatives in Ethiopia and beyond. If we really need to enhance sustainable development, we need to exercise integrating sustainability principles in every organization, including cooperatives, beginning from the planning stage. If cooperatives perform well, their impacts could be reflective (social) performance.

The SPME framework which is suggested here consists of two main components (performance determinants and performance indicators) identified based on institutional economics theory, literature on sustainability indicators, and sustainability reporting frameworks such as Global Reporting Initiatives (GRI) (Toit and Buys 2013) and Sustainability Balanced Scorecard (SBSC) (Figge et al. 2002).

Determinants of Cooperative Performance

As indicated earlier, the first component of the proposed SPME framework contains factors that determine performance of cooperatives. To build a sustainable cooperative, what needs to be of great importance is giving due consideration to the structure (institutional arrangement) of the cooperative *per se*. That is, we need to ensure that cooperative policies, regulations, bylaws and norms allow or require

environmental indicators should be identified under each category. These indicators shall be measured over time and need to show the changes/progress that the cooperatives have made. Existing sustainability reporting frameworks, such as Global Reporting Initiatives (GRI) can be applied to measure progress of cooperatives at this stage.

Cooperative performance can also be (social, economic and environmental) performance. These impact evaluations can be made through different approaches, such as by comparing before and after program situations, or by comparing the performance of cooperative members with that of non-members. The performance of cooperatives and their impacts are complimentary but are not necessarily the same. Performance usually looks at the cooperatives themselves, while impact is about effects on the other parties (e.g. on members' income) assessed using a p r o p

Finally, the SPME framework shows that every sustainable social, economic and environmental move (impact) made should positively contribute to sustainable development. Normally, when integrating the concept of sustainability, cooperatives should develop strategies that will lead to the creation of social, environmental, and economic values, and the SPME framework may help as a guide regarding what to consider during planning, monitoring, and evaluation. Meanwhile, the weakness of cooperatives underlined earlier can be corrected if this framework is adopted.

Figure 2. Sustainability Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (SPME) Framework i.e. developed based on theories and reviews of literature mentioned in the text (please see the previous page).

Application of the SPME Framework

As its name indicates, the SPME framework can be applied to design a sustainable cooperative at establishment (since it can serve as a guide in identifying what determines cooperative performance), and also helps to monitor and evaluate the performance or impact of any cooperative. Even if a cooperative was not designed using this framework, it can still help to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the existing cooperative model.

Considering the above, it is possible to pinpoint the lessons learned from previous studies and identify whether the findings could locate what went wrong/right according to the SPME framework. For instance, findings about members' low participation and governance (Bernard et al. 2013 and Mojo et.al. 2015a) indicate weaknesses in the internal and external processes as well as the structure of cooperatives as a whole. Hence, enriching the capacity of leaders, enabling the managing committees and members to exercise cooperative principles and obeying the agreed-upon bylaws, or modifying the cooperative rules (i.e. working on structures and internal processes) could be suggested. And, doing so could make the cooperative movement in the country more vigorous and sustainable.

Another good example could be a study that reported some undifferentiated services of cooperatives to members and non-members (Mojo et.al. 2015a and Mojo et.al 2017), which might have resulted in low participation of members. This problem can be addressed by improving cooperative structures (such as by strengthening bylaws) and improving internal processes (governance). Hence, the problems can easily be located and actions can be taken if the SPME framework is employed. Furthermore, the studies that indicate important positive impacts of cooperatives on farmers' social performance (Mojo et . highlight positive activities in the internal processes that have to be strengthened further. In the meantime, the negative impact of cooperatives on the environment suggests for a need to revise the cooperative structure and internal and external processes. In general, it is possible to locate what is going well and what should be improved to make progress toward sustainable development using the proposed framework. In addition, if

FCA, enriched the capacity of cooperative leaders? To what extent do managing committees and members obey cooperative rules and their own agreed upon bylaws? Do cooperatives take environmental sustainability into account, or focus on the socioeconomic services alone? And similar painstaking questions should be raised and answered so as to help the cooperative movement in the country to be long-lasting.

The existence of cooperatives in the business environment usually depends on many factors, which include leadership, type of cooperatives, market linkages, investments in fixed assets (that can be used as collateral), location, initial establishment, member size, access to capital and the availability of sound technical support systems, among others (Emana and Nigussie 2011). As economic viability of cooperatives alone does not insure their existence, working on ensuring equity, equality and social sustainability as a whole becomes vital. Moreover, to be competitive, all cooperative societies should place environmental sustainability as integral part of their activities since the world is getting more conscious about the environmental cost of doing business. Generally, taking the variations of challenges regarding the performance of cooperatives by type for granted, the next concern in cooperative business in Ethiopia is about their own existence and their staying competitive in this changing world.

Hence, the proposed SPME framework can be used as a guide when initiating a cooperative in the future and can help to integrate sustainable development principles into a cooperative structure right from the setup stage. Moreover, the SPME framework can help to indicate how a cooperative can contribute to the economy, society and environment in activity plan upon which its performance can be monitored and evaluated. The framework can also help to revisit and evaluate the current cooperative structure to make the necessary amendment.

Generally, this article embraces important implications and can also be a foundation in promoting the performance/impact evaluations of cooperatives from economic, social, and environmental perspectives as these are minimum criteria to be met for a sustainable development.

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