ENHANCING THE PERFORMANCE OF COOPERATIVE SOCIETIES IN ABIA STATE, NIGERIA: CRITICAL FACTORS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT
Against the background of recent economic reforms in the rural development sector and the enhanced linkages between the extension agency and cooperative societies this paper compares the performance of three categories of cooperatives, namely, farming, trading and agro-industrial. A multi stage stratified sampling technique was adopted in selecting twenty five (25) cooperatives and one hundred and fifty (150) cooperators studied. Data were collected with standardized tests and personality inventories. Performance indicators investigated were the level of efficiency (interpersonal relationship, group cohesiveness) and effectiveness (members' leadership behaviour and group task orientation).Surrogate measures were used to generate scores aggregated to yield an index of performance. Although the three groups investigated had above – average performance, agro-industrial groups emerged best in overall efficiency and effectiveness, followed by farming and trading groups. The paper highlights measures for enhancing the performance of cooperatives as instruments of grassroots social and economic development.
Key Words: *Performance, group efficiency, group effectiveness, task orientation.*

INTRODUCTION
Considering Nigeria's large farming population vis-à-vis its low agricultural density, and recognizing the utility of collective and corporate existence of farmers (for purposes of efficient technology transfer, consolidation of scattered land holdings, easy procurement of production resources and disposal of produce), Nigerian Government encouraged the formation of cooperative societies as a microcosm of corporate organizations and as instrument of grassroots development (FMNP, 1981). Consequently, there were over 200,000 multipurpose, marketing credit group farming and fisheries cooperative organizations in Nigeria in the early eighties (Idachaba, 1981). Government, in addition, encouraged the people by mobilizing financial resources and empowering cooperative groups to secure loans and other credit facilities for executing their projects (Ijere, 1986; FMFED, 1989, CBN, 1996).

There is, however, doubt if the operation of these cooperatives has, as anticipated, guaranteed efficient production and distribution of food, or utilization of abundant natural resources in the country. Several studies have examined aspects of cooperatives and addressed a variety of cooperative problems (Arua, 1983; Mejeha, 1987; Ezeh and Unamma, 1987; Igben, 1988; Kalu, 1995).

Views expressed in these and other reports (FMNP, 1981; Ojo, 1991; Idachaba, 1992; MAMSER, 1992; CBN, 1996) point to the general weakness of farmer cooperatives and to the inadequacy of government's efforts to develop cooperatives. It has, also, been perceived that cooperatives are too difficult to organize in the Nigerian environment, and that management failure had characterized many cooperatives in Nigeria. Worse still, the impression had been created that the contributions of cooperatives to agricultural and rural development in Nigeria was minimal.

Against the background of renewed emphasis on management of cooperatives as a self-reliant, people-oriented rural development strategy, with emphasis on the alleviation of rural poverty (FMOI, 1991); and the current reforms of the public and private sectors of the economy, there is need to critically re-examine the situation with a view to enhancing the quality of rural life. This study was, therefore, focused on cooperative group performance. Specifically, the study evaluated the performance of cooperatives based on selected criteria, identified factors that enhance the performance of cooperatives, and ascertained the magnitude of correlation of performance of the various categories of cooperatives in Abia State.

It was hypothesized that there is no significant difference in the task or problem-solving orientation and degree of cohesion of cooperative societies, as well as in the interpersonal relationship and leadership behaviour/potential of members of cooperative societies operating in Abia State, the nature of their business undertaking notwithstanding.

Overview of Performance Assessment Criteria

The term performance embodies multiple concepts and strategies used in determining accomplishment including monitoring, assessment, measurement and evaluation. Every sphere of human endeavour or work situation (factory, ministry, formal or informal organization) has a unique reference standard which provides a guide for monitoring progress and/or measuring achievement. This is especially there when the inputs and outputs are prone to measurement and the objectives are easily represented by given performance indicators.

Casley and Kumar (1988) defined evaluation, in relation to projects, as the analytical assessment or expansion of a project relevance, performance, efficiency and impact in relation to stated objectives. Brech (1975), cited in Akinyemi (1978), defined productivity as the net outcome in a given period from a known input of resources (factors of production), or more loosely as continuing improvement of a firm's management performance in the use of resource with and through the operations it is conducting.

Blum and Naylor (1984) explained performance in industrial settings as falling into three categories, namely, production data, personal data (tenure, lateness or absenteeism), and judgmental information (superior, peer, self ratings). Performance appraisal techniques adopted in measuring productivity in the public sector include cost benefit analysis, management by objectives and critical path analysis. Others are programme evaluation and review techniques, programme performance budgeting and management audits (Okechukwu, 1983).

Assessing the performance of social groups appears more difficult and transcends measuring technical efficiency or how well resources of the groups are combined and utilized. This is because in some cases output are not physically or readily discernible but revolve around several task-oriented activities and interpersonal behaviour. In a situation where performance indicators are not tangible or easily operationalized, surrogate measures are adopted to generate scores which are transformed or aggregated to yield a composite index of performance. Problems are also encountered when performance variables are quantifiable. According to Martin (1980), problems of measurement include the measurability of the quantitative measures and the degree to which each measure represents the underlying indicators and objectives.

Group performance appraisal system will, among others, address issues such as frequency and regularity of meetings, level of attendance and punctuality of members to group activities, latitude allowed for members' suggestions, and level of interest in, commitment to, and involvement in group activities. Others are incidence of conflicts, grievances and complaints, members' level of satisfaction and morale, members' attitude and sense of belonging and members' leadership ability/potential. Cooperative groups objectives and business undertakings notwithstanding, they as social systems provide a suitable framework for understanding group structure and dynamics. The foregoing information guided this study on groups and focused on the performance of cooperatives in Abia State.

METHODOLOGY

Study Area

Abia, which is located in the south-east humid agro-ecological zone of Nigeria, has a large expanse of cultivable land holdings which favours crop and livestock diversity. The large farming and trading population vis-à-vis low agricultural extension density in the State; and the abundant agricultural and natural resources, which maximum utilization is guaranteed through group action and cooperation, justify the choice of Abia State and farmer groups for this study.

Sampling Procedure

A multi-stage, stratified sampling technique was adopted in selecting twenty five (25) cooperative societies and one hundred and fifty (150) cooperators for the study. (Table 1) The sample was carefully taken to reflect agricultural and agro-related cooperative interest (Farming, Trading, Agro-industrial) and geographical or operational base, ensuring that the three agricultural zones of the State, namely Aba, Ohafia and Umuahia, were covered.

Table 1: Study Population and Sample

Category	Population*		Agricultural zones			Sample taken
	No	%	Aba	Ohafia	Umuahia	
Farming	1104	54.87	441	321	342	12
Trading	397	19.73	121	124	152	8
Agro-industrial	101	5.02	50	14	37	5
Others (non-agricultural groups)	410	20.38	239	78	93	-
Grand Total	2012	100	851	537	624	25

* Source: Official document of Abia State Ministry of Environment Solid Minerals and Cooperatives, 2004.

Data Collection and Analysis

The framework for comparative analysis of performance of cooperatives in this study consisted of measuring organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Standardized tests and personality inventories developed by Hemphill and Seashore were used to measure group efficiency, while Halpin-Winer and Segiovianni scales were used to measure group effectiveness (Patton and Giffin, 1978; Miller, 1991).

Group efficiency refers to members' interpersonal relationship and group cohesiveness, while group effectiveness describes members' leadership behaviour or potential and task orientation of the groups. The procedure adopted was self, peer and group rating with these interval scales to ascertain the existence or otherwise of the aforementioned social indicators within the groups.

Scores obtained from the rating exercise were aggregated to yield a composite index of performance. One way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and post hoc tests were conducted to ascertain if the cooperatives differed in performance and the nature or scope of the

variation respectively (Winer, et al, 1991; Sirkin, 1995; Howell, 1997). Furthermore, Pearsons product-moment correlation (r) was used to estimate the coefficient of correlation of performance of the various categories of cooperatives. F-max and t-tests were also used to ascertain the level of agreement of results obtained on the performance of the cooperatives. The study recognizes the fact that some characteristics, though relatively easy to obtain from secondary sources, are difficult to express on a comparable basis (Martin, 1980).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The performance status of agricultural and agro-related cooperatives operating in Abia State is presented in Table 2. Data relating to the performance of these groups were classified by efficiency and effectiveness criteria. Findings indicate that all the groups had above – average performance (Table 2). Agro-industrial groups emerged best in overall efficiency and effectiveness followed by farming and trading groups. These findings are inconsistent with the perceived general weakness or poor performance of cooperatives (CBN, 1996; MAMSER, 1992; Ojo, 1991). The challenge, however, is not only to sustain this level of performance, but to improve on it considering the relevance of cooperatives to agricultural and rural development and government's interests in cooperative organizations in Nigeria.

Table 2: Performance Rating of Cooperative Societies in Abia State.

Category of cooperatives	Efficiency criteria		Effectiveness criteria	
	Interpersonal relationship (%)	Cohesiveness (%)	Task orientation (%)	Leadership ability or Potential (%)
Farming	60.84	84.52	62.85	64.96
Trading	60.14	64.6	59.65	64.26
Agro-Industrial	62.5	86.32	60.0	66.14

Source: Field survey, 2004

Leadership rating

Majority of the agricultural and agro-related cooperative members possessed satisfactory leadership qualities as can be seen from the performance ratings the least of which was obtained by trading cooperatives (64.26). This suggests that members of most agricultural

and agro-related cooperatives can readily influence opinion shifts during group activities or direct action during group activities. There is a relationship between power or leadership and communication in human groups. (Patton and Giffin, 1978) Leaders' position and action can be inhibiting, intimidating or helpful to the communication process.

Patton and Giffin (1978) also observed that the direction and content of communication flows are influenced by the power structure of the groups. Although the study found group members' leadership ability to be high, (Table 2) it is recommended that cooperative still invest in leadership training for their members to further enhance their communicability and general performance.

Cohesion rating

The level of cohesion or unity among the three groups was also found to be high, indicating that most of the group members were dedicated, and were willing to remain together in their groups to advance their personal as well as the collective objectives of the groups. Agro-industrial groups were the most united (86.32%), while trading groups possessed this attribute to the least degree (64.60). Disagreements on problems become far less contentious when the level of cohesion is high.

Table 3: Comparison of Task and Person Orientation of the Cooperative Societies

Category of cooperatives	Task orientation (%)	Person orientation (%)
Farming	65.6	60.1
Trading	68.7	50.6
Agro-Industrial	69.0	51.6

Source: Field survey, 2004

Participation in cooperatives presupposes that there is a condition of perceived or recognized need which can be satisfied by belonging to the group. Viewed from this perspective, agro-industrial cooperatives can be said to be the most effective in satisfying the collective and corporate needs of her members and, consequently, the category with the least chance of group mutation resulting from members joining and leaving the groups over time. Furthermore, since communication between members of groups with high level of cohesiveness is more effective than between members of less-cohesive groups (Patton and Giffin, 1978), far greater effort is required by trading cooperatives to attain stability and achieve maximal communication than in farming groups.

Task Orientation

The study revealed that all the groups studied had a higher task orientation (x = 68%) than person orientation (x = 54.1), implying that cooperative members in Abia State showed higher commitment to achieving group tasks, but considered human needs to a minimal or lesser degree. (Table 3) This result, obtained through an introspective (self rating) data collection process, followed a similar trend as that obtained with Halpin-Winer Scale (Table 2), which is a performance rating process reflecting group members' perception of the task and interpersonal relationship of other members of the same group. The implication of these findings however, is that group development or training efforts for cooperative societies should be focused more on building team spirit and enhancing group potency and vitality in order to improve members' commitment to both task and human needs.

Magnitude of Correlation of Performance of Selected Cooperatives

Four null hypotheses were tested to compare the relationship between the performance data on the three categories of cooperative societies namely, farming, trading and agro-industrial. A *priori* expectation was that the means across the three groups, with respect four performance criteria, (interpersonal relationship, task or problem-solving orientation, leadership behaviour or potentials and the cohesiveness of the groups) would not differ significantly.

Pearson Product moment correlation

Results of Pearsons Product Moment correlation test (Table 4) showed a high and positive correlation between the various cooperatives with respect to members' interpersonal relationship, group task orientation, group cohesiveness and members' leadership behaviour. Best and Kahn (1989) listed the criteria for evaluating the magnitude of a correlation as negligible (r = 0.00 to 0.20); low (r = 0.20 to 0.40); moderate (r = 0.40 to 0.60); substantial (r = 0.60 to 0.80) and high to very high (r = 0.80 to 1.00).

Table 4: Correlation Matrix of Relationship Between Cooperatives on selected Performance Variables

	Interpersonal relationship			**Task orientation**			**Cohesiveness**			**Leadership behaviour**		
	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C
A (Farming)	1.00			1.00			1.00			1.00		
B (Trading)	0.9078 (0.2755)	1.00		0.9820 (0.1210)	1.00		0.5903 (0.5980)	1.00		0.9820 (0.1210)	1.00	
C (Agro-Industrial)	0.4425 (0.7082)	0.7777 (0.4328)	1.00	0.9333 (0.2339)	0.8486 (0.3549)	1.00	0.9951 (0.0632)	0.5074 (0.6612)	1.00	0.9608 (0.1789)	0.9959 (0.0579)	1.00

Source: Derived from analysis of survey data, 2004.

Figures in parentheses represent t – values;

Key: A = Farming; B = Trading; C = Agro – Industrial
Significant at 5% level

F – max test

F – max test gave an indication of perfect homogeneity for the various groups' level of cohesiveness and leadership behaviour; partial homogeneity for members task orientation (5.32) and interpersonal relationship (4.58) for farming and agro-industrial groups; and partial homogeneity for interpersonal relationship (5.59) of trading and agro-industrial groups (Table 5).

Table 5: Result of F-max Test among the Different Categories of Cooperatives

Attributes	Farming and trading	Farming and agro-industrial	Trading and agro-industrial
Interpersonal relationship	1.22	4.58*	5.59*
Task orientation	2.91	5.32*	1.83
Leadership behaviour	1.30	2.02	2.62
Cohesiveness	1.02	1.38	1.35

Source: Derived from analysis of survey data, 2004

* Significant at 0.05 level; Critical value on Hartley's table = 3.28

ANOVA results (Table 6) showed a significant difference in the level of cohesiveness of the three groups. Consequently, the null hypothesis which assumed that there will be no statistically significant difference across the three groups with regard to group cohesiveness was rejected.

The difference between the groups regarding their task orientation, interpersonal relationship and leadership disposition of members was non-significant. The null hypothesis that there will be no statistically significant difference across the three groups with respect to these attributes was, thus, accepted.

Table 6: Summary of Results of one-way ANOVA for Performance Variables

Measured Attribute	Source of Variance	Degree of Freedom	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F-Calculated
Interpersonal relationship	Between groups (major)	2	54.3	27.15	0.25
	Within groups (error)	12	1310	109	
Task orientation	Between groups (major)	2	4.3	2.1	0.37
	Within groups (error)	12	69.80	5.8	
Leadership Behaviour	Between groups (major)	2	8.78	4.39	0.34
	Within groups (error)	12	156	12	
Cohesiveness	Between groups (major)	2	1453.01	726.5	5.475*
	Within groups (error)	12	1592.30	132.69	

Source: Derived from analysis of survey data, 2004
*Significant at 0.05 level; F – tabulated = 3.89

The results of four post – hoc tests (Duncan, Tukey, Neuman – Keuls (N – K) and Scheffe), which sought to determine the nature and scope of variance existing among the groups' level of cohesiveness, is presented in Table 7. Farming and agro-industrial cooperatives were found to be significantly different in their level of cohesiveness. Trading cooperatives were not significantly different from either the farming or agro-industrial cooperatives in this respect.

Table 7: Summary of results of Post – hoc tests on level of cohesiveness

A.	Difference between pair of means					
	Mean differences	86.32	84.52	64.6	r.	
		Agro- industrial (C)	Farming (A)	Trading (B)		
	Agro-Industrial (C)		1.86	21.72	3	
	Farming (A)			19.92	2	
B.	Minimum difference of significance of each (Δx^{-} min)					
	Range	Duncan	N – K	Turkey B	Turkey A	Scheffe
	3	15.69	19.45	19.45	19.45	26.23
	2	14.91	15.89	17.67	19.45	26.23
C.	Critical values for each test, q Crit.					
	3	3.23	3.77	3.77	3.77	3.94
	2	3.08	3.08	3.43	3.77	3.94
D.	Significant pairs as identified by each test					
	3	AB	AB	BC	BC	AB
	2	BC	BC	AB	AB	BC

Source:Derived from analysis of survey data, 2004.

(MS within = 133; df within = 12; n = 5); r. = range of means

For the t – test, data in Table 8 shows that the difference between farming and trading cooperatives, with regard to interpersonal relationships was positive (1.11) and statistically non-significant. Consequently, we may not reject the hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the interpersonal relationship of farming and trading cooperatives.

Table 8: Results of t – test among the different categories of cooperatives

	Interpersonal relationship	**Task orientation**	**Cohesiveness**	**Leadership behaviour**
Farming and Trading	1.1068 (0.300549)	5.05964* (0.00097748)	31.4963* (1.12353E-9)	1.1068 (0.300549)
Farming and Agro-Industrial	-2.62469* (0.030428)	4.50625* (0.00198563)	-2.84605* (0.0216099)	-1.86574 (0.0990528)
Trading and Agro-Industrial	-3.73149* (0.00577541)	-0.553399 (0.595114)	-34.3423* (5.64949E-10)	-2.97254* (0.0178019)

Source: Derived from analysis of survey data, 2004

* Statistically significant at 0.05 level; Figures in parentheses represent t – ratios (coefficients)

The relationship between farming and agro-industrial cooperatives (4.51) regarding the task or problem – solving orientation was positive and significant. We may, therefore, reject the hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the task orientation of farming and agro-industrial groups.

The level of cohesion among the three categories of cooperatives was found to be high. The difference in the level of cohesion among the three groups was also statistically significant. The relationship between farming and trading groups (31.5) was positive and significant. Consequently, the hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the degree of cohesion of farming, trading and agro-industrial cooperatives in Abia State may, therefore, be rejected. In all cases, the t – values exceeded the t – critical value of 2.132 in the t – distribution table at 0.05 level of significance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The prominence given cooperatives in Nigeria's third and fourth National Development Plans (FMNP, 1981) underscores the importance of the Federal Government of Nigeria attaches to organization of cooperative societies as instruments of grassroots social and economic development. Evidence from this study, particularly the wide geographical spread of the groups and variety of business undertakings, lend support to the high relevance hypothesis of cooperatives operating in Abia State. It also provides a strong case for policy initiatives that would strengthen group formation and empower existing ones to achieve self-reliance and independence. In the light of the above, the following recommendations are hereby presented.

First, it is recommended that many more people be sensitized to participate in cooperatives especially those that engage in viable business or service-oriented undertakings that would ultimately raise members' savings and investment potentials, and improve their resource-poor status. Mobilization and sensitization of the people should be closely followed by proper official scrutiny and verification by cooperative officials at all various levels as they perform their supervisory and legitimization functions.

Second, the programme of each cooperative group must be designed and tailored to correspond with the needs of her members in order to promote group cohesiveness and reduce group mutation. Cooperative relationship, a form of social behaviour more developed in humans than any other species (Taylor *et al*., 1997) is brought about by such circumstantial factors as similarity of needs, interests and motivational drives. This presupposes that the performance of such groups is most likely to be limited by the clarity of the group's collective goal and correspondence or congruence between the collective goals of the group and the goals of her members.

It, therefore, follows that having individual goals that are vague or ambiguous or even goals that are not communicated clearly to members of the group will not only be counter productive but will exert disruptive effects on the performance of the cooperative groups. Conversely, effective performance is assured when a group succeeds both in satisfying personal or individual needs of each member of the group and in achieving the collective goals of the group as an organized system (Mc David and Harari, 1994).

Third, there should be greater emphasis on human resource development both at the supervisory and participatory levels. Cooperatives societies should be made to statutorily work out and vigorously organize relevant training packages for her members to enable

them, among other things, keep abreast with cooperative ethos and democratic principles, as well as imbibe discipline. Apart from equipping members to utilize credit, technological packages and government services, education will assist members in making qualitative contributions prior to collective decision making in the groups.

Finally, we should note that there is stillroom for improvement of the performance of cooperative societies in Abia State. Comparatives should take, therefore, advantage of the expertise of the supervising ministry or government outposts for administration of cooperatives at the primary level who through organizing training programmes could improve the managerial competence of cooperative officials, change members-task and interpersonal orientation and promote members communication competence and credibility

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