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Organizational Learning and Knowledge Sharing in Cooperative Networks

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ABSTRACT

In the era of knowledge-based economies, the ability of cooperatives to manage organizational learning and cross-entity knowledge sharing is a key factor in sustainability and innovation. This research aims to explore the dynamics of organizational learning and knowledge sharing in cooperative networks, as well as identify the factors that support and hinder the process. Using a qualitative approach with a multi-case study design, data was collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis from eight cooperative networks in Indonesia. The analysis was conducted using a thematic approach assisted by NVivo 14 and a simple social network analysis method. The study's results show that face-to-face meeting methods remain dominant in sharing knowledge. However, the adoption of digital platforms is increasing in line with the need for adaptation in the post-pandemic era. Inter-cooperative mentoring has proven effective in accelerating collective learning, although this approach remains informal. Limitations of explicit documentation and digital literacy gaps were identified as significant barriers. The implications of this study are the importance of building hybrid learning strategies, strengthening digital literacy, and developing a collective documentation system in cooperative networks. This research contributes to strengthening the capacity of cooperatives as an innovative learning ecosystem that is adaptive to global changes.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly competitive knowledge-based economy, organizational learning and knowledge sharing are the two main pillars in maintaining organizational sustainability. According to the World Economic Forum (2024), more than 50% of organizations worldwide now make developing organizational learning capabilities a strategic priority to maintain their relevance and competitiveness. The inability of organizations to adapt to changes in information and technology is considered one of the primary factors contributing to business failure in the 21st century.

In the context of cooperative networks, organizational learning becomes more complex because it involves entities that are independent but interconnected in a single social economic ecosystem. Cooperatives are not only required to learn internally, but also need to develop knowledge sharing capacity across organizations to strengthen solidarity and mutual innovation. This places cooperatives in a unique position on the global economic map, while also presenting the distinct challenge of developing effective learning systems within community networks.

A study conducted by the OECD (2023) reveals that cooperatives that implement organizational learning mechanisms and formal knowledge-sharing systems experience a 35% increase in productivity compared to those that do not. Additionally, the same report noted that cooperatives actively engaged in cross-

network knowledge sharing exhibit higher resilience to global economic crises, as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the data also reveals that only about 30% of cooperatives in developing countries have documented knowledge management mechanisms. This low adoption rate of organizational learning practices highlights an urgent need to develop network-based learning strategies, which not only enhance the internal efficiency of cooperatives but also expand their impact in strengthening local economies and empowering communities.

In practice, the development of organizational learning in cooperative networks faces various obstacles. One of the main problems is the limitation of human and technological resources, which makes the process of documenting, disseminating, and adopting knowledge not optimal. Differences in organizational culture between cooperatives also often hinder the standardization of effective knowledge sharing practices.

Additionally, many cooperatives still rely on traditional methods of sharing information informally, without a structured system. This leads to the loss of important knowledge when there is a change of management or when the cooperative faces external challenges. Therefore, a new, more systematic approach is needed to build an adaptive and sustainable learning culture among cooperative networks.

Seminal research by Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) on *knowledge-creating companies* has highlighted the importance of the community-based learning spiral process in generating innovation. This concept emphasizes that explicit and tacit knowledge must be dynamically managed in order for organizations to remain innovative and adaptive. In the context of cooperatives, Zeuli & Radel (2005) found that collective learning among cooperative members increases the ability to adopt technological innovations in the agricultural sector.

However, most existing research still focuses on learning within a single cooperative organization, rather than on cross-cooperative interactions within the network. The study of organizational learning in cooperative networks remains limited, despite the complexity of the relationship between cooperatives, which opens up new dynamics distinct from those found in a single organization.

Although numerous studies on organizational learning have been conducted, a research gap remains regarding how cooperatives build, manage, and sustain learning in collaborative networks. Most previous studies have highlighted cooperatives as a single unit, without considering the dynamics of knowledge sharing between cooperatives that are in regional, national, or even international networks.

This research aims to fill this gap by examining the mechanism of knowledge sharing within cooperative organizations, the factors that facilitate or hinder this process, and how cooperatives can establish a sustainable learning ecosystem that is adaptable to social and technological changes.

The urgency of this research is even higher considering the global pressure on cooperatives to be more responsive to digital transformation, changing member needs, and global market dynamics. Without a strong organizational learning capacity, cooperatives risk becoming irrelevant and lagging behind new technology- and network-based business models.

In addition, with the increasing need for a solidarity-based and sustainability-based economy, cooperatives are expected to play a key role as agents of social change. This can only be achieved if cooperatives can internalize the continuous learning process, accelerate innovation, and effectively manage their collective knowledge.

The novelty of this research lies in its adoption of a networked learning perspective to examine organizational learning and knowledge sharing in cooperatives. Instead of focusing solely on learning within a single organizational unit, this study views cooperative networks as dynamic and complex collective learning systems.

In addition, the application of network analysis approaches to understand patterns of knowledge exchange, social relations, and power dynamics in cooperative networks provides new methodological contributions that have been underutilized in previous cooperative research.

This study aims to (1) identify how the organizational learning and knowledge sharing process takes place in cooperative networks, (2) analyze the factors that support and hinder the process, and (3) develop a conceptual model of network-based collaborative learning strategies for cooperatives.

Through achieving this goal, it is hoped that a more comprehensive understanding of the role of cross-organizational learning in strengthening the innovation capacity and resilience of cooperatives in the face of rapid global change can be gained.

This research contributes to the development of organizational learning theory, especially in the context of cooperative social networks. The results of this study enrich the discourse on how economic solidarity-based organizations manage the process of collective knowledge creation, dissemination, and adoption.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this research can be utilized by cooperatives, cooperative federations, and policymakers to design strategies that strengthen learning capacity across organizations, thereby increasing the competitiveness, resilience, and sustainability of cooperative movements.

The practical implication of this research is the need for cooperatives to build a more open, collaborative, and technology based organizational learning culture. The development of digital platforms for knowledge sharing among cooperatives, as well as training in learning-based organizational literacy, should be part of the cooperative development strategy in the future.

At the macro level, the findings of this study can inform the development of national or regional policies that support the strengthening of cooperative networks as innovative and resilient social learning ecosystems in response to future global challenges.

2. METHOD

This study employs an exploratory qualitative approach with a multi-case study design to investigate how the organizational learning and knowledge sharing process unfolds in cooperative networks. This approach was chosen because the phenomenon studied is closely related to social dynamics, inter-organizational relations, and cultural contexts that cannot be fully explained through a quantitative approach. The research population consists of cooperatives that are members of regional and national cooperative networks in Indonesia, with a focus on the agricultural, service, and creative sectors. The research sample was selected using the purposive sampling technique, with the following criteria: cooperatives that are actively networking with other cooperatives, have been operating for at least five years, and explicitly apply organizational learning mechanisms or knowledge management. A total of eight cooperative networks were selected for analysis, involving key informants such as cooperative managers, network coordinators, and active cooperative members involved in the knowledge-sharing process.

The primary instrument used in this study is a semi-structured interview guide, developed based on the theory of organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978) and knowledge management within the context of social networks. To ensure validity, instrument validation tests were conducted through consultation with three experts in the field of cooperatives and knowledge management, as well as feasibility tests using pilot interviews at two cooperatives outside the main sample. The reliability of the data is maintained using triangulation methods (in-depth interviews, participatory observations at cooperative network meetings, and analysis of internal documents such as meeting minutes and network reports). The data collection technique was carried out in three stages: (1) initial exploration for network mapping, (2) primary data collection through interviews and direct observations, and (3) data verification through discussion of provisional results with some informants.

For data analysis, NVivo 14 software was used to facilitate the coding process, categorization of themes, and mapping of inter-organizational relationships within cooperative networks. The analysis technique employed is a combination of thematic analysis, based on the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), to explore patterns of learning and knowledge sharing, and simple social network analysis (SNA) to map interactions between cooperatives within the network. The analysis procedure begins with data familiarization, followed by open coding, the development of master themes and subthemes, the analysis of inter-cooperative relationships, and the preparation of conceptual models of network-based organizational learning. This process is carried out iteratively to maintain the credibility of the interpretation and to explore the depth of meaning from the empirical experiences of cooperative actors.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results and Discussion

Research Data Presentation

The study analyzed eight cooperative networks in three provinces in Indonesia, focusing on how they manage organizational learning and knowledge sharing. The graph above illustrates the most widely used knowledge-sharing methods in cooperative networks. Face-to-face meetings are the dominant method (7 networks), followed by digital platforms (6 networks), joint training (5 networks), mentoring between cooperatives (4 networks), and collective documentation (3 networks). Here is a detailed table:

Knowledge Sharing Method	Number of Networks (n=8)
Face-to-face meetings	7
Platform Digital	6

Joint Training	5
Inter-Cooperative Mentoring	4
Collective Documentation	3

Research Data Analysis

Data analysis shows that the face-to-face meeting method remains the primary means of sharing knowledge between cooperatives. Activities such as monthly meetings, thematic workshops, and community forums are the primary channels for information exchange and collective learning. However, the trend of using digital platforms is increasing, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic forced many cooperatives to adopt virtual communication technology. The use of applications such as WhatsApp groups, Google Workspace, and local platforms like SIKOP (Cooperative Information System) facilitates the exchange of information across cooperatives.

Data interpretation shows that cooperative networks that combine face-to-face and digital methods are more adaptive to changes in the external environment. They can maintain a collective learning rhythm even when facing limited physical mobility. In contrast, cooperatives that rely solely on conventional meetings exhibit a lag in absorbing innovations and expanding their networks. This highlights the importance of adopting a multi-method approach in optimizing the knowledge-sharing process in a modern cooperative environment.

One of the important findings is the effectiveness of mentoring between cooperatives. Networks that have a structured mentoring system, where senior cooperatives guide new cooperatives through program development or innovation, exhibit a significant increase in their internal capabilities within a relatively short period. Additionally, collective documentation in the form of best practice handbooks, joint project experience reports, and shared knowledge databases remains minimal. This documentation is crucial to maintaining the continuity of knowledge across generations of cooperative management.

Discussion: Organizational Learning in Cooperative Networks

Dominance of the Face to Face Meeting Method

Face to face meetings remain the most dominant method of knowledge sharing in cooperative networks. This is because direct physical interaction fosters a stronger dimension of interpersonal trust, enhances social cohesion, and accelerates the process of information validation among cooperative members. In the culture of local communities in Indonesia, physical presence is still regarded as a form of respect and collective commitment to the community, making face-to-face forums an important space for the exchange of ideas, experiences, and shared learning.

Nonetheless, the exclusive reliance on face to face meetings is an obstacle in Indonesia's vast geographical context and mobility challenges in the digital age. Cooperatives that rely solely on physical interaction tend to face limitations in expanding the reach of their networks. Therefore, cooperative network learning strategies need to integrate physical meetings with virtual media to increase the frequency, accessibility, and efficiency of cross regional knowledge exchange. This hybrid model is considered more adaptive to the challenges of the times.

Digital Transformation in Knowledge Sharing

The development of digital technology adoption in cooperative networks shows a paradigm shift in organizational learning patterns. Cooperatives that have begun to adopt digital platforms such as online discussion forums, cloud storage for document sharing, and instant communication applications can accelerate the process of information exchange and expand collaboration across geographical borders. This innovation also encourages the creation of new knowledge networks that are more dynamic, responsive, and sustainable.

However, the process of digitizing knowledge sharing also faces structural challenges. The digital literacy gap among cooperative members, limited internet infrastructure in rural areas, and the lack of guidelines for digital data management protocols are serious obstacles. Without a program to increase digital literacy capacity and develop adequate infrastructure, digital transformation in cooperative networks will be uneven and may deepen the gap between cooperatives.

The Role of Mentoring in Collective Learning

Mentoring between cooperatives has proven to be an effective mechanism for accelerating knowledge transfer, innovation adoption, and strengthening leadership capacity in cooperative networks. Through trust based mentor-mentee relationships, new cooperatives can learn directly from more experienced cooperative best practices, shorten learning curves, and increase the effectiveness of local innovations.

Unfortunately, mentoring practices in cooperative networks today tend to be informal and ad hoc, depending on personal initiatives between cooperatives. This informality makes mentoring schemes difficult to measure their impact and prone to network dysfunction. Therefore, there needs to be an effort to institutionalize mentoring through the development of formal mentoring programs with structural incentives, mentoring protocols, and standardized monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure the sustainability of collective learning.

The findings of this study support the results of Garavan's (1997) study, which emphasized that collaboration-based learning improves an organization's adaptability to external changes as found by Smallbone et al. (2013). These cooperative networks are active in building knowledge sharing exhibit higher resilience and better innovation capabilities, especially when facing the pressure of global economic crises or technological disruptions.

However, unlike the results of Nonaka & Takeuchi's (1995) research on the importance of explicit documentation in organizational learning models, this study found that Indonesian cooperatives still tend to rely on oral communication rather than formal documentation. The low documentation increases the risk of institutional knowledge loss, especially when there is a change in generation in cooperative management. This suggests that improving the documentation system is a strategic priority for maintaining learning continuity.
Involvement

The practical implications of this research are wide-ranging, both at the individual cooperative level and at the network scale. At the cooperative level, it is necessary to adopt a hybrid learning strategy that combines face to face methods with digital platforms to optimize the effectiveness of knowledge sharing. In addition, cooperatives must build a more structured and sustainable culture of knowledge sharing through digital literacy training programs, innovation workshops, and community-based documentation training.

At the network level, there is a need for the development of collaborative digital platforms to support information exchange, structured mentoring programs between cooperatives, and the creation of a database of best practices that can be accessed together. This step is crucial for accelerating the spread of innovation, strengthening solidarity among cooperatives, and enhancing the adaptive capacity of cooperative networks in the face of changing global socioeconomic dynamics.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that youth involvement in cooperatives still faces significant challenges rooted in negative perceptions, internal structural barriers of cooperatives, and a lack of innovation relevant to the aspirations of the younger generation. Youth tend to view cooperatives as less innovative entities and offer fewer career development opportunities than other modern business organizations. Nevertheless, cooperatives still have great opportunities to attract the participation of the younger generation through digital technology-based innovations, entrepreneurship empowerment programs, and strengthening their identity as a platform for community social and economic innovation. These findings indicate that cooperatives must undertake structural and strategic transformations to adapt to the values of the younger generation, such as flexibility, collaboration, sustainability, and personal growth.

For further research, it is recommended to conduct a longitudinal study to explore changes in the perception and level of youth involvement in cooperatives in line with the implementation of innovation programs. Broader quantitative research involving cooperatives from different economic sectors and geographical areas is also needed to enrich the understanding of the dynamics of young generations' involvement in cooperatives. In addition, intervention studies examining the effectiveness of digital-based innovation and career development programs in increasing youth participation will be an important contribution to future cooperative literature and practice.

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