

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Application of strategic planning for extension and development of agricultural production cooperatives in Iran

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Accepted 22 July, 2011

There is no doubt that in today's world establishment of cooperatives is an effective way of attracting people's involvement at macro level. The agricultural sector is so extensive that achievement of national goals and high levels of development is practically unattainable without active participation by farmers. Provision of a combination of agricultural functional requirements by cooperatives would lead to enhancement of the standard of living of their members. Rural production cooperatives, also known as agricultural cooperatives, are defined as a modern construct with their own specific organization and management. Cooperatives incorporate their own ruling principles, structures, networks, rules, regulations, and bylaws. These features provide concrete benefits in the process of agricultural development. This paper aims to review the activities of rural agricultural production cooperatives in Iran and propose a strategic planning approach for development and institutionalization of their operations. This qualitative research was conducted in Iran using case study and purposeful sampling method. The proposed strategies for promotion of production cooperatives include: provision of support in terms of financial credits, organizational and management expertise, technical know-how and technology, equipment and training, empowerment of members aimed at transforming them into successful farm managers, promotion of team work among members, and extraction of appropriate information and practical advice from research data provided by contemporary investigations. In conclusion, it is proposed that establishment of cooperatives alongside other issues should be considered by policy makers and local leaders and representatives trusted by farmers be involved in their implementation.

**Key words:** Production cooperative, strategic planning, cooperation, strategy, participation.

## INTRODUCTION

The extent and variety of changing forces applied to contemporary organizations are so intense that they are left with no recourse but to adapt to the changing conditions. Comprehensive and extensive planning are needed to develop coordinated strategies for management of organizational growth, operational methods, staff relations, and communication and information systems in an adaptive fashion such that the whole entity evolves in

harmony with predictable, as well as unforeseen changes and contingencies. This necessitates the requirement for forward looking organizational planning.

The importance of agriculture and the impact of agricultural policies on economic development are undeniable. Several reasons have made policy makers, experts, and researchers in the field of agriculture to focus on modeling and prediction of future socio-economic trends and developments. These reasons include the perceived job-creation potential of expansions in the agricultural sector, the persistent vulnerability of this sector to potential risks, and the ecological and environmental issues and challenges. Therefore, experts in agricultural

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sciences have tried to develop appropriate programs and plans in a proactive fashion with an eye to the future. They maintain that development should be guided in such a way to ensure future stability and sustainability (Zamani and Yazdanpanah, 2004). From this perspective, agriculture would be guided to serve in support of qualitative and quantitative aspects of communal life. Obviously, a dogmatic adherence to static and inflexible modes and organizations for agricultural development and production would in fact create additional problems and difficulties. Therefore, the agricultural sector should utilize strategic planning based on both current conditions and expected future changes to be able to cope with challenges and generate more job opportunities. It is in this vein that the importance of strategic planning for the agriculture sector and its institutions and operational units, especially in conjunction with expansion of agricultural production cooperatives, is clearly understood.

Small farmers constitute a major section of the agricultural production. Unfortunately, small farmers' efficiency and production yield is relatively low due to lack of deployment of modern technology and know-how. Experts believe that establishment of production cooperatives by small farmers and pooling individual resources into bigger teams would increase productivity and thus improve their standard of living (Aghaya et al., 2005). Undoubtedly, cooperatives are an effective instrument of ensuring people's participation at macro level. The agricultural sector is so vast that achievement of national goals and high levels of development are practically impossible without active and organized participation of farmers in mass production (Amini, 1993). The cooperative model in agricultural development planning is a comprehensive model. This model assumes that if production is organized through cooperatives enjoying pooled resources of the team, the members' standard of living improves. In contrast, when the same process is undertaken by the small and perforce restricted unit of individual families, their standard of living degrades (Karami and Rezaei-Moghaddam, 2005).

The rural production cooperatives, also known as agricultural cooperatives, are a modern mode of organization in Iran. They possess their own specific organizational structure, management, rules, regulations, charter, and bylaws (Paknia, 2003). However, in Iran, a large number of strategies and policies for agricultural development are executable through rural and agricultural cooperatives. Therefore, one could suggest that agricultural cooperatives constitute one of the most effective networks present at rural level that directly serve the rural masses and play an important role in implementation of national policies (Shirani, 1989). Industrialization and mechanization of agricultural production and the relative low output of small farmers have created conditions under which small farmers are not able to secure their own modern agricultural

equipment and have to organize into cooperatives to pool their resources and increase their productivity (Raduan et al., 2009). In addition, the risk of climatic events like cold, floods, draught, storms, as well as a multitude of plant diseases and parasitic infestations, etc. pose a high risk to small agricultural units. Small units cannot afford to utilize modern and more effective techniques to fight against such dangers.

Agricultural cooperatives consist of a community of individuals with limited equipment and resources that gather together voluntarily to pursue common socio-economic goals. Cooperative members pool their work force and capital together and accept risks and rewards as a group (Flygare, 2006). Cooperatives are capable of recruiting group resources and directing the members' combined capabilities to achieve success, enhance production, and facilitate growth (Zamani and Yazdanpanah, 2004). In other words, cooperatives are autonomous entities comprised of volunteer members who have gathered together to pool their resources and cooperate in production to satisfy their economic, social, and cultural needs. They are organized based on common individual vested interests and are run in a democratic fashion (Novkovic, 2008).

Rural production cooperatives are an important economic sector of the Iranian economy and could play a significant role in creation of rural employment. The voluntary participation of individuals in various activities is one of the most important characteristic of cooperatives. Therefore, rural cooperatives provide means and resources for employment as well as an opportunity for development and growth of individual and group leadership skills for their members and managers (Eslami Nasab, 2001). Furthermore, rural cooperatives spur knowledge and know-how for enhanced production, mitigate rural poverty and prevent immigration of desperate rural populations to urban areas, and serve as a means for balancing rural and urban development and progress. In this way, cooperatives are considered an effective and constructive tool for long-term planning of rural development in Iran (Sedighi and Darvishnia, 2001).

The present paper reviews the activities of rural production cooperatives in Iran. As a case study, one production cooperative in Fars Province was studied. The collected information from this cooperative is analyzed to determine its points of strength and weakness and evaluate challenges and threats for its future. The general conclusions are summarized as a draft preliminary guideline for development of optimal strategic plans for development and progress of cooperatives as an effective tool for agricultural extension.

## RESEARCH METHOD

Qualitative research methodology and multi case study method was used. Case studies were selected with the research objectives in mind. A farmers cooperative in Sabzdasht in leej village in

Estahban county of Fars Province, Iran was chosen for the study.

### Sample

The "purposeful sampling" method was used and rural production cooperatives served as the basis for analysis. Purposeful sampling is intended to find and select cases that provide major information about the research problem and the purpose of the study (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2007). For this study, the Snowball Sampling method was used. According to this technique, about a search was conducted to identify and locate the persons who possess information of value to the study. The process for data collection and information extraction continued until the interviewed sources were fully debriefed.

Fifteen members of the target rural production cooperative as well its director and board of management (5 persons) were interviewed. In total 21 members of the cooperative were interviewed. Direct observation and in-depth interview techniques were used for data collection. In addition to the main research questionnaire, several other topics of interest derived from literature and existing records, organized in the form of a protocol, were discussed with farmers and the cooperative director to obtain a more comprehensive perspective.

### Analytical procedures

Several analytical techniques were used to collect and process the data according to the following steps:

**Data entry and storage:** The text of responses (from interviews, observational notes, memos, etc.) were typed into word processing documents.

**Coding and categorization:** All of the transcribed information were carefully reviewed line by line and divided into meaningful analytical units (data segmentation). Meaningful segments were coded with symbols and/or descriptive words or assigned a category name.

**Enumeration:** The coded and categorized data were quantified by the enumeration process.

**Hierarchical category systems:** Codes and categories were organized into different levels or hierarchies. The outcome is ordering ideas or themes in a vertical scale on the basis of the quantification dimension of interest.

### CASE STUDY: SABZDASHT COOPERATIVE

Sabzdasht Production Cooperative is located in leej about 5 km from Estahban. This cooperative was established in 1994 with an initial capital of 10,000,000 Rials (approximately \$1000). Sabzdasht Cooperative has 5 employees and is managed by a director. The salary of two of the employees is paid by the government and the other 3 are compensated by the cooperative itself. At the time of interview, the cooperative had a capital of about 810 million Rials (approximately \$81000) and covered 7500 ha of land in 6 rural districts. It had 550 members of which 15 were women.

The director was 40 years old and had taken some courses in plant pathology and had two years of experience. He lived in the city away from the village and lacked sufficient educational and technical expertise. He had not been able to establish an efficient and productive communication link with the members. In his opinion, this cooperative had not been properly established with a suitable organization and talent to be able to serve the members' needs.

Sabzdasht Cooperative had received a total of 500 million Rials (approximately \$ 50, 000) in loans from the government. However, except for a piece of planting machinery, it had not received any governmental assistance grants. Therefore, the cooperative suffered from the lack of state financial support and was not in a position to provide loans to its members. The interviewed farmers indicated that, if resources were available, they could greatly benefit from financial and technological assistance from the cooperative.

### Resources and equipment

Data indicate that Sabzdasht Cooperative has limited resources and capital. It has one seeder, disk, one fertilizer spreader, one leveler, 4 tractors, and 4 ploughs. The cooperative has a 400 m<sup>2</sup> room as its office and a small building for keeping its equipment. This cooperative has none of the other equipment such as baler, car, sprayer, etc. Thus, the cooperative was not able to provide all the required tools to its members and the farmers could not be adequately supported for their machinery needs and face challenging shortcomings.

### Regional water resources

The farming water needs of Sabzdasht Cooperative members are provided from wells and natural springs. No rivers flow through this region and the mean annual rainfall is about 150 mm. The amounts of water available from these sources are inadequate to meet the farmers' needs. In addition, these water sources are subject to climatic variations and at the risk of uncontrollable natural events. Moreover, a portion of the available water is salty. The interviewed farmers informed that one of the most important activities of the cooperative was focused on deploying modern irrigation techniques to increase sustainability, predictable availability, and usage efficiency.

### External relations

The cooperative does not have much contact or relations with other regional organizations such as Jihad Agricultural Service Center, the Agriculture Bank, or other cooperatives and associations. Therefore it failed to seek benefits from potential resources and know-how that may be obtained from such institutions which are tasked with relevant missions for regional development. The farmers believed establishing beneficial relationships with other entities were a major responsibility of the director and the cooperative's management.

### Agricultural activities

The cooperative's lands are situated at a moderate slope and the soil texture is sandy clay. The mean yield of wheat by the cooperative is approximately 3 tons per hectare which is lower than the overall mean of the Fars Province. The cooperative has failed to carry out any significant activity in the context of improving agricultural conditioning such as laser leveling, land consolidation, and drainage. It did not establish any roads between farms or undertake any irrigation projects to improve and facilitate water transfer.

Based on farmers' interviews, because of insufficient training, the cooperative members were not empowered to engage in and deploy modern agricultural techniques. The cooperative had only succeeded to provide the farmers with some materials such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides to control plant insects and diseases.

The cooperative did not own any harvesting tools and the farmers have to rent their required tools from outside sources. In addition, farmers indicated that the cooperative did not perform well in successful marketing and sale of their products and lacked adequate quality storage facilities. Therefore, both the increased cost of harvesting and loss of products due to inadequate storage facilities diminished farmers' revenues.

### Educational activities

The cooperative members had a low literacy level and did not demonstrate a lively propensity for participation in rural community activities and cooperative meetings. The members complained that the cooperative and other (state) institutions did not endeavor to encourage and attract cooperative members for engagement in execution of regional development plans and projects. The members need to be taught and trained in modern agricultural techniques. The cooperative showed a dismal record in training and transfer of modern know-how to its members. Only 3 of the 15 interviewed farmers (20%) had attended any agricultural training classes. The cooperative has little communication with research centers and thus could not benefit from training and support available from these centers. Therefore, in the main part, the major agricultural practices used by the members are suboptimal and in need of significant overhaul. For example, the mean consumption of chemical fertilizers for wheat production in the region is 125 kg more than the optimum amount recommended by the experts. Issues like this increase the production costs and lead to negative environmental effects in the future.

### STRATEGIC PLANNING

Strategic planning is an essential pre-requisite for success of every common-interest community enterprise. In a nutshell, strategic planning serves as a tool for organizing the present circumstances on the basis of past experience and present knowledge and determines steps to successfully navigate from now to the projections of the desired future. That is, a strategic plan is a road map to lead an organization from where it is now to where it would like to be in five or ten years (Edgley, 2001). Operationally, strategic planning is the process and approach of specifying an organization's objectives, developing policies and plans to achieve and attain these objectives, and allocating resources so as to implement the policies and plans. In other words strategic planning can be seen as a combination of strategy formulation, implementation and evaluation (Raduan et al., 2009). Farrah (2001) cites three main components for strategic planning: plan development, plan execution, and plan review. Therefore, strategic planning should be focused on an organization's long term goals and requires assessment of its existing capabilities, defining ways to mobilize and acquire needed resources from within and outside the organization, define a concrete and clear action plan with flexibility for contingencies and unexpected challenges (environmental, climatic, etc.), performance of a risk analysis and envision mitigations for emergencies and define fall back positions (Plan B's). To be successful, strategic planners should be prepared to manage a continuous and fluid process for improving organizational performance by developing and executing action plans to produce desired results. They need to have a clear understanding of the overall direction of where the organization needs to go, assess the its current situation, and develop and implement approaches for guiding and coordinating different aspects based on an ongoing and stage by stage review and analysis of progress towards the final goals.

There is no best way to approach strategic planning (Koteen,

2005). However, the main premises for determination of sound and effective strategic plans include an organization's "vision and mission". Strategic planning for a cooperative association is a systematic process involving a number of steps that include identifying the current status of the association, including its mission, vision for the future, operating values, needs, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, risks and threats, goals, prioritized action steps and strategies, action plans, and monitoring procedures (Farrah, 2001). A viable strategic planning process should provide the members with answers to the following questions:

Who are we?

What are our capabilities, what can we do?

What problems do we want to address? How and in what order?

What kind of changes do we want to bring about?

What are the critical issues we must we respond to?

Where and how should we allocate our resources and what should our priorities be?

An organization's mission defines the particular way in which it intends to make a contribution towards its vision (Shapiro, 2007). The mission statement describes what the organization does, with whom or for whom it does it, and how it does it. A factorial analysis of a number of critical underlying factors is used to arrive at realistic mission statements. This analysis uses four important factors of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and is called SWOT for short. Strengths mean organizational attributes that promote an organization's ability to meet its mission and vision. Weaknesses include those organizational attributes that limit an organization's ability to meet its mission and vision. Opportunities mean internal and external factors that would enable the organization to meet its mission and vision. Threats include internal and external factors that could challenge the organization and vision. The SWOT approach involves systematic thinking and comprehensive diagnosis of factors relating to a new product, technology, management, or planting. It is used extensively in strategic planning, where all factors influencing the operational environment are diagnosed with greater detail (Shrestha et al., 2004).

An analysis of the stake holder audience of an organization is a requirement for preparing its mission statement. The key audience should be convinced and assured that their interests will be protected and promoted. Lack of a good understanding of their expectations and criteria for success would present a huge obstacle towards delivering results and outcomes that would satisfy their needs and aspirations. Therefore, key internal and external audiences (cooperative's stake holders) should be identified and their needs and expectations clearly analyzed and understood (Bryson, 2007).

The internal audience of a cooperative consists of its members, farmers and the rural population of the region it covers. The external audience includes other cooperatives in the region, regional developmental agencies, financial institutions, consulting companies and agricultural clinics.

The local socio-economic and political setting in which the cooperative is established has a direct and significant impact on the type and range of activities its management may undertake. The local setting should be analyzed and the main factors with potential influence on the functioning of the cooperatives must be analyzed and reflected in the cooperative's strategic plan. Local factors analysis should be undertaken with the objective of identifying the ways that changes in the economic, social, cultural, legal, political, and technological settings may indirectly impact the cooperative (Melkote, 1998). Therefore, in the initial organizational and strategic planning, a list of major localized factors should be prepared and analyzed to determine opportunities and threats. These factors

**Table 1.** Frequencies and rank order of farmers' memos and derived concepts regarding vision of cooperative.

Ranking	Concept	Farmers' memos	Frequency
1	Team formation	"The cooperative has been established on the basis of collective participation". "Participation and cooperation of members together is conducive to the cooperative's success".	11
2	Collective social participation	"At the time being, the cooperative is the most suitable agricultural organization for the rural areas". "Formation of cooperatives as the most effective social organization is necessary in every rural area".	8
3	Mutual interests	"People with similar interests become members of a specific cooperative". "Achievement of a cooperative's goal is in fact accomplishment of the objective of all the members".	5

**Table 2.** Frequencies and rank order of farmers' memos and derived concepts regarding mission of cooperative.

Ranking	Concept	Farmers' memos	Frequency
1	Empowerment	"The most important objective of a cooperative is the empowerment of its members". "Any cooperative that fails to empower its members, would fail in other aspects of its activities".	14
3	Changing farmer practices	"The cooperative should be able to transfer the best practices to its members". "The ability of a cooperative to change the farmers behavior towards the right direction is required for success".	9
2	Close communication	"The managers and members of a cooperative should be in constant contact". "If the members are not in constant and close contact with the cooperative, the cooperative would fail".	11
4	Training technologies	"Introduction and teaching of new agricultural technologies and techniques are amongst the main responsibilities of a cooperative".	8
5	Honesty, care and constant vigilance	"The officers of a cooperative should perform duties with honesty, compassion, and hard work". "The cooperative officers are expected to pursue the cooperative's goals with perseverance to deliver results".	6

should be continuously monitored and used in planning course corrections and decision making in the best interests of the cooperative. Furthermore, the internal factors of the organization also need to be monitored and analyzed to identify the cooperative's strengths and weaknesses in political, economic, social, and technological arenas (Bryson, 2007).

## RESULTS

### Analysis of farmers' memos: The vision of cooperative

Table 1 shows the "memos" and the "concepts" derived from them in relation to the vision of the cooperative. The

data indicate that cooperative members have put the greatest emphasis on the concept of "team formation" in the vision of the cooperative. This concept was repeated 11 times in their memos. In addition, the concepts of "collective social participation" and "mutual interests" were cited 8 and 5 times, respectively. These findings support the findings by Ghaisari (2010) regarding cooperatives in Fars Province, Iran. Based on these findings, we can formulate a vision for the cooperative as: "rural production cooperative associations are a symbolic representation of extension of team formation and collective social participation for the mutual interests of individual members, as well as the whole association".

### Analysis of farmers' memos: The mission of cooperative

Table 2 shows the "memos" of the farmers and the "concepts" derived from them in relation to the mission of the cooperative. The members emphasized "empowerment" 14 times. Empowerment has the highest rank among the concepts. This finding also confirms findings by Ghaisari (2010). The analysis of farmers' memos showed that "close communication" between various sections of the cooperative is a major factor in determination of the mission of the cooperative. Farmers repeated this concept 11 times (Table 2). As ranked by the results, "changing farmer practices", training and new technologies" and "honesty, care and constant vigilance" follow after "empowerment".

Based on the interviews with farmers and in compliance with the principles and goals of production cooperatives, the mission statement may read as follows:

*"We, the officers and staff of the rural production cooperative, in order to empower the membership and expand services to farmers, maintain agricultural collective activities as our goal, so that in this way, we are able to change farming practices towards improved agricultural production. Towards these goals, we will strive with perseverance, sincerity, honesty, care, and constant vigilance to do the best for the cooperative and its members, and in addition to maintaining close communication with members, we will provide the means for their introduction to and training in advanced agricultural techniques and technologies, all to empower the membership."*

### SWOT analysis

The observations and interview data obtained from Sabzdasht cooperative members were analyzed and categorized to determine this organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and risks. Table 3 summarizes the findings using the SWOT analysis method.

### DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of Table 3 and interview findings, the Sabzdash Cooperative faces a number of strategic issues and challenges. In this study, these challenges are summarized and several social, economic, technological, and political strategies are identified and prioritized. In addition action plans are suggested to make these strategies operational.

### Strategic challenges

Strategic matters are the basic policies that impact an

organization's agenda, mission and values. The major strategic issues deducted from collected information may be highlighted as follows:

- (i) Lack of management skills;
- (ii) Non-sufficient farmers' technical capabilities and resources;
- (iii) Shortage of accessible credits for extension activities and delays in handing out allocated credits;
- (iv) Shortage of transportation facilities and non-conformity of available tools with local conditions;
- (v) Lack of institutionalization of cooperation culture among farmers;
- (vi) Weak inter-group coordination and lack of effective relations and communication between management (director and the board) and farmers;
- (vii) Weak financial ability.

Ghaisari (2010) and Karami and Rezaei-Moghaddam (2005) have shown that the cooperatives in Iran suffer from the weak financial support, lack of management skills and shortage of credits for extension activities.

### Recommended strategies

The concepts related to strategies for cooperative are listed in Table 4. In summary, four categories of concepts were identified: social, economic, technological and political. Based on the frequencies of farmers' memos and their concepts in Table 4, we ranked them in Table 5 to recommend the strategies for improvement. Table 5 shows a number of strategies to improve operations and enhance goal realization for Sabzdasht Cooperative. The "empowerment of farmers" (category of technological concept), "reinforcement of team work" (category of social concept), "simplification of agricultural knowledge" (category of technological concept) and "institutionalization of cooperation culture" (category of political concept) received the highest ranks for adoption of strategies. Ghaisari (2010) in her study has concluded that empowerment of farmers is the most important strategy for Iranian cooperatives. In addition, she found that reinforcement of team work and improvement of cooperation culture are the other important strategies for Iranian cooperatives.

"Hierarchical Category System Method" was used to organize various strategies and their categories into different levels (Figure 1). This method presents the relations of strategies in a vertical scale.

### Operationalization of strategies

Operationalization strategies for the first four prioritized strategies listed earlier may be suggested as shown in Table 6.

**Table 3.** SWOT component.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Component</b>
	<b>Strengths</b>
Social	Presence of a graduate of agricultural extension among members serving as the Cooperative expert Provision of useful training for members and the board of management Relevance of the educational background of the cooperative technical expert to the field Honesty in services presentation Increase in the membership Employment of agricultural graduates to provide services to members
Economic	Governmental support especially during initial years Provision of assistance for increased production in normal years and support during drought conditions
Technological	College-level professional knowledge that needs to become operational through experience Mechanization of production process Protection of environment and natural resources
	<b>Weaknesses</b>
Social	Lack of professional experience on the side cooperative technical expert Lack of management expertise Lack of applied experience in advanced production techniques Weak inter-group cooperation and team work among members and technical experts Weakness in establishing communication between farmers and technical experts
Economic	Weak financial ability Lack of on time salary payment staff
Technological	Shortage of transportation facilities for members Shortage of transportation facilities for technical experts and cooperative director
	<b>Opportunities</b>
Social	Reinforcement of team work and cooperation among members (especially young farmers) Media publicities for promotion of cooperation culture among farmers Mass media publicities for promotion of team work and participation in collective activities Meeting information needs of farmers Plurality of type and span of farmers' activities Large number of potential members for recruitment
Technological	Provision of agricultural services and agricultural machinery Expansion of modern marketing activities
Political	Administration of the 44 principle of the Constitution regarding expansion of cooperation and privatization Facilitating communication among all layers of farmers especially the women and the young
	<b>Threats</b>
Social	Low literacy or illiteracy of farmers Traditional production units (risk-averse) Small- holdings of majority of farmers Paucity of farmers' technical aptitude

**Table 3.** Contd.

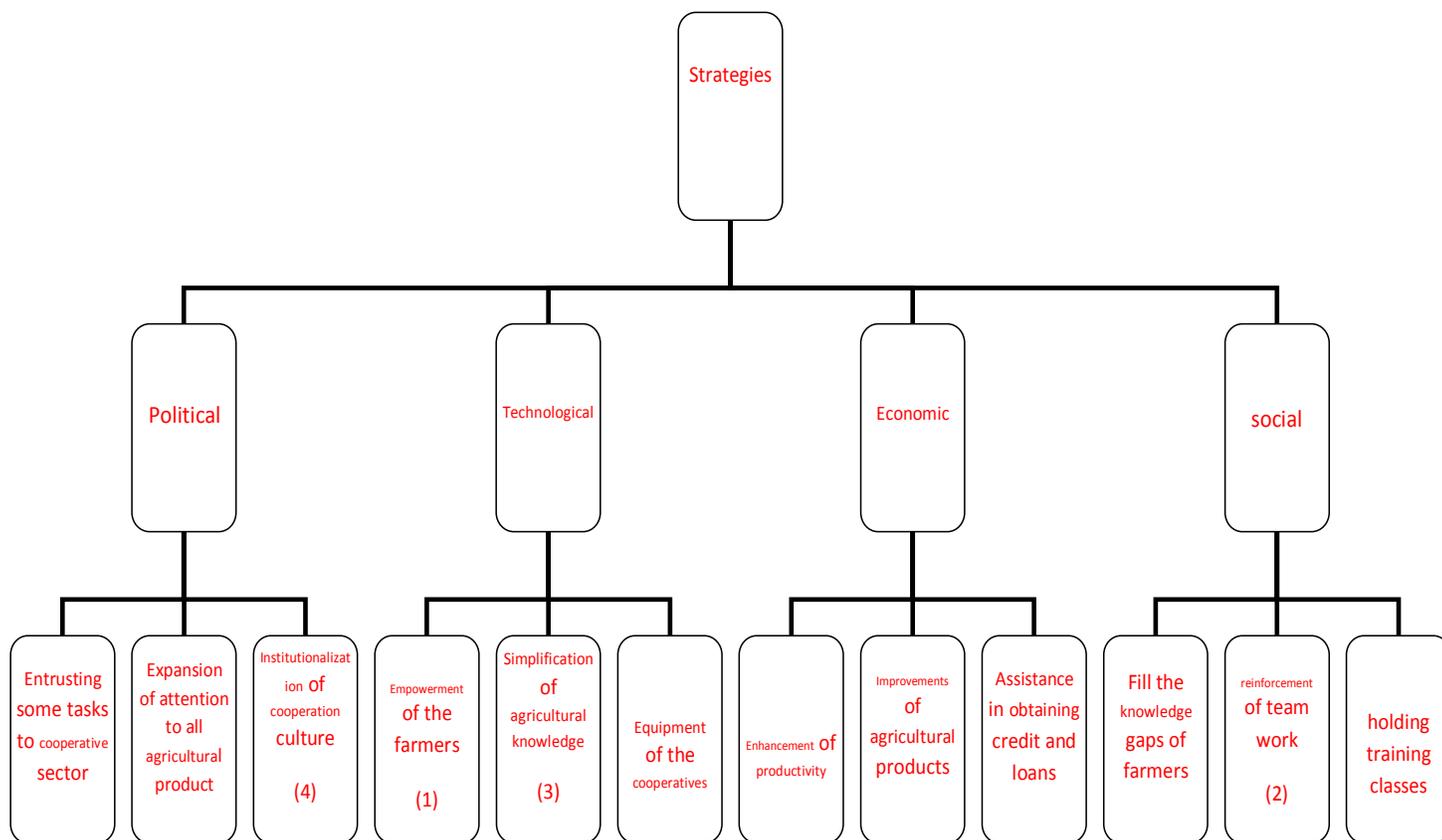
Economic	Low financial resources of majority of farmers Shortage of allocated credits to cooperatives Lack of credit facilities from cooperative to the members Shortage of cooperative capital
Technological	Incorrect usage of technical advice by farmers Shortage or non-conformity of transportation facilities for products Non-sufficient mechanized tools
Political	State emphasis on special products such as wheat State's negligence of optimized cultivation pattern management (lack of attention to crop alteration) Lack of institutionalization of cooperative culture among farmers Prolonged bureaucratic process of formation and expansion of cooperatives

**Table 4.** Frequencies and rank order of farmers' memos and derived concepts and their category regarding strategies of cooperative.

Category	Concepts	Farmers' memos	Frequency
Social	Holding training classes	"Training programs organized by the cooperatives are needed to update farmers".	10
	Reinforcement of team work	"Constant communication between cooperative members would enhance team work".	15
Economic	Assistance in obtaining credit and loans	"The cooperatives can assist their members with securing loans".	7
	Improvement of agricultural products	"By introducing new technologies and techniques, the cooperative can have a major impact on increasing the yield and quality of agricultural products".	8
	Enhancement of productivity	"A cooperative is expected to enhance the agricultural yield in the area it covers and thus facilitate development and progress of the area".	9
Technological	Equipment of cooperative	"The cooperative should be able to provide the instruments and equipment needed by its members".	3
	Simplification of agricultural knowledge	"The cooperative management should facilitate transfer of new know-how to its members by preparing training programs compatible to the aptitude of its members".	13
	Empowerment of farmers	"The most important thing a cooperative can do for its members is their empowerment".	19
Political	Institutionalization of cooperation culture	"The cooperatives cannot be successful until the culture of team work and cooperation is promoted and established across the nation".	12
	Entrusting some tasks to cooperative sector	"Giving the cooperative sector a bigger role in the national economy would foster closer involvement and participation of farmers in cooperatives".	4
	Expansion of attention to all agricultural productions	"The state should pay attention and incentivize regional products in addition to its focus on wheat".	6

**Table 5.** Ranking of the recommended strategies for improvement.

Category	Strategies	Ranking
Social	Holding appropriate training classes to update farmers and fill the knowledge gaps in the context of cooperation, collaboration, and management	5
	Reinforcement of team work among members	2
	Holding appropriate training classes for members to provide technological and technical know-how and training	10
Economic	Assistance in obtaining credit and loans	8
	Quantitative and qualitative improvements of cooperative's products especially for exports outside the region	7
	Enhancement of productivity	6
Technological	Acquisition of equipment to improve production and services to the farmers (hard-wired).	11
	Education and empowerment of members aimed at transforming them into successful farm managers (soft-wired)	1
	Simplification of knowledge and information derived from new research to provide practical operational advice and training to members in accordance with local conditions and needs (soft-wired)	3
Political	Expansion of government attention to production protocols and mandates better fitted to local conditions and agricultural science (include both strategic and other crops)	9
	Institutionalization of cooperation culture in society	4
	Entrusting some of distribution tasks to the cooperative sector	12



**Figure 1.** Hierarchical categorization of strategies to improve cooperative.

**Table 6.** Sample operationalization strategies.

Strategic goal	Operational plan
Empowerment of members aimed at transforming them into successful farm managers	<p>Active presence on farms and providing consultation and advice to farmers.</p> <p>Holding training classes according to informational and technical needs of farmers.</p> <p>Establishment of close relations with farmers through ongoing contacts and building trust.</p> <p>Promotion of close and ongoing contact and communication between the farmers and the cooperative.</p>
Reinforcement of team work among members	<p>Holding appropriate training classes to update farmers and fill the knowledge gaps in the context of cooperation, collaboration, and management.</p> <p>Holding regular periodic meetings (example, monthly) in order to establish friendly relations between members and the other farmers.</p> <p>Holding healthy and friendly competitions between regional cooperative associations.</p> <p>Recognition and encouragement of cooperatives with effective and efficient division of work.</p>
Simplification of knowledge and information derived from new research to provide practical operational advice and training to members in accordance with local conditions and needs	<p>Holding professional management training classes and workshops the director and management board to enhance their management and organizational skills and transfer of advanced know-how.</p> <p>Increasing the numbers of training classes for cooperative's technical staff according to their needs.</p> <p>Transfer of new knowledge generated by applied research to cooperative's technical staff and providing technical support for adaptation of new know-how to specific local conditions.</p>
Institutionalization of cooperation culture in society	<p>Media publicities for promotion of cooperation culture among farmers.</p> <p>Mass media publicities for promotion of team work and participation in collective activities.</p> <p>More efficient division of tasks and decision making between public (state) and private sectors to enhance farmers communication and collaboration with cooperatives.</p> <p>Providing incentives and motivations for farmers engaged in active participation and cooperation in collective work with cooperatives.</p>

## Conclusions

Cooperation and collaboration are important evolutionary survival and growth factors in human societies. Social participation and economic cooperation should be developed as a pedagogical science in academia and

taught and promoted as effective problem solving methodologies. National policy makers, planners, managers, and technical experts should help farmers, as the main stake holders, to analyze and investigate their problems and challenges as well as provide and facilitate timely and adequate resources to empower them and

their cooperatives to arrive at effective solutions. The framework of cooperative programs, their organization, and operational processes and procedures must be compatible with all aspects of local conditions and socio-economic and cultural settings. They should be envisioned and realized in dynamic and organic relation with their regional settings and their mission must be based on the concrete needs and aspirations of the local membership for collective well-being and growth. Programs, policies, and operational strategies should be flexible and continually and proactively adapted to the changing conditions and evolving needs. Therefore, ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment should become a built-in process in the operation of cooperative organizations.

Agricultural production cooperatives bring together individual farmers and pool their resources and lobbying powers as a legal entity to more effectively obtain and manage resources, seek and achieve better success vis-à-vis other socio-economic forces and organized entities as well as securing more advantageous terms in the marketplace.

In conclusion, based on the findings of this investigation, the following suggestions are proposed:

- (i) The experience of developed countries has shown that cooperatives improve productivity. Therefore, it is suggested that cooperative organizations be promoted in all three sectors of agricultural economy, industry, and services. In this regard, deliberative development and timely implementation of strategic planning are essential for success of such nascent organizations;
- (ii) Cooperative members are the most important factors in viability of cooperatives associations. They should know their cooperative's aims, principles of operation, and their roles and responsibilities as the ultimate stake holders;
- (iii) Local leaders and representatives trusted by farmers should be involved and actively engaged in various aspects of decision making, planning, execution, monitoring, and evaluation;
- (iv) National and regional policy makers and state agents entrusted with developmental planning should maintain close relations with the rural populace and secure their trust and confidence in order to identify their need, understand their aspirations, and work together to develop viable plans and programs;
- (v) Organizational and project management skills and training and effective and scientific analysis of conditions and problem solving techniques appear to be amongst the most vital necessities at all levels.

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