

Strengthening Village Economies Through Cooperative Business Model Training

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Abstract

This community service initiative aimed to strengthen rural economies by introducing and empowering local communities to adopt cooperative business models. Limited economic opportunities and fragmented individualistic approaches hinder sustainable development in many rural areas. This project sought to address these challenges by providing training on cooperative principles, governance, and practical business strategies. The method employed Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), engaging local participants in identifying community resources, challenges, and potential cooperative opportunities. Over three months, participants attended interactive workshops, field visits, and group discussions, leading to an increased understanding of cooperatives. The results demonstrated significant improvement in participants' knowledge, with a marked shift in mindset from individualistic to collective economic action. Several groups also began drafting cooperative bylaws and sought legal recognition for their ventures. While the initiative was successful, it highlighted the need for continuous support and follow-up to ensure long-term sustainability. The project contributes to rural development by demonstrating the potential of cooperatives as a tool for inclusive economic growth, emphasizing the importance of local ownership and community-driven solutions. Future initiatives should incorporate ongoing mentorship and involve local leaders more deeply in the facilitation process to ensure lasting impact.

Keywords

Capacity Building, Cooperative Business Models, Rural Development, Sustainable Economic Growth.



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INTRODUCTION

Rural areas in many developing countries, including Indonesia, possess abundant natural resources, cultural richness, and human potential. However, strong economic development often does not match these advantages [1]. Village economies typically rely on agriculture, small-scale trade, and informal sectors, which are vulnerable to market fluctuations, low productivity, and limited access to financing. In this context, there is an urgent need to identify sustainable and inclusive economic models that can empower rural communities, enhance livelihoods, and reduce urban migration [2]. Among the various models considered, the cooperative business model emerges as a promising approach for

collective economic growth [3].

Despite numerous efforts by the government and NGOs to uplift rural communities, many villagers still lack access to the knowledge and practical skills necessary to manage and sustain community-based enterprises. The cooperative model, in particular, remains underutilized due to misconceptions, lack of technical understanding, and inadequate training [4]. While some cooperatives exist in rural settings, their operations are often limited to basic saving-and-loan activities without evolving into fully functional businesses that can compete in broader markets [5]. Furthermore, the success rate of cooperatives varies widely, with many failing due to weak governance, poor financial planning, and limited community engagement.

This article addresses a critical issue: the gap between the potential of the cooperative business model and its actual implementation in rural villages. This unique study focuses on designing and delivering tailored training programs that translate complex cooperative principles into practical strategies that villagers can adopt [6]. By grounding the training in the local context and using participatory learning methods, this approach ensures that communities understand the cooperative model and feel a sense of ownership and capability in operating such enterprises [7]. In doing so, this article contributes to the ongoing discourse on how to localize economic empowerment strategies effectively.

Previous community service initiatives often focused on general entrepreneurship or short-term aid programs lacking long-term sustainability. While some programs have introduced cooperative concepts, they fail to equip villagers with the critical skills for real-world applications, such as market analysis, financial literacy, and collaborative leadership [8]. Moreover, few programs have tried to assess and adapt training materials to the unique socio-economic conditions of each village [9]. This gap has resulted in a mismatch between training objectives and community needs, leading to underperformance or even the collapse of cooperative ventures after the initial implementation phase [10].

This article seeks to fill these gaps by documenting a structured training intervention for rural communities. The program combines theory with practice and integrates local economic mapping, cooperative simulation exercises, and post-training mentoring [11]. The training is informative and transformative, aiming to shift mindsets from individual-based profit orientation to a collective, inclusive economic perspective [12]. By introducing villagers to successful cooperative case studies and involving them in experiential learning, the program aims to ignite a long-term commitment to cooperation and shared growth.

The ultimate goal of this scientific community service initiative is to strengthen village economies by empowering communities to initiate, manage, and sustain cooperative-based businesses. Through this approach, it is expected that rural communities will be better equipped to build resilient economic structures, enhance their bargaining power, and increase household incomes [13]. More broadly, the initiative hopes to contribute to regional development agendas by reducing economic disparities and promoting social cohesion at the grassroots level.

This article presents a training model and a framework for community transformation.

By highlighting both the process and the outcomes of the training, it provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and practitioners working in rural development. The findings and reflections in this article are intended to serve as a replicable model that can be adapted to other rural areas facing similar economic challenges. Ultimately, this effort is grounded in the belief that real, lasting change begins when communities are given the tools and trust to shape their economic futures.

METHODS

The community service activity employed the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approach, which emphasizes inclusive and active participation from community members in every stage of the program. This method was chosen due to its effectiveness in empowering rural communities through joint planning, decision-making, and action. The activity was carried out over three months, from July to September 2024, in Desa Margasari, a rural village in Central Java, Indonesia. The target participants were residents, specifically members of farmer groups, women's economic groups, and youth organizations. These groups were identified as key stakeholders due to their existing informal economic networks and potential to form or join cooperatives. The main partners in this program were the Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) and the village government, who played essential roles in mobilizing participants and supporting logistics.

The program began with a planning and licensing phase, involving coordination meetings with village authorities to ensure the initiative aligned with local development priorities. After receiving formal approval, a needs assessment was conducted using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and community mapping sessions to gather qualitative and quantitative baseline data. Data sources included primary data from interviews with villagers and secondary data from village records and cooperative archives. The next phase involved designing context-specific cooperative training modules, which were then delivered through interactive workshops, simulation games, and field visits to successful cooperatives in nearby areas. Data was collected using observation checklists, attendance records, pre- and post-training questionnaires, and participant reflection journals. These were analyzed using descriptive qualitative methods and quantitative correlation tests (such as Pearson's correlation) to measure the relationship between participants' level of engagement and the improvement in their understanding and interest in cooperative business models.

Monitoring and evaluation occurred continuously through weekly check-ins and mid-program reviews involving facilitators and community representatives. The final evaluation was conducted at the end of the training series through surveys and in-depth interviews to assess changes in knowledge, attitudes, and intentions toward cooperative formation. A final reflection forum was also held where participants shared feedback and co-created follow-up plans to initiate real cooperative business models. This holistic and cyclical process ensured the transfer of knowledge and the cultivation of sustainable community ownership over economic development efforts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the community service initiative revealed significant progress in knowledge acquisition and behavioral transformation among the participating villagers regarding the cooperative business model. The pre-and post-training surveys showed a marked increase in participants' understanding of cooperative principles, including democratic governance, profit-sharing mechanisms, and collective ownership. The average score of participants' comprehension improved from 58.7% in the pre-test to 86.3% in the post-test, indicating that the participatory training model effectively delivered complex concepts in an accessible manner [14]. This increase was strongly correlated with the level of active participation during the training sessions, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.73$, signifying a robust positive relationship between engagement and knowledge improvement.

Qualitative analysis of data from focus group discussions and participant reflection journals highlighted a noticeable shift in community mindset from individualistic economic behavior to a more collective and collaborative outlook. Many participants expressed that the training had helped them realize the long-term benefits of working together for economic gain and building stronger social cohesion within the village [15]. This transformation was particularly evident among the youth and women's groups, who began discussing the potential of forming specialized cooperatives in agriculture processing and local crafts. Participants also cited the simulation exercises and exposure to successful cooperative models as particularly influential in shaping their motivation and confidence to start similar initiatives [16].

The community mapping and participatory appraisal sessions yielded rich insights into the existing economic potential of the village, which had previously been overlooked. Participants identified several untapped resources, such as unused land, underutilized traditional food products, and seasonal harvest surpluses, which could be optimized through cooperative initiatives. Furthermore, the economic profiling helped participants visualize possible business models aligned with their local context, including cooperative-led organic farming, shared processing units for cassava-based products, and a marketing cooperative for local artisans [17].

Regarding behavioral outcomes, monitoring data revealed a gradual emergence of self-initiated activities following the training. Within a month of the final session, three informal groups had begun drafting cooperative bylaws and engaging with BUMDes and village authorities for legal recognition. These groups received follow-up mentoring and technical assistance, marking a crucial step in translating training into action. The presence of a support system facilitated by the community service team and local partners helped sustain this momentum, ensuring that post-training enthusiasm did not dissipate over time.

Evaluation data from interviews with key stakeholders, including village leaders and facilitators, confirmed the practical value of the PRA approach in engaging communities deeply and meaningfully. They noted that, unlike previous one-way training models, the

participatory design enabled villagers to become co-creators rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Visual tools, role-playing, and real-time problem-solving allowed even those with limited formal education to grasp key concepts and contribute ideas. This approach also built trust between the facilitators and the community, fostering an environment where honest dialogue and critical reflection could occur.

The community service initiative successfully bridged the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical readiness. The combination of tailored content, participatory delivery, and continuous mentoring created a dynamic learning environment that empowered the villagers to understand the cooperative business model and begin organizing and operationalizing it. These findings suggest that when rural communities are engaged as equal partners in the learning process, the outcomes are more sustainable and transformative.

Table 1: Impact of IoT-Based Smart Agriculture Practices

No	Component	Description
1	Target Participants	Local villagers, including farmers, women's economic groups, and youth organizations.
2	Training Focus	Cooperative business models, governance, financial management, and market access.
3	Methodology	Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) combines community mapping, focus groups, and cooperative simulations.
4	Duration	Three months (July – September 2024).
5	Key Outcomes	Improved knowledge of cooperatives, mindset shift towards collective action and formation of cooperative groups.
6	Challenges Identified	Limited market access, dependency on external facilitators, and need for continuous support.
7	Recommendations for Future	Follow-up mentoring, involvement of local leaders, and long-term monitoring to ensure sustainability.

The table outlines the core components of the initiative, focusing on the target participants, training content, and methodology used. It highlights the primary outcomes, such as a significant shift in participants' understanding of cooperative business models and the challenges faced, particularly regarding market access and sustainability. The table also summarizes the researcher's recommendations for future initiatives, emphasizing the importance of continued mentorship and local leadership involvement to ensure the long-term success of cooperatives. This structure captures the essence of the program and reflects the need for continuous support and local empowerment in fostering sustainable rural development.



Figure 1. A community training session where local villagers

The image showcases a community training session where local villagers, including men and women of various ages, actively participate in a cooperative business model workshop. A presenter leads the session, explaining key concepts about cooperative governance and shared economic efforts. The visual aids and clear, concise presentation aim to empower the participants to implement these principles into their daily practices. This hands-on approach allows for deeper engagement and fosters an understanding of the cooperative business structure in rural settings.

The results of this community service program demonstrate a clear advancement in the application of smart agriculture practices using IoT technology, particularly when compared to similar community-based interventions in previous studies. In analyzing the outcomes, it is important to juxtapose them with findings from prior community service projects in rural agriculture and with relevant theoretical frameworks that support the integration of technology in farming [18].

The results of this community service initiative provide significant insights into the impact of the cooperative business model training on rural economies, particularly when using the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approach. Several distinct differences and improvements emerged when compared with previous community service initiatives. Past programs aimed at introducing cooperatives in rural areas often faced limitations regarding participant engagement, long-term sustainability, and practical application [19]. Many of these initiatives, though educational, were one-time interventions that did not foster lasting behavioral change or the development of concrete business plans [20]. In contrast, through its participatory nature and continuous support, this initiative enabled a much deeper connection to the cooperative model, with participants not only acquiring knowledge but actively moving towards implementation.

Previous community service activities that employed top-down training approaches were often less successful due to the lack of community ownership and insufficient local contextualization. For example, many programs would provide generic cooperative training

that did not consider each village's unique economic and social conditions [21]. This was particularly the case in rural regions with underdeveloped economic infrastructure, and participants are typically not exposed to advanced business models. By contrast, the approach used in this initiative, which involved community mapping and participatory design, allowed villagers to identify their local resources, challenges, and opportunities, thus making the cooperative model more relevant to their specific needs and interests [22]. The PRA method, which includes the active involvement of local participants in identifying their problems and solutions, significantly improved both the uptake and application of cooperative training. The training covered theoretical aspects and allowed for hands-on exercises that helped participants translate abstract concepts into actionable business strategies [23].

When analyzed through the lens of relevant theoretical frameworks, the findings of this study align with Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, which emphasizes the importance of expanding people's capabilities and freedoms in determining their wellbeing. Sen's theory posits that development is not merely about economic growth but also about expanding individuals' ability to make choices and improve their lives through access to knowledge, resources, and social participation [24]. The training provided in this initiative enabled villagers to expand their economic capabilities by introducing them to a model that prioritizes collective ownership and shared prosperity. As participants gained practical knowledge about cooperatives and worked together to devise business plans, they simultaneously enhanced their capacity to manage economic resources and make informed decisions. This empowerment was especially notable among the youth and women's groups, who traditionally have limited roles in economic decision-making [25]. The shift in mindset from individualistic to collective economic behavior reflects a broader view of development that is focused on material gains and expanding social and political capabilities.

The results also resonate with Michael Porter's theory of competitive advantage, particularly in local economies. Porter argues that businesses can achieve sustainable competitive advantage by capitalizing on local factors such as culture, resources, and community cooperation. By engaging in cooperative business models, the villagers could identify and leverage their local advantages, such as land, labor, and traditional knowledge [26]. The community mapping sessions revealed previously untapped resources that could be used for collective economic gain. This reflects Porter's idea that individual or cooperative businesses are most successful when they align their strategies with local strengths and opportunities [27]. The program helped participants understand how to use the cooperative structure to enhance their collective bargaining power, reduce costs through shared resources, and strengthen their position in the marketplace.

Moreover, the outcomes of this initiative support the Social Capital Theory proposed by Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Putnam, highlighting the role of social networks and community engagement in fostering economic development. In rural areas, social capital can often be an underutilized asset. The PRA approach, by design, fosters stronger social bonds and trust through collaborative activities, such as focus group discussions and joint decision-making

[28]. The results indicated that participants not only gained knowledge about cooperatives but also built stronger interpersonal networks, which will facilitate the long-term success of any cooperative ventures. This sense of collective identity and mutual support is key to the sustainability of cooperatives, as social capital is critical in overcoming challenges and ensuring shared success [29].

The significant improvement in participants' knowledge and their subsequent actions can also be understood through the lens of Adult Learning Theory, which emphasizes the importance of experiential and participatory learning for adults. This approach contends that adults learn most effectively when they can relate new knowledge to their own experiences and are involved in active problem-solving [30]. The training model used in this initiative emphasized hands-on activities, such as cooperative simulations and local case studies, which allowed participants to engage deeply with the material and see its relevance to their lives. This contrasts with previous training models that relied more heavily on lectures or passive learning methods, often resulting in lower retention and application of knowledge.

In summary, the findings from this community service initiative not only represent a step forward in terms of the participants' understanding and application of cooperative business models but also show a marked improvement over previous approaches. The unique combination of PRA methodology, adult learning principles, and social capital theory ensured the training was contextually relevant and deeply engaging for the participants. The results highlight the critical role of community-based, participatory approaches in fostering sustainable economic development in rural areas, and they provide a compelling case for the scalability of this model to other regions facing similar socio-economic challenges.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this community service initiative successfully addressed the researcher's concern regarding the underutilization of cooperative business models in rural areas, particularly in equipping local communities with the knowledge and skills to manage sustainable cooperative ventures. The findings revealed that through participatory, contextually relevant training, participants gained a solid understanding of cooperative principles and developed a sense of ownership and collective responsibility for economic development in their village. The shift in mindset from individualistic to cooperative thinking—was significant and indicated that with the right tools and support, rural communities can overcome traditional barriers and build resilient, self-sustaining local economies. Despite these successes, the researcher acknowledges that the full potential of the cooperatives has yet to be realized, and challenges remain in ensuring that these nascent initiatives continue to thrive long after the project's conclusion.

However, the program was not without its weaknesses. One notable limitation was the relatively short duration of the training, which, while impactful, may not have been enough to address the full spectrum of challenges that rural cooperatives often face, particularly in terms of market access, ongoing financial management, and long-term sustainability.

Additionally, the reliance on external facilitators during the training may have created a dependency on outside support, which could undermine the self-sufficiency of the cooperatives in the long run. To strengthen the impact of future community service efforts, it is recommended that follow-up training sessions, mentorship programs, and continuous monitoring be integrated into the project's structure. This will help solidify the foundations laid during the initial training and ensure that villagers have the ongoing support they need to adapt and thrive in the cooperative business model. Furthermore, expanding the involvement of local leaders in the facilitation process would promote greater ownership and reduce dependency on external actors, ensuring that the cooperatives are truly community-driven and sustainable.

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