



# Strategic Management of Agricultural Cooperatives for Sustainable Rural Development

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**Abstract:** *Agricultural cooperatives play an important role in strengthening rural economies and supporting sustainable rural development. However, many cooperatives in rural areas still face challenges related to governance, limited human resources, technological adaptation, and market access. This study aims to analyze the strategic management of agricultural cooperatives in supporting sustainable rural development. The research employed a qualitative descriptive approach using secondary data collected from academic journals, books, government reports, statistical publications, and previous studies related to cooperatives and rural development. Data were analyzed through descriptive qualitative analysis by identifying and interpreting cooperative management strategies, including organizational governance, human resource development, digitalization, partnerships, and product innovation. The findings indicate that effective strategic management can improve cooperative performance, strengthen farmers' bargaining positions, expand market access, and increase rural community income. In addition, agricultural cooperatives contribute to economic, social, institutional, and environmental sustainability through community empowerment and collective economic*

*systems. The study concludes that strengthening strategic management in agricultural cooperatives is essential to support inclusive and sustainable rural development.*

**Keywords:** *Agricultural Cooperatives; Strategic Management; Rural Development; Sustainability, Community Empowerment.*

## Introduction

Rural development is a key agenda for driving inclusive and sustainable economic growth in Indonesia ([Vujanovic, 2015](#)). To date, the agriculture and plantation sectors remain the primary source of livelihood for rural communities ([Sahoo et al., 2022](#)). However, rural communities still face various challenges, such as limited access to capital, weak agricultural marketing systems, limited technology, low-quality human resources, and dependence on middlemen, which weaken farmers' bargaining position ([Penrose-Buckley, 2007](#)). These conditions impact farmer welfare and slow rural economic transformation. On the other hand, the agricultural sector remains a pillar of the national economy. By 2025, agriculture, forestry, and fisheries will remain crucial sectors supporting regional economic growth, including in rural Indonesia.

In addressing these challenges, agricultural cooperatives are seen as a strategic instrument for rural economic development ([Shpykuliak, 2020](#)). Cooperatives function not only as economic institutions but also as a vehicle for community empowerment by providing access to capital, distributing agricultural inputs, strengthening marketing

networks, and increasing farmer capacity ([Lipatova et al., 2021](#); [Ortiz-Miranda et al., 2010](#)). Through the collective system of cooperatives, farmers have greater opportunities to improve production efficiency and strengthen their bargaining position in the market. The Indonesian government itself has begun to prioritize cooperatives as a key focus for village economic development through the Red and White Village Cooperative program ([H. N. Wicaksono, 2025](#)). As of May 2025, 47,630 village cooperatives had been established, representing approximately 57.02% of the total number of villages in Indonesia.

This increased attention to cooperatives is also evident in the growing number of active cooperatives in Indonesia. Data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) shows that the number of active cooperatives in 2025 reached 222,462 units, a 69% increase compared to the previous year and the highest figure in the past decade. East Java is the province with the largest number of cooperatives, with 30,132 units, followed by West Java and Central Java. Furthermore, cooperatives also make a significant contribution to the national economy. Data from the Ministry of Cooperatives indicates that cooperatives contributed approximately IDR 214 trillion to national income in 2024, with approximately 30 million members.

However, the contribution of cooperatives to national economic development remains relatively low compared to their potential. The contribution of cooperatives to Indonesia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2021 was recorded at only around 1.07%, while cooperatives in production sectors such as agriculture, forestry, and fisheries only contributed around 8.4% of the total national cooperative business volume. This situation indicates that various challenges persist in cooperative management, such as weak organizational governance, limited management innovation, low utilization of digital technology, and suboptimal human resource quality ([Chali & Lakatos, 2024](#)). Consequently, many agricultural cooperatives have not been able to develop sustainably and maximize the welfare of rural communities.

Previous studies have investigated various aspects of agricultural cooperatives. [Lipatova et al. \(2021\)](#) examined agricultural cooperation as a factor supporting sustainable rural development. [Kumar et al. \(2015\)](#) analyzed the contribution of cooperatives to improving farmers' livelihoods and economic resilience. [Mhembwe and Dube \(2017\)](#) demonstrated the role of cooperatives in sustaining rural livelihoods through collective economic activities. Meanwhile, [Santos et al. \(2024\)](#) and Lestari and [Magfiroh \(2025\)](#) focused on digital transformation and digitalization strategies in agricultural cooperatives. Other studies have discussed governance, human resource management, and cooperative performance as determinants of organizational sustainability ([Chali & Lakatos, 2024](#); [Baumgartner & Rauter, 2017](#)).

Recent studies have highlighted the important role of agricultural cooperatives in promoting rural economic development and sustainability. Agricultural cooperatives are increasingly recognized as strategic institutions that provide farmers with access to capital, technology, market information, and collective bargaining power. Furthermore, the emergence of digital technologies has encouraged cooperatives to adopt innovative management practices to improve operational efficiency, expand market access, and

strengthen organizational competitiveness. Current literature also emphasizes the importance of governance, human resource development, partnerships, and innovation as critical success factors for cooperative sustainability.

Despite the growing body of literature, existing studies tend to examine cooperative governance, digitalization, human resource development, partnerships, and innovation separately. Limited research has comprehensively integrated these strategic management dimensions into a unified framework to explain how agricultural cooperatives contribute to sustainable rural development. In addition, many previous studies focus on specific organizational or economic outcomes, while the broader contribution of strategic management to economic, social, institutional, and environmental sustainability remains underexplored.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this research gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of strategic management practices in agricultural cooperatives and their contribution to sustainable rural development. The novelty of this research lies in the development of an integrated strategic management perspective that combines governance strengthening, human resource development, cooperative digitalization, partnership development, and product innovation as key strategic pillars supporting sustainable rural development. This study contributes to the literature by offering a holistic framework that links strategic management practices with the economic, social, institutional, and environmental dimensions of rural sustainability.

### **Research Method**

This study employed a qualitative literature review approach to analyze the strategic management of agricultural cooperatives in supporting sustainable rural development. The research relied on secondary data obtained from academic journal articles, books, government reports, statistical publications, and previous studies related to agricultural cooperatives, strategic management, rural development, digitalization, and sustainability. The data collection process was conducted through documentation techniques by identifying and selecting relevant literature from reputable academic databases and official publications. The selected sources were screened based on their relevance to the research objectives, publication credibility, and contribution to the discussion of agricultural cooperative management and rural development.

The analysis was conducted through several stages. First, data collection was carried out by gathering relevant literature and policy documents. Second, data reduction was performed by selecting, categorizing, and summarizing information directly related to strategic management practices in agricultural cooperatives. Third, the data were organized into major themes, including organizational governance, human resource development, cooperative digitalization, partnerships, and product innovation. Fourth, thematic interpretation and synthesis were conducted to identify patterns, relationships, and strategic implications for sustainable rural development. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the integration of findings across the selected literature.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, data validation was conducted through

source triangulation by comparing information from various academic publications, government reports, and previous empirical studies. In addition, cross-reference analysis was employed to verify consistency among different sources and strengthen the credibility of the interpretations. This approach enabled the study to provide a comprehensive understanding of the strategic management of agricultural cooperatives and their contribution to sustainable rural development.

## Result and Discussion

### Problems of Rural Communities in the Agricultural Sector

**Table 1.** Main Problems of Rural Communities in the Agricultural Sector

No	Problems	Impact on Farmers	The Role of Cooperatives
1	Limited business capital	Low productivity	Provision of credit/loans
2	Dependence on middlemen	Low selling price	Collective marketing
3	Limited technology access	Production is less efficient	Training and mentoring
4	Fertilizer distribution is unstable	Production costs increase	Provision of production facilities
5	Weak market access	Unstable income	Strengthening the distribution network

Source: Author, 2026

Table 1 shows the main challenges facing rural communities in the agricultural sector, along with their impact on farmers and the strategic role of cooperatives in addressing them. One major issue is limited business capital, which leads to low agricultural productivity because farmers have difficulty purchasing adequate seeds, fertilizers, and production equipment ([Ehui & Pender, 2005](#); [Poulton, Kydd, & Dorward, 2006](#)). In this situation, cooperatives play a crucial role by providing credit or loans through a system that is more accessible than formal financial institutions ([Langyintuo, 2020](#)). Furthermore, many farmers still rely on middlemen to market their crops, resulting in low selling prices for agricultural products and unprofitable conditions ([Ranjan, 2017](#)). To address this, cooperatives can implement collective marketing to strengthen farmers' bargaining power in the market.

Another issue is limited access to agricultural technology, which leads to inefficient production processes and under-developed agricultural productivity ([Shiferaw, Hellin, & Muricho, 2016](#)). In this regard, cooperatives can provide training, mentoring, and introduce agricultural innovations to cooperative members. Stable fertilizer distribution is also a significant challenge in rural areas, as unstable supplies can increase farmers' production costs. Cooperatives can assist by providing more organized and affordable agricultural inputs. Furthermore, weak market access leads to unstable farmer incomes due to limited product distribution and marketing networks ([Ma, Sonobe, & Gong, 2024](#)). Therefore, cooperatives play a strategic role in strengthening distribution networks and opening wider market access for rural agricultural products. Overall, the table shows that cooperatives play a crucial role as instruments for rural economic empowerment by strengthening access to

capital, marketing, technology, and distribution of agricultural products (Nowfal et al., 2025).

### Agricultural Cooperatives as a Pillar of the Rural Economy

Agricultural cooperatives play a crucial role in building the economic resilience of rural communities, particularly amidst challenges such as fluctuating agricultural prices, limited access to capital, and the dominance of middlemen in the distribution chain. In many rural areas, farmers remain economically disadvantaged due to their individual work on a small scale. This situation results in low bargaining power in determining the selling price of their crops and limited access to broader markets. The presence of cooperatives provides a collective solution that can strengthen the economic position of rural communities through collaboration and shared resource management ([Mhembwe & Dube, 2017](#)).

Cooperatives function not only as savings and loan institutions but have also developed into centers of rural economic activity. Through cooperatives, farmers can obtain fertilizer, seeds, agricultural equipment, and access financing at more affordable costs ([Kumar, Wankhede, & Gena, 2015](#)). Furthermore, cooperatives also assist farmers in the marketing process of agricultural products, resulting in more efficient product distribution and more stable selling prices. In the context of rural development, cooperatives play a role as drivers of the local economy, creating jobs, increasing community productivity, and strengthening village economic resilience in a sustainable manner ([Pramesthi, 2025](#)).

### Strategic Management as the Key to Cooperative Success

**Table 2.** Agricultural Cooperative Management Strategy

No	Strategic Aspects	Implementation	Objective
1	Organizational Governance	Financial and administrative transparency	Increase member confidence
2	Human Resources Development	Management and digitalization training	Improving the competence of administrators
3	Digitalization of Cooperatives	Online marketing and cooperative applications	Expanding market access
4	Partnership	Cooperation with government/private sector	Strengthening capital and distribution
5	Product Innovation	Agricultural product processing	Increase product added value

Source: Author, 2026

Table 2 shows that agricultural cooperative management strategies play a crucial role in supporting sustainable rural economic development. Strengthening organizational governance through financial and administrative transparency can increase member trust in the cooperative. Furthermore, human resource development through management training and digitalization is necessary to enhance the competency of cooperative administrators and members ([Rustam et al., 2024](#)). Digitalizing cooperatives through online marketing also helps expand market access and increase the competitiveness of agricultural products. Furthermore, partnerships with the government and the private sector can

strengthen cooperative capital and distribution networks ([Lestari & Magfiroh, 2025](#)). Meanwhile, product innovation through agricultural processing can increase added value and farmer incomes. Overall, these strategies demonstrate that effective cooperative management can be a crucial factor in strengthening the rural economy.

The success of agricultural cooperatives is not solely determined by the number of members or the amount of capital they hold, but also depends heavily on the management strategies they implement. In an era of increasingly competitive economic conditions and rapid technological development, cooperatives are required to have professional, innovative, and adaptive management systems that respond to market changes. Strategic management is a crucial element because it helps cooperatives determine the direction of organizational development, manage resources effectively, and ensure long-term business sustainability ([Baumgartner & Rauter, 2017](#)).

One of the main strategies in cooperative management is strengthening organizational governance. Many rural cooperatives experience stagnation due to weak administration, a lack of financial transparency, and limited managerial skills among their management. Therefore, implementing the principles of good cooperative governance is crucial to boosting member trust and strengthening organizational stability. Transparency in financial management, fair profit sharing, and member participation in decision-making can increase member loyalty to the cooperative ([Jang, 2026](#)).

In addition to governance, human resource development is also a strategic factor in the success of agricultural cooperatives. Cooperative administrators and members need to be equipped with skills in business management, marketing, digital literacy, and agricultural innovation to face the challenges of the modern economy. Cooperatives with quality human resources will be more adaptable to market changes and able to create innovations that support rural economic growth ([Moral & Uclés, 2022](#)).

### **Digitalization of Cooperatives and Village Economic Transformation**

The development of digital technology presents significant opportunities for agricultural cooperatives to expand their business networks and improve operational efficiency. Amidst changing consumer consumption patterns and the increasing use of technology in the economic sector, cooperatives need to undertake digital transformation to remain relevant and competitive. Cooperative digitalization can be achieved through the use of financial applications, online product marketing, and the development of technology-based distribution systems ([Wicaksono et al., 2024](#)).

Through digitalization, cooperatives can help farmers reach a wider market without relying on middlemen or traditional distributors. Agricultural products previously marketed only locally can be promoted through digital platforms, thereby increasing their sales value. Furthermore, the use of technology also helps cooperatives improve administrative efficiency and transparency in financial management ([Patro et al., 2026](#)).

The digital transformation of cooperatives not only increases farmers' incomes but also opens up opportunities for younger generations to become involved in the agricultural sector. The agricultural sector is often considered unattractive to young people due to its

association with traditional jobs and low incomes. However, integrating technology into cooperative management can create a modern agricultural model that is more innovative, productive, and market-oriented ([Santos et al., 2024](#)).

### Challenges in Managing Agricultural Cooperatives

Despite their significant potential for rural development, agricultural cooperatives still face various challenges that can hinder their sustainability. One major challenge is the low quality of human resources involved in cooperative management. Many cooperative administrators lack adequate managerial skills, resulting in ineffective organizational decision-making and a lack of strategic planning ([Mahazril' Aini, Hafizah, & Zuraini, 2012](#)).

Furthermore, limited business capital is also a barrier to the development of agricultural cooperatives. Many rural cooperatives remain dependent on government assistance and have not yet developed a self-sufficient business system. This situation hinders cooperative growth and makes them less competitive compared to other businesses. The low adoption of digital technology is also a challenge, particularly in rural areas with limited infrastructure and internet access ([Cook, 1994](#)).

Another challenge is the low participation of cooperative members. Some communities still perceive cooperatives as formal institutions providing capital loans, rather than as platforms for collective economic empowerment. This lack of member participation can reduce the effectiveness of cooperative programs and undermine the long-term sustainability of the organization.

### Cooperatives and Sustainable Rural Development

From a sustainable rural development perspective, agricultural cooperatives make a crucial contribution because they integrate economic, social, and institutional aspects into rural development. Economically, cooperatives help increase community incomes and strengthen local economies through the development of more productive agricultural enterprises. Socially, cooperatives foster community solidarity and cooperation in collective resource management. Institutionally, cooperatives serve as a means of community empowerment, encouraging active participation in village development ([Song, Qi, Zhang, & Vernooy, 2014](#)).

Strategically managed cooperatives can also support more inclusive and sustainable rural development. By strengthening market access, increasing agricultural productivity, and fostering local economic innovation, cooperatives can be a crucial instrument in reducing poverty and economic disparities in rural areas ([Shiferaw, Hellin, & Muricho, 2011](#)). Therefore, strengthening cooperative management strategies is crucial to ensuring that agricultural cooperatives not only survive as traditional economic institutions but also become key drivers of rural economic transformation in the modern era.

**Table 3.** Contribution of Cooperatives to Sustainable Rural Development

Pillars of Sustainable Development	Cooperative Contribution
Economic Sustainability	Increase productivity and income
Social Sustainability	Strengthening community cooperation
Institutional Sustainability	Improving village institutional capacity

**Environmental Sustainability**

## Supporting sustainable agriculture

Source: Author, 2026

Table 3 shows that cooperatives make a significant contribution to sustainable rural development through various development aspects. In terms of economic sustainability, cooperatives play a role in increasing productivity and community income by strengthening agricultural businesses and market access. In terms of social sustainability, cooperatives are able to strengthen cooperation and solidarity in rural communities through a collective-based economic system (Akbari et al., 2023). Furthermore, in terms of institutional sustainability, cooperatives help increase village institutional capacity through strengthening organizations and community participation. Meanwhile, in terms of environmental sustainability, cooperatives support sustainable agricultural practices through more efficient and environmentally friendly resource utilization. Thus, cooperatives function not only as economic institutions but also as important instruments in supporting sustainable rural development (Lipatova et al., 2021).

**SWOT Analysis of Agricultural Cooperatives**

To provide a more comprehensive strategic management perspective, this study analyzes agricultural cooperatives using the SWOT framework. SWOT analysis helps identify internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats affecting cooperative sustainability.

**Table 4.** SWOT Analysis of Agricultural Cooperatives

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
I. Collective bargaining power II. Strong community participation III. Access to local agricultural resources IV. Cooperative values and social capital	I. Limited managerial capability II. Low digital literacy III. Dependence on government support IV. Limited financial resources
<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
I. Expansion of digital markets II. Government support programs III. Increasing demand for sustainable products IV. Technology adoption in agriculture	I. Market price fluctuations II. Competition from private agribusiness firms III. Climate change risks IV. Rapid technological changes

The SWOT analysis indicates that agricultural cooperatives possess significant strengths in collective action and social capital. However, weaknesses related to managerial competence and technological capability may limit their competitiveness. Therefore, cooperatives should adopt strategies that leverage their strengths to exploit emerging opportunities, particularly digital transformation and sustainable agriculture markets. At the same time, capacity building and governance improvements are required to address internal weaknesses and external threats.

## Conclusion

This study highlights that agricultural cooperatives play a strategic role in supporting sustainable rural development through strengthening farmers' access to capital, markets, technology, and collective economic activities. The findings indicate that effective strategic management, encompassing good governance, human resource development, digitalization, strategic partnerships, and product innovation, is essential for improving cooperative performance and enhancing their contribution to economic, social, institutional, and environmental sustainability. The study further implies that agricultural cooperatives should not be viewed merely as traditional economic institutions but as strategic agents of rural transformation capable of increasing competitiveness and community welfare. Practically, policymakers, cooperative managers, and rural development stakeholders should prioritize capacity building, digital transformation, and collaborative partnerships to strengthen cooperative sustainability and resilience. For future research, empirical studies employing quantitative, mixed-method, or case-study approaches are recommended to validate and extend the proposed sustainable cooperative framework across different regional and agricultural contexts.

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