
RESILIENCE AND ADAPTATION OF COOPERATIVE BUSINESSES IN NIGERIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS.

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Abstract

This paper delves into the theme of resilience and adaptation in Nigerian Cooperative Businesses during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The primary objectives of this study are as follows: examine the financial challenges faced by cooperative societies in Nigeria as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures implemented to contain it, evaluate the effectiveness of government support programs and policies in mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cooperative societies in Nigeria and assess the strategies employed by cooperative societies to maintain business continuity and sustain operations during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. This study contends that cooperative societies possess a pivotal role in the transformation into sustainable and resilient communities in the post-COVID-19 era. It explores the contributions made by cooperative organizations in response to both previous and ongoing crises across different regions. The article discusses the role of umbrella organizations and how their initiatives can facilitate a cascading effect throughout the cooperative movement, exemplifying instances of stimulus packages and their alignment with policies. The paper also provides a concise overview of prominent national cooperative enterprises and apex organizations, underscoring their significant contributions to enhancing resilience and sustainability. The author underscores the substantial role that cooperative businesses are playing in fostering inclusive and sustainable development at the grassroots level. In conclusion, while some cooperative societies grapple with the fear of losing investments or facing business closure, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented opportunities for cooperatives to advance cooperative innovation, strengthen value addition, and bolster the marketing of cooperative products. Consequently, it is recommended that both the government and cooperative stakeholders take economic intervention measures to preserve cooperative business enterprises and empower cooperative members through a well-structured economic recovery program.

Keywords: Cooperative, Business, COVID-19, Pandemic, Crisis, Lockdown.

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 triggered an unprecedented global crisis, challenging the very fabric of economies and societies across the world. Nigeria, like many nations, found itself grappling with the multifaceted repercussions of the virus. The pandemic's disruptive force knew no bounds, impacting industries, businesses, and individuals with an unforeseen intensity (Abu-Rayash & Dincer, 2020).

In this crucible of adversity, cooperative businesses in Nigeria emerged as a beacon of resilience and adaptation. These cooperative enterprises, which have long served as pillars of the Nigerian economy, confronted the daunting challenges imposed by the pandemic with remarkable tenacity and innovation. In doing so, they not only safeguarded their existence but also underscored the enduring significance of cooperative models in times of crisis.

Cooperative societies across the globe experienced significant repercussions due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, manifesting in diverse ways. The impact of this crisis has been notably uneven, affecting households, workers, and businesses disparately, further accentuating the pre-existing disparities within society. Cooperative and mutual enterprises (CMEs), their employees, members, and communities were not exempt from this impact, although the extent varied considerably depending on the sectors and the geographical stage of the virus's prevalence (Adnan et al, 2020). While the virus itself is considered indiscriminate, affecting individuals regardless of their social or economic standing, the prevailing social and economic inequalities within our societies have amplified the crisis's devastating consequences, particularly for the most vulnerable segments of the population. With the imposition of lockdowns, those already at risk of poverty have lost their primary source of income, hindering their access to essential goods and services. Vulnerable and marginalized individuals have faced exacerbated challenges, including restricted or non-existent access to healthcare and social support networks (IMF, 2020).

Mandatory restrictions have disrupted travel, tourism, businesses, and entire industries, compelling community lockdowns, quarantines, remote work, and online education. Consequently, certain cooperative societies ceased their operations, while others transitioned entirely to the digital realm. This unpredictable and unprecedented situation presented unanticipated hurdles for cooperative societies in Nigeria.

The COVID-19 outbreak initially surfaced in Wuhan, China, in 2019, resulting in a global death toll that extended to nearly every corner of the world (Akanni and Gabriel, 2020). As of September 20, 2021, the total number of confirmed cases worldwide reached 229,349,150, with casualties standing at 4,706,668 (Worldometers, 2021).

In Nigeria, the pandemic was first detected on February 27, 2020 (Hatzius, Philips, Mericle, and Struyven, 2020). Consequently, on March 29, 2020, the government imposed a comprehensive lockdown in three states: Lagos, Ogun, and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. This lockdown effectively halted all non-essential activities in these regions. Subsequently, similar measures were implemented in other states, accompanied by a ban on interstate movement, except for essential services. As of September 20, 2021, the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) reported 201,798 cases, with 190,563 recoveries, 8,580 active cases, and 2,655 fatalities (NCDC, 2021). This underscores the urgency of conducting studies on the impact of COVID-19 on cooperative society activities in Nigeria during this global pandemic.

Throughout history, periods of crisis have witnessed a surge in the appreciation of values such as cooperation, solidarity, and mutualism. Such times also coincide with

increased membership and turnovers in cooperative societies. This phenomenon was evident during and after the 2007-2008 global financial crisis. Similarly, cooperative organizations have played pivotal roles in responding to public health epidemics like AIDS, participating in relief and reconstruction efforts after natural disasters, and contributing to post-conflict settings (Erdem, 2011).

In the context of the profound effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, cooperative organizations worldwide are rallying to provide relief to their workers, members, and communities. Some countries have begun integrating cooperative societies into their public relief strategies as partners and beneficiaries. This present study aims to assess the status of cooperative societies in Nigeria following the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Statement of the Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic, also known as the coronavirus, has had significant detrimental effects on the global economy. To mitigate the spread of the virus, governments around the world implemented measures such as total lockdowns and social distancing, leading to the closure of various cooperative activities, markets, public offices, businesses, places of worship, and events. The uncertainty surrounding the situation and the widespread transmission of the virus has caused cooperators, consumers, and investors to seek safer alternatives for their operations, consumption, and investments. Additionally, restrictions on the movement of people, goods, and services in many countries have resulted in substantial losses for businesses and industries, including cooperative societies, aviation, entertainment, hospitality, and sports.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises (SMEs). These enterprises, due to their vulnerability and limited resources, have been disproportionately affected by the outbreak. Measures such as self-isolation, quarantine, social distancing, and the closure of markets have negatively impacted their operations, sales, and profits. SMEs have experienced significant shocks to their demand and supply chains during this pandemic. The demand for goods has plummeted due to lockdowns and restricted movement, while supply chains have been severely disrupted. For instance, Nigerian businesses that rely on imports from China have faced challenges due to travel bans, hindering the supply of goods and the continuity of their operations. Additionally, border closures have had adverse effects on import and export businesses.

The concept of cooperative societies highlights the importance of collective efforts to help businesses recover from the consequences of the pandemic. Cooperatives can serve as powerful tools for businesses to respond to the crisis caused by COVID-19. However, there is a lack of research on the status of cooperative businesses during and after the pandemic, particularly regarding the implications for cooperatives in Nigeria. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the relationship between cooperative societies and the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, focusing on evidence from Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to examine the resilience and adaptation of Cooperative Businesses in Nigeria during the COVID-19 Pandemic, while the specific objectives are to:

- i. Examine the financial challenges faced by cooperative societies in Nigeria as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures implemented to contain it.

- ii. Evaluate the effectiveness of government support programs and policies in mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cooperative societies in Nigeria.
- iii. Assess the strategies employed by cooperative societies to maintain business continuity and sustain operations during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The above specific objectives were addressed with the following research questions:

- i. What are the major financial challenges encountered by cooperative societies in Nigeria due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated containment measures?
- ii. What government support programs and policies have been implemented to assist cooperative societies in Nigeria in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- iii. What are the various strategies adopted by cooperative societies in Nigeria to ensure business continuity and sustain their operations amid the COVID-19 pandemic?

A Review of Cooperative Societies and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Cooperative societies serve as a potent and efficient means of generating wealth and investments. These societies are formed by individuals who voluntarily join together to collectively own shared assets and advance the economic interests of their members. Prior to the sudden emergence of the coronavirus, cooperative societies were functioning seamlessly. However, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic, leading to significant disruptions in various aspects of life, including interactions, education, work, and our daily routines. The outbreak had a profound impact on the activities of cooperative societies worldwide.

COVID-19, also known as coronavirus disease 2019 or COVID-19, is an infectious illness caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS CoV-2). It is highly contagious and primarily spreads from person to person through respiratory droplets released when an infected individual sneezes or coughs. Common symptoms include fever, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, runny nose, and sneezing. Measures like lockdowns, social distancing, self-isolation, and the practice of good hygiene, such as frequent handwashing, mask-wearing, and covering one's mouth when coughing or sneezing, have been recommended to curb the disease's spread. It's important to note that there is currently no known cure or vaccine for COVID-19, although various countries and international organizations, including the World Health Organization, are actively working to develop vaccines and treatments for this pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had far-reaching effects across various aspects of society, including social, religious, political, and economic dimensions. Among the key players in the local and international business landscape, cooperative societies are a group we must consider when examining the significant direct and indirect consequences resulting from the pandemic. These consequences encompass aspects like the export and import of crops and related products, as well as the financial sector, where Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SACCOS) operate.

Despite ongoing efforts to mitigate the spread of the virus, the financial sector has already begun experiencing notable effects. This is evident in shifts in the savings and borrowing habits of members, which have been significantly altered in response to the business impact of COVID-19. For instance, lockdown measures implemented to curb the virus's spread have prompted countries to reevaluate their credit ratings and risk positions, considering the unprecedented geo-economic challenges brought about by the crisis (Weltman, 2020).

While some scholars argue that it might be premature to assess the pandemic's full impact, the crucial question remains: when will the pandemic come to an end? According to certain experts, the Covid-19 pandemic may persist for an extended period and may not entirely vanish (Brito, 2020). Additionally, there is currently no definitive cure for the virus. Therefore, it is imperative to engage in discussions about its effects now in order to implement measures and actions aimed at mitigating the pandemic's impact.

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Social and Economic Aspects of Cooperative Business Operations

It was evident that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on cooperatives of all sizes throughout Nigeria, affecting their business operations, revenue, and workforce. The pandemic disrupted cooperative activities, with many employees resorting to remote work. Some cooperatives experienced project suspensions, exemplified by a small cooperative in Enugu, a state in the southeast of Nigeria, which had its commercial contracts terminated, putting its survival at risk. Similarly, a micro cooperative in the energy sector lost potential customers who initially showed interest in signing contracts but shifted priorities during the pandemic.

The impact on cooperatives varied by sector. Cooperative startups, as well as the transport, education, and cultural sectors, including tourism, were notably affected. Conversely, some sectors, like health and retail, saw increased activity levels. Certain cooperatives seized unexpected business opportunities during the pandemic, such as textile cooperatives in Anambra State adapting their production to manufacture masks and gloves. In Enugu, a large cooperative in the food sector established mobile stores to provide fresh and affordable food in areas lacking grocery shops or facing food supply challenges.

Across cooperatives of all sizes, turnovers generally decreased significantly or slightly compared to normal. The tourism sector was particularly hard-hit due to lockdown measures, affecting over 10,000 cooperatives in Nigeria involved in tourism, entertainment, artistic and cultural heritage management, leisure, and sports.

In only a few instances, turnover exceeded normal levels, notably among some medium-sized cooperatives in the social and health sectors. As businesses increasingly adapt to a remote working environment, many cooperatives expressed the need for support in digitalization efforts.

Reaction to the COVID-19 Crisis

The response of cooperative organizations to the COVID-19 pandemic has been commendable on a global scale. While cooperatives are arguably most effective at the local level, where they establish and unite local communities through day-to-day interactions with both members and non-members, their cooperative model aligns well with localized economic structures. This is due to the reinvestment of surpluses and the active participation of members in the local economy. The cooperative principle of "concern for community" is also particularly well-suited to the local level, as cooperatives can rejuvenate the areas in which they are rooted by focusing on community-centric activities. At this level, cooperatives often take the form of primary cooperatives, and their activities vary depending on the sector and the type of cooperative (user, producer, worker, or multi-stakeholder). These activities can encompass community investment, community education, or the provision of services and employment.

Cooperative societies have played significant roles in addressing the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their responses have included providing personal

protective equipment (PPE) kits, healthcare services, addressing financial needs, and prioritizing issues such as gender violence. Youth have also been actively involved in both responding to and recovering from the pandemic. Numerous examples of response strategies undertaken by cooperatives in sectors such as production, finance, health, social services, and retail have been identified in various countries where the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) has a presence and collaborates with partners.

Theoretical Underpinning

This research paper is primarily grounded in two key theoretical frameworks: Epidemiologic Transition (ET) as proposed by Thomson in 1929, and Resource Dependence Theory (RDT). These theories collectively serve as the foundation for this study, offering valuable insights into the emerging socio-economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on the performance of cooperative societies. They jointly provide a framework for understanding how individuals within the socio-economic sphere collaborate, leveraging available resources to achieve their objectives while considering the consequences arising from their endeavors.

a. Epidemiologic Transition (ET)

The Epidemiologic Transition (ET) theory delineates a transformative shift in the disease patterns within a population. This transition encompasses stages in which acute infectious diseases decline while chronic degenerative diseases gain prominence, resulting in a gradual shift in the age distribution of mortality from younger to older ages. The theory focuses on the intricate changes in patterns of health and disease, and their interplay with demographic, economic, and sociological determinants and consequences for populations affected by a specific phenomenon (Mayer, 1962). In the context of this study, we concentrate on the economic and sociological consequences stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. Thomson's (1929) framework outlines four stages of epidemiological transition. The third and fourth stages are particularly relevant to this study. The third stage involves the elimination of infectious diseases, making way for chronic diseases among the elderly and the vulnerable. Major causes of death in this stage include chronic degenerative and man-made diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and diabetes. The pace at which this transition occurs varies between nations, influenced by socially determined factors in both developed and developing countries, and also by medical technology in developed nations (Thomson, 1929). Additionally, the fourth stage of ET pertains to the emergence of infectious diseases, including new infections or the re-emergence of "old" diseases with significant impacts on population health. Various factors contribute to this development, such as travel and trade, microbiological resistance, human behavior, disruptions in healthcare systems, and environmental pressures. The theory posits that ill health can lead to reduced economic activity, trapping poor countries in a downward spiral of declining incomes and health. The control of infectious diseases is hindered by political and financial obstacles and an inability to utilize existing technologies. Consequently, it is crucial for this study to integrate relevant theoretical assumptions regarding the consequences of emerging infectious diseases, like the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically within cooperative societies.

b. Resource Dependence Theory (RDT)

Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) views inter-firm governance as a strategic response to conditions of uncertainty and interdependence among exchange partners (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). The theory posits that organizational actions are primarily driven by resource considerations, and that resource complementarities among firms can substantially explain the relationships and interactions among them. It assumes that variations in uncertainties arising within the organization and the business environment influence both the

internal distribution of power among organizational entities and the external power dynamics among market participants (Hillman et al., 2009). In the context of cooperative performance amidst the uncertainties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, resource mismatches create dependencies among cooperatives and other stakeholders in the cooperative sector. Therefore, this theory sheds light on the extent to which firms in the business environment need to maintain exchanges of information and material resources with other partners as a response to an uncertain future (Abosedo and Onakoya, 2013). As the COVID-19 outbreak continues to spread globally, impacting both the internal and external business environment, the interdependence among participants becomes increasingly critical for survival through resource sharing among cooperatives and other stakeholders, in alignment with the 6th cooperative principle, which emphasizes cooperation among cooperatives.

Methodological Approach

Qualitative methodologies were employed to investigate and delineate the emerging resilience and adaptation of Cooperative Business in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on Agricultural Marketing Cooperatives (AMCOS) and Savings and Credits Cooperatives (SACCOS) in the South-East region of Nigeria, particularly in the Enugu and Anambra regions. The study involved engaging a total of 62 key informants, comprising cooperative managers and board chairpersons. Data collection was facilitated through telephone interviews and discussions conducted via Google Meet and Zoom applications, guided by a pre-tested interview guide.

In addition to primary data, secondary data were sourced through a documentary review approach, which encompassed a thorough examination of published scholarly articles, non-scholarly articles, and grey literature. This approach proved valuable in providing data not typically found in commercially published literature, thus reducing publication bias and ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of available evidence. Furthermore, a Systematic Literature Synthesis (SLS) was carried out, drawing on articles published between 2000 and 2020 to gather insights from similar contagious pandemics like SARS (2002), which had significant impacts on national, regional, and global businesses.

Supplementary secondary data were accessed from the websites of the National Cooperative Financing Agency of Nigeria (CFAN), the World Health Organization (WHO), which offered daily situation reports on the spread of COVID-19 and the measures taken to contain it, and the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), a mandated body providing accredited national statistics on various developmental matters. The data collection process was primarily guided by specific keywords such as "coronavirus," "COVID-19 pandemic," "cooperative societies," and "socio-economic effects." As a result, a total of 42 published articles were reviewed following a rigorous screening process in line with the established objectives and theoretical foundations. Subsequently, data analysis involved basic coding, including open, axial, and selective coding, followed by a constant comparison analysis (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012).

Findings and Discussions

The examination of both the manifested and anticipated socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the functioning of cooperative societies is rooted in the cooperative doctrine, which is firmly anchored in socialization principles. Cooperatives are founded on the principles of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity, with solidarity and democracy serving as the cornerstones of these principles. The democratic control of these societies hinges on social interactions as a fundamental function. As posited by Glass et al. (2006), even though the implementation of social distancing measures is

challenging, these strategies are crucial in containing the transmission of the virus among individuals, directly impacting socially oriented organizations like cooperative societies.

In response to the pandemic, the Nigerian government, like many other nations, imposed social distancing measures as a means to curb the virus's spread. The findings of this study have unveiled that the social interaction dynamics within cooperative societies have been significantly disrupted by the outbreak of the coronavirus, primarily due to the enforcement of social distancing measures. These measures have compromised the practice of democracy through crucial events like the Annual General Meeting (AGM). Cooperative societies have struggled to uphold their core values as a result. Moreover, the study reveals that many cooperative societies have been unable to convene members' General Meetings as mandated by the law, making it challenging to make critical decisions. This includes matters such as reviewing audited financial reports, various committee reports, and discussing issues related to cooperative development. In response to the social distancing strategy, the spread of the virus has hindered these core functions.

In contrast to legal requirements, it was found that most member decisions are currently being made by the board, which contradicts the second cooperative principle emphasizing democratic member control of their society. This departure from democratic decision-making jeopardizes the practice of democracy and places the performance of cooperative societies at risk.

Conclusions

This paper focuses on the resilience and adaptability of Cooperative Businesses in Nigeria amid the COVID-19 Pandemic. It is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic has had and will continue to have a significant economic and social impact on the performance of cooperative societies. Many cooperative societies have already experienced income losses or are at risk of doing so, and if the pandemic persists and worsens, it could have catastrophic effects on the sector, especially for leading cooperative societies like AMCOS and SACCOS. Cooperative societies, which often serve vulnerable groups in society, are expected to bear a substantial social and economic burden due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To address these challenges, there is a pressing need to establish a Cooperative COVID-19 Response Committee (CCRC) tasked with gathering information and maintaining statistics on the effects of COVID-19 in the cooperative sector. This committee would ensure ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and the implementation of sector-specific measures, which can be disseminated to cooperative members to keep them informed about the social, economic, technological, and cultural consequences of the pandemic on the cooperative sector.

The COVID-19 crisis has also created opportunities for cooperatives to innovate, strengthen value addition, and enhance the marketing of cooperative products. Producer cooperatives, in particular, can seize this moment to manufacture masks and sanitizers or procure them at affordable prices for distribution to their members and the wider community.

The implementation of an Integrated Cooperative Model (ICM) is of paramount importance at this juncture. All stakeholders should work to enhance connectivity and reinvigorate the cooperative sector during and after the pandemic. Through cooperative platforms, education and awareness campaigns should be conducted on COVID-19 preventive measures, including the dissemination of bulk messages on accessing markets and adopting flexible repayment methods. The introduction of online supervision and a focus on self-regulation are also crucial during this period. Cooperative Audit and Supervision Corporation (COASCO)

should consider employing off-site audits conducted in hygienic environments to contain the spread of the virus.

As a result, some cooperative organizations are restructuring to ensure efficiency and survival during the COVID-19 pandemic. Others are facing the fear of losing their investments or being forced out of business. This is the challenging reality confronting cooperators in Nigeria due to the global pandemic, which has significantly disrupted cooperative activities in their respective contexts.

Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has wrought more havoc than benefits on cooperative businesses, individuals, and governments. Therefore, it is imperative to implement decisive measures to preserve and sustain cooperative enterprises. While the Federal Government of Nigeria initiated a stimulus program known as COVID-19 relief packages to provide support, regrettably, some of these resources were withheld by certain governors, thus failing to reach their intended recipients – the impoverished and the vulnerable. Consequently, the following recommendations have been proposed:

- i. Proactive strategies should be established in anticipation of events like COVID-19 that are likely to impact cooperative organizations adversely.
- ii. There is an urgent need for economic interventions by the government and cooperative stakeholders to uphold cooperative business operations and empower cooperative members through a well-structured economic recovery initiative.
- iii. The government should adopt a proactive stance in ensuring that protective equipment, such as masks and gloves, are distributed to farmers through cooperatives (both primary and unions). This will promote safer interactions between farmers and other individuals at the farm gate.

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