



COOPERATIVE ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT – AN OMANI PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Youth unemployment and poverty presents a major challenge that threatens the social fabric of many communities around the world. Though the challenge is forcing the younger generation to focus on developing their own businesses, the extreme competition and uncertain market dynamics are making venture creation even more challenging. The cut-throat competition has made it difficult for the small-scale entrepreneurs also to survive in the market. The Covid 19 pandemic and the resultant market conditions, in terms of higher job losses and reduced market growth across different sectors, are making the complex situation even more complicated. Oman, as a country, is facing multiple challenges with youth unemployment, as more and more eligible and educated youth joining the labour market every year, looking for suitable positions. This further aggravates unemployment related issues faced by the individuals and communities. Cooperative entrepreneurship, which encourages collective effort, could play a major role in overcoming this situation, as it provides a framework for young individuals, both job seekers and entrepreneurs alike, to work together by sharing the risks and rewards, thereby enhancing the economic and social value to individuals and to the society. This study intends to provide a clear understanding on the role of cooperative entrepreneurship on sustainable development and will explore the scope of adopting the concept in a wider scale to provide economic and social value, among the communities in Oman. The author has used the secondary data available, for the purpose of this study, while duly acknowledging the different approaches used by other authors. While adding value to the existing literature, the findings of this study could also be of interest to job seekers, small-scale entrepreneurs, educators, researchers, mentors and decision makers in Oman. This study could also be used as a point of reference for future studies in this field.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cooperative Entrepreneurship concept focuses on facilitating effective and positive change within the society [35], through a shared, value-based enterprise structure [18] focused on community welfare and sustainable development [13]. It concentrates on major issues faced by the society and work towards providing practical and culturally acceptable solutions to those challenges [7] in a sustainable manner [20], while upholding the social value system [27]. Cooperative entrepreneurship recognizes human values over profit focus [14], and considers democratic management principles, solidarity, concern for environment and equity as the major pillars of the enterprise [13].

Cooperatives were considered to be the first social enterprise [53] that focused on binding the individuals within the communities to associate themselves for their common good. Cooperative entrepreneurship concept benefits the whole community [20], by helping them to overcome inequality, poverty and unemployment [53]. Being owned and managed by the beneficiaries themselves, these cooperative enterprises work towards improving the economic and social wealth of both members and the community in a sustainable manner [13], while supporting the communities [20] in enhancing their entrepreneurial intent. Cooperative enterprises generally operate in essential but, low profit margin sectors [45], encouraging shared responsibility and risk. This society oriented approach helps these enterprises to sustain their business practices, while continuing to provide value to both members and the society [22].

Oman, being a country intending to bridge the youth unemployment gap through entrepreneurship [1] could benefit greatly by facilitating the development of cooperative entrepreneurial ventures, as they allow number of individuals and small-scale entrepreneurs to join together to create economic value [4], to both members and the societies. While helping the authorities to solve the socio-economic challenges faced by the countries, encouraging the development of cooperative enterprises within communities could also provide the much needed platform towards sustainable development of local communities [13], there by supporting the Sultanate of Oman in achieving its sustainable development goals, in a post covid 19 situation. This requires a clear strategic intent from the stakeholders concerned as such intent could be the first step in developing cooperative entrepreneurial ventures, that can create, share and sustain economic and social value within the communities.

1.1 Context of the Study

Oman, similar to many countries in the middle east region, is struggling with youth unemployment issues, with more and more graduates coming out of the universities looking for jobs in different sectors [2]. Oman, as a country, consists the highest percentage of youth population within the GCC nations. 50% of Oman's population is below the age of 25yrs, followed by 46% in Saudi Arabia, 40% in Kuwait, 35% in Bahrain, 34% in UAE and 25% in Qatar [47]. With half of its population below the age of 25yrs, Oman faces serious challenges to its labor markets, as providing employment opportunities for the youth, becomes a bigger challenge to the nation. This issue is also highlighted by the relatively higher youth unemployment rate which stayed at 13.75% in 2020 [39]. Though more and more members of the younger population are joining the Omani labor market every year, the limited job opportunities available in the market is making the recruitment extremely competitive [47], thereby allowing only the best to get the jobs. Similarly, the extreme competition is also making the survival difficult, for the young entrepreneurs who have come forward to start-up a business on their own [2]. Introducing the cooperative entrepreneurship concept will be very useful for these individuals, as it provides an opportunity for them to start the business as a cooperative enterprise, where the resources and competencies could be pooled to achieve business success [18] while sharing the risk and reward, thereby enhancing their business success, collectively [13]. While providing job opportunities for the job seekers, such enterprises will also provide economic value to the society [14], and develop it in a sustainable manner

Cooperative enterprises, with their strong community centered approach could play a major role in developing inclusive societies and economies [13]. Though the concept has gained greater importance at global level, Santos (2012) has observed that they still face number of challenges in developing economies. Cooperative entrepreneurship has a huge potential in Oman due to the country's collectivist culture and consumers' preference towards adhering to societal norms [43]. As such, development of cooperative enterprises across different sectors and societies will help the authorities to manage the challenges faced by the communities due to youth unemployment and poverty [33]. Encouraging cooperative enterprises and entrepreneurial societies will also improve the attractiveness of the private sector, while making sure that the growth, in both economic and social terms, is sustainable.

Hence, this study focuses on developing a clear understanding on the role of cooperative entrepreneurship in tackling the socio-economic issues prevailing in the society, while exploring the possibility of adopting the concept across different sectors and communities, thereby making them sustainable in Oman.

2. EMPIRICAL REVIEW

The concept of sustainable development focuses on "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [20]. Apart from economic sustainability, the concept also focuses on environmental and societal sustainability [31] as well. While the economic platform focuses on generating wealth for the entire population [9] through waste minimizations and maximum utilization of resources, the social platform focuses on developing the people and culture towards improving their quality of life [26]. The environmental platform focuses on protecting the environmental resources from misuse or overuse, so that they remain active and useful for future generations [20]. Sustainable development concept follows the sustainable development goals (SDGs) set by the member states of the United Nations, in 2012 [52]. SDGs specified the way forward for addressing the social challenges related to youth unemployment and poverty [13], protecting the planet, and ensuring better quality of life through sustainable economic growth for all the citizens [20].

Cooperative entrepreneurship, which encourages the development of cooperative enterprises, could play a major role in implementing the sustainable development goals [25] as these enterprises promote equality, improves the financial position of their members [10], drive social inclusiveness, and promote environment friendly behaviour [18] among the communities, while exerting a considerable impact on the country's economic situation [46].

The development and operation of cooperative enterprises, are further strengthened by the seven cooperative principles identified by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) [20]. These seven principles focus on the challenges that cooperative enterprises may come across and set the guidelines for their success.

The first principle focuses on voluntary participation and considers the cooperative enterprises to be open to all individuals within the community, who were willing to accept the responsibilities of membership without any differences or discrimination [20]. The second principle expects the cooperatives to be controlled by its members in a democratic manner [16], with each member having one vote. The third principle focuses on members' economic participation, whereas members were expected to contribute to the capital required to run the organization and play a role in democratically controlling the usage of such capital [37]. The fourth principle identifies cooperatives to be autonomous and independent enterprises controlled by its members in a democratic manner [29]. The fifth principle focuses on the provision of education and training for its members so that they could work effectively to-

wards improving the enterprise [52]. The sixth principle expects the cooperatives to focus more on cooperating within local, national, regional and international structures [37], to improve the services provided to their members. The seventh principle expects the cooperative enterprises to work towards developing the communities in a sustainable manner, while focusing on the needs of their members [29]. These principles, when followed meticulously, support the cooperative enterprises in their work towards providing multiple benefits to its members while helping the community to get developed through both economic and social platforms in a sustainable manner [36].

Cooperative enterprises, built on these seven principles remain as the best possible business format that would provide the individuals and communities with both financial and social value [13]. As these enterprises are deep-rooted within the communities in which their operations are carried out [29], cooperative enterprises can work towards developing the communities in a sustainable manner [25] in both economic and social terms.

The idea of sustainable development forms the core of cooperative enterprises, as they focus on fulfilling the requirements of their members in an ethical manner [36]. They provide training and self-help opportunities to improve the resources and competencies of the local communities [46], while enhancing both social and economic value for them [18]. By moving away from the traditional short term profit maximization strategy followed by for-profit (FP) capitalist organizations and focusing on long term goals of sustainable growth [20], shared profits [31], poverty alleviation [53], societal welfare [7, 27] and environmental protection [31], cooperative enterprises support sustainable development by adopting the triple bottom line approach of people, profit and planet, in their operations.

The global financial crisis in 2008 and the resultant losses in financial (economic losses) and social (youth unemployment and poverty) terms showed the drawbacks of adopting common, investor owned, for-profit business model that focuses more on short term profit maximization as it resulted in reduced social wellbeing and increased unemployment [54]. However, cooperative enterprises were able to manage the financial crisis in 2008 and maintain the number of jobs and even improve the economic value to their members due to their democratic control and faster response [42]. This shows the importance of promoting cooperative entrepreneurship, as a mode of developing cooperative enterprises, that would be more resilient to short term environmental changes, and sustainable over long periods of time [13], due to their focus on shared ownership [29] and societal well-being [7, 27].

3. DISCUSSION

Cooperatives are not something very new to Oman. The idea of cooperatives in the agricultural sector in Oman started in 1970s, with nearly twenty agricultural cooperatives and one consumer cooperative being formed between 1975 and 1979 [5].

The farmers' association set up by the farmers in the Al-Batinah governorate in Oman, boasts one of the success stories of cooperative enterprises in the agricultural sector [5]. With participation in the association being voluntary, the association charges a nominal fee for membership, based on the size of the farm. The collective action group that started with 24 members in 2005 has increased its membership to 40 by 2009 and 68 by 2013. [11]. The cooperative association has also signed an agreement with a local company to market their products at the national level, thereby providing improved visibility to the produce of their members [5]. The farmers' association has further expanded and today is renamed as The Omani Farmers Association [11]. The organization has created employment opportunities to individuals living in the area through their grading, sorting and packaging activities. The farmers' association has also rented number of vehicles for transporting their products, thereby greatly reducing the transport costs of their members. Apart from the operational support, the cooperative action also provides the members with the required training [30] enables the members to have greater access to credits from bank, authentic market information and training opportunities as well [5]. This access supports the farmers to make informed decisions that are both profitable and sustainable.

Similar to farmer's association of Al-Batinah governorate, Sidab Women Sewing Group, set up by a social entrepreneur in the village of Sidab in Muscat governorate, also supports the women in the area to learn skills and earn a decent living [23]. The organization provides the required training to the members on sewing bags and encourage them to develop the products with a local touch and local story [48] These products are marketed together by the organization, primarily as a gift item, in corporate and tourism sectors [17]. Apart from their signature 'calico' bags, the Sidab Women Sewing Group also produce number of other products, such as, make-up bags, tissue holders and a range of hand made products as well [38]. The members work on their own pace, while accommodating their family commitments, thereby safeguarding the family values while earning a decent living [48]. Apart from being just an additional income earning option, Sidab Women Sewing Group has played a major role in improving the commercial awareness of their members [49] while enhancing their communication and leadership skills, thereby providing both economic and social value to the whole of Sidab community [23].

Though there have been success stories, their numbers are limited as the initial growth of cooperatives could not be sustained [5] due to economic, operational, institutional and human resource related limitations [2]. This requires the authorities to focus on the provision of encouragement and support to the formation of such enterprises [31] as cooperative enterprises have a huge potential in Oman [32] due to its geographical extension and the norms followed within different societies.

3.1 Cooperatives in different sectors of Oman

Cooperative enterprises set up to support and improve the livelihood of the farming sector of Oman could prove to be a very strong asset to those communities [32].

The dairy farmers in the Sohar and Salalah region of Oman face major issues related to lack of market opportunities for selling the products [48], lower milk productivity of their cows, lack of facilities to improve milk productivity of their traditional low milk producing breeds through artificial insemination and lack of awareness towards modern systems that support animal husbandry and

milk production [32]. The study conducted by Dr. Mbagha and his team found that the small-scale farmers within the sector generally produce around 2 to 4 litres of milk every day [32]. As such it is difficult for these small-scale entrepreneurs to find standard markets for their products [13] and invest on technology [25] that will improve the productivity of their low milk yielding cows. The study conducted by Dr. Mbagha has also found overwhelming support from these small-scale dairy farmers, for the formation of a cooperative enterprise, that can help these farmers by collecting the milk from different farmers and marketing them together, so that the small-scale dairy farmers could also receive higher income [32]. Apart from marketing milk, the cooperative enterprise could also support the small-scale farmers with other services towards improving the yield from their cows as well [5].

Similar to dairy farmers, the small-scale agricultural farmers also face multiple challenges related to finding markets and receiving the right price for their products [31]. Their limited production compels many farmers to sell their produce to the customers through the intermediaries [5], thereby further reducing their profit margins. Apart from finding the markets for their products, the limited produce and limited financial freedom restricts their ability towards engaging in activities such as usage of technology [3], gaining access to authentic marketing information [40] in improving production, gaining access to better distribution network [3] etc. A cooperative enterprise set up with the patronage of these farmers, could help them to market their products together, and play a useful role in improving their bargaining power and even provide a better platform for any direct negotiations with other stakeholders [32].

Apart from farming sector, development of cooperative enterprises could also result in the development of cooperative entrepreneurial societies in other sectors as well.

Incense marketing has been a major contributor to the economy of the Dhofar region of Oman for a long time. These incense and perfumes, made by small-scale entrepreneurs using frankincense at their homes are sold by the makers themselves in the local marketplace [24]. Though these producers, were able to get reasonable business from the tourists visiting the local market, the business is neither attractive nor easy [24]. The hard work required towards frankincense harvesting and unattractive business practices have made the younger generation to focus on other avenues for their personal economic growth. As the current operational structure expects each producer in the sector to focus on the production, promotion and sale of their own products to a smaller target group of customers, these producers find it difficult to get the optimum value out of their products [24]. However, introduction of cooperative enterprise concept could greatly benefit these communities by providing them with the platform where they could promote their products together under a common brand [14] and find suitable markets for their products [45], rather than solely depending on the local markets. Cooperative enterprises and the development cooperative entrepreneurial societies could also help these entrepreneurs to train their younger generation [30] while using the best technology available for frankincense harvesting [24] and incense production, thereby managing to retain an age-old entrepreneurial tradition.

Handicraft making is another area that could benefit greatly from the formation of cooperative enterprises, as it would allow the sector to work towards improving the awareness about the social and cultural importance [34]. These are mostly home-based businesses done using the basic tools and sold mostly to the tourists, in their own, smaller sales outlets, generally by the craftsman themselves [51]. However, an opportunity for these craftsmen to pool their products and promote them through a unified channel [13], in the form of a cooperative enterprise, will provide these handicraft makers with an opportunity to improve their bargaining power and identify more profitable markets [42] to promote their products jointly [29], rather than depending entirely on a single segment, to make their ends meet.

Apart from these sectors, development of cooperative enterprises and cooperative entrepreneurial communities could be very useful for small-scale entrepreneurs involved [31] in businesses such as Omani dress making, cooking & catering businesses and artists as well. Hence, focusing on this aspect will provide the small-scale entrepreneurs with improved visibility and business opportunities [5], thereby providing optimum value for both small-scale entrepreneurs and the society.

3.2 The Way forward

Although the concept of cooperative entrepreneurship is gaining momentum in the middle east region, their rate of growth is relatively low compared to countries like India, Vietnam and China [32], due to their relatively fragile and mostly informal nature. However, the success stories of farmer's association and Sidab women sewing group show that cooperative entrepreneurship could play a pivotal role in tackling issues related to unemployment [54], within the communities, while focusing on improving the financial freedom [31] and social wellbeing [7, 27] of the societies concerned.

Cooperative entrepreneurship has played a major role in improving the financial and social wellbeing of the societies in many countries [41]. USA has become one of the most successful country in developing cooperative enterprises, with more than 100 million farmers becoming members in 47000 cooperatives [32]. Such successes are also seen in France (through LAITA dairy Cooperatives) and India (through AMUL cooperative) as well. Supporting this concept, Mohammed and Lee (2015)[31] has emphasised the importance of cooperative enterprises in Ethiopia as well.

These organizations, though limited in number, demonstrate the versatility and viability of cooperative entrepreneurship concept, that could be extended to communities throughout the country [50], by encouraging the societies to focus on developing cooperative enterprises that could provide improved opportunities to small-scale entrepreneurs to develop their businesses in a cooperative manner while enhancing their commercial acumen and leadership skills.

This requires the organizations concerned to focus on encouraging and promoting the concept of cooperative enterprise among the population. These cooperative enterprises need to be clearly focused on their objectives and function as a professional

organization with clear priorities related to efficiency, profits and social welfare [55]. The cooperatives need to include the producers and the related enterprises within the sector, so that their resources and competencies could be pooled in, to create synergies that result in economics of scale, considerable reduction in the cost of production and better income for all the stakeholders [56]. A professionally managed cooperative enterprise will be in a position to purchase the required raw materials, maintenance, control and packaging related requirements, in higher volumes at a lower cost, thereby greatly reducing the cost of production [19]. This cooperative mechanism will also be useful in improving the efficiency of distribution process as negotiations related to channels and logistics could be done on organizational level, with the prospective partners [15]. This could result in efficient storage and distribution network being made available for the products at an affordable cost.

The cooperative enterprises should also focus on the usage of technology to improve their operations and achieve economies of scale [6]. For example, agricultural cooperatives that include small-scale farmers, could focus on using productive and previously unused technologies such as 'fertigation' which allows the farmers to use irrigation technique to deliver liquid fertilizers, technologies that allow the members to manage their land, water and energy usage in a smarter manner and weather-smart technologies that help the farmers to be informed about the upcoming weather condition and patterns [44]. Usage of suitable technology in an effective manner will help these cooperative enterprises to reduce the waste and improve their efficiency, thereby achieving economies of scale [21]. The cooperative enterprises should also focus on training their members and the members of the society on the usage of technology, to make sure that their efforts yield positive results in a sustainable manner.

The success in developing cooperative entrepreneurial societies also requires a robust legal framework that supports the formation of such entities along with a clear policy framework related to the formation, functioning and dissolution of such entities. The law should focus on the provision of possible incentives such as VAT (value added tax) exemptions or tax holidays for a limited period of time, thereby encouraging the formation of cooperative ventures. A robust cooperative law, that addresses issues related to protection of intellectual property rights, copyrights issues, information security and unfair competition, will create an enabling environment that will encourage the formation of entities that focus on cooperative entrepreneurship.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Cooperative enterprises play a major role in helping small-scale entrepreneurs to improve their market reach and business resilience. These entities provide the members with an opportunity to enter previously untouched and value-added markets as the guidance and support provided by the cooperative brand greatly reduces the market risk experienced by the entrepreneurs. The cooperative membership also supports them to focus on a better pricing strategy due to the improved bargaining power gained through such membership and cost savings on raw materials, due to collective (bulk) purchasing agreements with their suppliers. The collective effort will also enhance the efficiency and productivity, thereby increasing the income earned by the entrepreneur.

Cooperative operation provides the members with improved and more authentic information related to their field of operation. This authentic information could help the members of the cooperative enterprise to make strategic decisions related to product improvement and technology adoption to ensure their success and sustainability.

Cooperative enterprises could have a useful role in tackling the issues of unemployment and poverty within communities. As poverty alleviation being the first sustainable development goal set by the United Nations, governments need to encourage the development of entities such as cooperative enterprises. This requires concrete action from the authorities concerned towards enhancing the image of cooperatives through education, while strengthening the support services available to such entities. Authorities concerned should also encourage the cooperatives to develop robust business relationships at regional, national and international platforms to improve their business visibility and versatility.

Given the right ecosystem, that has a conducive work environment, supportive administrative structure and right legal framework, cooperative enterprises could encourage the whole communities to get involved in entrepreneurial activities, thereby embedding the cooperative entrepreneurship concept into the social fabric of the communities, which could help the whole community to develop in a sustainable manner.

This study adds value to the existing literature through the provision of country specific information on the importance of cooperative entrepreneurship for sustainable development. Apart from academic value, this study could also be of interest to various stakeholders such as job seekers, small-scale entrepreneurs, educators, researchers, mentors and decision makers in Oman.

This study has focused on the role of cooperative entrepreneurship in reducing unemployment and poverty, within communities thereby developing the whole community in a sustainable manner. While this study could be used as a point of reference for future studies in this field, more focused studies on the role of cooperative entrepreneurship in specific segments could be carried out in future to solve sector specific issues. Future studies could also focus on the development of cooperative entrepreneurial societies within suitable areas, in detail.

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