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Navigating Growth and Sustainability: Strategy Mapping Across the Life Cycle of a Fishermen's Cooperative

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Abstract

This study maps strategies adopted by a fishermen's marketing cooperative to sustain and grow across its life cycle stages. It employs an exploratory case study aligned with Cook and Burress's (2009) lifecycle framework, using in-depth interviews, documents, observations, and informal discussions as data sources. Findings show that each phase presents distinct challenges that can be addressed through timely, stage-appropriate strategic choices. The study highlights the importance of a robust financial foundation and complementary activities, such as retailing and banking, providing a practical framework for cooperative leaders—especially in developing countries to prevent stagnation and foster long-term success.

Keywords: *Cooperative lifecycle, Marketing Cooperative Society, Strategy mapping, Cook and Burress lifecycle framework*

Introduction and Background of the Study

Fishermen who work alone are vulnerable to exploitation due to low income, limited education, weak bargaining power, and inadequate capital for infrastructure (Ayoob & Fowsar, 2020; Jentoft & Finstad, 2018; Schwabe et al., 2021). Organising and bargaining collectively through cooperatives has therefore become a vital organisational form for fishermen (Jentoft & Finstad, 2018; Coglan & Pascoe, 2015; Chai P. et al., 2021; Hueth & Reynolds, 2011).

Despite fish being a leading export commodity in many developing countries, fishing communities often remain poor, partly due to weak linkages between small-scale fishers and markets (Alemu & Azadi, 2018). Those who depend on middle agents for marketing their catch and obtaining finance often become permanent debtors to these intermediaries (Schwabe et al., 2021; Solomon, 2023).

Cooperation can address unemployment and poverty while supporting more sustainable economic activities and fairer income distribution (Samian M. et al., 2017). A cooperative is essentially a collective of individuals who collaborate under democratic principles to serve the needs of members and the community, reduce dependence on intermediaries, build awareness, and encourage saving (Ramkishen, 2004; Solomon, 2023). As such, cooperatives are widely recognised as an effective organisational model for combating poverty (Child A., 2018).

Through collective action, farmers and fishers can improve overall market performance and redistribute economic surplus from input-supply and intermediation sectors back to producers (Hueth & Reynolds, 2011). However, the long-term sustainability of fisheries cooperatives depends on their capacity to adapt to changing conditions and emerging challenges, despite cooperative principles having proven applicable and successful across countries (Jentoft & Finstad, 2018).

Literature review

Organisations must continually adjust structures and practices to meet societal and member needs, making strategy a central factor in achieving goals and performance (Trigkas et al., 2020; Liu, P., & Wu, J., 2023). Early strategic choices at the founding stage, such as prioritising mission-based or member-interest-based activities, shape later strategic trajectories, whose effectiveness depends on contextual variables and competitive practices (Zhou Z. et al., 2023; Bauwens et al., 2020; Shapiro-Garza et al., 2020; Kinyuira, 2014). Diversification, knowledge sharing, strong interpersonal relationships, and strategic alliances can strengthen resilience and competitive advantage in volatile, globalised markets (Snorek et al., 2023; Galati et al., 2019). In cooperatives, strategic management entails acting in members' best interests, with policies, strategy, internal organisation, and participatory, integrated planning jointly determining performance and enabling effective alignment of strategy, structure, process, and environment (Bijman & Iliopoulos, 2014; Salavou, 2015; Wilbon, 2012; Walker, 2013). Thus, cooperatives must identify and adapt strategies across their life cycle stages to sustain efficiency and member benefits.

Life cycle assessment is widely regarded as a decision-support tool that helps set targets, monitor performance, identify opportunities for improvement, manage environmental impacts, and provide transparent information to stakeholders (Pryshlakivsky et al., 2021; Fritsch et al., 2022; Moutik et al., 2023). Organisational life cycle practices, however, need to be understood in relation to ongoing discussions, negotiations, and reconfigurations rather than in isolation (Nilsson-Lindén et al., 2021). In cooperatives, social capital is a key success factor that tends to be high in early stages and decline as size and complexity grow, requiring strategies that rebalance social and economic attributes at maturity (Deng et al., 2020). Life cycle–based frameworks link stages to different emphases in social responsibility, from basic compliance at establishment to broader internal and external responsibilities at maturity and redevelopment, while degeneration studies highlight erosion of participation and increasing heterogeneity in member preferences over time (Jin Tang et al., 2020; Bretos et al., 2019). Although product and organisational life cycle assessments are well established for decision-making, there remains limited research specifically on cooperative life cycles and their strategic life cycle management.

Cook's LCF

Cook and Burress (2009), with revisions by Cook (2018), introduced the cooperative life cycle framework (LCF) comprising five phases. Phase 1 (Justification) sees patron-owned cooperatives form in response to market failures or unmet member

needs. Phase 2 (Organisational Design) establishes legal, capital, and governance structures. Phase 3 (Growth, Glory, Heterogeneity) marks the peak development, characterised by growth, complexity, diverse member interests, and internal strife. Phase 4 (Recognition and Introspection) involves poor governance, strategic drift, and deviation from the mission. Phase 5 (Choice) requires decisions on reinvention, spin-offs, or market exit, emphasising active governance and renewal to align with dynamic markets (see Figure 1).

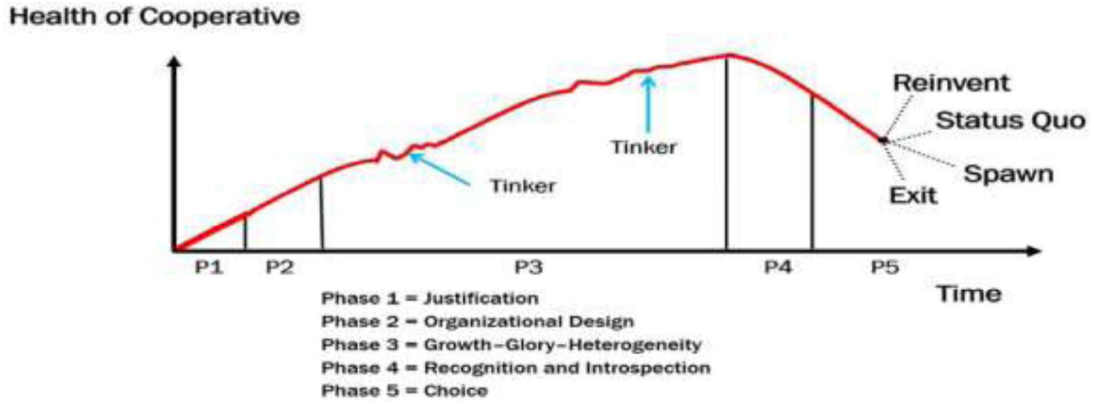

Figure 1: LCF of a Cooperative organisation

Source: Cook, M.L. (2018). A life cycle explanation of cooperative longevity. *Sustainability*. (Reprinted with permission)

Research methodology

The study employed a qualitative case study design to map the strategies used by the Mandovi Fishermen's Marketing Cooperative Society Ltd. (MFMCSL) to sustain and develop across its various life cycle stages. MFMCSL, a leading fisheries marketing cooperative in Goa with nearly four decades of operation and several state and national recognitions, was purposively selected as the case. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with directors, documentary evidence, observations at the jetty, and informal discussions with the fishermen members.

A literature review on strategic management and organisational life cycles informed the development of an unstructured interview guide, sensitising the researchers to key concepts. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a relaxed setting to encourage open discussion, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then returned to participants for confirmation. Drawing on Cook's (2018) life cycle theory, the researchers then interpreted the data to delineate MFMCSL's life cycle stages and identify the strategies associated with each stage.

About the Study Area: Goa

Goa, located on India's west coast, borders the Arabian Sea, Maharashtra, and Karnataka, and derives significant economic growth from fishing, as well as agriculture, tourism, and pharmaceuticals (IBEF, June 2023). The fisheries sector contributes 2.5% to state GDP and 17% to agricultural GDP, with 5–10% of the population engaged in fishing and allied activities like marketing, processing, and vending; it accounts for nearly 2% of India's marine fish production (Department of Fisheries, 2022;

Sreekanth & Mujawar, 2021). Despite growth potential as a "sunrise sector" and statements positioning Goa as a national fisheries hub (Giriraj Singh, 2021), challenges persist, including overexploitation, pollution, climate change, and weak management frameworks (Sreekanth & Mujawar, 2021).

Among the five main jetties (Mallim, Talpona, Cutbona, Chapora, and Vasco), Mallim is the oldest and largest, with the highest average fish catch, where most activities are conducted through MFMCSL (Department of Fisheries, 2022).

Discussion on the Case

Overview of MFMCSL

The MFMCSL, although formed in 1984, was registered under the Cooperative Societies Act in 1987 by fishermen who owned mechanised shipping vessels to provide a conducive environment for the marketing of the members' fish catch and promote the economic and social welfare of the members.

This cooperative was awarded the Best Cooperative Society Award in 2004 by the National Cooperative Development Corporation (NCDC) in India. The Goa Government recognised it as the best society for its outstanding work. The society is known for prioritising member satisfaction and providing diverse facilities. Although it started with only 13 members, the cooperative currently has 149 members who own 189 Trawlers and employs 42 regular staff members.

For the benefit of its members, the cooperative society offers a variety of amenities on the Jetty, including ration stores, diesel pump stations, ice plants, a nut and bolt shop, and a spare parts shop, as well as repair workshops, a net mending workshop, a canteen, and a freshwater supply.

Determination of Life Cycle Stages of MFMCSL

MFMCSL began with high member unity but later faced challenges aligning organisational and individual interests, prompting adaptive strategies for long-term survival. Life cycle stages were identified using sales turnover trends as a key indicator of financial health and performance, given cooperatives' need to balance sustainability with member benefits over profit maximisation or charity (Al Hayak, 2018).

Table 2: Turnover per annum of the cooperative society (₹ lakhs)

Years	1985-86	1986-87	1987-88	1988-89	1989-90	1990-91	1991-92	1992-93
Turnover	0.79	0.77	0.7	1.49	4.72	4.82	4.42	4.06
Years	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-200	2000-01
Turnover	9.19	85.51	424.43	564.43	834.72	755.87	925	1155.6
Years	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09
Turnover	1068.3	1570	2010.2	1902.9	2429.9	2634.3	2595.1	2994.9
Years	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
Turnover	3218.4	3480.3	3854	3937.6	4618	4901.3	4318.6	4600.6
Years	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	-
Turnover	4618.2	4353.1	4014.4	3522.1	4670.6	4741.9	4367.6	-

(source: Audited reports of MFMCL)

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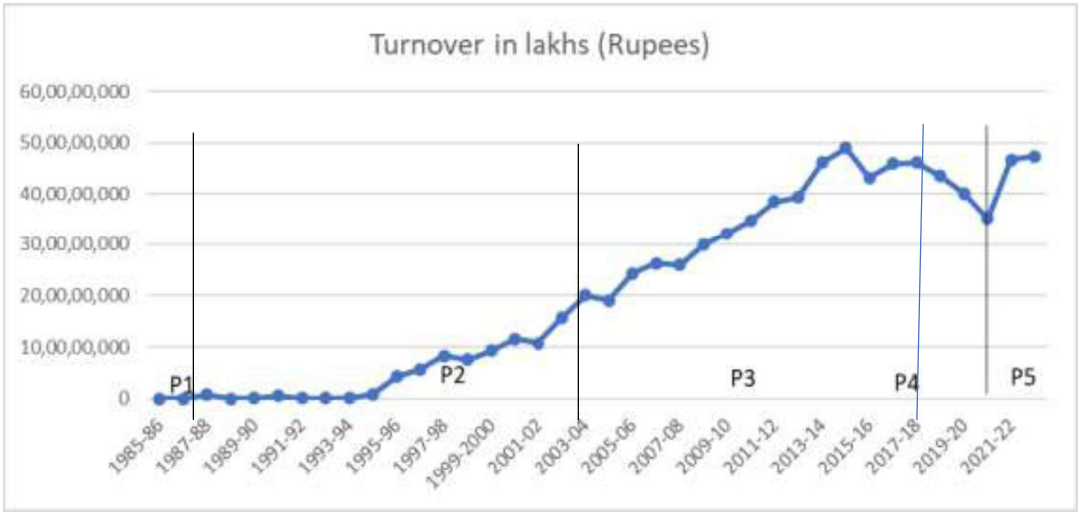

Graph 2: Life cycle stages of MFMCL based on its Turnover p.a.

MFMCSL's life cycle phases (Phases 1–5) were mapped to turnover trends (Graph 2) and key strategies adopted for sustained performance, as summarised in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Mapping of Life Cycle Stages and Strategies (Cook & Burress, 2009)

Phase (Years)	Cook's Description	MFMCSL Symptoms & Strategies
Phase 1: Justification (1984–1986)	High member idealism, direct democracy, and assembly decisions	- High loyalty, unity, trust in leadership - Collective bargaining to market catch and avoid middleman exploitation
Phase 2: Organisational Design (1986–2002)	Formal structures adopted; idealism continues, management power grows, and conflicts emerge	- Member conflicts, adjustment issues - Umbrella strategy (member marketing freedom under co-op); new bylaws, structure - New revenue-generating units established
Phase 3: Growth-Glory-Heterogeneity (2002–2015)	Degeneration symptoms: market values accepted, democracy diluted, board control dominant	- Rising conflicts; acceptance of market values and structure changes - Peak diversification, new income avenues; growth/glory phase - Belief: co-op growth benefits members
Phase 4: Recognition-Introspection (2015–2021)	Economic logic dominates; managers assume full control	- Leadership dominance, democracy eroded - Market values > participation; co-op principles lost - Recognition of degeneration; choice needed (continue/exit/convert)

Source: Elaborated from Cook (2018)

Phase 1 - Justification (1984-1986):

According to Cook and Burress's LCF, cooperation among members is paramount at this stage, with a mission grounded in commitment and idealism. In the initial phase of its life cycle, MFMCSL exhibited strong unity and a shared commitment to a common cause. The primary challenge for members was marketing their catch, as it was often exploited by intermediaries. In response, the cooperative initially acted as a commission agent, selling all members' catch collectively through an auction system. This collective bargaining strategy secured reasonable prices for fish, leaving little scope for exploitation or manipulation.

Phase 2: Organisational Design (1986–2002)

This phase consolidates cooperative principles with member economic benefits amid emerging hurdles. After initial collective bargaining proved ineffective, MFMCSL adopted a hybrid strategy, allowing one-third of its members to sell fish individually, while the others continued to sell collectively. However, conflicts persisted, leading to the full implementation of individual marketing freedom. To ensure survival without revenue from bargaining, the cooperative pursued diversification. A repair shop opened in 1986 for vessel maintenance, and in 1995, partnerships with Bharat Petroleum and Indian Oil. A diesel pump and storage tank, providing discounted fuel and easing members' financial burdens. These changes reshaped organisational structure, bylaws, and policies, generating revenue while benefiting members.

Phase-3–Growth-Glory Heterogeneity (2002-2015): According to LCF, the organisation understands the need to suppress its cooperative principles and focus on survival, wherein members allow the penetration of market values as signs of degeneration become apparent. and are willing to compromise their ideals of cooperation.

At this stage, the MFMCSL decided to focus on expansion to grow and survive economically, as the signs of degeneration were becoming apparent. The Cooperative was surviving only on the sale of Diesel, and the members' retention was becoming important. More and more units were added to provide economic benefits to members, in addition to cooperative survival. This led to the suppression of cooperative principles and market penetration as a means of survival. The society established additional units, including an ice plant, grocery store, lathe workshop, nut and bolt stores, net mending shed, and canteen, as part of an extension and diversification strategy. The members were given these facilities at discounted rates and, to some extent, on credit. Other avenues, such as charging rent for offices, parking fees, rent for fish-selling boxes, and wharfage for using the jetty, were explored and utilised. At the same time, to retain the existing members, multiple member-centric financial schemes were introduced. The following section provides a brief description of these strategies.

Strategies for Growth and Survival

a) Workshops for boat maintenance and the provision of nuts and bolts (2002)
b) Provision of fresh water to the crew (2003) by collaborating with water supply contractors, thus easing the financial burden of procuring it.
c) Offer grocery items at discounted prices (2004).

d) A Canteen (2004) was established to provide food at concessional rates for the crew when they dock on the Jetty.
e) Setting up of ice plant (2004 and 2006) has helped to decrease the cost of purchasing ice from the market.
f) Lathe workshop (2005) was started on a jetty that reduced the costs of the boatmen and saved time.
g) Net Mending Shed (2005 and 2012) intended to attain revenues while benefiting members.

Financial Strategies

a) Providing Credit Facility to the boatmen on all the stores maintained by the cooperative, including the diesel pump up to the limit of Rs. 10000/- on every shop
b) Loan provision at a nominal rate nearly equivalent to the interest rate on a bank savings account.
c) Compensation for the family of the dead crew member in case of his accidental death.

Operational Strategies

Several strategies, including complete operational freedom for boat owners, offered the option to sell directly to exporting agencies, intermediaries, or local vendors. Directors ran units, enforced jetty discipline, and managed canteen/office work internally to ensure efficiency, thereby reducing salary costs to professional managers.

Phase-4 - Recognition and Introspection (2015-2021): In the fourth stage of the life cycle**,** management plays a dominant role, focusing primarily on economic growth. In this phase, the members' power is subdued, and decision-making is centrally concentrated.

By 2015, MFMCSL ran nine jetty units, charged non-members for entry/loading/parking, collected auction fees, held bank deposits, and earned from rents/scrap—yet peaked in turnover while declining in participation, loyalty, trust, and procedural consent amid a "survival of the fittest" culture. The Cooperative has reached its highest peak in terms of turnover, but has lost in member participation, support, loyalty, and trust and was showing a declining trend in the total 'Turnover' of the cooperative**.**

Stage 5: Choice (2021 onwards):

This is a stage where, according to LCF, the Cooperative must make a choice and decide on its future course of action, as the Cooperative principles are becoming less visible and economic survival is becoming the dominant factor. MFMCSL must choose between fading principles and dominant economic survival. It peaked in turnover (2015) but declined post-COVID, even dropping diesel discounts for market rates despite member needs. Facing stagnation, it must decide whether to exit, convert to an investor-based model, maintain the status quo, or regenerate through cooperative renewal.

MFMCSL must decide whether to accept its current state and remain stagnant or develop new strategies, recognise its social value, and plan for its future. If no action is taken, there is a possibility that the cooperative may have to exit the industry.

Concluding Remarks

Despite challenges, MFMCSL survived as a fisheries marketing cooperative through adaptive strategies across its life cycle (Table 3). High

member loyalty, commitment, and trust strengthen cooperatives through pooled resources (Deng et al., 2020), enabling members to benefit from and execute board-planned strategies (Talonen et al., 2021). Collective efforts combat poverty and foster development (Moon & Lee, 2020), though organisations often lack clear situational knowledge for solutions (Mintzberg, 1973; Mintzberg et al., 1976). MFMCSL innovated by competing, modifying tactics, and linking internal/external environments for varied outcomes. Growth strategies succeeded in the short term, but sustained success requires identifying critical factors for productivity, participation, and competitive advantage (Muneeb et al., 2023). Ultimately, member unity and involvement distinguish successful cooperatives, which in turn determine MFMCSL's sustainable development.

Theoretical Contribution

Cooperative literature lacks research on life cycle frameworks, despite cooperatives' teamwork spirit and the need for longevity, especially in strategy mapping, particularly in developing countries. Fisheries cooperatives face professional gaps, conflicts, trust issues, and financial illiteracy, issues that are more acute in Asia. This study uniquely maps a fishermen's cooperative strategies across life cycle stages, expanding the literature

Managerial Implications and Future Research

A strong financial base, supported by supplementary activities like retailing and banking, is essential for cooperative success, particularly in developing countries. The life cycle framework guides leaders in timing strategies across stages to avoid stagnation and exit. This study offers insights for identifying and developing adaptive strategies in fisheries cooperatives. Future research should apply the framework to multiple cooperatives to enhance generalizability and utilise quantitative methods, such as time-series analysis, to validate the findings.

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