

Article

Economic and Social Motives of Cooperative Membership for Sustainable Agricultural Development

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Received: 25 January 2026; Accepted: 13 June 2026

Abstract: Agricultural cooperatives represent a crucial business model for sustainable agricultural production. Historically, interest in cooperatives peaks during periods of macroeconomic uncertainty, when their intrinsic organizational advantages are rediscovered. Following the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, cooperatives have demonstrated remarkable resilience, proving that their structural model is vital for local and global supply chain sustainability. The aim of this paper is to empirically analyze the economic and social motives driving farmers to join agricultural cooperatives in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Serbia. Utilizing a combined qualitative and quantitative approach, data were collected via an online survey from February to December 2022, resulting in a representative sample of 209 active agricultural holdings. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The empirical findings reveal that from an economic perspective, the primary motivators are the securing of a stable market channel, enhanced investment opportunities, improved negotiating power, and access to cheaper inputs amid recent supply chain shocks. Socially, membership is driven by an increased sense of business security, proximity of operations, access to targeted training activities, and international networking opportunities. Understanding these diversified socio-economic drivers allows for the formulation of targeted institutional strategies to valorize cooperative membership, thereby fostering long-term sustainable agricultural development and regional productivity.

Keywords: *Agricultural cooperatives; economic motives; social motives, sustainable agricultural development.*

1. Introduction

Agricultural production has been, since the establishment of the first human communities, the practical fundament for the development and survival of the human society. The agricultural cooperatives represent the potential for rural and overall socio-economic development. The establishment of a direct connection between farmers and the market contributes to the greater added value of products, increases business security, which in turn leads to greater investments and reduction of the depopulation of rural areas [1]. The cooperative business model is most widely utilised in the agriculture sector, although innovations in the forms of the producer cooperatives as hybrid business structures have emerged over recent decades [2,3].

The cooperatives contribute to the food security as they hold an estimated 32 per cent of the global market share in this sector while their actions could be the pillars for disseminating a business

model that embraces the goals promoted by the 2030 Agenda in terms of human rights, fair labor, environmental sustainability, and sustainable growth [4].

In the European Union (EU), the cooperatives retain a significant role in the economic system. The model of cooperative structures varies between different Member States and is the mostly dependent on the achieved level of economic development. [5] have identified five main dimensions of the cooperative entrepreneurial ecosystem: (1) policy and regulatory framework; (2) education and skills; (3) market environment; (4) culture; (5) networks. In the EU economy there are 250,000 cooperatives that are owned by 163 million citizens which employ 5.4 million people. According to the market share the agricultural cooperatives hold substantial market shares in the Netherlands (83%), Finland (79%), Italy (55%) and France (50%) [6].

This study aims to better understand the factors that affect the cooperative membership especially, having in mind the importance of their business model. Therefore the paper is structured as follows. In the literature review, the farmers' motives for joining an agricultural cooperative and the organizational characteristics of agricultural production are presented. In the section of Material and method the authors have provided a rationale for the empirical research, conducted in the Vojvodina region, where family farming is a dominant form of agricultural organization. In the empirical part of the work, the motives for joining the cooperative have been investigated. In the conclusion the authors summarize new knowledge on the agricultural cooperatives, while its findings can serve as a starting point for the creation of further strategies for the promotion of the cooperative membership model that can enhance the sustainable practices in agriculture and increase in productivity.

2. Motives for cooperative membership

There are many motives why farmers chose to join a cooperative. The motivation may initially be driven by the personal interest of the members [7]. The changes in attitudes and motives of the membership in the cooperatives over time, which would allow a better understanding of dynamics and trends in cooperatives should be the subject of additional research. It is possible to distinguish internal motives (i.e. association follows the member's desire to educate and achieve certain goals) and external motives, which are related to the benefits of membership.

2.1. Economic motives

The goal of joint activities, which the cooperative carries out, is to ensure greater benefits for the members - to increase their individual income, to raise the standard of living of the members [8]. Maintaining the competitive position and the market share [9] and ensuring a stable market channel are viewed as one of the most important motives. The farmers who sell their products through the cooperative are faced with less market risk [10] because the purchase of products by the members of the cooperative is firmly guaranteed [11]. In this way the farmers can achieve more effective marketing of products/services as the collective marketing helps to meet market needs, especially when entering new markets, as these markets often require larger quantities [12] which may be difficult for the farmers to achieve alone. One of the reasons is also the expansion of production, where cheaper inputs obtained through the cooperative allow producers to increase productivity [13]. The cooperatives can enable the producers to coordinate the time of arrival of raw materials to the market, enabling producers to implement quality systems and standards [14]. The farmers involved in the cooperative can receive a good price for the raw materials produced [15] and joint activities increase producer prices and simultaneously reduce production costs [13] which creates additional funds that can be further invested. The knowledge that has been created in the cooperative can help in making optimal managerial decisions in accordance with market conditions [13]. When handling a large volume of products, the cooperatives can reduce the unit marketing and processing costs for producers and allow them to focus on producing goods rather than finding buyers and suppliers [14].

2.2. Social motives

The most important social motive for the entry of farmers into existing cooperatives, as well as for the establishment of new cooperatives, is a sense of security regarding the stability of business activities within the cooperative [16]. The operation of the cooperative in the nearby area allows the cooperative members to minimize the costs associated with the communication in the cooperative [17]. It also better opportunities for the training activities, which indirectly contribute to achieving greater economic effects. Thanks to the cooperative membership, the farmers were able to increase their incomes, which in turn led to economic independence [18]. The farmers have more opportunities to support the local community, make new acquaintances, which can be useful in terms of exchanging ideas and learning new agricultural techniques. The membership in the cooperative also provides an opportunity to build friendships with people who share the same value system and interests [19]. The agricultural cooperative can provide social assistance to members who are in trouble or have suffered losses [20]. The members have greater opportunities to express their opinion in cooperative activities, thanks to the principle of one member = one vote, regardless of the number of shares they own. Concentrating on achieving the same goals, due to common interests, can contribute to the development of the cooperative [21].

Although existing work clearly points out various motives for the cooperative membership, there is a need for the detailed analysis of the motives in the aftermath of the disease Covid 19 as the agricultural cooperatives emerged as an important model for the society. The cooperatives as “optimistic entrepreneurs” have proved vital in the local and global sustainability [22] justifying its relevance and need to contribute to the scientific community and practice. Illuminating these gaps through research can lead to a better understanding of how economic and social factors intertwine in the context of membership in the agricultural cooperatives, and how this knowledge can be used to strengthen the cooperative sector, having in mind that in the transition countries the cooperatives play a significant role in the transformation of the economy.

3. Material and methods

The authors have performed the study in order to understand the current motives for the agricultural cooperative membership (the desire to become a member of a cooperative or lack of interest in it) in the Province of Vojvodina. The questions of the questionnaire were created based on the theoretical review on the motives that were identified in the existing literature. Drawing on the previous research modelled on [23] the authors have carried the research in the rural areas of the Province of Vojvodina. The scale from [23] has measured the relevant concepts that are of interest for the research, i.e. attitudes on the membership in agricultural cooperatives and their economic and social motives. Due to the specific context of agricultural cooperatives in the Republic of Serbia, the authors have adapted the scale to suit the research context. The approach is combined using a qualitative and quantitative method. The authors have adapted the questionnaire according to the theoretical framework and have pretested it with experts from the rural experts. The questionnaires have then been sent by e-mail to the several agricultural cooperatives that operate in the area of AP Vojvodina (one of them is the Agricultural Cooperative Voćar Slankamen from Novi Karlovac) in the period of February 2022 till December 2022.

The link for the questionnaire has been created in the Google Forms online survey environment. The survey questionnaire has been anonymous, and included specific questions and general information about the respondents. The sample in the research consisted of the agricultural holdings. The questionnaires have been sent to a total of 250 agricultural holdings in various agricultural cooperatives and a total of 209 responses were received in full. The total number of cooperatives in the Sector Agriculture, forestry and fishing is 1312, therefore the sample is consider representative. The typical profile of a cooperative has up to 20 employees, and assets, profit and turnover of up to EUR 50,000, which points to a weaker market power position of the cooperatives, which is also confirmed by the fact that 87.56% of the cooperatives are classified as micro-sized

business entities They represent the traditional cooperatives conforming to the cooperative principles of equal treatment of members, equal voting rights, and unallocated capital.

A five-point Likert scale was used to rate the claims, where 1 = don't agree at all, 2 = strongly disagree, 3 = I can't say, 4 = pretty much agree and 5= completely agree. The response rate was 83%. Descriptive statistics has been used to summarize data in an organized manner by describing the relationship between variables in a sample (or population) and provide a simpler summary as to enable decision-makers to assess specific populations in a more manageable form [24]. In the first part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked about their productions, as well as whether they are still members of the cooperative. The respondents were asked what economic and social reasons motivated them to join the cooperative. The general data such as gender, age and membership in the cooperative (in years), were also collected. In total, there were 23 motives that influence cooperative membership, out of which 13 were economic and 10 were social motives (Table 1).

Table 1. List of economic and social motives for agricultural cooperative membership.

Economic motives	Social motives
1) as a member of the cooperative, I can survive the competition = E1	1) membership in the cooperative provides a sense of security = S1;
2) the cooperative offers me a stable market channel = E2;	2) the cooperative operates in the nearby area = S2;
3) as a member of the cooperative, I have better opportunities for marketing my products/ services = E3;	3) members of the cooperative have greater opportunities for training activities = S3;
4) as a member of the cooperative, I have better opportunities for expanding agricultural production = E4;	4) members of the cooperative have better opportunities to become familiar with business situations in other EU countries (trips to fairs, farms, etc.) = S4;
5) the cooperative improved the quality of my product/service = E5;	5) members of the cooperative have better opportunities to support the community = S5;
6) as a member of the cooperative, I have a better negotiating position = E6;	6) members of the cooperative have better opportunities to make new acquaintances, which will be useful both at work and in everyday life = S6;
7) the cooperative paid me a competitive production price = E7;	7) the members of the cooperative have better opportunities to solve everyday problems = S7;
8) as a member of the cooperative, I could get the needed information cheaper = E8;	8) members of the cooperative have greater opportunities to express their opinion in cooperative activities (one member = one vote) = S8;
9) as a member of the cooperative, I have better opportunities for the investments = E9;	9) cooperative members have better opportunities to concentrate on achieving the same goals = S9;
10) as a member of the cooperative, I have better opportunities for obtaining various services (e.g. counselling) = E10;	10) members of the cooperative have better opportunities for maintaining a good internal climate (visits to the theatre, social events) = S10
11) as a member of the cooperative, I received better information about the market situation = E11;	
12) as a member of the cooperative, I managed to reduce my production costs = E12;	
13) as a member of the cooperative, I have better opportunities to receive state benefits= E13	

4. Results and discussion

The characteristics of the sample, such as the gender, age and years of membership of the respondents in the cooperative, are presented in the following text. The majority of respondents were male with 91% with female respondents being represented by 9% in the sample (Figure 1). The majority of the respondents were between the ages of 31 and 40 (43%), followed by the age group from 41 to 50 years old (25%). The age groups of over 61 years and 51-60 years, were represented by 18% and 14%, respectively. There were no respondents in the age groups up to 20 years and 21-30 years (Figure 2).

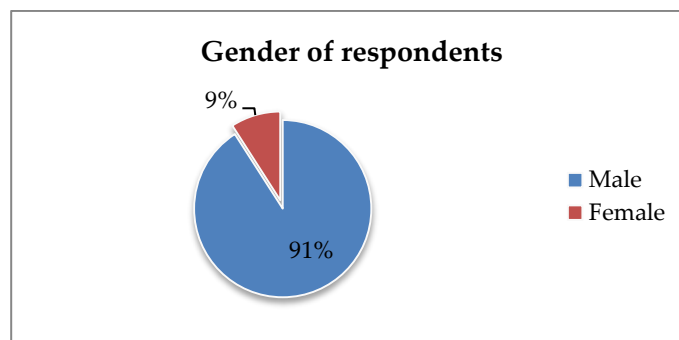


Figure 1. Gender of the respondents (in %).

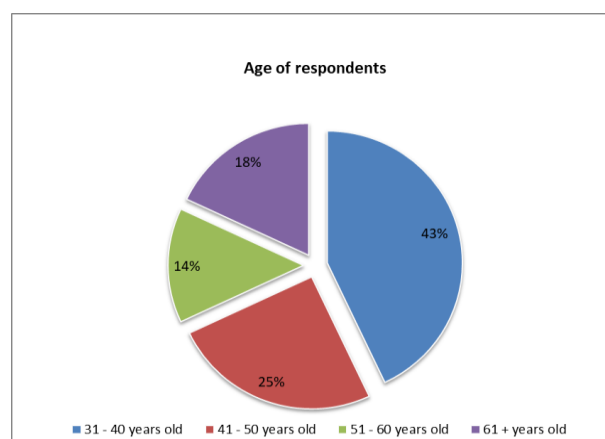


Figure 2. Distribution of age groups of respondents (in %).

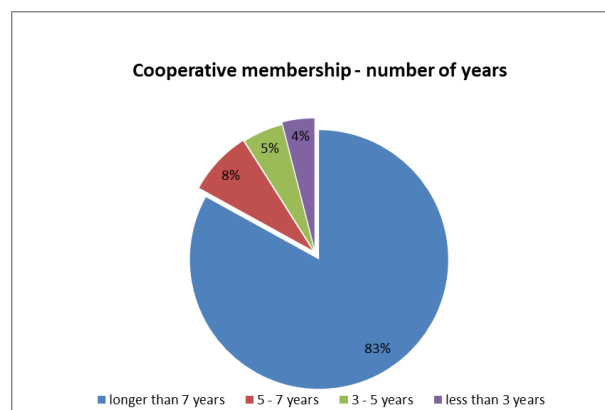


Figure 3. Membership in the cooperative according to the number of years (in %).

We have asked the respondents for how long they have been members of the cooperative and received the following answers (Figure 3). In total 173 respondents (83%) have been members of the cooperative for more than 7 years, followed by 17 respondents (8%) that have been members of the

cooperative for 5 – 7 years. A small number of 11 respondents (5%) have been members of the cooperative for 3 – 5 years, while 8 respondents (4%) have been members less than 3 years (Figure 2).

When asked if they were members of more than 1 cooperative (out of 209 respondents) only 27 of them declared as members of other cooperatives at the same time (12.9%). Figure 1 portrays the motives of the respondents regarding economic motives for joining the cooperative. The most important economic motive for joining the cooperative was the offer of a stable market channel (E2) with which 84% of respondents "completely agreed". The second most important motive was better investments (E9) with which 167 respondents "somewhat agreed". With the possibility of obtaining cheaper inputs and different services through the cooperative, 57% (E8) and 55% (E10) of the respondents, marked the option "completely agree" (Figure 4).

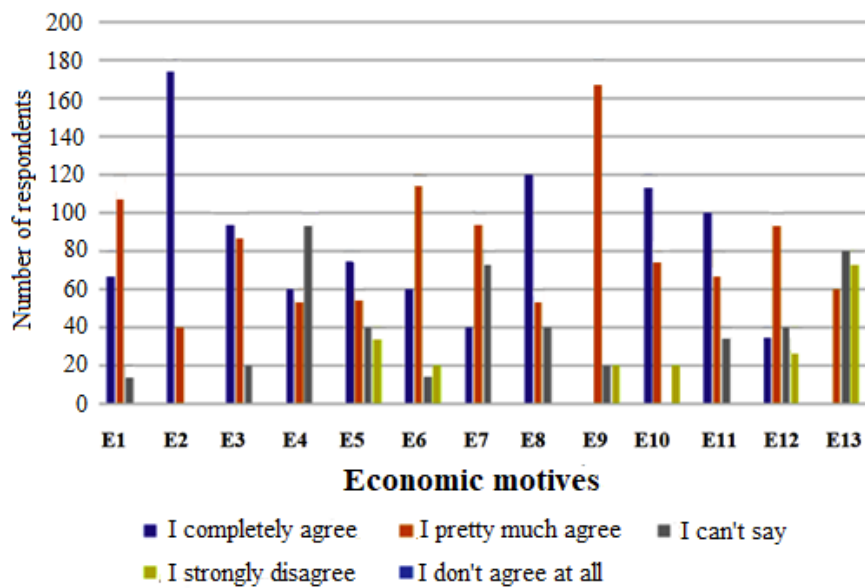


Figure 4. Values of economic motives for joining a cooperative.

The farmers were also motivated to join forces by better opportunities to "survive" in competition (E1) and achieve a better negotiating position (E6). The respondents "fairly agreed" with both statements, 33% and 29%, respectively. The farmers were also motivated to join forces with a better opportunity to market their products/services (E3) with which 96 respondents (46%) "strongly agreed" and 87 respondents (41.6%) "somewhat agreed". The findings are in line with Tortia et al. (2013, p.30) pointing out that "the major challenges faced by cooperatives include fierce competition with powerful food and agricultural input conglomerates as well as financing shortages caused by deteriorating capital markets". This is in line with the findings that show that the cooperatives have shown resilience and better survival during the economic crisis [25]. It is also in line with the findings that the cooperative model were recognized as being resilient to the shocks of the global economic and financial crisis [1], having in mind the various supply disruptions during the COVID-19 crisis in which the cooperatives acted entrepreneurially [22]. During the pandemic, the agricultural cooperatives helped small producers to access on the market and minimize risks [26].

On the other hand, the farmers were not motivated to join the cooperative by the possibility of receiving state subsidies (E13) showing that 75 respondents or 36% "rather disagree" with this statement (Figure 4) although it has been shown that the government support programs can have a significant impact on the survival and performance of agricultural cooperatives [27] and new agricultural cooperatives can start to operate [28]. New members perceive that the cooperative can fulfil their wishes or expectations, and old members stay, because they have achieved what they joined the cooperative for [29]. As far as state support is concerned, in the Republic of Serbia, the Law on Cooperatives as the primary law regulating this issue is fully consistent with the basic principles of cooperatives in the European Union [30]. The introduction of the digital technology in

the cooperative sector can also help smooth running of the cooperative’s activities in crisis situations and via the creation of an “e-commerce” the goods could be sold at the national and international markets [27]. In terms of economic motives, members should be encouraged to invest more in the cooperative, which would then increase working capital, and in turn enable the cooperative to purchase more products from members and subcontractors. Adding value to the primary raw materials would also be a good way to improve the economic performance of the cooperative, thus the economic strength of the cooperative.

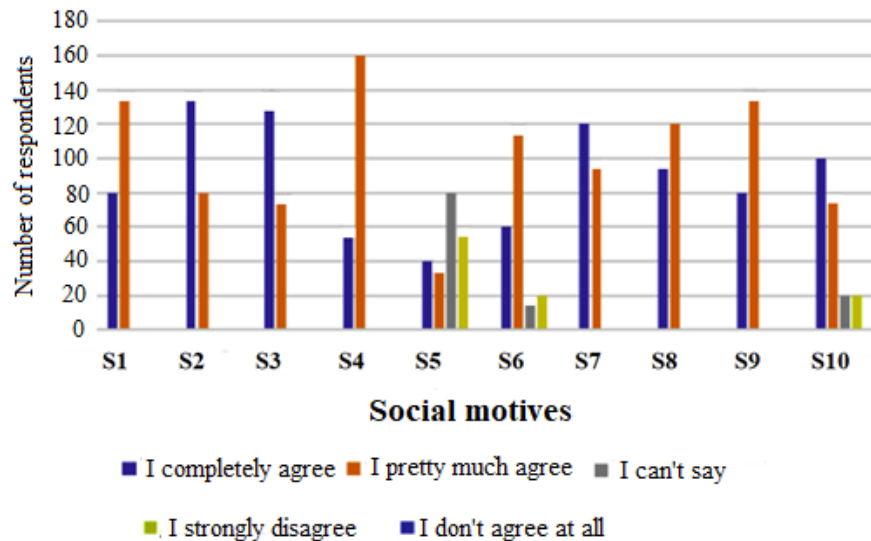


Figure 5. Values of social motives for joining a cooperative.

Figure 5 shows the motives of the respondents regarding the social motives for joining the cooperative. We see that the in the group of social motives, the fact that the cooperative operates in a nearby environment (S2) and the opportunity to participate in training activities (S3) mostly motivates the farmers to join the cooperative. Thus we see that 65% of respondents "completely agreed" with the first statement, while 61% of respondents "completely agreed" with the second statement. The motive S4, stating that “the farmers have a better opportunity to learn about business situations on farms from other EU countries”, has been also selected an important motive by 159 respondents (86%) that have "fairly agreed" with it.

This findings are in line with [31] pointing out that the farmers were motivated to join a cooperative by the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process, but the provision of the training was also found to be an important motive. The intensification of the activities on informing and educating the young farmers can raise the level of knowledge about the benefits of cooperatives and their greater participation [32]. A sense of security (S1) and a better ability to concentrate on achieving goals (S9) were also significant motives for the membership with which 134 respondents (64%) "fairly agree" (Figure 5). These findings point out that cooperatives meet a diversified set of needs, which go beyond profit generation or shareholder return, strongly connected with a cooperative value of solidarity. The cooperative members were also motivated to join forces because of the opportunity to solve everyday problems (S7) with which 119 respondents (57%) "strongly agreed", as with the opportunity to participate in the activities of the cooperative (S8) with which 121 respondents "fairly agreed". Having a better opportunity to support the community has not motivated the farmers to join the cooperative (S5) as 26% of respondents "rather disagree" with this statement, and 38% answered "can't say" (Figure 4).

The contribution of the study highlights the importance of understanding the main motives for cooperative membership in Vojvodina, which is the first step towards valorisation of the cooperative business model and better cooperative management. Its practical contribution can be reflected in offering recommendations for the strategies for the development cooperatives, improving conditions for the existing members and attracting new members in the cooperatives. The research

can contribute to the academic knowledge and to the understanding of the role of cooperatives in the promotion of social-economic inclusion and the development of rural areas. Overall, the research can make a significant contribution in both practical and theoretical terms, enabling a better understanding of the potential and challenges of the cooperatives as a model for economic and social development. Understanding different types of motives allows the development of specific strategies for the valorization of the cooperative membership that can contribute to the sustainable agricultural development, promoting practices that are in line with the principles of a cooperative ecosystem.

5. Conclusions

This research has revealed that the main motives of the farmers to join the cooperative were related to the economic incentives. The economic motives can provide the farmers in the cooperative better business conditions - provision of a stable market channel and better opportunities for investments which is especially important after the disruption in global value chains caused by the Covid 19 disease. However, the farmers also take in consideration the fact that there is a high competition in the markets and the belief that the cooperative will ensure the placement of products and enable more favourable procurement of raw materials. Of the social motives, conducting the business operations in a nearby environment and the opportunity to participate in training activities have been shown as most important motives. Therefore, we underline the economic motives are not the only important ones for joining and staying in a cooperative. The farmers also value social motives – conducting business in the local community, education, trust, mutual respect, mutual communication and loyalty. Also, it would be worth investigating other ways of contributing to the local community, as this would show that the cooperatives and its members look beyond mere profit-making.

The limitations of the research are reflected in the fact that the results cannot be generalized due to a particular context setting of a smaller developing economy. This research study is based only on small sample of farmers in the Republic of Serbia. Other limitation that should be borne in mind is that the survey self-reported responses can be subject to a tendency to respond in a socially acceptable way and express a subjective valuation. The qualitative interviews, for example, could also contribute to new knowledge on the motives of the cooperative membership. These limitations can point to the need to undertake further studies in comparable economies at a similar stage of development. In the future research, special attention should be paid to the willingness of members to contribute financially to the capital of the cooperative, as a way to increase the benefits and motivation of cooperative members.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration of Generative AI Use: The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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