

# 15 Common cultural background

## The key to success of two Bolivian agricultural cooperatives

*Ramiro Reinaga, Elena Garnevska and  
Nicola Shadbolt*

### 1 Introduction

Small-scale farmers constitute a significant portion of the global agricultural sector in developing countries. These farmers often face challenges associated with limited resources and the struggle to remain competitive in an increasingly complex and globalized market (Fernando et al., 2021). They also lack bargaining power when negotiating with large agribusiness traders and market intermediaries (Abraham & Pingali, 2020; De Silva et al., 2023). The small-scale farms lack economies of scale, technical expertise, and access to modern technologies, unlike their counterparts in developed countries (Khairallah et al., 2023). Numerous studies suggest that agricultural cooperatives effectively address these challenges (Liu et al., 2024; Pansera & Rizzi, 2020; Tray et al., 2021).

Agricultural cooperatives are organizations established and managed by groups of individuals who collaborate to achieve shared economic, social, and cultural objectives. While the concept of cooperatives is well-established, there is no universally agreed definition (Evans & Meade, 2006). However, three core principles characterize cooperatives: user ownership, user control, and user benefit (Hardesty & Salgia, 2004). Cooperatives are collectively owned by their members, who share both formal and residual ownership rights as well as the right to benefit from the cooperative's products and services. They operate with democratic governance structures, enabling members to vote on decisions regarding the cooperative's direction and resource allocation. Furthermore, the benefits generated by the cooperative are distributed among its members, typically based on the level of their participation or patronage (Chaddad & Cook, 2004; Liu et al., 2024).

Agricultural cooperatives offer small-scale farmers a viable alternative to overcoming the limitations imposed by their scale. One key advantage is the ability to achieve economies of scale (Cook, 2018; Khumalo, 2014). By pooling resources, small-scale farmers can collectively acquire modern machinery and technologies, access bulk inputs at reduced costs, and enhance production efficiency. This collective action enables them to compete more effectively and access high-value markets that were previously unattainable (Hidalgo-Fernández et al., 2020). Additionally, cooperatives strengthen the bargaining power of small-scale farmers, enabling

them to secure better prices and terms when negotiating with suppliers and buyers. This enhanced position directly contributes to improved incomes and overall economic well-being of the small-scale farmers (Mera-Bastidas et al., 2019).

Bolivia's agricultural sector faces significant challenges related to the farming structure, development, and size of farms across the country (Barrientos-Fuentes & Torrico-Albino, 2014). Agricultural production in Bolivia is notably lower than that of other countries in the region, despite agriculture accounting for 10.6% of the country's GDP, 5.6% of total exports, and employing 26.1% of the economically active population of the country (Murguía et al., 2018; Alcaraz et al., 2020). A large proportion of farms operate at a semi-subsistence level with limited access to mechanization (Mirete García, 2023; Barrientos-Fuentes & Torrico-Albino, 2014). Consequently, many farmers in these areas rely heavily on community cooperation schemes to address labor and capital constraints (Barrientos-Fuentes & Torrico-Albino, 2014).

In Bolivia, cooperatives play a crucial role in addressing the needs of remote, rural, and indigenous communities far removed from urban centers (Villaroel, 2014). The persistence of subsistence farming—driven by unequal land distribution and inefficient agricultural practices—underscores the pressing need to improve conditions for small-scale farmers. The cooperative movement in Bolivia has emerged as a vital mechanism to bridge gaps in agricultural development and foster socio-economic progress (Mogrovejo & Vanhuynegem, 2012). Therefore, understanding the factors that drive the success of cooperatives is critical to enhancing their impact.

Previous studies have analyzed the cooperatives in the country from different perspectives. These studies are based on a historical perspective (Mogrovejo & Vanhuynegem, 2012), the social and cultural factors that determine their inner dynamics (Ofstehage, 2012), or the effect of the aggregation on the development of better market conditions (Villaroel, 2014). However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the analysis of the factors of success and challenges that agricultural cooperatives in Bolivia face. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the success factors and challenges of two agricultural cooperatives in Bolivia that have established strong reputations over time.

## 2 Factors for success and challenges of cooperatives

Literature identifies several key factors that determine the success of cooperatives: membership structure, member commitment, member control mechanisms, management structures, strategic thinking, benefits for members, leadership, and training (Table 15.1).

The *membership structure* significantly impacts cooperative success by shaping its internal organization and relationships among members. Cooperatives with large memberships that share common attributes—such as educational background, average income levels, cultural ties, and previous commercial relationships—tend to foster greater cooperation and positive perceptions of the cooperative (Garnevská et al., 2011; Pansera & Rizzi, 2020).

Table 15.1 Common success factors for cooperatives

<i>Success Factors</i>	<i>Explained</i>	<i>Authors</i>
Membership structure	Nature of member base and member relationships	Garnevskva et al. (2011); Pansera and Rizzi (2020);
Member commitment	Member levels of participation and perseverance	Cook (2018); Apparao et al. (2019)
Member control	Member ability to exercise control over the cooperative decision-making	Birchall (2018); Iliopoulos (2015); Banaszak (2008)
Management structures	Management team with skills fit for cooperative management	Bruynis et al. (2001); Kinnunen (2019); Graetz (2002)
Strategic objectives, vision, and plan	Clear long-term strategies	Siddique and Shadbolt (2016)
Benefits for members	Economic (e.g. economies of scale) and non-economic (e.g. welfare and social support)	King (2001); Liu et al. (2024); Fernando et al. (2021)
Leadership	Leaders' skills and capability	Khumalo (2014); Zarafshani et al. (2019)
Training	Develop skills and capability	Banaszak (2008); De Silva et al. (2023)

*Member commitment* is another critical success factor. High commitment drives long-term participation and patronage, enhancing trust and alignment with the cooperative's objectives (Apparao et al., 2019). This commitment positively influences the cooperative's planning horizon and the retention of members.

Clearly defined *member control* mechanisms improve coordination and effectiveness in governance (Birchall, 2018). Conversely, ineffective structures or inadequate member knowledge can lead to disconnection between members and the cooperative's board, threatening member retention (Iliopoulos, 2015).

The success of cooperatives also hinges on well-adapted *management structures*. A professional, full-time management team with specialized skills and strong communication channels enhances management effectiveness (Bruynis et al., 2001).

Establishing clear *strategic objectives, vision, and plans* is crucial for long-term success (Kinnunen, 2019). However, a formally established plan does not always guarantee successful implementation (Siddique & Shadbolt, 2016). A culture of strategic thinking can sometimes compensate for the absence of formal plans (Graetz, 2002).

The *benefits for members*—both economic and non-economic—are significant drivers of success. Economic benefits include economies of scale, filling market gaps, increasing profitability for farmers (King, 2001), and access to additional funding sources (Tekdemir, 2017). Regarding non-economic benefits, support in social solidarity and welfare systems reduces the hardships faced by farmers, especially in developing countries (Woldegebrial et al., 2013). Also, the existence of R&D initiatives reduces the individual risk for the implementation of new technology and innovation for members (Luo & Hu, 2014).

Strong and effective *leadership* encourages member participation, reduces transaction costs, and enhances cooperation (Garnevska et al., 2011). The skills and education levels of leaders significantly influence their effectiveness in navigating the complexities of cooperative management (Khumalo, 2014).

Training and development programs also play an essential role for the success of a cooperative. These programs increase the effectiveness of control mechanisms by increasing the availability of managerial skills while also generating better results in operation and production (Banaszak, 2008). They are especially critical in cooperatives with limited access to formal education (Garnevska et al., 2011).

The challenges identified in the literature fall into two main categories: internal and external (Table 15.2). Internal challenges are further divided into investment-related and decision-related problems. Investment-related problems stem from unclear definitions of common property rights, which complicate decision-making processes (Borgen, 2004). Examples include the free-rider effect, where non-members benefit without sharing costs; horizon problems, where member time horizons do not align with cooperative goals; and portfolio problems, where inflexible investment portfolios reduce incentives to join (Chaddad & Cook, 2004).

Decision-related problems arise from agency issues within the cooperative. For instance, monitoring problems occur when management's interests diverge from those of members (Iliopoulos, 2015). The follow-up problem is created by the size and diversity of the membership, which makes it harder for individuals to influence decisions (Borgen, 2004). Influence cost problems occur when certain member groups dominate decision-making, leading to suboptimal outcomes for the cooperative (Iliopoulos, 2015). Finally, heterogeneous member preferences can complicate decision-making processes, undermining alignment with collective interests (Apparao et al., 2019).

Table 15.2 Common challenges faced by cooperatives

<i>Challenges/Problems</i>	<i>Explained</i>	<i>Authors</i>
INTERNAL		
Investment-related problems	Free-rider Horizon problems, Portfolio problems	Apparao et al. (2019); Borgen (2004); Banaszak (2008); Chaddad and Cook (2004); Cook (2018)
Decision-related problems	Monitoring/control problems Influence cost problems	Evans and Meade (2006); Hansmann (2000); Iliopoulos (2015); Nilsson (2001)
EXTERNAL		
Legal framework	Structure of cooperative Law	Banaszak (2008); Bennett (2017); Evans and Meade (2006)
Institutional framework	Stable and independent institutions	Faulhaber (2000); Garnevska et al. (2011); King (2001)
Economic context		Liu et al. (2024)
Political environment		Zarafshani et al. (2019)

External challenges arise from the broader context in which cooperatives operate. Legal frameworks play a crucial role. Stable legal structures reduce establishment costs (Liu et al., 2024), but policies that heavily subsidize cooperatives, especially in developing countries, can harm their competitiveness and sustainability (Bennett, 2017). Institutional support is significant for cooperative development. However, when institutions are closely tied to political objectives, their effectiveness diminishes (Zarafshani et al., 2019). Economic context factors—such as supply chain structures, market access, and competition levels—pose significant challenges (King, 2001). Political and economic instability reduces cooperatives' ability to conduct accurate forecasting and risk analysis (Faulhaber, 2000).

### **3 Methodology**

Qualitative methodology was employed in this study using a multiple case study approach, outlined in Yin (2016). Cooperative Central “El Ceibo”, involved in cacao production and processing, and Cooperative “CAICO”, involved in cereal production and processing, were selected for this study. The two cooperatives are some of the largest cooperatives in Bolivia and were chosen as a successful organization after recommendation from the officials from the Bolivian Cooperative Audit and Control Authority. They also shared some common characteristics: being formed as a result of a colonization process, having a similar structure due to the country's cooperative legislation, and having changed their focus from exporting raw materials/commodities to value-added products. El Ceibo is a second-level cooperative based in the northern region of La Paz, and CAICO is based in a Japanese colony north of Santa Cruz.

Secondary data were collected from the Cooperative Audit and Control Authority (AFCOOP) and the Ministry of Agriculture in Bolivia. Data about the two cooperatives were obtained through reports and other published and unpublished materials provided by the cooperatives.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The respondents were selected using purposive sampling, focused on obtaining a wide array of perceptions on the context of the cooperatives, and included members, directors, and management staff of the cooperatives, as well as representatives of the main institutions in charge of overseeing the cooperative sector in Bolivia. A total of 16 interviews were conducted using a questionnaire.

The data were analyzed by describing, classifying, and connecting the data through several cycles as proposed by Dey (1993). The ethical issues were strictly followed regarding the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. This study was limited to only two cooperatives and may not be representative of the whole sector; however, it provides valuable insights on the successful development of cooperatives in Bolivia as well as the challenges they are facing in a rapidly changing external environment. Further study of a larger number of cooperatives is needed for a deeper understanding of the cooperative sector in Bolivia.

#### 4 Results and discussion

The first cooperative chosen in this study is *El Ceibo*, a central cooperative based in the western highlands of La Paz. Founded in 1977, this cooperative central consists of 47 grassroots cooperatives and represents 1,200 families of cocoa farmers in the region. See Appendix 1 for key milestones in *El Ceibo*'s history over the years. The cooperative's main activity is the processing and commercialization of its members' cacao production. Over time, its main markets have shifted from primarily exporting raw materials to the commercialization of finished high-value products within Bolivia.

The second cooperative chosen is the *Integral Agricultural Cooperative of the Okinawa Colonies (CAICO)*, located in the eastern lowlands of Santa Cruz. Established in 1971, CAICO comprises 124 members from the three Okinawa colonies, founded by Japanese migrants. The current members are descendants of these original settlers. See Appendix 2 for key milestones in CAICO's history. The cooperative produces crops such as soybeans, wheat, rice, corn, and sorghum, as well as meat and dairy cattle. Additionally, it operates an independent agro-industrial complex with a grain processing center, a wheat mill, and a pasta processing factory:

My parents are Japanese immigrants. They came with that group purpose. Before forming the Okinawa Colonies Comprehensive Agricultural Cooperative (CAICO for its initials in Spanish) in 1971, they had individual co-operatives called Okinawa 1, Okinawa 2 and Okinawa 3. My father was a "cooperativist" since he arrived as an immigrant, always working in group. (...) They were all small producers and had to fill the trucks to transport the products. Also, because of the distance, it took a week to go and sell. That's why the cooperative was formed" (CAICO respondent).

The study identified seven key factors contributing to the success of these cooperatives. Table 15.3 summarizes these success factors and their relative importance for both cooperatives.

Both cooperatives heavily invested in developing training programs for members and leaders. These programs focus on improving farming and technical skills

Table 15.3 Key factor of success

<i>Factors of Success</i>	<i>El Ceibo</i>	<i>CAICO</i>
Members' training and leadership development	◆◆◆	◆◆◆
Economic incentives	◆◆◆	◆◆
Strategic management	◆◆◆	◆
Member services	◆◆	◆◆◆
Member control	◆◆	◆◆
Strong sense of ownership	◆◆	◆◆◆
Common cultural background	◆◆◆	◆◆◆

Note: ◆◆◆ very important; ◆◆ important; ◆ less important

while nurturing leadership potential among future managers. Importantly, they emphasize community outreach, which has increased the availability of skilled labor and incentivized new members to join. Similar results have been identified in other studies (Banaszak, 2008; Garnevska et al., 2011; Khumalo, 2014; King, 2001; Zarafshani et al., 2019). Additionally, both cooperatives encourage members and their families to pursue tertiary education and formal training, fostering a pool of skilled workers and building stronger ties with their communities. These programs also serve as key incubators for future cooperative leaders, equipping them to navigate the complexities of growing organizations.

Economic incentives were another crucial success factor identified in this study. Both cooperatives provide benefits such as reduced operational costs, better prices, and access to credit. They leverage economies of scale, enhance bargaining power, and reduce dependence on intermediaries, thereby increasing members' profit margins. These efforts help mitigate subsistence farming and encourage members to remain loyal to the cooperative. Similar effects have been documented in other studies (De Silva et al., 2023; Khumalo, 2014; Mera-Bastidas et al., 2019; Ranjan, 2017; Schmit & Severson, 2019; Hidalgo-Fernández et al., 2020; Tekdemir, 2017):

There are benefits that we receive, like the distribution of profits. That is what makes us one of the best cooperatives in Bolivia. We went to visit other cooperatives in Santa Cruz and Cochabamba and those cooperatives do not distribute profits among their members, they just re-invest in the cooperative” (El Ceibo respondent).

El Ceibo has implemented scholarships; it has guaranteed good prices for cacao as a raw material, and, following the national policies, has contributed to a higher participation by women. Also, according to the cooperative principles, there must be gender equality. We implemented these policies even before the government did” (El Ceibo respondent).

Strategic management emerged as a vital success factor. Both cooperatives exhibit a strong strategy-oriented culture that guides decision-making. While El Ceibo employs a formal strategic planning framework, including a five-year strategic plan with long-term objectives, CAICO uses a more agile but less structured approach. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of strategic objectives and implementation in reducing management ambiguities (Barati et al., 2017; Graetz, 2002; Komulainen & Siltala, 2018):

We base ourselves in our 5-year plan. So, every area has a defined role and analyses what we have accomplished during the year and forecasts budget, forecasts indicators, and establishes activities that aim towards the 5-year plan” (El Ceibo respondent).

The services provided by the cooperatives also significantly impact their success. Technical support and R&D initiatives enhance members' productivity and living standards, fostering loyalty and identification with the cooperative. Both cooperatives prioritize the self-sustainability of these initiatives, minimizing the need

for ongoing subsidies. Welfare programs, particularly those of El Ceibo, further address accessibility gaps in areas like health insurance and retirement pensions, especially for small rural communities. These programs, also highlighted in prior studies (Dirimanova, 2018; Woldegebrial Zeweld et al., 2013), increase member satisfaction and long-term commitment.

The city is much closer than when our parents started the co-operative, 65 years ago. I remember that it took one whole day to come to the city, and the road was awful. You would stay in the city one night and return to the colony. Now it takes an hour and a half to get to the city. I go to work and come back easily. Speaking of education, many have the possibility of becoming professionals. In our time, we are 10% of young people who are professionals. Now 70% are professionals, if I'm not mistaken. There have been tremendous changes" (CAICO respondent).

The cooperatives' member control structures were another important success factor. Bolivia's cooperative legislation mandates clear governance structures, which both cooperatives have effectively implemented. Informal control mechanisms, career paths for younger members, and bottom-up governance approaches enhance participation and reduce agency costs (Cook, 2018; Iliopoulos, 2015). However, CAICO does not involve members in its management team to the same extent as El Ceibo, which could hinder specialization in governance roles (Adamišin & Kotulič, 2013; Brandão & Breitenbach, 2019).

A strong sense of ownership among members contributes to both cooperatives' success. Members exhibit a strong sense of belonging and accountability, reducing opportunistic behavior and the need for penalties. Studies have shown that shared needs and non-economic factors promote cooperation (Holden & Tilahun, 2018; Holland et al., 2013), though some researchers still argue for penalties as a safeguard (Casaburi & Macchiavello, 2015).

Finally, a shared cultural background significantly enhances cooperative success. El Ceibo's indigenous Andean heritage and CAICO's Japanese origins foster solidarity, reciprocity, and accountability within their member bases. Cultural practices like *Ayni* in Andean communities exemplify collective action and mutual support, creating robust governance structures (Paerregaard, 2017; Wutich et al., 2017).

The challenges faced by the cooperatives can be categorized as internal and external (Table 15.4). Internal challenges include agency costs and difficulties in defining residual rights (Hansmann, 2000). Both cooperatives experience increasing agency costs due to their large membership bases and the need for independent management staff. They mitigate these costs by involving members and community members in staffing decisions. However, the non-transferable nature of property rights complicates the valuation of cooperative shares, leading to free-rider issues. External valuations and partial demutualization of certain operations, like R&D, have been used to address some of these challenges:

"I would like to retire from farming but am I going to get any money back from the cooperative after being a member for over 30 years" (El Ceibo respondent).

Table 15.4 Key challenges

<i>Challenges/Problems</i>	<i>El Ceibo</i>	<i>CAICO</i>
INTERNAL		
Investment-related problems	◆◆	◆◆
Decision-related problems	◆	◆◆
EXTERNAL		
Legal framework	◆◆	◆◆
Institutional framework	◆◆◆	◆◆◆
Economic context	◆◆◆	◆◆◆
Political environment	◆◆◆	◆◆◆

Note: ◆◆◆ very challenging; ◆◆ challenging; ◆ less challenging

External challenges stem from Bolivia's unstable political and economic environment, including legislative, market, and institutional issues. Despite the modernization introduced by the 2013 cooperative legislation, political instability (e.g., the 2019 transitional government, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the exchange rate crisis) undermines long-term investment and strategic planning. This aligns with studies linking stable political and economic contexts to reduced risks for cooperatives (Liu et al., 2024; Luo & Hu, 2014; Zarafshani et al., 2019):

During the tenure of the transition government there was a change in the direction of policy that benefited the cooperatives. An example of this is the elimination of the export bans on crops that the previous administration established. However, after the elections and the return of the previous party in government it is uncertain if this will continue" (CAICO respondent).

## 5 Conclusion

Agricultural cooperatives represent an important alternative to minimizing the effects of subsistence farming in developing and emerging countries. To better understand the drivers of success for these cooperatives, two successful cooperatives in Bolivia were analyzed. Economic and non-economic benefits generated by the cooperatives—through the successful creation of economies of scale and the development of welfare systems—help increase the attractiveness of cooperatives for new members and strengthen the commitment of existing ones.

A well-developed democratic control structure for governance allows members to exercise their control rights, fostering participation and commitment. Additionally, a strong focus on education, training, and leadership development has helped these cooperatives improve access to better farming practices while preparing members for more complex decision-making roles. This enabled the cooperatives to build robust management structures led by professional staff with deep knowledge of the cooperative model, capable of handling the increasing complexities within the organization.

Both cooperatives also demonstrated a strong strategic ethos when formulating long-term objectives, enabling them to adapt to changes in market structures and plan for sustained growth over time. This environment has cultivated a strong sense of ownership and responsibility among members, driving commitment, participation, and alignment with cooperative objectives.

However, the factor that played the most significant role in fostering these conditions was the shared cultural background among members. The cultural and ethnic dynamics of these communities facilitated the development of governance structures from within the membership. These shared values also strengthened identification with the cooperatives and deepened relationships with their surrounding communities. Core principles such as solidarity, reciprocity, and self-accountability have significantly enhanced members' willingness to cooperate, which, in turn, has driven the success of these cooperatives.

Despite challenges posed by agency costs, the valuation of property rights, and external political and economic instability, the cooperatives have developed resilient models that enable them to thrive within their respective industries.

This study analyzes in depth two successful agricultural cooperatives in Bolivia that have a deeply ingrained bottom-up approach. This approach was generated by a strong sense of belonging and the dynamics of their common cultural background that set the basis for the implementation of the democratic structure of the cooperatives. This is a very important unique characteristic because it shows that within the context of small-scale farmers in Bolivia, the influence of ethnic-based practices in combination with a focus on developing efficient management structures is fundamental for the success of cooperatives. However, more research is needed to generate a better understanding of the wider cooperative sector in the country. Larger studies that include other cooperatives based in different regions and of different sizes is needed. Financial data and more coordination with governmental databases are also essential for any future studies. See also Chapter 25, this volume.

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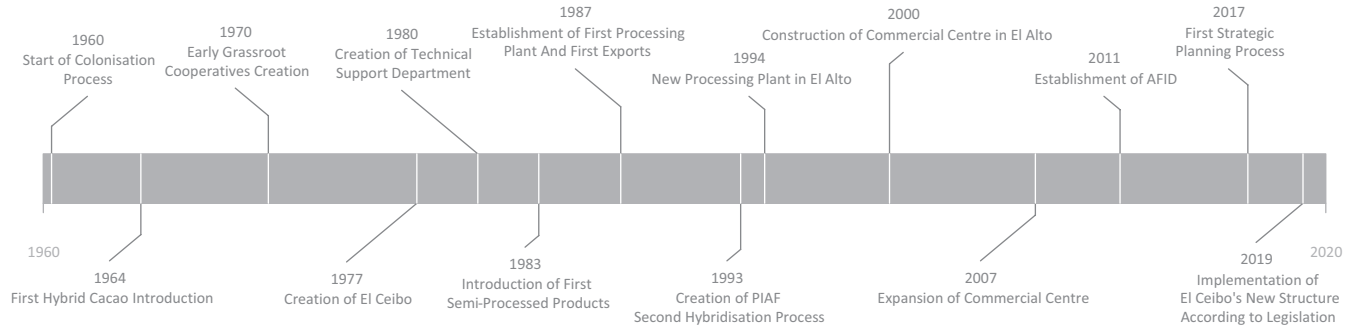
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# Appendix 1

## Milestones of El Ceibo Cooperative



# Appendix 2

## Milestones of El CAICO Cooperative

