

Sustaining Co-operatives: The Role of Board Members and Local Governance in Butwal Sub-Metropolitan City

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Abstract

In Nepal, co-operatives have evolved from being just financial entities to becoming lifelines of communities striving for inclusive growth and economic resilience. They especially help people in places such as Butwal Sub-Metropolitan City to come together, pool resources, generate employment and empower women and marginalized groups. But these co-operatives are not easy to keep going. In this study we examine the real dynamics that underpin the sustainability of co-operatives, with particular attention to the roles of board members and local governance. The research is based on in-depth interviews and group discussions with ten selected co-operatives of Butwal. It shows that good leadership, ethical leadership, and supportive policies from local government, make a big difference. When board members are trained, transparent and inclusive, they build trust and ensure stability. Likewise, when local governments actively partner with co-operatives, they help to magnify impact. But poor communication, inadequate training and political interference often get in the way. This suggests investment in leadership development and the formation of genuine partnerships between co-operatives and municipalities can greatly boost the survival and success of these grassroots organizations.

Keywords: Board member, co-operatives, monitoring, role and sustainable.

Introduction

Cooperatives have emerged around the world in uplifting the life of economically underprivileged communities (Khambule, 2015). They assist such communities and individuals in many ways such as providing small loans, supports, trainings and many more. At the same time cooperatives are also backbone to medium and large scale business organizations (Wathanga et al., 2017). However, as the numbers of cooperatives are growing in society, there are complaints regarding unethical transactions and illegal activities, many cooperatives have turned towards down fall. Not only they become unable to pay back the deposits, sometimes they create a hopeless environment in the society. The inability of the board members in taking good decisions becomes the cause of downfall. Cooperatives in Nepal are not free from the same influence.

Co-operatives in Nepal have emerged as a critical component of the country's socio-economic fabric, fostering collective action and community empowerment (Pandey et al., 2024). The cooperative movement in Nepal began in the 1950s, initially focused on agricultural development to address food security challenges (Paudel, 2022). Over time, the sector expanded into areas such as microfinance, savings and credit, dairy production, handicrafts, and renewable energy. Co-operatives operate under a three-tier system: primary co-operatives at the grassroots level, central co-operatives at the district level, and

a national federation representing the collective interests of co-operatives (Pooja et al., 2023). The legal and institutional framework supporting co-operatives is established by the Co-operative Act, 2017, which emphasizes their role in sustainable development and poverty alleviation.

Nepal's co-operative sector has grown appreciably, with over 31,500 registered co-operatives and millions of members across the country. These entities are mainly active in rural areas, where they provide critical financial services to underserved communities. By collecting

resources and nurturing collective entrepreneurship, co-operatives address systemic challenges such as access to credit, employment creation, and local resource mobilization (Joshi, 2024). Women and marginalized groups often find co-operatives a vital platform for participation in economic activities, contributing to inclusivity and social equity (Bose, 2022).

Sustainability, on the other hand, in the co-operative sector extends far beyond financial stability; it reflects the capacity of these community-based institutions to remain relevant, trustworthy, and resilient within changing socio-economic environments (Jacob, 2023). In the context of Nepal - particularly in rapidly growing areas such as Butwal Sub-Metropolitan City - the sustainability of co-operatives depends heavily on how well they balance economic goals with social responsibility and long-term community welfare. Sustainable co-operatives are those that can continuously meet the needs of their members, adapt to emerging challenges, and uphold values of transparency, participation, and equity (Jokila, 2025). This requires not only prudent financial management but also ethical leadership that fosters inclusion and cultivates a culture of accountability. When board members demonstrate integrity, make informed decisions, and prioritize capacity-building, they strengthen institutional stability and member confidence. Similarly, supportive local governance plays a vital role by establishing enabling policies, offering technical guidance, and ensuring fair oversight. Yet, sustaining co-operatives becomes difficult when gaps in policy implementation, political interference, and weak monitoring systems create uncertainty and erode trust (Borda-Rodriguez and Vicari, 2013). Therefore, sustainability in Nepal's co-operative landscape can be understood as a dynamic interplay between leadership effectiveness, community participation, and the quality of local governance - an interplay that determines whether co-operatives merely persist or truly thrive as engines of grassroots development.

Problem Statement

Co-operatives in Nepal play an essential role in empowering local communities, enhancing financial inclusion, and improving livelihoods. Despite their socio-economic importance, many co-operatives - particularly at the local level - struggle to sustain themselves over time. In Butwal Sub-Metropolitan City, several co-operatives face challenges such as weak governance structures, limited leadership capacity, inadequate monitoring, and inconsistencies in cooperation with local government bodies. Board members often lack adequate training and strategic skills, while local government engagement tends to be uneven or influenced by political interests. These issues collectively undermine transparency, accountability, and institutional stability, leading to operational inefficiencies and decreased member trust. However, little research has explored how the interactions between board leadership and local governance practices shape the sustainability of co-operatives in this specific context. This gap warrants a systematic qualitative inquiry to understand the factors supporting or hindering co-operative performance and to identify ways to strengthen their long-term viability.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this qualitative study is to examine how the interplay between board members' leadership practices and local governance mechanisms influences the sustainability of co-

operatives in Butwal Sub-Metropolitan City. By focusing on ten selected co-operatives, the study seeks to uncover the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges that shape co-operative performance and long-term viability. The research aims to generate an in-depth understanding of how governance quality, decision-making processes, transparency, accountability, training, and collaboration with municipal authorities contribute to or hinder sustainable outcomes. Ultimately, this study intends to produce evidence-based insights that can guide policymakers, co-operative leaders, and local governments in strengthening co-operative governance and ensuring their continued contribution to community development and economic resilience.

Research Questions

- How do board members perceive and carry out their roles and responsibilities in ensuring the sustainability of co-operatives in Butwal Sub-Metropolitan City?
- In what ways does local governance influence the functioning, monitoring, and overall sustainability of co-operatives in the study area?
- What strategies or practices do respondents suggest for strengthening co-operative governance and enhancing long-term sustainability?

Literature Review

Co-operatives are crucial instruments for socio-economic development, particularly in rural and semi-urban settings. Their sustainability hinges on effective governance, strategic decision-making, and the synergy between board members and local government bodies. The literature on co-operative sustainability highlights two critical factors: the competence of board members and the alignment of co-operatives with local governance mechanisms.

Role of Board Members in Co-operative Sustainability

The board of directors plays a central role in ensuring the long-term sustainability of co-operatives. Studies emphasize the importance of leadership, financial management, and strategic planning in driving co-operative success (Bijman and Höhler, 2023). Board members are tasked with formulating policies, overseeing operations, and ensuring accountability within the organization. A well-functioning board fosters member trust and engagement, which are essential for co-operatives' survival (Cornforth, 2004). In Nepal, many co-operatives face challenges related to the capacity and expertise of board members, often due to a lack of formal training in governance and management. This gap underscores the need for capacity-building programs tailored to the unique challenges of Nepalese co-operatives (Khadka et al., 2024).

Research also points to the pivotal role of ethical practices and transparency in board operations. Ethical governance minimizes internal conflicts and builds credibility with external stakeholders, including government institutions and financial partners (Ahmed, 2023). The participatory nature of co-operatives further requires board members to balance diverse member interests while pursuing collective goals, which can be challenging without strong leadership skills.

Local Governance and Co-operative Sustainability

Local governance structures significantly influence co-operatives' ability to sustain themselves. Decentralized governance models, as adopted in Nepal following the federalization process, provide a conducive environment for co-operatives to thrive by aligning their objectives with local development goals (Chettri, 2013). Effective collaboration between co-operatives and local governments can enhance access to resources, regulatory compliance, and the delivery of community-oriented services.

Studies highlight that local governments can play a facilitative role by creating policies that support co-operative growth and by providing technical and financial assistance. In Nepal, co-operatives are recognized as a vital mechanism for achieving local economic development under the Local Government Operation Act, 2017. This legal framework encourages partnerships between co-operatives and municipal bodies to address issues such as financial inclusion, employment generation, and sustainable resource management (Rangwetsi, 2021).

However, challenges persist in aligning co-operative activities with local governance priorities. Fragmented communication, political interference, and overlapping responsibilities can hinder effective collaboration (Tsheko, 2020). Strengthening this partnership requires clear policy directives, capacity-building initiatives for local officials, and mechanisms for regular dialogue between co-operatives and local government representatives.

Intersection of Governance and Sustainability

The interplay between co-operative governance and local governance is crucial for sustainability. Literature suggests that co-operatives with robust internal governance mechanisms are better equipped to collaborate effectively with local authorities (Ntambwe, 2020). Conversely, proactive local governance can enhance co-operatives' resilience by addressing systemic barriers and creating a supportive ecosystem for their growth (Johnson et al., 2016). For example, joint initiatives such as skill development programs and infrastructure development projects can enhance the operational efficiency and community impact of co-operatives.

In summary, sustaining co-operatives in Nepal requires strengthening the capacity of board members and fostering productive relationships with local governance structures. The literature underscores the importance of ethical leadership, strategic planning, and collaborative policymaking as fundamental pillars of co-operative sustainability. Future research could explore innovative governance models and best practices that integrate these elements, providing actionable insights for co-operatives and policymakers in Nepal.

Methodology

The methodology for investigating the role of board members and local governance in sustaining co-operatives in Nepal employs a qualitative research approach. The study will use a phenomenological design (Dunn, 2016) to explore lived experiences based on the practices, challenges, and contributions of board members and local governance structures in maintaining co-operative sustainability. Primary data will be collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with board members, co-operative members, and representatives of local governance bodies in Butwal Metropolitan City. There are 135 registered co-operatives in Butwal Metropolitan city and 79 of them are saving and credit cooperatives. Ten co-operatives were purposively selected for this study.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data were collected using semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their experiences freely while ensuring that key themes were consistently explored across interviews (Karatsareas, 2022). Interview participants included board members, general co-operative members, and representatives of local governance bodies. In addition, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted to capture collective perspectives and shared experiences among co-operative members (Mumararungu et al., 2024). Secondary data - including policy documents, co-operative reports, and previous research - were also reviewed to contextualize the findings and understand the broader institutional environment.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis, following a systematic coding process to identify recurring themes and deeper meanings in the data.

- Open coding was used as the first step, where interview transcripts and FGD notes were examined line-by-line to identify initial concepts and meaningful segments.
- Axial coding followed, grouping related codes into broader categories and exploring connections between the roles of board members, governance practices, and sustainability challenges.
- Finally, selective coding was used to integrate the categories into overarching themes that explain the dynamics influencing co-operative sustainability in Butwal.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, triangulation was employed by comparing interview data, FGD insights, and secondary documents (Natow, 2020). Ethical principles were strictly followed, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms to protect participants' identities.

Despite its strengths, this methodology has several limitations. The purposive selection of only ten co-operatives may limit the generalizability of the findings to the wider co-operative sector in Nepal. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as participants may be hesitant to disclose internal conflicts or politically sensitive issues. Time constraints and limited access to certain municipal documents also restricted the depth of institutional analysis. Nonetheless, the qualitative approach provides rich, context-specific insights into the lived experiences of stakeholders and the governance realities shaping co-operative sustainability (Zhang et al., 2025).

Results and Discussion

The findings from interviews, focus group discussions, and secondary data reveal a complex but deeply interconnected landscape of co-operative sustainability in Butwal Sub-Metropolitan City. The thematic analysis - guided by open, axial, and selective coding - highlights how leadership practices, governance processes, and local government interactions shape the long-term viability of co-operatives. The themes presented here capture both the strengths and the persistent challenges within the co-operative ecosystem, reflecting the lived realities of board members, members, and municipal stakeholders.

Leadership Capacity and Ethical Governance as Cornerstones of Sustainability

A dominant theme emerging from the data is the centrality of board members' leadership capacity in ensuring co-operative sustainability. During open coding, participants repeatedly associated sustainability with qualities such as transparency, accountability, and timely decision-making. Axial coding further connected these descriptions to the broader categories of ethical governance and leadership competence.

Many board members expressed a sense of responsibility toward their fellow members, but they also recognized gaps in technical and managerial skills. Several respondents shared that they had assumed leadership without prior training in financial management, strategic planning, or conflict resolution. This aligns with broader national studies emphasizing skill deficits among co-operative leaders (Simkhada, 2019). As one board member stated in an interview, "We want to do what is good, but sometimes we don't know what is the right way." Such reflections underscore the human dimension of governance - leaders are committed, yet often under-equipped.

Issues of transparency also surfaced strongly. Members emphasized that trust is built when leaders openly communicate financial reports and decision outcomes. Conversely, where communication is weak, suspicions emerge, affecting participation and confidence. These findings resonate with Allert and Chatterjee

(1997) assertion that credible leadership fosters member ownership and institutional stability. Ultimately, the theme illustrates that leadership qualities are not merely administrative attributes but relational ones that determine the level of trust and engagement in the co-operative.

Participation, Communication, and Internal Governance Dynamics

Participation - both in decision-making and daily operations - emerged as another powerful theme influencing sustainability. Open coding highlighted recurring mentions of “limited member involvement,” “poor attendance in meetings,” and “lack of communication.” Axial coding grouped these into a broader category of internal governance dynamics.

Co-operatives with active member participation reported stronger accountability and cohesion. Members in these groups felt informed, heard, and collectively responsible. However, in many cases, board members described challenges in mobilizing participation due to member apathy, busy schedules, or lack of awareness about their responsibilities. This aligns with literature noting that the participatory nature of co-operatives can become both a strength and a challenge (Österberg and Nilsson, 2009).

Communication gaps between board members and general members also surfaced as a critical issue. In FGDs, participants shared experiences of feeling sidelined from important decisions or learning about changes only after they were implemented. These situations created internal dissatisfaction and weakened the sense of ownership.

Thus, sustainability is shown to depend not only on formal structures but on everyday communication practices, meeting regularity, and the willingness of leaders to maintain meaningful engagement with members.

Local Government Support: A Mixed Reality of Facilitation and Frustration

The third major theme relates to the role of local governance. While policy documents highlight the importance of municipal support for co-operatives, participants’ experiences reveal a mixed and uneven reality. Through open and axial coding, responses clustered into two contrasting categories: supportive collaboration and institutional gaps. In some cases, local government bodies provided training, monitoring assistance, and facilitative policies that strengthened co-operative operations. Such support aligns with Nepal’s Local Government Operation Act, 2017, which positions co-operatives as vehicles of local economic development.

Yet, several participants also described inadequate coordination, political interference, and delayed administrative services. One interviewee explained, “Sometimes they support us, but other times it feels like we are left on our own.” These sentiments mirror findings in regional studies that highlight challenges of fragmented communication and administrative inconsistencies (Tsheko, 2020).

Local government representatives acknowledged these limitations during interviews, citing limited manpower, resource constraints, and political pressures. This suggests that sustainability is influenced not only by co-operative readiness but also by the structural capacities of municipal institutions. Effective monitoring - an essential component for maintaining transparency - is often irregular, reducing accountability and weakening co-operatives’ ability to address emerging risks promptly.

Overall, the theme illustrates that while local governance has the potential to significantly strengthen co-operatives, gaps in implementation often limit this impact.

Political Interference and Governance Vulnerability

Political interference emerged as a sensitive but consistently mentioned theme. During open coding, participants hinted at political pressures in board elections, loan distribution, and decision-making. Through axial coding, these descriptions converged into a category of governance vulnerability.

Many co-operatives reported that political influence often disrupts norm-based decision-making, leading to favoritism in loan allocation or the selection of board members based on affiliation rather than competence. Some members expressed fear of conflict if decisions went against politically backed individuals.

This theme echoes the concerns raised by Borda-Rodriguez and Vicari (2013), who argue that external interference threatens co-operatives' autonomy and long-term sustainability. In Butwal, political involvement often blurs the boundary between community service and party interest, creating internal divisions and reducing trust in leadership.

Participants emphasized that political neutrality is essential for maintaining financial discipline and institutional integrity. When co-operatives remain independent of party politics, they are better positioned to serve all members fairly and sustainably.

Training, Capacity Building, and the Need for Institutional Strengthening

Another prominent theme is the need for continuous capacity-building for both board members and general members. Open and axial coding revealed strong connections between training availability, governance quality, and financial stability.

Nearly all respondents agreed that training in bookkeeping, digital finance, leadership, conflict management, and co-operative law would substantially improve their effectiveness. Co-operatives that had received such training demonstrated better record-keeping, more confident leadership, and greater member participation.

However, many participants highlighted inconsistencies in training availability. Although local government and district-level co-operative offices occasionally provide training, these sessions are often irregular, too brief, or not tailored to the specific needs of the participants. This resonates with broader literature advocating for continued capacity-building to strengthen governance (Wathanga et al., 2017).

The theme underscores that sustainability requires not only committed leadership but also institutional mechanisms that equip stakeholders with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate complex financial and administrative responsibilities.

Sustainability as a Balance of Social Responsibility and Economic Performance

The final integrated theme, emerging from selective coding, highlights that sustainability in co-operatives is understood as a balance between economic stability and social responsibility. Participants repeatedly emphasized that co-operatives are not ordinary financial institutions - they exist to uplift communities, support women and marginalized groups, and foster solidarity.

However, co-operatives in Butwal often struggle to maintain this balance. Economic challenges arise from loan defaults, competition from commercial banks, and limited capital. Social challenges emerge from declining member participation, mistrust, and unequal benefits.

This finding complements Jokila's (2025) conceptualization of co-operative sustainability as a dynamic interplay between financial viability and social values. In practice, co-operatives that transparently communicate financial risks, maintain inclusive participation, and adhere to co-operative principles tend to remain more resilient.

This theme reinforces that sustainability cannot be achieved through financial strategies alone; it requires maintaining the social ethos that co-operatives were built upon.

The thematic analysis reveals that sustaining co-operatives in Butwal Sub-Metropolitan City is a multidimensional process shaped by leadership capacity, transparency, member participation, political

neutrality, and the effectiveness of local governance support. While co-operatives remain powerful tools for community development, their long-term viability depends on strengthening institutional capacity and nurturing collaborative relationships with municipal authorities.

The themes collectively highlight that co-operative sustainability is not merely a technical challenge but a human one - deeply embedded in relationships, communication, trust, and shared responsibility. As such, targeted interventions in leadership development, regular monitoring, tailored training, and depoliticized governance can significantly enhance the resilience and impact of co-operatives in the region.

Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that the sustainability of co-operatives in Butwal Sub-Metropolitan City is influenced by a wide range of interconnected factors that extend beyond financial performance. Co-operatives, which have long served as vehicles for community empowerment and local development, rely heavily on the quality of their internal governance practices and their relationship with local government bodies. The research shows that board members play a decisive role in safeguarding co-operative values, promoting transparency, and ensuring accountability. Their leadership capacity, ethical conduct, and ability to communicate effectively shape member trust and institutional stability. At the same time, the support and engagement of local government are critical, particularly in areas such as monitoring, capacity-building, and policy facilitation. However, inconsistencies in coordination, political interference, and shortages of resources within municipal institutions often limit the effectiveness of this support. Taken together, the results indicate that co-operative sustainability is a dynamic process requiring continuous leadership development, active member engagement, and stronger institutional collaboration. Only when these elements align can co-operatives fully realize their potential as engines of inclusive economic growth.

The implications of these findings are significant for co-operative governance, local policy, and community participation. For co-operative leaders, the study highlights the need for ongoing professional development that equips board members with the technical and managerial skills necessary to navigate financial complexities, resolve conflicts, and make strategic decisions. Local governments, on the other hand, must recognize their responsibility in creating a stable and supportive environment for co-operatives. This includes ensuring regular monitoring of co-operative activities, providing timely technical guidance, and facilitating access to training opportunities. Strengthening this partnership will not only improve regulatory compliance but also help co-operatives align their initiatives with local development priorities. The study also carries important implications for community involvement, suggesting that internal transparency, regular communication, and participatory governance can significantly enhance member engagement. For many women and marginalized groups, co-operatives remain a vital platform for economic empowerment, which makes inclusive participation a crucial part of long-term sustainability. At the policy level, the findings point to the need for reforms that limit political interference, promote standardized governance practices, and institutionalize long-term training programs at the national and provincial levels.

Based on these insights, several broader recommendations emerge for strengthening co-operative sustainability in Butwal and similar contexts across Nepal. First, it is essential to invest in leadership development to ensure that board members have the knowledge, confidence, and ethical grounding required to manage co-operatives effectively. Regular training programs, supported by local and provincial governments, should focus on financial literacy, digital record-keeping, communication, and the principles of co-operative governance. These efforts need to be structured and ongoing rather than sporadic. Second, the relationship between co-operatives and local government should be strengthened through more consistent coordination, timely monitoring, and joint initiatives that address local socio-economic priorities. Improving

communication channels and establishing dedicated coordination mechanisms would help reduce confusion and enhance institutional accountability. Third, political neutrality must be protected to ensure that co-operatives function as community-serving institutions rather than extensions of political interests. This requires both clear internal policies and greater awareness among members about the risks of politicization. Fourth, enhancing member participation through transparent communication practices, accessible reporting systems, and inclusive decision-making can build trust and reinforce collective ownership. Such internal democratic practices will help stabilize co-operatives during times of financial or organizational stress. Finally, at a broader structural level, there is a need for more robust policy frameworks that institutionalize capacity-building, standardize monitoring processes, and allocate resources for long-term strengthening of co-operative governance. By reinforcing both internal capacities and external support structures, co-operatives will be better positioned to maintain financial health, uphold their social values, and contribute meaningfully to community well-being.

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