

Cooperative Governance of Public Goods: A Bottom-Up Model of Governance in an Ever-Evolving World

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ABSTRACT

The complexities of the modern world highlight the need for new, inclusive, and effective governance models. Complex phenomena such as environmental sustainability, socio-economic challenges, and the rapid evolution of the digital domain mean that traditional governance mechanisms are often inefficient in addressing emerging issues. This is especially true in diverse societies where various stakeholders seek to be heard. Cooperative governance stands out in these cases, combining collective action with shared accountability and informed decision-making. This article examines the premises of cooperative governance as one possible mode of governance that demonstrates the flexibility and complexity required for tackling emerging global challenges. It specifically focuses on the multifaceted character of cooperatives and their potential for democratic governance. This manuscript aims to familiarize the general audience with the nuances of cooperative governance and demonstrate how this mode of governance may offer a suitable governance structure for an ever-evolving world.

Introduction

The complexities of the modern world highlight the need for new, inclusive, and effective governance models (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Complex phenomena such as environmental sustainability, socio-economic challenges, and the rapid evolution of the digital domain mean that traditional governance mechanisms are often

inefficient in addressing emerging issues (Widerberg, 2015; Sarker, 2018; Jordan, 2017). This is especially the case in diverse societies where various stakeholders seek to be heard (Pieterse, 2018; Morris, 2016). Cooperative governance stands out in these cases, combining collective action with shared accountability and informed decision-making.

The essence of cooperative governance is deeply embedded in values like mutual advantage, joint ownership, and democratic oversight (Ostrom, 1990; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Österberg & Nilsson, 2009; Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012). The concept of cooperative governance also resonates with the idea of cooperative systems, where parts of a whole work in unison for the greater good of the system (Laszlo, 1991). When tackling issues related to the governance of global commons, this cooperative approach becomes especially important.

Throughout history, from agrarian societies to modern digital cooperatives, the values of collaboration, shared effort, and mutual respect have remained constant (Ostrom, 1990; Vasconcelos, 2013; Leviten-Reid & Fairbairn, 2011; Kyazze, 2017). In today's world, where global challenges like climate change, pandemics, and cyber threats loom large, the importance of cooperative governance in shaping sustainable, harmonious, and fair futures becomes even more crucial (Ostrom, 1990; Vasconcelos et al., 2013; Liang & Hendrikse, 2013; Herrera-Reyes et al., 2018). Cooperative governance faces principal-agent problems when the goals or interests of those delegating authority do not align with those given authority (Vaubel, 2006; Bailey et al., 2017). However, when these issues are effectively addressed, it can lead to the development of resilient and adaptable governance models.

Cooperative governance focuses on public goods. Resources or services that benefit communities or societies without being exclusive or rivalrous. Such governance can be seen in Latin America's regional structure, where it plays a crucial role in promoting regional integration and addressing common challenges (Nolte, 2014).

Studying social cooperatives, as organizations that prioritize the well-being of society over pursuing profit, is a noteworthy attempt. These cooperatives are deeply rooted in reality and provide tailored solutions to complex issues (Alexandra, 2019; Maroua, 2015; Klaas Wissing, 2010).

On a global scale, international summits amplify the cooperative spirit. Forums such as the G7 and G20 highlight the importance of finding shared solutions through determination and mutual respect (Papadopoulos, 2003).

This article examines the nuances of cooperative governance by exploring its historical development, significance, challenges, and future directions. As we stand at this juncture in history, the role of cooperative governance becomes even more vital in shaping a sustainable future that is characterized by harmony and fairness (Phelan et al., 2012; Mokoena & Marais, 2007).

A Historical Perspective on the Rise of Cooperative Governance

The history of humanity has always been characterized by cooperation. Societies first came together to pool resources for the good of all. To this day, cooperatives still play a significant role in the economy. This section highlights the development of cooperative governance and examines how it has evolved over time.

Cooperatives have historically been movements that have developed in response to economic and social challenges. For instance, small farmers found it challenging to compete with larger commercial entities during certain periods of the industrial revolution in Europe. Agricultural cooperatives were created to address this issue in order to guarantee stability and advance societal well-being. In profit-driven markets, these cooperatives enabled small

farmers to increase their collective bargaining power, pool their resources, and share risks. Additionally, they supported democratic governance practices in society and promoted social and community development (Morfi et al., 2021).

Cooperatives have contributed to rural development and poverty reduction in Asia. They have played a crucial role in agrarian communities' socio-economic transformation. Cooperatives have contributed to promoting sustainable farming methods, managing community-based resources, and empowering disadvantaged groups in this continent (Zhang et al., 2016).

Cooperatives have also evolved to be used in the management of common resources (i.e., public goods), such as the governance of the Murray Darling Basin (MDB) in Australia, a realm that has often been exclusively governed by states. Over time, there has been a shift from state-centric approaches to cooperative and community-driven mechanisms. This shift emphasizes the need for initiatives that consider the interests of various stakeholders and offer adaptable solutions to complex challenges (Alexandra, 2019).

According to universally accepted cooperative values and principles, cooperative governance structures prioritize member control (Snaith, 2017). Additionally, cooperatives support social cohesion and democratic participation, especially in areas going through socio-political transitions (Wilder, 1993).

The importance of cooperative governance has been further highlighted by global issues like climate change and environmental degradation (Vasconcelos et al., 2013). A global cooperative effort is required to supplement conventional climate policies, as discussed in recent discussions on global

strategies for the administration of public goods (Emmerling & Tavoni, 2020).

These strategies emphasize the significance of cooperative governing systems that can deal with complex global landscapes in the absence of international organizations. In essence, the growing popularity of cooperative governance serves as proof of the cooperative model's adaptability and durability. Cooperatives have demonstrated their ability to promote group action, mutual benefit, and shared decision-making, whether they are grassroots initiatives addressing socio-economic concerns or sophisticated governing structures addressing global issues.

The Significance of Public Goods

Non-excludability and non-rivalry are two characteristics of public goods (Demsetz, 1970). Non-excludability denotes the difficulty, if not impossibility, of preventing people from enjoying the benefits of a good, regardless of whether they were involved in its production. Non-rivalry is the state in which the use or consumption of a good by one person does not reduce its availability for use by others. Public goods are universally available and their use by one person does not affect the availability of others. The importance of these goods in the realm of cooperative governance cannot be overstated.

The main challenge associated with these goods stems from their inherent nature. Since these goods are freely available to all individuals, they may be tempted to rely on others to provide them. This gives rise to what's commonly known as the "free rider" problem (Groves & Ledyard, 1977). This issue has been witnessed in many instances in the past, an example of which is China's cooperative governance efforts aimed at tackling haze pollution. Governmental diversity and instances of "free riding"

posed significant obstacles to establishing a sustainable cooperative framework for addressing haze pollution. Given the varying approaches adopted by local governments, ensuring collective action without some entities benefiting without contributing became a matter of utmost concern (Zhang et al., 2016).

The provision of public goods is especially of interest in the context of social cooperatives. Social cooperatives, unlike private investor-owned corporations, have a focus on serving their members or the wider community, which aligns well with the provision and management of public goods. The case of water governance in the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB), for example, showcases the complexities involved in managing a shared water resource, which is a quintessential example of a public good. The intricate interplay between stakeholder interests, ecological considerations, and socio-economic imperatives necessitates cooperative governance (Alexandra, 2019).

Global challenges such as climate change further emphasize the importance of cooperative governance of public goods. The atmosphere serves as an example of a public good influenced by emissions from around the world. Strategies like solar radiation management have been proposed to tackle global warming. However, these strategies also highlight the governance challenges associated with managing public goods (Emmerling & Tavoni 2020). In this context, Vasconcelos et al. (2013) suggested that a cooperative-based bottom-up approach to governing global goods, such as the environment, may offer a successful model in encouraging cooperation. Cooperative governance gains more value, especially when international organizations are absent in a particular sector. The importance of cooperatives in such cases is due to the need for collective effort when a

phenomenon can potentially influence all of humanity (Emmerling & Tavoni 2020).

Public goods also have a role in promoting resilience and sustainability, both locally and globally. Pönkä (2019), while examining cooperatives as platforms for business operations, highlights the similarities between cooperative and public goods principles. Both aim to serve societal interests, and both face challenges from people who try to benefit without contributing. By adopting a member approach, the cooperative model offers insights into how public goods can be managed and governed with collective interests in mind (Pönkä, 2019).

The governance of goods also requires a nuanced understanding of the relationship between government entities and non-government actors. While governments have traditionally been responsible for providing and regulating goods, social cooperatives and other non-governmental entities are increasingly playing an influential role. Cooperatives exemplify control and member orientation as models of governance that ensure public goods are managed in accordance with collective values. When it comes to public goods like water resources, clean air, and maintaining climate stability, the cooperative governance model offers a way to handle the complexities of managing public goods (Snaith, 2017).

Public goods come with their own set of challenges and opportunities due to their inherent characteristics. In today's interconnected world, where we face shared challenges, their importance cannot be overstated. Cooperative governance, which focuses on action shared interests and democratic control, presents a promising approach to effectively managing, protecting, and improving public goods for the benefit of everyone.

Social cooperatives: Characteristics and Principles

Cooperatives, at their core, are organizations that prioritize the well-being of people rather than solely focusing on maximizing profits. Unlike businesses, which aim to make as much money as possible, cooperatives operate based on principles of mutual benefit, shared responsibility, and democratic decision-making (Bretos & Marcuello, 2016). Specifically, social cooperatives expand on these principles to address community concerns, giving them a unique ability to manage and govern public goods. However, social cooperatives may fall short of the necessary financial and structural means when innovative strategies are needed (Tuna & Karantininis, 2021). This is not necessarily a weakness, however, as cooperatives often balance this shortcoming with a high capacity for survival (i.e. longevity and stability) (Perlines et al., 2013).

Cooperatives are distinct from other types of corporate structures in that they are centered on their members (Österberg & Nilsson, 2009; Snaith, 2020; Munch et al., 2021), they encourage democratic governance by adhering to the principle of ‘one member, one vote’ regardless of the amount of financial contribution (i.e., capital input) (Smith, 1997; Österberg & Nilsson, 2009; Zhang, 2016; Munch et al., 2021; Tuna & Karantininis, 2021; Dumitru et al., 2022), they extend their influence to the wider community in the shape of economic development, ensuring access to goods and services, encouraging democratic governance as a public good in its own right, social and community development (e.g. education and training programs), and embracing sustainable practices and environmental stewardship (Österberg & Nilsson, 2009; Tuna & Karantininis, 2021; Dumitru et al., 2022), they share

responsibility and risks among their members (Österberg & Nilsson, 2009; Dumitru et al., 2022), and they enjoy a high level of operational autonomy ensuring decision making in line with their values and principles without external influence (Snaith, 2020; Xue, 2020; Munch et al., 2021; Dumitru et al., 2022).

In addition to the aforementioned attributes, these entities are essentially built on the principles of voluntary and open membership (Snaith, 2017; Munch et al., 2021), the economic participation of members (Xiliang, 2014, Munch et al., 2021), trust (Munch et al., 2021; Tuna & Karantininis, 2021) and value creation for members (Munch et al., 2021; Tuna & Karantininis, 2021) due to their cooperative nature.

The attributes and principles mentioned above require cooperatives to invest heavily in education, training, and information sharing. They focus on equipping their members, elected representatives, and employees with knowledge and skills. Additionally, they actively educate the public about the benefits of cooperatives and promote the cooperative movement (Yamori, 2017; Morfi et al., 2021; Munch et al., 2021). Cooperatives strongly believe in working for collective strength. They collaborate with other cooperatives at local, national, and international levels to strengthen the cooperative movement and create mutual advantages (Snaith, 2017).

As the world grapples with escalating socio-environmental and socio-economic challenges, the significance of social cooperatives in offering sustainable collective solutions becomes increasingly crucial.

Cooperative Governance in Action

Cooperative governance, although based on shared principles, takes on different forms

depending on the region, sector, and challenges it faces. To contextualize these differences, a number of cases have been addressed in the following paragraphs as examples of social cooperatives in different sectors and regions.

Water Governance: The case of the Murray Darling Basin

The Murray Darling Basin (MDB) provides an enlightening case study when it comes to managing public resources through cooperative governance. Stretching across regions in Australia, the MDB is a vast river system with immense ecological, cultural, and economic significance (Alexandra, 2019). Governing such a system requires carefully balancing the interests of indigenous communities, farmers, environmentalists, and urban residents (Ross & Connell, 2016).

The MDB has faced a crisis of governance marked by diminishing trust among stakeholders, waning public confidence, and allegations of mismanagement (Alexandra 2019). These have been caused by inadequate governance standards and practices, limited capabilities to manage risks, erosion of legitimacy, reactive crisis-reaction reform, and lack of critical evaluations (Chipperfield & Alexandra, 2022). However, amidst these challenges, cooperative governance emerges as a beacon of hope. Community-led initiatives, supported by research and facilitated through collaborative platforms, have aimed to restore equilibrium in managing the MDB (Ross & Connell, 2016) despite occasional discrepancies on the side of local governments.

Efforts have been made to ensure that water allocation is fair, ecological flows are preserved, and cultural values are respected in this water basin. Although there are challenges, the experience of the MDB

demonstrates the potential of cooperative governance in navigating complex socio-ecological landscapes (Alexandra, 2019).

Tackling haze Pollution in China through cooperative governance

The issue of haze pollution in China serves as evidence of both the difficulties and opportunities presented by cooperative governance. Given that multiple provinces are affected by harmful air quality, it has become crucial to have a unified and coordinated response. However, differences in government approaches and the occurrence of “free riding” create significant obstacles when trying to establish a stable cooperative model (Zhang et al., 2016). Cooperative governance help tackle this issue by encouraging coordinated efforts between different regions and provinces, prioritizing the protection of vulnerable populations, encouraging cost efficient pollutant reduction efforts, and encouraging long term cooperation among regions (Xie et al., 2016).

Tackling financial challenges through cooperatives

The governance and financial dynamics of cooperatives in Europe provide valuable insights into how they navigate economic challenges. Countries like Austria, Finland, Germany, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Italy, France, Greece, and Spain have witnessed the role played by these cooperatives in ensuring both financial stability and the well-being of their communities in times of global financial crisis through the interplay between member contributions, external financing, and cooperative objectives (Pönkä, 2019).

Cooperative governance of space explorations

When it comes to cooperative governance in the field of space exploration, there is an

intriguing case study presented by programs like the Breakthrough Starshot initiative. These initiatives aim to utilize directed energy technologies such as laser propulsion for exploring star systems but raise questions about the dual-use nature of powerful lasers (Johnson Freese & Schmidt 2020).

Such technologies, although they hold promise for space exploration, present security and strategic challenges. Establishing a cooperative framework for directed energy technologies could reduce security threat perceptions in this regard. This cooperative framework would ensure that while we harness the potential of directed energy for exploration, we also address the risks tied to these technologies (Johnson, Freese, & Schmidt 2020).

The examples above are only a few of the many different areas to which cooperative governance can contribute. As can be seen in the given examples, cooperative governance is a dynamic framework of governance that can be used in the governance of public goods, especially when interstate, or for that matter intrastate, trust among stakeholders is missing. Although, it is increasingly used in different sectors and regions around the world, cooperative governance does have its own challenges. These challenges and deficiencies are discussed in the following section.

Challenges of Cooperative Governance

Cooperative governance, although holding promise in its ability to tackle societal challenges, is not without its obstacles. The very foundations of cooperatives (i.e. shared ownership, collaborative decision-making and community focus) can present unique challenges in their own right. In this section, we will delve into some of these challenges by examining the provided documents and exploring strategies to address them.

The “Free Rider” Problem

The “free rider” problem is one of the most frequently faced problems in cooperative governance. Non-excludability of public goods, encouraging, or rather tempting, stakeholders to benefit from them without making any contribution to their provision. Examples abound of such behaviour. One such example is the free-riding behaviour of some Chinese provinces in relation to reducing haze pollution in China, which makes it difficult to establish a stable cooperative model in this regard. The absence of penalties and a supervisory mechanism further worsens this issue, leading to inefficiencies and disparities in efforts to control haze pollution (Zhang et al., 2016).

Ensuring adaptability while maintaining trust and legitimacy

The changing socio-economic and environmental landscapes require cooperatives to remain adaptable. However, achieving this level of adaptability while upholding cooperative principles presents its own set of challenges. This is exemplified by the MDB water governance scenario, where the governance structure of the basin faced a crisis of trust and legitimacy caused by shifting climate patterns and societal demands (Alexandra, 2019; Wilder, 1993).

Balancing Needs with Broader Objectives

Cooperatives often face the challenge of finding a balance between addressing local needs specific to their members while also considering broader societal or community objectives. For example, agricultural cooperatives in Europe need to navigate market dynamics, regulatory frameworks, and societal expectations while focusing on the welfare of members. However, this may be easier said than done as the tension between the contributions of members, external financing sources, and broader

cooperative objectives may pose a serious challenge to the balancing process (Pönkä, 2019). In highly regulated and multijurisdictional sectors, keeping the balance between core objectives of cooperatives may even be more difficult. In such cases, while cooperatives prioritize member control and democratic decision-making, they must simultaneously ensure compliance with regulatory requirements. This calls for governance structures that can bridge cooperative principles with external regulatory mandates (Snaith, 2017).

Lack of international institutions at global scale

The lack of international institutions and diverse national interests present substantial obstacles to global cooperative efforts. Ensuring inclusive, effective cooperative governance at a global scale is indeed an immense task (Emmerling & Tavoni 2020).

The abovementioned challenges, while troublesome for cooperative governance of public goods, are not inevitable and do not lead to the obsolescence of cooperative governance models. Instead, they need to be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

The Future of Cooperative Governance in Light of the Existing Literature

Today's world is characterized by advancements in technology, shifts in socio-economic dynamics, and increasing environmental concerns. In such an increasingly dynamic world, rethinking modes of governance is of crucial importance. Cooperative governance is a dynamic and flexible model that may be suitable for such an everchanging era. This section explores the paths of cooperative governance, discussing emerging trends, challenges, and the transformative power of this approach.

The digital revolution provides opportunities to improve cooperative governance. The incorporation of tools into cooperative structures has increased member participation and improved decision-making processes (Bosch-Sijtsema & Postma, 2009). Agrell et al. (2017) expand on the relationship between technology and cooperative governance, emphasizing the importance of adaptive strategies in response to changing technological landscapes.

Pandemics and cyber threats are among the global challenges of the twenty-first century. Because of its emphasis on solutions, cooperative governance is uniquely positioned to address these challenges. G7 and G20 discussions on health initiatives (Kirton, 2020) and collaborative responses to environmental challenges (Emmerling & Tavoni, 2020) highlight the potential of cooperative governance in navigating complex global terrain. Furthermore, Chahla (2019) emphasizes the significance of cooperatives taking the lead in addressing socio-economic disparities, particularly in developing countries.

While international summits and global forums are important, the future of cooperative governance is also dependent on the expansion of grassroots initiatives. Laszlo (1991) emphasizes the importance of cooperatives in sustainable development, as well as the importance of prioritizing community-driven efforts. Arjona et al. (2015) investigate how grassroots movements shape governance and emphasize their transformative potential.

Strong global collaborations will be required for cooperative governance to thrive in the future. The G7 and G20 discussions shed light on how cooperative governance can be expanded. Wilder's (1993) insights emphasize the importance of forming large-scale alliances to address transnational

challenges. Borgen (2011) also investigates how transnational cooperatives can foster collaborations and ensure that shared challenges are met with shared solutions.

It is critical for cooperative governance structures to remain compliant with evolving frameworks. Davis (2001) emphasized the importance of understanding aspects of cooperative structures for their long-term sustainability. Additionally, Azmi (2011) emphasizes the importance of frameworks in guiding cooperative operations, particularly in the financial sector.

Prioritizing inclusivity and representation is critical for ensuring the future of cooperative governance. Penny (2016) emphasizes the importance of providing marginalized communities with a voice within structures. Furthermore, Bosch, Sijtsema, and Henriksson (2009) investigate how digital platforms can promote inclusivity by ensuring that all perspectives are heard and considered during decision-making processes.

While there are obstacles, the fundamental principles that cooperatives are founded on can pave the way for progress. As we stand at a crossroads with shared interests and interconnected destinies, the role of cooperative governance in shaping our collective future has become increasingly important.

Conclusion

The significance of innovative governance structures becomes evident in contemporary global challenges, such as environmental crises and socio-economic disparities. This article examines governance as a robust framework integrating collective action, shared responsibility, and democratic decision-making. Through a comprehensive analysis of scholarly literature, empirical evidence from real-world scenarios, and the examination of global discourse, a deeper

comprehension can be attained regarding the inherent possibilities for transformative change and the obstacles that arise in cooperative governance.

The significance of cooperation is evident in various aspects, ranging from the emergence of social cooperatives to the comprehension of public goods dynamics (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012). Cooperative governance presents an inclusive, adaptable, and practical approach to addressing various challenges, from water governance in the Murray Darling Basin to global threats like climate change. This statement underscores the significance of seeking collective resolutions through diligent endeavour and mutual respect when confronting shared challenges.

Whether it's dealing with the complexities of air pollution caused by haze in China (Zhang et al., 2016), promoting stability in European financial cooperatives (Pönkä, 2019), or venturing into the frontiers of space through global collaborations (Johnson Freese & Schmidt, 2020), cooperative governance has proven its resilience and influence. These real-life examples highlight the potential of cooperatives and underscore the challenges that come with this governance model.

The significance of summits like the G7 and G20 in strengthening cooperative governance cannot be overstated. By bringing world leaders together and encouraging collaborative discussions, these forums amplify the spirit of cooperation on a global level (Kirton, 2020). They demonstrate that cooperative governance provides a pathway towards shared understanding, mutual growth, and global harmony in an era marked by geopolitical tensions and differing interests.

As we contemplate the future of governance, we find promising prospects intertwined

with challenges. With its technological advancements, the digital revolution offers tools to enhance efficiency, transparency, and inclusivity within cooperatives. However, navigating through evolving regulations and ensuring representation and inclusivity for all stakeholders while tackling emerging challenges will put cooperative governance to the test. However, the basic principles of cooperatives, which focus on shared ownership and democratic control, provide a glimmer of hope. They serve as a guide to ensure that the cooperative spirit remains strong in the face of challenges.

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