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ASSESSMENT OF PERFORMANCE OF COOPERATIVES IN MARKETING OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCE IN THE SOUTH EAST REGION, NIGERIA

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Abstract
The study assessed the performance of cooperative societies in the marketing of members' agricultural produce in the South East region of Nigeria. A multistage sampling technique was used to select 283 respondents for the study. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis. Findings from the study show that marketing channel selection was rated as the major role (3.82) that the cooperative society played in the marketing of the agricultural produce of members. While the overall performance of the cooperative society system was high (3.27), the highest performance indicator was ease of access to the market (3.78). The major challenge confronting the marketing of agricultural produce was a lack of transparency (3.42) in the pricing of produce on behalf of the producers. Furthermore, commitment factor was ranked higher as the critical success factor for cooperative societies in the marketing of agricultural produce. Finally, the intensification of the role and performance of cooperative societies in the marketing of agricultural produce was positively correlated and statistically significant ($p<0.01$). From the findings of the study, it was concluded that cooperative societies play very important roles in the marketing of the agricultural produce of members. Their performance assessment was rated high. An increase in the roles of cooperative societies would lead to an increase in the performance of the marketing roles of the societies. The study recommended that cooperative societies should sustain guidance in the selection of marketing channels for the marketing of agricultural produce of members, as well as continue to increase market access for members. This will guarantee the timely sale of produce.

Keywords: *Assessment, Performance, cooperatives, marketing, Agricultural produce.*

1.0 Introduction

In Africa, agricultural co-operatives had been established and promoted as part of promoting the agriculture sector. The categories of agricultural co-operatives are based on various activities each perform like; supply of agricultural inputs, joint production, and agricultural marketing. The input supply includes the distribution of seeds and fertilizers to farmers. The co-operatives in joint agricultural production assume that members operate the cooperative on jointly owned agricultural farms. Also, there are collective agricultural marketing of producer crops, where members mobilize resources for the transformation, packaging, distribution, and marketing of one or more agricultural produce (Anania and Rwekaza, 2016).

Cooperative societies constitute a veritable platform for enabling agriculture to facilitate economic development (Verma and Jheeba, 2023). Cooperatives help in the spreading of risk and marketing costs among participants. This collective approach allows them to operate more efficiently and meet buyers' demands (United States Department for Agriculture and Rural Development (USDA), 2000). Towards attaining processing efficiency, cooperatives take advantage of assembling enough volume of produce that is often required by processing plant operators (Hoffman, 2005).

Agricultural Marketing Co-operative Societies (AMCOS) are among the non-financial co-operatives that engage in marketing the produce of members and other value added to the same. Cooperatives operate under a very challenging and competitive environment that threatens their performance. In order to perform well in this hostile competitive environment, they should depend on their own struggle rather than depending much on external support (Shirima & Shirima, 2022), thus giving rise to the need for the identification of critical success. Hence, in order to contribute meaningfully to the welfare

of members, perform optimally, and assure sustainability, certain critical success factors are required.

Critical success factors (CSFs) are the essential elements that an organization, project, or team must carry out effectively in order to achieve the strategic objectives of the organization. The CSFs represent high-level goals that drive significant value and are frequently connected to the overall business strategy of an organization. According to Oluwatoyin et al. (2018), market orientation is a critical success factor for business performance. It is important to stress that critical success factors do not constitute a measure of success but instead, a means to achieving success. In addition, critical success factors can be applied at the various levels of an organization and are measurable and trackable. According to Tuan (2020), CSF refers to the key areas where things must be done exceptionally for an organization to be successful. The goal of CSF is to minimize the range of decision-making impinging on top executives/general managers.

There are economic problems confronting the marketing of agricultural produce by cooperative societies. Examples of such economic problems include scale, finance, and management. It has been observed that, although the critical success factor concept has been increasingly adopted by industries to achieve business goals, the conventional approaches used for identifying critical success factors are underpinned by the mechanism paradigm (Tuan, 2020). Furthermore, the mechanism paradigm does not take the interlaced relationships between system elements into account. Shirima & Shirima (2022) stressed that, globally, underperformance of primary AMCOS has raised concerns by various stakeholders, such as the government and cooperative supporting institutions, towards improving the situation.

There are also some technological problems, which include (1) Business character: The trading activities of a marketing society are carried on traditionally. The management, due to fear of loss, does not take risks. They only follow the trading practices of the commission shops run by private dealers in agricultural produce. (2) Decision Making: The working of the society is affected due to the inability to arrive at a quick, timely decision. As the decision-making of the society is done by the management committee, it takes time to call the meeting and then make decisions. The decisions of society are mostly person-oriented instead of being business-oriented. (3) Lack of storage and transport facilities**:** The marketing societies do not usually have adequate storage and transport facilities. The facilities are indispensable for the efficient operation of the shops; and (4) No Outright Purchase**:** The commission shops do not practice any outright purchase. They do not practice any outright purchase. They do not make payments to the farmers on receipt of the produce. The farmers, therefore, hesitate to deliver the produce to these shops.

Dejene and Getachew (2015) investigated the factors involved in the success of agricultural marketing cooperatives (AMCs) from members' perspectives in Becho Woreda, South West Shoa, Oromia Region. Oluwatoyin et al. (2018) investigated the impact of market orientation practices on the performance of selected hotels in Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria. Kurdi et al. (2022) assessed the critical success factors to improve the performance of service operations in Jordan. Shirima & Shirima (2022) established the Critical Success Factors (CSFs) for the primary Agricultural Marketing Co-operative Societies (AMCOS) at Rombo District in Tanzania. However, no available study in Nigeria has evaluated the critical success factors for cooperatives in the marketing of the

agricultural produce of members. Consequently, this study sets out to evaluate the critical success factors for the sustainability of the agricultural cooperative system in Nigeria's southeast region. The specific objectives were to evaluate the critical success factors for cooperative societies in the study area and identify the challenges faced by the respondents in the marketing of the agricultural produce of members.

2.0 Objectives of the Study

The broad objectives of this study were to assess the performance of Cooperatives in the marketing of the agricultural produce of members in the South East region, Nigeria.

The Specific objectives were to:

i. Describe the market performance of the cooperative in marketing agricultural produce.

ii. Identify challenges in the marketing of produce

Methodology

The study area is the South-East region. It is one of the 6th geopolitical zones of Nigeria, representing both a geographic and political region of the country's inland southeast. It comprises five States – Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. The zone is bounded by the River Niger on the west, the riverine Niger Delta on the south, the flat North Central to the north, and the Cross River on the east. It is divided between the Cross–Niger transition forests ecoregions in the south and the Guinean forest–savanna mosaic in the drier north. Culturally, the vast majority of the zone falls within Igboland–the indigenous cultural homeland of the Igbo people, a group which makes up the largest ethnic percentage of the southeastern population (Onah et al., 2024).

Although the South East is the smallest geopolitical zone, it contributes greatly to

the Nigerian economy due to oil and natural gas reserves, along with a growing industrialized economy. The region has a population of about 36 million people, around 18% of the total population of the country. Aba and Enugu are the most populous cities in the South East, as well as the tenth and fourteenth most populous cities in Nigeria. Other large Southeastern cities include (in order of population) Onitsha, Umuahia, Owerri, Nnewi, Awka, and Abakaliki.

The South East is predominantly Igbo ethnically and linguistically. Various Igbo subgroups and their dialects in South East are: Owerri people, Mbaise people, Nkanu people, Ngwa people, Omambala people, Nsukka people, Enuani people, Ezza people, Afikpo people, Arochukwu people, Oguta people, Aguata/Orumba, Okigwe people, Egbema people, Izzi people, Effium people, Idemili people, Agbaja people, Ikwo people, Ndoki people, Abriba people, Ohafia people, Orlu people, Ohaji people, Ohaozara people, Anaedo people, and many others.

The zone has 85 Local Government Areas with a total population of over twenty million people. The zone has about ten large commercial cities. Apart from agriculture, which is the major economic activity, the zone is also known for commercial and trading activities with small and medium indigenous industries that are manufacturing goods and services. The main agricultural produce in the zone is yams, cassava, rice, and cocoyams. The zone has solid minerals and natural resources such as crude oil, natural gas, bauxite, iron ore, sandstone, lignite, clay, coal, tin, and columbite.

The enterprising nature of the people makes it easy for them to embrace cooperation as well as cooperative marketing. Cooperative societies dot the entire landscape of the region

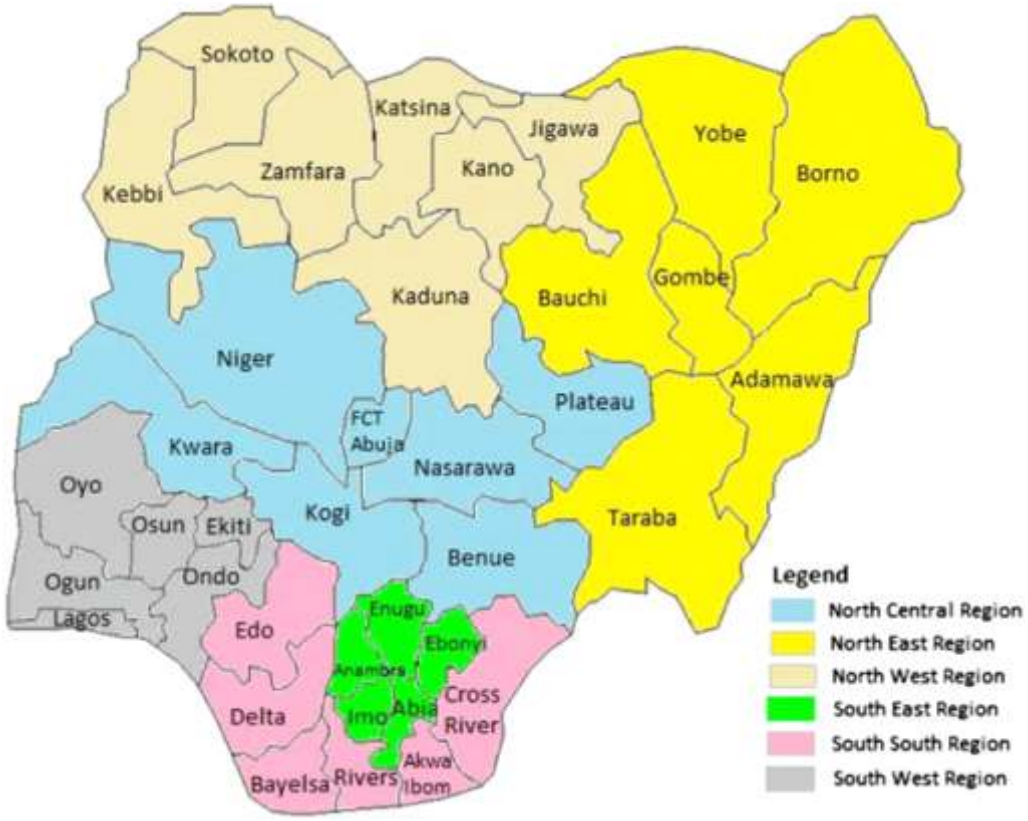


Figure 2: Map of Nigeria showing the South-Eastern States in Nigeria

Population, Sample Size, and Sampling Techniques

The population for the study comprised all members of agricultural cooperative societies in the South East region of Nigeria. A multistage sampling technique was adopted for the selection of respondents. In the first stage, three States, Anambra, Ebonyi, and Enugu, were randomly selected from the five States in the region. In the second stage, two agricultural zones were purposively selected from each State because of the high concentration of farmers' cooperative societies. This gave a total of six agricultural zones. These agricultural zones were Anambra and Onitsha (Anambra state), Ebonyi Central and Ebonyi South (Ebonyi state), and Awgu and Nsukka (Enugu state).

In the third stage, two Local Government Areas (LGAs) were randomly selected from each of the selected agricultural zones, making twelve LGAs. These Local Government Areas were Anambra East and Ayamelum from Anambra; Ihiala and Ogbaru from Onisha; Ishielu and Ikwo from Ebonyi Central; Afikpo South and Ohaozara from Ebonyi South; Awgu and Aninri from Awgu and Igbo-entity and Uzo-want from Nsukka agricultural zones. Based on the list of Farmers' Cooperative Societies (FCSs) in each LGA, which will be supplied by the LGA cooperative officer, the Taro Yamene formula was applied to determine the sample size. Bourley's proportional allocation was then used to allocate the sample to the appropriate sectors. The models for Taro Yamene and Bourley allocation formula are shown in Equations (1) and (2), while the outcomes are presented in Table 1.

Taro Yamane's formula:

$n = N/1 + N(e)^2$ ..... (1)

Where:

n = the required sample size from the population under study

N = the whole population that is under study

e = the precision or sampling error 0.05

Bourley's proportional distribution formula:

$$n_h = \frac{N_h}{N} \times n \quad \text{..... (2)}$$

Where:

n_h = sample size for the stratum *h*

N_h = population size for the stratum

Primary data were collected for the study. Enumerators were trained to assist in the data

collection process. Local Government Cooperative Officers were recruited to assist in the identification of the respondents. The data were analysed with the aid of descriptive statistics.

4.0 Results and Discussion

4.1 Critical Success Factors for Cooperative Societies in Produce Marketing

In Table 1, six categories of critical success factors for cooperative societies were evaluated. Commitment emerges as the highest-rated factor (3.64) among the six categories of critical success factors for cooperative societies. This includes commitment to the goals, participation, structural factors, communication, managerial, and external factors. The commitment factor, with a specific focus on the individuals' commitment (rated 4.13), highlights the centrality of human factors in the successful functioning of cooperatives. This discussion will expand on the role of commitment in cooperative success, explore the other factors, and relate these findings to existing literature on the key drivers of cooperative performance.

The finding that commitment to the goals had the highest mean score (4.13) emphasizes that for cooperatives to succeed, there must be a strong sense of shared purpose and dedication from all stakeholders—members, management, and leadership. Commitment to the collective goals of the cooperative, including improving members' livelihoods, increasing economic efficiency, and accessing markets, serves as the foundation for cooperative sustainability. Without this core commitment, cooperatives can struggle with member retention, effective operations, and meeting the collective needs of their members.

Birchall (2014) emphasizes that commitment to the cooperative's goals is essential for

building trust among members, which in turn strengthens the cohesion of the cooperative. When members are motivated by a sense of ownership and a common vision, they are more likely to invest time and effort into the cooperative's activities, which translates to better outcomes. This commitment is especially important in agricultural cooperatives, where collective action is required to address issues such as market access, price stabilization, and postharvest losses (Benedict et al., 2014).

The finding suggests that cooperative success is intrinsically linked to the level of members' commitment. When cooperative members are committed, they are more likely to stay active in the cooperative's operations, contribute resources (financial, human, or material), and ensure the organization's sustainability. As noted by Aliguma et al. (2018) in the context of Ugandan coffee cooperatives, member engagement and commitment directly contribute to the cooperative's ability to secure higher prices, better market access, and increased bargaining power. Without strong member buy-in, cooperatives can suffer from low participation and high turnover, undermining their effectiveness.

The participation factor, which also plays a pivotal role in the success of cooperatives, was rated highly, reflecting the need for active involvement by all stakeholders. Members participation is essential for ensuring that the cooperative is managed democratically and that decisions reflect the needs of the majority. Active participation encourages transparency, accountability, and mutual support, which are essential for creating an environment of trust and collaboration.

Sullivan et al. (2015) underscored that the level of members' participation is directly correlated with the success of the cooperative. In cooperatives with high levels

of participation, members have more influence over the governance, direction, and priorities of the cooperative. Mwangi et al. (2016) similarly note that farmer cooperatives in Kenya that encourage active participation tend to outperform those that operate with less engagement from members. By implication, member participation is essential not just for decision-making but for building commitment and ownership. When members actively participate in cooperative activities—whether through attending meetings, contributing to discussions, or participating in cooperative projects they are more likely to stay committed to the success of the organization. This participation, in turn, supports the cooperative's long-term sustainability by ensuring that it adapts to the evolving needs and goals of its members.

Structural factors refer to the organizational framework, the governance model, and the legal and regulatory frameworks within which cooperatives operate. The study's finding that structural factors scored relatively high but not as highly as commitment and participation indicates that while the organizational structure is important, it is not the sole determinant of success. Structural factors include aspects such as the cooperative's legal status, governance system (e.g., democratic leadership and member representation), and the internal policies that guide operations.

According to Birchall (2014), the structure of the cooperative, particularly its governance model, has a significant impact on the success of cooperatives. A cooperative with a clear, well-structured system of management and decision-making tends to operate more efficiently. Tadesse and Engida (2016) also found that the legal status and regulatory environment in which cooperatives operate affect their performance, especially in ensuring compliance with quality standards and facilitating

access to external markets. A well-established organizational structure ensures that the cooperative operates efficiently and transparently, promoting member confidence and participation. Effective governance structures, with clear roles and accountability mechanisms, are key to ensuring that cooperatives remain responsive to the needs of their members while also adapting to changing market conditions.

Effective communication is another critical factor that supports cooperative success. Communication within a cooperative ensures that all members are kept informed about the cooperative's goals, activities, and financial status. It also enables the cooperative to act as a unified voice when negotiating with external parties such as suppliers, buyers, or government agencies. Sserunkuuma et al. (2017) suggest that communication is one of the most important factors for the success of agricultural cooperatives. Regular communication between members, as well as between management and members, enhances transparency and trust within the organization. Furthermore, Gubbins (2015) notes that communication is essential for coordinating collective activities such as marketing campaigns or group farming practices, which are central to the success of agricultural cooperatives.

Effective communication fosters a sense of belonging and engagement among cooperative members. Clear, open, and frequent communication helps build trust, resolve conflicts, and ensure that everyone is working toward the same goals. Additionally, external communication is equally crucial, especially when cooperatives negotiate with stakeholders such as buyers or government officials.

Managerial competence is crucial for the smooth operation of any cooperative. This factor includes the effectiveness of the cooperative's leadership, the ability of managers

to implement decisions, and the skills they possess in organizing, coordinating, and evaluating activities. The success of cooperatives is often linked to the effectiveness of their managers and leaders. Okello et al. (2016) argue that managerial factors—such as the skills of cooperative leaders and their ability to make sound decisions—have a direct impact on the efficiency and profitability of cooperatives. A competent leadership team can ensure that the cooperative is well-organized, responsive to market changes, and able to address challenges as they arise.

Strong managerial skills are essential for ensuring that cooperative objectives are effectively implemented. Managers with the right skills—such as financial management, conflict resolution, and strategic planning—can help cooperatives navigate market dynamics, increase operational efficiency, and ensure member satisfaction.

External factors include factors such as economic policies, market conditions, and government support. While cooperatives can influence many internal factors, external factors often lie beyond their control. Nevertheless, the study found that these factors still play a significant role in shaping cooperative performance. According to Chirwa (2013), external factors, such as government policies and market access, heavily influence the viability of cooperatives, especially in developing countries. External factors like subsidies, training programs, and infrastructure development can significantly enhance the performance of cooperatives. Additionally, Tadesse and Engida (2016) argue that favorable policies—such as tax exemptions and support for cooperative development—can directly contribute to the success of cooperatives. External factors can either facilitate or hinder cooperative success. Cooperatives that

receive support from the government or development agencies, including access to finance and infrastructure, tend to perform better. Therefore, a cooperative's external environment is an important factor that can either support or constrain its growth and impact.

Table 1: Critical Success Factors for Cooperative Societies (n = 283)

	Critical success factors	Mean	Std. dev	Coef.. of var
A	**Commitment Factors (Mean = 3.64)**			
1	Good individual motivation and drive	4.13	1.26	0.30
2	Mutual trust among cooperative members	3.94	0.93	0.24
3	Commitment to shared goals	3.79	1.14	0.30
4	Cooperative education of members	3.53	1.30	0.37
5	Willingness of members to provide equity capital	3.27	1.47	0.45
6	Willingness to exchange private information	3.41	1.36	0.40
7	Willingness to serve in cooperative committee	3.37	1.43	0.43
B	**Participation Factors (Mean = 3.57)**			
1	Participation in technical training	3.48	1.42	0.41
2	Participation in cooperative governance	3.58	1.44	0.40
3	Participation to vote in general meeting & election	3.65	1.44	0.39
4	Influencing the decisions in the society	3.59	1.33	0.37
5	Attend every meeting of the society	3.53	1.37	0.39
C	**Structural Factors (Mean = 3.56)**			
1	Member homogeneity	3.68	1.31	0.36
2	Members cooperation	3.62	1.34	0.37
3	Large number of workers	3.56	1.31	0.37
4	Availability of well-structured facilities	3.51	1.43	0.41
5	Practice of sharing experiences of other successful cooperatives	3.53	1.36	0.38
6	Good relationship with other cooperatives	3.44	1.49	0.43
D	**Communication Factors (Mean = 3.49)**			
1	Members access to timely & worthwhile information	2.30	1.65	0.72
2	Communicate member-owner responsibilities & benefits	4.13	1.26	0.30
3	Communication of related industry news & market trends	3.94	0.93	0.24
4	Accuracy of messages cooperatives communicate to member	3.79	1.14	0.30
5	Provide regular feedback to members to allow them to share in collective successes	3.53	1.30	0.37
6	Good communication medium	3.27	1.47	0.45
E	**Managerial Factors (Mean = 3.52)**			
1	Good interpersonal skills of officials	3.41	1.36	0.40
2	Good understanding the concept of cooperative	3.37	1.43	0.43
3	Good interest of management to work in cooperatives	3.48	1.42	0.41
4	Good experience of managers in cooperative	3.58	1.44	0.40
5	General business and managerial skills	3.65	1.44	0.39
6	Efficient conflict solving abilities	3.59	1.33	0.37
7	Good educational level	3.53	1.37	0.39
F	**External Factors (Mean = 3.58)**			
1	Good market access	3.68	1.31	0.36
2	High number of cooperatives in the area	3.62	1.34	0.37
3	Good infrastructural development level of the area	3.56	1.31	0.37
4	Government support	3.51	1.43	0.41
5	Non-government organization support	3.53	1.36	0.38

4.2 Challenges in the Marketing of Agricultural Produce by Cooperative Societies

While cooperative societies have been generally recognized for their positive impact on the marketing of agricultural produce for their members, several challenges persist in the system. According to the findings presented in Table 2, key obstacles were identified, including issues related to lack of transparency and lack of trust in the marketing process.

A significant challenge highlighted by respondents was the lack of transparency (mean score: 3.42) in the pricing of agricultural produce. Cooperative societies, though generally trusted to handle marketing on behalf of members, often implement pricing strategies that are either unknown or unclear to the producers. This lack of transparency may create opportunities for sharp practices akin to those associated with marketing intermediaries, also known as middlemen. In such cases, the producer is at risk of being shortchanged, as the final price or the commission taken by the intermediary may not be adequately disclosed, leaving the farmer with little control or understanding of how their produce is being valued. This issue is not isolated to cooperatives, as similar challenges are often observed in broader agricultural marketing systems, where middlemen exploit the gap in information between producers and consumers (Aliguma *et al.,* 2018; Harris *et al*., 2017).

Several studies have pointed to transparency as a critical factor for the success of cooperatives in agricultural marketing. Birchall (2014) emphasizes that when cooperatives fail to ensure transparency in pricing and profit-sharing, members may lose confidence in the system, ultimately undermining the cooperative's effectiveness. This

finding is also supported by Sullivan et al. (2015), who note that a lack of transparency in agricultural pricing often leads to conflicts among members and damages the cooperative's reputation, thereby limiting its capacity to provide a sustainable market for producers.

Another major challenge identified by respondents was the lack of trust (mean score: 3.31) among cooperative members. This issue is often exacerbated when marketing agreements are not clearly defined or communicated, leading to a sense of uncertainty and suspicion among the members. Without clear agreements, members may fear that the cooperative leadership or committees responsible for marketing their produce are not acting in their best interests. This lack of trust can lead to reluctance among members to fully engage in the cooperative's activities, thereby threatening the long-term sustainability of the marketing system.

Moreover, the restricted participation of members in the marketing process was also highlighted. When the marketing of produce is largely controlled by a small group within the cooperative leadership or designated committees, the wider membership may feel disenfranchised and excluded from decision-making processes. This limited participation can further erode trust and undermine the sense of collective ownership that is essential to the functioning of cooperatives. Dorward et al. (2018) argue that for cooperatives to thrive, they must encourage inclusive governance and allow members to actively participate in all aspects of the marketing process, from pricing decisions to final sales. Research by Okello et al. (2016) supports these findings, showing that trust and participation are critical elements for the successful operation of cooperatives. In their study, they found that cooperatives with higher levels of member engagement and transparency in decision-making were more likely to experience improved economic

outcomes and higher levels of member satisfaction.

These challenges are not unique to the context of this study. Sserunkuum et al. (2017) found similar issues in Uganda, where cooperatives faced difficulties in gaining the trust of members due to perceived lack of transparency in marketing and pricing. Tardese and Engida (2016) also highlighted that the exclusion of producers from key decisions in cooperatives, particularly in the marketing of their produce, can lead to disempowerment and mistrust, further reinforcing the challenges of cooperative systems in developing countries.

In sum, while cooperative societies have the potential to enhance the market access of smallholder farmers, the issues of lack of transparency and lack of trust are significant barriers that must be addressed. Ensuring clearer pricing strategies, fostering greater participation among members, and enhancing transparency in all marketing processes are essential steps for improving the effectiveness and sustainability of agricultural cooperatives.

Table 2: Challenges Faced by the Respondents in the Marketing of Agricultural Produce (n = 283)

S/No	Statistics	Mean	Standard deviation	Coefficient of variation
1	Lack of trust	3.31*	0.82	0.25
2	Low integrity of officials	3.10*	0.67	0.22
3	Inadequate produce	3.00*	0.69	0.23
4	High commission	2.82*	0.90	0.32
5	Lack of transparency in pricing	3.42*	0.95	0.28
6	Restricted participation of members	3.20*	1.72	0.54

* Mean score is at least 3, the cutoff point
Source: Author's Computation, 2024.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

From the findings of the study, it was concluded that the top critical success factors for cooperative societies were external and participation factors. The major challenges were a lack of transparency in pricing and restricted participation of members. The study recommended that the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, which supervises cooperative societies, should develop strategies that would ensure that external and participation factors are managed in a way that would enhance the success of cooperative societies. In addition, the leadership of cooperative societies should ensure that there is transparency in the pricing of the agricultural produce of members.

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