



## **The Role of Cooperatives in Empowering Traditional Fishermen: A Case Study in Cirebon**

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### **Abstract**

*Traditional fishing communities are among the most economically vulnerable groups, especially amidst the pressures of climate change, limited market access, and the dominance of middlemen. Amid these challenges, cooperatives serve as an alternative economic institution with the potential to strengthen the bargaining power and solidarity of coastal communities. This study aims to examine the social role of cooperatives in the economic empowerment process of traditional fishing communities in Cirebon. The method employed is qualitative, utilizing a case study approach through in depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation of active, cooperative members. The results show that cooperatives not only function as providers of access to capital but also as reinforcing agents of social solidarity, spaces for democratic participation, and means of local economic transformation that reduce dependence on intermediaries. Cooperatives encourage collective behavioral change and shape a more equitable socio economic structure. The implications of this research support the development of community based policies and the expansion of social based cooperative models to improve the economic resilience of coastal areas. Furthermore, this study identifies opportunities for further research on cooperative digitalization and adaptive cooperative models within the context of a sustainable maritime economy.*

**Keywords:** *cooperatives, economic empowerment, coastal communities, social solidarity, traditional fishermen.*

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### **1. Introduction**

The economic crisis affecting coastal communities is not only a local or national issue, but has become a global problem. According to a report by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2022), over 120 million people worldwide rely on small scale fisheries. Yet, ironically, they are among the most vulnerable to poverty and economic instability. This is exacerbated by the threat of climate change leading to extreme weather, rising sea levels, and degradation of marine ecosystems all of which have a direct impact on the productivity and survival of traditional fishing communities. In addition, access to markets, capital and technology is still minimal among coastal communities, making it difficult for them to escape structural poverty.

The economic challenges faced by coastal communities, particularly traditional fishermen, are multifaceted, involving not only external pressures such as climate change and limited market access but also internal structural issues, including dependency on middlemen and financial insecurity. Despite these obstacles, cooperatives have emerged as a pivotal institution that has the potential to strengthen the economic resilience of these communities. While previous studies have focused on the financial functions of cooperatives, the social role they play in fostering solidarity, trust, and collective behavior change remains underexplored. This research aims to address this gap by investigating the social role of cooperatives in empowering traditional fishing communities in Cirebon, with a focus on how these cooperatives contribute to the economic and social transformation of the community.

Indonesia, an archipelago comprising over 17,000 islands, has more than 2.7 million traditional fishermen (KKP, 2021). However, many of them live in poor economic conditions. In Cirebon, for example, local research and government reports indicate that the majority of fishermen live on irregular incomes, are dependent on middlemen, and lack access to formal financial institutions.

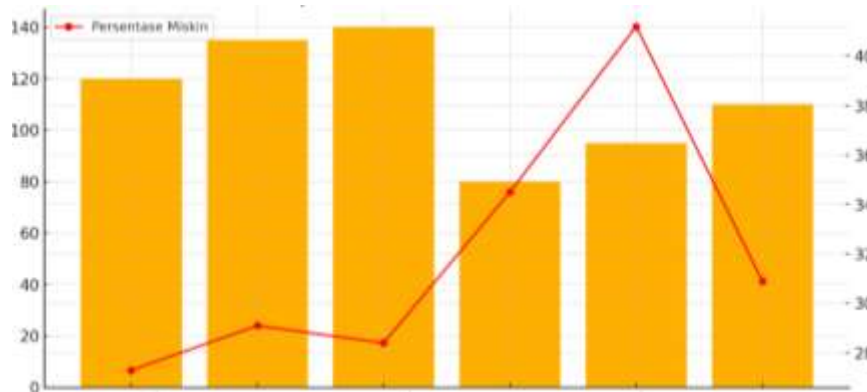
Cooperatives have been a long standing presence as a people's economic institution. However, not many have studied in depth how cooperatives not only perform economic functions, but also social functions in strengthening the bargaining power and solidarity of coastal communities.

Several previous studies have explored the role of cooperatives in community empowerment, particularly in the coastal sector and among traditional fishermen. Mujiburrahman and Astuti (2020) in their research on fishermen cooperatives in Pesisir Selatan found that cooperatives can increase access to fishing gear and production facilities. However, they still face managerial constraints and low financial literacy among members. Lestari (2019) further highlights how the active participation of members and transparency in management primarily determine the revitalization of cooperatives as a pillar of the people's economy. These two things are often the weak points of conventional cooperatives in Indonesia.

Meanwhile, Huda (2021) in his study on the economic resilience of coastal communities highlights the importance of local social institutions, such as cooperatives, in maintaining the financial stability of fishing households, especially amid fluctuations in catches and market prices. Another study by Sutanto and colleagues (2018) highlights the importance of social capital in supporting the sustainability of cooperatives, where trust relationships, solidarity, and strong social networks are the primary foundation for the running of cooperatives in rural areas. Finally, Fitriani and Mahendra (2022) attempted to view cooperatives from a modern perspective by examining the transformation of digital cooperatives in coastal regions.

They emphasize that digitalization can be an adaptive strategy for cooperatives in facing global challenges, although its application is still limited in traditional areas.

**Figure 1.** Distribution of Traditional Fishermen and Poverty Percentage



The graph above illustrates the number of traditional fishermen and the poverty rate in several coastal provinces in Indonesia, including West Java, which includes Cirebon. It can be seen that although the number of fishermen is relatively high, the percentage of poverty among them remains significant, even reaching more than 40% in some areas.

Looking at the field conditions, cooperatives in fishing communities are often just a formality or 'administrative complement' for aid distribution. If managed well and rooted in the community's needs, cooperatives can transform into an empowering socio economic tool. This research is essential to qualitatively explore the actual social role of cooperatives in the context of economic empowerment of fisherfolk, especially in the Cirebon coastal area, which is rich in maritime traditions but also marginalized in the national economic flow.

Most previous studies have focused on the managerial aspects of cooperatives or quantitative approaches to economic output. This research offers a qualitative approach based on community participation to uncover the social dimensions of cooperatives, including solidarity, trust, shared values, and collective behavior change, that have not been empirically studied. The focus on traditional fishermen in Cirebon also provides a unique local context that has not been used as a case study in the national or international literature.

Despite the potential of cooperatives to address critical issues such as economic instability and dependency on middlemen, they are often underutilized or mismanaged in traditional fishing communities. This gap between the ideal and the reality of cooperative functioning is especially pronounced in Cirebon, where cooperative institutions fail to fully harness their role in promoting not only economic independence but also social solidarity. As traditional fishing communities continue to face vulnerability from climate change, market volatility, and exploitation by

intermediaries, the need to explore the broader social role of cooperatives becomes increasingly urgent. By examining this untapped potential, this study aims to provide new insights into the role of cooperatives in promoting long term, sustainable development for coastal communities.

This study aims to describe and analyze the social role of cooperatives in depth in the process of economic empowerment of traditional fishing communities in the Cirebon coastal area. Through a qualitative approach, this research aims to reveal the internal dynamics of cooperatives that not only function as economic entities but also as social institutions, thereby strengthening community solidarity, increasing collective capacity, and reducing fishermen's dependence on external parties, such as middlemen. The results of this study are expected to provide practical contributions in the form of field based policy recommendations for local governments and cooperative institutions, as well as academic contributions through the expansion of literature on cooperatives and local values based coastal community empowerment.

## **2. Method**

### **Type of Research**

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a case study method. This approach was chosen because it is considered the most suitable for a deep exploration of the meanings, experiences, and social dynamics that occur in traditional fishing communities, particularly in the context of the role of cooperatives in economic empowerment. Qualitative research enables researchers to understand phenomena from the perspective of the research subjects' context, in a holistic manner.

### **Population and Sample**

The population in this study consisted of all members of the traditional fishing community in coastal Cirebon who are active members of cooperatives. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, which intentionally selects informants based on specific criteria such as: (1) active cooperative members for at least 2 years, (2) cooperative management, and (3) fishermen community leaders. The number of informants to be interviewed will be determined based on the principle of information sufficiency or data saturation, namely when the data obtained no longer reveal new findings.

### **Research Instruments**

The main instrument in this research is the researcher himself (human instrument), with the support of semi structured interview guides, field notes, and observation guidelines. The interview guide was developed based on the problem formulation and theoretical framework, covering aspects such as the role of

cooperatives in the economic life of fishermen, forms of social solidarity, and fishermen's perceptions of cooperatives.

### **Data Collection Technique**

Data collection was done through several techniques, namely:

1. *In depth* interviews: conducted face to face to explore informants' views and experiences related to the social role of cooperatives.
2. Participatory observation: The researcher directly observes cooperative activities, interactions between members, and decision making processes in the field.
3. Documentation involves collecting cooperative documents, such as bylaws, financial statements, meeting minutes, and member data that support the analysis.

### **Research Procedure**

The research procedure began with obtaining a research permit and an initial approach to the community and cooperative management. After receiving approval, the researcher conducted an initial exploration to recognize the social context of the fishing community. Next, interviews and observations were conducted gradually, with data recorded in a field journal. The collected data were then organized and coded for analysis. This research also pays attention to research ethics, such as informed consent, data confidentiality, and the right of informants to discontinue participation at any time.

### **Data Analysis Technique**

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques. The stages of analysis included transcription of interview results, data coding, identification of main themes, interpretation of the data's meaning, and preparation of a narrative of the results. Data validity was tested through source and method triangulation techniques, as well as member checking, i.e., reconfirming the interpretation results with the informants.

## **3. Result & Discussion**

### **Increased Access to Capital and Economic Independence**

One of the essential findings of this research is the role of cooperatives in opening access to capital for traditional fishermen. Before joining cooperatives, most fishermen relied heavily on loans from middlemen with systematically high interest rates (Mujiburrahman & Astuti, 2020; Huda, 2021; Fitriani & Mahendra, 2022). However, after joining the cooperative, fishermen gain access to low interest savings and loans, as well as cooperation. This encourages increased independence in procuring fishing gear and fuel.

Interviews indicate that fishers feel more financially secure because they have access to emergency reserve funds provided by the cooperative. In addition, they have begun to avoid the "ijon" practice, which was previously very common (Sutanto et al., 2018; Lestari, 2019; Huda, 2021). Overall, cooperatives are becoming a fair and trusted institutional alternative for fishing communities. The graph below shows the increase in participatory scores in access to capital after joining the cooperative:

**Figure 2.** Comparison of Socio Economic Impact Before and After Joining the Cooperative



Source: Field interview data 2025, processed by researchers

### Strengthening Solidarity and Social Capital

Cooperatives have also been shown to play a significant role in building social trust and community solidarity. This is evident from the high level of involvement of members in deliberative activities, cooperation, and joint decision-making (Sutanto et al., 2018; Lestari, 2019; Fitriani & Mahendra, 2022). Many cooperative members state that their social relations have become closer after being actively involved in cooperative activities.

The social capital formed through cooperatives is a strong internal driver for strengthening economic resilience. When fish prices fall or catches decline, solidarity among cooperative members increases with a trust based emergency loan mechanism (Huda, 2021; Lestari, 2019; Mujiburrahman & Astuti, 2020). Table 1 below illustrates the changes in perceptions of trust among cooperative members before and after they became active in the cooperative structure.

**Table 1.** Changes in Perceptions of Trust Among Cooperative Members

Social Aspects		Before the Cooperative	After Cooperative
Trust between members		Low (1)	High (4)
Cooperation between families		Limited	Organized
Community participation	meeting	Rare (1)	Active (4)

Source: Results of field observations and interviews, 2025



### **Transformation of Local Economic Structure**

The study also found that cooperatives have transformed the way fishermen's catches are distributed. Previously, almost all catches were sold to middlemen at low prices, but cooperatives now act as aggregators and distributors of seafood to broader markets, including city markets and hotels (Fitriani & Mahendra, 2022; Lestari, 2019; Huda, 2021).

With cooperatives as intermediaries, the selling price becomes more stable and fair for fishermen. It also reduces the risk of price manipulation often practiced by big traders (Mujiburrahman & Astuti, 2020; Sutanto et al., 2018; Huda, 2021). Some cooperatives have partnered with maritime logistics startups to optimize their seafood supply chains digitally.

Efficient distribution not only increases fishers' income but also strengthens their bargaining position in the market. These changes demonstrate the strategic role of cooperatives as new economic actors in coastal areas.

### **Revitalizing Citizen Participation in Collective Processes**

Cooperatives in the Cirebon fishing community have successfully established a more inclusive and democratic culture of participation. The active participation of residents in cooperative meetings and deliberations reflects an increased collective awareness of the importance of economic sovereignty (Sutanto et al., 2018; Lestari, 2019; Huda, 2021).

Field findings indicate that nearly all cooperative members regularly attend monthly meetings, discuss financial reports, and contribute to decision making processes. This process creates an egalitarian spirit within the community and minimizes the dominance of a few individuals as occurs in the middleman system.

This culture of participation reinforces the values of local economic democracy and transforms cooperatives into a collective learning institution (Fitriani & Mahendra, 2022; Mujiburrahman & Astuti, 2020; Huda, 2021). Activities such as cooperative management training and monthly discussions provide a forum for both social interaction and capacity building.

### **Reduced Dependence on Middlemen**

Dependence on middlemen is one of the main structural problems in fishing communities. Through cooperatives, fishermen can break free from exploitative economic relations and establish a more equitable system (Lestari, 2019; Mujiburrahman & Astuti, 2020; Sutanto et al., 2018). Interview data indicate a significant decrease in dependence on middlemen, as cooperatives provide financing, distribution, and even production facilities.

In addition to economic access, the presence of cooperatives also promotes psychological changes: fishers feel more confident and in control of their work (Huda, 2021; Fitriani & Mahendra, 2022; Sutanto et al., 2018). Some respondents mentioned that they are "no longer afraid of debt" and feel the cooperative is "more like a family than a financial institution." These changes indicate that cooperatives are not only economic solutions, but also social instruments that transform power relations in coastal communities.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that cooperatives play a crucial role in the economic empowerment of traditional fishermen in Cirebon, serving not only as an alternative financial institution but also as a social institution that fosters solidarity, reduces dependence on middlemen, and encourages community participation in the collective decision making process. Cooperatives have been proven to increase access to capital, improve the distribution of catches, and foster social trust among members. This finding addresses the key issue of fishermen's weak bargaining position in the local economic system. It confirms that empowerment encompasses not only material aspects but also social and cultural elements that shape the identity and resilience of fishing communities.

The main contribution of this research lies in the community based qualitative approach that is rarely used in the study of fisher cooperatives. This research provides a foundation for the development of social value based cooperative models in other coastal communities, opening up an exploration space for further research on cooperative digitalization, member regeneration, and cooperative integration in national supply chain systems. In the future, such a participatory approach could strengthen the transformation of cooperatives as a key pillar in a sustainable and socially just maritime economy.

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