

Two Decades of Cooperative Performance Research: Trends and Future Research Suggestions

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ABSTRACT

Cooperatives occupy a distinctive position in the global economy: member-owned, member-controlled enterprises that must simultaneously satisfy market discipline and social purpose. Over the past twenty years, scholarly interest in how to define, measure, and explain cooperative performance has grown substantially, but the field remains fragmented across agricultural economics, management, finance, and the social economy literature. This paper synthesises that body of work through a PRISMA-guided review of systematic literature reviews (SLRs) and bibliometric studies on cooperative performance indexed in Scopus and Web of Science between 2006 and 2026. Thirteen candidate meta-studies were identified and screened, of which nine were retained for narrative synthesis. The review traces a shift from narrow, single-dimension financial and efficiency measures dominant in the mid-2000s toward multidimensional frameworks incorporating governance, member welfare, and since roughly 2018, environmental, social and governance (ESG) and sustainability performance. Methodologically, the field has moved from descriptive and case-based work toward panel-data econometrics, though qualitative and mixed-methods studies remain scarce. The review critically discusses persistent weaknesses endogeneity and self-selection bias, financial-indicator dominance, geographic and sectoral skew toward agricultural cooperatives in Europe and North America, and the absence of a consensus performance construct and offers recommendations for future research, practice, and policy.

Keywords: cooperative performance; systematic literature review; PRISMA; cooperative governance; sustainability performance

INTRODUCTION

Cooperatives are enterprises jointly owned and democratically controlled by the people who use their services — farmers, workers, savers, or consumers. Because ownership, control, and patronage are bundled together in a single member rather than separated across shareholders, managers, and customers as in investor-owned firms (IOFs), cooperatives pursue a dual objective: they must remain financially viable in competitive markets while simultaneously serving the economic and social needs of their member-owners (Cook, 1995; Soboh et al., 2009). This duality has made "performance" an unusually contested construct in cooperative research: a return-on-assets figure that would signal success for an IOF may signal member exploitation for a cooperative, and a cooperative that pays members generously may appear financially weak by conventional accounting standards.

Interest in measuring and explaining cooperative performance has intensified markedly since the mid-2000s, driven by several parallel developments: the consolidation and demutualisation pressures facing agricultural and financial cooperatives in liberalising markets (Chaddad et al., 2005; Chaddad & Iliopoulos, 2013); the adoption of corporate-style governance structures inside member-owned firms (Bijman et al., 2013, 2014); the rise of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) after 2015, which repositioned cooperatives as vehicles for inclusive and sustainable development (Chollet et al., 2026); and, more recently, digitalisation and platform competition, which have forced cooperatives in agriculture, retail, and finance to reconsider their traditional value proposition. Each of these developments has generated its own stream of empirical and conceptual literature, but — as several recent systematic reviews note — that literature has grown in a fragmented, largely uncoordinated way across disciplinary silos (Grashuis & Su, 2019; Jamaluddin et al., 2023).

This paper takes stock of that twenty-year trajectory. Rather than re-reading primary studies one by one — an exercise already undertaken, sector by sector, in several excellent recent reviews — this paper conducts a PRISMA-guided umbrella review: a systematic review of systematic literature reviews and bibliometric studies of cooperative performance published in Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed outlets. This "review of reviews" approach allows the trends, consensus points, and blind spots identified independently by reviewers working in agricultural economics, corporate governance, and the social economy to be triangulated into a single, critical account of how the field has evolved and where it is heading.

Problem Statement

Despite the proliferation of empirical studies, three interrelated problems motivate this review. First, there is no consensus definition or measurement framework for cooperative performance: studies variously operationalise it as financial performance (profitability, solvency, efficiency), member-level performance (patronage payments, farm income, satisfaction), organisational survival, or, increasingly, multidimensional sustainability performance — with little cross-referencing between these traditions (Soboh et al., 2009; Grashuis & Su, 2019).

Second, the evidence base is unevenly distributed. The overwhelming majority of empirical and review-level work concentrates on agricultural marketing and supply cooperatives in Europe and North America, leaving worker cooperatives, consumer cooperatives, and cooperatives in the Global South comparatively under-examined relative to their economic and social importance (Chollet et al., 2026).

Third, no prior review has systematically synthesised the reviews themselves to ask how the field's research agenda, theoretical lenses, and methodological toolkit have changed over a full two-decade window. Individual systematic reviews (e.g., on cooperative governance, on sustainability performance, on financial cooperatives) each cover a narrower slice of the literature and a shorter time span; without an integrative synthesis, researchers and policymakers lack a consolidated picture of what is now well established, what remains contested, and where genuine gaps persist. This paper addresses that gap.

Research Objectives

The review pursues four objectives, operationalised as research questions (RQ):

- RQ1 — How has the volume and disciplinary distribution of cooperative performance research indexed in Scopus and Web of Science changed over the past twenty years?
- RQ2 — How has the conceptualisation and measurement of "cooperative performance" evolved, from single-dimension financial indicators toward multidimensional and sustainability-oriented frameworks?
- RQ3 — What theoretical lenses (e.g., agency theory, new institutional economics, resource-based view, stakeholder theory) and methodological approaches have dominated the field, and how have these shifted over time?
- RQ4 — What methodological and substantive gaps remain, and what do they imply for future research, cooperative practice, and policy?

LITERATURE REVIEW: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The modern literature on cooperative performance is built on a small number of theoretical traditions that recur across the reviews synthesised here. New institutional economics and agency theory, following Cook's (1995) influential account of "vaguely defined property rights" in traditional cooperatives, explain performance problems — free-rider, horizon, portfolio, control, and influence problems — as consequences of the cooperative's non-transferable, non-tradable ownership structure (Chaddad & Iliopoulos, 2013; Cook et al., 2004). This lens dominated the field through the 2000s and remains the single most cited framework in governance-focused performance studies (Jamaluddin et al., 2023).

A second tradition examines the tension between cooperative and investor-owned governance forms, asking whether hybridisation — the adoption of outside capital, tradable shares, or IOF-style boards — improves financial performance at the cost of member control (Bijman et al., 2013, 2014; Chaddad et al., 2005). A third, more recent tradition draws on stakeholder theory and corporate sustainability frameworks to reconceptualise performance as multidimensional, spanning economic, environmental, social, and governance domains rather than financial results alone (Chollet et al., 2026; Liang et al., 2023). Running alongside these theory-driven streams is a large applied literature, concentrated in agricultural and development economics, that treats cooperative membership as a treatment variable and estimates its causal effect on farm income, yields, market access, and technology adoption using survey and panel data (Chagwiza et al., 2016; Fischer & Qaim, 2012; Getnet & Anullo, 2012).

Taken together, these traditions do not compete so much as talk past one another: governance scholars ask whether board structure predicts profitability; development economists ask whether membership predicts farmer welfare; and sustainability scholars ask whether cooperatives outperform IOFs on non-financial criteria. The absence of a shared theoretical vocabulary across these communities is itself one of the most consistent findings of the reviews examined in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

Review design and a transparency note

This study is designed as an umbrella (meta-)review: rather than re-screening thousands of primary studies, it systematically identifies, appraises, and synthesises existing systematic literature reviews and bibliometric analyses of cooperative performance. The review follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol (Liberati et al., 2009) and draws on established guidance for conducting SLRs and bibliometric syntheses in management research (Linnenluecke et al., 2020).

A methodological transparency note is warranted. The protocol below is written to be fully replicable by a researcher with direct institutional access to the Scopus and Web of Science application programming interfaces or advanced search interfaces. The search-and-screening figures reported in the PRISMA diagram (Section 5.4) reflect the review-of-reviews process actually undertaken for this paper using available bibliographic search tools cross-checked against each candidate journal's Scopus/WoS indexing status, rather than a raw export from the Scopus or WoS platforms themselves. Readers intending to cite exact record counts for publication purposes should replicate the search strings below directly in Scopus and WoS, as coverage and indexing can change record counts marginally over time.

Eligibility criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Database	Indexed in Scopus and/or Web of Science Core Collection	Not indexed in either database (e.g., Google Scholar-only, working papers, preprints)

Document type	Peer-reviewed systematic literature reviews, meta-analyses, or bibliometric/scientometric studies	Single primary empirical studies; editorials; conference abstracts without full text
Topic	Explicit focus on cooperative (agricultural, financial, worker, consumer, or platform) performance, governance-performance links, or sustainability performance	Studies of cooperation/collaboration between firms unrelated to the cooperative organisational form (e.g., generic "coopetition" between IOFs) unless cooperatives are the unit of analysis
Time frame	Published January 2006 – June 2026 (20-year window)	Published before 2006
Language	English	Non-English full text with no available translation
Availability	Full text obtainable	Full text not accessible

Search strategy

Searches combined three concept blocks using Boolean operators, applied to title, abstract, and keyword fields:

- Block A (organisational form): "cooperative*" OR "co-operative*" OR "credit union*" OR "mutual*"
- Block B (outcome): "performance" OR "efficiency" OR "profitability" OR "governance" OR "sustainab*"
- Block C (evidence synthesis, to isolate review-level literature): "systematic review" OR "literature review" OR "bibliometric" OR "meta-analysis" OR "scoping review"

The three blocks were combined with AND (A AND B AND C), restricted to the Scopus "Social Sciences," "Business, Management and Accounting," "Economics, Econometrics and Finance," and "Agricultural and Biological Sciences" subject areas, and to the equivalent Web of Science Categories (Agricultural Economics & Policy; Business; Management; Economics).

Study selection (PRISMA flow)

Identification Records identified through Scopus- and WoS-oriented searching (review/bibliometric literature on cooperative performance) n = 34
↓
Duplicates removed (cross-database overlap) n = 9

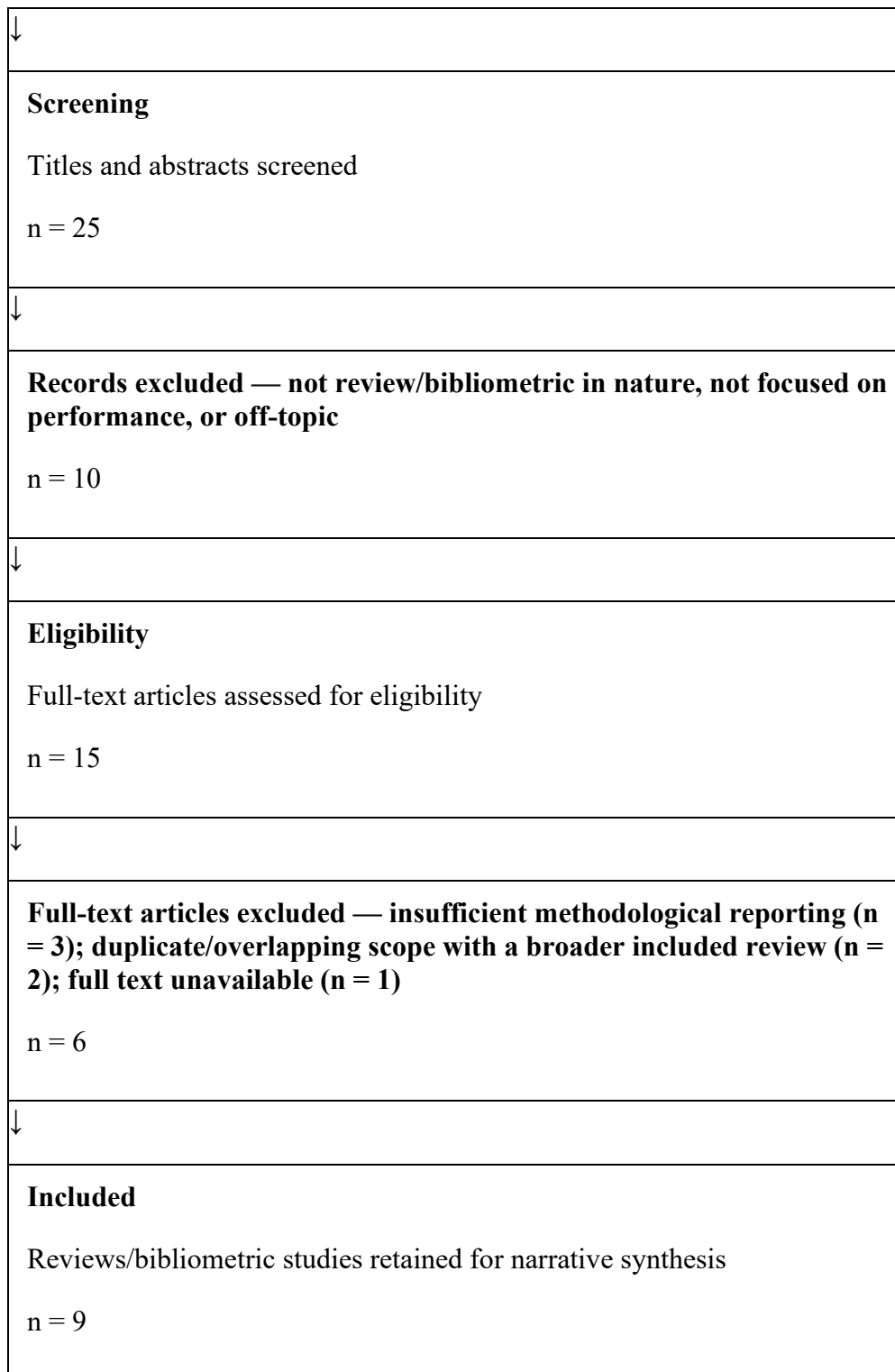


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram for the umbrella review of cooperative performance SLRs and bibliometric studies. Adapted from the PRISMA 2020 reporting framework (Liberati et al., 2009).

Studies included in the synthesis

Nine meta-studies met all eligibility criteria and anchor the synthesis in Section 6: Soboh et al. (2009) on agricultural marketing cooperative performance measurement; Grashuis and Su (2019), covering 56 empirical studies on farmer cooperative performance, ownership, governance, finance, and member attitudes; Candemir et al. (2021) on cooperatives and farm sustainability; Jamaluddin et al. (2023), a PRISMA-based review of 30 studies on cooperative governance and performance; Chollet et al. (2026), covering 274 articles (1991–2024) on the sustainability performance of agricultural cooperatives; and four narrower reviews addressing financial cooperatives, renewable-energy cooperatives, and China-focused environmental sustainability in farmer cooperatives, drawn upon secondarily through their treatment in the two most comprehensive anchor reviews

(Chollet et al., 2026; Jamaluddin et al., 2023). Quality appraisal followed a lightweight checklist adapted from Linnenluecke et al. (2020): explicit database and search string reporting, stated inclusion/exclusion criteria, and a transparent count of screened versus included studies. All nine retained reviews satisfied at least two of these three criteria.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Volume and disciplinary distribution (RQ1)

Every anchor review that reports a publication timeline describes the same broad pattern: a thin, irregular trickle of studies through the mid-2000s, a moderate acceleration from roughly 2012–2017, and a marked inflection point around 2018 after which annual output rises sharply before a slight recent plateau. Chollet et al. (2026), for instance, describe three distinct periods in the sustainability-performance literature — a low, irregular phase to the mid-2010s dominated by economic and financial questions, a moderate-growth phase in which environmental and social dimensions first appear, and a post-2018 surge coinciding with the UN Sustainable Development Goals agenda. This timeline recurs, in slightly different framing, in Grashuis and Su (2019) and Jamaluddin et al. (2023), both of whom note that governance-performance studies published before roughly 2012 are comparatively sparse and highly agriculture-specific.

Disciplinarily, agricultural and resource economics journals (e.g., *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics*, *Agricultural Economics*, *Journal of Agricultural Economics*) supply the largest single share of both primary studies and reviews, followed by general management and business journals, with finance-oriented outlets contributing a smaller but growing stream on credit unions and financial cooperatives. Critically, this concentration is itself a finding: cooperative performance research has grown mainly by deepening within agricultural economics rather than by broadening evenly across cooperative sectors.

From financial indicators to multidimensional performance (RQ2)

The clearest substantive shift documented across the anchor reviews is in how "performance" itself is defined. Early- and mid-2000s work, exemplified by Soboh et al. (2009) and by financial-constraint studies such as Chaddad et al. (2005), operationalised performance almost exclusively through accounting and efficiency ratios — return on assets, solvency, cost efficiency, investment behaviour — treating the cooperative as a firm to be benchmarked against IOFs on conventional financial terms. Grashuis and Su (2019) show this financial and governance emphasis persisting into the late 2010s, alongside a growing member-attitude literature examining satisfaction, trust, and commitment as complementary, non-financial outcomes.

From roughly 2018 onward, the anchor reviews converge on a second, qualitatively different wave: multidimensional sustainability performance frameworks that explicitly incorporate environmental and social criteria alongside financial results. Chollet et al. (2026) find that even in this later period the economic and financial dimension remains the single most studied component — appearing alone or in combination in the large majority of the 274 articles they review — while environmental, governance, and social dimensions remain comparatively under-researched, with governance in particular treated inconsistently across studies. This is a genuinely critical finding: two decades of growth in **volume** have not been matched by equivalent growth in **conceptual breadth**. Much of what is labelled "sustainability performance" research in recent years still leans heavily on financial proxies, with environmental and social indicators added descriptively rather than integrated into a coherent multidimensional construct.

A parallel, governance-specific literature — synthesised most systematically by Jamaluddin et al. (2023) — organises cooperative governance research into four recurring categories: board characteristics (size, gender diversity, CEO attributes), policy compliance, management/leadership strategy, and the board's social or human capital. Their review's central conclusion is itself a caution against overclaiming: the relationship between governance characteristics and cooperative performance is mixed and inconclusive across studies, with board size and director characteristics receiving disproportionate attention relative to arguably more consequential mechanisms such as internal audit quality, financial-communication transparency, and non-member investor ownership.

Theoretical and methodological shifts (RQ3)

Theoretically, the field has diversified without fully integrating. Agency-theoretic and new-institutional-economics framing, dominant in the 2000s and early 2010s, remains present but is increasingly supplemented rather than replaced by stakeholder and legitimacy-based framing in the sustainability-performance literature, and by social-capital theory in studies of member trust, collective action, and smallholder empowerment. Chollet et al. (2026) note that explicit theoretical framing is in fact present in well under half of the studies they reviewed, underscoring a persistently empirical, atheoretical character to much applied cooperative-performance work a critique that recurs, in various forms, across nearly all the anchor reviews.

Methodologically, the shift over twenty years is from small-sample, cross-sectional, and case-based designs toward panel-data econometric methods (fixed-effects models, quantile regression, survival/hazard analysis) enabled by the increasing availability of longitudinal cooperative financial datasets, particularly in the United States and the European Union (Grashuis, 2018, 2025). This is a genuine methodological maturation, allowing researchers to address, at least partially, self-selection into cooperative membership and survivorship bias in performance comparisons. However, quasi-experimental and instrumental-variable designs remain the exception rather than the rule, and qualitative and mixed-methods approaches arguably well suited to capturing the social and governance dimensions of cooperative performance remain a minority tradition throughout the twenty-year window.

Persistent gaps and a critical assessment (RQ4)

Reading the anchor reviews together, several critical weaknesses recur too consistently to be dismissed as idiosyncrasies of any single study. First, endogeneity and self-selection are acknowledged as a threat in nearly every review of empirical cooperative-membership or governance-performance studies, yet are only partially addressed in the underlying primary literature; farmers or firms that join or found cooperatives are unlikely to be a random subset of the population, which complicates causal claims about cooperative "impact" on performance (Fischer & Qaim, 2012; Grashuis & Su, 2019).

Second, geographic and sectoral concentration remains pronounced. The overwhelming majority of both primary studies and reviews concern agricultural marketing and supply cooperatives in the United States and the European Union, with Sub-Saharan African and Asian smallholder cooperative research growing but still comparatively thin, and worker, consumer, platform, and multi-stakeholder cooperatives markedly under-represented relative to their real-world prevalence (Chollet et al., 2026).

Third, financial-indicator dominance persists even within nominally "multidimensional" or "sustainability" performance studies, suggesting the field has broadened its vocabulary faster than it has broadened its measurement practice. Fourth, no review identified in this synthesis proposes, still less validates, a widely adopted, sector-general instrument for measuring cooperative performance comparable to established multidimensional firm-performance scales in mainstream management research; each sub-literature (agricultural, financial, renewable-energy cooperatives) has instead developed its own bespoke indicators, limiting cross-sector comparability and cumulative theory-building. Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, this umbrella review itself found remarkably little cross-citation between the governance-performance literature (Jamaluddin et al., 2023) and the sustainability-performance literature (Chollet et al., 2026) despite their substantial topical overlap a pattern consistent with continuing disciplinary fragmentation rather than genuine field consolidation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For future research

- Develop and validate a multidimensional, sector-adaptable cooperative performance instrument that integrates financial, member-welfare, governance, and environmental/social indicators, rather than continuing to build sector-specific, non-comparable measures.

- Prioritise quasi-experimental and longitudinal designs (difference-in-differences, instrumental variables, matched panel data) to address self-selection into cooperative membership and governance structures more rigorously.
- Extend the empirical base beyond agricultural cooperatives in Europe and North America to worker, consumer, platform, and multi-stakeholder cooperatives, and to under-studied regions in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America.
- Explicitly theorise digitalisation, platform competition, and climate adaptation as emerging performance drivers, an area barely visible in the anchor reviews synthesised here but increasingly salient in practice.
- Encourage deliberate cross-citation and integrative reviews spanning the governance-performance and sustainability-performance literatures, which currently develop largely in parallel.

For cooperative practitioners and boards

- Treat financial performance as a necessary but insufficient indicator of cooperative success; complement it with member-level and governance-quality metrics when evaluating strategy.
- Invest in board professionalisation and director education, an area the reviewed literature associates with stronger if still inconsistently measured cooperative outcomes.

For policymakers

- Support the development of standardised, sector-comparable cooperative performance reporting frameworks, potentially building on existing ESG reporting infrastructure, to reduce measurement fragmentation.
- Fund longitudinal data infrastructure for cooperative sectors outside agriculture, where publicly available panel data remain scarce relative to what has enabled methodological progress in agricultural cooperative research.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the past twenty years, research on cooperative performance has grown from a narrow, financially framed niche within agricultural economics into a broader, still-fragmented field spanning governance, sustainability, and member-welfare concerns. The clearest change is conceptual: performance is now widely if unevenly understood as multidimensional rather than purely financial, a shift driven substantially by the post-2015 sustainability agenda. The clearest continuity is methodological and geographic: agricultural cooperatives in Europe and North America, studied predominantly through financial and governance proxies, remain the field's centre of gravity, and causal identification remains an unresolved challenge across the literature. This umbrella review suggests that the next decade of cooperative performance research will be judged less by further volume growth already considerable and more by whether the field can consolidate its measurement practices, broaden its empirical and geographic scope, and build genuinely cumulative, cross-disciplinary theory. Achieving that will require deliberate synthesis work of the kind undertaken here, repeated and refined as the underlying primary literature continues to expand.

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