

Success Story

KENYA CLEAR

Cooperatives Hold the Key to Increasing Resilience to Shocks

By Tindi Sitati

Worker Cooperatives are a powerful pathway to protect vulnerable populations from shocks such as livestock illnesses, climate-related challenges, economic insecurity, election-related violence and the COVID-19 pandemic. Global Communities' Cooperative Leadership, Engagement, Advocacy and Research (CLEAR) Project, funded through the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Cooperative Development Program, conducted a research project to understand how shocks impact cooperative members and how to support their recovery. Scott Bellows, United States International University–Africa (USIU–A), led the Cooperative Resilience Longitudinal (CRL) study in partnership with Global Communities. The longitudinal study was conducted over five years, from 2019 to 2023, measuring data from 20 cooperatives across nine counties in Kenya.

The CRL study explored how cooperative members built resiliency and trust in their cooperatives following shocks. It revealed that active members tend to have positive expectations for their lives, greater hope for the future, higher family cohesion, increased self-efficacy and higher self-esteem. Several key trends emerged from the results, including benefits of active membership, cooperative gender gaps, impacts of reduced youth engagement and economic resilience.

Active cooperative members report higher levels of optimism for their future. Active members of better-performing cooperatives reported being able to fund medication, doctor visits, home repairs and their children's education. 31.1% of active cooperative members reported being very confident they could get a business loan compared to 17.5% of inactive members. Being able to pay for health-related costs and having the flexibility to continue expanding business ventures led active cooperative members to feel more hopeful about their futures.

"The study shows those whose households are more optimistic is because they are active members of their cooperatives – so the question is how to make cooperative members more active," said Mary Mkare, Director of Cooperatives in Kilifi County, Kenya.



"We learned that the biggest risk is never what we anticipate, it is what we have never experienced before which we don't have a manual for, especially the dangers posed by unpredictable climatic changes."

—Daniel Marube, CEO of Cooperative Alliance of Kenya



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The gender gap in agricultural production widened significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, as women were required to increase unpaid domestic labor and reduce working hours outside of the home. As a result, women's participation in cooperatives decreased while men's remained steady. The CRL study revealed that active female cooperative members experience greater stability and economic safety, which showed the importance of finding ways to increase women's participation in cooperatives.

"Cooperatives need to provide stability and safety for women," said Pamela Kaburu, Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist at Global Communities. "A key finding from the study was that gender and age inclusivity is crucial for enhancing resilience within agricultural cooperatives.

According to the CRL study, cooperative members aged 25 to 30 were the least optimistic about their future in business, health and food security. They were found to have decreased participation in cooperatives, emphasizing the need to create products, values and responsibilities that can attract the youth population and increase their interest in cooperatives.

"The movement is 'aged' – but there's an opportunity for young people to actively participate in cooperatives through the worker cooperative model," Kaburu said. "Study stakeholders agreed that good governance is key to motivating youth in cooperatives."

Only 50% of cooperative members could pay medical bills out of pocket rather than needing a loan for doctor visits, dental appointments and hospitalization during the COVID-19 pandemic. And 70% of members who reported medical emergencies received financial support from their cooperative. This phenomenon emphasized the need for cooperative leaders to adequately plan for the future by supporting resilience through emergency response programs.