

Mentoring for the development of the Merah Putih Village cooperative for horticultural farmers in Sempajaya Village

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ABSTRACT

The Merah Putih Village Cooperative serves as a strategic rural economic institution to improve community welfare through collective business development. However, the Merah Putih Village Cooperative in Sempajaya Village continues to face several challenges, including limited productive business units, low membership participation, and inadequate managerial capacity to support the economic activities of horticultural farmers. This community service program aimed to strengthen the cooperative through mentoring focused on institutional development, productive business expansion, and increasing the participation of horticultural farmers as cooperative members. The program adopted a participatory approach using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), training, mentoring, and monitoring and evaluation. The mentoring activities emphasized business development planning, organizational governance, capacity building for cooperative managers, and membership recruitment strategies through farmer groups. The results demonstrated improved managerial knowledge and skills among cooperative administrators, the development of a productive business plan focused on agricultural input supply, increased interest among horticultural farmers in joining the cooperative, and improvements in membership administration. Overall, the mentoring program strengthened the institutional capacity of the Merah Putih Village Cooperative and enhanced its potential to become a productive, participatory, and sustainable rural economic institution that supports the development of the horticultural sector in Sempajaya Village.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The horticulture sector is an agricultural sub-sector that plays a strategic role in supporting food security and increasing rural incomes. Horticultural commodities, such as vegetables and

fruits, possess high economic value and enjoy relatively stable market demand. In Karo Regency, the horticulture sector serves as the backbone of the local economy, particularly in highland areas where agro-climatic conditions favor the cultivation of these crops.

The Merah Putih Village Cooperative in Sempajaya Village has been operational for approximately one year, with core activities comprising member savings, the sale of basic necessities, and the organization of low-cost markets. While these activities demonstrate that the cooperative is functioning, its operations remain limited to consumption-oriented functions; it has yet to evolve into a productive cooperative capable of supporting the community's agricultural enterprises.

A primary challenge is the limited scope of the cooperative's productive business units. Its business activities have not yet extended to the community's main sector: horticultural farming. Yet, developing agriculture-based business units could generate greater added value for cooperative members. According to the International Labour Organization (2020), successful cooperatives are those capable of developing business units that align with their members' economic needs.

Furthermore, the cooperative's membership remains relatively low around 60 individuals relative to the total number of farmers in the village. This low membership stems from a lack of community understanding regarding the benefits of cooperatives and the absence of an effective member recruitment strategy. In this context, farmer groups (*Poktan*) hold significant potential as a foundation for expanding cooperative membership, given that farmers are already organized within these groups. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (2017), farmer institutions such as farmer groups play a crucial role in strengthening farmers' access to resources and economic services.

Another issue is the limited managerial capacity of the cooperative's administrators, particularly regarding business and financial management. This limitation has hindered the cooperative from developing its business operations optimally. Strengthening the capacity of administrators is a critical factor in a cooperative's success. According to the Ministry of Cooperatives and Small and Medium Enterprises of the Republic of Indonesia (2021), the success of a cooperative is largely determined by the quality of its management and the level of member participation. On the other hand, the participation of horticultural farmers in cooperatives remains limited. Farmers tend to operate individually and have yet to leverage cooperatives as a means to strengthen their collective economic position. This indicates a gap between the existence of cooperatives and the actual needs of farmers on the ground. According to the World Bank (2020), strengthening local economic institutions is key to improving the well-being of rural communities..

2. METHOD

2.1 Place and Time of Implementation

The community service activity was conducted in Sempajaya Village, Karo Regency, North Sumatra Province, Indonesia. The initial socialization and coordination activity was carried out on Monday, April 20, 2026, at 11.00 WIB at the Sempajaya Village Office. The activity involved the management of the Merah Putih Village Cooperative, horticultural farmers, farmer groups (*Kelompok Tani/Poktan*), village communities, and the community service implementation team.



Figure 1. Documentation following the community service activity conducted by the UQB team with the local community and the board of the Merah Putih Cooperative in Sempajaya Village, Karo Regency.

2.2 Types and Sources of Data

This community service activity employed a participatory approach by actively involving the management of the Merah Putih Village Cooperative, horticultural farmers, and farmer groups (*Poktan*) in Sempajaya Village. The data used in this activity were obtained through field observations, activity documentation, group discussions, and direct mentoring processes with partners.

The implementation of the program consisted of several stages as follows:

2.2.1 Initial socialization and coordination

The initial stage was conducted to introduce the objectives and program plans to partners, establish a mutual understanding between the community service team and cooperative administrators, and identify the main problems related to institutional strengthening and cooperative business development.

2.2.2 Cooperative capacity-building training

The training stage aimed to improve the understanding and skills of cooperative administrators regarding cooperative governance, productive business development, institutional administration, and membership development strategies. The training was conducted through material presentations, interactive discussions, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to identify problems and formulate alternative solutions based on partner conditions.

2.2.3 Cooperative development mentoring

Mentoring activities were carried out directly with cooperative administrators and horticultural farmers, focusing on the preparation of productive business development plans, strengthening cooperative administrative systems, and increasing farmer participation through a farmer group-based approach (*Poktan*).

2.2.4 Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation were conducted to assess the achievement of the mentoring program. The evaluation was carried out through direct observation, discussions with partners, and analysis of changes in the cooperative's institutional conditions after the implementation of activities. The evaluated aspects included improvements in administrators' understanding, readiness for productive business development, farmer participation, and program sustainability.

The participatory approach implemented in this activity is expected to strengthen the institutional capacity of the Merah Putih Village Cooperative so that it can develop into a productive, participatory, and sustainable rural economic institution supporting horticultural farmers in Sempajaya Village.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Implementation of Mentoring Activities

The mentoring program for the development of the Merah Putih Village Cooperative for horticultural farmers in Sempajaya Village was conducted through several stages, including initial coordination, socialization, training, mentoring, and evaluation. The activities involved cooperative administrators, horticultural farmers, village representatives, and the community. The implementation of the program aimed to strengthen the role of the cooperative as a village economic institution that supports the productivity and welfare of horticultural farmers.

The initial stage began with coordination and identification of partner problems. The results showed that the Merah Putih Village Cooperative in Sempajaya Village had been operating with activities such as member savings, basic necessities sales, and village market activities. However, the cooperative's role was still limited to consumption-oriented activities and had not optimally supported the main economic activities of the community, particularly horticultural farming.

The mentoring activities provided an understanding of the importance of developing productive cooperative units that are aligned with members' needs. Through discussions and mentoring sessions, cooperative administrators and farmers identified potential business opportunities, especially those related to agricultural input supply and marketing of horticultural products.



Figure 2. Documentation of the UQB community service team's engagement with the community and the board of the Merah Putih Cooperative in Sempajaya Village, Karo Regency.

3.2 Strengthening Cooperative Management Capacity

One of the main focuses of the mentoring program was improving the managerial capacity of cooperative administrators. The training activities covered cooperative governance, business planning, financial administration, and strategies for increasing member participation. The results showed that administrators gained a better understanding of cooperative management principles and the importance of professional governance. Before the mentoring program, the cooperative faced limitations in business planning, administrative management, and development strategies. Through training and discussions, administrators began to understand that cooperatives should not only function as savings and consumption institutions but also as productive economic institutions that provide direct benefits to members. The mentoring process also encouraged administrators to improve membership administration systems and develop more structured cooperative management practices. This improvement is important because effective management and transparency are key factors in building member trust and ensuring cooperative sustainability.

3.3 Development of Productive Business Units

The mentoring program resulted in the identification of potential productive business units that could be developed according to the characteristics of Sempajaya Village, where most residents work as horticultural farmers. One of the proposed business developments was the establishment of an agricultural input supply unit providing farming necessities such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides. The development of this business unit is expected to provide economic benefits for cooperative members by improving access to agricultural inputs at more affordable and organized prices. In addition, the cooperative has the potential to expand its role in supporting the horticultural value chain through collective marketing of agricultural products.

The development of cooperative business units based on local potential is considered important because the success of rural cooperatives depends on their ability to respond to the economic needs of members. Therefore, further development of marketing units for horticultural products is needed to increase farmers' bargaining position and expand market access.

3.4 Increasing Farmer Participation and Membership Development

Another important outcome of the mentoring activity was increased awareness among horticultural farmers regarding the benefits of joining the cooperative. Previously, many farmers had not actively participated because they had limited understanding of the economic advantages provided by cooperatives. The mentoring approach utilized farmer groups (Poktan) as an entry point for increasing participation. This approach was considered effective because farmers already had social relationships and organizational structures within their groups. Through discussions and socialization activities, farmers received information about cooperative functions and opportunities to obtain economic benefits through collective business activities. The activity encouraged the cooperative management to develop a more systematic membership recruitment strategy. Increasing farmer participation is expected to strengthen the cooperative's capital, expand its business network, and improve the sustainability of the Merah Putih Village Cooperative.

3.5 Evaluation and Future Development

The evaluation results indicated that the mentoring program provided positive impacts on strengthening the cooperative institution. The administrators demonstrated improved understanding of cooperative management, the cooperative obtained clearer business development directions, and collaboration between cooperative members, farmers, and village stakeholders became stronger. However, continuous support is still required to ensure the sustainability of the cooperative development program. Future development should focus on strengthening digital-based cooperative administration, improving financial management systems, and expanding productive business units, particularly in the marketing of horticultural products. Digitalization can support more efficient record management, increase transparency, and improve cooperative accountability. Overall, the mentoring program has become an initial strategic step in transforming the Merah Putih Village Cooperative in Sempajaya Village into a productive, participatory, and sustainable rural economic institution. Through continuous assistance and collaboration among stakeholders, the cooperative is expected to contribute significantly to improving the welfare of horticultural farmers in the region.

4. CONCLUSION

The assistance program for developing the Merah Putih Village Cooperative for horticultural farmers in Sempajaya Village was carried out through stages comprising socialization, training, direct mentoring, and monitoring and evaluation. This initiative has contributed positively to enhancing the understanding among cooperative administrators, horticultural farmers, and the community regarding the cooperative's role as a village economic institution that supports the strengthening of agricultural enterprises. The results indicate that the mentoring successfully strengthened the cooperative's institutional capacity by improving administrators' understanding of cooperative governance, business development planning, and strategies to expand membership through farmer groups. Furthermore, the program established a development direction for productive business units aligned with the needs of horticultural farmers, particularly regarding the provision of agricultural production inputs and the enhancement of economic services for cooperative members. The continued development of the Merah Putih Village Cooperative in Sempajaya Village requires ongoing support from the village government, cooperative administrators, farmer groups, and relevant stakeholders. Strengthening the cooperative should also focus on implementing administrative digitalization to improve the effectiveness, transparency, and accountability of its management. Additionally, business unit development needs to expand into horticultural product marketing utilizing collective marketing, broadening market networks, and leveraging digital technology to enhance the value-added and competitiveness of the farmers' produce. Overall, this mentoring program serves as an initial step toward fostering the Merah Putih Village Cooperative's growth into a productive, participatory, and sustainable village economic institution that supports the improved welfare of horticultural farmers in Sempajaya Village.

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