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Obstacles to effective strategy implementation: Insights from Agricultural Cooperatives in Malawi

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ABSTRACT

The strategy implementation literature remains fragmented, thus requiring further empirical studies to explain SI challenges in different types of organizations. This has influenced the nature of this study, which aims to identify barriers in SI in the novel organizational context of agriculture cooperatives.

This research is a qualitative, multi-firm investigation of the barriers to strategy execution in Malawian agricultural cooperatives. Seven agricultural cooperatives with diverse characteristics that have been in business for at least ten years were purposefully chosen for the study. Managers, chairpersons, and organization members provided information through in-depth interviews facilitated by a semi-structured questionnaire.

Findings include that strategy implementation ineffectiveness results from the lack of understanding of strategy, financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, governance, organizational structure, and low literacy levels. The reasons for the strategy implementation failure originated from the formulation stage, with the lack of understanding of strategy, resource allocation, and strategic direction affecting the type of strategy. It is recommended that agricultural cooperatives, in an effort to transform into competitive businesses, be remodeled into a structure that can influence effective strategy implementation and give them a competitive advantage.

A limited number of in-depth interviews were conducted as access to the other cooperatives was a challenge. However, the number of cooperatives interviewed is a representative sample of the agriculture cooperatives across the country providing deep insights into the topic relevant to the organizational type and industry.

This paper explains why strategy implementation fails in underexplored non-investor firms like cooperatives within the agriculture industry.

Keywords: Strategy Implementation Failure, Agriculture Cooperatives, Competitive Advantage, Effective Strategy Implementation.

JEL Codes: Q13, L31, M21.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The science of strategic management has broadened its research scope to encompass many phenomena and has been merged into various other disciplines. The concerns that have arisen with the extensive research in strategic management are the relevance of the studies for management practice (Drnevich et al., 2020) and ensuring the field does not lose its core direction (Durand et al., 2017). The relevance of strategic management research is argued to have been lost in less impactful research and increasing fragmentation (Durand et al., 2017). This study is based on the least researched subfield of strategic management, strategy implementation (SI), to refocus strategic management research on practical relevance and retain its fundamental direction.

Empirical research in the strategy implementation domain has taken a drastic turn in the past decade as practitioners and academics have taken a keen interest in understanding the phenomena. SI is pivotal in determining an organization's capacity to secure and sustain a competitive edge (Noble, 1999). Research has estimated that approximately 70% of U.S. organizations experience failure due to ineffective strategy implementation, with around 60% encountering subpar performance during the implementation phase (Yang, 2019). However, these reported failure rates should be cautiously approached, as the underlying data often relies on outdated, unreliable, or incomplete sources (Candido, 2015). Despite the challenges in obtaining accurate failure rates for strategy implementation, the critical importance of executing strategy effectively remains unquestionable. This has led to a unified drive among practitioners and scholars to delve into the dynamics and components that contribute to successful strategy implementation and into understanding the challenges that hinder the effective implementation of strategy (Noble, 1999; Tawse & Tabesh, 2021; Srivastava & Sushil, 2016). This has helped establish the trajectory of strategy implementation research, which is still fragmented and developing, thus requiring further exploration to understand factors that hinder the successful implementation of SI in diverse organizations and industries through empirical studies.

Despite their challenges over the years, public policy worldwide has favored the establishment of agricultural cooperatives (Zhang, Luo & Li, 2021). This phenomenon is due to the economic and social benefits that this form of organization exhibits. From an economic perspective, cooperatives give a collective opportunity for a smallholder farmer's voice to be heard in negotiating prices, marketing, and meeting costs (Mohammed & Lee, 2015). Besides, cooperatives are preferred because their democratic principles mean that farmers who lack business acumen have a say in the running of the business itself and would not suffer from the asymmetric information and moral hazard problems accompanying associations that are generally not managed by the owners (Grashuis, 2018).

In Western countries, agricultural cooperatives dominate the agri-food supply chain. For example, in the European Union (EU), the cooperatives' market share for the whole agricultural sector exceeds 50% in countries like Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Bijman & Iliopoulos, 2014) cited in Cadmir et al. (2021). In the USA, about 75% of the milk produced in the country in 2017 was marketed by dairy cooperatives (Cadmir et al., 2021).

In the African context, it is evident from studies carried out in countries like Ethiopia, for example, that independent farmers were less efficient than members of cooperatives (Abate et

al., 2014).In Malawi, agriculture is critical to the economy, with the sector contributing 23 percent to the total GDP in 2020, making it the principal livelihood of over 80% of the population (World Bank, 2022). The agriculture sector has been challenged with many inefficiencies as smallholder farmers have limited access to markets and information, disparate and limited access to agricultural extension services, limited capital, failure to cope with changing tastes and demands, and heavy reliance on rain-fed agriculture has led to low levels of output. Cooperatives, therefore, have been resuscitated after a period of oblivion as a measure to circumvent these challenges (Mutero et al., 2016; Mojo et al., 2017; Lwanda, Phiri & Gondwe, 2012; Vicari & Borda-Rodriguez, 2014). However, cooperatives face numerous challenges that emerge from both the internal structure and external forces. In most cases, cooperatives often fail to attain their intended objectives, leading to scholars recommending the reinvention of their operative model (Zhang et al., 2021; Grashuis, 2018; Mazzarol et al., 2018).

Therefore, this paper endeavors to understand what hinders strategy implementation effectiveness in agricultural cooperatives. To pursue this objective, the following research questions were employed to direct the investigation: i) How is strategy implementation defined in agricultural cooperatives? ii) How does the cooperative implement strategy? iii). What are the occurring challenges or problems that hinder strategy implementation? The paper is structured in sections and begins with a literature review to explore academic discourse in strategy implementation and understanding the nature of cooperatives, followed by the methodology section, which outlines the study protocol. This is followed by a results section, discussion and recommendations, and finally, the limitations and areas of future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the academic discourse, "strategy implementation" and "strategy execution" are often used interchangeably, signaling a broad agreement that these terms encapsulate the same concept (Safdari Ranjbar et al., 2014; Tawse & Tabesh, 2021; Richardson, 2005). This consensus is further supported by literature that treats them as synonymous (Yang, Sun & Eppler, 2008; Hrebiniak, 2006; Thompson & Strickland, 2003). Despite this agreement, the field is characterized by various definitions, reflecting diverse researcher perspectives. These definitions generally fall into three categories: process-oriented, behavior-oriented, and a hybrid of the two (Yang, Sun & Eppler, 2008).

According to Noble (1999), strategy implementation is defined as the "communication, interpretation, adoption, and enactment of strategic plans" (Noble, 1999). Noble's definition takes on the process perspective of strategy implementation, unlike Floyd and Woolridge (1992), who defined strategy from the behavioural perspective in the context of managers whose actions or behaviours influence implementation through the alignment of organizational actions (Floyd & Woolridge,1992) cited in (Noble,1999). On the other hand, Singh (1998) approached strategy implementation as an iterative process that captures the process and behavioral aspect to reflect the influence of factors such as decision-making – a cognitive process (Singh,1998) cited in (Yang, Sun & Eppler, 2008).

Other researchers in the domain of strategy implementation define the phenomenon as related to organizational processes, such as performance management and project management, and organizational factors, such as organizational culture (Verweire, 2019).

The absence of a universally accepted definition has led to fragmented research efforts and a lack of cohesive understanding in the field (Alharthy et al., 2017; Noble, 1999a). However, it can be argued from Mintzberg's perspective in his article, The Strategy Concept 1: Five Ps For Strategy, that the very definition of strategy is diverse, and this affords researchers the space to explore the subject in broader terms and thus offer novel submissions which otherwise could have been constrained by a singular definition (Mintzberg,1987). In essence, eclecticism is essential as it offers different perspectives that enhance understanding of a domain through unearthing fundamental elements (Mintzberg, 1987). As such, the focus should not be on establishing a singular definition, as the SI field is still in its infancy, but on ensuring the definitions complement each other.

2.1 Challenges and barriers to strategy implementation

In assessing strategy implementation research in the past decade, the period of 2014-2024, one of the most common themes that emerged is the exploration of obstacles/barriers that hinder implementation efforts within organizations (Cândido, Carlos and Santos, Sérgio (2019); Van der Merwe, & Nienaber (2015); Radomska, (2014); Malshe, Hughes, Good & Friend (2022); Köseoglu, Yazici & Okumus (2018); Vigfusson, Johannsdottir & Olafsson (2021); Candido & Santos (2018).

In their study, Vigfússon et al. (2021) identified obstacles to strategy implementation, which was illustrated through Pryor et al. 5P's strategic leadership model. The study's findings are summed up in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Vigfússon et al. (2021) study findings

5P's Model	Obstacles
Purpose	• Inadequate leadership • Goals and tasks not defined • Management style and lack of support • Unclear strategy • External barriers
Principles	• Inadequate change management • Cultural problems • No guidelines to implement
Process	• Poor communication • Lack of time • Lack of resources • Unexpected problems
People	• Limited commitment and understanding • Inadequate staff capabilities
Performance	• Limited alignment and coordination • It does not support or monitor strategy

Source: Authors own work

Apart from identifying the 16 barriers to strategy implementation, the study identified dualistic factors that pose both barriers and successes. For example, the authors identify commitment and understanding as both a barrier and a success factor. However, the definition of dualism attributed to the factors is ambiguous and can be extended to include all the identified barriers as dualistic. Arguably, the extent as to whether the presence of it (identified factor)

would invariably cause success or its absence would inadvertently create failure. The weightier consequence would render the factor either an obstacle or a success but not both.

On the other hand, Candido and Santos (2018), in their study on strategy implementation, identified similar obstacles to SI and conclusively stated the reality of the accumulation of barriers during the strategy implementation process and further identified the casualty relationship between the barriers- a domino effect of one barrier creating another throughout the implementation process, thus hindering the success of the strategy implementation (Candido & Santos, 2018). The perspective of this study creates an awareness of the effect existing barriers have through the implementation process, perhaps to allude to the necessity of continuous intervention through the strategy implementation process to ensure strategy implementation effectiveness. This perspective can be further explored by future research.

However, the organizations explored in the empirical studies mostly included private entities, state-owned enterprises, publicly listed companies, and small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). However, a significant observation was that a clear majority of the empirical studies, about 67%, did not specify the organizational type under investigation. This lack of specification introduces a degree of ambiguity, as it is unclear whether the findings are applicable across different organizational forms or are specific to certain types. Among the studies that identified the organizational type, there was a noticeable focus on the public sector, particularly within the African context, suggesting a regional emphasis in strategy implementation research. The question is whether the barriers and challenges in literature are identifiable in the context of non-investor firms.

2.2 Cooperatives

A cooperative has several definitions, which can be summed up as a member-controlled organization in which the return on investments is meant to benefit the members. Unlike investor-owned firms (IOFs), cooperatives' objective is to meet the common economic, social, and cultural needs of the members (International Cooperative Alliance 1995) cited in (Okem, 2016). Several scholars have identified governance structure as the prominent difference between IOFs and cooperatives (Hendrikse & Bijman, 2002; Bontems & Fulton, 2009; Hueth & Marcoul, 2015; Peng *et al*., 2018).

The classification of cooperatives is based on the principles that the cooperatives adopt. There are four distinct cooperative principles: "Rochdale, Traditional, Proportional, and Contemporary" (Bijman & Hanisch, 2012). Rochdale principles date back to the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, founded in England in 1844. These principles are foundational to establishing cooperative associations worldwide (Conover, 1959). As such, the four principles differ based on the "business organizational variables of control, ownership and the distribution of benefit" (Bijman & Hanisch, 2012). For example, the contemporary principle based on Dunn (1988) states that "equity is provided by member-users," whereas the proportional principle, "equity is provided by patrons in proportion to patronage" (Bijman & Hanisch, 2012).

Birchall and Ketilson (2009) grouped cooperatives into four categories: consumer, worker, producer, and finance cooperatives (Okem, 2016). The International Labour Organization (ILO) also identified four types of cooperatives, with the multi-stakeholder cooperative being included in place of finance cooperatives (ILO, 2018). The agriculture cooperatives on which the study is based fall into the category of producer cooperatives.

2.2.1 Agriculture Cooperatives

Agricultural cooperatives have transformed from being a social movement of independent farmers Torgerson et al. (1997: 2), cited in (Okem, 2016) to organizations that consist of three functions:

Marketing, supply, and service. Marketing cooperatives assist members in finding outlets for their produce at competitive prices, supply cooperatives help farmers acquire the inputs they need, and service cooperatives provide mechanisms for the provision of critical farm services that may otherwise be expensive for both smallholders and capital-intensive farmers (Ortmann & King P, 2007).

In Africa, governments extensively use agricultural cooperative organizations in countries such as Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Malawi, Ethiopia, Uganda, South Africa and Madagascar (Francesconi & Wouterse, 2021; Mhembwe & Dube, 2017; Mohammed & Lee, 2015; Ahmed & Mesfin, 2017; Khumalo, 2014). At least 40% of African households are members of a cooperative, and Kenya is the leading country in this regard (Mhembwe & Dube, 2017). The World Cooperative Monitor (WCM) reported that among the world's top 300 cooperatives that contributed significantly to their national GDP in 2021, about a third (35%) were in the agriculture sector (ICA, 2021). None of these (105 agricultural cooperatives) were from Africa. Assessing the top 300 cooperatives, only a single consumer cooperative from Kenya, a bank, made it into the 300. These results indicate the low performance of African agricultural cooperatives.

2.2.2 Malawi Agricultural Cooperatives

The cooperative environment in Malawi remains in the infancy stage (Francesconi & Wouterse, 2021), with 1,500 registered cooperatives, of which 76% are agricultural (GoM, 2020). This is in comparison to countries such as Rwanda, which had 8,995 registered cooperatives by 2018 (Moon & Lee, 2020); in Ethiopia, 43 256 were registered cooperatives by 2012 (Ahmed & Mesfin, 2017); and in South Africa, 40 720 were registered by 2012 (Khumalo, 2014).

The study by Francesconi and Wouterse (2021) found that the average age of agricultural cooperatives in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) countries of Uganda, Madagascar, Kenya, Malawi, and Rwanda was 9.2 years. However, Malawi's cooperatives averaged 6.7 years, much lower than the SSA mean, while Kenyan ones averaged 23.2 years. This indicates that the survival rate of Malawian cooperatives is about four times lower than that of their Kenyan counterparts or that Malawian cooperatives are much less resilient than Kenya's.

Systemic challenges threatening the survival of cooperatives in Malawi were highlighted as poor management expertise, poor governance, poor policy framework, regulation and supervision, top-down approach of establishment, poor marketing systems and value chain, limited capital and access to credit, and low integration among existing cooperatives; hence the inability to exploit market opportunities and reach quality standards (Borda-Rodriguez & Johnson, 2019; Makiyoni, 2017). The challenges faced by Malawian cooperatives are not peculiar but are prevalent in most cooperatives across the globe.

2.2.3 Challenges in Cooperatives

Cooperatives face many challenges that emerge from both internal structure and external forces. In most cases, cooperatives often fail to attain their intended objectives leading to scholars recommending the reinvention of their operative model (Zhang et al., 2021;

Grashuis, 2018; Mazzarol et al., 2018). Effiom (2014) reviewed these challenges, and some of the main problems with African agricultural cooperatives included the illiteracy of members, confusion when paperwork is involved, poor managerial expertise as leaders are chosen by popularity and not expertise, low financial capacity due to poverty of participating members, poor decisions and delays due to the open and democratic member control, fraud and disloyalty among members. The resources, knowledge, and efficiency limitations for agri-cooperatives seem to narrow down their focus. Besides, their limited integration with external motivating factors reduces their efficiency (Dary & Grashuis, 2020). Cooperatives also tend to suffer from the free-rider problem whereby individual interests override the organizational interest (Tremblay et al., 2019).

In South Africa, cooperatives fail due to poor managerial expertise, financial limitations, illiteracy, and lack of loyalty (Ortmann & King, 2007). Furthermore, Khumalo (2014) found that the challenges were exacerbated by internal conflict, poor understanding of the purpose of cooperatives, capital injections by donors whose money was viewed as 'cheap' and 'free,' thereby hindering organic growth, dependence on donor aid which made them unsustainable, poor product quality that would limit market access and a top-down prescriptive approach devoid of room for innovativeness (Khumalo,2014).

Evidence from Zimbabwe suggests that cooperatives lack financial support, managerial ability, and market access (Mhembwe & Dube, 2017). In Ethiopia, cooperatives' failure is attributed to attitude, poor commitment by political leaders, poor governance, low financial capacity, corruption, poor harmony among cooperatives and within, and low government support.

Thus, cooperative challenges across different countries can be summarized as poor governance, managerial inefficiencies, member disloyalty, low financial capacity, inappropriate government support, inappropriate donor support that undermines cooperative principles, lack of aid exit strategy, low survival rate due to poor resilience, poor linkages with markets, and lack of enabling legislation for their flourishing. While public agricultural policy favors cooperative establishment, negligence in considering these weaknesses might also account for cooperatives' low survival rate.

There is a lack of empirical evidence that the challenges identified directly impact strategy implementation within agricultural cooperatives.

2.2.4 A Case for Cooperatives

Despite their challenges over the years, public policy worldwide has favored the establishment of agricultural cooperatives (Zhang, Luo & Li, 2021). This phenomenon is due to the economic and social benefits that this form of organization exhibits. From an economic perspective, cooperatives give a collective opportunity for a smallholder farmer’s voice to be heard in negotiating prices, marketing, and meeting costs (Mohammed & Lee, 2015). Besides, cooperatives are preferred because their democratic principles mean that farmers who lack business acumen have a say in the running of the business itself and would not suffer from the asymmetric information and moral hazard problems accompanying associations that are generally not managed by the owners (Grashuis, 2018).

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Netherlands, and Sweden (Bijman & Iliopoulos, 2014) cited in (Cadmir et al., 2021). In the USA, about 75% of the milk produced in the country in 2017 was marketed by dairy cooperatives (Wadsworth, 2019) cited in (Cadmir et al., 2021).

In the African context, it is evident from studies carried out in countries like Ethiopia, for example, that independent farmers were less efficient than members of cooperatives (Abate et al., 2014).In Malawi, agriculture is critical to the economy, with the sector contributing 23 percent to the total GDP in 2020, making it the principal livelihood of over 80 percent of the population (World Bank, 2022). However, the sector has been challenged with many inefficiencies as smallholder farmers have limited access to markets and information, disparate and limited access to agricultural extension services, limited capital, failure to cope with changing tastes and demands, and heavy reliance on rain-fed agriculture has led to low levels of output. Cooperatives, therefore, have been resuscitated after a period of oblivion as a measure to circumvent these challenges (Mutero et al., 2016; Mojo et al., 2017; Lwanda, Phiri & Gondwe, 2012; Vicari & Borda-Rodriguez, 2014).

From a social perspective, cooperatives enhance the inclusion of marginalized groups in market participation and decision-making. On gender, for instance, studies have shown that social dialogue is enhanced in heterogeneous cooperatives while decision-making capacity is enhanced in women-only cooperatives (Ahmed & Mesfin, 2017). In Zimbabwe, for example, women and other marginalized groups were empowered socially and economically through their cooperative membership (Mhambwe & Dube, 2017). In Malawi, coffee cooperatives benefited more from the loyalty and innovativeness of female members than their male counterparts (Hazel et al., 2016).

2.3 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The study focused on the internal resources and capabilities that aid in implementing strategy within agricultural cooperatives. To this end, the resource-based view (RBV) anchored the research with an "inside-out" perspective (Connor, 2002), placing the effectiveness of strategy implementation in the custody of practicing managers.

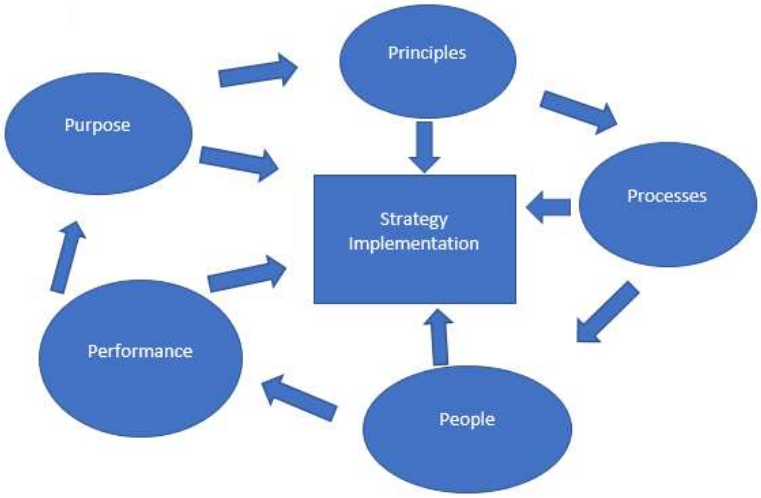
RBV is a theory about the nature of firms and provides a platform for understanding organizations (Barney et al., 2011; Lockett & Thompson, 2009). The theory delves into explaining, explicitly describing, and predicting the connectedness of organizational relationships (Barney et al., 2011). The relevance of the RBV theory for the study is the approach towards a firm as an integration of resources and capabilities, which are physical, financial, human, and intangible assets.

Assessing the wide and diverse perspectives of strategy implementation by different researchers, it is necessary to develop a conceptual framework underpinning understanding of the strategy implementation process from the novel perspective of agriculture cooperatives, exposing the variety of factors that influence SI. In this regard, a factor-oriented perspective with a process emphasis was favored over a "rational implementation" perspective (Tawse & Tabesh, 2021), which isolates implementation from the formulation as the focus of this study was to capture the essence of the sum of factors (Hourani, 2017) that are integral to SI from the formulation.

The 5P's strategic leadership model was adopted as the conceptual framework, which presents five integral factors that influence the SIhe process variables that are introduced in the framework are people, performance, principles, purpose, and processes-which, are the

resources and capabilities within an organization, as stipulated in RBV theory. The conceptual framework is presented in the diagram below.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Source: Authors own work

The 5Ps model shows the alignment of the relevant factors within the organization, which were succinctly summed up by Taneja et al. (2023) as follows:

i). Purpose: This refers to the organization's vision, objectives, beliefs, and mission. It is the factor that determines why the organization exists and illustrates the firm's strategic direction.

ii). People: These are the individuals and teams within the organization responsible for directing and implementing the organization's strategic plan. They encompass all levels of the organizational structure, including top management, middle management, and employees.

iii). Processes: How individuals or teams accomplish personal or professional goals and objectives.

iv). Performance: The measurement of the output of individual or professional efforts.

v). Principles: This refers to core values or beliefs that individuals, teams, and organizations adhere to.

3. METHODOLOGY

Agricultural cooperatives are social structures. As such, the social context regarding its role in strategy implementation must be understood. To achieve this, an inductive qualitative research design with an Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA) allowed key informant interviews (KII) with individual managers and leaders and focus group discussion (FDG) with members from the respective cooperatives to relate experiences on how different strategies are implemented, their understanding of strategy and the existing obstacles towards SI effectiveness. The structured, in-depth interviews guided by semi-structured questionnaires with open-ended questions were used in both instances to allow participants to share detailed experiences.

3.1 Sample Size

The study purposively sampled 7 registered agricultural cooperatives with heterogeneous attributes that have been operational on average for 10 years (see Table 2). The targeted

population could articulate their purpose, management, processes, challenges, performance, member involvement, and values.

Table 2. Sample Population

Cooperative Name	Location	Type of Coop	Year Established	Total Membership
Nkhata Bay Highlands Coffee Cooperative	Mzuzu	Coffee Producer	2006	225 (Mix of both men and women)
Mtoto Poultry Cooperative	Mzuzu	Poultry Producing	2002	58 (All women)
Nkhate Cooperative	Chikwawa	Rice Production	2007	157 (men, women and youth)
Phata Cooperative	Chikwawa	Sugarcane Production	2011	1150 (Mix of both men and women)
Chitsanzo Diary Cooperative	Dedza	Dairy Producing	2010	205 (mix men, women, and youth)
Kapilimutu Cooperative	Dedza	Cereals producing (beans, maize, soya)	2012	40 (mix men and women)
Gwiritse Cooperative	Lilongwe	Cereals producing (beans, maize, soya, sunflower)	2017	336 (273 women and 93 men)

Source: Authors own work

3.2 Data Analysis

This study's data analysis followed a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) approach, in which interview transcripts were processed through NVIVO, a qualitative software. This analysis allowed for the identification of themes and patterns. It allowed the researcher to explore more information about the social context and the factors that affect strategy implementation in a cooperative setting (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

The data analysis process involved gathering the data by converting the voice recordings into text, which involved transcribing the interviews. After this, the researcher read through the data and noted observable aspects that emerged from the data that would guide the analysis. Secondly, initial codes were created from the questionnaires: i). Understanding and awareness ii). Role and involvement iii). Stakeholder involvement iv). Communication and leadership

v).Challenges and barriers vi). Resources and support vii). Feedback and improvement viii). Outcomes and impact xi).Future considerations.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Data collection followed ethical procedures to ensure the participants were not exploited or treated unfairly during the study. Researchers have the moral responsibility to protect research participants while building trust, ensuring the integrity of the study, and averting malpractice and impropriety, which may misrepresent the organization (Israel & Hay, 2006) cited in (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As such, the researcher followed the ethical protocol to seek respondent consent before the inquiry and to ensure the confidentiality and safety of the data.

Ethical clearance for the study was approved by the ethical committee at the University of Zambia (UNZA) in Zambia, to which the researcher is affiliated as a student, granted the approval number REF. No. 5514-2024. Approval was sought to collect data in the respective agriculture cooperatives in Malawi before conducting the research through the governing body, the Malawi Federation of Cooperatives (MAFECO), which permitted the research to proceed.

3.3.1 Informed Consent

Before inquiry, the researcher must be transparent with the participants by disclosing the purpose of the study to ensure the participants comprehend the nature of the study and the objectives (Sarantakos, 2005) cited in (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher was aware of the rights participants had of either accepting or declining to be part of the study; as such, participants were not tricked into or coerced into signing consent forms.

The researcher ensured that the nature of the study and the intended objectives were fully disclosed and was confident the participants had comfortably understood before presenting them with the consent forms. The participants were allowed to ask follow-up questions surrounding the study, which allowed the researcher to address any queries or clarify certain aspects. There was no case in which the participant opted not to participate in the study.

When presented with the consent forms, the participants were given ample time to read through them in detail and inquire about sections they needed further clarification before consenting. This ensured the level of credibility and transparency was maintained.

3.3.2 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Ethical protocol demands confidentiality and anonymity of research participants (Cassell et al., 2018). The respondents' particulars, including names, age, status, gender, or any specifics that may reveal their identity, have not been revealed. The names of the respondents were not revealed in data analysis as the respondents' particulars were not requested during the inquiry period.

4. 4 RESULTS

4.1 Results of Challenges and Barriers to SI

The structured interview process identified and categorized challenges using the 5Ps model. The challenges were spelled out as barriers to strategy implementation effectiveness. They are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of Challenges and Barriers to SI

Challenges	Quote	5Ps
Infrastructure	*"Another challenge comes when cultivating and transporting sugar cane from the farm to Illovo we use trucks from Unitrans and they are expensive" (PH16).* *"Escom sometimes fail us when there is no electricity sugar cane needs a lot of water. We find there is no electricity but we need to water the sugar cane. This brings negative units" (PH19).*	Process
Literacy levels	*"Our cooperative majority of farmers did not go far with school but a few have gone and understand the dynamic ways of operating" (NB8)*	People
Leadership	*The board has all the zone leaders. We have problems where leadership is the owner of strategy (NB19).* *"When communicating right now since we changed management people are comparing the old and the new leadership as such those who were benefiting then think they are not benefiting now" (GW23).*	People
Economic environment	*"The negative elements we have is cost of inputs have risen" (NB24).* *"...price adjustments of fertilizer, using recycled seeds…"(KAP16).*	Process
Cash flow	*"...money is a problem, we do not have enough money"(MT* *"...members making contribution late" (KAP16).* *"...the cost of electricity is very high to irrigate the sugarcane we need 70 million a month for phase one and K50 million for phase two and we are talking of 120 million on electricity per month" (PH16).*	Process
Climate Change	*"Due to poor rains we had no enough produce thus did not make a profit, we have no markets, people think that as leaders we are benefiting than them" (NK25).* *"We have involved government departments to change some of the things like we are facing problems with the flow of water in the river, water is becoming a problem we need a solar pump for irrigation to increase production" (NK15).* *"Climate change making our plan not to be implemented as planned like last year we received less rains" (KAP16).*	Process
Resources	*".....requires cooperative resources because lack of resources our structure is not able to function" (NB18).* *"Lack of resources.." (KAP16).*	Process
Resistance to change	*"We are slow but we are not giving up others are coming up and are changing" (NB17)*	Purpose
Members/Employees	*"..sickness of members making them delay the work" (KAP16).* *"...some are side lining themselves. We can say some are happy some are not" (GW23).* *"Training because people do not understand and continued training is necessary" (GW18).* *"Minimum wage also is a challenge last time it was raised it had a big impact and we laid off some workers meaning the remaining ones have a lot of work to cover" (PH16).*	People

Other challenges and barriers to strategy implementation effectiveness analyzed through the information collected from the respective cooperatives are the role of external stakeholders, structure, governance, and understanding of strategy.

4.1.1 Role of external stakeholders in SI

Some diverse external stakeholders are involved in the strategy implementation process, from formulation to implementation within agricultural cooperatives. The stakeholders range from government to non-government bodies and other donor agencies. The empirical evidence shows that stakeholders are involved in various ways, offering professional advice, financial assistance (grants and loans), procuring resources, capacity building, and infrastructure development.

According to Freeman (1984), the key assumption of the stakeholder theory is that the organization or firm exists to create value for stakeholders with the assistance and cooperation of the stakeholders themselves (Minoja, 2012). From the cooperative's perspective, stakeholders are viewed as partners who assist the cooperative without the cooperative in creating value for the stakeholders. This cycle has created a dependency syndrome among the majority of cooperatives. This dependency affects the motivation and commitment of stakeholders to sustain their involvement within the cooperatives for the long term, whilst, on the other hand, strategy implementation efforts within cooperatives face inertia as there is inadequate funding from the external stakeholders.

Agricultural cooperatives are engaged with multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSP) who have diverse objectives, initiators, models, timeframe and partner expectations (Maryono et al., 2024). The impact these MSPs (both internal and external) have on the cooperatives cannot be understated in influencing strategic plans.

Therefore, it is necessary to understand whether the cooperative strategy aligns with the MSP's objectives to create sustainable value chains, a consideration that was beyond the scope of this investigation. However, the gap between cooperatives' and stakeholders' objectives must be abridged to allow cooperatives to attain the appropriate level of stakeholder support and partnership. Likewise, stakeholder involvement within cooperatives will be guided by the appropriate governance structures set in place to yield favorable returns for both the cooperatives and the stakeholders.

The empirical evidence reflects stakeholders' ability to either influence SI effectiveness or hinder it, depending on the organization's and stakeholders' alignment of objectives. This builds a case for future indulgence in stakeholder theory discourse in the context of SI.

4.1.2 Understanding of Strategy

The cooperatives' understanding of strategy was an operations plan that outlined daily activities. The futuristic aspect is included when applied to crop production, and inference is given to the allocation of resources, specifically farm inputs. Therefore, with this understanding, cooperatives refer strategic plans to daily activities intended to yield the desired outcome.

Understanding a strategy influences the nature of the strategic plan. In essence, organizations formulate a strategy based on how much they understand the strategy to be or achieve (Cornut et al., 2012). As such, the cooperative's understanding of strategy translates into strategic plans that reflect daily activities focusing on production and not on competitive advantage.

Apart from aggregating smallholder farmers' efforts, the objective of agriculture cooperatives is to secure and sustain competitive advantage (Bijman & Iliopoulos, 2014), which is a consequential outcome of effective strategy implementation efforts (Noble, 1999). This is the juxtaposing understanding of strategy implementation between cooperatives in Sub-Saharan Africa and agriculture cooperatives in the Western context.

4.1.3 Structure

"Structure follows strategy" (Pryor et al.,2007); the cooperative organizational structure requires one that will reflect the strategy. The current status quo of cooperatives is adopting an organizational structure that allows owners to control the cooperative while neglecting the impact on strategy implementation. This structural challenge is reflected in the decision-making process. The cooperatives have similar organizational structures despite having varied strategic directions – a contradiction of the belief that "structure follows strategy" (Pryor et al.,2007).

4.1.4 Governance

Governance is a word derived from the Latin "gubernare," which refers to "steering" (Musawir et al., 2020); Müller, 2009), leading to its application to the direction and control of activities within specific contexts. The governance perspective has been highlighted in this study due to the board's existence in the cooperative structure. The board's role is to provide direction and control within the cooperatives. Through the empirical evidence, which is concurrent with literature on corporate governance, the role of the board and executive management presents a blur with the entanglement between the board and executive management strategic decisions (Schmidt & Brauer, 2006; Westphal & Fredrickson, 2001). The scenario within cooperatives is complex as the "third wheel" comes into the picture – members' strategic decisions. This creates inertia within the strategy process, with conflicting and diverging views that hinder the effectiveness of strategy implementation. An in-depth analysis of governance structures within cooperatives is a study that would enrich the literature on governance in the context of cooperatives.

4.2 Summary of challenges and barriers

Apart from the challenges and barriers cited afore, there were other challenges and barriers to strategy implementation cited by most cooperatives, which were attributed to a lack of resources, mainly financial resources, and inadequate infrastructure. The identified challenges are unique to the cooperative structure as they depend on funding and members' contributions. The other barriers mentioned are low literacy levels among members, which hinder understanding the strategic direction, influencing behaviors that are divergent from the strategic objective, and further creating resistance through the strategy implementation process. Apart from the internal factors, external factors hinder the effectiveness of SI, such as the adverse economic environment and climate change.

There are dualistic factors, such as the role of stakeholders, which act as both a challenge and a success SI factor. Based on the recommendation of effective multi-stakeholder management, cooperatives are bound to leverage the stakeholder's involvement within the cooperatives.

5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the challenges and barriers reflected in the literature regarding strategy implementation in agricultural cooperatives resonate with those in the literature. The new

insights from the empirical research are the governance factor and the dualistic factor of external stakeholder involvement. Investigating these factors would further enrich areas of stakeholder management and governance and their role in strategy implementation in establishing theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the effectiveness of strategy implementation. Further, the impediments to effective strategy implementation in agricultural cooperation originated from the strategy formulation stage, when the understanding of strategy, resource allocation, and strategic direction emerged. The effectiveness of strategy implementation to be attained within the agricultural cooperatives calls for a remodeling of the organizational structure to incorporate measures that would govern and establish the role and involvement of stakeholders and enable a clear understanding of strategy.

5.1 Implication of the study

5.1.1 Implication for Practicing Managers

For the longest time, the managerial role within an organization has been to ensure the strategic objectives handed down by top management are communicated and executed throughout the organization by ensuring resources are aligned toward the successful implementation of the strategy. However, the study has highlighted an essential responsibility that managers of stakeholder management often overlook. Echoing Ivančić, Jelenc, and Mencer's (2021) perspective on the inclusive approach towards SI, both internal and external stakeholders influence the implementation of strategy in a variety of ways as such managers need to be aware of the different stakeholders and their respective needs to ensure stakeholder value is achieved and retained through the implementation process.

5.1.2 Implication for Researchers

The study has increased the scope of empirical studies within the SI domain by including underexplored organizational types, such as cooperatives. The results from the survey have challenged specific perspectives within the field of strategy implementation, such as the different approaches toward SI. Scholars have held the stance that strategy implementation research is approached in either of two ways: from the structural perspective or the interpersonal perspective interpersonal standpoint (Noble, 1999; Tawse & Tabesh,2020), and indeed, most SI research is organized with either a structural framework or an interpersonal framework. However, this study has incorporated both perspectives. This was influenced predominately by the nature of the organization under study – being a novel context, it was imperative to study the phenomena from both a process and behavioral perspective (hybrid view) to gain a general understanding. Cooperatives, unlike traditional organizations, are structured and operate with and from a different organizational philosophy; this, therefore, influenced the study approach. Thus, it has established an essential underlying element that researchers within the SI domain must consider when dealing with different organizational types.

6. LIMITATIONS AND AREAS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

6.1 Limitation of Study

The exploratory multi-firm approach was with seven cooperatives, which is sufficient for a qualitative study. However, extending the scope to explore different perspectives of the phenomenon would have further enriched the study. To establish a comparative analysis, extending the study to include agricultural associations would be a perspective future researchers may want to consider. Language barriers with some of the cooperatives

compromised the nature of the questions; however, the meaning of which was not lost, but the interviewee's ability to express themselves more may have been hindered.

6.2 Areas of Future Research

This research introduces the conversation of strategy implementation within the context of agricultural cooperatives. As such, it has unearthed different areas which can be further explored. Insights such as the organizational structure of cooperatives and its impact on strategy implementation can be further explored to establish the alignment of organizational structure with strategic objectives to attain SI effectiveness. Strategist researchers would be interested in ascertaining competitive strategies that would equip cooperatives with a competitive advantage within the market. Within corporate governance, the interrogation of the board's role in strategy implementation can be further explored to gain deeper insights into the board's strategic role in strategy formulation and implementation. A quantitative approach to ascertain the correlation between performance and strategy implementation within agricultural cooperatives would further enrich empirical studies in the SI domain.

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