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THE DEVELOPMENT OF TEMPE MSME COOPERATIVES IN SIDOARJO: A STRATEGY TO STRENGTHEN COMPETITIVENESS AND LOCAL ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

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Abstract

The development of cooperatives as the main driver of tempeh Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in Sidoarjo Regency, East Java, is an interesting model in the context of strengthening competitiveness and local economic independence. This study aims to analyze the strategies implemented by tempeh MSME cooperatives in Sidoarjo, using qualitative research methods with a case study approach at the Sidoarjo Branch of the Indonesian Tofu and Tempeh Producers Cooperative (KOPTI) and similar cooperatives. The results show that the strategy to strengthen competitiveness is carried out through supply chain consolidation, particularly the collective procurement of soybean raw materials (Dethier & Effenberger, 2012; Poulton et al., 2004). In terms of economic independence, cooperatives play a role as learning and inclusive financial institutions (Birchall & Ketilson, 2009) that facilitate increased managerial capacity, access to soft capital, and the formation of a broader marketing network. Synergy between cooperatives, local governments, and other supporting institutions has proven crucial in creating a sustainable business ecosystem (Mazzarol et al., 2018). Challenges faced include fluctuations in global soybean prices, competition with non-organic products, and the regeneration of business actors. It is concluded that the tempeh MSME cooperative in Sidoarjo has developed an effective integrative strategy to build collectivity-based competitiveness and promote local economic independence.

Keywords: cooperative; MSME: competitiveness; local economy

Introduction

The Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) sector has long been proven to be a fundamental pillar of the Indonesian economy, particularly in terms of employment

absorption and contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In the context of a people-centered economy, MSME empowerment cannot be separated from the role of cooperatives as a pillar of the national economy. Cooperatives, with their principles of togetherness and member ownership, are seen as appropriate institutions for consolidating dispersed and vulnerable MSMEs, increasing bargaining power, and achieving economies of scale (Birchall & Ketilson, 2009; Mazzarol et al., 2018). One MSME sector synonymous with Indonesian society is the tempeh processing industry, which is widespread across various regions, including Sidoarjo Regency, East Java.

Sidoarjo Regency is known as a significant center for small- and medium-scale tempeh production. However, tempeh MSMEs in this region face complex challenges, such as dependence on imported soybean raw materials with fluctuating prices, intense price competition, limited access to capital and technology, and management capacity that still needs to be improved (Poulton et al., 2004). These challenges threaten business sustainability and hinder competitiveness. Amid these challenges, the presence and development of cooperatives specifically accommodating tempeh and tofu producers, such as the Indonesian Tempeh and Tofu Producers Cooperative (KOPTI) Sidoarjo Branch, offers a strategic alternative.

Against this backdrop, this study begins with the fundamental question: What strategies have tempeh MSME cooperatives developed in Sidoarjo to strengthen their members' competitiveness and promote local economic independence? This study is crucial to identify effective cooperative institutional models and mechanisms for transforming fragmented MSMEs into a resilient collective force.

This study aims to analyze in-depth the development, strategies, and impacts of tempeh MSME cooperatives in Sidoarjo. Specifically, the research objectives are: (1) to map the institutional model and development of tempeh MSME cooperatives in Sidoarjo; (2) to analyze the strategies implemented by cooperatives to improve the competitiveness of their members' businesses, particularly in supply chain, product quality, and marketing; and (3) to evaluate the cooperatives' contribution to achieving local economic independence. This study is expected to contribute academically to the literature on collective entrepreneurship and institutional economics in the context of the local food industry. Practically, the findings of this study can serve as a reference for cooperative administrators, MSME actors, and local governments in formulating more targeted policies and supporting programs to strengthen community-based economic ecosystems and sustainable local products.

Literature Review

This literature review discusses three main conceptual pillars underlying the research: (1) the role of cooperatives as drivers of MSMEs, (2) strategies for building small business competitiveness, and (3) local economic independence through collective institutions.

2.1. Cooperatives as Institutions Driving and Strengthening MSMEs

Cooperatives, in the international literature, are viewed as a unique form of socio-economic institution because they prioritize democratic values, member autonomy, and equitable benefit-sharing (Birchall, 2013; Mazzarol et al., 2018). In the context of small and micro enterprises, cooperatives serve as a mechanism to overcome market failures often faced by isolated businesses, such as access to quality inputs, capital, technology, and markets (Poulton et al., 2004). By grouping together in a cooperative, MSMEs can achieve economies of scale in bulk purchasing, strengthen bargaining power, and provide shared services not accessible individually, such as training and insurance (Shiferaw et al., 2009). A study by Birchall and Ketilson (2009) confirmed that the resilience of the cooperative business model, especially during times of crisis, stems from strong social bonds among members and a long-term orientation that prioritizes service. In the local food industry, producer cooperatives act as value chain integrators, connecting farmers or small producers with broader markets while maintaining added value at the local level (Trebbin, 2014).

2.2. Strategies for Strengthening MSME Competitiveness through a Collective Approach

MSME competitiveness is not only determined by internal company factors but is also heavily influenced by the institutional environment and collective ability to adapt (Porter, 1998; Pyke et al., 1990). Strategies for strengthening competitiveness through cooperatives can be formulated in several critical areas. First, a cost-efficiency strategy through consolidating raw material purchases and sharing production facilities (Dethier & Effenberger, 2012). Second, a product differentiation strategy through the implementation of quality standards, certification (e.g., organic or Home Industry Food/P-IRT), and product innovation based on local knowledge (Bellemare & Novak, 2017). Third, a market access strategy includes the formation of collective branding, the development of direct marketing channels, and the joint use of digital platforms (Mazzarol et al., 2018). Fourth, a capability-building strategy through training and continuing education programs organized by cooperatives to improve the technical and managerial skills of their members (Lyon, 2003).

2.3. Local Economic Independence and the Role of Institutions

Local economic resilience refers to the capacity of a community or region to sustainably maintain and develop its economic activities, reduce external dependency, and withstand or adapt to shocks (Pendall et al., 2010). This independence is characterized by longer-term capital circulation within the region, strengthening of local basic sectors, and increased community participation in economic decision-making (Shuman, 2012). Institutions such as cooperatives play a central role in achieving this independence because: (a) ownership and control rest with local members, (b) profits generated are redistributed to members and the surrounding community (the principle of concerned community), and (c) cooperatives tend to reinvest in their areas of operation

(Birchall & Ketilson, 2009). In the context of food systems, local food producer cooperatives contribute to regional food security by shortening supply chains, increasing transparency, and preserving local products and knowledge (Chiffolleau, 2009; Trebbin, 2014).

2.4. Research Gaps and Position of This Study

While numerous studies on agricultural cooperatives and MSMEs in general exist, research specifically integrating these three dimensions—MSME cooperatives, competitive strategies based on specific local products (such as tempeh), and their contribution to local economic independence in a specific region like Sidoarjo—remains limited. Most of the literature focuses on rural cooperatives based on primary commodities. This study seeks to fill this gap by presenting an empirical analysis of how tempeh MSME cooperatives, a typical Indonesian food processing industry, function as a driving force for collective competitiveness and a pillar of economic independence at the local level. This research will examine the relevance of the theoretical framework of collective institutions in the context of the small-scale food processing industry in Indonesia.

Research Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995). A qualitative approach was chosen because it is appropriate for exploring social phenomena in depth and holistically in their natural context, where researchers interact directly with research subjects to understand their meanings, perspectives, and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An intrinsic case study was applied because the focus of this research is to deeply understand a specific case, namely the development and strategies of tempeh MSME cooperatives in Sidoarjo Regency. This method allows researchers to investigate the unique complexities and dynamics of the case through multiple data sources (Yin, 2018).

Research Results and Discussion

4.1. Characteristics and Development of Tempeh MSME Cooperatives in Sidoarjo

The results show that the Sidoarjo Branch of KOPTI has evolved from an informal association into a solid cooperative legal entity with more than 150 member tempeh and tofu producers. Its development is characterized by three main phases: (1) the social consolidation phase (formation of collective identity), (2) the institutional phase (strengthening organizational structures and legality), and (3) the business phase (diversification of economic services). The institutional model aligns with the concept of cooperatives as "social enterprises," which combine members' social goals with the business logic necessary for market survival (Mazzarol et al., 2018). A professional, yet democratic, management structure is a key factor in this transition, addressing the agency problems that often hinder traditional cooperatives (Birchall, 2013).

4.2. Strategies for Strengthening Collective-Based Competitiveness

The analysis reveals four core strategies implemented to enhance member competitiveness :

- a. **Supply Chain Consolidation and Cost Efficiency:** The most obvious strategy is collective bulk soybean purchasing. This practice significantly reduces production costs through volume discounts and reduces individual transaction costs (Poulton et al., 2004). Cooperatives also act as a buffer against price fluctuations through flexible reserve and payment systems. This is a concrete implementation of the concept of "collective bargaining power," which is the *raison d'être* of producer cooperatives (Shiferaw et al., 2009).
"Previously, we bought soybeans individually, which were more expensive and sometimes the quality was inconsistent. Now, through the cooperative, we can get factory prices and control the quality." (Interview with AP, a cooperative member since 2015).
- b. **Product Standardization and Differentiation:** The cooperative actively promotes the implementation of food hygiene and safety standards (P-IRT) in its members' businesses. Furthermore, product innovations have been implemented, such as low-fat tempeh, tempeh with various flavors, and tempeh-based food products. This strategy represents an effort to move from solely price-based competition to differentiation and increasing added value, as proposed by Bellemare and Novak (2017) in the context of contract farming.
- c. **Capability Enhancement through Education and Training:** The cooperative regularly holds technical training (processing, hygiene) and simple business management. Member meeting forums serve as peer-to-peer learning spaces. This mechanism embodies the educational principles of cooperatives and effectively enhances members' human capital, which is the foundation of long-term competitiveness (Lyon, 2003).
- d. **Inclusive Financial Access:** Cooperatives provide working capital loans with low interest rates and terms that better understand the tempeh business cycle than formal financial institutions. This service addresses the main obstacles faced by MSMEs, namely information asymmetry and lack of collateral (Dethier & Effenberger, 2012), thereby strengthening members' liquidity and business expansion capacity.

4.3. Contribution to Local Economic Independence

The role of cooperatives extends beyond enhancing individual competitiveness to strengthening local economic resilience.

- a. **Local Capital Circulation and Leakage Reduction:** By consolidating purchasing and marketing, cooperatives increase the proportion of economic transactions occurring within the local ecosystem. Profits generated from cooperative activities (SHU) are

redistributed to local members, thus strengthening the multiplier effect in Sidoarjo (Shuman, 2012).

- b. Establishment of Pentahelix Networks and Synergy: Cooperatives have successfully become credible connecting nodes between small producers and the local government, academics (for technological assistance), banks, and large businesses. This synergy creates a supportive ecosystem vital to the sustainability of MSMEs (Mazzarol et al., 2018). Support from relevant agencies in the form of equipment assistance and certification facilitation demonstrates institutional recognition of the role of cooperatives.
- c. Resilience to External Shocks: During the COVID-19 pandemic and periods of global soybean price volatility, cooperatives functioned as a crisis support system. Collective purchasing mechanisms help stabilize supply, while strong communication networks enable rapid coordination to address disruptions. This reinforces Birchall and Ketilson's (2009) findings on the resilience of the cooperative model during crises because it is based on trust and solidarity.

4.4. Synthesis and Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and enrich the theoretical framework of cooperatives as institutions driving MSMEs. The strategy developed by KOPTI Sidoarjo demonstrates that MSME competitiveness in the local food industry is not built through competition between individuals, but rather through structured collaboration within the cooperative institution. The cooperative successfully translates collective potential into real competitive advantages in the areas of supply chain, innovation, and resource access. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that local economic independence is not a static condition, but a dynamic process built through strengthening local institutions with strong social roots and a member-oriented approach. The success of the tempeh cooperative in Sidoarjo offers a relevant model for the development of other local product-based MSME clusters, where building collective institutional capacity is a key and often overlooked strategic element.

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These strategies include: (1) supply chain consolidation to achieve cost efficiency and input stability (Poulton et al., 2004); (2) product standardization and innovation to differentiate and increase added value (Bellemare & Novak, 2017); (3) capacity building through continuous education and training (Lyon, 2003); and (4) providing inclusive financial access that understands the characteristics of members' businesses. These four strategies work synergistically to improve the bargaining position and resilience of their members' businesses in the market. Third, the contribution of cooperatives to local economic independence is multidimensional. Cooperatives not only enhance the microeconomic competitiveness of their members but also serve as guardians of local capital circulation (Shuman, 2012), a nexus in the pentahelix ecosystem, and a buffer against external shocks (Birchall & Ketilson, 2009). Thus, cooperatives have become institutional pillars that promote regional economic resilience based on local ownership and participation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, this study offers several recommendations to stakeholders:

1. For Cooperative Management and Members:
 - a. Institutionalizing Innovation: A more systematic mechanism is needed to capture, test, and commercialize product innovation ideas from members, perhaps through a dedicated business unit or collaboration with local food polytechnics/laboratories.
 - b. Regeneration Strategy: Cooperatives need to design special programs to attract the interest of the younger generation, for example by creating entrepreneurial internship programs, developing a more contemporary brand, or integrating digital technology more extensively into marketing and administration.
 - c. Impact Monitoring: It is recommended to develop a simple monitoring system to quantitatively measure the economic impact of membership (such as comparing costs, revenues, and profit margins before and after joining), to strengthen the accountability and attractiveness of cooperatives.
2. For Regional Governments (Sidoarjo Regency and East Java Province):
 - a. Pro-Cooperative Policies: Regional governments can strengthen procurement policies for goods and services (PBJ) that prioritize products from certified cooperatives, especially for the needs of government institutions, schools, and hospitals.
 - b. Research and Development Facilitation: Building stronger bridges between cooperatives and universities and research centers to provide assistance in tempeh processing, preservation, and packaging technology, as well as exploring local soybean raw materials.
 - c. Establishing Integrated Clusters: The government can act as a facilitator to develop integrated tempeh industry clusters that connect producer cooperatives with downstream industries, waste processors, and other supporting sectors, to create a circular economy.

Research Gap

Based on a comprehensive literature review, this study identified several knowledge gaps (research gaps) that serve as the foundation and original contribution of this research. These gaps were identified by mapping previous literature findings to the specific context of tempeh MSME cooperatives in Sidoarjo.

1. Contextual Gap: Local and Regional Product Specificity

Most international literature on producer cooperatives focuses on primary agricultural commodities (such as coffee, cocoa, and grains) in rural areas or on the agricultural sector in general (Shiferaw et al., 2009; Trebbin, 2014). Meanwhile, studies

on cooperatives in the agro-processing sector or small- and medium-scale food processing industry—especially those based on signature products like tempeh—are still relatively limited. Tempeh is not only a commodity, but also a cultural product with a value chain that involves simple but labor-intensive processing. This study fills this gap by investigating the institutional dynamics of cooperatives in the context of the Indonesian MSME-scale processed food industry, in Sidoarjo Regency as a specific locus with unique industrial and social characteristics.

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2. Theoretical Gap: Integration of Three Analytical Frameworks

Many studies have discussed the role of cooperatives in economic empowerment (Birchall & Ketilson, 2009) or the competitive strategies of MSMEs separately (Porter, 1998). However, research that simultaneously and holistically integrates three main conceptual frameworks—(1) cooperative institutional theory (as a social enterprise), (2) collective resource-based competitiveness strategy, and (3) local economic resilience—is still rare, especially within a single in-depth case study. This research seeks to bridge these three theoretical discourses by analyzing how cooperative structures and strategies directly operationalize into competitive advantages, which in turn contribute to building regional economic resilience.

3. Empirical Gap: From Potential to Practice and Measurable Impact



The literature often emphasizes the potential and ideal principles of cooperatives (Mazzarol et al., 2018). However, there is a gap in detailed empirical documentation on how cooperative operational strategies are actually implemented in the field and the causal mechanisms by which they enhance members' competitiveness. For example, how exactly does purchasing consolidation affect smallholder producers' profit margins? How does collective learning occur within cooperatives? This study is designed to provide a dense description and in-depth analysis of the operational strategy of tempeh MSME cooperatives, encompassing aspects of the supply chain, innovation, financing, and networking.

4. Gap in Sustainability and Contemporary Challenges

Research on cooperatives in developing countries often focuses on classic challenges such as capital and market access (Poulton et al., 2004). However, relatively little research explores contemporary challenges such as vulnerability to fluctuations in global commodity prices (imported soybeans), issues of membership regeneration and aging, and pressures to adapt to modern market standards and digital technology in the context of traditional food cooperatives. This study explicitly addresses and analyzes these new challenges, providing a more up-to-date and relevant picture of current global economic dynamics.

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