Fostering Member Engagement for Resilient Cooperatives: Lessons from COOPSSUR

Madre de Dios, Peru

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Executive Summary

Madre de Dios, Peru, is a region of extraordinary biodiversity facing pressure from deforestation, illegal gold mining, and climate change. In response to these challenges, the Cooperativa Agraria de Servicios Múltiples Sur Oriente (COOPSSUR) was founded in 2018 with the support of Cáritas Madre de Dios to provide smallholder farmers with a sustainable, market-driven alternative through organic and conventional cacao and copoazú production. COOPSSUR's growth represents an important cultural and economic shift toward environmental stewardship and rural development in a historically extractive landscape.

This research was conducted by the University of Notre Dame's Regenerating Ecologies and Economies for Livelihoods (REEL) program as the first part of a multi-year partnership with Cáritas Madre de Dios. The project aimed to assess how COOPSSUR's internal organizational structures influence member motivation, cohesion, and engagement, and to identify strategies to strengthen governance, transparency, and operational resilience as the cooperative grows.

The research employed a qualitative ethnographic approach, incorporating five focus group discussions (FGDs) and nine key informant interviews (KIIs) with cooperative members across five agricultural zones. These were complemented by 21 member surveys and seven KIIs with COOPSSUR's strategic partners. A benchmarking analysis of successful cooperative models in Peru, Honduras, and Ethiopia was also conducted to inform practical recommendations.

The analysis revealed that while localized community ties within COOPSSUR remain strong, cooperative-wide communication is fragmented and member engagement with leadership is limited. Members expressed concerns about unequal access to resources, lack of transparency in decision-making, and unclear governance structures. Nevertheless, members recognized COOPSSUR's vital role in securing market access, providing technical training, and linking them to public funding opportunities. Strategic partners view COOPSSUR as a promising but capacity-constrained organization in need of stronger internal management and cohesion to fully realize its potential.

Key recommendations include (1) Defining clear engagement expectations and transparent benefit distribution criteria to strengthen fairness and accountability, (2)Improving internal communication through the launch of a monthly bulletin and consistent quarterly general assemblies paired with technical workshops, (3) Investing in technical support, post-harvest infrastructure, and management capacity to improve product quality and organizational resilience, (4) Expanding access to financial tools and working capital to support production cycles and reduce liquidity challenges.

Future research and technical assistance should focus on evaluating COOPSSUR's business model sustainability, refining pricing strategies for value-added products, modernizing quality control and disease management systems, and establishing robust internal monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Strengthening these areas will be critical to ensuring the cooperative's long-term viability and scaling its impact across Madre de Dios.

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I. Introduction

Cooperatives play a vital role in empowering small-scale producers and advancing sustainable development by fostering collective action, market access, and resource sharing. In Peru, they have become key instruments for rural inclusion, supporting economic growth, social cohesion, and environmental stewardship.

COOPSSUR, located in Madre de Dios, Peru, was founded in 2018 with the support of Cáritas Madre de Dios. It is a cooperative focused on organic and agroforestry-based cacao and copoazú production that brings together 125 smallholder farmers to strengthen market access, improve production quality, and promote sustainable agricultural practices.

This report, prepared for COOPSSUR, examines how the cooperative's internal organization influences member motivation and commitment. As the cooperative grows and evaluates its performance, understanding these internal dynamics becomes critical to strengthening its ability to serve its members effectively. Member commitment will affect the cooperative's overall functionality, operational coherence, and long-term sustainability.

The research team employed an ethnographic research methodology, composed of focus group discussions (FGD), Key Informant Interviews (KII), and surveys conducted across COOPSSUR's main agricultural zones. The analysis followed a two-level thematic approach to examine both internal member experiences and external stakeholder perspectives on COOPSSUR's organizational dynamics.

II. Background Information

1. Department of Madre de Dios

Madre de Dios (MDD), located in southeastern Peru at the intersection of Bolivia, Brazil, and the Andes foothills, is a culturally and ecologically rich region within the Amazon. With approximately 45% of its territory under conservation, it is home to 37 Indigenous communities representing ten linguistic groups.[1] The area remained largely isolated until the late 19th-century rubber boom and later road construction in the 1960s. Recognized as Peru's "Biodiversity Capital," Madre de Dios contains some of the world's most diverse ecosystems, with dense old-growth forests, high species endemisms, and vital ecological services such as climate regulation, freshwater, timber, and products like Brazil nuts and medicinal plants.[2] However, biodiversity is under threat from deforestation, illegal gold mining, mercury pollution, climate change-pressures driven by migration, infrastructure expansion such as the Interoceanic Highway (IOH), global commodity prices, and insecure land tenure.[3]

While extractive industries like mining and logging remain economically significant, they pose serious risks to long-term sustainability and worsen social issues such as inequality, corruption, and weak governance.[4] Sustainable alternatives offer promising solutions, such as ecotourism, sustainable forest product harvesting, land restoration, and agroforestry. Agriculture in Madre de Dios is dominated by traditional, low-input practices like slash-and-burn and manual harvesting, yielding primarily subsistence crops such as maize, rice, yucca, and bananas. The sector is heavily climate-dependent and concentrated along the IOH, where vulnerable floodplains and acidic soils pose additional challenges. Despite this, emerging opportunities in sustainable livelihood are gaining traction.[5] High-value crops like papaya, cacao, and copoazú are increasingly cultivated, especially as policy shifts and market access have improved over the past few decades. Medium landholdings are common, but migrants often own smaller plots closer to Puerto Maldonado, the main regional market.

2. Cáritas Madre de Dios

Cáritas Internationalis is a global confederation of 160+ Catholic relief and development organizations operating worldwide.[6] Founded in 1954, it serves the poor and vulnerable through

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[1] Marca Madre de Dios. (n.d.). Marca Madre de Dios. https://marcamadrededios.pe/

[2] Torre-Marin Rando A., González-Rojí S.J., Hurni K., Mathez-Stiefel S-L., Messmer M., Raible C.C., Snethlage M., Stocker T.F., Fischer M. 2021. Towards sustainable futures for nature and people: An appraisal report for Madre de Dios, Peru. Wyss Academy Report 1, Wyss Academy for Nature, Bern, Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.48350/161385

[3] Nicolau, A. P., Herndon, K., Flores-Anderson, A., & Griffin, R. (2019). A spatial pattern analysis of forest loss in the Madre de Dios region, Peru. Environmental Research Letters, 14(12), 124045. https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ab57c3

[4] Torre-Marin Rando A., González-Rojí S.J., Hurni K., Mathez-Stiefel S-L., Messmer M., Raible C.C., Snethlage M., Stocker T.F., Fischer M. 2021. Towards sustainable futures for nature and people: An appraisal report for Madre de Dios, Peru. Wyss Academy Report 1, Wyss Academy for Nature, Bern, Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.48350/161385

[5] Torre-Marin Rando A., González-Rojí S.J., Hurni K., Mathez-Stiefel S-L., Messmer M., Raible C.C., Snethlage M., Stocker T.F., Fischer M. 2021. Towards sustainable futures for nature and people: An appraisal report for Madre de Dios, Peru. Wyss Academy Report 1, Wyss Academy for Nature, Bern, Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.48350/161385

[6] Caritas Internationalis. (n.d.). Caritas Internationalis. https://www.caritas.org/

charity and social services, guided by Catholic human dignity and solidarity principles. Cáritas del Perú, founded on October 4, 1955, is part of this global network. It comprises a network of 48 diocesan Cáritas organizations across the country's 24 departments. It focuses on various programmatic areas, including emergency response, development, and social services, aiming to assist vulnerable communities throughout the nation.

In the Puerto Maldonado region, Cáritas operates through Cáritas Madre de Dios, the area's diocesan branch. This branch has been actively involved in addressing local challenges, particularly those arising from environmental issues. For instance, Caritas Madre de Dios has collaborated with communities and local governments to control deforestation in the Southern Amazon, promoting sustainable practices and environmental stewardship.

Cáritas Madre de Dios has also responded to natural disasters affecting the region. In 2014, following severe flooding that impacted numerous communities, Caritas del Perú launched the "Emergencia por Inundaciones en Madre de Dios" campaign to provide aid to those affected. This initiative aimed to address immediate needs and support recovery efforts in the flood-stricken areas. Later in 2021, “Unidos en Solidaridad”, another solidarity campaign was launched by Cáritas to support families affected by severe flooding in the Peruvian Amazon.[7]

Cáritas MDD has maintained a strong relationship with the Cooperativa Agraria de Servicios Múltiples Sur Oriente (COOPSSUR) since its founding in 2018, a process Caritas actively supported by helping to unite five local producer associations. Their partnership focuses on promoting sustainable and organic agricultural development in the Madre de Dios region of Peru. Together, they have achieved key milestones, including international exports, while Caritas has also organized training programs and internships to strengthen COOPSSUR’s; leadership and technical capacity.[8]

3. Cooperativa Agraria de Servicios Multiples Sur Oriente (COOPSSUR)

COOPSSUR is primarily a cacao-focused cooperative, uniting smallholder farmers in Madre de Dios, Peru, to produce and market high-quality, sustainably grown cacao for both domestic and international markets. COOPSSUR was formed in 2018 by 54 producers from the communities of Santa Rosa, Progreso, Alegría, and Lucerna to strengthen farmers’ market access, improve production quality, and promote long-term stewardship of land and forest resources.

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[7] Caritas del Perú. 2024. “Caritas Madre de Dios Launches Campaign ‘United in Solidarity’ for Flood Victims.” Caritas del Perú, February 20, 2024. https://caritas.org.pe/caritas-madre-de-dios-lanza-campana-unidos-en-solidaridad-por-damnificados-de-las-inundaciones/

[8] Caritas del Perú. “Farmers from Madre de Dios Export 25 Tons of Organic Copoazú to Russia Thanks to Caritas Madre de Dios and COOPSSUR.” Caritas del Perú, August 3, 2021. https://caritas.org.pe/agricultores-madrediosenses-exportan-25-toneladas-de-copoazu-organico-a-rusia-gracias-a-caritas-madre-de-dios-y-coopssur/

In 2019, the cooperative obtained its first organic certification, audited by KIWA, enabling participation in international markets and leading to its debut at the Paris Chocolate Fair. This visibility helped COOPSSUR complete its first copoazú export to Russia, even amid the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, the cooperative continues to renew its organic certification—now in its fourth cycle—and has initiated Fair Trade certification through Floser. Certification strategies are tailored to specific export markets; for example, France places a premium on certifications from small-scale producers.

COOPSSUR promotes sustainable agroforestry by encouraging the intercropping of cacao with fruit and forest species, improving biodiversity, soil health, and long-term climate resilience. Cacao is prioritized due to its strong and growing global demand, but the cooperative also supports diversification—particularly through copoazú, a climate-adapted crop valued for its high usability: over 70% of the fruit can be processed and consumed, in contrast to cacao, where only the beans are typically used. All 125 member families cultivate cacao, and approximately 40 also grow copoazú.

The cooperative operates in a region historically dominated by extractive industries such as illegal gold mining and deforestation. COOPSSUR's emphasis on sustainability therefore, represents a significant cultural and economic shift. Its membership includes both mestizo and Indigenous farmers, and its approach integrates not only organic and agroforestry practices but also strategic planning, capacity building, and self-management. These elements are essential to fostering long-term environmental stewardship and economic stability for its members.

In recent years, the cooperative has also faced challenges—from crop losses due to pests and disease to internal governance concerns and market access limitations. These issues underscore the importance of strengthening organizational resilience as COOPSSUR scales its operations and deepens its sustainability commitments.

To support its growth and resilience, COOPSSUR works closely with a network of external partners, many of which are government-affiliated. This reflects a broader national strategy in Peru that promotes cooperatives as vehicles for rural development and access to public funding. Key partners include CITEagroindustrial, which provides technical assistance and innovation services; Agrobanco, a state-owned bank offering credit and microfinance; and Agroideas, a program that co-finances business plans to strengthen producer organizations. Regional support is provided by the Dirección Regional de Agricultura and the Regional Environmental Agency, which coordinate agricultural development and environmental sustainability efforts. Newer initiatives like Dinamización del Ecosistema Regional (DER) aim to foster innovation and strengthen value chains, while peer organizations such as Agrobosque offer models of member-driven, biodiversity-based production. Together, these partnerships enhance COOPSSUR's ability to improve productivity, expand market access, and pursue long-term sustainable development[9].

[9] See Appendix 4 for full partner information

III . Research Design

This study was undertaken by the University of Notre Dame's REEL Regenerating Ecologies and Economies for Livelihoods (REEL) Class in collaboration with Cáritas Madre de Dios to:

I. Determine how the cooperative's internal structure impacts social cohesion among members
II. Assess the current levels of motivation and commitment among cooperative members.

To achieve the objectives listed above, the report aims to answer the following question:

> *How does the internal organization of the cooperative influence members' motivation and commitment?*

To answer this question, the team adopted an ethnographic research methodology composed of focus group discussions (FGD), Key Informant Interviews (KII), and surveys. The team conducted five FGDs in the Madre de Dios region. The FGD's spanned four of the five agricultural zones and native communities where COOPSSUR has had presence for the last couple of years by recruiting producers for cacao; Mavila, Alegría, Lucerna, Santa Rosa, and Las Piedras (Boca Pariamanu community). Due to time constraints, we did not conduct a FGD in the fifth region, El Progreso.

Additionally, the team carried out nine key informant interviews (KIIs) with active cooperative members—two in Mavila, Lucerna, Santa Rosa, and El Progreso, and one in Las Piedras. The team administered 21 surveys to cooperative members who participated in the focus group discussions to gather demographic and standardized data on their perceptions of governance, economic benefits, and levels of engagement within COOPSSUR. These surveys were conducted in the following zones: Alegria (4), Lucerna (4), Mavila (8), Santa Rosa (3), and El Progreso (2).

The team also conducted seven KIIs at Puerto Maldonado with strategic partners of the cooperative, as well as two interviews with technical and administrative staff from Cáritas and COOPSSUR, both based in Puerto Maldonado. This qualitative approach was complemented by a benchmark analysis to identify best practices in cooperative models, examine cooperative organizational structures, market strategies, and social initiatives, and extract practical lessons that could strengthen COOPSSUR.

1. Qualitative Data Sources

To gather qualitative data, the team prioritized agricultural zones where COOPSSUR maintains an active presence and where Cáritas Madre de Dios has conducted activities supporting the organization. The selected areas—Mavila, Alegría, Lucerna, Santa Rosa, and El

Progreso—were chosen based on their relevance to the cooperative's current operations, diversity in levels of member engagement, and accessibility for fieldwork. Particular attention was given to areas with Indigenous participation, such as Boca Pariamanu in Las Piedras. Table 1 summarizes the focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and surveys conducted by location and stakeholder type. Interviews with strategic partners and technical staff from Cáritas and COOPSSUR, based in Puerto Maldonado are detailed in Table 2.

Table 1. Agricultural zones sampled for data collection in Madre de Dios, Peru

Region	Agricultural Zone	Data collected	Date
MDD	Mavila	1 FGD, 2 KII, 8 Surveys	**Mar 10, 2025**
MDD	Alegría	1 FGD*, 4 Surveys	**Mar 10, 2025**
MDD	Lucerna	1 FGD, 2 KII, 4 Surveys	**Mar 11, 2025**
MDD	Santa Rosa	1 FGD, 2 KII, 3 Surveys	**Mar 12, 2025**
MDD	El Progreso	1 FGD, 2 KII, 2 Surveys	**Mar 12, 2025**
MDD	Las Piedras	1 FGD & 1 KII**	**Mar 13, 2025**

**No KII due to time constraints as a result of road and weather conditions*
*** No Survey due to time constraints as a result of road and weather conditions*

Table 2. Cáritas, Coopssur, and strategic partners KIIs in Madre de Dios, Peru

Region	Location	Interviewee	Data collected	Date
MDD	Virtual	Cáritas Staff 1	1 KII	**Apr 3, 2025**
MDD	Virtual	Coopssur Staff 1	1 KII	**Apr 3, 2025**
MDD	Pt. Maldonado	Agrobanco	1 KII	**Mar 14, 2…**
MDD	Pt. Maldonado	Agroideas	1 KII	**Mar 14, 2…**
MDD	Pt. Maldonado	CITE	1 KII	**Mar 14, 2…**
MDD	Pt. Maldonado	Municipality of Puerto Maldonado-Environmental Agency	1 KII	**Mar 14, 2…**
MDD	Pt. Maldonado	Dirección Regional de Agricultura (DRA)	1 KII	**Mar 14, 2…**

MDD	Pt. Maldonado	Dinamización del Ecosistema Regional (DER)	1 KII	**Mar 14, 2…**
MDD	Pt. Maldonado	Agrobosque	1 KII	**Mar 14, 2…**

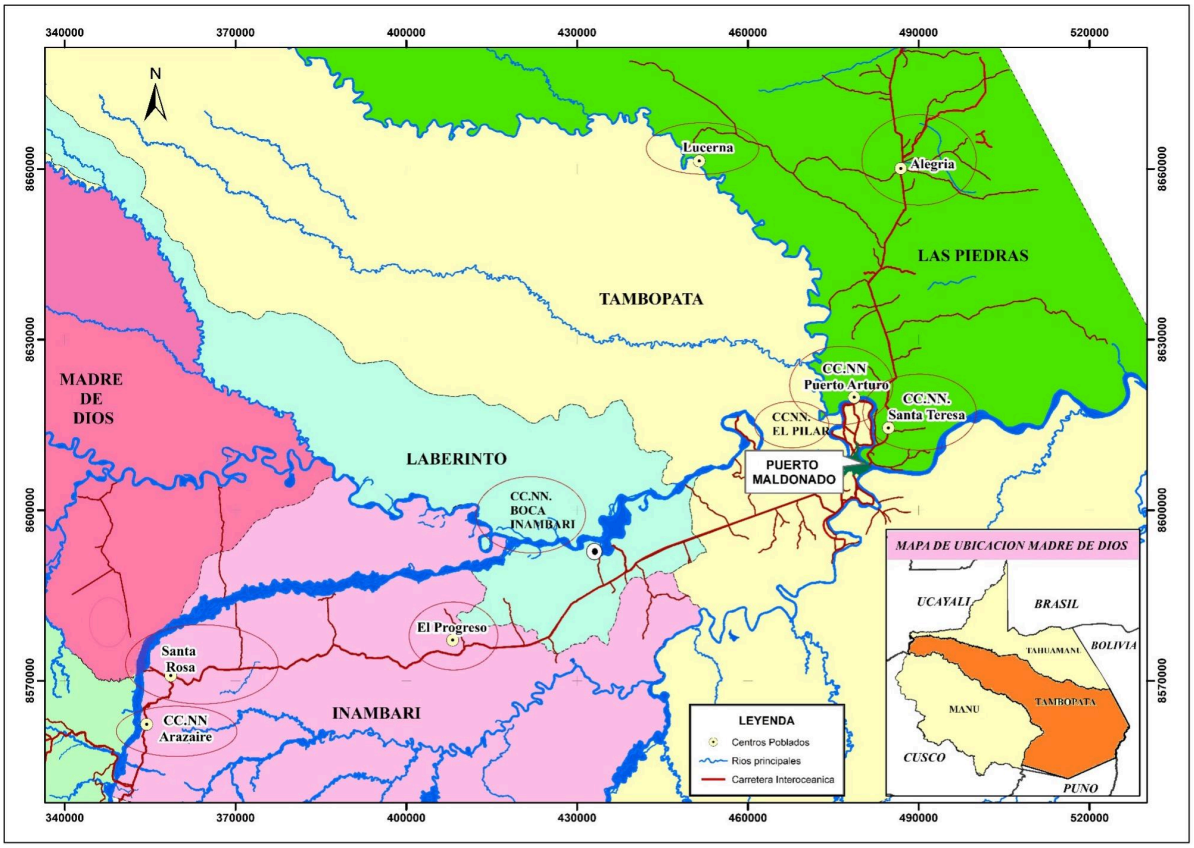

Figure 1 Map of study sites in Madre de Dios, Peru (Cáritas, 2025)

2. Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

2.1 Data collection

Qualitative data was collected in Madre de Dios between March 8 and March 16, 2025. The research team gathered data through five focus group discussions (FGDs) and nine key informant interviews (KIIs) with active members of COOPSSUR across the zones of Mavila, Alegría, Lucerna, Santa Rosa, El Progreso, and Las Piedras. Participants included long-standing members, new affiliates, and individuals holding positions on the cooperative's board. The team relied on Cáritas MDD to identify the appropriate members to be interviewed. Participant selection was conducted collaboratively with Caritas Madre de Dios, which

leveraged its long-standing relationships and trust with the communities to propose an initial list of participants, further refined by the research team according to the study's objectives.

Four members of the research team facilitated the FGDs and KIIs directly in the field, using the standardized instruments. Instrument implementation was conducted in Spanish to support main ideas in native language of participants. Data collection was carried out in coordination with COOPSSUR's management and Cáritas Madre de Dios, who also supported the logistical arrangements and community outreach. FGDs took place in locally accessible venues provided by community members and allies, such as homes, restaurants, and community centers. KIIs with technical and administrative staff from Caritas and COOPSSUR were conducted virtually after the fieldwork period, also in Spanish.

All FGDs and interviews were conducted in accordance with ethical research practices that were aligned with IRB guidelines. Verbal informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to any note-taking or audio recording. To ensure confidentiality, participants' responses were anonymized and used solely for analytical purposes. While handwritten notes were taken in all sessions, KIIs were also audio-recorded—with prior consent—to ensure accuracy. Participants were not identified by name in the recordings, which were used exclusively for internal analysis. The team adapted the wording of the questions according to the audience to engage with them and adapt to their terminology. While most data collection took place in person, virtual interviews were conducted with staff members due to logistical constraints.

2.2 Data Analysis

To prepare the data for analysis, all handwritten notes and audio recordings from FGDs and KIIs were transcribed and translated into English. The research team carried out transcriptions, and the resulting documents were organized using Excel to facilitate thematic classification and coding.

The qualitative data was analyzed through a two-level analysis process designed to capture internal- with members (first level) and external- with partners (second level) perspectives on COOPSSUR's performance and organizational dynamics. This approach enabled a layered understanding of the cooperative by first focusing on the voices of its members and then incorporating the observations of strategic partners and institutional actors. The findings were compared with survey data to reinforce and contextualize key patterns.

The team members that conducted the various instruments in the field implemented a cross-review of coding and thematic groupings to ensure data reliability. This collaborative validation process helped strengthen the consistency and accuracy of the analysis across interviews and locations.

2.2.1 First-level Analysis: Member Perspectives

In the first level of analysis, transcripts from focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) with cooperative members were manually reviewed and thematically coded. For KIIs, the data was thematically organized under the following categories: (1) Introduction and General Perception of the Cooperative, (2) Challenges and Opportunities, (3) Current Initiatives and Impact, and (4) Other Insights. For FGDs, the themes included (1) Introduction and Perception of the Cooperative, (2) Challenges, (3) Opportunities, (4) Current Initiatives and Impact, (5) Member Benefits and Engagement, (6) Future Needs, and (7) Other. An initial codebook was developed inductively to reflect recurring themes emerging directly from participants' testimonies. The analysis focused on three main categories: Production, Cohesion, and Motivation.

This analysis stage allowed the research team to capture the lived experiences of cooperative members and identify both barriers and enablers for deeper engagement in the cooperative. The data revealed variations across communities in terms of perceived leadership, the distribution of benefits,and participation levels.

The team applied a mixed coding strategy that combined inductive and deductive approaches. An initial codebook was developed based on the research questions and fieldwork objectives and was refined through an iterative review of the transcripts. A binary coding system (0–1) was applied to each interview and focus group transcript to identify the presence or absence of specific variables.

The thematic and comparative analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns, emerging themes, and variations across different zones. Each category was analyzed in relation to a set of predefined sub-variables:

- Production-related variables: crop diseases, drought, cold weather (freeze), access to dryers, tools, labor intensity, staff availability, on-site technical assistance, transportation, storage capacity, product quality and volume.
- Cohesion-related variables: perceptions of fairness and inequality, awareness of the cooperative model, transparency, sense of belonging, workload (as a barrier to participation), and previous experiences in organized groups.
- Motivation-related variables: fair and stable pricing, fixed buyers, access to government programs, financing, tools, and training opportunities.

2.2.2 Second-level Analysis: External and Comparative Insights

The second stage focused on the analysis of KIIs with external stakeholders, including technical and administrative staff from Cáritas and COOPSSUR, as well as strategic partners. These interviews were reviewed separately to identify broader institutional and strategic perspectives. Data was coded and grouped into three overarching categories:

- Perceptions of COOPSSUR from external actors, focusing on reputation, organizational capacity, and alignment with development goals.
- Challenges identified by partners, including structural limitations, leadership gaps, or operational inefficiencies.
- Opportunities for growth, such as potential partnerships, funding sources, and long-term sustainability strategies.

This external lens provided a complementary viewpoint to the internal assessments, helping to validate some member concerns while also identifying additional areas for improvement that were not always visible from within the organization.

The second stage was supported by a descriptive analysis of survey data collected from cooperative members. After translating- with AI tools and the team checking the translations for accuracy- the results, these were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics to identify trends related to communication practices, leadership perception, awareness of cooperative policies, and reported benefits. These findings were used to contextualize and reinforce the results obtained from the other instruments.

IV. Findings

Drawing from the data analysis outlined in the research design, the following findings center around the themes of cohesion, motivation, and transparency.

1. Communication

While intra-community communication remains strong, communication across zones is inconsistent and often mediated by intermediaries, limiting broader cohesion within the cooperative.

Communication within COOPSSUR reflects a cooperative that is socially cohesive in pockets but fragmented at scale. In zones like Lucerna and Santa Rosa, members report regular contact through WhatsApp, phone calls, and informal in-person check-ins. One respondent in Santa Rosa shared, “We’re neighbors first.”[10] In these areas, participants described “neighborly” relationships, shared resources, and a sense of mutual responsibility, reinforcing cohesion on a small scale. This generates support for harvest coordination, pest management, and workshop participation. However, in many cases, these close ties predate the cooperative itself—some members come from migrant communities that settled and organized together before joining COOPSSUR. As one member from El Progreso noted, “We already had our own community before–we just joined together.”

This pre-existing cohesion has helped certain zones operate more smoothly, but it also underscores a gap: the cooperative has not consistently created or strengthened communication across different zones. Several members noted that they only encounter others at occasional meetings—if they attend at all. “I don’t communicate much with others outside of meetings…[at meetings] we discuss the harvest,” said one member. Physical distance and limited cooperative-led outreach have contributed to this silo effect, leaving members in more isolated areas with minimal connection to the broader network.

Leadership communication is another area of concern. While technicians and collectors often serve as an informal communication channel, direct engagement with COOPSUR leadership and the board is limited. One member from Mavila explains, “I am familiar with leadership but not with decision-making. I deal with technicians and collectors, but not actual leadership.” Others expressed appreciation for technical support but emphasized the need for more formalized and visible leadership contact. Members also expressed interest in general assemblies not just as reporting mechanisms, but as opportunities for dialogue and relationship-building.

To summarize, while localized relationships sustain limited interpersonal cohesion, the cooperative’s communication practices do not yet support a cohesive, cooperative-wide identity

[10] Translated for clarity from member KII in Santa Rosa.

or engagement strategy. Crucially, members aren't just asking for information—they want to feel seen and heard as part of a collective. As one participant put it, "We are part of this, but it doesn't always feel like we're in it." Without that, the cooperative struggles to generate the shared identity and trust that would foster full participation.

2. Board of Directors: Governance and Engagement

Although COOPSSUR's governance structures are in place, members seek deeper involvement, transparency, and connection with leadership.

The cooperative is governed by a Board of Directors, elected by the General Assembly, with the most recent election taking place in December 2024[11]. However, by mid-March 2025, the newly elected Board had not yet fully assumed their roles. Some of the Board members, including the incoming president, were interviewed, but a few were unclear about their specific responsibilities, reflecting a lack of clarity about their roles within the governance structure. The supporting committees—Electoral, Education, Supervisory, and Certification—were not mentioned by interviewees, suggesting limited visibility or engagement with these governance bodies.

From the perspective of the management, there is a strong emphasis on ensuring financial transparency, with an expectation for the Board to be actively involved in audits. The cooperative promotes a participatory management style, aiming to treat all members equally, regardless of whether they hold leadership positions. This approach is intended to foster a non-hierarchical and transparent system where communication flows directly from leadership to the members. Despite this, several members reported limited engagement with the Board. Their primary interactions tend to be with the cooperative's technicians and collectors, and occasionally with representatives from COOPSSUR and Cáritas.

Furthermore, some farmers expressed a desire for more involvement and transparency from the Board. One farmer suggested that the distance between leadership and members might contribute to low attendance at meetings and recommended hosting more frequent meetings to improve engagement. Additionally, some farmers wanted to know more about the destinations of their products and sought greater involvement in decision-making processes. There were also suggestions for increased mobilization efforts, such as home visits from leadership to build unity and encourage greater attendance at events and workshops. It was also observed that certain zones where more established associative models are in place, such as APROCCI and the Boca Pariamanu Indigenous Community's Women's Committee, could offer valuable insights into effective Board governance and engagement.

[11] See appendix 2 for COOPSSUR organizational chart

3. Transparency

Members raised concerns about unequal access to support, limited transparency of internal processes, and the need for more inclusive decision-making.

Resources Allocation: Participants indicated a lack of transparency in decision-making and support allocation. Specifically, members noted that some members receive benefits while others do not, without any clear justification or visible criteria for such allocation. Examples of mentioned benefits include access to technical assistance, agricultural tools, training, and participation in income-generating projects.

A member in Lucerna states, *"*There are people who don't deliver their product and still get the tools. Meanwhile, those of us who deliver everything are still waiting to receive ours." This directly highlights a perception of dissatisfaction about how resources and projects are being distributed. Similarly, in Mavila, we found that this issue also generated disagreements, reflecting underlying tension among members.

In addition, there was a recurring call for more support for young and new producers. As one member of Mavila stated, "I am somewhat new, and I think that's why I don't receive much support."

Decision-making: Although members, in general, acknowledged the existence of leadership, they did not feel fully informed about how decisions are made or what is expected of participation. In Mavila, Lucerna and El Progreso individuals said they were unfamiliar with the cooperative's internal decision-making processes or its operational policies. In Alegría and Lucerna, members expressed the feeling that they manage daily challenges while others make decisions without their input. El Progreso and Lucerna members shared that they want to feel heard and included and that their opinions should be considered when decisions are made in the cooperative. In contrast, Santa Rosa and Las Piedras participants did not report significant barriers in terms of transparency, but also did not reflect strong indicators of understanding the structure and the decision-making process of the cooperative.

Limited Role Clarity and Information Flow: Within the cooperative, responsibility is concentrated in a few people—the general manager, the Cáritas leaders, and the technical team–who are expected to solve problems and make things happen. Members in leadership positions reported a lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities. A few members reported that they did not remember the name of the position they held on the board.

A few members directly mentioned that policies are not communicated, while another expressed frustration that the cooperative expects them to produce but does not clearly communicate the requirements needed to access support.

4. Member Benefits

Farmers join COOPSSUR primarily to access better markets, secure fairer prices, receive technical support, and qualify for financial and government programs.

Many members previously sold cacao to middlemen, or *rescatistas*, who offered low and inconsistent pricing. Others transitioned from illegal gold mining or coca production, seeking more sustainable and calm livelihoods. Organizing collectively through COOPSSUR has allowed members to secure more reliable sales, negotiate better prices, and eliminate the dependence on intermediaries. The cooperative's ability to guarantee a market for their cacao and representation in national and international markets provides a sense of economic security. Being a part of a collective also brings visibility to the Madre de Dios region and fosters a sense of community among farmers.

Beyond market access, the cooperative also offers valuable opportunities for growth and learning. Members benefit from the workshops and technical support provided by the cooperative, which focus on improving their cacao and copoazu cultivation practices. Through these initiatives, members have gained knowledge about organic certification, disease management, and sustainable agricultural techniques.

Officials from the Dirección Regional de Agricultura in Madre de Dios emphasized that Peruvian public policy is increasingly prioritizing support for formally organized groups, making cooperative membership a prerequisite for accessing state-funded resources. COOPSSUR plays a critical role in helping farmers complete the necessary paperwork for grants and project support, enabling them to qualify for government-sponsored technical assistance programs and rural development initiatives such as Agroideas and Procompite, which provide business plan development and resources like fermenters, dryers, and other equipment. In addition, cooperative membership facilitates access to financial and institutional support that is typically unavailable to individual small-scale farmers. For example, through COOPSSUR, producers can obtain low-interest loans from the AgroPerú Fund via government-sponsored financial institutions such as Agrobanco.

While many COOPSSUR members expressed optimism about the long-term benefits of the membership, the return on the investment is not always immediate or financial. Some members noted that while short-term gains have been limited, they now feel more secure and better equipped to manage their production. As one farmer summarized, "It feels like you have a little more money available—plus, there's the stability of fair pricing and someone who helps you through the hard times." This sentiment reflects a common view among members: although monthly income fluctuates due to factors like seasonality and market prices of cacao, the cooperative provides valuable non-monetary support.

However, others mentioned challenges with delayed payment during periods when the cooperative lacked sufficient liquidity to buy the full harvest. This lack of working capital can be challenging because cacao production is seasonal, and farmers need to continue tending to their crops and managing certain expenses, even when payments are delayed. In these

instances, farmers sometimes turn to third-party buyers to meet immediate needs. While the timing of payments can occasionally create some financial pressure, members remain hopeful that the cooperative's model will continue to provide long-term stability and support. As one farmer explained, “We give and we receive,” referencing both the financial returns and the institutional support that come with cooperative membership.

5. Technical Support and Crop Management

Despite significant efforts to adopt organic practices and improve production, persistent challenges continue to hinder farmers' ability to maintain quality and fully capitalize on market opportunities. They emphasize the need for more technical support and resources to overcome these obstacles.

Plant Diseases: One of the primary concerns voiced by farmers relates to persistent plant diseases, which continue to hinder cacao production and threaten economic viability. Three main diseases were consistently mentioned: Witches’ Broom, Monilia Pod Rot, and Black Rot[12].

The farmers expressed a clear need for more specialized technical support to manage these diseases better. Many rely on traditional control methods such as pruning and removing infected material, but there is a desire for more frequent, field-based guidance from COOPSSUR technician. While the cooperative provides occasional training and assistance, there was a consensus that the support is not sufficient given the scale and severity of the issue.

Climate Variability: In addition to disease pressure, farmers have increasingly struggled with climate variability, which has disrupted cacao production cycles. Extreme temperatures, prolonged drought, and intense rainfall have become more common in recent years. These shifts have led to many challenges, including soil moisture retention, which has heightened the risk of drought stress during critical stages of cacao development. Farmers consistently expressed a strong need for an irrigation system to more effectively manage water resources and alleviate the impacts of drought conditions. Farmers also noted that these climate changes have made it harder to predict the timing of the harvest, leading to inconsistent production levels.

Technical Support: Farmers consistently acknowledge the value of the technical assistance, tools, and workshops provided by the cooperative. Many members emphasized that before joining, they lacked formal knowledge about organic production standards and had limited understanding of proper post-harvest handling techniques. Through the cooperative’s support, they have developed greater capacity to manage their crops more effectively, specifically cacao. However, despite this progress, several producers expressed a continued need for further support. A recurring theme was the limited access to essential post-harvest infrastructure and

[12] See appendix 3 for detailed information on the plant diseases

tools. Farmers pointed to the need for additional dryers and storage areas, as well as more timely collection services.

Organic Production: Many producers have transitioned to organic production practices, motivated by COOPSSUR's guidance as well as the environmental benefits and potential access to premium markets. They recognize the advantages of organic farming, including higher quality soils, reduced chemical use, and alignment with international buyer expectations. However, several farmers expressed that the additional effort and compliance required for organic production is not yet reflected in the prices they receive. As a result, some continue to engage in conventional farming practices alongside organic ones.

These gaps in post-harvest support are seen as barriers to strictly adhere to quality and organic certification standards. There is a clear understanding among members that enhancing post-harvest processes is not only important for maintaining product integrity but also for accessing more demanding markets that offer higher and more stable prices. Continued investment in infrastructure, technical assistance, and transparency around pricing structures will be essential to reinforce farmers' commitment to organic production and to ensure that the benefits of certification translate into tangible economic gains.

6. Post-harvest Collection

Unreliable cacao collection–ranging from missed pickups to long waits for the cooperative due to unprepared product–has led members to sell elsewhere, undermining cooperative loyalty and operational efficiency.

Some members express significant dissatisfaction with the current cacao collection system, citing two main issues:

Unfulfilled Collection Requests: Members report that collectors fail to arrive after being called. This unreliability forces members to seek alternative sales channels, weakening commitment to the cooperative, and also reducing the overall volume and quality control.

A member in Mavila shared, "Collection is not reliable ---members feel forced to sell elsewhere,″ directly highlighting the issue. The sentiment from some members in Mavila that "they deal with issues while someone else makes the decisions" may reflect a broader frustration with unreliable collection and lack of local decision-making power..

In Lucerna, members mentioned that "some sell their produce to other cooperatives"--likely a consequence of unreliable collection services, pushing members to seek more dependable buyers.

In contrast, reliable collection was cited as a strength for some groups, such as the Boca Pariamanu community, where members highlighted that ″they are able to sell all their cacao production to the cooperative" and the cooperative is "also picking up the product." This further

exemplifies how inconsistent collection can lead to frustration and loss of loyalty when it is unreliable elsewhere.

Excessive Wait Times for Collectors: Conversely, collectors often experience substantial delays when responding to collection requests. This occurs because members call for collection, but their cacao produce is not yet prepared or ready for pickup. These prolonged wait times waste valuable time and resources for the collectors, impacting the efficiency of the entire collection process.

7. External Partners' Perception of COOPSSUR

Some partners view COOPSSUR as professional and a key regional player, with its reputation enhanced by its association with the highly credible Cáritas. However, others identified critical gaps in managerial capacity, internal collaboration, and technical expertise that need to be addressed for sustained success.

The cooperative is respected and professional: Agrobanco expressed a positive view, stating that COOPSSUR is "very reliable and professional" and consistently keeps all documentation up to date. They also noted that they "seem very involved in the business." This indicates a perception of a well-organized and committed partner from a financial institution.

While highlighting areas for improvement, Agroideas' continued support and the significant financial investment (2 million soles) suggest a fundamental respect for COOPSSUR as a key player in the region's agricultural development. The fact that they signed an agreement in 2023 and are moving towards the "AgroMercado" phase (brand development) indicates a belief in COOPSSUR's potential for growth and market success.

The reputation is linked to Cáritas: CITE explicitly mentioned working with Cáritas since 2017 and COOPSSUR since 2019, implying a connection in their engagement. The positive framing of their support (e.g., "help open new markets" ,"support producers" , and "consolidates producers") could be indirectly influenced by the established positive reputation of Cáritas in the region.

The municipality highlighted that "Caritas has the most credibility in the region because their support is so broad." The fact that the Environmental Agency is working on the "Madre de Dios" brand alongside Caritas suggests that partnerships with credible organizations like Caritas enhance the perceived legitimacy and trustworthiness of initiatives, potentially including COOPSSUR's involvement in the brand.

Gaps in managerial capacity: Agroideas directly stated the "need to strengthen the organization, currently not working collaboratively" and sees a "need for increased oversight." This points to a perception of weaknesses in internal management, coordination, and potentially

accountability within COOPSSUR. The recommendation to "hire managerial support"[13] and the observation of limited hiring options for technicians (despite available funding) further underscore these perceived managerial and technical capacity gaps. The fact that Agroideas will begin evaluating COOPSSUR's benchmarks soon also suggests they are actively monitoring and concerned about the cooperative's organizational effectiveness.

The external partners generally view COOPSSUR with respect, recognizing its professionalism and potential, particularly in market access and producer consolidation. The association with a highly reputable organization like Cáritas further bolsters its image. However, there is a clear recognition, particularly from Agroideas, of existing weaknesses in managerial capacity, internal collaboration, and the ability to secure necessary technical expertise. Addressing these gaps will be crucial for COOPSSUR to fully capitalize on the opportunities available and ensure long-term sustainability and growth.

[13] This was under discussion during our March interview. This role might have been fulfilled already.

V. Recommendations

Given that this study represents an initial phase in a multi-year project, the following recommendations have been crafted to be highly actionable and feasible within the current state of the cooperative. This approach allows for the establishment of a clear benchmark and facilitates the measurement of impact as the project evolves and deepens in the coming years.

1. Transparency

To address the widespread concerns around fairness and clarity in decision-making, COOPSSUR should prioritize actions that advance internal transparency to strengthen members' motivation and involvement. Focus groups and interviews' findings revealed that many members perceive support distribution as inconsistent and lacking clear justification. This perception is increased by the limited visibility of how decisions are made, who makes them, and according to what criteria. In the absence of clear communication and documented processes, members (particularly newer and younger producers) feel disconnected from the cooperative's internal operations and uncertain about their rights and responsibilities. Rather than promoting collective trust, the current approach risks reinforcing power imbalances and reducing accountability. To build a culture of openness and shared responsibility, we propose the following recommendations: (1) Define "Engagement" in the cooperative context; (2) Set expectations and responsibilities for everyone; and (3) Establish clear and public criteria for the distribution of benefits and tools.

Recommendation 1: <u>Define "Engagement" in the Cooperative Context</u>

Defining what engagement means (with clear actions and metrics) to build trust, clarify expectations, and ensure fair participation in the cooperative.

To strengthen participation and fairness within the cooperative, it is essential to define what "engagement" means in this specific context. We recommend clearly identifying which actions count as active engagement, such as attending meetings, consistently delivering products, participating in training, or contributing to decision-making. Creating simple engagement metrics (e.g., attendance records, delivery consistency, or training participation) and using the metrics to assess eligibility for cooperative benefits and project participation can help clarify expectations among members.

Transparency is a key element for building strong, inclusive, and lasting relationships within the cooperative. It involves developing a shared understanding of values, goals, and responsibilities. Based on insights from the interviews and focus groups, it is essential to challenge and redefine the current understanding of what commitment means in practice.

Example of metrics:

Category	Examples	What it reflects
Participation	Attending general assemblies, workshops, joining working groups, etc.	Shows commitment and shared governance. Members' presence helps shape decisions and collective direction.
Production	Delivering product on time and in agreed quantity/quality	Ensures cooperative performance and trust, and reliable delivery supports everyone's success.
Communication	Responding to cooperative messages, reading announcements	Keeps members informed and involved. Open communication builds transparency and inclusion.
Learning & Training	Attending workshops, applying new practices	Supports innovation and sustainability. Members' learning strengthens the cooperative's future.
Solidarity	Helping other members, respecting community agreements	Reinforces cooperative values. Mutual support creates a stronger and more united cooperative.

To implement this recommendation, we suggest co-creating a shared definition of engagement through a participatory, bottom-up approach. This process should actively involve all members—especially new and younger producers—so that the final definition reflects diverse perspectives and is perceived as meaningful to everyone. Once agreed upon, this definition should be clearly communicated and socialized across the cooperative, using accessible formats and repeated messaging to ensure it has been well captured and understood by all members.

Recommendation 2: <u>Set expectations and responsibilities for everyone.</u>

Create a Mutual Expectations Chart, co-designed with members, clearly communicated, and regularly updated, to strengthen trust and ensure fair participation.

To make participation more fair and transparent, it is important to define clearly what the cooperative expects from its members—and what members can expect in return. When roles and responsibilities are not well-defined, it can lead to confusion, frustration, and less participation. Members must understand what is expected from them: attending meetings, delivering products on time, participating in training, and contributing to cooperative life. At the same time, they have the right to know what the cooperative offers: fair access to benefits, clear communication, support, and spaces to be heard.

To put this into practice, we suggest creating a Mutual Expectations Chart, where both sides—members and cooperative—can see and agree on their responsibilities. This should be built together, with input from members, so it reflects the reality and values of the community. Once agreed, it should be shared in assemblies, trainings, and other communication channels so everyone is on the same page. Making these expectations visible can help strengthen trust and promote a more active and respectful participation from everyone.

Example of the chart:

What the Cooperative Expects from Members	What Members Expect from the Cooperative
Deliver the product on time and in good condition*	Clear and timely communication of policies and decisions
Attend general assemblies and training sessions	Fair access to benefits and tools based on clear criteria

**Define what good condition means.*

We suggest printing and sharing the chart with members, presenting it at meetings, and distributing it through all communication channels, including the promoters. This should be a living document, not static. It must be reviewed and updated at least once a year, ideally during a general assembly or strategic planning process to ensure it stays relevant and inclusive.

Recommendation 3: Establish clear and public criteria for the distribution of benefits and tools.

Define and share clear criteria for the distribution of benefits, based on fair and transparent standards, and ensure everyone knows, understands, and sees them applied equally.

The cooperative should develop clear internal guidelines that explain who is eligible for support and under what conditions. These criteria should be based on transparent, fair, and achievable standards—such as attendance, product delivery, or participation in training—and must be applied equally to all members. Transparency in how support is given is not just about rules, it's about fairness, inclusion, and building a stronger sense of collective belonging.

The above, considering one of the most frequently mentioned concerns during focus groups and interviews, was the perception that benefits and tools are not distributed fairly. Creating and communicating these rules will help prevent misunderstandings, reduce tensions, and promote greater trust among members. When people clearly understand the benefits, tools, and expectations, and see that the rules apply to everyone, it strengthens the legitimacy of the cooperative processes. Once the criteria are defined, they should be written in simple, accessible language that all members can understand; printed and shared in meetings, through

WhatsApp, or other communication channels; regularly reviewed to make sure they are still relevant and fair; and monitored and applied consistently, with space for members to ask questions or request clarification.

2. Communication

To address fragmentation and strengthen cooperative-wide cohesion, COOPSSUR must adopt a structured communication strategy that fosters connection across zones and builds a shared sense of identity among its members.

To address persistent fragmentation across zones and promote a more unified cooperative identity, COOPSSUR should strengthen its internal communication practices. Findings from the focus groups and interviews indicate that while localized communication is strong within certain communities, cooperative-wide communication remains inconsistent, informal, and overly reliant on intermediaries such as the collectors, technicians, and COOPSSUR and Caritas staff. This lack of structured communication appears to contribute to a broader sense of disconnection–both from the cooperative as a collective institution and from its leadership. Rather than fostering a shared identity, the current approach to communication risks reducing member engagement to transactional interaction. To build cohesion and ensure all members feel seen, informed, and actively included in COOPSSUR's development, we recommend two complementary actions: (1) the creation and distribution of a monthly *Boletín Informativo* (informative bulletin) and (2) the continuation of quarterly general assembly meetings, with the integration of high-value technical workshops to increase attendance and engagement.

Recommendation 4: Boletín informativo

A consistent, cooperative-wide bulletin is essential to bridge communication gaps and build a stronger sense of unity across zones.

First, the *Boletín Informativo* would provide members with clear and consistent updates each month. This one-page bulletin should include details such as which zones received tools, workshops, or technical support; how much cacao was collected from each area; reminders for key agricultural tasks (e.g., pruning, best-practices, etc.); updates on *Mesa Técnica* participation; sales and value-added production updates; upcoming state programs; and reminders for meetings and deadlines. Including milestone celebrations and a section for member "call-outs" can further foster a sense of inclusion and belonging. While technicians and staff can assist in gathering this information, the bulletin should come directly from cooperative leadership to reinforce transparency and visibility. This recommendation is supported by existing cooperative governance literature, which emphasizes the role of frequent and transparent communication in strengthening accountability, reducing internal tensions, and promoting participation—particularly in cooperatives that span multiple, geographically dispersed communities.

This first recommendation is grounded in both the feedback collected during KIIs and focus groups and in emerging best practices in cooperative development, which underscore the importance of frequent and transparent communication for sustaining member trust, participation, and organizational cohesion.[14] Literature on cooperative governance highlights that even simple recurring communication mechanisms—such as monthly bulletins—can significantly improve member awareness and reduce perceptions of favoritism or unequal benefit distribution, especially in cooperatives with geographically dispersed members.[15][16] The bulletin format also provides an opportunity to reinforce a culture of accountability by showing clearly where and how resources, trainings, and support are allocated across the membership. Beyond improving information access, the bulletin offers an opportunity to reinforce a collective identity. Including sections for milestone announcements, reminders of upcoming meetings, and member call-outs or acknowledgments from different zones would foster inclusion and encourage participation beyond one's immediate local circle. While technicians and collectors currently serve as an informal communication channel, a direct, standardized communication channel would reduce overreliance on intermediaries and strengthen the relationship between the leadership and general membership.

To support implementation, we propose assisting COOPSSUR in designing a simple reporting tool that leadership and staff can complete monthly, which will serve as the basis for generating and distributing the *Boletín Informativo*. Based on our understanding of internal roles and responsibilities, technicians and collectors already maintain daily logs related to collection and fieldwork. Given this, we suggest that the consolidation of this information could be coordinated by a COOPSSUR staff member, who currently serves as a bookkeeper and maintains close communication with technicians and collectors. Additionally, representatives from each zone would submit local updates they wish to include directly to the COOPSSUR staff member. She would then be responsible for compiling and completing the bulletin format we have developed (see Appendix 7.), which would ideally be distributed by the COOPSSUR president via WhatsApp. This system is designed to minimize the burden of data collection while ensuring regular, standardized communication across the cooperative.

We further recommend including a short "pulse check" survey in the same WhatsApp message as the bulletin. This 2–3 question monthly survey can collect real-time feedback on topics such as clarity of communication, fairness, or members' sense of trust in leadership—while also offering a channel for input on bulletin content itself. These mini-surveys would help COOPSSUR track progress and adapt communication practices over time.

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[14] Nyoro, J. K., & Ngugi, I. K. (2007). A qualitative analysis of success and failure factors of agricultural cooperatives in Central Kenya. Decentralization and the social economics of development: lessons from Kenya, 12-32.

[15] Österberg, P., & Nilsson, J. (2009). Members' perception of their participation in the governance of cooperatives: the key to trust and commitment in agricultural cooperatives. Agribusiness: An International Journal, 25(2), 181-197.

[16] Bijman, J., & Wijers, G. (2019). Exploring the inclusiveness of producer cooperatives. Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability, 41, 74–79.

Recommendation 5: Quarterly General Assembly Meetings

Quarterly general assemblies are critical to restoring trust, fostering inclusion, and re-centering members in the cooperative's decision-making process.

Second, to reinforce cooperative identity, increase transparency, and strengthen member engagement, COOPSSUR should hold quarterly general assembly meetings that are consistent, scheduled in advance, and prioritized as a central element of cooperative governance. While general assemblies are meant to serve as a forum for collective decision-making and leadership accountability, we found that, as of mid-March, no meeting had yet occurred following the December 2024 board elections. As a result, many members across different zones reported that they had not met the newly elected leadership or received updates on recent decisions, funding allocations, or project progress. In a context where cooperative-wide communication is already limited, the absence of regular assemblies has deepened feelings of disconnect and weakened members' sense of cohesion.

To address this, we recommend the institutionalization of quarterly general assemblies, ensuring they are scheduled and communicated in advance through WhatsApp and included in the *Boletín Informativo*. Regular assemblies offer a critical space for leadership to share updates, explain decisions, and respond to member concerns directly—replacing ad hoc, intermediary-led communication with transparent, face-to-face dialogue. These meetings are not just administrative obligations; they are vital touchpoints for reinforcing a shared cooperative identity and maintaining trust between leadership and members.

To improve attendance—particularly given the economic burden members face in leaving their parcels and work behind to attend meetings—we further recommend that COOPSSUR pair general assemblies with high-value technical workshops as well as a meal. Across all focus groups and KIIs, workshops were described as the most appreciated and useful service the cooperative offers. Members consistently cited training on topics like organic certification, crop disease management, fermentation and drying techniques, and post-harvest quality control as both practical and transformative. By linking general assemblies with these types of skill-building opportunities, the cooperative can ensure that members not only receive information but also gain something of tangible value in return for their participation. This aligns with best practices in cooperative development, which show that when administrative meetings are integrated with productive learning opportunities, participation increases, motivation improves, and member retention strengthens[17].

To maximize the impact of these assemblies, we recommend expanding their purpose beyond technical content to include structured dialogue and trust-building. Specifically, time should be

[17] Amiquero, A., Schmid, J., & Bijman, J. (2023). An integrated framework of success and failure factors of agricultural cooperatives: An illustrative case study. Journal of Co-operative Organization and Management, 11(1), 100208.

set aside for open discussion between members and board leadership. This should include dedicated space for newer, younger, or less vocal members to share concerns or suggestions in a respectful and safe setting. Facilitators should rotate across zones and reflect gender and generational diversity to promote more inclusive engagement.

Additionally, we recommend aligning external guest visits—such as representatives from other cooperatives, state agencies, or technical partners—with these quarterly meetings. Focus group feedback indicated that members are eager to learn from outside experiences, and hosting guests during assemblies can increase turnout, encourage knowledge exchange, and support broader member participation.

We suggest that each quarterly meeting include one targeted workshop—selected based on seasonal needs or ongoing challenges (e.g., pruning before the rainy season, managing Monilia outbreaks, and organic compliance audits). These workshops should be facilitated either by COOPSSUR technicians or external partners when possible, and their content should be shared afterward via the *Boletín Informativo* for members who could not attend. Over time, this structure can reframe assemblies not as a disruption to members' work, but as essential spaces for growth, connection, and collective progress.

Together, these two strategies–implementing a monthly *Boletín Informativo* and institutionalizing quarterly general assembly meetings–offer a realistic approach to strengthening internal communication driven by members' needs. They directly address the core challenges identified in the field: fragmentation, lack of transparency, and disengagement from leadership. By improving how information is communicated and how members participate, these recommendations lay the foundation for a more cohesive, accountable, and resilient cooperative where all members, regardless of their location, feel a part of the collective and connected to COOPSSUR's mission and future.

VI. Opportunities for Growth

The following strategic opportunities represent COOPSSUR's envisioned future state and are intended to guide its long-term growth, sustainability, and impact. By strengthening internal systems, investing in member capacity, and fostering strategic partnerships, COOPSSUR can build a more resilient organization, improve operational efficiency, and better meet the evolving needs of its members. These forward-looking recommendations draw on feedback from partner organizations, cooperative members, and proven practices from successful cooperative models.

1. **Improve product quality**

Standardize post-harvest handling, reward quality with premium pricing, and leverage peer learning and funding partnerships to consistently deliver high-quality products.

To enhance the quality of its products, COOPSSUR should focus on improving post-harvest handling processes, as the cooperative cannot directly control the quality of products during the harvest itself. Establishing standardized procedures to ensure consistent product quality, will lead to higher marketability and better pricing for members. Key strategies for improving product quality include:

- **Centralizing post-harvest handling:** Standardize post-harvest processes to ensure consistency and quality control at every stage of handling.
- **Implementing a tiered pricing system:** Introduce a tiered pricing structure where products of higher quality are rewarded with premium pricing, while lower-quality products (*merma*) are either rejected or paid at a lower price.
- **Leverage upcoming funding:** Use grants and partnerships with CITE and DER to modernize production infrastructure, improve quality control, and reduce operational costs.
- **Quality-based incentives:** Develop incentives that reward members for adhering to best practices in post-harvest handling, ensuring that products meet quality standards for both local and international markets.
- **Introduce peer-to-peer learning models:** Encourage members with strong post-harvest practices to serve as peer educators, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and knowledge-sharing across zones.

2. **Strengthen disease management protocols**

Implement integrated training, early warning systems, and expert partnerships to proactively protect crops from pests and diseases.

COOPSSUR should implement comprehensive training programs in Integrated Phytosanitary Control for its members and establish localized early warning systems to monitor and respond promptly to pest and disease outbreaks. To strengthen this effort, the cooperative can consider the following actions:

- **Conduct training workshops:** Organize regular training sessions for cooperative members focusing on pest identification, monitoring techniques, and sustainable control methods.
- **Develop early warning protocols:** Establish a community-based surveillance system to monitor pest populations and disease symptoms, enabling rapid response to emerging threats.
- **Collaborate with agricultural experts:** Partner with local agricultural extension services and research institutions to stay updated on pest management innovations and receive technical support.

3. **Invest in Internal Capacity and Capability Development**

Upskill members and staff through targeted training, mentorship, and performance incentives to strengthen COOPSSUR's leadership and operations.

Given the recruitment challenges in the region, COOPSSUR should prioritize developing the skills and leadership potential of its existing members and staff. By focusing on internal training, mentorship, and upskilling in areas such as quality control, cooperative governance, and operational management, the cooperative can build a stronger internal pipeline. This approach not only enhances operational effectiveness and institutional resilience but also creates pathways for member advancement and long-term sustainability. To support this capacity-building, key steps include:

- **Define key roles and competencies**: Develop clear job descriptions outlining the technical and managerial skills required for positions in agronomy, quality control, and cooperative governance.
- **Provide ongoing training:** Invest in continuous professional development programs for hired managers and technical staff to ensure they remain current with best practices and innovations.
- **Create performance-based incentives:** Tie contract bonuses for managers and technical staff to measurable outcomes such as quality improvements, member satisfaction, or implementation benchmarks.
- **Leverage Agroideas and other external funding**: Use existing funds to support technician hiring, training, and operational support. This may include assigning a dedicated operations or strategy manager to lead growth initiatives, coordinate implementation across zones, and drive internal alignment.

4. **Establish clear performance benchmarks and oversight mechanisms**

Introduce KPIs, regular evaluations, and digital monitoring tools to drive accountability, governance, and trust within the cooperative.

Develop and implement standardized performance indicators alongside regular internal evaluations to monitor progress and strengthen accountability. Research shows that cooperatives with strong governance structures and internal accountability experience greater member satisfaction and success (Cornforth, 2004). To strengthen governance and oversight, recommended actions include:

- **Develop standardized performance indicators**: Define key performance indicators (KPIs) for production quality, member participation, financial health, and service delivery.
- **Implement regular internal evaluations:** Set up quarterly or biannual reviews using agreed benchmarks to assess progress and identify areas for improvement.
- **Digitize Monitoring Systems:** Gradually introduce digital tools to streamline data collection, reduce errors, and create accessible dashboards for leadership review.

- **Train leadership and staff in monitoring and evaluation:** Build capacity among Board members and key staff in monitoring and evaluation techniques, including data collection and reporting.
- **Create transparent feedback mechanisms:** Institutionalize systems such as member assemblies, feedback surveys, or listening sessions to capture input and reflect it in governance decisions.
- **Enhance Board's visibility:** Through more frequent meetings, home visits, and information sharing, the Board's engagement can help bridge gaps in trust and understanding. COOPSSUR can also learn from more participatory models in the region, such as APROCCI or Boca Pariamanu's Women's Committee, and adapt their practices to its context.

5. **Enhance access to working capital and financial tools**

Expand financial literacy, facilitate access to revolving credit options, and leverage external funding opportunities to empower members with the capital necessary for long-term sustainability.

Expanding access to financial tools and working capital will empower COOPSSUR members and improve the cooperative's long-term sustainability. In collaboration with partners, COOPSSUR could explore:

- **Expand usage of available funds**: Encourage broader awareness and participation in grant and credit programs already available through partner organizations.
- **Develop a revolving line of credit**: Design a fund that can provide timely support for production cycles, emergencies, or quality improvements, with the potential to be replenished through cooperative revenues.
- **Offer financial literacy programs:** Provide training to members on the benefits of becoming banked, budgeting, managing seasonal income, and understanding loan conditions, enabling more informed participation in cooperative financial tools

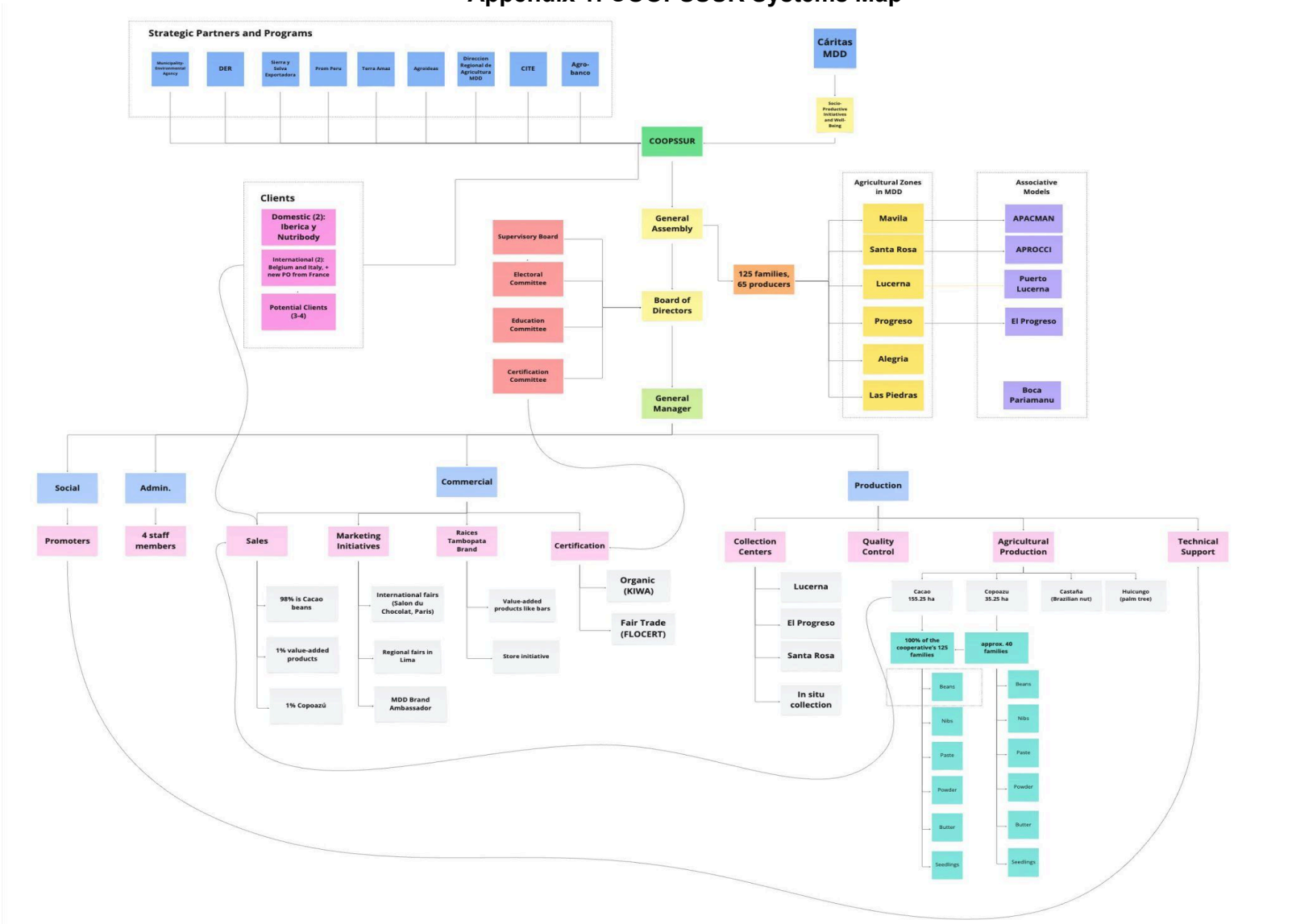
Conclusion

COOPSSUR stands at a pivotal moment in its development. As it continues to grow and gain external credibility, its long-term success will depend on strengthening internal structures that promote trust, transparency, and active member engagement. The findings from this study show a strong commitment among members to the cooperative's mission and highlight opportunities to enhance governance, communication, and service delivery in ways that further support that commitment.

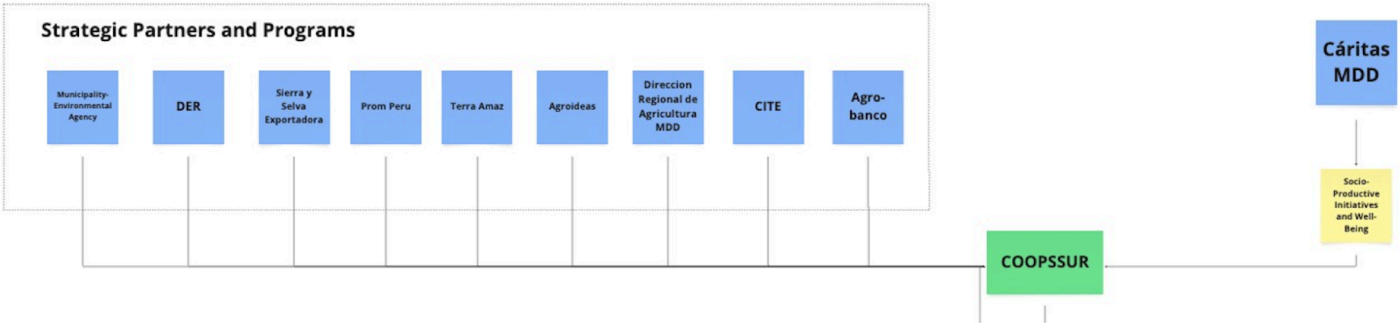
To move forward, COOPSSUR must embrace a more inclusive and participatory approach, one that clearly defines expectations, communicates decisions openly, and ensures all members feel seen and valued. By reinforcing internal cohesion and building a shared sense of ownership, the cooperative can not only improve its operational efficiency but also empower its members to collectively shape a more resilient and sustainable future

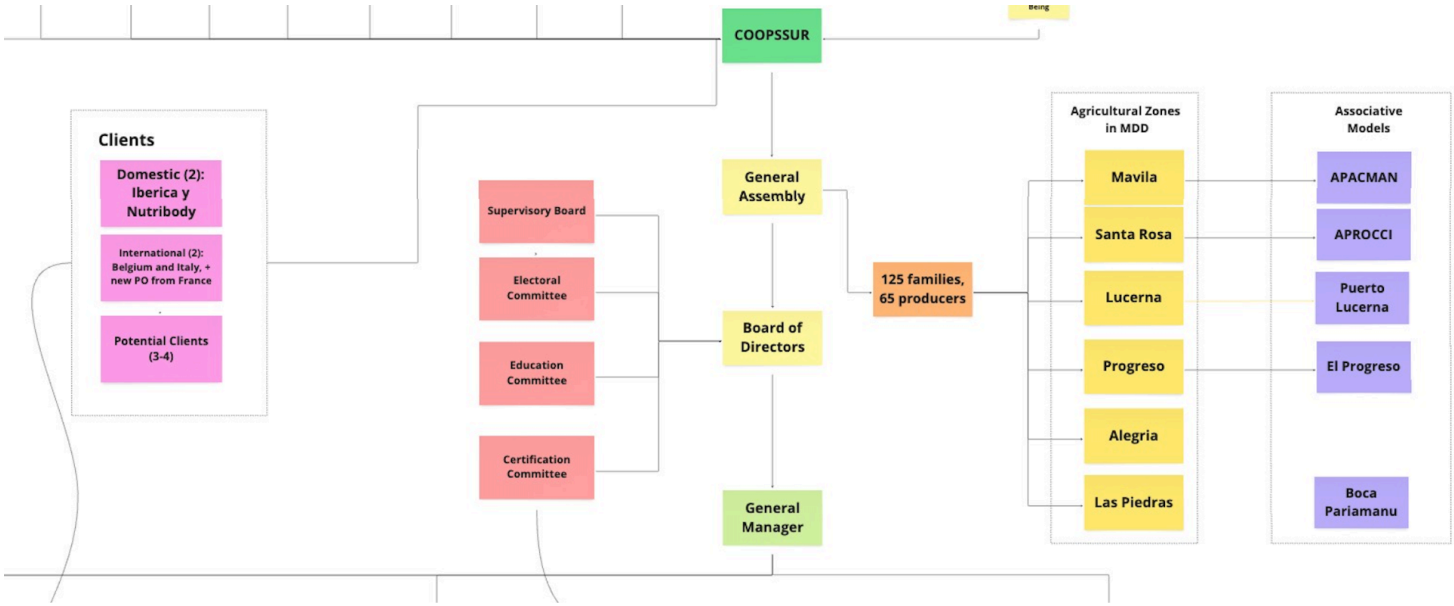
VII. Appendix

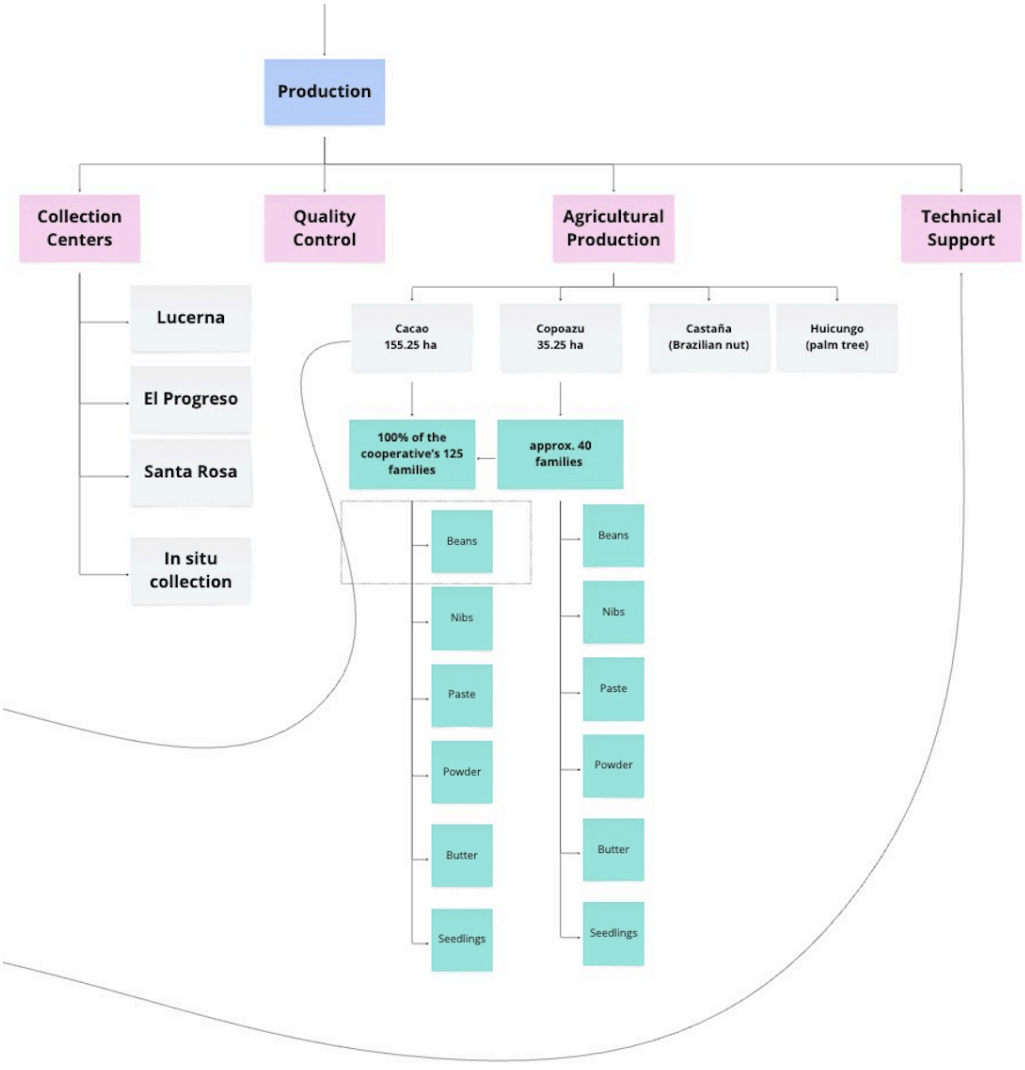
Appendix 1: COOPSSUR Systems Map

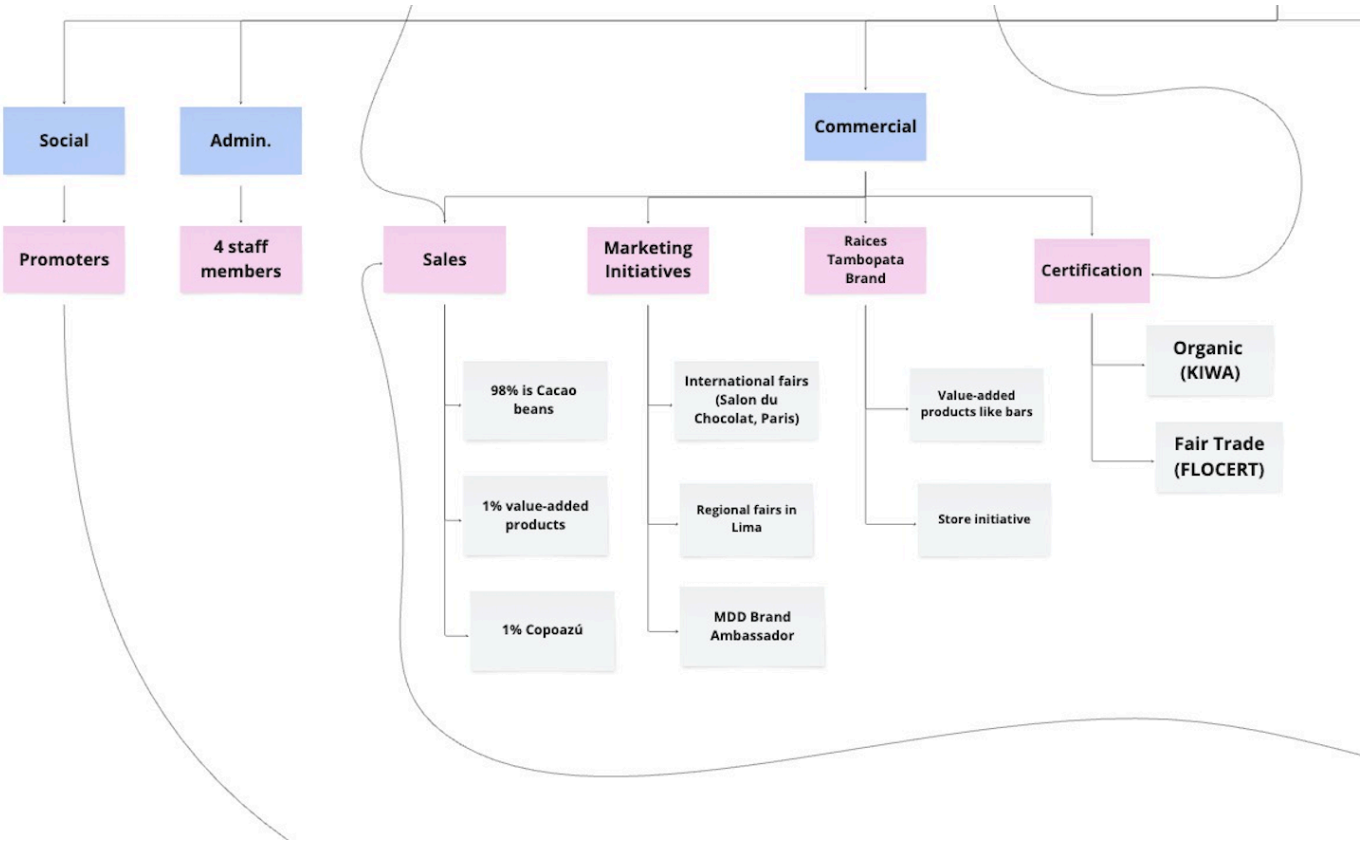


Zoomed-in-view

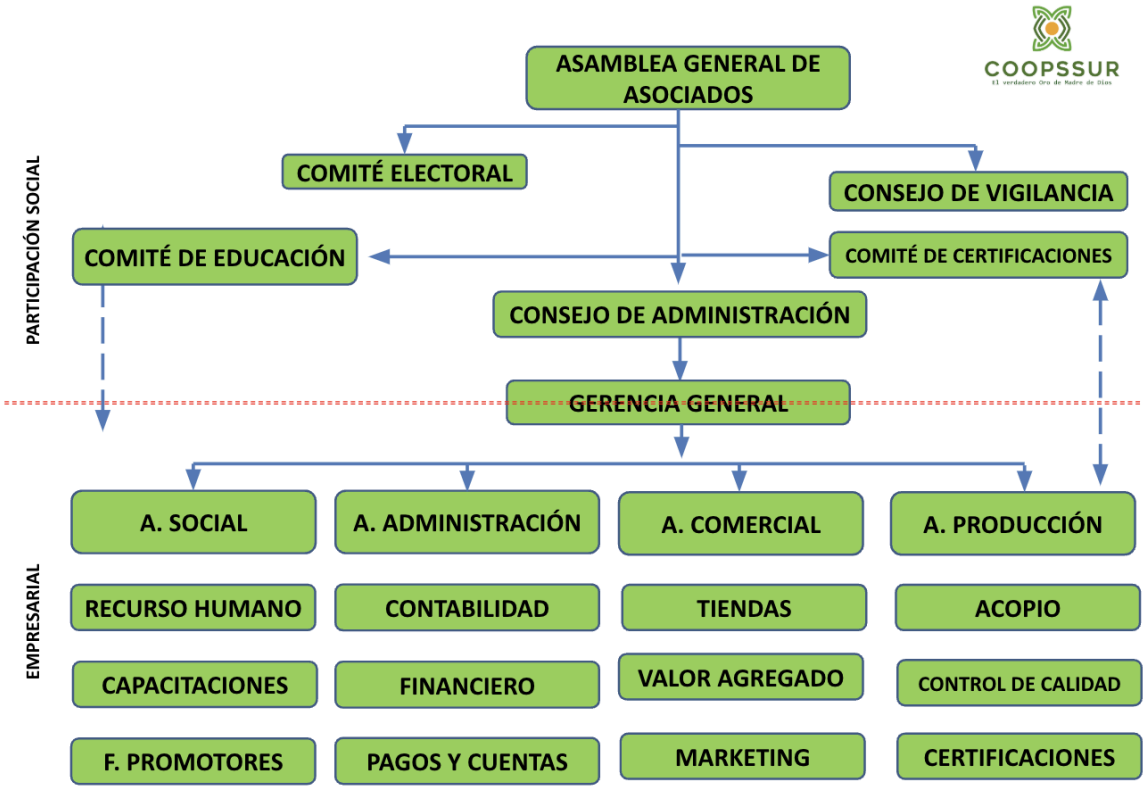



COOPSSUR
Clients
Domestic (2): Iberica y Nutribody
International (2): Belgium and Italy, + new PO from France
Potential Clients (3-4)
Supervisory Board
Electoral Committee
Education Committee
Certification Committee
General Assembly
Board of Directors
General Manager
125 families, 65 producers
Agricultural Zones in MDD
Mavila
Santa Rosa
Lucerna
Progreso
Alegria
Las Piedras
Associative Models
APACMAN
APROCCI
Puerto Lucerna
El Progreso
Boca Pariamanu


Production
Collection Centers
Quality Control
Agricultural Production
Technical Support
Lucerna
El Progreso
Santa Rosa
In situ collection
Cacao 155.25 ha
Copoazu 35.25 ha
Castaña (Brazilian nut)
Huicungo (palm tree)
100% of the cooperative's 125 families
approx. 40 families
Beans
Nibs
Paste
Powder
Butter
Seedlings
Beans
Nibs
Paste
Powder
Butter
Seedlings


Social
Admin.
Commercial
Promoters
4 staff members
Sales
Marketing Initiatives
Raices Tambopata Brand
Certification
98% is Cacao beans
1% value-added products
1% Copoazú
International fairs (Salon du Chocolat, Paris)
Regional fairs in Lima
MDD Brand Ambassador
Value-added products like bars
Store initiative
Organic (KIWA)
Fair Trade (FLOCERT)

Appendix 2 : COOPSSUR Organizational Chart



Appendix 3: Plant Diseases

- **Witches' Broom**, caused by the fungus *Crinipellis perniciosa*, leads to abnormal shoot growths ("brooms"), pod deformities, and early fruit drop. It significantly reduces yield and is difficult to manage once established.[18]

- **Monilia Pod Rod**, or frosty pod rod, is caused by the fungus *Moniliophthora roreri* and infects cacao pods, causing external lesions and internal decay. It spreads rapidly by wind and rain, with yield losses reaching up to 90% in unmanaged plots.[19]

- **Black rot**, caused by Phytophthora spp, thrives in humid conditions and causes black lesions on pods, leading to rotting and loss of marketable products. It can spread quickly during the rainy season. The disease severely reduces cacao yield and causes premature death of trees if not controlled.[20]

Appendix 4: Description of COOPSSUR's Strategic Partners

1. CITE

CITEagroindustrial is part of the Centros de Innovación Productiva y Transferencia Tecnológica or Centers for Productive Innovation and Technology Transfer (CITE), a network of centers under the Instituto Tecnológico de la Producción, or Technological Institute of Production, that promotes innovation and the adoption of new technologies across Peru. In our KII, CITE staff explained how they work with producers, businesses, associations, and cooperatives to improve productivity, sustainability, and competitiveness in the agro-industrial sector. Their services—including applied research, training, and technical assistance—support the development of value-added products and help strengthen local and regional economies.

2. Agrobanco

Agrobanco is a state-owned but independently managed financial institution that supports small agricultural producers through credit and microfinance services as well as financial education. Agrobanco administers the AgroPerú Fund, a public financing mechanism that provides low-interest loans to smallholder farmers and producer organizations. Through this and other targeted financial products, Agrobanco promotes rural financial inclusion, strengthens agricultural value chains, and supports sustainable, inclusive economic development in Peru's rural sectors.

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[18] Evans, H. C. (2016). De Souza, J. T., Monteiro, F. P., Ferreira, M. A., Gramacho, K. P., & Luz, E. D. M. N. (2018). Cocoa diseases: Witches' broom. In P. Umaharan (Ed.), *Achieving sustainable cultivation of cocoa* (pp. 239–269). Burleigh Dodds Science Publishing. https://doi.org/10.19103/AS.2017.0021.14

[19] Bailey, B. A., Evans, H. C., Phillips-Mora, W., Ali, S. S., & Meinhardt, L. W. (2018). *Moniliophthora roreri*, causal agent of cacao frosty pod rot. *Molecular Plant Pathology*, 19(7), 1580–1594.

[20] Vanegtern, B., Rogers, M., & Nelson, S. (2015). *Black pod rot of cacao caused by Phytophthora palmivora* (PD-108). College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. https://www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/oc/freepubs/pdf/PD-108.pdf

3. Agroideas

Agroideas is a government-run and publicly funded program under Peru's Ministry of Agrarian Development and Irrigation that promotes the competitiveness and sustainability of small and medium agricultural producers through co-financed business plans. Agroideas is the 'seed' program that initiates the formalization and strengthening of producer organizations, serving as the first step in a broader support pipeline that includes more advanced programs like Agromercado which supports producers in the market and branding part. Through a competitive process, organizations submit proposals for productive investments, with Agroideas funding up to 80% of project costs and requiring a 20% contribution from beneficiaries. This approach promotes long-term sustainability, value chain development, and improved market access for rural agricultural communities.

4. Dirección Regional de Agricultura

The Dirección Regional de Agricultura, the Regional Agriculture Office, (DRA) is the regional branch of Peru's Ministry of Agrarian Development and Irrigation and serves as the principal state institution supporting agricultural development in Madre de Dios. DRA has a dual role in providing technical support to farmers and promoting environmental conservation through coordination with other government entities. They convene the *Mesa Técnica*, a regional technical roundtable launched in 2012, which brings together stakeholders to prioritize productive chains—including cacao, copoazú, camu camu, and Brazil nuts—and align efforts across sectors. The office promotes associative models, supports infrastructure and certification projects, and links cooperatives to national programs like Agroideas and Procompite. As the primary agricultural authority in the region, the DRA plays a central role in fostering sustainable, competitive, and organized rural development.

5. Regional Environmental Agency

The Municipality's Environmental Agency in Tambopata is responsible for enforcing environmental regulations and promoting sustainable land use in the region. The Agency works in environmental oversight, technical assistance, and grant facilitation, including support for cooperatives applying for and managing environmental funding. They also play a key role in the development of the "Madre de Dios" regional brand, which emphasizes biodiversity and conservation, capitalizing on the fact that over 50% of the region remains under some form of environmental protection. As a regional authority, the agency helps integrate environmental sustainability into local development while navigating major challenges related to underfunding and rapid population growth.

6. Dinamización del Ecosistema Regional

Dinamización del Ecosistema Regional, Ecosystem Activation for Regional Development, (DER) is a newly launched initiative under Peru's Ministry of Production aimed at energizing regional economies through innovation and ecosystem strengthening. DER is in its first year and currently conducting a diagnostic study across four sectors—academia, business, government, and civil society—to identify priority value chains in Madre de Dios. While DER is provisionally aligned with COOPSSUR, its future engagement depends on whether cacao is selected as a

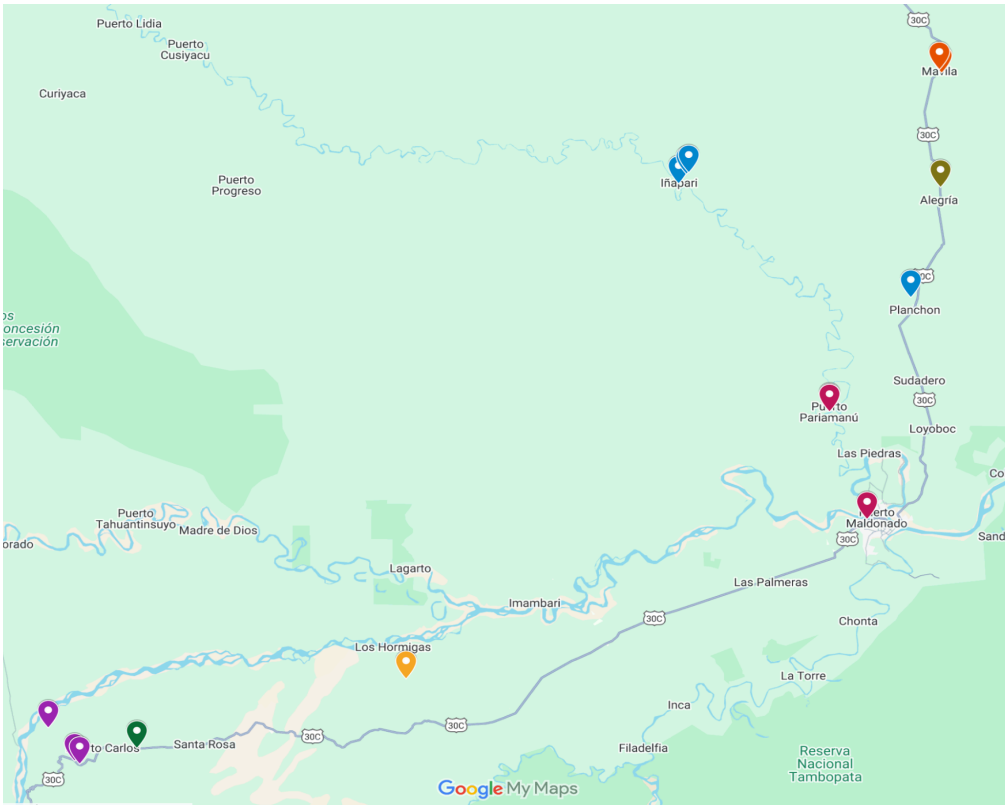
strategic focus area; if not, the program will not proceed with related interventions. Designed to promote cost reduction and efficiency through innovation, DER offers a potential pipeline for targeted support but remains in the planning phase as of now.

7. Agrobosque

Agrobosque is a cooperative established in 2013 to support sustainable forest and agroforestry production among its member cooperatives in the Madre de Dios region. With a mission focused on improving rural livelihoods through inclusive, biodiversity-based development, Agrobosque integrates gender equity, fair trade principles, and environmental conservation into its operations. Unlike many other cooperatives, Agrobosque processes cacao on-site into value-added products, strengthening its position in both domestic and international markets. Initially supported by a Swiss partner—similar to how Caritas has supported COOPSSUR—the cooperative has since transitioned to full independence in recent years. In a Key Informant Interview, leadership emphasized their commitment to cooperative consolidation, market access, and logistical efficiency: all member cooperatives deliver their own product, fostering ownership and accountability, in contrast to models like COOPSSUR where technicians manage collection. Agrobosque's proven experience, peer coordination, and sustainability-driven model make it a strong anchor institution within the regional cooperative ecosystem.

Appendix 5: FGD & KII Locations

- Mavila: FGD in El Mojo
- Mavila: KII Maritza
- Alegría: FGD
- Lucerna
- Lucerna: FGD
- Lucerna: KII Melchor
- Lucerna: KII Rolando
- Santa Rosa: FGD Aprocci
- Santa Rosa: KII Faustino (Aprocci)
- Santa Rosa: KII Alejandrina (Aprocci)
- KII Agrobosque
- El Progreso: KII Wilson & Natano
- Las Piedras: KII Don Segundo
- Puerto Maldonado
- Las Piedras: Boca Pariamanu



[Google link]

The locations where the focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted are geolocated in the interactive map below. This resource illustrates the territorial distribution of field activities and supports a better understanding of the local context of each participating community:

Appendix 6: Successful Cooperative Model Case Studies

A. Introduction

A cooperative is an autonomous association of persons who voluntarily unite to meet their shared economic, social, and cultural needs through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise. Through their unique structure and principles, agricultural cooperatives play a significant role in empowering small-scale producers and promoting sustainable development. They serve a dual function of contributing to both social and economic development.

This benchmarking aims to identify best practices in cooperative models, analyze their organizational structures, market strategies, and social initiatives, and extract practical lessons that may strengthen Coopssur. By comparing different cooperative models, we aim to provide strategic recommendations grounded in evidence and best practices.

Cooperatives can generally be categorized into three primary organizational models: traditional cooperatives, cooperatives supported by external capital entities, and federations of cooperatives.

- **Traditional cooperatives** are fully owned, financed, and governed by their members, emphasizing democratic decision-making, collective ownership, and autonomy.
- **Externally supported cooperatives** also maintain member ownership but access financial resources and technical assistance from external entities such as NGOs, donors, or impact investors, which can enhance investment capacity and economic resilience, though often requiring careful management to preserve member control.[21]
- **Federations of cooperatives** represent a third model, where individual cooperatives unite to form an umbrella organization, allowing them to aggregate products, strengthen bargaining power, and coordinate services while retaining local-level autonomy within each member cooperative.

Organizational Models of Cooperatives

Category	Traditional Cooperatives	Externally Supported Cooperatives	Federations of Cooperatives

[21] Chaddad, F. R., & Cook, M. L. (2004). Understanding new cooperative models: An ownership–control rights typology. Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy, 26(3), 348–360. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9353.2004.00184.x

Definition	Member-owned, member-financed, democratically controlled cooperative	Member-owned cooperative supported financially or technically by external entities (NGOs, donors, impact investors)	A cooperative whose members are other cooperatives (zone or local cooperatives); umbrella organization
Capital Source	Internal: members shares and retained earnings	Internal plus external: grants, loans, or impact investments	Contributions from member cooperatives, sometimes external project funding
Governance Structure	One-member-one-vote system; full member control	Member governance with oversight or influence from external partners	Federated governance: each member cooperative is represented; an umbrella board of directors is elected by cooperatives
Pros	- Strong member loyalty - High alignment with member needs - Full autonomy	- Access to larger financial resources - Faster scaling and investment - Technical and marketing expertise	- Strong collective bargaining power - Economies of scale - Division of tasks: local cooperatives focus on production; federation handles marketing, advocacy
Cons	- Limited capital access-Slower decision-making-Vulnerability to financial shocks	- Risk of external control - Dependency on external funding - Mission drift is possible	- Complex governance and coordination - Risk of weak local leadership - Potential bureaucratic inefficiency if not well-structured
Growth Potential	Gradual, member-driven expansion	Accelerated with external financing	Expanded reach through the aggregation of multiple cooperatives
Sustainability Risk	Financial fragility occurs if member capital is weak	Long-term dependency on donors or investors	Risk of fragmentation if local cooperatives lose engagement or loyalty
Examples		Early-stage Manduvira Cooperative (Paraguay) with NGO support	Oromia Coffee Farmers Cooperative Union (Ethiopia)

B. Lessons learned from other cooperatives

Agricultural cooperatives must succeed both as businesses and as member-serving organizations. Their success depends on strong financial performance and member satisfaction[22]. Failure can result from poor economic performance or weak member engagement. This section examines three cooperatives, Cooperativa Agraria Yakatheo del Amazonas, Café Orgánico Marcala S.A. (COMSA), and Oromia Coffee Farmers Cooperative Union (OCFCU), selected for their different development stages and relevance to Coopssur.

Cooperativa Agraria Yakatheo del Amazonas

Founded in 2021, Cooperativa Agraria Yakatheo del Amazonas (Coopayakat) is a traditional producer cooperative with over 690 members from 25 Awajún indigenous communities and 3 mestizo neighborhoods in the Imaza district of Peru's Amazonas region. It follows a democratic model with a general assembly, a board of directors, and specialized committees. Focused on the sustainable cultivation of native cacao and bananas, the cooperative integrates indigenous knowledge with environmentally responsible farming practices. Members receive technical assistance, training, and credit through AgroPerú and Agrobanco, supporting their commitment to organic production. Cacao is centrally collected at community points and transported to a wet processing facility in Monte de los Olivos for fermentation and drying before delivery to clients.

While Coopayakat continues to face challenges such as limited financial resources, market access barriers, and the need for ongoing capacity building, it has made significant progress. Strategic partnerships with organizations like Helvetas Perú and the Binational Development Plan have facilitated training, organic certification, and logistics upgrades—including the acquisition of a transport truck. Public engagement through events like native cacao fairs has also raised the cooperative's profile. Coopayakat's experience highlights the importance of combining grassroots participation with targeted external support to overcome early-stage obstacles and build a more stable and market-responsive organization.

Café Orgánico Marcala S.A. (COMSA)

The Café Orgánico Marcala S.A. (COMSA), based in Marcala, Honduras, was established in 2001 by a group of smallholder coffee farmers seeking better prices and sustainable practices. Today, it has over 1,500 members, about a quarter of whom are women, and is renowned for its organic, Fair Trade, and specialty coffees grown at high altitudes. COMSA is governed democratically, with a board elected from among its members and a participatory structure that includes regular assemblies and specialized committees. The cooperative's La Fortaleza experimental farm serves as a hub for training and innovation, where members and visitors learn about organic techniques and agroecological principles.

COMSA's market strategy is built on certifications such as Denomination of Origin Marcala and a focus on specialty coffee exports to North America, Europe, and Asia. The cooperative has developed value-added products and established strong relationships with ethical buyers,

[22] Mann, S., & Stoinescu, A. (2021). Exploring draheim's three dimensions of success in cooperative organizations—the case of collective alpine summer farms.

securing premium prices for its members. Social and environmental initiatives are central to COMSA's mission: it runs extensive training programs, supports women and youth leadership, and invests in reforestation, water conservation, and carbon-neutral production. COMSA's achievements include international awards for coffee quality, the restoration of thousands of acres through agroforestry, and the creation of educational and health infrastructure funded by Fair Trade premiums.

Oromia Coffee Farmers Cooperative Union (OCFCU)

The Oromia Coffee Farmers Cooperative Union (OCFCU) was founded in 1999 in Ethiopia's Oromia region and now represents over 250,000 smallholder farmers through a federation of more than 400 primary cooperatives. OCFCU is a second-tier cooperative, with a general assembly of elected representatives from each member co-op and a board that oversees union-wide operations. This structure allows OCFCU to coordinate large-scale activities, such as direct exports and infrastructure investments, while maintaining democratic accountability and transparency through regular audits and member participation.

OCFCU's market strategy focuses on the direct export of organic, Fair Trade, and Rainforest Alliance-certified Arabica coffee, bypassing intermediaries to maximize returns for members. The union has invested in value addition, including a state-of-the-art roasting plant, and has diversified into domestic and international packaged coffee markets. Socially, OCFCU uses Fair Trade premiums to build schools, water stations, and clinics, while environmentally, it promotes sustainable farming, distributes clean cookstoves, and supports reforestation. OCFCU has been recognized as Ethiopia's largest organic coffee exporter, significantly increasing member incomes and earning international recognition for its sustainability and climate resilience programs.

C. Common Strengths and Weaknesses by Cooperative Type

Cooperative Type	Common Strengths	Common Weaknesses
Traditional Cooperative (e.g., Coopayakat, Peru)	- Strong community identity - High local participation and ownership - Grassroots leadership and trust - Flexibility to adapt to local context	- Limited access to financing - Weak infrastructure - Product and market dependency - Low technical and managerial capacity

Externally Supported Cooperative (e.g., COMSA, Honduras)	- Strong technical assistance and capacity building - Access to external funding and expertise - Advanced training and innovation programs - Integrated social and environmental initiatives	- Risk of donor dependency - Sustainability challenges post-support - Risk of limited local ownership if not well-balanced - External influence on governance decisions
Federation of Cooperatives (e.g., OCFCU, Ethiopia)	- Economies of scale - Strong export market access - Centralized services and infrastructure - Broad social and environmental impact	- Complex coordination and governance - Risk of disconnect between federation and base-level members - Potential inequities across member co-ops - Higher administrative burden

D. Conclusion

Cooperatives have proven to be powerful vehicles for empowering producers, improving livelihoods, and fostering sustainable development. While each model offers unique strengths, such as community cohesion, access to external resources, or economies of scale, they also face challenges like resource limitations, governance complexity, or the risk of disconnect between members and leadership. The case studies of COMSA, OCFCU, and Coopayakat illustrate that success is rooted in strong member participation, transparent governance, and a commitment to social, economic, and environmental responsibility. For COOPSSUR, adopting best practices from these models and tailoring them to local needs will be crucial for building a resilient, equitable, and future-ready enterprise.

Appendix 7: Sample Informative Bulletin

MAYO

BOLETÍN MENSUAL

Actualizaciones de Abril:

- Distribución de herramientas completada en Lucerna y Santa Rosa
- Volumen recolectado por zona (abril):
  - Lucerna: 1.2 T
  - Mavila: 850 kg

Anuncios:

- **Taller de control de enfermedades** –
- 15 de mayo en Alegría
- **Entrenamiento de postcosecha**
- 23 de mayo en El Progreso
- **Asamblea general programada para el 8 de junio**

Recordatorios Importantes:

- **Encuesta rápida**: Responde 2 preguntas sobre comunicación en tu zona – [enlace en WhatsApp]
- **Documentación**: Fecha límite para actualizar datos de socio: 25 de mayo
- **Contacto directo**: Tu representante zonal es tu punto de referencia para cualquier duda

Mensaje de la Junta

Este mes, reafirmamos nuestro compromiso con la transparencia y el aprendizaje compartido. El boletín mensual es una herramienta para mantenernos conectados, reconocer sus esfuerzos, y escuchar sus voces. Gracias por seguir construyendo esta cooperativa con nosotros.

Logros del Mes

- Felicitaciones a Rosa M., productora de Alegría, por entregar su cacao con 98% de calidad A
- Bienvenida a tres nuevos socios en la zona de Las Piedras

Appendix 8.1: Instruments: Survey Questions

Survey Questions

Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary, and your responses will remain confidential. The information you provide will be used solely for understanding how to make COOPSSUR better and will not be shared in a way that identifies you personally. Your responses will not affect your relationship with COOPSSUR, CARITAS, or the University of Notre Dame in any way. If you have any questions or concerns, please ask us.

Thank you for your time and participation.

Target audience: COOPSSUR Members

Topic 1: Demographic information			
Current Occupation		**Zone**	
Farming Experience (Years)	☐ Less than 5 ☐ 5-10 ☐ 11-15 ☐ 16-20 ☐ Greater than 20		
Previous source of income (if not farming)		**Role in COOPSSUR**	
How long have you been a COOPSSUR member?	☐ Less than a year ☐ 1-3 ☐ 4-6 ☐ Since 2018 (Co-op creation)	**What crops do you mainly produce in your parcel?**	☐ Cocoa ☐ Copoazu ☐ Brazil nut ☐ Chestnut ☐ Other (please specify):_____

Topic 2: Communication	
Preferred Communication Channels with COOPSSUR leaders:	☐ WhatsApp ☐ SMS ☐ Radio ☐ Printed newsletter ☐ in-person meetings ☐ Email ☐ Other (please specify): _____
Preferred frequency of updates:	☐ Daily ☐ Weekly ☐ Biweekly ☐ Monthly ☐ Other (please specify): _____
Who do you contact at COOPSSUR for production/ financial/ technical-related concerns?	please specify: _____

How do you typically interact with other COOPSSUR members?	☐ Buying and selling goods/services from other members ☐ Bartering/exchanging services ☐ Financial support ☐ Social support ☐ Sharing resources (e.g., equipment, space, transportation) ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Topic 3: Leadership						
Please indicate your level of satisfaction with the following statements:		Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
1	How satisfied are you with how COOPSSUR leadership represents its members?					
3	How satisfied are you with how COOPSSUR leadership addresses challenges?					
4	How satisfied are you with how COOPSSUR leadership communicates during change/crises?					
5	How satisfied are you with your level of involvement with decision-making in COOPSSUR??					
6	Overall, how satisfied are you with the current governance of COOPSSUR?					

Topic 4: Perceived Benefits		
1	Please indicate any benefit(s) of COOPSSUR membership? (Select all that apply)	☐ Increased income ☐ Access to funding opportunities ☐ Improved farming techniques ☐ Fairer pricing for products ☐ Better access to markets ☐ Training and capacity building ☐ Stronger community support ☐ Other (please specify) _____
2	Please indicate any disadvantages of COOPSSUR membership.	

3	How has your income and livelihood changed since joining COOPSSUR?	☐ Significantly worsened ☐ Slightly worsened ☐ Neither worsened nor improved ☐ Slightly improved ☐ Significantly improved
4	Do you receive any training from the cooperative?	☐ Yes ☐ No
5	If Yes, specify the type of training	☐ Technical ☐ Financial ☐ Other(please specify)_____

Topic 5: Members' Experience					
Please indicate any motivations for joining the cooperative: ☐ Higher income ☐ Better work conditions ☐ Professional growth ☐ Community support ☐ Other (please specify): _____	Have you gained new skills through the cooperative? ☐ Yes ☐ No If yes, please describe: _____				
Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:	**Strongly disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neither disagree nor agree**	**Agree**	**Strongly agree**
My opinions are considered in cooperative decisions.					
I have built stronger relationships with other members since joining the cooperative.					
The main COOPSSUR leadership provides sufficient support for my farming or production activities.					
The cooperative leadership offers adequate training and learning opportunities.					
The local leadership in my area provides sufficient support for my farming and production activities					
I trust the leadership to act in the best interest of members.					

Topic 6: Cooperative's Policies

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following question:	**Strongly unfamiliar**	**Somewhat unfamiliar**	**Neutral**	**Somewhat familiar**	**Very familiar**
How familiar are you with COOPSSUR's rules, policies, and decision-making processes?					
Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neither disagree nor disagree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
Coopsur Policies are clearly communicated to members.					
Members can give input on policies and rules					
COOPSSUR policies align with members' needs.					
Do you have any concern about COOPSSUR policies	☐ Yes ☐ No	If yes, Please specify			
Are you currently practicing organic farming?	☐ Yes	☐ No			
Are you aware of the certifications COOPSSUR promotes?	☐ Yes	☐ No			
What certifications are you aware that COOPSSUR promotes	☐ USDA organic ☐ Agricultura familiar del peru ☐ Senasa peru ☐ Other(please specify):_____				
The organic certification process is worth the benefits.	☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither disagree nor disagree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree				

What benefits do you think certification will bring	☐ Increased market access ☐ Higher prices and improved income ☐ Good reputation and credibility ☐ Improved production practices ☐ Access to training and resources ☐ Better working conditions and community development ☐ Other(please specify):_____

Appendix 8.2 Instruments: Focus Group Discussion Questions

Introduction of the Focus Group Discussion	
Greetings	Good [morning/afternoon/evening], everyone, and thank you for taking the time to join us today. My name is [Your Name], I am working with the University of Notre Dame and COOPSSUR, and I will be facilitating our discussion. The purpose of today's focus group is to gather your valuable insights and experiences as members of the cooperative. Your feedback is crucial as we assess the current operations and plan for future improvements. Through this discussion, we hope to better understand what's working well, what challenges exist, and how COOPSSUR can better serve its membership moving forward.
Topics	Over the next [45-60] minutes, we'll explore four main topic areas: - [Introduction & General Perception]: We'll start by discussing your understanding of the cooperative's purpose and reflecting on their achievements thus far. - [Challenges & Opportunities]: Next, we'll explore the challenges you've faced as members and identify what aspects of the operations have been most beneficial. - [Current Initiatives & Impact]: We'll then assess which programs have had the greatest impact and areas where their current offerings could be improved. - [Future Growth & Member Needs]: Finally, we'll discuss what additional support or resources would help members thrive and what changes would make the cooperative more valuable to you.
Information	Before we begin, I want to emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers. We're interested in your honest opinions and experiences. Your feedback will be used to develop recommendations for improving the cooperative's services and operations, which will be presented to – and incorporated into the strategic planning process. Everything shared today will be kept confidential, and while we'll be compiling themes and insights from our discussion, no comments will be attributed to specific individuals without your permission. I encourage everyone to participate actively and respectfully. Please feel free to build on others' ideas or share different perspectives.
Questions	Are there any questions before we begin? [Address any questions] Great, let's start with our first topic...

Current State to Future Vision Road Mapping Activity	
Materials Needed	• Large poster paper or whiteboard • Different colored post-it notes (4 colors) • Markers • Dot stickers (for voting) • Timer
Setup	Draw a simple road on the large poster paper/whiteboard that starts at the bottom ("Current State") and winds upward to the top ("Future Vision/Goal").
Facilitation Steps	

Introduction (5 mins)	• Explain that this activity will help visualize where the cooperative is now, where it wants to go, and what lies in between
	• Introduce the color coding:
	  ○ **Yellow post-its**: Current state elements/realities (Topic 1)
	  ○ **Green post-its**: Future vision/goals (Topic 4)
	  ○ **Blue post-its**: Resources/strengths that will help get there (Topic 3)
	  ○ **Pink post-its**: Pain points/challenges that might be encountered (Topic 4)

Current State Assessment (10 minutes) – TOPIC 1	• Distribute yellow post-its to all participants • Ask: "What are the key characteristics of our cooperative today? What defines our current state?" • Have each person write 2-3 ideas (one per post-it) • Collect and place post-its at the starting point of the road • Briefly discuss key themes
Future Vision (10 minutes) – TOPIC 4	• Distribute green post-its • Ask: "Where do we want the cooperative to be in 2-3 years? What does success look like?"

	● Have each person write 2-3 vision elements ● Place these post-its at the end of the road ● Briefly discuss key themes
Resources & Strengths (10 minutes) – TOPIC 3	● Distribute blue post-its ● Ask: "What resources, strengths, or opportunities do we have that will help us reach our goals?" ● Have participants write 1-2 ideas each ● Place these along the sides of the road ● Briefly discuss key themes
Pain Points & Challenges (10 minutes) – TOPIC 4	● Distribute pink post-its ● Ask: "What obstacles, challenges, or pain points might we encounter on this journey?" ● Have participants write 1-2 ideas each ● Place these as "roadblocks" along the road ● Discuss major themes
Group Assessment (15 minutes) ND Team: make sure we capture photos of all boards/materials created	● For each top priority challenge, ask: ○ "What resources from our blue post-its could help overcome this challenge?" ○ "What additional resources might we need?" ○ "What specific actions could we take to address this?"

Topic 1: Introduction and General Perception of the Cooperative
1. How would you describe the cooperative's primary mission and purpose?

2. **Looking back, what do you think has been the most important achievement of the cooperative?**

Topic 2: Challenges and Opportunities
3. **What challenges have you encountered as a member of the cooperative?**
4. **What aspects of the cooperative's operations have been most helpful to members?**
5. **Are there any barriers that limit members from fully benefiting from the cooperative?**

Topic 3: Current Initiatives and Impact
6. **Which cooperative programs or initiatives have had the greatest impact on you and other members?**

7. Are there any areas where the cooperative's current programs could be improved?

Topic 4: Member Benefits and Engagement
8. What additional support or resources would help members thrive in the cooperative?
9. What changes or new initiatives would make the cooperative more valuable to its members?
10. If you could improve one key aspect of the cooperative, what would it be and why?

Appendix 8.3: Instruments: Member Key Informant Interview

Member KII

Target Audience: Members of the COOPSSUR Cooperative (producers/

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Your opinions are valuable to our research. Please note that your responses will remain confidential and will be used solely to understand how to improve the cooperative. No personally identifiable information will be shared in reports or publications.

Additionally, your participation is entirely voluntary, and your responses will not affect your relationship with COOPSSUR, Cáritas, or the University of Notre Dame in any way. If at any point you feel uncomfortable answering a question, you may decline to answer or end the interview.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to ask us.

I. Introduction and General Perception of the Cooperative
1) Can you tell me about your farm?
2) How many hectares do you own?
3) How long have you been involved in agriculture?
4) What products do you grow and sell?
5) Do all the products you sell go to COOPSSUR?

6) Where else do you sell your products?
7) Where did you sell your products before joining COOPSSUR?
8) Why did you decide to join the cooperative?

II. Communication and Transparency
9) Are you satisfied with the current level of communication with COOPSSUR's leadership?
10) How do you perceive communication with other COOPSSUR members?
11) Do you think COOPSSUR members are sufficiently engaged with one another?
12) If not, how would you like to be more involved with other members, and what currently prevents that?
13) Do you feel a greater sense of community and collaboration with other producers since joining the cooperative? Is this connection stronger within the cooperative as a whole or only among producers in your specific area?

III. Challenges and Opportunities
14) Do you think COOPSSUR supports its members and advocates for their needs?
15) Are you familiar with COOPSSUR's decision-making processes?
16) Are you clear on what COOPSSUR expects from you as a member?
17) Do you believe the policies are communicated clearly?
18) Have you adopted new agricultural practices since joining COOPSSUR? What has your experience been with these practices?
19) Do you feel that your membership in COOPSSUR has generated a satisfactory return on investment?

IV. Current Initiatives and Impact
20) What do you think is COOPSSUR's most important objective?
21) What benefits have you gained from joining COOPSSUR?
22) What would make you feel more engaged and participatory in COOPSSUR?

Appendix 8.4: Instruments: Stakeholder Key Informant Interview

Strategic Partner KII

Target Audience: Strategic partners of COOPSSUR

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Your insights are valuable to our research. Please note that your responses will remain confidential and will be used solely to understand how to improve the cooperative. No personally identifiable information will be included in any reports or publications.

Furthermore, your participation is entirely voluntary, and your responses will in no way affect your relationship with COOPSSUR, Cáritas, or the University of Notre Dame. If at any point you feel uncomfortable answering a question, you may choose not to answer or end the interview.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to let us know.

I. Introduction and General Perception of the Cooperative
1) What organization are you from and what is your role?

2) How long has your organization collaborated with COOPSSUR and in what capacity?
3) How was the partnership with COOPSSUR established?
4) What specific resources (funding, training, technology, market access, legal advice, etc.) has your organization provided to COOPSSUR?

5) How well does COOPSSUR align with your organization's mission and objectives?
6) How would you describe your overall experience working with COOPSSUR?
7) In your opinion, what are the main strengths of COOPSSUR as a cooperative?

II. Communication and Transparency
8) How effective is COOPSSUR's communication with your organization? Who is your main contact at COOPSSUR?
9) How well-informed do you feel about COOPSSUR's goals, initiatives, and progress?
10) Are there any barriers to effective decision-making and coordination between your organization and COOPSSUR?

III. Challenges and Opportunities
11) Are there administrative and/or operational barriers that make working with COOPSSUR difficult?
12) What opportunities do you see for strengthening your partnership with COOPSSUR?
13) How would you describe COOPSSUR's level of commitment and motivation toward your organization and joint initiatives?

IV. Current Initiatives and Impact
14) In what specific COOPSSUR initiatives has your organization participated?
15) In your experience, what have been the most successful aspects of the collaboration with COOPSSUR? What metrics do you use to measure this success?
16) Do you believe COOPSSUR effectively incorporates feedback from partners like you to improve its initiatives? Why or why not?