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*Research note*

## **Leadership skills in primary multipurpose cooperative societies in Ethiopia**

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**Abstract** Cooperatives are considered as an important institution for uplifting the socioeconomic conditions of their members and local communities. To be successful, the cooperatives need to have dedicated and vibrant leaders. This paper analyses leadership skills of the board of directors of the selected multipurpose cooperatives in Ethiopia. The findings show that majority of the directors have basic leadership skills in project management, information technology, and application of cooperative principles. Most of them are good in professional behaviour, interpersonal relations, governance and motivation. Regression results indicate that skill levels are positively associated with education, experience, training, motivation, participation in social activities, and participation in cooperative management.

**Keywords** Leadership skills, Cooperatives, Ethiopia

**JEL classification** P13, J54, L31, Q13

### **1 Introduction**

Cooperatives being voluntary and democratic grass-root organizations of people, their leadership serve as a catalyst in group action. Leadership is an interaction that occurs between two or more members of a group and can involve a structuring or restructuring of both the parties and the perceptions and expectations of the members involved (Bass 1985). In a wider sense, cooperative leadership means all those who influence, instrument and inspire cooperative ideals, ideology, policies, programmes, physical growth, expansion, structure and working of individuals in the organisations at various levels. Leadership skill refers to the abilities and acquired tasks related to the leadership developed by an individual.

Katz (1955) identifies three categories of skills essential trait of a good leadership: technical skills, human skills, and conceptual skills. These skills may vary depending on a leader's position within the organization but are important for a leader to be successful. Technical skills,

according to Katz, are the most concrete type of skills and are associated with understanding and being able to complete specific activities. In other words, these are “how to do it” skills and involve methods, processes, procedures and techniques. Leaders engage in technical skills when they perform technical activities required of them. Technical skills are more important at lower levels of administration (Goleman 1998; Hicks & Gullett 1975; Katz 1955). As a leader moves up in an organizational hierarchy, he/she relies on technical skills of the followers more than his/her own technical skills (Hicks & Gullett 1975).

Human skills can be considered the “people skills.” Katz (1955) defines human skills as “the ability to work effectively as a group member and to build cooperative effort within the team he leads”. This skill is demonstrated in “how a leader perceives and behaves towards those around him/her, including superiors, peers and followers”. Most importantly, it cannot be a “some-time skill,” but rather must be demonstrated in every action of the leader (Katz 1955). Leaders engage in human relation skills when they motivate individuals

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and groups. Human skills are essential throughout all management levels (Hicks & Gullett 1975; Katz 1955).

Conceptual skills can be thought of as the “thinking skills” needed by a leader. This type of skill involves being able to see what is going on within the organization and how various components of the organization interact to depend on one another (Katz 1955). Conceptual skills are perhaps the most important for top management levels where policy decisions, long-term planning, and broad scale actions are required (Hicks & Gullett 1975; Katz 1955).

Franklin (2006) categorized all the factors influencing leadership skills into four types. These relate to the leader, the follower, the organization and the external environment. The leader related factors are the factors that originate from a leader’s personal characteristics. These include education, behaviour and leadership style (Franklin 2006). These factors can determine the cooperative leadership skills. On the other hand, follower related factors are those of the followers or members in cooperatives and their relationship with leaders which determine the effectiveness of leadership in the organizations. Organizational factors that affect effectiveness of an organization are significant to organizational characteristics. The nature of task performed, linkage among committee members and incentive policy of the society are the major ones.

Now a days, agricultural and rural cooperatives are facing new challenges of institutional restructuring, rapidly changing technology and rapid consolidation of agro-food industry. Unlike other cooperative organizations, agricultural and rural cooperatives sometimes fail as cooperatives, disenfranchising their members, even though these could be viable businesses. Members’ interests may be increasingly heterogeneous (Fulton & Gibbings 2001), rendering leading process to become more difficult. At the same time, there is evidence that cooperative conversations are rarely members-driven indicating the need for greater cohesion between members and leaders. Generally speaking, agricultural cooperatives face numerous challenges, since these serve more than one purpose, often with a transaction.

In Ethiopia, cooperatives are challenged by several problems. Among these, low capacity of cooperative leadership management, inadequate capacity building support by agencies, literacy gap among cooperative

leaders and low interest of management committee due to low incentives are predominant (Bezabih 2012). Given this backdrop, it is imperative to probe empirically on the skill inventory of cooperative leaders of primary multipurpose cooperatives.

Cooperative leaders must recognize their leadership role as “Servant Leaders”, whose source of power comes from their superior professional qualification and skills (Davis 2004). In countries where cooperative movement is weak and ineffective, the absence of dynamic leadership is one of the major reasons (ICA 1963). In other words, there is strong direct relationship between cooperative leadership skill level and cooperative performance (Das 2006).

As people-centric community based-organizations, cooperatives need effective board members to lead the cooperative and their members. But, what are the effective leadership skills to be practiced for cooperative? What leadership skills do the primary multipurpose cooperative leaders need to be successful? What are the factors that influence leadership skills? An attempt is made to find answers of these questions through an empirical analysis taking into account the existing knowledge and research gaps. The major objectives of this study are to: (i) assess skill inventory of cooperative leaders in primary multipurpose cooperatives, and (ii) identify factors that influence leadership skill level of leaders of the primary multipurpose cooperatives.

## 2 Data and methods

Wondo Genet is one of the Woredas (District) in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Region (SNNPR) of Ethiopia. Part of the Sidama Zone located in the Great Rift Valley, Wondo Genet is bordered on the south by Malga, on the West by Awasa Zuria, and on the North and on the East by the Oromia Region. The administrative center is Wondo Genet. Based on the 2007 Census conducted by the CSA, this Woreda has a total population of 155,715, of whom 79,664 are men and 76,051 women; 23,125 or 14.85% of its population are urban dwellers. The majority of the inhabitants are Protestants (83.26%) followed by Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity (7.69%), Muslims (7.40%), and Catholic (1.68%). There are 13 rural kebeles (villages) and 1 town kebele, Wondo Chuko the capital of Woreda.

**Table 1. Number of cooperatives in Wondo Genet woreda**

Types of cooperative	No. of Coops	No. of BoDs	Membership		
			Male	Female	Total
Savings and credit cooperatives	10		585	330	915
Vegetable cooperatives	2		56	13	69
Consumers cooperatives	1		27	1	28
Medicine plant producers' cooperatives	1		14	8	22
Multipurpose cooperatives	12	96	270	23	293
Cereal producers' cooperatives	5		274	28	302

Source: Sidama Zone Cooperative Development Office, June 2016.

A field survey method was adopted to audit skills of cooperative leaders (Board of Directors). Both qualitative and quantitative approaches have been used for data collection and analysis.

Multi stage sampling procedure was adopted. At first stage, out of 19 Woredas in the Zone, Wondo Genet Woreda was selected purposively based on the concentration of different types of primary cooperatives. At second stage, 12 primary multipurpose cooperative societies were selected on the basis of the membership coverage and complexity of the business transactions. At the final stage, based on census method, all the board of directors (BoDs) from 12 multipurpose cooperatives were considered for interview purpose.

To meet the objectives of the study, both primary and secondary data were gathered and utilized. As to primary data, semi structured interview schedule (SSIS) administered among the board of directors was prepared, pre-tested and finalized. Besides, focus group discussion (FGD) and key informant interview (KII) techniques were used for eliciting qualitative information.

To identify the factors influencing skill levels of cooperative leaders, an ordered logistic regression model was employed with cooperative leadership skill level as the dependent variable. The level of leadership skill takes a value of 1 if a leader has the basic skill, takes a value of 2 if he/she has intermediate skill level, 3 if he/she has advanced skills and 4 if he/she is expert in leadership skill. Frequencies of attributes in different sets of skills corresponding to a specific skill level were averaged to generate a composite dependent variable for use in ordered logistic regression. The explanatory variables demographic, psycho-

behavioural and institutional factors are indicated in table 2.

### 3 Results and discussion

#### 3.1 Inventory of leadership skills

Leadership skills inventory includes professional behavioural skills, project management skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, information technology skills and cooperative leadership skills.

The results as depicted in table 3 show that among the respondents, 40.6% and 33.3% have intermediate level of skills in demonstrating confidentiality and professionalism, respectively. Nonetheless, 44.8% have intermediate leadership skills in demonstrating positive attitude towards the stakeholders. Professionalism among the leaders was found to be a major impediment as majority (53.1%) possess basic skill level.

A perusal of table 4 reveals that majority of the leaders have basic leadership skills in goal setting, critical path development and evaluation of the projects. Only a few have advanced leadership skill with respect to resource and task allocation and meeting the deadlines.

A cursory look at table 5 shows that about 40% of the leaders have intermediate and advanced leadership skills with respect to written and verbal communication. Nonetheless, 60.4% and 51.0% of them opined that they are at intermediate and basic level of leadership skills in terms of consensus development and goal development respectively. Further, it is interesting to note that more than 10% of the respondents are expert in written and verbal communication skills. The results of FGD with members show that most of the time the written communication used to be prepared by the paid

**Table 2. Meaning and units of measurements of the variables**

Variables	Meaning	Units of measurement
Dependent		
Leadership skill level	It is the level of skill possessed by a leader of cooperatives in delegating, inspiring and communicating effectively.	Basic (1), Intermediate (2) Advanced (3) and Expert (4).
Independent variables		
Age	It is a continuous variable refers to the number of years completed by the respondents at the time of interview.	Years
Education	It is a categorical variable which means the level a leader has actually attained in education.	Primary (1), Middle (2), High (3), Higher secondary (4), Diploma (5), Degree (6)
Income	It is a continuous variable means the total monthly income of a leader derived from all sources.	Ethiopian Birr
Participation in social activities	It is a dummy variable means the state of a leader's participation in social activities in their locality.	Yes 1; No 0
Leadership duration	It is a continuous variable means number of years a leader served in the board of management.	Years
Participation in cooperative management	It is a dummy variable means the state of a leader's participation in cooperative democracy.	Yes 1; No 0
Training	It is a dummy variable means the state of a leader whether or not received training on leadership development.	Yes 1; No 0
Attitude	It is a categorical variable which means a leader's predisposition to respond to particular object in generally favourable or unfavourable way.	Low 1 Moderate 2 High 3
Perception	It is a categorical variable which means the recognition of things using leaders' senses, especially the sense of sight.	Low 1 Moderate 2 High 3
Motivation	It is a categorical variable which means the level of psychological force that determines leader's behaviour in an organization.	Low 1 Moderate 2 High 3
Leadership style	It is a categorical variable which means the manner and approach of providing direction, implementing plans and motivating people.	Autocratic 1 Democratic 2 Laissiez faire 3

**Table 3. Professional behavioural skills**

	Leadership skills level				Total
	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	Expert	
Demonstrate confidentiality	16 (16.7)	39 (40.6)	35 (36.5)	06 (06.2)	96 (100.0)
Demonstrate professionalism	51 (53.1)	32 (33.3)	08 (08.3)	05 (05.2)	96 (100.0)
Demonstrate positive attitude	17 (17.7)	43 (44.8)	30 (31.3)	06 (06.2)	96 (100.0)

Source: Field survey, 2016.

Figures in brackets are percentage to row total.

**Table 4. Project management skills**

	Leadership skills level				Total
	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	Expert	
Goal setting	46 (47.9)	42 (43.8)	08 (08.3)	—	96 (100.0)
Critical path development	48 (50.0)	39 (40.6)	09 (09.4)	—	96 (100.0)
Resource and task allocation	35 (36.4)	38 (39.6)	16 (16.7)	07 (07.3)	96 (100.0)
Meeting deadlines	19 (19.8)	29 (30.2)	38 (39.6)	10 (10.4)	96 (100.0)
Evaluation of projects	56 (58.3)	30 (31.3)	08 (08.3)	02 (02.1)	96 (100.0)

Source: Field survey, 2016.

Figures in brackets are percentage to row total.

**Table 5. Communication skills**

	Leadership skills level				Total
	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	Expert	
Written	31 (32.3)	38 (39.6)	16 (16.7)	11 (11.4)	96 (100.0)
Verbal	08 (08.3)	33 (34.3)	39 (40.6)	16 (16.7)	96 (100.0)
Consensus development	22 (22.9)	58 (60.4)	10 (10.4)	06 (06.2)	96 (100.0)
Goal development	49 (51.0)	31 (32.3)	12 (12.5)	04 (04.2)	96 (100.0)

Source: Field survey, 2016.

Figures in brackets are percentage to row total.

employees of the cooperatives and will be communicated through the board of directors. They added further that most of the board of directors have elementary school level education and hence the leaders are not good at written communications. This finding indicates that majority of the leaders are at advanced level as to verbal communication while they are at basic level with respect to goal development and consensus development.

Table 6 lists the interpersonal skills. More than half of the leaders are at intermediate leadership skills in listening, negotiating, resistance and conflict resolution

respectively. Nonetheless, about one third of them had advanced skill with respect to negotiations. Thus, it may be inferred that majority of the leaders are at intermediate and basic level leadership skills with respect to interpersonal skills. Focus group discussion (FGD) with members reveals that "Our leaders are good at resolving the conflicts among and between members and employees and members and board of directors, especially at the time of appropriation of net surplus".

A perusal of table 7 reveals that more than 90% of the leaders have basic skills with regard to information technology such as word processing, spreadsheets,

**Table 6. Interpersonal skills**

	Leadership skills level				Total
	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	Expert	
Listening skills	22 (22.9)	58 (60.4)	10 (10.4)	06 (06.2)	96 (100.0)
Negotiating skills	12 (12.5)	49 (51.0)	31 (32.3)	04 (04.2)	96 (100.0)
Resistance skills	39 (40.6)	48 (50.0)	05 (05.2)	04 (04.2)	96 (100.0)
Conflict resolution skills	32 (33.3)	51 (53.1)	08 (08.3)	05 (05.2)	96 (100.0)

Source: Field survey, 2016.

Figures in brackets are percentage to row total.

**Table 7. Information technology skills**

	Leadership skills level				Total
	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	Expert	
Word processing	90 (93.7)	06 (06.3)	—	—	96 (100.0)
Spreadsheets	93 (96.8)	03 (03.2)	—	—	96 (100.0)
Electronic communications	94 (97.9)	02 (02.1)	—	—	96 (100.0)
Internet browsing	89 (92.7)	06 (06.3)	01 (01.0)	—	96 (100.0)

Source: Field survey, 2016.

Figures in brackets are percentage to row total.

electronic communications and internet browsing. It was observed through FGD that many cooperatives do not have computerized account keeping system. Moreover, many cooperatives do not have internet connections at their office premises. They added further that we live in rural areas where infrastructures for information technology are yet to be developed.

Around half of the respondents opined that they are at basic leadership skill level in recognizing cooperatives key characteristics, identifying the disparities between cooperatives and other forms of business organizations, understanding the cooperative advantages relative to the alternative business models and structure of the cooperative movement respectively (Table 8). Nonetheless, about half of them are at intermediate skill level in practicing the principles of cooperation. Thus, it may be inferred that more than half of the leaders are at basic level skills with regard to application of cooperative principles and management.

A cursory look at table 9 show that more than half of the leaders are at the intermediate skill level with regard

to practising bylaws, ensuring democratic management, participation in cooperative affairs, showing accountability and demonstrating transparency, respectively; while 50.0% of the leaders are at basic level skills with respect to drafting the bylaws, understanding the roles of internal stakeholders and ability to predict. Nonetheless, about one-third of them are at advanced skill level in ensuing democracy in cooperatives. This finding shows that majority of the leaders are at intermediate skill level as to cooperative bylaw and governance skills. From FGDs, it was observed that absence of training and weak assistance from the union and promotion bureau are the issues with regard to cooperative governance.

It is observed from table 10 more than half of the respondents are at the intermediate level skills as for empowering individuals and groups, building confidence among individuals and group, developing positive attitude among stakeholders and identifying personal and group goals, respectively; whereas rest have basic skills with regard to innovation and recognition and appreciation.

**Table 8. Skills in application of cooperative principles and management**

	Leadership skills level				Total
	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	Expert	
Recognize key characteristics of cooperatives	46 (47.9)	42 (43.8)	08 (08.3)	—	96 (100.0)
Practicing cooperative principles	39 (40.6)	48 (50.0)	05 (05.2)	04 (04.2)	96 (100.0)
Understand the disparities between cooperatives & other forms of business	48 (50.0)	39 (40.6)	09 (09.4)	—	96 (100.0)
Identify the cooperative advantages	56 (58.3)	30 (31.3)	08 (08.3)	02 (02.1)	96 (100.0)
Understand the structure of cooperative movement	51 (53.1)	32 (33.3)	08 (08.3)	05 (05.2)	96 (100.0)

Source: Field survey, 2016.

Figures in brackets are percentage to row total.

**Table 9. Cooperative bylaw and governance skills**

	Leadership skills level				Total
	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	Expert	
Drafting bylaw of cooperatives	48 (50.0)	39 (40.6)	09 (09.4)	—	96 (100.0)
Practising the bylaw	22 (22.9)	58 (60.4)	10 (10.4)	06 (06.2)	96 (100.0)
Ensure democratic management	12 (12.5)	49 (51.0)	31 (32.3)	04 (04.2)	96 (100.0)
Understand the roles of internal stakeholders	48 (50.0)	39 (40.6)	09 (09.4)	—	96 (100.0)
Participation in cooperative affairs	39 (40.6)	48 (50.0)	05 (05.2)	04 (04.2)	96 (100.0)
Show accountability	32 (33.3)	51 (53.1)	08 (08.3)	05 (05.2)	96 (100.0)
Demonstrate transparency	39 (40.6)	48 (50.0)	05 (05.2)	04 (04.2)	96 (100.0)
Ability to predict	48 (50.0)	39 (40.6)	09 (09.4)	—	96 (100.0)

Source: Field survey, 2016.

Figures in brackets are percentage to row total.

**Table 10. Motivation skills**

	Leadership skills level				Total
	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	Expert	
Empower individuals and group	30 (40.6)	59 (61.5)	05 (05.2)	04 (04.2)	96 (100.0)
Build individuals and groupconfidence	36 (31.2)	51 (53.1)	05 (05.2)	04 (04.2)	96 (100.0)
Help to create a positive attitude	12 (12.5)	49 (51.0)	31 (32.3)	04 (04.2)	96 (100.0)
Identify personal and group goals	32 (33.3)	51 (53.1)	08 (08.3)	05 (05.2)	96 (100.0)
Encourage innovation	48 (50.0)	39 (40.6)	09 (09.4)	—	96 (100.0)
Recognition and appreciation	51 (53.1)	32 (33.3)	08 (08.3)	05 (05.2)	96 (100.0)

Source: Field survey, 2016.

Figures in brackets are percentage to row total.

### 3.2 Factors influencing leadership skills

Table 11 shows results of the ordered logit regression obtained taking into consideration various personal, social and cultural traits of the leaders.

**Education:** Education is hypothesized to have a positive influence on leaders' skill level. This variable is significant at  $p<0.001$  and have a positive influence on leadership skill level. This is expected as education contributes towards improving leaders' skill in planning, performing and monitoring the organization. This is consistent with the observation of ICA (1963) that states there is a direct relationship between the successes of cooperative organizations and its level of leaders' education.

**Participation in social activities:** This is another variable which is hypothesized to be positively associated with the dependent variable and is significantly related to leaders' leadership skill level

at 10% level of significance. By participating in social activities, the leaders can exercise their skills in leading the cooperatives. Evidence from FGDs also indicate that as part of the community, the leaders participate in different social institutions, i.e. Equb, Edir, Debo (Traditional forms of cooperatives), and political party. By participating in these social activities, cooperative leaders improve their leadership skill level through learning and sharing experiences.

**Leadership duration:** Experience in leadership can increase skill level of the leaders. FGD results indicate that experienced leaders are more enthusiastic in making decisions pertaining to day to day affairs of cooperatives. The regression result confirms that duration of leadership has a significantly positive influence on leadership skills.

**Participation in cooperative management:** The regression results show that participation in cooperative

**Table 11. Results of ordered logit regression model**

Variables	Unit of measurement	Estimates	Std. Error	Wald	Sig.
Age	Years	0.096	0.831	0.130	0.908
Education	Primary (1), Middle (2), High (3), Higher secondary (4), Diploma (5), Degree (6)	0.759	0.201	14.309	0.000***
Income	Years	-0.180	0.175	1.057	0.304
Participation in social activities	Yes 1; No 0	1.197	0.641	3.489	0.062*
Leadership duration	Years	0.379	0.121	9.845	0.002**
Participation in cooperative management	Yes 1; No 0	1.009	0.390	6.716	0.010**
Training	Yes 1; No 0	1.056	0.355	8.840	0.003**
Attitude	Low 1, Moderate 2, High 3	0.028	0.353	0.006	0.936
Perception	Low 1, Moderate 2, High 3	-0.402	0.293	1.883	0.170
Motivation	Low 1, Moderate 2, High 3	0.429	0.195	4.851	0.028**
Leadership style	Autocratic 1, Democratic 2, Laissiez faire 3	0.011	0.331	0.001	0.973
Chi-square = 87.516, p=0.000					
-2log likelihood = 24.438, N=96					

Source: Computed from field survey, 2016

\*\*\*significant at <1%, \*\*significant at <5\*\*, and \*significant at <10%.

management has a significantly positive influence on the leadership skills. Active participation in management of cooperatives no doubt contributes to the leadership skill as leaders are expected to take part in monthly board meeting, annual general assembly, performance appraisal and review of the progress of the cooperatives wherein decisions made through discussions and deliberations.

**Training:** Participation in training is expected to influence leadership skills positively. This is indicated by a positive and significant regression coefficient on training. Training not only influences declarative or procedural knowledge, but also enhances strategic knowledge, defined as knowing when to apply a specific skill. Acquisition of new skills, enhancement of self-management skills and improved job performance are the benefits of participation in training.

**Motivation:** The motivation to lead the cooperatives is positively and significantly associated with leadership skill. The motivation and skills are functions of performance, in a sense that, leadership skill alone will not lead to good performance unless there is motivation to work which together leads to successful achievements of outcome.

#### 4 Conclusions and implications

It is evident that leaders are at intermediate level in basic skills, and they are at basic and intermediate skill levels in cooperative knowledge and experience. However, it is distressing to note that the behavioural factors such as attitude and perception of leaders towards cooperatives do not have any influence on the leadership skills. This is because the cooperatives in Ethiopia, most of the time, seem to be sponsored and the government failed to nurture the values and ideals of cooperation among the elected leaders. Further, although leaders possess basic skills to run and manage the cooperatives, they need to be oriented towards improving their skills to the advanced and expert level through appropriate leadership skill development programs. Based on the findings of this study, the following suggestions need merit to improve the leadership skills in the cooperatives.

- Special attention needs to be given on cooperative leadership training, targeting cooperative principles, organization by-laws, governance system and business development.
- Cooperatives need to be organized, promoted and perpetuated with the minimum government

intervention. Emergence of spontaneous cooperatives needs to be encouraged.

- Experience sharing and exposure visits are very important tools for cooperative development. Thus, to upgrade leadership skill, joint programs with other cooperatives is recommended.
- Programmed and continuous meetings of the committee members are helpful in improving basic skills of cooperatives leaders. To achieve this, the cooperative societies must respect meeting deadlines of the committees.
- In addition to synergizing cooperative leaders and members as actors, integrated efforts of the government and non-government organizations as stakeholders need to be promoted.

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