

COOPERATIVES FOR INNOVATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Larisa SAVGA, Prof., PhD

Trade Co-operative University of Moldova

Email: savga.larisa@gmail.com

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Abstract

Co-operatives are a distinct dimension in international economic and social activities. They are constantly expanding and developing, becoming an important player in the social economy, due to the influence they have on socio-economic development of any country. Consumer co-operatives in the Republic of Moldova are part of the global system of co-operatives, and have an important role in the implementation of national economic and social policies. At the same time, current challenges, amplification of globalization and competition, as well as the need to stimulate the development of consumer co-operatives require new innovative solutions in this area. The objective of this research was to identify the strategic priorities for the medium-term development of consumer cooperation. To achieve this, the trends in the development of the country's co-operative sector in recent years were analyzed, the challenges faced by co-operatives and the internal needs for changes were highlighted, and the progress made by co-operative enterprises at the international level was assessed. Research was based on the use of complex methodological tools. The research results formed the basis of the Strategy for the Development of Consumer Cooperation in the Republic of Moldova for the period 2020-2023, which has been approved at the XVII Congress (August 2020) and is being implemented currently.

Keywords: consumer co-operatives, strategic priorities, economic development, managerial reengineering

1. Introduction

Co-operatives play an important role in contemporary society due to the influence they have on the socio-economic development in any country. Co-operatives have become an important pillar in international and European policies of economic development, cohesion and social inclusion due to the variety of promoted activities, level of population involvement, their contribution to the improvement of the quality of life and development of communities.

In this context, it becomes particularly important to promote and encourage innovative and sustainable development of consumer cooperation in Moldova in terms of economic development of the co-operative sector and its impact on the economic and social development of the country. Such development should be focused on the integrative processes of efficient use of co-operative system resources, on the continuity of the institutional framework restructuring, on the expansion of co-operative community and its position in the domestic and foreign markets, on the implementation of innovative solutions into the activities of co-operative entities.

Starting from 1863, during its activity the country's consumer cooperation managed to respond to the challenges of the time, still remaining in the national economy system and

contributing to its development.

And, at present, the activities of consumer cooperation faces multiple challenges, obstacles, while having various opportunities for development. In this context, it becomes imperative to highlight these challenges and identify solutions for the development of the country's co-operative system. This desideratum becomes particularly important in the context of strategic planning for the development of the co-operative system.

2. The extent of the current study of the problem, objective of the study

Currently, co-operatives are an important segment of the national economy of any country, due to their impact not only economically, but also socially, as well as the orientation of their services to meet the needs of co-operative members and population in the area of their activities. For this reason, co-operatives are assigned to the area of social economy according to international regulations and policy documents.

The United Nations Resolution (2009) „Co-operatives in Social Development” [7], ILO Recommendation on the Promotion of Co-operatives (193/2002) [18], as well as the Communication on the Promotion of Co-Operative Societies in Europe (2004) [5], the European Parliament Resolution on the Contribution of Co-operatives to Overcoming the Crisis (2013) [10] and other international documents are aimed at supporting this form of activity and *encouraging governments, academic and research environment to contribute to the development of co-operatives* by improving legislation, identifying and implementing innovative forms of co-operatives and co-operative activity, promoting education in this area based on international principles and good practices.

The importance of research in this area is also due to the size of the co-operative sector around the world. According to the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), there are more than 3 million co-operatives worldwide, with 1.2 billion members [13]. The development of the co-operative sector involves millions of employees. Co-operatives provide more than 250 million jobs worldwide, 20% more than multinational companies. Within the G20 countries, co-operatives employ about 10% of total employed population [14].

In the context of the above, research in this area, focused on identifying innovative solutions for cooperatives development, acquires major values and is in the attention of various research and educational institutions (ICA Committee on Cooperative Research [11], International Center for Research and Information on the Public, Social and Cooperative Economy - CIRIEC [12], and universities) and researchers from different countries.

Thereby, the subjects referring to the role of co-operatives in the social economy are in the attention of C. Borgaza, Dependi S. Ermanno T. [4]; issues concerning the development of co-operative legislation are being investigated by Cracogna, D., Fici A., Henry H. [8]; aspects addressing the nature of the co-operative activity are studied by Petrescu C. [17], Crisan I. [9]; issues related to the argumentation of the co-operative business model are examined in the works of Birchall J., Ketilson L. [3], Zeuli K. [26]; the role of co-operative principles and values for co-operative business development is exposed in the publications by Novkovic S. [16]; the new models of co-operative governance are addressed by Banaszac I,

Beckmann V. [2]; the strengthening of indigenous knowledge, human rights, and the principles and values of co-operation are examined by Priscilla S. [25] and others.

The latest research results of the world scientists on co-operative issues are reflected in the Review of International Co-operation, published under the auspices of the ICA Committee on Cooperative Research [19], Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics, edited by CIRIEC [1] and other publications. At national level, recent research in the field of co-operative development is presented in the Journal of Research on Trade, Management and Economic Development [15], monographs [20, 23], and publications of Moldovan researchers (such as L. Savga, V. Sitnicenco, N. Şerban [21, 22, 24, 27] etc.) particularly from the Trade Co-operative University of Moldova.

A particularly important compartment in the area of co-operative activity research aims at strategic planning for the development of co-operatives at national level, which should take into account the specific operating conditions of co-operatives, the challenges of internal and external environment, best practices and efficiency of co-operatives in other countries and regions. This is due to the fact that a well-founded and well-designed medium-term development strategy ensures the progress and sustainability of co-operatives' activities and contributes to the increase of their impact on the socio-economic evolution, development of settlements and well-being of the population.

Based on the foregoing, the purpose of this research is to analyse the development trends of consumer cooperatives in the Republic of Moldova, highlight the challenges it faces, assess internal needs for changes, determine the methodology for designing the development strategy of the co-operative system in the medium term, define strategic priorities and future directions for action in order to move to another qualitative level of development.

3. Methods and materials applied

Research methodology included the study of relevant reports on the implementation of national strategic development programs, sectoral programs and recorded progress; analysis of the implementation of Consumer Co-operative Development Strategy for the period 2016-2019 [6]; PESTEL analysis of consumer co-operatives activity as well as of encountered challenges; social and economic analysis of the consumer co-operatives activity; evaluation of European regulatory and strategic development framework for co-operatives; analysis of statistical data, reviews, social and economic reports; other relevant documents in this field. At the same time, the needs and expectations of stakeholders (members, employees, other beneficiaries of co-operative services, authorities, etc.) were identified and the key actors were consulted on the challenges and visions of future cooperative development.

Identification of strategic priorities for the development of country's consumer cooperatives was based on the following principles: participation and transparency, efficiency, complementarity of resources and innovation.

To carry out the study the following research methods have been used: systemic and problematic approaches, as well as statistical methods, synthesis, induction and deduction methods, comparative analysis, benchmarking, modelling, and forecasting methods, etc.

4. Results obtained and discussions

4.1. Evolutions and trends in the development of consumer cooperation and factors that influence it

Traditionally, consumer co-operatives offer a wide range of services and the promotion of various activities, such as retail and wholesale trade, purchase of agricultural, animal origin and other products and their processing, provision of various services, including educational, market and public catering services, thus, subordinating their activity to the interests of its members and population in their area of activity.

Currently, Moldovan consumer co-operation system associates 106,5 thousand co-operative members (co-operators), integrates 142 economic agents, including 88 consumer co-operatives; 1600 trade units; 176 catering facilities; and 21 markets. Consumer cooperation is present in about 770 settlements of the country, serving the population, mainly in rural area. During its existence, consumer cooperation has also developed its own educational system that currently integrates four educational institutions representing vocational and higher education.

In the recent years, particular attention has been paid to infrastructure strengthening. The development of infrastructure and capitalizing on the existing potential have contributed to growth in some areas of activity in the period 2016-2019: retail sales increased by 3.3% in this period, wholesale sales increased by 29.2%, constituting cumulatively 3224.2 million lei and 495.4 million lei, respectively, in the reference period; provision of paid services to the population increased by 14.6%, amounting to 662.9 million lei in 2016-2019, purchase of products (agricultural and animal origin, other nature products) amounted to 291.5 million lei; manufacturing of industrial production amounted to 205.7 million lei for the same period; the volume of export amounted to 34.4 million lei.

Although the entities of consumer co-operatives operate in conditions of insufficient financial resources, the co-operative system has invested in its own development about 57.8 million lei in recent years. However, the lack of necessary investments and the unattractiveness of the system for external investors remains an important obstacle to the sustainable development of consumer co-operatives for the long-term.

In 2016-2019, the contributions of consumer co-operative system to the consolidated budget has also increased due to the payment of taxes, fees, contributions to social and health insurance, in the amount of about 478.3 million lei. Payments to the consolidated budget have increased by 14.4% over the past four years compared to 2012-2015.

However, the consumer co-operatives system of the country is influenced by multiple factors, both of incentive and reverse action. Their analysis made it possible to single out, among the main factors that contribute to further evolution of the consumer cooperation, the next:

- participation of co-operative entities in the implementation of national, regional and local development programs,
- strengthening of integration and associative processes,
- diversified nature of the cooperative system' activities (trade, production, procurement, services, etc.),
- further expansion of the areas of co-operative activity in accordance with the needs

- of society and good international practices,
- established sales market, penetration into the new internal markets and market niches (urban, regional, etc.) and the external market,
 - economic participation of members in the activities promoted by co-operative entities and in the decision-making process,
 - experience in economic activity, development of partnerships with public authorities in order to support the development of co-operative services in rural areas,
 - capitalizing on the internal potential of consumer cooperation and innovative development of the system,
 - motivating co-operative members and employees to participate and to contribute to the development of co-operatives,
 - strengthening the community of co-operative members and recruiting new members,
 - formed image of a socially-focused system,
 - human resources with experience in the co-operative sector,
 - promoting research, innovation and development projects of consumer cooperation,
 - own infrastructure dispersed throughout the territory of the republic, constant modernization of co-operative infrastructure and technological processes,
 - implementation of modern business models and activities based on ICT,
 - supporting the worldwide co-operative movement, etc.

At the same time, among the factors that hinder the development of the consumer co-operatives sector, the following are distinguished:

- unfair competitive environment for all economic entities operating in the domestic market,
- diminishing the positions of co-operative sector by segments of economic activity,
- low profitability of economic activity in some areas, generated mainly by the social nature of co-operative benefits in rural localities,
- decrease of the income and the purchase power of the served population, and reduction of population in the area of co-operative activity,
- lack of financial resources to implement extensive programs of infrastructure modernization and renovation, and expansion of activities,
- diminishing the co-operative members interest in supporting and developing co-operatives in the absence of efficient mechanisms of economic and social motivation,
- imperfection of legislative and regulatory framework regarding the consumer co-operatives,
- underestimation of the consumer co-operative system by public authorities and the role played by co-operative enterprises and organizations in the implementation of national social policies, lack of support to socially-focused co-operative activities in remote or less-populated areas,
- negative demographic trends in the country, migration of the population, including economically active labour force, trends for decreasing demand at local and national levels,

- insufficient awareness of the population regarding the benefits offered by consumer co-operatives,
- low interest of young people for association in consumer co-operatives, etc.

Currently, consumer co-operatives should continue the evolutionary positive processes and adopt a strategic position towards the challenges and opportunities of internal and external markets. Despite many development challenges, there are also many opportunities that can and should be harnessed.

4.2. Strategic objectives for the development of consumer cooperation in 2020-2023

The analysis of consumer co-operatives activities, assessment of faced challenges and factors with impact on the co-operative system operation have contributed to the establishment of *priorities for further development of consumer co-operative sector*, among which:

- development and diversification of economic activities, increasing the competitiveness of the co-operative system;
- increasing the efficiency of financial and economic activities of consumer co-operatives and ensuring their sustainable development;
- managerial reengineering of the co-operative system and its business processes,
- motivation and development of human resources involved in co-operative activity.

Let us further examine priority areas for the development of co-operative activity according to the above priorities.

Actions in the area of **development and diversification of economic activities and increase of co-operative system competitiveness** are aimed primarily at the following.

The improving of the *commercial activity* requires:

- development of an integrated trading system in the framework of consumer co-operatives system,
- modernization and development of co-operative commercial units infrastructure, renovation of existing stores, design of new types of stores, endowment of commercial units with modern equipment and technologies,
- encouraging the expansion of „Coop” brand stores, in particular of „CoopPrim” and „CoopPlus” networks, as well as specialized commercial stores,
- diversification of forms of sales through the use of methods that are known, but not used by co-operative organizations, such as mobile trading, home sales, sales by order, sale of goods on credit, etc.,
- centralization of goods purchasing function for the entire trading system of consumer co-operatives, establishment and development of direct commercial relations with manufacturers and suppliers from the country and abroad,
- centralization of products distribution function within a co-operative system in order to optimize logistics, advertising and administrative costs,
- development and promotion of own trading brands for manufactured and/or marketed products, for services offered through consumer co-operative’s networks and trade units,

- digitization of commercial activities, creation and development of online stores, implementation of electronic payment system, implementation of modern electronic marketing tools, automation of business processes within co-operative business,
- providing consumers with facilities for provision of maintenance and repair services at the place of purchase or near commercial units,
- diversification of products manufactured for the foreign market, efficiency in promoting export offers of consumer cooperation, etc.

Further development of *public catering services* will focus primarily on diversification, renewal, improvement of the quality of products and services. Future actions are aimed at:

- re-equipment and refurbishment of public catering units;
- creation of a modern network format of co-operative public catering units;
- expanding the manufacture of confectionery and culinary products, semi-finished products, etc. by the public catering units and distribution of products both through the trading network of co-operatives and through other commercial units, public institutions;
- promotion of public catering services in the electronic and other traditional media;
- integration of co-operative public catering enterprises into the tourism industry;
- improvement of the quality of products developed in public catering units and enlargement of services offered to consumers, implementation of consumer loyalty programs, etc.

The objectives of the *procurement of agri-food products activity* development are focused on providing the business with adequate resources, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in due time and space, and at minimum cost. However, lack of financial resources necessary for the development of infrastructure and endowment with modern equipment and technologies, limited opportunities to ensure long-term storage of purchased products, inconsistency of the quality of purchased products with national and international standards, lack of a complete system for marketing and processing of purchased products, unfair competition in the agri-food market, etc., limit the development of this sector.

Stimulation of this sector's development is aimed primarily at assessing the procurement potential of consumer co-operatives system in terms of: agricultural specialization of the country's regions and districts, capacity of enterprises and co-operative organizations, investment needs and identification of development priorities for the sector, its transformation into an attractive one for both internal and external investment.

To ensure the competitiveness and sustainability of the procurement sector, it is advisable to create a republican-level cooperative enterprise specializing in the purchase of agricultural, agri-food and other products, their processing and distribution, with well-developed regional-level infrastructure and appropriate technical, material and logistic infrastructure (warehouses, refrigerators, vehicles, marketing, etc.) that would be part of a circular economy. Chain reunion of acquisition, production, sale and catering activities would have a high synergistic and cumulative effect.

Along with the procurement area, it is required to develop the *processing sector*, which represents an important source of the formation of the product offer. Traditionally, the co-operative's industry is focused primarily on production of goods for basic needs, including

bread and bakery products, confectionery, pasta, sausages, drinks, etc.

Sustainable development of this sector calls for the following actions, which would contribute to effective development of the industrial sector:

- identification of priorities and strategic directions for the development of co-operative industry, assessment and economic and financial diagnosis of each enterprise within the industrial complex, highlighting enterprises that correspond to strategic goals in this area, reconversion or elimination of unprofitable ones, their alienation and investment of obtained resources in infrastructure development;
- integration of production structures (enterprises, departments) into a single complex with the centralization of certain functions (design and development of new products, joint information infrastructure, joint distribution system, etc.);
- increasing product competitiveness and ensuring economic efficiency of co-operative manufacturing enterprises;
- attraction of internal and external investment sources for the modernization of infrastructure, technical base and production technologies, etc.

An important factor for sustainable operation and development of co-operative organizations and enterprises is to ensure financial balance, as well as to increase economic efficiency of consumer co-operatives activities.

In order to *improve the efficiency of economic and financial activity of consumer co-operatives and ensure sustainable development*, the following actions have become imperative:

- diagnostics of the activity of cooperative economic entities from an economic point of view and their liquidation/reorganization;
- optimization of economic activities, entry into new markets, diversification and expansion of co-operative services, infrastructure modernization and retechnologization in all areas of co-operative activity;
- implementation of effective tools in order to stimulate managers and employees for their performance, to reward contributions of co-operative members depending on their participation in the formation of social capital and the activity of co-operatives;
- strengthening investment potential by attracting funds from co-operative system employees, attracting external financial sources (loans, credits, deposits, etc.) from various third parties, without losing co-operative identity, applying for microfinance projects, technical assistance and other projects, accessing European funds for the development of co-operative infrastructure, introduction of investment reward mechanisms depending on the results of economic activity of co-operative entities;
- support from the local public authorities to co-operative activities in communities where such activities are unprofitable but requested by the population, which can be carried out in various forms (exemption or reduction of taxes on the location, provision of subsidies for economic activities with social impact, etc.);
- assessment of international experience in relation to existing models and practices regarding participation of non-user financing organizations in co-operative

activities and transfer of best practices to the consumer cooperation system of the country, etc.

In order to meet the challenges of the competitive environment, consumer co-operatives should constantly change not only in terms of its infrastructure modernization, but also in terms of organizational and managerial optimization. *Managerial reengineering of the co-operative system and business processes are aimed*, first of all, at rethinking and re-designing the consumer co-operatives system, at reorganizing and optimizing the managing bodies of co-operative entities.

Organizational and managerial optimization of the consumer co-operatives system implies mainly the creation of integrated (both vertical and horizontal) and associative structures, regardless of the territorial area of operation and profile of economic activity (wholesale or retail trade; procurement-processing-storage-distribution of agricultural products, etc.), with a single management system and unified administration of material, technical, financial, human and information resources, within which the principles of equal cooperation prevail.

Processual redesign requires the implementation of new business processes, particularly of those based on the use of ICT as well as the modernization of existing ones based on value-added activities.

These and other proposals formed the basis of the Consumer Co-operative Development Strategy for the period 2020-2023, developed under the coordination of the author of this paper, which was approved at the XVIIth Congress of Consumer Co-operatives (August 26, 2020). The implementation of the Strategy will contribute to the consolidation of internal potential of the co-operative system, will stimulate its economic growth, progress and sustainable development. This will increase the indicators characterizing economic and financial activities of co-operative entities: turnover growth by about 2-4% annually, and increase of consumer co-operative income on average by 3-6% annually.

5. Conclusions

Co-operatives are recognized worldwide as key players in the social economy, employment and inclusion policy. The development of co-operatives, especially of consumer co-operatives, in the Republic of Moldova also plays an important role due to their contribution to socio-economic development and to the growth of population's well-being.

In the context of a constantly changing socio-economic environment, national consumer co-operatives should continue its evolutionary positive processes and take a strategic position in relation to the challenges and opportunities of the internal and external markets. Despite the fact that there are many challenges in development, there are also many opportunities that can and should be taken advantage of. Their analysis in this research and identification of strategic priorities for the development of consumer co-operatives of the country in the next four years, as well as the key actions required in this context, regarding their implementation, will contribute to strengthening competitive advantages of the national co-operative system, to quality and innovative development of the promoted activities and to maximizing the benefits that can be obtained by co-operatives, as well as by the population within its area of activity.

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Rezumat

Cooperativele constituie o dimensiune distinctă în activitatea economică și socială la nivel internațional. Acestea sunt în continuă extensie și dezvoltare, devenind un actor important al economiei sociale, datorită impactului pe care îl au asupra dezvoltării socioeconomice în orice țară. Cooperativele de consum din Republica Moldova sunt parte a sistemului global al cooperativelor, acestora revenindu-le un rol important în realizarea politicilor economice și sociale naționale. Totodată provocările actuale, amplificarea globalizării și concurenței, precum și necesitatea dinamizării dezvoltării cooperativelor de consum solicită noi soluții inovative în domeniu. Identificarea priorităților strategice de dezvoltare a cooperăției de consum pe termen mediu a constituit obiectivul prezentei cercetări. Pentru realizarea acestuia au fost analizate tendințele în evoluția sectorului cooperatist din țară din ultimii ani, evidențiate provocările cu care se confruntă cooperativele și necesitățile interne de schimbare, evaluate progresele înregistrate de întreprinderile cooperatiste pe plan internațional. Cercetarea s-a bazat pe utilizarea unui instrumentar complex metodologic. Rezultatele cercetărilor au constituit fundamentul Strategiei de dezvoltare a cooperăției de consum din Republica Moldova pentru perioada 2020-2023, care a fost aprobată la congresul XVII (august 2020) și este pusă în aplicare.

Cuvinte-cheie: cooperative de consum, priorități strategice, dezvoltare economică, reengineering managerial

Аннотация

Кооперативы представляют собой особый сегмент экономической и социальной деятельности на международном уровне. Они постоянно развиваются, становясь важным игроком социальной экономики, благодаря влиянию, которое они оказывают на социально-экономическое развитие любой страны. Потребительские кооперативы в Республике Молдова являются частью глобальной системы кооперативов и играют важную роль в реализации национальной экономической и социальной политики. В то же время, современные вызовы, усиление глобализации и конкуренции, а также необходимость развития потребительских кооперативов требуют новых инновационных решений в этой области. Целью данного исследования явилось определение стратегических приоритетных направлений развития потребительской кооперации на среднесрочный период. Для этого были проанализированы тенденции развития кооперативного сектора в стране за последние годы, выделены проблемы, с которыми сталкиваются кооперативы, выявлены внутренние потребности в изменениях, а также оценен опыт, достигнутый кооперативными предприятиями на международном уровне. Исследование основано на использовании комплексного методического подхода. Результаты исследования легли в основу Стратегии развития потребительской кооперации Республики Молдова на период 2020-2023 годов, которая была утверждена на XVII съезде (август 2020 года) и находится в стадии реализации.

Ключевые слова: потребительские кооперативы, стратегические приоритеты, экономическое развитие, реинжиниринг управления

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