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An Investigation into Strategies to Promote Co-operatives Growth and Resilience to Environmental Risks in Namibia

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ABSTRACT
The co-operatives are faced with various challenges and uncertain environmental risks that limit their abilities to succeed and grow. Even though co-operatives are considered the most effective private sector approach to poverty reduction, employment creation, wealth distribution, and economic inclusion of less privileged community members; a slow growth in the number of co-operatives registered in Namibia is observed. This study sought to explore the business environment risks commonly faced by cooperatives in Khomas, Otjozondjupa, and the Northern Central Regions (Oshikoto, Oshana, Omusati, and Ohangwena) and develop strategies to help them build long-term resilience to business environmental risks. The study adopted an interpretivism philosophy, embraced a qualitative research approach, and used a phenomenological research design. Purposive non-probability sampling technique was used in identifying and selecting the participants for the interviews. The collected data was analysed thematically. It was found that co-operatives are faced with financial constraints, lack of knowledge among co-operative members about the co-operative concept and seven principles of co-operatives, lack of conflict management, lack of access to land, insufficient potable water supply in the rural areas, and an increase in theft of co-operative assets in the study areas. Drought, disease outbreaks (Covid-19 and Foot and Mouth Disease), natural disasters (flood and wildfire), credit default, and locust outbreaks were found to be the common Business Environmental Risks experienced by co-operatives in Namibia. It was established that a lot needs to be done by both the Regulator and co-operatives themselves as they are both failing each other. To promote the growth of co-operatives, enhance their sustainability, and strengthen their resilience to crises, the study recommends that co-operative members should be encouraged to attend courses related to conflict management, risk management, and study the co-operative concept to master the seven principles of co-operatives. The government should continue rehabilitating, constructing, and excavating boreholes and earth dams to address water shortages. Financial providers should make their funds affordable and accessible to co-operatives. It further recommends co-operatives to develop and implement various strategies for coping with crises and promote growth.

Keywords*:* Business environmental risks, Co-operative, Growth and resilience, Strategies

1. INTRODUCTION
Formation of co-operatives represents the most effective private sector approach to wealth distribution, poverty alleviation, and economic inclusion of economically less developed community members in the country. It is worth noting that co-operatives play a very integral role in the economic development of a country through various ways such as employment creation, poverty eradication, promoting food security and addressing wealth inequality (Namibia Co-operative Policy [NCP], 2017). Specifically, in Namibia, co-operative initiatives can be viewed as strategic tools to the Harambee Prosperity Plan (HPP), which aims to promote wealth creation by growing the economy sustainably and inclusively. Uchezuba, Mbai, and Laubscher, (2016) supported this sentiment by stating that a co-operative system promotes economic and social development, consequently strengthening human capital. Co-operatives play a significant role in job creation and poverty reduction (Mabunda, 2017).

However, co-operatives like any other form of business are oppressed by different business environmental risks that negatively impact their operations, productions, management, success, and overall performance of the co-operatives. The instabilities and uncertainties posed by the ever-changing internal and external environment has imposed huge challenges threatening the survival and sustained growth of co-operatives everywhere. “These uncertainties in the market environment and their effects are called risks” (Shi & Wang, 2019). There are several world occurrences which can be cited as having impacted the business environment excessively. These include, the global financial issues caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, consequently leading to shortages of certain commodities and higher inflation in many countries including Namibia. Namibia has also experienced natural disasters such as drought and flooding on several occasions destabilising demand and supply of different goods and services in the market. Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak led to some devastating effects on all sectors of the economy worldwide. It has also impacted all human affairs at both individual and aggregate levels in all affected countries and the co-operatives sector is no different (World Cooperative Monitor, 2020). Tanjung & Purnamadewi, 2021, noted that some cooperatives in the field of farming and horticulture, because of their labour intensiveness and demanding high monitoring involvement, are still struggling to pick up in the post covid era because of the losses they made during the pandemic. This situation was worsened by the Russia and Ukraine conflict which led to spiking prices of inputs such as fertilisers, threatening global crop production (Aidi, 2022).

This provides evidence that many co-operatives in Namibia are faced with uncertainties reducing their potential, threatening their survival and growth levels. Some empirical studies have indicated that whether co-operatives succeed in realizing economies of scale, increased productivity, improved market access, the price premiums for members depends on internal organizational and external political and economic factors (Wedig and Wiegratz, 2017). Hence, this research aimed to develop strategies that can help co-operatives to invest in critical capacities that would build long-term resilience to face crises and survive in the face of business environmental risks (BERs).

Historical research on cooperatives revealed that in Namibia, the co-operative movement was introduced in the early 1960s. The two oldest co-operatives are the Alfa Co-operative formed in 1964, and Agra Co-operative Pty formed in 1980 (Thomas & Hangul, 2011 as cited in Uchezuba, Mbai, & Laubscher, 2016, p. 2861). By the year 1992, there were 5 registered co-operatives in Namibia (Namibia Co-operative Policy [NCP], 2017). Since then, recent statistics show that there are 11 fully registered and 197 provisionally registered co-operatives in Namibia. Despite various support to co-operatives from the government after independence in the form of training, co-operative incentive schemes, funding, and given access to public goods, a slow growth in the number of co-operatives registered in Namibia is observed (NCP, 2017). Since the introduction of co-operatives in Namibia slow growth and a lack of vibrant development in the sector were observed (Kapuka, 2017). In addition to the noted slow growth, many co-operatives are underperforming, and are very much at risk of failing especially in the face of environmental risks such as pandemics, wars, inflation, changes in repo rate, and natural disasters etc.

There is clear evidence of slow growth which intrigues one to want to explore the business environment risks commonly faced by cooperatives and develop strategies that can be put in place to increase opportunities for survival, strengthen the resilience to these risks and attain sustained growth of cooperatives in Namibia.

2. METHODS

This research was premised on the interpretivism research philosophy which is based on the beliefs of relativist ontology and transactional or subjectivist epistemology (Gupta, 2023 & Gemma, 2018). The researchers viewed reality as subjective and socially constructed to answer the relativist ontological question of this study: How can co-operatives be promoted to grow and strengthened to survive in the face of adverse business environmental risks in Namibia? This study adopted a qualitative research approach motivated by the need for an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon’s universal nature by exploring the views of those who have experienced it (Dumlao, 2022). Hence, a phenomenological research design was used in this study to give an in-depth understanding of the experiences of those who are involved or have been involved in co-operatives and ultimately developing counter strategies to enable sustainable growth and development.

The population for this study was the total number of co-operatives in Namibia, which is 208, with 11 of them fully registered and 197 provisionally registered (Namibia Co-operative Policy [NCP], 2023). The report further highlighted that the co-operatives in Namibia have a total population of 17 000 people registered as co-operative members in accordance with section 20 of co-operatives Act 23 of 1996 and the By-Laws of the co-operatives. This study was delimited to cooperatives operating in Khomas, Otjozondjupa, Oshikoto, Oshana, Omusati, and Ohangwena Regions. The study area has a total of 52 primary co-operatives averaging 8 co-operatives per region. Both non-performing and performing workers and service co-operatives that are either provisionally or fully registered were considered under study. Within the membership of these co-operatives, the study focused on members who previously served or are currently serving on the board of the co-operative or on the Supervisory Committee of primary co-operatives. In terms of the population size, the qualitative research experts argue that there is no straightforward answer to the question of 'how many'; the sample size is contingent on several factors relating to epistemological, methodological, and practical issues (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018). The researcher applied the non-probability sampling techniques to purposely select the 5 co-operatives per region from 6 regions included in this study, 2 non-performing and 3 performing co-operatives, resulting in 30 cooperatives being selected. Using the referral/snowball sampling method, each co-operative had 2 representatives who participated in the study. The researcher trusted the snowball sampling at this level as the selection would be based on the participants' capacity to provide richly textured information, relevant to address the research questions, and it is the members themselves who could identify such people.

The research instruments for this study were semi-structured interviews, and these were conducted telephonically with selected co-operative representatives. Prior to the actual data collection, pilot interviews were done with a few members selected from 2 co-operatives in Windhoek. The interview questions were adjusted accordingly following the engagement with the pilot testers, ensuring clarity and a good flow and structure. The data were analysed thematically, breaking down complex data sets and organising it systematically into key emerging themes (Dawadi, 2020). Informed consent was obtained before the interviews, and all the proceedings in this research took place with a clear observation of ethical considerations such as no deception, respect for participants, maintaining confidentiality, careful handling of data and anonymity.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The results are presented in two sections, the first section presents results, the response rate and participants demographic data. This information helps to reveal the characteristics of respondents such as their current position/role, gender, years of experience, age, and the number of co-operative businesses owned, which will be evaluated in relation to their experiences and ability to give in-depth information required in this study. It also helps in highlighting some possible strengths and weaknesses that may be in these co-operatives. The other section presents the information addressing the research objectives.

3.1 Response rate and demographic data

In terms of co-operatives, only 25 (twenty-five) participated in this study from the intended 30 co-operatives, resulting in a total of 50 participants, which accounted for an 83% response rate, see table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1.1: Response rate

	KHM	OTJZ	OSHI	OSHA	OMU	OHA	TOTAL
Targeted number of co-operatives	5	5	5	5	5	5	30
Actual number of co-operatives	3	4	3	5	5	5	25

Note: KHM means Khomas Region, OTJZ means Otjozondjupa Region, OSHI means Oshikoto Region, OSHA means Oshana Region, OMU means Omusati Region, and OHA means Ohangwena Region.

3.1.2 Current role in the co-operative

The participants were asked to tell the researcher their current roles/ positions in the co-operative, below are the responses:

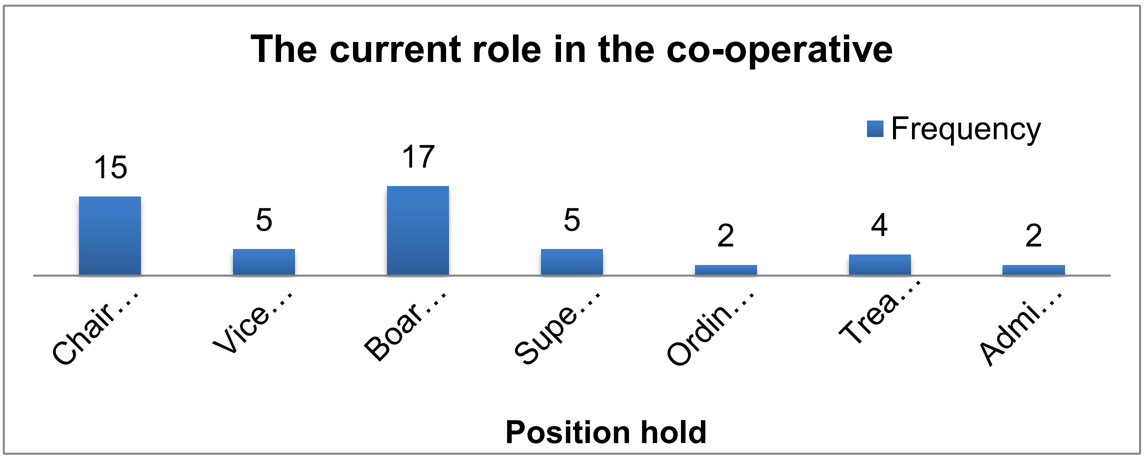

Figure 3.1: Current role in the co-operative

Source: Author's compilation

Figure 3.1 above indicates the current positions of the participants in the co-operative. Out of 50 participants, 15 of them were serving as Chairpersons, 5 Vice Chairpersons, 17 were general board members, 5 Supervisory Committee members, 2 ordinary members, 4 were Treasurers, and 2 Administrators. The findings indicate that roles and responsibilities of running co-operatives in Namibia are shared among their members, thus promoting participation by members.

3.1.3 Gender

The researcher inquired about the gender of the participants, which was considered among others one of the essential demographic data, and responses provided are presented below:

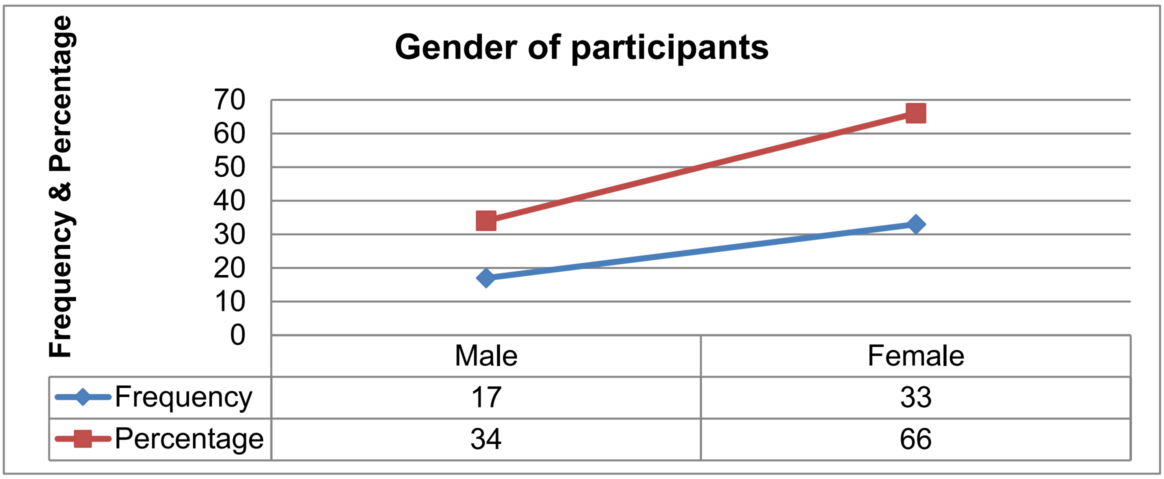

Figure 3.2: Gender presentation of the participants

Source: Authors' compilation

Figure 3.2 above depicted the gender segregation of the participants, and the results were as follows: From the total of 50 co-operative members that have participated in this study, 17 (34%) were male and the remaining 33 of participants were female which accounted for 66% of the total participants. The domination of female participants in this study reveals that women are more willing to form and run co-operative businesses in Namibia. The findings also suggest that females enjoy working together with others compared to their male counterparts.

3.1.4 Experience in the co-operative business

The participants were asked to indicate how long they have been members of co-operatives. The responses provided are presented below:

Table 3.2: Participants' experience in the co-operative

Period in a co-operative	Frequency	Percentages
Less than 5 years	7	14%
5 to 10 years	17	34%
More than 10 years	26	52%
Total	50	100%

Table 3.2 above illustrates the results of the participants' years of experience in the co-operative sector. It indicates that out of 50 participants 7(14%) had less than 5 years of experience, 17(34%) have been members of co-operatives for 5 to 10 years, and 26 (52%) which represents most of the participants had stayed in the co-operative for more than 10 years. These findings imply that valuable responses were offered by the very experienced and knowledgeable participants who are the majority in this study, with only 14% of the participants having less than 5 years of experience. This is viewed as positive and likely that the majority have been through different circumstances in running the co-operatives and encountered various business environmental risks.

3.1.5 Co-operative membership of the participants

The participants were asked to indicate the number of co-operatives in which they are members. Figure 3.3 shows the responses to that question.

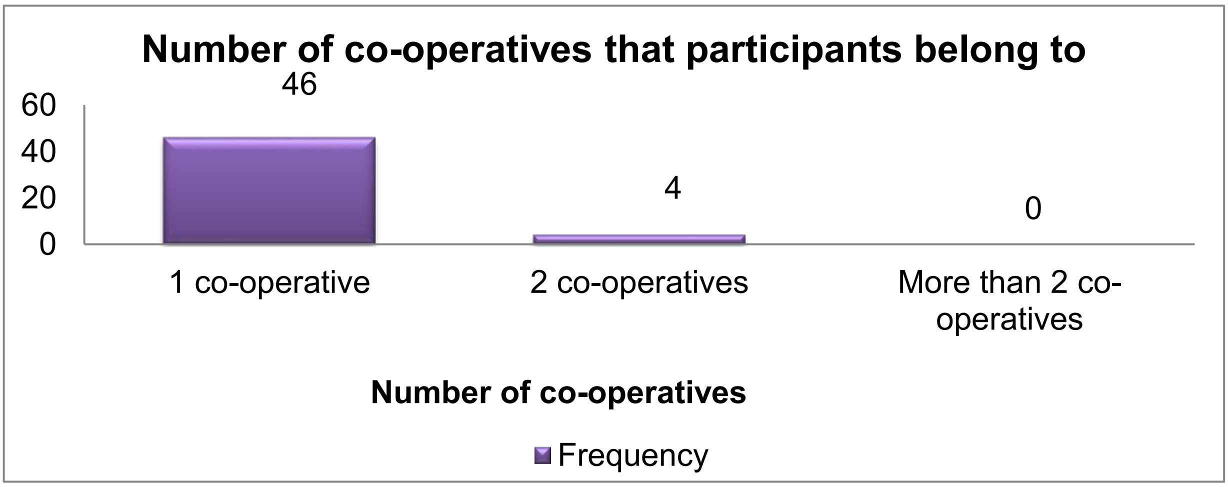

Figure 3.3: Number of co-operatives owned by participants

Source: Authors' compilation

The above figure 3.3 is a graphic depiction of the number of co-operatives to which the participant is a member. The study revealed that 46 (92%) of the participants belonged to just 1 co-operative, 4 (8%) owned 2 co-operatives, and none of the participants belonged to more than 2 co-operatives. From this analysis, most of the participants are only members of one co-operative. The findings indicate that most of the participants are committed to their co-operative; they do not have to divide their time and limited resources between co-operatives which often causes members to neglect the works of one of the co-operatives.

3.1.6 Age categories

The researcher asked the participants to indicate the age group within which they fall. The responses are shown in Figure 3.4 below:

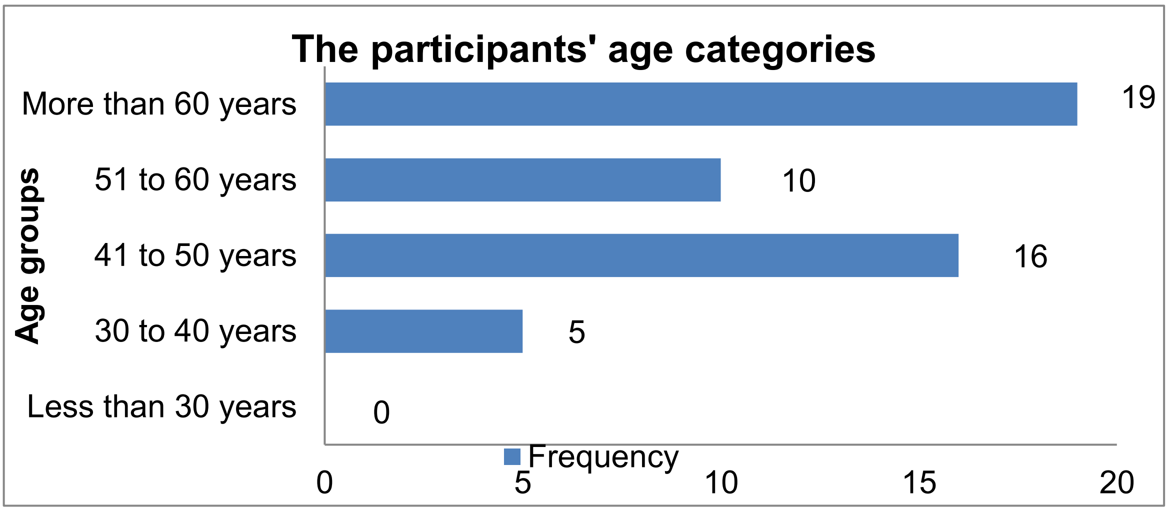

Figure 3.4: Age groups of the participants

Source: Authors' compilation

Figure 3.4 above indicated that none of the participants are below the age of 30 years. 5 (10%) participants fall between 30 to 40 years, 16 (32%) of the participants are aged between 41 to 50 years. The other 10 (20%) are 51 to 60 years old, and the remaining 19 (38%) participants, which are the majority, were recorded to be above 60 years old. This is evident that many elderly people in the co-operative sector in Namibia impact positively on the growth and skill transfers to young co-operative members. The findings also indicated that the membership in these co-operatives lack the youths who are expected to be more energetic and conversant with the new technology that enables co-operatives to be innovative.

3.2 SECTION B: Semi-structured Interview Responses

This section presents the responses to the interview questions regarding the common business environmental risks faced by co-operatives in Namibia. It tackled all questions that were aimed to attain the 3 (three) objectives of this study and the study developed 3 (three) themes driven from the research objectives. The analysed data are presented according to those themes.

Table 3.3: The study themes and subthemes

Theme 1: Common BERs experienced by co-operatives in Namibia **Subtheme 1.1:** The effect of BERs on co-operatives **Subtheme 1.2:** Responses of co-operatives to BERs
Theme 2: Strategies to strengthen the resilience of co-operatives in Namibia **Subtheme 2.1:** Strategies to deal with crises **Subtheme 2.2:** Strategies for growing the co-operative **Subtheme 2.3:** Interventions to strengthen resilient of co-operatives

Table 3.3 above shows key themes and sub themes that emerged from the responses given by the participants in this study.

3.2.1 Theme 1: Common BERs experienced by co-operatives in Namibia.

This theme contributes to the attainment of the first research objective of the study which is "To explore the common business environmental risks experienced by co-operatives in Namibia."

Subtheme 1.1: Effect of BERs on co-operatives.

1st Question: "What are the common business environmental risks experienced by your co-operative?"

This question required the participants to reveal the common BERs that affected their co-operatives. The co-operatives in different geographic areas experience different BERs based on the landscape of the areas. Some co-operatives that participated in this study are situated in the regions with mountain landscapes while others are in the flat landscape regions, and none form the coastal landscape area. The answers to the above question were as follows:

- Diseases outbreaks such as Foot and Mouth disease, Covid-19, Congo fever
- Natural disasters such as flooding, and wildfire. All the participants from co-operatives located in the NCRs have stressed on flooding which is not a surprise because they are situated along the Cuvelai – Etosha basin and this is one of the flood-prone areas in Namibia.
- Drought- from 2013 to 2016 and in 2018/2019 agricultural co-operatives recorded the lowest production and an increase in livestock deaths.
- Credit default by the SACCOs clients and co-operatives that acquired loans finding it difficult to pay back
- Locust outbreak that destroyed grazing areas of farmers' co-operatives as well as the crop production of crop-producing co-operatives in 2021.

From the results above, many of the participants indicated that drought, natural disasters, and disease outbreaks, especially Covid-19 pandemic, are the most detrimental factors experienced by co-operatives in the study area. The findings also revealed that credit defaults were mostly experienced by SACCOs. This is because their primary service is to save and lend money to its members. Some co-operatives also indicated that since losing their production in 2021 due to a locust outbreak coupled with the devastating Covid-19 pandemic they are still struggling to recover.

2nd Question: "How do those business environmental risks affect your co-operative?"

All the participants confirmed that the BERs above negatively affected their co-operatives. The majority emphasized that during Covid-19 when stringent measures were implemented, co-operatives were not doing any business, as a result, they lost income, and no AGMs were being held. Many co-operatives also lost some of their key members to Covid-19 related illnesses and death. This hampered the operations of many co-operatives in the study area with most of them still struggling to recover. One of the participants narrated that *"the veld fire destroyed our grazing area and forced us to sell our livestock at very low prices. This was the only option, as much as we wanted to keep our livestock, we could still lose them, they would die of hunger because we have no money to buy animal feeds"*.

Participant B explained that "*the drought cost our co-operative in the sense that some animals died, and the remaining ones have bad looking bodies that are not appealing to the potential buyers, as a result, the buyers are only willing to pay small money. If we knew earlier that it was not raining any time soon, we could have sold all of them when they were looking very healthy and made good money from them."*

Participant A revealed that *"the co-operative had a bad harvest for 3 consecutive years from 2018 to 2020 due to drought and covid-19 which later kicked in." "The situation also forced us to significantly reduce the number of livestock we are farming."* The participant recalled that "*some of our members were discouraged from carrying out the co-operative activities when there were no returns in the end and left the co-operative."*

3.2.2 Subtheme 1.2: Responses of co-operatives to BERs

1st Question: "How prepared is your co-operative to eliminate or mitigate the impact of those business environmental risks?"

In answering the above question, the participants stated that the co-operatives are not financially prepared, but they are actively seeking financial assistance from different organisations. Fortunately, some members often come through and inject extra money into the co-operative which improves its cash flow. The findings also revealed that to effectively minimise the impacts of BERs one needs to be knowledgeable. For that reason, the co-operatives planned to send some of its members to be trained in areas such as disaster management, business management, risk prevention, and financial management.

The findings further showed that co-operatives made efforts to encourage their members to attend member education courses offered by the DCDR. Some participants indicated that their co-operatives are not so well prepared to do something about the BERs, but they are relying on government interventions. One participant revealed that its management acquired skills and knowledge helpful to the co-operative to maintain good productivity. Considering the irrigation system and drawing water from the few functional boreholes will help the co-operative to enjoy a good harvest in the drought years. One of the participants pointed out that, since flooding is the major natural disaster in their region; their co-operative cleared the way of the water flow to prevent their facility from flooding.

Some co-operatives formed partnerships with local governments by developing public and private sector initiatives in building the resilience of their communities (Dave, 2021). The literature revealed that co-operatives must implement good corporate governance to help mitigate business environmental risks (Hui & Sarah, 2019).

2nd Question: "What do you think the management of your co-operative must do in order to reduce the co-operative's degree of vulnerability to business environmental risks?"

To respond to the above question, the participants articulated that management must call for meetings regularly with the members. The participants believed that the management must ensure that the co-operative is in a safer area, and that the structures are built with disasters in mind. The findings also revealed that the management must develop and implement the response and recovery plans; in that case, the co-operative's degree of vulnerability to business environmental risks is reduced. The findings further revealed that mechanisms that will enable the co-operative to perform even in difficult times must be put in place. Participants added that co-operatives must consider opening various branches in different geographical areas (with different landscapes) to move production between branches in the event of disasters occurring. Some participants explained that management has no power to do anything on their own in a co-operative but is only tasked to carry out decisions taken by the AGM.

The literature explained that good preparedness before a disaster and improvisation in the aftermath are crucial in emergency management (McEntire, 2004). The co-operative must always be ready when it comes to decision-making as it is expected to make decisions under uncertainty (al, 2014).

3.2.2 Theme 2: Strategies to strengthen the resilience of co-operatives

Under this theme the study contributed to the attainment of the 3rd research objective of the study. "To develop strategies for growth and strengthen the resilience of co-operatives in the events of crises."

Subtheme 2.1: Strategies to deal with crises

Question: "What are the strategies your co-operative has in place to help it stand crises and minimise their adverse effect? If nothing, what are you planning to do in the event of crises occurring?"

The findings revealed that none of the participants indicated that their co-operatives already have strategies in place to tackle crises and their effect on the businesses. All the participants have stated that they are planning to develop strategies for dealing with the effect of crises on their co-operatives sooner rather than later. One of the participants explained that "*strategies of such nature are necessary to develop and implement in a co-operative, considering many unpredictable world events that are already occurring such as the Covid-19 that we went through, and the war in Ukraine*." One participant indicated that they planned to amend their co-operative By-Laws and engage with other co-operatives as well as the associations in their surroundings to share ideas on what can help them combat crises collectively. One of the participants expressed that, "*our co-operative planned on contacting interested individuals and private companies to help with de-bushing in order to improve our grazing capacity.*"

The findings above clearly show that co-operatives in the study area are not prepared to stand crises as none of the co-operatives has developed and implemented any strategy to mitigate the effect of crises. For the co-operative sector in Namibia to be successful and grow, the co-operatives and its members must be well prepared to withstand times of uncertainties and dangers.

According to Thaba and Mbohwa (2020) co-operatives must keep up with the changing world to easily adapt and not to become obsolete. The literature further states that the launching of a new business support program can help co-operatives to grow (Co-operative UK, 2016). Furthermore, the literature revealed that co-operatives succeed and grow when they are well organised by incorporating three strategies namely: Do it yourself, Facilitated, and Incubated (USDA Rural Development, 2017).

Subtheme 2.2: Strategies for growing the co-operatives

Question: "What strategies have you implemented in your co-operative to help it perform better and grow?"

To answer the question above, the participants provided the following responses:

- Diversifying products and engaging in different business activities which will improve customers' choices and cater for the members' needs.

- Grow sales of the co-operative product by conducting aggressive marketing campaigns such as having printed banners and auto-play videos.
- Invest in research and development to be innovative in introducing new products into the market at the appropriate time.
- Using various pricing strategies for different products to ensure that good revenue is generated from sales for the co-operative to be self-sustainable.
- Recruiting more new and young members into the co-operative, they are more energetic, well educated, conversant with technology, and often have a better understanding of the market trends.
- Getting the inactive members to resign and groom the young members to get leadership roles in the co-operatives.
- Raising money collectively for earth dam construction and assessing communal water supply systems to address the problem of insufficient water supply and improve the co-operatives' productivity.
- Engaging with other co-operatives who are performing well and emulating them.
- Continuous encouragement of members to consistently engage in the co-operative activities because its success depends on them.

From the responses above, the results evidently show that co-operatives in the study area are eager to grow and improve their performances as they have developed and implemented some business strategies to steer their businesses to success. However, one participant indicated that "*we have not implemented any strategy in our co-operative yet, but we regularly hold meetings to remind ourselves of why we started a co-operative*. The participant continued that, "*success does not come by accident, one needs to try repeatedly until you get the results you want. I believe our commitment to carry out the activities of the co-operative effectively and efficiently is key to our success*."

The literature emphasized that co-operative members must be committed to the mission and life of the enterprise (Thaba & Mbohwa, 2020).

Subtheme 2.3: Interventions to strengthen resilient of co-operatives

1st Question: "What do you think needs to be done by the co-operative and the regulator to help you build strong capacities to be resilient in the event of crises?"

To answer the question above, the participants revealed that co-operatives need to be financially prepared to stand crises. Thus, the co-operatives must find ways to raise sufficient funds and build strong operating facilities with disasters in mind. One of the participants pointed out that, "*Lack of funds must be addressed first to talk about building strong capacities in business, and when the funds are available the co-operative must ensure that they are used sparingly*." The participant further enunciated that, "*the DCDR knows our biggest problem (which is lack of capital) but they are quiet and not taking any step to assist us. The government through the office of Registrar of Co-operatives should provide funding to co-operatives."*

One of the participants also emphasised that "the *co-operative sector must be included in the national budget annually and the DCDR can facilitate the distribution of the funds to co-operatives*". Another participant expressed that, "*the DCDR must negotiate with financial providers to give loans to co-operatives at low interest rates or borrow money on behalf of co-operatives. In that way they will push co-operatives to succeed and to be ready for uncertainties*." The co-operatives need to have contingency plans such as entering into agreements with other co-operatives to have strong and supportive business partners, stated one of the participants. "*For example, in our case as farmers in the NCRs, we can have agreements with co-operatives in other regions to move our livestock there when drought hits, but moving our livestock across the Namibia's veterinary cordon fence (VCF), also known as the Red Line to other regions with better grazing and good market such as Otjozondjupa and Khomas is prohibited and as a result we are suffering a lot. The government must permit free movements of livestock within the country for everyone to enjoy the bread of independence*" Reiterated one of the participants. "The infamous redline" (2021, July 22) agreed with the sentiment by revealing that since Namibia's independence in 1990, there has been growth in exporting beef to international markets and many of Namibia's livestock herders living north of the fence, argued that Red Line denies them the same economic opportunities as those livestock herders living south of the fence.

The participants also indicated that the DCDR must work together with the Deed Office to allocate land to co-operatives, which will help them stop paying exorbitant rental fees. Furthermore, the results revealed that co-operatives in Namibia are vulnerable, and they are not self-reliant. This is because they expect more of the things to be done for them, specifically by the government. NCP (2017) is of the opinion that successful co-operatives are member-driven initiatives, sustainability and self-reliance. The members of co-operatives need to work hard and be rewarded for their hard work; there are no entitled benefits to be earned for merely being a co-operative member.

2nd Question: "Is there anything else you would like to say regarding the problems you are experiencing in your co-operative, and how do you think they can be addressed?"

In answering the above question, the participants stated that misuse of the co-operative assets and properties by some members is an alarming concern. They further indicated that this can be addressed if the government makes such offence punishable by law. The participants also expressed that the government must fix the broken boreholes to improve water supply to co-operatives, consider subsidising co-operatives on transport costs, land acquisition, and on the training of members in various business areas. The participants were also of the opinion that co-operatives must get a privilege to access cheap funding and claimed that this is because co-operatives are helping the government to reduce poverty and improve food security in the country. Similarly, NCP (2017) agreed that co-operatives represent the most effective private sector approach to wealth distribution, poverty alleviation, and employment creation.

According to the participants in their point of view, the government through the DCDR which is the regulator of co-operatives in the country needs to always step in to assist the co-operatives with capacity building and to assist financially when they are affected by crises. One of the participants narrated that "*for example, during Covid-19 pandemic our business activities came to a standstill, no meetings, and as a result the co-operative lost revenue and we are still struggling to recover from that devastating effect*". This finding was supported by Hadfield (2020), who indicated that co-operatives were unable to hold AGMs. Other writers sided with this result when stating that co-operative members found it difficult to repay loans which interfered with the co-operative income and the co-operatives' productivity dropped respectively (Rustariyuni et al , 2021 & Dave , 2021).

4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Co-operatives are self-reliant businesses and highly depend on the commitment and hard work of their members. In this business setup, members are required to contribute equitably to the co-operative capital as an adherence to the co-operative's principle of members economic participation (NCP, 2017). Typically, co-operatives are people-driven organisations and their success depends on members' commitment to the co-operative activities (Mabunda, 2017). The literature further added that investing in member education will boost their commitment to the co-operative business (Rodriguez & Vicari, 2014). The research findings clearly indicated that the business environment risks adversely affect the co-operatives in the study area. The co-operatives were not able to hold AGMs, make decisions and assign responsibilities to the members (Hadfied, 2020). AGM being the highest decision-making body of the co-operative, this suggests that the management of the co-operatives was unable to effect informed decisions which led to poor management and poor overall performance of the co-operatives. Based on the findings, when there were no operations taking place, the revenue of the co-operatives was also adversely affected and as a result, the co-operatives struggled to maintain self-sustainability. According to Habimana et al. (2022), the outbreak of Covid-19 significantly reduced the income of co-operative members because, at some point during the pandemic, there were no economic activities taking place.

On their preparedness to deal with the risks, the findings revealed that to effectively minimise the impacts of BERs, cooperative members need to be knowledgeable, innovative and technologically affluent. For that reason, the co-operatives planned to send some of its members to be trained in areas such as disaster management, business management, risk prevention, and financial management. They made efforts to encourage their members to attend member education courses offered by the DCDR. Some participants indicated that their co-operatives are not so well prepared to do something to minimise or counter the effects of the negative occurrences, but they are relying on government interventions. As for some cooperatives, management acquired skills and knowledge helpful to the co-operative to maintain good productivity. Considering the irrigation system and drawing water from the few functional boreholes will help the co-operative to enjoy a good harvest in the drought years. One of the participants pointed out that, since flooding is the major natural disaster in their region; their co-operative cleared the way of the water flow to prevent their facility from flooding.

According to Dave (2021) co-operatives formed partnerships with local governments by developing public and private sector initiatives in building the resilience of their communities. Cooperatives have been noted to be reluctant in their governance, not following proper corporate governance principles. To sustain, co-operatives must implement good corporate governance to help mitigate business environmental risks (Hui & Sarah, 2019).

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study sought to explore the business environment risks commonly faced by cooperatives and develop strategies that can be put in place to increase opportunities for survival, strengthen the resilience to these risks and attain sustained growth of cooperatives in Namibia. An exploration of the business environment risks, this study concludes that there are more natural environmental risks such as drought, natural disasters, and disease outbreaks, especially Covid-19 pandemic, are the most detrimental factors experienced by co-operatives in the study area. There are also final risks such as defaulting when members get loans from the cooperatives. Strategy wise, this study concludes that cooperatives need to diversify their operations, focus on satisfying customers' needs, and market their product extensively. There is a need to engage in research and development to enrich their capacity, innovativeness and competitiveness. Concluding this study, to develop the co-operative sector in Namibia, the co-operative member should be acquainted with relevant knowledge on co-operative concepts and principles of co-operatives. To resolve the above challenges the MAWLR through DCDR should develop appropriate training programmes for the co-operative members and help them build strong capacity that will promote sustainability and growth of co-operatives in the country.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings, the researcher makes the following recommendations:

- Co-operatives should develop and implement various strategies for coping with crises and promote growth of co-operatives.
- Financial providers should initiate a financial scheme to assist such co-operatives in accessing funds at low costs.
- The government through the MAWLR and other stakeholders must continue with the rehabilitation, construction, and excavation of boreholes and earth dams to address water shortages.
- Co-operative members should be encouraged to attend courses related to conflict management. Good conflict management will enhance cooperation among members and contribute positively to the performance of a co-operative.
- The co-operative members should also be encouraged to attend courses related to risk management as poor risk management contributes to failure and lack of growth in co-operatives.
- The co-operatives board members should be encouraged to attend training on corporate governance, financial management, and business management.
- Co-operatives must avoid dependence on grants and other external support and cultivate a culture of self-reliance in raising their capital. They should rely on share capital, retained surplus, annual membership fees, and other members' contributions.

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