

Cultural Norms in Action: A Qualitative Inquiry into Cooperative Governance and Social Sustainability in Urban Makassar

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Received : 29 October 2025

Published : 20 November 2025

Revised : 18 November 2025

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.59971/jumawa.v3i1.378>

Accepted : 19 November 2025

Link Publish : <https://abadiinstitute.org/index.php/JUMAWA/issue/view/56>

Abstract

This study explores how cultural norms shape cooperative governance and social sustainability in the urban context of Makassar, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis from multiple cooperative organizations. The findings reveal that indigenous cultural values—particularly gotong royong (cooperation), musyawarah mufakat (consensus deliberation), and sipakatau (mutual respect)—play a pivotal role in defining governance practices, member participation, and collective trust. These norms reinforce social cohesion and long-term sustainability but also create tensions between traditional hierarchies and modern demands for accountability and transparency. The study contributes to existing scholarship by introducing a hybrid model of “culturally embedded governance,” where traditional collectivist ethics coexist with adaptive institutional practices. This research provides theoretical and practical insights into how local cultural frameworks can serve as a foundation for sustainable governance in rapidly urbanizing societies.

Keywords: Cultural Norms, Cooperative Governance, Social Sustainability, Qualitative Research, Makassar.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, cooperative governance has emerged as a crucial mechanism for fostering social sustainability in urban contexts, particularly in developing countries like Indonesia. Cooperatives—rooted in collective ownership, mutual aid, and local participation—serve as a bridge between economic development and social equity. In Makassar, a rapidly urbanizing city, cooperatives play a vital role in promoting inclusive growth and supporting community-based welfare initiatives. However, the effectiveness of these cooperatives is often influenced by deeply embedded cultural norms and local governance practices, which shape decision-making processes, leadership patterns, and participation levels among members (Amir & Irjayanti, 2023)

The urgency of this research lies in understanding how cultural norms influence cooperative governance and, consequently, the achievement of social sustainability goals. Although cooperatives are designed to function democratically, local cultural values—such as hierarchical respect, communal solidarity (gotong royong), and familial loyalty—can either strengthen or undermine governance practices (Situmorang & Pasaribu, 2022)

In urban Makassar, these dynamics are particularly complex due to the coexistence of traditional Bugis-Makassarese social structures and modern urban economic pressures. Hence, exploring how these norms manifest in cooperative governance is crucial for designing sustainable management models that respect local culture while ensuring accountability and inclusivity.

Currently, studies on cooperative governance in Indonesia have primarily focused on economic outcomes, financial sustainability, or managerial efficiency, while largely neglecting the sociocultural dimensions that underlie cooperative functioning (Fathurrahman & Arsyad, 2021)

Moreover, existing research often treats cultural norms as static or peripheral factors, rather than dynamic elements actively shaping governance and member behavior. This gap limits our understanding of how local values, traditions, and social expectations interact with formal cooperative structures to influence governance outcomes.

Therefore, this study addresses a critical research gap by examining the interplay between cultural norms and cooperative governance within the context of urban social sustainability in Makassar. It employs a qualitative approach to uncover lived experiences, perceptions, and collective practices that define how cooperative members navigate cultural expectations while striving for equitable decision-making and sustainable impact (Hakim & Supriadi, 2023)

This inquiry will not only provide empirical insights into cooperative governance in Indonesia but also contribute to the global discourse on culturally responsive models of social sustainability.

By situating this research in the urban context of Makassar, the study contributes to both theoretical and practical discussions on participatory governance and sustainability transitions in Southeast Asia. It proposes that understanding cultural norms as active governance mechanisms can enhance the design of policies and cooperative strategies that foster both economic resilience and social well-being. Such insights are timely as Indonesia pursues its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 11 on sustainable cities and communities and Goal 16 on strong institutions, making this research both contextually relevant and globally significant.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of cultural norms, cooperative governance, and social sustainability represents a critical yet underexplored dimension in development studies. While cooperatives are globally recognized as key instruments of inclusive economic participation and social cohesion, their governance effectiveness in non-Western urban contexts is deeply shaped by local cultural systems. In Indonesia, cooperative performance is often mediated by shared values such as *gotong royong* (cooperation) and *musyawarah mufakat* (collective deliberation) (Amir & Iriyanti, 2023)

Despite this recognition, limited empirical work has systematically examined how these cultural frameworks affect cooperative governance and contribute to long-term social sustainability in rapidly urbanizing areas like Makassar.

Cooperative governance refers to participatory structures that enable members to collectively make decisions and manage resources, grounded in principles of democracy, equity, and accountability (Hidayat et al., 2021)

Social sustainability, in turn, emphasizes the capacity of societies to maintain well-being, equity, and community cohesion over time (Hakim & Supriadi, 2023)

Cultural norms—defined as collectively shared expectations and behavioral codes—serve as invisible governance systems that influence trust, collaboration, and authority structures within cooperatives. This triadic relationship forms a theoretical foundation to understand how values and social rules become operational within institutional frameworks.

Three theoretical frameworks underpin this study: (1) Institutional Theory, which explains how social norms and traditions shape organizational behavior (Scott, 2014), (2) Social Capital Theory, emphasizing networks and trust as key resources for collective action (Putnam, 2000), and (3) Cultural Embeddedness Theory, which highlights how local norms are intertwined with governance mechanisms (Granovetter, 1985)

Integrating these perspectives allows for a nuanced understanding of how cooperative governance in urban Makassar reflects both traditional social relations and modern institutional frameworks.

Table 1. Map of Previous Studies (2020–2025)

Author(s)	Year	Focus Area	Findings	Relevance to Current Study
Situmorang & Pasaribu	2022	Cultural influence on cooperatives	Cultural hierarchies shape member participation	Confirms the role of norms in governance
Hidayat et al.	2021	Governance models in Indonesian cooperatives	Weak accountability mechanisms	Highlights governance challenges
Amir & Irjayanti	2023	Cultural norms in local cooperatives	Values of <i>gotong royong</i> strengthen solidarity	Links norms to sustainability
Hakim & Supriadi	2023	Social sustainability and governance	Collective decision-making improves resilience	Supports governance–sustainability link
Fathurrahman & Arsyad	2021	Urban cooperative performance	Cultural inertia limits innovation	Identifies modernization barriers
Rahim & Nurdin	2024	Gender norms in cooperative leadership	Patriarchal values reduce inclusivity	Extends to gendered governance analysis
Lim & Setiawan	2020	Institutional embeddedness of cooperatives	Informal networks drive governance	Shows embeddedness effects
Nasution & Dewi	2022	Cooperative trust networks	Trust mediates cultural effects	Confirms social capital mechanisms
Puspitasari	2025	Governance and social well-being	Participatory systems enhance cohesion	Supports social sustainability outcomes
Kurniawan & Lestari	2023	Urban cooperative adaptation	Cultural flexibility supports resilience	Introduces the adaptive governance lens

Source: data processed, 2025

Existing studies converge on the importance of cultural norms in shaping cooperative effectiveness but diverge in their methodological and theoretical integration. Most prior works focus on either the economic or governance aspects of cooperatives, treating culture as a contextual backdrop rather than a core analytical lens (Situmorang & Pasaribu, 2022)

Furthermore, few have explored how specific cultural mechanisms—such as communal decision-making or relational hierarchies—mediate governance outcomes in urban settings. This research fills the gap by operationalizing cultural norms as active governance mechanisms that interact with institutional frameworks to shape social sustainability in cooperative systems.

The proposed conceptual model positions cultural norms as mediating variables linking cooperative governance structures and social sustainability outcomes. It suggests that governance quality depends on how cultural logics of trust, hierarchy, and collectivism are institutionalized within cooperative decision-making processes. By situating the study in urban Makassar, the research introduces a culturally grounded model of cooperative sustainability that contributes to both theory and practice. The novelty of this inquiry lies in its qualitative exploration of cultural norms in action—examining governance as a living social process rather than a formalized administrative structure.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore how cultural norms shape cooperative governance and social sustainability practices in urban Makassar. A qualitative approach is particularly suited to this research because it allows for an in-depth understanding of human experiences, meanings, and social interactions within their natural context (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

The study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing subjective meanings and context-specific insights over generalizability. This approach is essential in examining culturally embedded governance practices, as it captures the nuances of shared values such as *gotong royong* and *musyawarah mufakat*, which influence decision-making and social cohesion within cooperatives (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and participant observations with cooperative members, leaders, and community stakeholders in Makassar. The sampling strategy employed purposive sampling, targeting participants actively involved in cooperative management and governance processes (Patton, 2015)

Approximately 20 participants were interviewed, allowing for thematic saturation while maintaining depth of inquiry. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and later transcribed and translated into English to ensure cultural fidelity. Complementary document analysis was performed on cooperative statutes, annual reports, and local government records to triangulate findings and enhance data credibility. Ethical clearance was obtained, and all participants were provided informed consent before data collection.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. NVivo software was used to assist with data organization and thematic clustering. To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Member checking and peer debriefing were conducted to validate interpretations. This rigorous analytical process enabled the emergence of grounded insights into how cultural norms actively shape cooperative governance and influence pathways to social sustainability in urban Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative findings from interviews, observations, and document analyses reveal several core themes illustrating how cultural norms influence cooperative governance and social sustainability in urban Makassar. Participants consistently emphasized that traditional values such as gotong royong (cooperation), musyawarah mufakat (deliberative consensus), and sipakatau (mutual respect) remain central to the functioning of cooperatives. These norms shape interpersonal relations, decision-making styles, and leadership legitimacy within cooperative organizations. Members expressed that these values strengthen collective trust and cohesion, fostering a sense of belonging that motivates voluntary participation and loyalty. However, cultural hierarchies and deference to seniority sometimes constrained open dialogue, limiting inclusivity in governance decisions.

Thematic analysis identified three major domains—cultural influence on governance structures, collective decision-making processes, and social sustainability outcomes. In governance structures, cultural norms were found to legitimize informal authority based on age, social status, or kinship ties rather than formal leadership roles. While this practice ensured social harmony, it occasionally hindered accountability and innovation. In collective decision-making, musyawarah practices promoted consensus and minimized conflict, yet often slowed administrative processes. Finally, in terms of social sustainability, cooperatives that effectively institutionalized local cultural principles demonstrated higher levels of trust, equitable participation, and long-term member retention compared to those adopting externally imposed management frameworks.

Table 2. Summary of Key Findings from Thematic Analysis

Theme	Subthemes	Illustrative Evidence	Analytical Insight
Cultural Influence on Governance Structures	Informal authority; hierarchical respect	“Decisions are usually guided by elders or respected figures, even if they are not in formal roles.”	Cultural legitimacy shapes leadership more strongly than formal governance rules.
Collective Decision-Making Processes	Consensus-based deliberation; conflict avoidance	“We discuss until everyone agrees—no decision is made if one member strongly objects.”	Consensus fosters inclusion but delays administrative responsiveness.
Social Cohesion and Trust Networks	Solidarity; kinship-based collaboration	“Members are like family; we help each other beyond business matters.”	High social trust enhances cooperative resilience and reduces turnover.
Accountability and Transparency Challenges	Limited feedback mechanisms; cultural sensitivity	“Criticizing leaders is uncomfortable—it feels disrespectful.”	Cultural politeness norms constrain critical governance dialogue.
Sustainability Outcomes	Member retention; community welfare	“Our cooperative supports education and health programs for members’ families.”	Embedded cultural norms strengthen long-term social sustainability impacts.

Source: data processed, 2025

Across all cases, cooperatives that balanced cultural sensitivity with modern governance practices exhibited the most sustainable outcomes. Those who relied excessively on hierarchical norms struggled

with intergenerational leadership transitions and transparency. The integration of cultural and institutional logic emerged as a key determinant of cooperative resilience, suggesting that social sustainability in Makassar's urban cooperatives is contingent on harmonizing traditional collectivism with adaptive governance mechanisms.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight that cultural norms in urban Makassar—particularly gotong royong, musyawarah mufakat, and sipakatau—serve as both enablers and constraints within cooperative governance. This aligns with prior research emphasizing that collectivist cultural traditions in Indonesia underpin cooperative values by promoting solidarity, trust, and reciprocity (Mariana & Dwi, 2023)

Similar observations were made in studies from other Southeast Asian contexts, where community-based ethics were shown to strengthen local governance and sustainability practices (Manurung et al., 2022)

The present study extends this understanding by showing how these traditional values persist in urban environments undergoing modernization, suggesting a cultural resilience that adapts to changing socio-economic dynamics.

In relation to cooperative governance, the data reinforce the theory of embedded governance, which posits that organizational decision-making is inherently shaped by local cultural logics (North, 1990)

The hierarchical respect embedded in Makassar's culture often translated into paternalistic leadership, confirming previous findings that social hierarchy can undermine participatory governance in collectivist societies (Sudirman & Rahman, 2024)

However, unlike earlier studies that framed hierarchy as purely detrimental, this research found that hierarchical respect also fostered stability and moral authority—conditions that can enhance compliance and collective order when balanced with transparent communication.

The results also support the social sustainability framework, which links community cohesion and trust to long-term cooperative success (Boström, 2012)

Cooperatives that institutionalized local cultural values demonstrated greater member retention and equitable participation, consistent with research showing that social capital is a critical driver of sustainable governance (Mulyani & Fauzan, 2023)

Yet, this study contributes new insights by illustrating how overemphasis on cultural harmony can suppress critical feedback, a nuance underexplored in existing literature.

Furthermore, the findings reveal a research gap concerning the intersection of cultural continuity and adaptive governance. While prior studies focused largely on rural cooperatives (Prasetyo et al., 2021)

This study provides evidence from an urban context, showing that traditional norms continue to guide social interactions even amid modernization pressures. This contributes to theory development by proposing that cultural embeddedness and institutional modernization are not mutually exclusive but can coexist in hybrid governance models.

In summary, this study bridges the theoretical divide between cultural sociology and cooperative governance by demonstrating that local norms are not static but dynamically adapted to sustain organizational resilience. The novelty lies in uncovering how urban cooperatives in Makassar operationalize indigenous cultural logic within formal governance structures to achieve social sustainability. This emphasizes that sustainable governance in Indonesia must be contextually grounded—anchored in local cultural capital while open to institutional innovation.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that cultural norms such as gotong royong, musyawarah mufakat, and sipakatau remain deeply embedded within the cooperative governance framework in urban Makassar, shaping the ways decisions are made, authority is exercised, and trust is built among members. These traditional values serve as the moral foundation for collective participation and social sustainability, reinforcing cooperation, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. However, they also introduce structural challenges, particularly when cultural hierarchies and consensus-seeking behaviors limit open dialogue and innovation. The findings affirm that governance within cooperatives cannot be understood apart from the socio-cultural systems that inform behavior, legitimacy, and collective ethics.

Furthermore, the research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how cultural embeddedness interacts with institutional modernization. It demonstrates that sustainable cooperative governance in Indonesia must not reject traditional values but instead reinterpret them to align with contemporary governance principles such as transparency, inclusivity, and accountability. The novelty of this study lies in revealing how urban cooperatives negotiate the coexistence of cultural continuity and adaptive reform, offering a model for context-sensitive social sustainability. Future research should explore how these hybrid governance models evolve across different regions and sectors, deepening the theoretical integration between culture, governance, and sustainability.

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