

State-supported ecosystems and cooperative democracy: member perspectives in Korean social cooperatives

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Abstract

Purpose – In light of South Korea’s state-supported expansion of social cooperatives, this paper explores how members experience the balance between public value and cooperative principles.

Design/methodology/approach – Using Q methodology (which models shared viewpoints from rank-ordered statements), 70 worker-members from five cooperatives (Seoul, summer 2023) sorted 36 statements mapped to environmental, social–internal, social–external and governance (ESG) dimensions. Factor analysis yielded four perspectives.

Findings – We identify four perspectives–Principled but Inequitable, Instrumentalized Service Provider (Bipolar), Outward-Focused Strategic Enterprise, and Benevolent but Undemocratic. Across profiles, governance is the persistent fault line, the internal versus external social balance differentiates member experiences, and environmental commitment uniquely differentiates one profile. Outcomes span instrumentalization (narrow state-aligned service), selective agency (policy engagement and partnership), and benevolent paternalism (work-life gains with weak democracy). Implications span profile-specific policy and practice levers addressing governance gaps, autonomy-accountability tensions and the alignment of stated values with operational routines.

Originality/value – By centering member subjectivities under state pressure, the study demonstrates heterogeneous adaptations rather than a single path of co-optation and offers an actionable typology for policy and cooperative development.

Keywords ESG, Public sector, Public value, Q methodology, Social cooperative, South Korea

Paper type Research article

Introduction

South Korea (hereafter, “Korea”) [1] provides a salient context for studying state-enabled hybrid organizations, in particular social cooperatives. Following the 2006 Social Enterprise Promotion Act and the 2012 Framework Act on Cooperatives, Korea institutionalized social



cooperatives—nonprofit cooperatives that cannot distribute surplus to members, must allocate 30% to collective reserves, and must devote at least 40% of activities to community needs. The number of registered social cooperatives rose from 223 in 2013 to 5,790 by April 2025, reflecting policy-driven expansion aimed at reducing unemployment, expanding social services, and supporting elderly care (Ji, 2018, 2023; Kim, 2013).

This close relationship with the state creates a central tension. Public support can expand capacity for public value and social development (McCabe and Hahn, 2006; Thomas, 2004), yet it can also compress autonomy and reshape identity. These dynamics can be read through institutional isomorphism, where coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures diffuse policy and managerial templates into cooperatives (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), and through classic debates on democratic degeneration, which warn that professionalization can erode member control (Michels, 1962/1911; Cornforth, 2004). Recent Korean evidence on government-certified worker-run social cooperatives points to both enabling and instrumentalizing effects (Choi *et al.*, 2020; Claassen *et al.*, 2024a, b, 2025).

Despite the centrality of this tension between societal objectives and member interests to pro-social outcomes, empirical investigation of members' subjective experiences within this dual-mandate framework remains limited. Investigating their experiences is essential for assessing the potential of social cooperatives as models for social innovation, especially given the increasing global prominence of third-sector organizations (Fici, 2023; Hernández Cáceres, 2023; Kil, 2023). While policy has begun shifting toward more transformative approaches that emphasize inclusive and participatory development (Chaves-Avila and Gallego-Bono, 2020), members' perceptions of their role within this government-supported ecosystem have not been much explored.

Anchored in public administration and organizational studies of the social economy, this study employs Q methodology to analyze member subjectivities through the Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) framework (aligned with the EMES tradition) to evaluate how social cooperatives balance cooperative democracy and public value. The 36 statements used in the analysis were adopted from the revised cooperative evaluative indicators developed by Claassen *et al.* (2024c). Accordingly, building on the more expansive study of Claassen *et al.* (2025), this inquiry is guided by the following research question:

- RQ1. How do the experiences of members in social cooperatives in Korea align with the ideals of member empowerment and well-being, participatory governance, market engagement, and social impact?

This study makes three contributions. First, it develops a member-centered typology of social cooperative adaptation under state support, showing heterogeneous pathways beyond a single co-optation narrative. Second, it clarifies where tensions crystallize by combining institutional theory and degeneration debates with an ESG framework aligned with the EMES tradition. Third, it translates the typology into profile-specific policy and practice levers to guide cooperative development and state support design.

Literature review

The literature consistently shows that the public sector shapes third-sector ecosystems through policy design, funding, and certification regimes, often transmitting policy and managerial templates into organizations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Shockley and Frank, 2011; Díaz González and Dentchev, 2021). Such support can stabilize organizations and scale social outcomes, but its effectiveness depends on internal governance quality and responsiveness to stakeholders (Ahedo *et al.*, 2023).

Against these external influences stand the foundational cooperative principles of democratic control and mutual interest. As hybrid organizations embedded in markets and communities, social cooperatives must balance social mission, market discipline, and participatory governance (Defourny *et al.*, 2021; Chaddad, 2012), while maintaining stakeholder engagement and legitimacy (Smith and Woods, 2015). Contemporary

scholarship advances a social theory of the firm in which deep-level cooperation and member subjectivities serve as diagnostics of organizational integrity (Thompson, 2015; Byrne, 2022), with member attitudes serving as key indicators of cooperative health (Grashuis and Su, 2019); yet, classic degeneration arguments caution that professionalization can displace member democracy (Michels, 1962/1911; Cornforth, 2004). Novkovic *et al.* (2022) reframe these apparent dualities, such as those between economic and social objectives or between individual and collective interests, as complementarities rather than paradoxes, arguing that cooperatives are strongest when they acknowledge and leverage their associative foundations to position opposing tensions as synergistic forces.

These potential dichotomies are particularly pronounced in Korea, where state policy seeks to effectively nurture grassroots social entrepreneurship (Choi *et al.*, 2020; Claassen *et al.*, 2023a, b, 2024c, d, e) and “New Cooperativism” (Dolley, 2023) shifts objectives from member-oriented endeavors toward broader social outcomes, as evidenced by strategic adaptations in Korean cooperative networks (Cho and Jang, 2023). Comparable tensions appear in other high-capacity welfare states, such as Italy’s social cooperative system where structural dependence on public funding (Thomas, 2004), institutional frictions between cooperative economy and movement logics (Fonte and Cucco, 2017), post-crisis marketization pressures (Busso, 2018), and growth-induced conflicts between commercial success and founding principles (Pansera and Rizzi, 2020) all present ongoing challenges, and Spain’s social economy sector where austerity-era policies revealed gaps between political discourse and implemented support (Chaves-Avila and Savall-Morera, 2019), but Korea’s state-supported approach makes these dynamics unusually explicit (see Choi *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, while macro-level state influence and internal governance logics are well documented, the subjective viewpoints of social cooperative members remain under-examined, with only a few notable exceptions (e.g. Claassen *et al.*, 2024d; Claassen *et al.*, 2025).

To bridge the gap between macro-level state influence and micro-level member experiences, this study requires an analytical framework capable of capturing the multidimensional nature of social cooperatives. The framework from the EMES (Emergence of Social Enterprises in Europe) European Research Network, which identifies social enterprises through intersecting economic, social, and governance dimensions, has been particularly influential in the field (Defourny *et al.*, 2021). The ESG framework’s primary utility for this study lies in its multidimensional granularity.

The ESG framework can be utilized to disaggregate the broad “Social” dimension into internal (S–I) aspects concerning member welfare and equity, and external (S–E) aspects focused on the community mission. This distinction is critical for examining the core tension between member-centric benefits (S–I) and broader social mandates (S–E). Furthermore, the “Governance” (G) dimension aligns directly with cooperative principles of democratic control and autonomy, while the “Environmental” (E) dimension introduces a further contemporary measure of public value (Hudon and Huybrechts, 2017). A growing body of Korean scholarship has applied the ESG framework to assess social economy organizations (e.g. social enterprises), recognizing the framework’s capacity to evaluate multidimensional performance beyond traditional financial metrics (Kim, 2022; Chang, 2022; Myung, 2024).

Research design

We adopt Q methodology to systematically analyze intersubjective viewpoints (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2025). In Q, the aim is to model shared perspectives rather than individuals. Members rank a concourse of statements on a forced, quasi-normal grid, and factor analysis reveals clusters of viewpoints (Cross, 2005; Brown, 1980). This design fits our objective to surface distinct member subjectivities in social cooperatives. Combining the ESG framework with Q methodology allows multidimensional evaluation of member subjectivities, linking normative governance ideals (G) and social missions (S–I/S–E) to empirically observed viewpoints. We

Table 1. The 36 Q-statements and their ESG classification

#	Statement	ESG
1	I believe that my membership and role in the cooperative has a significant positive impact on society and contributes to addressing social needs	S-E
2	The cooperative values and recognizes the different roles and responsibilities I have within and outside of the organization	S-I
3	The cooperative supports me in balancing my professional and personal life	S-I
4	The cooperative does not promote collective decision-making and shared responsibility	G
5	The size of the cooperative, in terms of the number of members, is not appropriate	Mixed (S-G)
6	Public subsidies impact the autonomy and self-management of the cooperative	G
7	The cooperative's policies regarding worker contributions to share capital are fair and equitable	G
8	I am actively involved in the cooperative's decision-making and management processes	G
9	The cooperative does not promote democratic values and practices in its day-to-day operations	G
10	The cooperative actively contributes to the well-being of the community	S-E
11	The cooperative fosters an environment that encourages open and transparent communication	G
12	The cooperative does not have clear processes and procedures in place to ensure transparency and accountability	G
13	The cooperative does not distribute resources fairly and equitably among its members	G
14	The cooperative prioritizes reinvestment in the organization, member benefits, and community development when allocating surplus	Mixed (S-G)
15	The cooperative provides a range of benefits that support the well-being of its members	S-I
16	The cooperative is open to all individuals who share its values and objectives, regardless of their background or circumstances	S-I
17	The cooperative promotes equal opportunities and does not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, age, disability, or any other factor	S-I
18	The cooperative does not raise awareness about its mission, goals, and achievements in the public sphere	G
19	The cooperative does not actively seek to influence government policies and decision-making processes that affect its operations	G
20	The cooperative does not collaborate or form partnerships with other cooperatives and third-sector organizations	G
21	The cooperative raises awareness about the cooperative movement and provides training to its members	S-I
22	The cooperative does not actively promote the values and principles of the cooperative movement in its operations and activities	G
23	The cooperative's activities contribute to the preservation and revitalization of the local community	S-E
24	The cooperative actively works to integrate individuals in situations of social exclusion into the workforce	S-E
25	The cooperative promotes environmentally friendly practices and technologies	E
26	The cooperative does not foster an inclusive environment that values the contributions of all members, regardless of gender or background	G
27	The cooperative does not ensure a fair distribution of roles and tasks among its members	G
28	The cooperative does not invest in the professional growth and skill development of its members	Mixed (S-G)
29	The cooperative actively works to resolve conflicts among members in a fair and constructive manner	S-I
30	The cooperative provides emotional support to members, promoting mental well-being and resilience	S-I
31	The cooperative's financial stability allows it to effectively support its mission	G
32	The cooperative actively seeks collaboration and partnerships to enhance its diversification and resilience	Mixed (S-G)

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

#	Statement	ESG
33	The cooperative does not encourage innovation and creativity among its members, supporting the development of new ideas and solutions	G
34	The cooperative actively seeks partnerships with the public sector (e.g. local government, public enterprises, et cetera)	Mixed (S-G)
35	The cooperative actively seeks partnerships with the corporate/private sector	Mixed (S-G)
36	The cooperative actively seeks partnerships with civil society	Mixed (S-G)

Note(s): ESG = Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) framework; E = environmental; S = social; S-I = social (internal); S-E = social (external); G = governance

Source(s): Authors' own work

adopted 36 statements from prior research and mapped them by consensus to E, S–I, S–E, and G. The full mapping appears in Table 1.

In terms of our sampling and analytic decisions, we recruited 70 worker-members from five social cooperatives in Seoul, prioritizing worker-members to foreground day-to-day governance and service delivery. The five Seoul-based social cooperatives were selected to span distinct service and organizational domains: child welfare residential care, community care provision, community-based healthcare delivery, disability employment-support services, and social economy intermediary and cooperative development and support. Using authorization dates as an indicator of organizational age, cooperatives ranged from approximately 1 to 12 years active at the time of fieldwork. Public management-disclosure records indicate substantial heterogeneity in scale, with total membership ranging from approximately 17 to 3,699, and with publicly reported staff/employee headcount (where available) ranging from approximately 6 to 50; however, public sources do not consistently disaggregate worker-members from other stakeholder members or staff across multi-stakeholder cooperatives. Asset scale ranged from approximately ₩20 million (US\$15k) to ₩3.17 billion (US\$2.4 m). To preserve cooperative anonymity, we report ranges across the five cases rather than cooperative-specific values, and figures reflect the latest available public disclosures prior to fieldwork. KRW amounts are converted to USD using the 2023 annual average exchange rate (₩1,306.76 = US\$1); USD figures are approximate.

Recruitment occurred via direct contact with the cooperatives (email/phone and on-site briefings), and all members gave informed consent under Seoul National University IRB approval. Fieldwork took place in summer 2023. All materials were administered in Korean, with statements following a translation/back-translation process to ensure semantic equivalence. In Q methodology, the goal is to map shared viewpoints rather than estimate population parameters. Purposive P-samples in the 30–80 range are common, and $N = 70$ is ample to surface multiple stable factors while preserving heterogeneity (Cross, 2005; Brown, 1980). Members sorted the 36 statements on a 9-point (–5 to +5) forced, quasi-normal distribution, as shown in the grid in Figure 1.

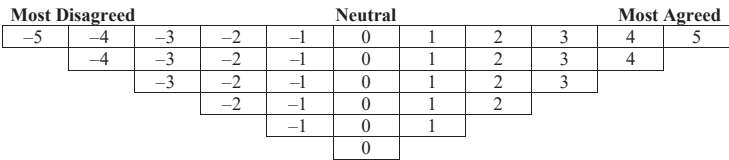


Figure 1. Q-Sort array. Source(s): Authors' own work

This method increases discrimination at the extremes and comparability across sorts. Analysis used KADE (Banasick, 2019) with Brown Centroid extraction and judgmental rotation. We retained factors with eigenvalues >1 , at least three pure loaders, $\geq 5\%$ explained variance, and scree-test confirmation. Defining sorts were flagged if they loaded significantly on a single factor (two-tailed $p < 0.05$; $|\text{loading}| \geq 1.96/\sqrt{36} \approx 0.33$) and not significantly on others. Factor polarity was oriented for interpretability, with labels referring to the positive pole. For the bipolar factor, both poles are interpretable.

Results

The analysis identified four factors representing distinct perceptual typologies among social cooperative members. Descriptive statistics for all statements (see Table A1) identify the most contested (high SD) and most consensual (low SD) items. Complete factor arrays and distinguishing and consensus statements are reported in Table A2 to aid replication and cross-factor comparison, while P-sample loadings are in Table A3. Each factor represents a shared viewpoint aggregated across members from the five cooperatives rather than a single organization, meaning divergent viewpoints may occur within the same cooperative.

To support systematic interpretation, the concluding paragraph of each perspective subsection briefly contrasts that perspective with the other three. These contrasts draw on the cross-factor patterns summarized in Tables 2 - 5 (and the distinguishing/consensus statements in Table A2), emphasizing differences on governance (G) and the internal versus external social balance (S-I vs S-E).

Table 2. Defining statements — factor 1 (The principled but inequitable cooperative)

#	Statement	Q-sort value	ESG
<i>Top Agreement</i>			
16	The cooperative is open to all individuals who share its values and objectives, regardless of their background or circumstances	5	S-I
8	I am actively involved in the cooperative's decision-making and management processes	4	G
10	The cooperative actively contributes to the well-being of the community	4	S-E
1	I believe that my membership and role in the cooperative has a significant positive impact on society and contributes to addressing social needs	3	S-E
2	The cooperative values and recognizes the different roles and responsibilities I have within and outside of the organization	3	S-I
20	The cooperative does not collaborate or form partnerships with other cooperatives and third-sector organizations	3	G
<i>Top disagreement</i>			
7	The cooperative's policies regarding worker contributions to share capital are fair and equitable	−5	G
17	The cooperative promotes equal opportunities and does not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, age, disability, or any other factor	−4	S-I
22	The cooperative does not actively promote the values and principles of the cooperative movement in its operations and activities	−4	G
4	The cooperative does not promote collective decision-making and shared responsibility	−3	G
35	The cooperative actively seeks partnerships with the corporate/private sector	−3	Mixed (S-G)
36	The cooperative actively seeks partnerships with civil society	−3	Mixed (S-G)

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 3. Defining statements — Factor 2 (The instrumentalized service provider, bipolar)

#	Statement	Q-sort value	ESG
<i>Top agreement</i>			
14	The cooperative prioritizes reinvestment in the organization, member benefits, and community development when allocating surplus	5	Mixed (S-G)
16	The cooperative is open to all individuals who share its values and objectives, regardless of their background or circumstances	4	S-I
24	The cooperative actively works to integrate individuals in situations of social exclusion into the workforce	4	S-E
9	The cooperative does not promote democratic values and practices in its day-to-day operations	3	G
6	Public subsidies impact the autonomy and self-management of the cooperative	3	G
22	The cooperative does not actively promote the values and principles of the cooperative movement in its operations and activities	3	G
<i>Top disagreement</i>			
11	The cooperative fosters an environment that encourages open and transparent communication	−5	G
25	The cooperative promotes environmentally friendly practices and technologies	−4	E
23	The cooperative’s activities contribute to the preservation and revitalization of the local community	−4	S-E
32	The cooperative actively seeks collaboration and partnerships to enhance its diversification and resilience	−3	Mixed (S-G)
5	The size of the cooperative, in terms of the number of members, is not appropriate	−3	Mixed (S-G)
15	The cooperative provides a range of benefits that support the well-being of its members	−3	S-I
Source(s): Authors’ own work			

Factor extraction yielded eigenvalues of 22.16, 9.06, 6.44, and 5.22, accounting for 32%, 13%, 9%, and 7% of variance respectively, cumulatively explaining 61% of total variance. Following judgmental rotation, all factors demonstrated high internal consistency (composite reliability >0.95, threshold = 0.80) and low inter-factor correlations, with the highest between Factors 3 and 4 ($r = 0.32$), marginally below the conventional independence threshold of 0.33.

Factor loadings revealed distinct patterns of member alignment. Using significance criteria of $p < 0.05$ and majority common variance (loading significantly on only one factor), 19 members loaded significantly on Factor 1, five on Factor 2, 15 on Factor 3, and 13 on Factor 4. Notably, Factor 2 emerged as bipolar, with two significant negative loadings. Interpretation refers to the positive pole. Factor 2 also exhibited the highest standard error of differences ($SE = 0.31$), associated with its smaller number of defining sorts ($n = 5$). Eighteen members failed to meet the criteria for defining sorts, primarily due to the majority common variance requirement.

Tables 2 and 5 report, for each factor, the defining statements with $|\text{score}| \geq 3$ (highest agreement/disagreement). In the profiles reported in these tables and described below, “(statement #8: +4),” for instance, denotes the factor score for statement 8 on the −5 to +5 Q grid. Positive values indicate relative agreement with the statement as written, negative values indicate disagreement, and 0 is neutral. For negatively worded items (marked †), disagreement implies a positive evaluation of the underlying construct.

Perspective 1: the principled but inequitable cooperative

Members who define this perspective strongly affirm cooperative ideals of openness and participation (#16 + 5; #8 + 4) and value social mission (#10 + 4; #1 + 3). They see their

Table 4. Defining statements — factor 3 (The outward-focused strategic enterprise)

#	Statement	Q-sort value	ESG
<i>Top agreement</i>			
32	The cooperative actively seeks collaboration and partnerships to enhance its diversification and resilience	5	Mixed (S-G)
12	The cooperative does not have clear processes and procedures in place to ensure transparency and accountability	4	G
21	The cooperative raises awareness about the cooperative movement and provides training to its members	4	S-I
33	The cooperative does not encourage innovation and creativity among its members, supporting the development of new ideas and solutions	3	G
1	I believe that my membership and role in the cooperative has a significant positive impact on society and contributes to addressing social needs	3	S-E
2	The cooperative values and recognizes the different roles and responsibilities I have within and outside of the organization	3	S-I
<i>Top disagreement</i>			
19	The cooperative does not actively seek to influence government policies and decision-making processes that affect its operations	−5	G
36	The cooperative actively seeks partnerships with civil society	−4	Mixed (S-G)
27	The cooperative does not ensure a fair distribution of roles and tasks among its members	−4	G
31	The cooperative's financial stability allows it to effectively support its mission	−3	G
35	The cooperative actively seeks partnerships with the corporate/private sector	−3	Mixed (S-G)
28	The cooperative does not invest in the professional growth and skill development of its members	−3	Mixed (S-G)

Source(s): Authors' own work

membership (#2 + 3) as socially meaningful and the organization a vehicle for public benefit. Yet they perceive serious deficits in equity and fairness: share-capital policies (#7–5) and equal-opportunity practices (#17–4) are viewed as unjust. Promotion of cooperative movement values is, however, affirmed (#22–4 †). Low support for actively seeking corporate (#35–3) and civil society (#36–3) partnerships signals a relatively insular stance. Collectively, the pattern depicts a cooperative anchored in values but unequal in practice—performing democracy constitutionally while failing to realize it organizationally. This reflects a legacy of formalistic democratization in Korean cooperatives, where constitutional ideals can precede managerial capacity.

Compared with Perspective 2, it appears less narrowly shaped by externally validated service outcomes and more anchored in participatory ideals, even while equity and fairness remain unresolved. Compared with Perspective 3, it articulates principles without building the operational routines to sustain them. Compared with Perspective 4, it asserts justice but delivers less equity. Institutionalizing transparent budgeting and role-allocation mechanisms would translate declarative democracy into everyday practice.

Perspective 2: the Instrumentalized Service Provider (bipolar)

This viewpoint centers on a narrow, externally validated mission. High agreement with reinvestment discipline (#14 + 5) and integration of socially excluded workers (#24 + 4) underscores a commitment to state-endorsed social outcomes. Openness (#16 + 4) is valued, but governance deficits dominate: poor communication (#11–5), weak democratic culture (#9 + 3 †), and tepid promotion of cooperative movement values (#22 + 3 †) portray formal compliance without authentic participation. Environmental engagement (#25–4) and

Table 5. Defining statements — factor 4 (The benevolent but undemocratic organization)

#	Statement	Q-sort value	ESG
<i>Top agreement</i>			
3	The cooperative supports me in balancing my professional and personal life	5	S-I
5	The size of the cooperative, in terms of the number of members, is not appropriate	4	Mixed (S-G)
25	The cooperative promotes environmentally friendly practices and technologies	4	E
7	The cooperative's policies regarding worker contributions to share capital are fair and equitable	3	G
2	The cooperative values and recognizes the different roles and responsibilities I have within and outside of the organization	3	S-I
4	The cooperative does not promote collective decision-making and shared responsibility	3	G
<i>Top disagreement</i>			
18	The cooperative does not raise awareness about its mission, goals, and achievements in the public sphere	−5	G
14	The cooperative prioritizes reinvestment in the organization, member benefits, and community development when allocating surplus	−4	Mixed (S-G)
35	The cooperative actively seeks partnerships with the corporate/private sector	−4	Mixed (S-G)
36	The cooperative actively seeks partnerships with civil society	−3	Mixed (S-G)
26	The cooperative does not foster an inclusive environment that values the contributions of all members, regardless of gender or background	−3	G
31	The cooperative's financial stability allows it to effectively support its mission	−3	G
Source(s): Authors' own work			

community revitalization (#23–4) rank low, while reliance on subsidies (#6 + 3) and limited collaboration (#32–3) suggest a dependent and isolated structure. The profile's bipolarity, where some members score negatively on the same factor, indicates contestation between those who see the model as empowering and those who see it as co-opted. Such divergence mirrors how performance contracts with public agencies structure incentives around output rather than participation.

Compared with Perspective 1's values-forward orientation, Perspective 2 reflects what members experience as a thinner enactment of cooperative identity in day-to-day practice (e.g. weaker internal communication and democratic culture), despite strong commitment to externally legible outcomes. Compared with Perspective 3's selective agency, Perspective 2 operates under state templates. Compared with Perspective 4's benevolent climate, it sacrifices member welfare (S–I) to external performance (S–E). Embedding autonomy clauses in multi-year contracts and earmarking member-development budgets could restore balance between public accountability and internal empowerment.

Perspective 3: the outward-focused strategic enterprise

This perspective reflects selective agency and entrepreneurial orientation. Members endorse collaboration (#32 + 5) and training (#21 + 4), acknowledge transparency gaps (#12 + 4 †) and innovation deficits (#33 + 3 †), and still express confidence in their social impact (#1 + 3; #2 + 3). They strongly reject the idea that the cooperative avoids policy influence (#19–5 †), portraying active engagement with government as a strategic asset. Disagreement with inequitable role distribution (#27–4 †) and under-investment in skills (#28–3 †) shows belief in fairness and member growth, although concerns persist over financial stability (#31–3) and lower support for actively seeking corporate partnerships (#35–3) alongside weak civil society partnering (#36–4). This profile depicts an organization that buffers isomorphic pressures

through targeted partnerships and capability building while recognizing its governance shortcomings. It also signals managerial professionalization compatible with policy networks but vulnerable to mission drift unless participatory safeguards are strengthened.

Compared with Perspective 1's principle-practice gap, it privileges capability over declaration. Compared with Perspective 2's service dependence, it mobilizes strategic agency. Compared with Perspective 4, it is markedly more outward-facing and strategically agentic; Perspective 4 instead centers internal welfare and supportive routines as the primary basis of member satisfaction and commitment, even as governance engagement remains limited. Formalizing transparency and innovation routines would consolidate its legitimacy and resilience.

Perspective 4: the benevolent but undemocratic organization

This profile combines a supportive work culture with limited governance participation. Members value work-life balance (#3 + 5) and environmental responsibility (#25 + 4), view share-capital policies as fair (#7 + 3), and feel recognized (#2 + 3; #8 + 2). At the same time, they acknowledge limited collective decision-making (#4 + 3 †) and modest democratic practice (#9 + 2 †), with only lukewarm promotion of cooperative movement values (#22 + 1 †). They strongly disagree that the cooperative fails to raise public awareness (#18–5 †). Perceived inclusivity is affirmed (#26–3 †), yet vulnerabilities appear in stewardship (low reinvestment #14–4; financial fragility #31–3) and external connectivity (weak corporate #35–4 and civil society #36–3 partnerships).

Compared with Perspective 1, it appears less driven by universal openness and participatory governance ideals, and more sustained by internal benefits, yet both remain vulnerable when governance routines fail to translate values into consistent day-to-day practice. Compared with Perspective 2, it prioritizes member well-being over service delivery. Compared with Perspective 3, it turns inward toward care rather than outward toward strategy. Pairing existing work-life benefits with low-cost democratic reforms, such as role rotation, secret ballots, and participatory budgeting, could mitigate its governance deficit without jeopardizing its supportive ethos. This pattern illustrates a trade-off where organizational benevolence substitutes for participatory legitimacy.

Discussion

Building on these factor-level interpretations, the Discussion connects each profile to debates on state influence, cooperative democracy, and organizational adaptation. The four perspectives indicate that state involvement does not yield a single trajectory; instead, member experiences reflect heterogeneous adaptations under external pressures and internal governance dynamics. Read through institutional isomorphism and strategic agency, these adaptations range from instrumentalization to selective engagement (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Choi *et al.*, 2020; Claassen *et al.*, 2024a, d). An ESG framework aligned with the EMES tradition clarifies where tensions crystallize: the Governance dimension is the persistent fault line, while the Social dimension splits into internal versus external priorities, and the Environmental dimension distinguishes one profile (Hudon and Huybrechts, 2017; Defourny *et al.*, 2021).

Consistent with Thompson's (2015) social theory of the firm, member subjectivities function here as diagnostic signals of cooperative integrity under institutional pressure. Perspective 1's principles-practice gap resonates with the paradox of governance and the risk of degeneration, highlighting the need for routines that translate constitutional democracy into everyday practice (Cornforth, 2004; Michels, 1962/1911). Perspective 2 maps onto an instrumentalization pathway where strong policy templates risk co-optation. Autonomy clauses and capacity-building could rebalance governance without sacrificing the targeted social mission (Coston, 1998; Richez-Battesti and Petrella, 2023). Perspective 3 exemplifies

selective coupling to field pressures, where capability investment buffers isomorphism but requires governance process repair to sustain legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). This is consistent with profile-specific governance repairs rather than sector-wide fixes. Perspective 4 suggests a benevolent paternalism, where high internal social and environmental value mask low democratic governance, risking mission drift without low-cost democratic routines. Together these interpretations show that state–third sector relations form a multidirectional field of negotiation, not a linear continuum from capture to autonomy.

Across the four profiles, three cross-cutting implications emerge: addressing governance gaps that weaken democratic participation, managing autonomy-accountability tensions in state-supported models, and strengthening the alignment of stated values with operational routines (e.g. budgeting, role allocation, communication, and decision-making). Table 6

Table 6. Policy and practice levers by perspective

	Perspective	P1: Principled but inequitable	P2: Instrumentalized service Provider (bipolar)	P3: Outward-focused strategic enterprise	P4: Benevolent but Undemocratic
Core pattern		Values-forward, equity gaps, relatively inward stance	State-aligned delivery with thin democracy; contested by members	Collaborative and capability-oriented; governance lags the strategy	Supportive work culture and environmental ethos; low participation
High-level policy levers (ecosystem level)		- Signal equity and participation as priority outcomes in support schemes. - Provide flexible support to strengthen internal governance capacity - Encourage broader external connectivity	- Balance accountability with organizational autonomy - Pair performance expectations with attention to member development - Create room to diversify partnerships	- Enable selective partnerships and innovation while safeguarding democratic practice - Recognize organizations that combine capability with participation	- Value well-being outcomes while nudging toward democratic practice - Support light-touch steps that broaden voice and leadership
High-level practice levers (cooperative level)		- Translate stated values into day-to-day procedures - Clarify roles and expectations to reduce perceived unfairness - Increase transparency and regular feedback	- Strengthen participation norms and internal communication - Build member capabilities alongside service delivery - Reduce dependence on any single external template	- Embed participatory checks in growth and partnership decisions - Regularize transparency and learning routines - Keep mission clarity front and center during expansion	- Gradually expand shared decision-making - Pair care practices with clear expectations for member participation - Make inclusion visible in everyday operations

Note(s): These levers are intentionally general to fit diverse contexts; they guide adaptation rather than prescribe specific instruments, and they target governance gaps, autonomy-accountability tensions, and the alignment of stated values with operational routines

Source(s): Authors' own work

translates these implications into profile-specific policy and practice levers across Perspectives 1–4.

Conclusion

Our typology shows that under state engagement, member experiences cluster into four profiles that differ mainly on governance, the internal versus external social balance, and environmental commitment. Rather than a single path of capture or partnership, outcomes reflect variegated adaptations shaped by institutional pressures and internal governance routines. Across contexts where states shape the social enterprise field, the typology highlights three recurring challenges: governance gaps, autonomy-accountability tensions, and the alignment of stated values with operational routines. Policy and cooperative leaders can address these challenges using the levers summarized in Table 6.

These profiles, summarized in Table 7, are likely to appear in other contexts where state policy heavily shapes the social enterprise field, though their prevalence may vary. Substantively, we show that instrumentalization is only one pathway. Member experiences also evidence strategic agency and benevolent paternalism, expanding accounts of government–third sector relations (Choi *et al.*, 2020; Claassen *et al.*, 2024a, b; Coston, 1998; Toepler *et al.*, 2023). Theoretically, we link isomorphic pressures and member-democracy debates to an ESG framework aligned with the EMES tradition, clarifying where tensions crystallize (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Defourny *et al.*, 2021; Cornforth, 2004). Methodologically, we show how Q methodology measures member subjectivities under state pressure to generate an actionable typology.

Q methodology identifies shared viewpoints rather than representative distributions and thus does not claim statistical generalizability. Our sample comprised 70 worker-members

Table 7. A typology of social cooperative member experiences

	Internal focus (concerned with members, culture, and internal processes)	External focus (concerned with social mandates, politics, and market position)
<i>Proactive and Agentic</i> (Shapes its own destiny; driven by internal will or external strategy)	<i>Perspective 1: The Principled but Inequitable Cooperative</i> Characterized by a proactive commitment to its internal democratic ideals and social mission. This principled stance is contrasted by a critical view of its inequitable practices, particularly regarding finances. Its agency is directed inward, corresponding with an insular external posture	<i>Perspective 3: The Outward-Focused Strategic Enterprise</i> Characterized by a proactive, external strategy of political engagement and networking for resilience. This outward focus on securing its market position is prioritized alongside member development, but coexists with significant internal governance flaws and financial precarity
<i>Reactive and Instrumentalized</i> (Fulfills a role; dependent on external forces or internal problems)	<i>Perspective 4: The Benevolent but Undemocratic Organization</i> Characterized by a reactive and insular posture stemming from undemocratic governance and financial instability. This contrasts sharply with its perceived success in providing specific, highly-valued personal benefits to its members, such as work-life balance	<i>Perspective 2: The Instrumentalized Service Provider (Bipolar)</i> Characterized by a reactive fulfillment of a narrow, external social mandate (work integration). Its cooperative identity is perceived as instrumentalized and subsumed by this function, corresponding with a neglect of internal democracy and member well-being
Source(s): Authors' own work		

from five cooperatives, mostly in Seoul, which narrows roles and geography. The 36-statement concourse, the forced grid, and judgmental rotation shape expression and introduce researcher discretion. Factor 2 was bipolar with few defining sorts, so its profile merits caution. Cross-sectional timing further limits causal claims, as fieldwork took place in summer 2023. Future work should assess the prevalence of these profiles in larger samples, test the policy levers proposed for each profile, and combine Q with interviews or administrative data for validation. These findings invite comparative research on how state design shapes member agency across diverse social-economy regimes. We encourage profile-level policy trials with transparent evaluation.

Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive statistics of Q-sort values by Q statement

Q-statement #	Mean	SD
1	2.34	1.51
2	2.34	1.40
3	2.14	1.64
4	0.40	2.50
5	1.57	1.46
6	1.90	2.00
7	0.09	3.03
8	2.00	1.86
9	1.77	1.83
10	1.10	1.98
11	−0.33	2.35
12	1.50	1.82
13	0.80	1.55
14	−0.53	2.27
15	−0.56	2.16
16	1.14	2.53
17	−1.17	2.26
18	−0.77	2.17
19	−0.93	2.42
20	0.34	1.97
21	0.74	1.95
22	−1.07	2.43
23	−0.29	1.87
24	0.20	2.10
25	0.43	2.27
26	−1.20	1.48
27	−1.27	2.00
28	−1.37	1.49
29	−1.06	1.86
30	−1.24	1.68
31	−1.84	1.47
32	−0.47	2.53
33	−0.36	2.35
34	−1.81	1.80
35	−2.24	1.81
36	−2.30	1.67

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table A2. Complete factor arrays (factor scores) and distinguishing and consensus statements

Q-statement #	Q-sort value		Factor 3	Factor 4	Classification
	Factor 1	Factor 2 (Bipolar)			
1	3	1	3	2	Distinguishing (F2)
2	3	-1	3	3	Distinguishing (F2)
3	2	0	2	5	Distinguishing (F4)
4	-3	-1	1	3	Distinguishing (F1, F2, F3, F4)
5	2	-3	1	4	Distinguishing (F2, F4)
6	2	3	2	2	Consensus
7	-5	2	2	3	Distinguishing (F1)
8	4	0	2	2	Distinguishing (F1, F2)
9	2	3	1	2	Non-significant Variation
10	4	0	0	1	Distinguishing (F1)
11	1	-5	0	0	Distinguishing (F1, F2)
12	1	-2	4	1	Distinguishing (F2, F3)
13	1	2	0	1	Distinguishing (F3)
14	1	5	0	-4	Distinguishing (F1, F2, F3, F4)
15	1	-3	-1	0	Distinguishing (F1, F2)
16	5	4	0	-2	Distinguishing (F3, F4)
17	-4	0	1	-1	Distinguishing (F1)
18	0	1	1	-5	Distinguishing (F4)
19	0	1	-5	1	Distinguishing (F1, F3)
20	3	1	-1	0	Distinguishing (F1)
21	0	-2	4	-1	Distinguishing (F1, F3)
22	-4	3	-2	1	Distinguishing (F1, F3)
23	0	-4	0	0	Distinguishing (F2)
24	0	4	-1	-1	Distinguishing (F2)
25	0	-4	-1	4	Distinguishing (F2, F4)
26	-1	0	-2	-3	Distinguishing (F4)
27	-1	0	-4	0	Distinguishing (F2, F3)
28	-1	2	-3	0	Distinguishing (F2, F3)
29	-1	-1	-2	-1	Consensus
30	-1	2	-2	-2	Distinguishing (F1, F2)
31	-2	1	-3	-3	Distinguishing (F2, F4)
32	-2	-3	5	-2	Distinguishing (F3)
33	-2	-2	3	-2	Distinguishing (F3)
34	-2	-2	-1	-1	Consensus
35	-3	-1	-3	-4	Non-significant Variation
36	-3	-1	-4	-3	Distinguishing (F2, F3)

Note(s): Statement classifications are determined by statistically comparing the normalized Z-scores for each statement across the four factors. A difference in ranking (Q-Sort Value) between factors is statistically significant (at $p < 0.05$) if the difference in Z-scores exceeds 1.96 times the Standard Error of the Difference (SE) for those factors. A statement is classified as Distinguishing for a specific factor (noted in parentheses) if its Z-score on that factor is significantly different from its score on all other factors. A Consensus statement exhibits no statistically significant difference in Z-scores between any pair of factors. Statements classified as Non-significant Variation show statistically significant differences between at least one pair of factors but do not uniquely distinguish any single factor

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table A3. P-sample following Brown centroid factor extraction and judgmental rotation

Respondent Number	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
1	0.2705	0.4644	0.5139	0.4005
2	0.2155	0.3464	0.4970	0.6315
3	0.0809	−0.5011	0.5988*	0.0144
4	0.2268	−0.2414	0.2661	0.5441*
5	0.3996	−0.1388	0.3985	−0.1972
6	0.4437*	−0.2288	0.2597	0.0566
7	0.2962	−0.3807	0.3756	0.4741
8	0.3966	0.4581	0.2786	0.5903
9	0.8618*	0.2256	0.2303	−0.0807
10	0.0826	0.4081	0.4971	0.4802
11	0.1778	−0.5568*	0.0062	0.5161
12	0.0587	0.1762	0.4804*	0.4254
13	−0.0487	−0.4051	0.6129*	0.0050
14	0.8837*	0.0421	0.2424	−0.172
15	−0.1354	−0.3221	0.6386*	0.1643
16	0.3552	−0.1627	0.1098	0.5125*
17	0.2290	−0.2846	0.2653	0.4183
18	0.0853	−0.0875	0.7570*	0.1510
19	0.8881*	0.1672	0.1216	−0.0690
20	0.2983	0.2660	0.5510	0.4974
21	0.8969*	0.1638	0.1405	−0.1251
22	0.3355	−0.0860	0.0140	0.6457*
23	0.2228	0.6480*	0.3444	0.4807
24	0.1549	0.4278*	0.2119	0.2631
25	0.8010*	0.2098	0.2858	−0.1618
26	0.8405*	0.0772	0.3180	−0.1774
27	0.2687	−0.3609	0.0993	0.5301*
28	0.4419*	0.0891	0.3425	0.0888
29	0.2801	−0.1043	0.6462*	0.0542
30	0.3634	0.3975*	0.0024	0.0800
31	0.3609	0.3929	0.3817	0.5943
32	0.5234*	−0.1817	−0.0097	−0.0091
33	0.2655	0.3659	0.5292	0.4895
34	0.4677	−0.1306	0.2558	0.4101
35	0.0853	−0.3118	0.6061*	−0.0117
36	0.2519	−0.1746	0.6587*	−0.0456
37	0.3498	−0.1872	0.2310	0.7020*
38	0.3013	0.5944	0.4077	0.3886
39	0.9120*	0.0691	0.0684	−0.0543
40	0.3223	−0.3035	−0.0178	0.1502
41	0.0412	−0.1768	0.7570*	0.1645
42	0.8772*	0.0376	0.1087	−0.1046
43	−0.1287	0.0041	0.6697*	0.1285
44	0.8104*	0.1260	0.1917	−0.1488
45	0.2844	0.5118	0.4869	0.4981
46	0.2478	−0.1597	0.6926*	0.0289
47	0.2445	−0.2678	0.0381	0.6027*
48	0.3502	0.0748	0.3769	0.2512
49	0.2946	−0.3316	0.2387	0.6776*
50	0.2615	0.0389	−0.0622	0.5904*
51	0.4160	−0.2831	−0.0564	0.5892*
52	0.3696	0.3440	0.6103	0.3724
53	0.1889	−0.1730	0.0364	0.7056*
54	0.4638	−0.0072	0.1113	0.7081*

(continued)

Table A3. Continued

Respondent Number	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
55	0.1339	−0.1042	0.7064*	0.0142
56	0.1878	−0.1465	0.1364	0.4225*
57	0.2686	−0.6033*	0.4844	−0.1581
58	0.8793*	0.1085	0.1753	−0.0343
59	0.1465	0.5323	0.5212	0.5018
60	−0.1427	−0.0769	0.7212*	−0.2052
61	0.8789*	0.1326	0.1103	−0.1607
62	0.8984*	0.0928	0.0415	−0.2062
63	0.1814	−0.3160	0.2545	0.2587
64	0.8117*	0.1232	0.3650	−0.1901
65	0.9140*	0.0641	0.2735	−0.1326
66	0.1898	−0.4307	0.6997*	−0.0154
67	0.3493*	−0.0820	0.2411	−0.205
68	0.0911	−0.0671	0.7280*	0.2423
69	0.8700*	0.1050	0.2174	−0.1104
70	0.4356	−0.2423	0.1671	0.5584*

Source(s): Authors' own work

Note

1. Throughout this paper, "Korea" refers to South Korea (i.e. the Republic of Korea). This usage is conventional in social economy scholarship on the region and introduces no ambiguity, as North Korea (i.e. the Democratic People's Republic of Korea) lacks a comparable cooperative sector.

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