

Factors that affect the opening and growth of cooperative societies in the South of Tamaulipas, Mexico**Factores que afectan la apertura y crecimiento de las sociedades cooperativas en el sur de Tamaulipas, México**

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to identify the existing cooperative societies in the southern area of Tamaulipas, Mexico, and to know the challenges and strategies they have used to remain in force. The methodology includes a systematic search on government websites of the three levels of government, as well as their geolocation. A refined list of cooperative societies was integrated to request semi-structured interviews. The majority refused the interview. Likewise, interviews conducted with the media on the subject were located in the last five years. Subsequently, the speech of the interviewees was analyzed. The findings show that there are some cooperatives that are decades old, while many have disappeared. The causes are mainly associated with the lack of training and advice, although there have also been dramatic events such as the pandemic and climate change.

Cooperative, Social Economy, Coast of Gulf of Mexico**Resumen**

El objetivo de este artículo es la identificación de las sociedades cooperativas existentes en la zona sur de Tamaulipas, México, y reconocer los retos y las estrategias que han utilizado para permanecer vigentes. La metodología incluye una búsqueda sistemática en sitios web gubernamentales de los tres niveles de gobierno, así como su geocalización. Se integró una relación depurada de las sociedades cooperativas para solicitar entrevistas semiestructuradas. La mayoría denegó la entrevista. Así también, se localizaron entrevistas realizadas a los medios de comunicación sobre la temática en los últimos cinco años. Posteriormente se analizó el discurso de los cooperativistas. Los hallazgos muestran que existen algunas cooperativas que tienen decenas de años, mientras que muchas han desaparecido. Las causas están asociadas a la falta de capacitación y asesoría, principalmente, aunque también ha habido sucesos dramáticos como la pandemia y el cambio climático. Se sugiere una profesionalización en ese ámbito para ser más eficientes.

Cooperativa, Economía Social, Costa del Golfo de México

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Introduction

At least during the last decade, a phenomenon that has been occurring in the southern part of Tamaulipas is the gradual decrease of cooperative societies. This can be inferred from observation and monitoring of the regional economy, where most of the societies are of the anonymous and variable capital type.

The southern conurbation of Tamaulipas is composed of three cities: Altamira, Tampico and Ciudad Madero. This area has a large territorial extension, mainly by the municipality of Altamira, it is located in a privileged geographical position being very close to the border with the United States of America, besides having a great natural wealth, it has a long coastline on the Gulf of Mexico, and has two of the most important ports in Mexico, the deep sea port in Altamira and the river port in Tampico. This allows for large movements of various goods, including petrochemical fluids, to and from the east coast of the American continent, Europe and the Middle East, mainly (Government of Tamaulipas, n.d.).

For decades, the southern zone of Tamaulipas was characterised as a national example of the cooperative movement, as it was home to one of the most representative and long-lived internationally recognised societies known as Alijadores or GUA -Gremio Unido de Alijadores- a Limited Liability Cooperative Society.

The GUA integrated the workers who served in the port of Tampico for the loading and unloading of ships and everything concerning the movement of import and export goods. The shippers formed the cooperative that "allowed the development of an independent pole of the cooperative movement, giving rise to the constitution in 1925 of the Confederation of Socialist Cooperative Societies of the Republic and two years later to the National Cooperative Confederation" (Bautista Páez, 2022, p. 10).

The GUA served as inspiration for multiple associations that began to emerge under this same figure, as it fostered an ideology of solidarity, concern for others and social responsibility. This ideology was inherited and replicated by the members of these new associations who began to develop a social and solidarity economy -ESS- in the area.

According to the National Institute of Social Economy, the SSE is a set of socio-economic and cultural initiatives focused on a paradigm shift based on the collaborative work of people and the collective ownership of goods (INAES, 2021). It is well known that cooperatives are the basis of the SSE as they are the perfect materialization of collaborative work.

In Mexico, according to the Tax Administration Service (SAT, n.d.), a cooperative is a form of social organisation made up of individuals based on common interests and on the principles of solidarity, self-effort and mutual aid, with the purpose of satisfying individual and collective needs.

According to the General Law on Cooperative Societies in Mexico (Chamber of Deputies, 2018) there are three different kinds of cooperative societies: 1) of consumption, when their members associate with the purpose of obtaining in common articles, goods or services for themselves, their households or their production activities; 2) of production, those whose members associate to work in common in the production of goods or services, contributing their personal labour, either physical or intellectual or both, regardless of the type of production they carry out; 3) savings and loan companies are companies whose purpose is to carry out savings and loan operations with their members, regardless of the commercial name, corporate name or denomination they adopt, and are part of the Mexican financial system as members of the social sector without speculative intent.

In Mexico there are 18,038 cooperative societies with 8, 875, 186 members, of which 12,076 are engaged in consumption, 5,200 in production and 762 in savings and loans (Rojas Herrera, 2020). This number has increased substantially compared to the information provided by INEGI -Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía- in the 1980 industrial census, when 580 cooperative societies were identified (Rojas Herrera, 2020).

However, this increase was not reflected in the same proportion for the state of Tamaulipas, as 29 cooperative societies were detected in the 1980 census compared to 37 in 2020. This information shows a decline in the growth of the number of cooperative societies, despite being one of the emblematic forms of economic units in southern Tamaulipas.

While it is known that cooperatives are a society that has fallen into disuse due to the influence of a global mercantilist economy, motivated in southern Tamaulipas by large foreign capital, transnational companies and the close proximity to the North American border, it is also true that there are internal factors, such as lack of training, inadequate finances and fraud among members, among others.

The objective of this paper is to identify the factors that have affected the growth and development of cooperative societies in the southern zone of Tamaulipas, in order to understand the socio-economic and political environment of the region and to contribute proposals that motivate the creation of some appropriate ones for certain economic sectors.

In this sense, the development of socially responsible enterprises from the area will contribute to changing the vision so that not only economic benefit is sought, but also concern for sustainable regional development.

1. Background

The Social Economy has its origins in 19th century workers' associations, when workers organised themselves and the first cooperatives and mutual societies of the modern era emerged, in the face of the degradation of living conditions and unemployment caused by the industrial revolution. Cooperativism is one of the main forms of organisation of the social economy (INAE, 2021).

Article 2 of the General Law of Cooperative Societies (2009) establishes that the "Cooperative Society is a form of social organisation made up of individuals based on common interests and on the principles of solidarity, self-effort and mutual aid with the purpose of satisfying individual and collective needs through the performance of economic activities".

The above becomes relevant when studying the current situation in the south of Tamaulipas, since not only cooperative societies have suffered changes, but also commercial enterprises have been affected by the establishment and opening of transnational companies. This area of Tamaulipas, with its three cities, forms a very important economic ecosystem for the state.

The economic activities provided by Altamira include port activities, which is the most representative within the development of the cities, as it has a deep-draught artificial harbour that allows for deep-sea trade, i.e. international movements. The physical infrastructure of this important port not only ensures expeditious access for maritime and land means of transport, but also facilitates the reception, dispatch and handling of cargo at reasonable costs (Municipality of Altamira, 2018).

Around the port of Altamira is located the industrial corridor, mostly made up of companies in the petrochemical sector, which is why the port of Altamira itself ranks first nationally in the handling of petrochemical fluids.

After the opening of the port of Altamira in 1985, agriculture took a back seat, scattered over most of the municipal territory with an approximate surface of 48,000 hectares. Of this, 80% is dedicated to rainfed agriculture, with soybean and sorghum crops dominating (Idem).

Altamira also has the only salt mine in the area, in Loma Real, organised through a cooperative production society, which competes in the state only with the one located in Matamoros (Sal Roche, 2018). They are not in competition with those located in Yucatán, which is also sea-based, on the east coast of Mexico. But neither are they in competition with the salt mines in the states of Veracruz, Nuevo León, Coahuila and San Luis Potosí. Not to mention those along the Pacific coast.

Tampico is one of the main deep-sea ports on the east coast of Mexico, serving as an entry and exit point for products from the industrial, agricultural, fishing and mining sectors. Tampico is basically a commercial city, since, due to its geographical position, port and economic activity, there are large supply and commercial centres, so the most important productive sector is services, commerce and tourism (Hernández Rejón, et al, 2008).

Tampico is not only a pioneer in cooperative societies, including fisheries, but also for the first commercial flight of Mexicana de Aviación between Tampico and the capital of the country in the 1920s.

This milestone was firstly due to the great movement of businessmen who needed to travel to the Federal District, and later to cities in the neighbouring state of Texas in the United States of America. With the extensive tourist development of the area, and after the pandemic period, during 2022, the Tampico airport received 2,714,115 passengers on domestic and international flights, according to data published by Grupo Aeroportuario Centro Norte (OMA, 2023).

The municipality of Ciudad Madero emerged as such from oil activity, as it was previously part of Tampico (Gobierno del Estado de Tamaulipas, n.d.). The axis of its economy is centred on the movement generated by the Francisco I. Madero refinery, nationalised in 1938 by the Mexican government and created in 1914 as Compañía Mexicana El Águila - Mexican Eagle Petroleum Company- with English capital, in the locality called Doña Cecilia (Rivera Castro, 1988), located on the left bank of the Pánuco river, which separates the states of Tamaulipas and Veracruz.

At the height of the black gold rush, El Águila was part of a group of refineries owned by foreign capital such as the American Pierce Oil Company and Huasteca Petroleum Company, the Dutch Royal Dutch Shell, among others, in the exploration and refining of oil in the south of Tamaulipas, east of San Luis Potosí and Veracruz, and which in 1935 had labour problems (Idem). At its peak, the Madero refinery provided a significant economic benefit in 1940, in the midst of the Second World War, with a high demand for the precious fuel from the neighbouring North American nation.

Today, in addition to the oil industry, Ciudad Madero's economic activity includes commerce and services, mainly in the tourism industry. In recent years, Miramar beach is the main sun tourism destination in Tamaulipas and the only one with the Blue Flag certification as an inclusive beach in the Gulf of Mexico (Tamaulipas, 2023).

2. Methodology

The methodology used in the research work presented here is non-experimental, qualitative and cross-sectional. It is an exploratory study with a documentary phase and a field phase.

The documentary phase included the collection of information from: (a) the Ministry of Economy at the national level, which has categorised enterprises according to their size, number of people employed and amount of annual sales, but also by their economic activity (Dini & Stumpo, 2020); (b) municipal government reports as an official source of specific data to obtain very local data; (c) telephone directories with ordered data to locate the identified cooperative societies; (d) geolocation systems to locate a specific point and provide scrollable map images, as well as satellite photographs and routes of any place; (e) interviews disseminated by the press, as a valuable historical source of information, recovering the discourse and perception of the reality lived at the time and place of the events, as it provides a perspective of the background.

Interaction with existing cooperative societies was also included in the methodology in order to listen directly to the internal and external factors that have affected their growth and openness. Therefore, as a second phase of this work, field research was carried out through semi-structured interviews with cooperative members.

As this was a primary data collection with a flexible and dynamic technique, the experience of cooperative members was recovered, as well as their opinions and recommendations for social entrepreneurship in the southern area of Tamaulipas. In this way, they were also used as examples of successful cases to encourage the opening and development of cooperatives.

In this sense, this document provides findings in two areas: a) the identification of the factors for the opening and permanence of cooperative societies; b) the recommendations made by the members of successful cooperative societies themselves to motivate their development and permanence.

Finally, in the third stage, the information was organised for analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were triangulated with other sources to validate them, and classified for a frequency graph. The five interviews were analysed manually, as they were not long.

3. Results

The information obtained is presented according to the order of the findings, therefore, starting with the statistics. Figure 1 shows the comparative of cooperative societies that emerged in Mexico in 1980 and in 2022.

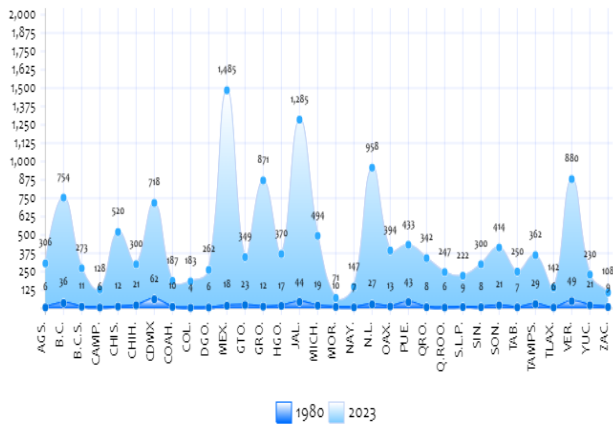


Figure 1 Emergence of co-operative societies in Mexico in 1980 and in 2023
Source: Own Elaboration with data from INEGI (1981, 2023)

According to the XI Industrial Census of 1980, there were 580 cooperative societies in Mexico and 29 in Tamaulipas, with a total gross income of \$1, 443,348 MDP, while their fixed investment was \$8, 679, 954 MDP (INEGI, 1981).

For the sake of comparison, the same data were used, but now corresponding to 332 corporations also existing in Tamaulipas. Their total gross income was \$3, 213,134 MDP and their fixed investment was \$1, 426, 823 MDP (Idem). An initial financial analysis identifies that the sociedades anónimas generated less income than the cooperatives, as the latter had an average of \$49,770 MDP and the former \$9,678 MDP. In comparison, the total fixed investment of the cooperative companies was six times that of the joint stock companies. This shows the great power and capacity for manoeuvre, including political manoeuvre.

For the 2023 data, the National Statistical Directory of Economic Units -DENUE- of the same INEGI (National Institute of Statistics and Geography) was used to obtain the number of cooperative societies in the study area. The result was 362 for Tamaulipas, of which there are 46 cooperatives in the southern zone of Tamaulipas.

However, upon initial review, it was detected that the census included school cooperatives, so they were excluded from the study due to their irregular legal status. Other data excluded were the branches of cooperative societies, which reduced the total to 11 cooperative societies in 2023, as shown in Table 1.

| Cooperative societies according to INEGI |
|--|
| La cafetería de Félix, SC de RL de CV |
| Cojumatlán SCL de CV |
| Pescadores del sur de Tamaulipas y de Veracruz de RL de CV |
| Producción pesquera Paso de los Caballos SC de RL |
| Producción pesquera Pescadores de Tampico SC de RL |
| Producción Salinera del Municipio de Altamira Tamaulipas SCL |
| Cues Orteños SC de RL de CV |
| Trabajadores del Mejor Pan SCL SC de RL |
| La Flor de México SCL SC de RL |
| Tamesí Tancol SC de RL de CV |
| Salineros del Golfo SC de RL de CV |

SC de RL de CV = Sociedad Cooperativa de Responsabilidad Limitada de Capital Variable (Variable Capital Limited Liability Cooperative Society)
SCL = Sociedad de Capital Limitado
S de RL MI = Micro-Industrial Limited Liability Company

Table 1 Co-operative societies in southern Tamaulipas according to INEGI 2023
Source: Own Elaboration with data from INEGI (2023)

In order to triangulate the above information, from which exclusions had already been made, but some missing information was noted, information from municipal governments was sought.

Although their information is up to date until 2019, it was observed that 20 cooperative societies are declared as existing in the area. However, when comparing with the INEGI information, nine were detected that are not included, and are identified in bold letters in Table 2.

| Cooperative societies according to Government Tamaulipas |
|--|
| Cojumatlán SCL de CV |
| Cues Orteños SC de RL de CV |
| Estero del Robalo, SC de RL de CV |
| Gremio Unido de Alijadores, SC de RL |
| La cafetería de Félix, SC de RL de CV |
| La Flor de México SCL SC de RL |
| Laguna de la Puente, SC de RL de CV |
| Lagunas y ríos del sur de Tamaulipas, SC de RL de CV |
| Pescadores de Altamira, SC de RL de CV |
| Pescadores de Martín A. Martínez, SC de P de RL |
| Pescadores del sur de Tamaulipas y de Veracruz de RL |
| Pescadores Unidos del Repecho S de RL MI |
| Producción pesquera Paso de los Caballos SC de RL |
| Producción pesquera Pescadores de Tampico SC de RL |
| Producción Salinera del Municipio de Altamira Tamaulipas SCL |
| Salineros del Golfo SC de RL de CV |
| Tamesí Tancol SC de RL de CV |
| Trabajadores del Mejor Pan SCL SC de RL |
| Unidos en las 200 Millas, SC de RL de CV |
| Unión de Pescadores de Esteros de Altamira, SC de RL |

SC de RL de CV = Sociedad Cooperativa de Responsabilidad Limitada de Capital Variable (Variable Capital Limited Liability Cooperative Society)

SC de P de RL = Sociedad Cooperativa de Producción de Responsabilidad Limitada (Limited Liability Production Cooperative Society)

SCL = Sociedad de Capital Limitado

S de RL MI = Sociedad de Responsabilidad Limitada Microindustrial (Microindustrial Limited Liability Company)

NOTE: In bold the co-operative societies not present in the INEGI data (2023).

Table 2 Cooperative societies in southern Tamaulipas according to the Government of Tamaulipas 2019

Source: Own Elaboration with information from Gobierno de Tamaulipas (2020), Altamira (2018).

Due to this situation, it became necessary to verify the physical existence of cooperative societies, since, although there is statistical data obtained from INEGI, there are some that, due to their almost inaccessible geographical location, are left out of these censuses.

As physical telephone directories have fallen into disuse, the information they contain is not up to date, but they provided certainty for the list of societies, as records were found for most of them, so the next tool used was geolocation.

This made it possible to verify the physical existence of the cooperative societies by means of a satellite image of their location. This has been of great help, as it had not been possible to contact both the salt and fish production companies by telephone.

Two more companies were identified: Autotransportes Liga de Choferes, SCL and Participación Estatal República de Cuba, SCL de CV, both dedicated to public transport services.

In this way, a directory was compiled with general data that helps to identify their current situation, both physically and commercially. This list of cooperative societies would serve as a basis for gathering more information through interviews in the next stage. Table 3 presents the 22 cooperative societies that were finally confirmed.

| # | Southern Tamaulipas Cooperative Societies |
|----|--|
| 1 | Autotransportes Liga de Choferes |
| 2 | Cojumatlán |
| 3 | Cues Orteños |
| 4 | Estero del Robalo |
| 5 | Gremio Unido de Alijadores |
| 6 | La cafetería de Félix |
| 7 | La Flor de México |
| 8 | Laguna de la Puente |
| 9 | Lagunas y ríos del sur de Tamaulipas |
| 10 | Participación Estatal República de Cuba |
| 11 | Pescadores de Altamira |
| 12 | Pescadores de Martín A. Martínez |
| 13 | Pescadores del sur de Tamaulipas y de Veracruz |
| 14 | Pescadores Unidos del Repecho |
| 15 | Producción pesquera Paso de los Caballos |
| 16 | Producción pesquera Pescadores de Tampico |
| 17 | Producción Salinera del Municipio de Altamira Tamaulipas |
| 18 | Salineros del Golfo |
| 19 | Tamesí Tancol |
| 20 | Trabajadores del Mejor Pan |
| 21 | Unidos en las 200 Millas |
| 22 | Unión de Pescadores de Esteros de Altamira |

Table 3 Co-operative societies in southern Tamaulipas

Source: Own Elaboration

It should be noted that the co-operative societies in southern Tamaulipas listed in Table 3 refer to all those that are active in some way - providing service, receiving government support, or with activities on their websites or social networks, and telephone or email service. They do not include branches of some based in another geographical location, and they are not school co-operatives serving various needs of students in basic education schools.

The activities of the existing co-operative societies in southern Tamaulipas are shown in Figure 2.

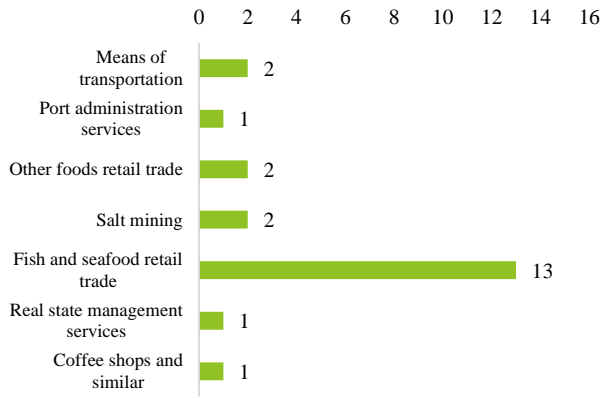


Figure 2 Activities of co-operative societies in southern Tamaulipas

Source: Own Elaboration

Interviews published in local media

Information from interviews published in the press was obtained from local newspapers: Milenio and El Sol de Tampico. Interviews were collected from members of various cooperative societies over a period of five years.

One of the successful cases of cooperative societies of yesteryear is the Trabajadores del Mejor Pan. They have expanded with more branches in the year 2023, after the pandemic, and after suffering a rise in the most important raw material, flour.

The war conflict in Ukraine has complicated production costs, but they have been very resilient and assertive in trying to keep their prices competitive, said their legal advisor (Durán, 2023). He also emphasised what is described in Figure 3, during the inauguration of a new branch in the city centre of Tampico.

“We are at a political and economic point where it is easy to invest. Let us remember that in the eighties they tried to disappear all the cooperative societies in Tampico, and many did not survive; a well-known case is the United Guild of Alijadores. We made a huge effort not only to maintain ourselves, we invested and proof is this location,” he explained.

Figure 3 Statement by the legal advisor of the Best Bread Workers' Company

Source: Durán (2023)

For the Salinera de Altamira, the pandemic caused a lot of uncertainty as sales plummeted, in addition to all the health problems and loss of life among its members, as can be read in Figure 4, part of the interview with Luis Enrique Yáñez Obregón, president of the cooperative society (Sosa, 2022). Pedro Ramírez Castillo, a cooperative member, also reiterated that they were only supplying businesses and ranchers in San Luis Potosí, along with the ranchers in this southern area of Tamaulipas and the purification plants, which allowed them to survive.

“COVID-19 left serious effects, it hurt us a lot in sales, we had many people who got sick and there were those who got ahead of us on the way; We have not recovered, we have sales that fell by more than 50%, main clients from the state of San Luis Potosí and the livestock sector stopped buying from us due to this pandemic situation,” he said.

Figure 4 Statement by the president of the cooperative Salinera de Altamira

Source: Sosa (2022)

During the covid-19 pandemic, a reporter from southern Tamaulipas, Monsiváis (2021), interviewed the representative of the members of the then Sociedad Cooperativa de los Autobuses Azules de Tampico. This was the result of a dispute that had been going on for 10 years over the sale of important real estate belonging to the cooperative itself. The perception of that representative of the members is shown in Figure 5, and the social networks of the company and its leaders were cancelled.

He recalled that it was a decade ago that the cooperative was terminated, "supposedly, because some debts could not be paid, but there were buses and land, however, the Board of Directors declared bankruptcy, and they were never given their severance payments to the 400 workers who work there.”

Figure 5 Statement of the representative of the Blue Buses Cooperative Company

Source: Monsiváis (2021)

Regarding the same cooperative society, Durán (2021) of Milenio reported the definitive ruling for the sale of the property in front of the Tampico International Airport, in favour of a hotel investor, as can be read in Figure 6.

The infrastructure formerly belonging to the Cooperativa de Autobuses Azules in Tampico, one of the most emblematic public transportation lines of the last century in the southern area of Tamaulipas, began to be demolished and cleaned to be occupied by a new investment after the end of a dispute.

Figure 6 Newspaper report on the sale of the property of the Sociedad Cooperativa de los Autobuses Azules (Blue Buses Cooperative Society)
Source: Durán (2021)

In the same year, Campos (2021) gives an account of the situation of the members of the Gremio Unido de Alijadores, once the most powerful cooperative society in Tamaulipas and a national leader for many others, officialised in 1922 as SC de RL. The workers in the port of Tampico, and then also in the port of Altamira in 1985, were left without a contract in 2010 due to non-compliance with various labour laws in force and non-payment of debts, and were therefore no longer able to work. See Figure 7.

An ordeal began for the alijadores, who to this day demand their severance after denouncing the then president of the GUA Board of Directors, Jesús Ramón Martínez del Ángel, who committed a million-dollar fraud against the union, a case that remains open until now. On October 2, 2012, Martínez del Ángel was arrested and released in less than 24 hours paying bail of 81,177 pesos.

Figure 7 Newspaper report on the denunciation of GUA leaders
Source: Campos (2021)

Quintín González Lima, president of the Board of Directors of the Sociedad Cooperativa La Flor de México, in an interview with the newspaper Milenio, said: "Over the years we have had very difficult situations, since the floods in Tampico in 1955. It should be noted that the bakery was founded in 1936 and is about to celebrate 90 uninterrupted years. In recent years, he pointed out that covid-19 is now the biggest challenge in their history (Reyes, 2021).

Before the covid-19 pandemic, a newspaper article by Mirna Hernández (2018) pointed out in June that, in order to obtain government benefits, more than a thousand fishermen would join various cooperative societies, as shown in Figure 8. However, when reviewing data from later dates, the shrimp fishermen's cooperative society mentioned by the interviewee did not appear.

To ensure that the more than a thousand shrimp fishermen in southern Tamaulipas obtain official credits, gasoline subsidies, and economic support from the state government and Conapesca, new cooperatives are in the process of integration, which will make fishing cooperatives flourish again in this town.

Figure 8 Statement by the President of the Federation of Fishing Cooperatives of Southern Tamaulipas
Source: Hernández (2018)

Interviews carried out

In the first instance, an attempt was made to contact members of the fish-producing cooperatives, as these are the predominant ones in the area. However, when asked for an interview, all of them chose to decline the request.

Therefore, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the cooperatives. The questions focused on the difficulties they have faced over time, the strategies implemented to deal with them and, from their perspective, what actions were taken to be successful.

These questions were answered by the Mejor Pan partner in the following words: "We changed the external advisory services both in accounting and legal and it was nice to discover that we found skilled professionals who have adapted to our vision" (Herrera, 2023).

Another person interviewed was Eduardo Castillo (2023), a cooperative leader with an engineering background in agronomy and vast experience in rural production. Castillo recommends always making a business plan, because any enterprise should be a business, including cooperatives. This implies having a vision of the demand to be covered by the supply, being aware of the risks and having a strategy for it.

Mr. Castillo also commented on the six-year fickleness of government support. Since there is no certainty about this, this situation should be considered. Finally, he insists on the need to share experiences, so he is willing to advise those who are starting a rural production cooperative.

Discussion

As described, the existence of co-operative societies is not at all consistent from one source to another, fieldwork has been essential for direct contact and validation of information.

Although fishing cooperative societies represent the majority in the southern zone of Tamaulipas, the ones that stand out for their permanence, crossing generations, are those of commerce, such as the bakeries: El Mejor Pan and La Flor de México.

Meanwhile, the GUA cooperative society, whose members were workers in the port of Tampico, still remains, legally speaking. However, it is in the process of liquidation following multiple lawsuits and embezzlement by the partners who once ran the society.

In Altamira, the salt works are also in financial trouble, initially because of the occupation of the land for the port of Altamira, and in recent times because of the covid-19 pandemic. In this particular case, in the early 1980s, a series of national policies began to be implemented affecting the then rural area of Altamira. Thus, "the ejidos as a whole have lost around 11,000 hectares, the most important of which are those located on the coast. Tensions between peasants and industrialists have surfaced in different ejidos in the region: Francisco Medrano, Ricardo Flores Magón, Congregación Armenta, Lomas del Real and Villa de Altamira" (Vera Vázquez, 2011, p. 189).

Hence, the fishing production cooperatives were directly affected, specifically those located around the Marismas area, where there were salt mines and rural producers. See Figure 9.

Vera Vázquez (2011) states that "neither the Federación de sociedades Cooperativas de la Industria Pesquera del Sur del Estado de Tamaulipas, nor the civil organisation linked to the Sociedad Cooperativa "Las Marismas" had the presence or the empowerment required to negotiate retribution for affecting the ecosystem and changing land use" (p. 194) and points to the prevailing illiteracy and trust in government authorities as two main causes.



Figure 9 Topographic chart F14B74
Source: INEGI (2021)

Based on the results presented, the main factors affecting the openness and development of co-operative societies are broken down below.

Foreign investment. The cooperative members mentioned that until the 1980s, all entrepreneurs in the area knew each other and there was no difference between commercial and social companies.

With the opening of the market to transnational companies, their income was affected. This situation led to the closure of several cooperatives, including the Miramar fishing production cooperative and small salt production cooperatives in Altamira.

Academic preparation. There have been repeated difficulties in the administration of the societies, as most of the members do not have higher education, having joined the operational area of the societies at a very young age.

Expert professionals. Some agreed that they have not been properly advised by outsourced legal and accounting services, due to their lack of knowledge of how to manage cooperatives.

Environmental factors. The pandemic was a challenge for the cooperatives to continue operating; today, the drought in the area is a challenge.

Political factors. Governmental actions carried out without involving the cooperative members and ejidatarios. Participatory actions should be appropriate for the sustainability of the area.

Recommendations for new social entrepreneurs

Training. It is necessary to have some basic knowledge in social economy and in the administration of these societies, when having the desire to undertake cooperative societies (INAES, 2021). In this way, values such as solidarity and participatory strategies will be present, so that there is effective collaborative work management and an awareness of the need for sustainability.

Specialised consultancy. For the opening of new companies it is necessary to seek professional advice from experts in the social area. This represents a challenge because there are no universities in the area that have related programmes. Recently, the National Technological Institute of Mexico, through the Technological Institute of Ciudad Madero, started a Master's programme in Social and Solidarity Economy. It is hoped that by 2025 there will be graduates who will be able to address this problem.

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Conclusions

The importance of this article lies in the identification of the existing cooperative societies in the southern area of Tamaulipas, and through the interviews, the challenges they have faced, as well as the strategies applied to remain in force.

The information presented shows that there is a majority of commercial enterprises as opposed to cooperatives, which represent a minority. This does not mean that the purely mercantile path is the right one, because given the existing deterioration of the local economic model, it is necessary to look for alternatives that allow for the reactivation of the economic situation of certain sectors in the southern zone of Tamaulipas.

This does not have to be done individually or in isolation; there are options such as those offered by the social economy, based on collaborative work with responsibility, solidarity and commitment, which can replace some commercial companies through cooperative societies.

This economic model will not replace the prevailing one, but it is a real and viable alternative to strengthen alliances between independent entrepreneurs who find the necessary support in the union with their peers.

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