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**THE POWER OF MEMBERS IN CO-OPERATIVES: ASSESSING MEMBERS' PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING PROCESS FROM SELECTED AGRICULTURAL MARKETING CO-OPERATIVES IN SHINYANGA REGION, TANZANIA**

**Gratian Cronery Rwekaza<sup>1</sup> and Paulo Anania<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract**

*Based on their structure and legal framework, the control and power of making decisions in co-operatives of all types is vested on the members, including those in agricultural marketing co-operatives (AMCOS). Through general meetings, members exercise their democratic rights and power to make various decisions on matters that affect their welfare. The current paper aims to share knowledge on how members in AMCOS participate in decision making rocs as part of exercising their power. The paper is based on the findings from the cross-sectional study conducted in three AMCOS of Ibadakuli, Uzogole and Kizumbi in Shinyanga region, Tanzania in 2018. Specifically the paper centred on; assessing socio-demographic characteristics of members participating in the AMCOS; frequency of general meetings and members' attendance; nature of members' participation in general meetings; members' participations in co-operative projects cycle and; the perceptions of members on the decision making process. The paper uses primary data collected through questionnaire, interviews and focus group discussion (FGD). The sample size was determined by convenience method but the selection was done randomly using rotary method to reduce biasness of non-mathematical sampling techniques. A total of 100 respondents were covered in through questionnaire administration, five (5) participants involved in FGD and ten (10) in key informant interview. Generally, the study found limited number of youth and women participating in AMCOS and most of the members were men aged above 60 years. General meetings were found not be held regularly as required and members' attendance was also low. In general meetings, members' participations has been high in; electing leaders; approving by-laws and budget and; follow up on agenda and low in other aspects indicating partial participation of members in some key matters in the meeting. In co-operative projects (investments), members participated mostly in identification, approval and financing and implementation while less involved in other aspects such as preparations, monitoring and evaluation. Despite all these, still members had some positive views on how decisions are made in their AMCOS and revealed to have control of decision making process, democracy is observed and they somehow get feedback on implementation of previous decisions. It was also found that members do not have opportunity to access meeting documents and agenda in advance and sometimes leaders and staff tend to influence them in approving issues in meetings. The paper conclude that members participation is biased with age and sex inequalities and meetings are not held frequently as required which all are likely to affect the strength an sustainability of the AMCOS. However to some extent, members have the opportunity to exercise their democratic rights and power in making decisions through general meetings. The paper generally recommends for continuous provision of co-operative education to members, leaders and management and external stakeholders continue working closely with the AMCOS to ensure that governance practices are well exercised and power of members is sustainably safeguarded.*

**Key words:** *Members, Powers, Participation, Decision making, Co-operatives, Agricultural marketing co-operatives*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Across the world, there are millions of people who have chosen the co-operative model of business enterprise to enable them to reach their personal and community development goals. Co-operatives help to form and maintain a great chance of attaining socio-economic development. Co-operatives exist in different types based on the sector where members' operate. In agriculture, as part of the advantages, co-operative societies provide employment and income and they are responsible for producing and supplying safe and quality food and services to their members as well as to the communities in which they operate (Yacob *et al.*, 2015; Hernández *et al.*, 2013; Chaddad and Cook, 2004). By concepts, a co-operative is viewed based on four major aspects. First, they are formed by groups of people, who have a specified need or problem. Second, the organization is formed freely by members after contributing to its assets. Thirdly, the organization formed, is governed democratically in order to achieve desired objectives on equitable norms, and fourth, it is an independent enterprise promoted, owned and controlled by people to meet their needs (Sacchett and Tortia, 2015; Simmons and Birchall, 2008; Chambo, 2007). Co-operatives operate by using on co-operative principles and values. By putting the co-operative principles and ethics in practice they promote solidarity and tolerance. On the other hand, co-operatives had been viewed as the 'schools of democracy' since it promote the rights of each individual (Chambo, 2007; Jussila *et al.*, 2012). In general, co-operatives are formed by people with same socio-economic needs and aspirations and opt to address them through operating their business collectively using democratic principles.

Co-operatives are socially conscious responding to the needs of their members whether it is to provide literacy or technical training, or to take action against their social problems and promote their wellbeing (Anania and Towo, 2016; Chambo, 2009). Through their varied activities, co-operatives are in many countries significant social and economic actors in national economies (Anania and Bee, 2018; Chaddad and Cook, 2004; Kimario, 1992) thus contributing to both personal development and well-being of the entire national populations. Co-operatives can be formed in any sector of the economy of a country such as agriculture, mining, industries, service and sectors. In agriculture, co-operatives have played an important economic role in human development. For instance, Tanzanian co-operatives were largely agriculture based (Likwata and Venkatakrishnan, 2014; Nuwagaba, 2012) and have been essential in enabling members' access to inputs, markets and protection of their interests. In attaining all these, participation of members in business and management of their co-operative is very important.

In Africa, participation of people in collective action for development existed for years with its origin from forms of cooperation and has survived impact of colonialism and the structural changes. Traditionally, in local communities people worked together is different issues ranging from helping each other in rotation or jointly carry out farming, construction and communal works, and rotating savings and credit associations whose members make regular contributions to a revolving loan fund (Lario *et al.*, 2014). From early 1920, member participation in collective action was formalized by colonial administration that promoted the establishment of co-operatives, mainly in form of primarily agricultural marketing co-operatives (AMCOS). The AMCOS aimed to enable members to produce and market their crops jointly while easing availability of raw materials for the colonialists. Rwekaza and Nko (2012) and Wanyama (2009) argued that, throughout the independence era in Africa, the component of member participation in creating institutional decisions passed through moments of state direction and later entered economic liberalization. Members are expected to take control of their co-operative and participate in various affairs. Unfortunately in most cases members are still lagged behind and the government has been championing decision making process in co-operatives (Rwekaza and Mhihi, 2016; Zeuli and Radel, 2005). In this case, participation of members in African agricultural co-operatives has for years been weakened by external interferences (Chambo,

2009). Provided that members can't have full control of decisions and other affairs in their co-operatives it is difficult to realize their destiny and likely to affect their commitment.

For instance from late 1960s to early 1980s, Tanzanian co-operative movement experienced major change of co-operative orientation through automatic membership which was propelled by the policy of Socialism and Self-reliance. In this era, members' participation in the policy formation and decision making process was mostly neglected and governance becomes top down (Sizya, 2001). However from 1980's, the state-control on co-operatives was severely affected by the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) adopted by many African states. The co-operatives institutions lost protection and support and in early 1990's the democratic reforms were adopted by many African countries, in those systems members became more aware about their democratic rights, the aspect of being controlled by the state was overturned by democratic practice. This resulted in a sharp decline in the number and turnover of co-operatives and the emergence of a multitude of grassroots initiatives (Rwekaza, *et al.*, 2019; Chambo, 2011). Co-operatives in Tanzania like in other African countries are still at the drawing board and more design should be done to promote members' participation and ensure their needs are met. This should be part of co-operative policy agenda (Chambo, 2007). It may be argued that if members are given opportunity to full exercise their power, they can actively participate in various issues and take control of their organizations. Members' participation may also help to capture different opportunities to address their socio-economic needs and aspirations.

Studies indicate that member participation in policies and institutionalization is determined by peripheral in the co-operative enterprises. In this case, it is difficult to promote co-operative institutions that champion the economy to suit members' social and economic goals (Rwekaza *et al.*, 2018b; Banturaki, 2012; Chambo, 2009; Deji, 2005; Chaddad and Cook, 2004). In such environment where members don't make decisions, they become marginalized. Members are expected to participate in different issues such as business operations, governance of their organizations, leadership process and managing of resources and key decisions. Participation of members in decision making machinery in the co-operatives helps to create strong organizations that can help to address their socio-economic problems. Also members need to have control of decisions in process of interacting with external stakeholders e.g. in pricing commodities, inputs supply, joint investments and other affairs (Maghimbi, 2006; Maghimbi, 2010 and Birchall, 2011). Therefore, attaining active participation of members, there is a need to promote their voice in decision making of various co-operative affairs as argued by Rwekaza and Anania, 2018 and Romzek, 2000).

Since co-operatives are member-owned and controlled organizations, it is expected that members shall always participate and take lead in various issues. This paper therefore aims to assess the power of members in co-operative life particularly in decision making on various affairs. The key focus of the paper has been on members' participation in decision making meetings, co-operative projects and their perceptions on how they participate. It is expected that this paper will contribute in empirical knowledge on the power of members particularly how they involve themselves in decision making process on matters of their enterprises. The paper is expected to further highlight the need to promote awareness to members on their legitimate powers and shape the role of various actors in policy and interventions within the co-operative movement with aiming of promoting members participation and their overall empowerment. Attaining all these will help to make members central to decision-making process and co-operative governance in general.

The current paper is organized into three parts that follows hereafter. From the introduction above, the paper proceeds with the description of the methodology applied followed with presentation and discussion of the findings. The discussion part is sub-divided into description

of; socio-demographic characteristics of members; member' participation in decision making meetings; their involvement in co-operative projects and members perceptions on their participations in co-operative affairs. The paper ends with providing conclusion and recommendations based on the discussion made.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This paper is written based on the findings from the study conducted in Shinyanga region in year 2018. The study focused on three agricultural marketing co-operatives (AMCOS) operating in Ibadakuli, Uzogole and Kizumbi wards. The focus was on the AMCOS engaging in cotton production. Though the AMCOS were purposively selected, the area was chosen in context of activeness of the co-operative movement in the region. Despite that Shinyanga region is among the places in Tanzania where the co-operative movement started early, yet there is minimal empirical works on members' participations in decision making and other governance aspects. Further, the long generated experience among members on co-operative life in both theory and practice made the area more relevant to carry such study to assess their participation in co-operative affairs.

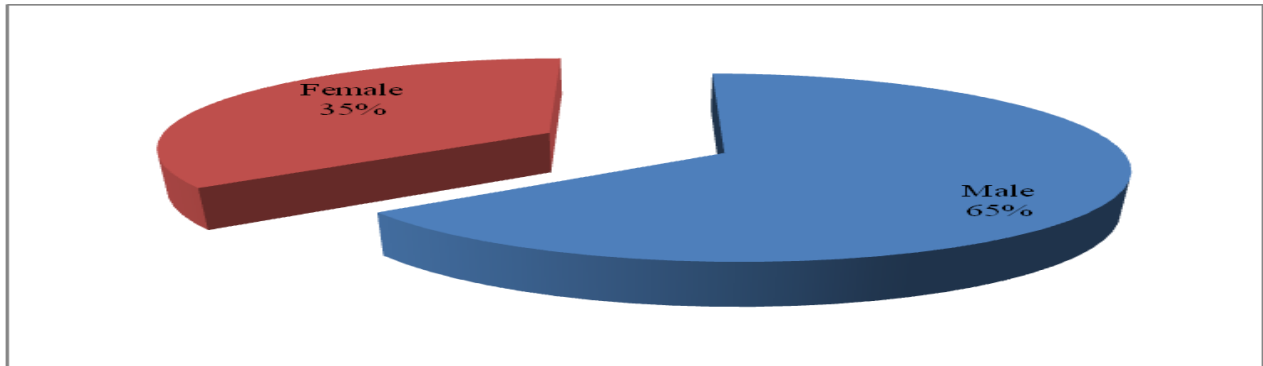
The study adapted a cross-sectional design where data were collected at once in the point of interaction with respondents. The tools for data collection were administered at once in each contact. Though both primary and secondary data were collected, only primary data from survey questionnaire, key informant interviews and focus groups discussion (FGD) have been included in this paper. The questionnaire and the checklists for key informant interview and FGD were all administered by the researchers during data collection. Similar themes were used in both interview and FGS checklist. The study involved the sample of 100 respondents from the AMCOS determine through convenience sampling method. The distribution was 35 respondents from Kizumbi, 35 from Ibadakuli and 30 from Uzogole. However, in selecting the respondents, random selection using rotary selection technique was used to reduce biasness of non-mathematical sampling techniques. From the registry of membership, 100 respondents were selected and involved in data collection. The questionnaire had both open and closed ended questions and used to collect quantitative data. In choosing participants for key informant interviews and FGD purposive sampling technique was applied. The participants were chosen based on their knowledge and experience on co-operative business operations and governance. A total of five (5) participants (2 Board members, 2 ordinary members and 1 AMCOS staff) were involved in the FGD. In key informant interviews, ten (10) participants were involved and included 2 Board members, 2 AMCOS staff, 2 District Co-operative Officers (DCOs), 2 Co-operative Union staff and 2 ordinary members. Both the interview and FGD methods enabled collection of qualitative data that supplemented questionnaire data. The qualitative data have been analyzed using content analysis. The qualitative data were collected through notebooks then later sorted and created logical patterns of statements which were provided with meaningful codes based on thematic issues of interests. The statements have been interpreted and discussed to supplement the discussion of the quantitative data. The quantitative data used in this paper have been analyzed using descriptive analysis and presented in percentages. The analyzed data have been presented in tables and figures (pie charts, column charts and bar charts) drawn using Microsoft Excel.

## **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This part provides the presentation of study findings and their discussion. It consists of three sub-parts on socio-demographic details, members' participation in decision making meetings, members' participation in projects (businesses) and members' perceptions on their participation in co-operative affairs. The presentation and discussion of findings is provided below.

### 3.1 Socio-demographic Characteristics of Members Participating in Co-operative Affairs

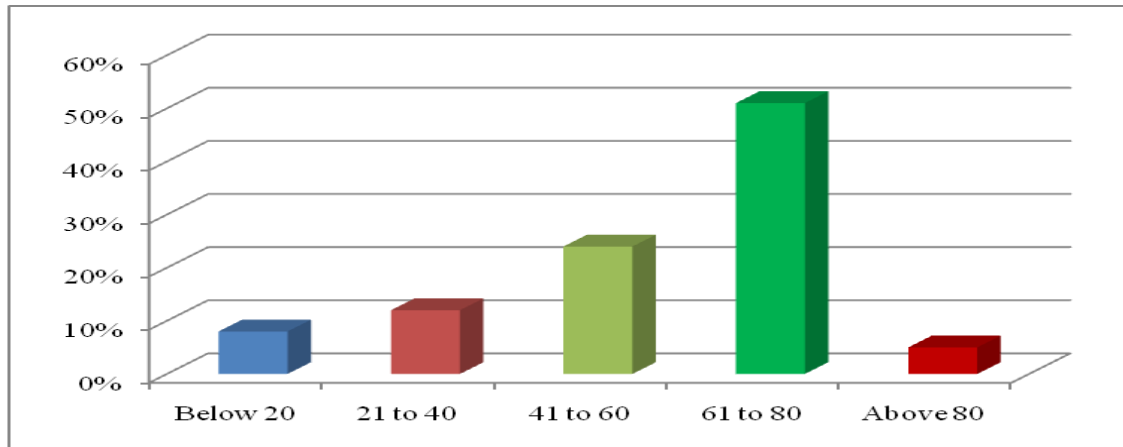
The sex composition of the respondents included 65 male (65%) and 35 (35%) female. The findings indicates that majority of the members in AMCOS are male. The difference in sex composition indicate the inequality in AMCOS membership where male members dominate. This further cements the long term practice of limited female members in AMCOS (Anania and Rwekaza, 2016). Figure 1 presents the sex composition of respondents.



**Figure 1: Sex of respondents**

The prevailing socio-cultural barriers such as patriarchy nature of most of agricultural societies accompanied with limited access to land, resource control and decision making power among women are likely to have affected women membership. In the context of participation, these findings on sex composition give as picture of how attaining gender balance in AMCOS is a serious challenge. With limited membership means that women members are likely not to be able to significantly influence decision making process, protect their interests and engage seriously in leadership process. Further, at point where democratic practices of voting on basis of membership not sex, it is possible that women cannot seriously be in favour if among them some are contesting for positions in AMCOS.

As indicated in Figure 2, the study also revealed the nature of age composition of the respondents in the AMCOS. It was found clearly that majority of members were in their elderly ages. It was found that 24% of respondents were aged between 41 to 60 years, 51% had between 61 to 80 years and those aged above 80 years composed 5%. Further, it was found that number of respondents aged 20 years and below was 8% while those aged 21 to 40 years were 12%. The findings indicate that few members in AMCOS are at youth age portraying lack of adequate energetic members in its majority. The low number of young members was due to the fact that youth are not becoming members in the co-operative societies. Most of the respondents were above 40 years which in average is above the youth age defined in Tanzania National Youth Policy of 2007 where youth are those aged 15 to 35 years (URT, 2007). It is true that literally people in their 40s are considered as energetic and equivalent to adult youth but that segment was found to be small. Unfortunately in this study majority of people were aged above 60 years and still a significant number of them were aged between 41 to 60 years. The large number of members above youth age implies lack of enough energetic members in the AMCOS. The AMCOS need to have large pool of young members to sustain operations at organization and individual levels. Young people can help to champion innovations and new ideas in business operations, governance and managerial issues (Anania and Sambuo, 2017).



**Figure 2: Age of members participating in co-operative affairs**

Despite the fact that it is argued that the more the age the more the wisdom, still wisdom cannot be the only thing to sustain production and business operations in the AMCOS. As the elders hold people in AMCOS, more youth are need to bring in new ideas and participation in whole value of cotton (for case of the study area) and other affairs in the organization. Limited youth participation are likely to contribute into stagnation of the AMCOS, low production, limited innovation and technological adoption and challenged competitive capacity in liberalized markets (Anania and Kimaro, 2016). Promoting youth and women membership and participation in co-operative life including governance process is essential (Deji, 2005). Issues constraining youth participation such as adult male dominance, limited trust on youth by elder members and cultural barriers to land access have to be the obligation of the AMCOS to address them (Anania and Sambuo, 2017). Co-operative institutional growth is largely determined by having new entry members, and members who are productive and participative. The aspect of having more elders indicates deterioration of co-operative institutions in social economic development. Also age might be one of the key reasons for low participation as old people tend to be less active in some issues as they are less energetic. It is clear that without deliberate efforts to restructure membership, by age and even sex, there is a threat in near future that these co-operatives will face shortage of members.

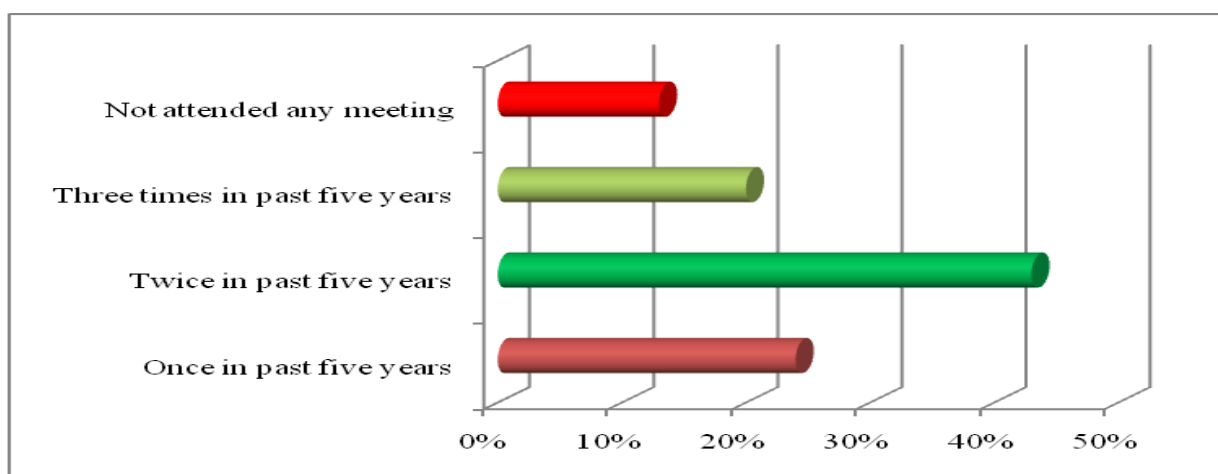
Generally it may be argued that these demographic characteristics among AMCOS members bring serious concern. Most of the members are in elderly in their sixties therefore they are those whose energies are in decline and possibly rarely active economically. The young people comprised of small fraction in membership while they are in age of activeness in terms of production and participation in co-operative affairs. Looked from this angle, the membership structure and activeness in participation in AMCOS affairs is subject to scrutiny as the situation is likely to lead into deterioration of co-operative institutions. Also it was found that currently there are no serious efforts to recruit young members for new recruitment. The aspects of promotion and advertisement, education and community awareness creation for the quest of attracting new membership, including youth were not found on the surveyed AMCOS.

In similar view, the problem of aging membership structure and limited youth participation in co-operatives has been revealed by different studies (Rwekaza *et al.*, 2018*b*; Anania and Kimaro, 2016; Anania and Rwekaza, 2016; Auka and Mwangi (2013). Youth in the agricultural marketing co-operatives lacks their voices despite of their minority in their numbers (URT, 2005). The youth and other members need to be actively involved in co-operative business hence emphasis should be made on empowerment programmes for them to build confidence and ability to manage their own economic affairs and their co-operative organization. Enabling environment should be created and should encourages participatory ways of tackling and solving problems (Bovens, 2007). This will help to promote participation hence assure

collective control, ownership and promotion of good governance and commitment in the AMCOS. These efforts should include education and training opportunities to promote participation. The traditional member education and training did not expose members to issues of their entitlements to power and authority in decision making and resource allocation (Azadi and Karami, 2010; Henricks, 2004).

### 3.2 Member participation in meetings for decision making

The status assessed the participation of members in AMCOS meetings as a forum for making major decisions for their socio-economic and organizational development. This was crucial as members are the key stakeholders of their co-operatives and responsible in deciding their fate. In this aspect, the study focused on assessing two main things. First, the frequency of members' participation in meetings (for past five years) and second, how members participated in the meeting they have been attending. Generally, the findings revealed that the frequency of members' participation differed among them but members were aware of the need to participate in meetings and how they were required to participate in those meetings they attended. The findings on frequency of members' participation in meetings are shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3: Frequency of members' attendance in meetings for the past five years**

In terms of members' frequency in attending co-operative meeting, it was found that most of members attended at least twice (43%) or three times (20%) in past five years. Also 24% of respondents found to have attended one general meeting and 13% of them didn't attend any meeting in the past five years. In general the percentages reveal the presence of low members' participation in co-operative meetings (below 50%). During the FGD, leaders and staff in the AMCOS revealed that only two to three general meetings were held in the past five years. This is likely to be the main reason for minimal frequency of members' attendance. The findings further reveal the existence limitation of democratic rights of members. The co-operative meetings are essential forum for members to exercise their democratic rights and power by engaging in discussing the agenda and making decision on matters that focus to promote their interests. Depriving members' rights and power by delaying conduct of meetings is harmful to the strength and sustainability of the AMCOS. The question also come, if meetings are not called regularly, how did the decisions were made? It is clear that leadership and management have hijacked the power and rights of members and make decision on their behalf. Reasons such as budgetary constraints and uncommitted leadership were revealed from key informant interviews as key reasons for such delays to hold general meetings very year as required in AMCOS by-laws and Co-operative Act.

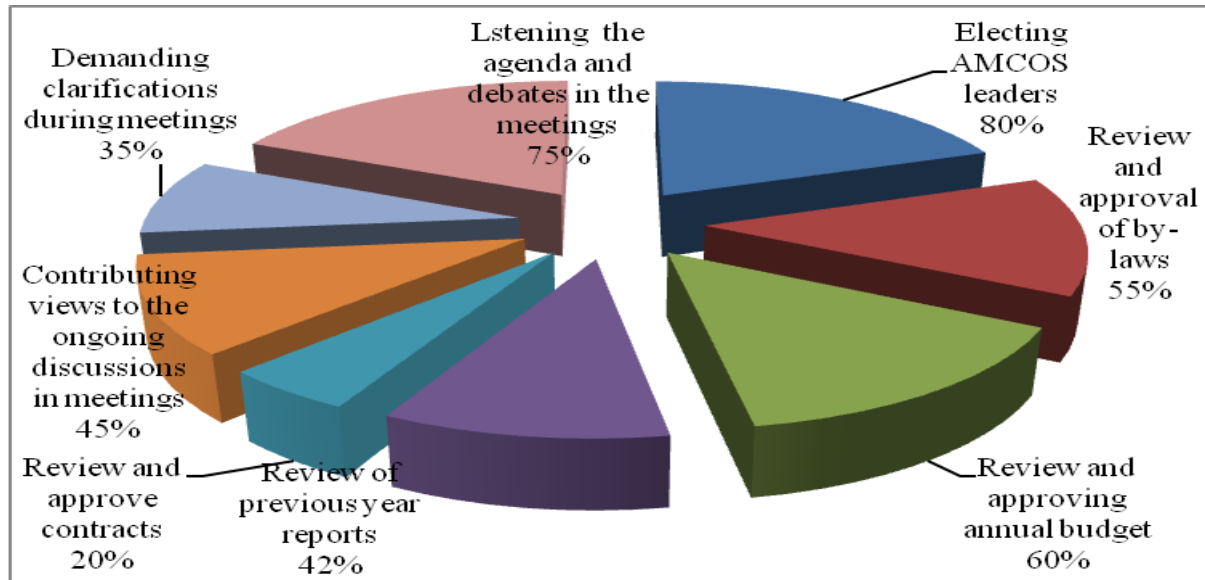
On the other side, presence of members who didn't attend meetings is a sign of limited members' education to understand their rights and obligations. As owners, controllers, users and



beneficiaries of the co-operative enterprise, members need to take the lead in all affairs within their co-operatives. The members involved in interview also revealed that members are more interested with selling their produce rather than making follow of else is happening in their AMCOS. In that case, they tend to choose what meeting to attend or not to attend. The aspect of members meeting was found to be given emphasis by members, that it should be given its status for co-operative developments. Rwekaza *et al.*, (2019), Lario *et al.*, (2014) and Chambo (2009) revealed that with minimal participation of members in meetings, it is likely that members will lose their democratic rights and opportunity to exercise power and even put their co-operative under weak bargaining positions when comes to external business interactions. Therefore, co-operative leaders and management are obliged to invest more on interventions aiming to empower members to increase their participation in co-operative affairs and capacity to engage in different forum of bargaining.

Meetings is one of the key areas and a tool for member control of their co-operative institutions, absence of meetings leads to minimize membership powers and leads to tarnishing the image of the co-operative societies. According to Rwekaza *et al.*, (2018a), Rwekaza and Nko (2012) and Chambo (2009) argued that, one of the reasons for tarnished co-operatives image for decades is due to limited membership powers vested at the annual general meetings. The challenges of limited members' ownership to demand for meetings and low participation in decision making are common in co-operative in agriculture (Baka, 2013). In this case, committed leaders and managers are needed to thoughtfully and professionally balance politics and economic interests to enable members exercise their democratic right and conduct their businesses. The members must be stakeholders who have more control of their institution and the leadership and management must give them opportunity to exercise their democratic rights and powers as owners Chambo (2008) and Anderson and Henehan, (2005). It was revealed from the key informant interviews that the general meetings were called under the directives of the District Co-operative Officers (DCOs) rather than being an initiative of the leaders (Board members). From this perspective, it may be argued that AMCOS leaders don't seriously execute their obligations granted to them by members. On the other side, it implies that co-operatives are still being owned by governments through the officials and leaders have to wait for the external orders to call meetings. This was further cemented by evidence of letters from DCOs directing the AMCOS to call general meetings rather than being an internal co-operative initiative to do so.

After assessing the frequency in attending general meetings, the study further wanted to assess the how the members actively participate in the meetings. A total of six areas of participation were provided in multiple response form. The findings revealed that when attended general meetings; 80% of respondents engaged actively in electing AMCOS leaders (Board), 75% found to be listening carefully and making follow up on the meeting agenda and debates, 60% in review and approval of annual budget and 55% in review and approval of by-laws. Low participation was revealed in; contributing views/ideas in the ongoing discussions (45%), review of previous financial and management reports (42%), review and approve contracts (20%), and demand for clarifications during meetings (35%). The findings on the aspects of members' participation in meetings have been shown in Figure 4. The findings indicate that mostly as they attend meetings, the members are more interested in issues relating to choosing leaders, making follow up of meetings agenda and debates, review and approve budgets as well as amendments of the by-laws.



**Figure 4: Areas of active members' participation in co-operative meetings**

The findings give the picture that there is quite a good level of participation in these aspects. However, low participations in other issues such as engaging in meetings' debates, follow ups of previous expenditures, review of contracts and seeking clarifications in meetings give an alarm. Members also tend to treat some matters in general meetings as more important than others. From the findings, it is likely that AMCOS members have put much trust on their leaders and management in running the co-operative to the extent that they don't make countercheck seriously what they have done. High response in elections and reviewing and approving various documents while there is low participation in engaging in debates and review of past performances show that members don't bother questioning the leadership and management. This is high risk behaviour for members as they can be deprived to exercise their power and promoting their interests. The findings also give another picture of "escaping responsibility" behaviour by members hence shift the burden to leaders and staff and sympathizing them by not provoking them through serious questioning through debates and demand for clarification of some issues.

Similarly, Baffes, (2003) and Sizya, (2001) explained the need for policy reforms and empowerment to members so they can capture their power and widen their participation. The members need to take active part in decision making process through meeting to ensure that their will is known and executed properly by leaders and management. They must be central to the governance of their organization (Lario *et al.*, 2014; ICA and ILO, 2014). Members need to take active part in general meetings as they are forum to catalyse change and development of their co-operatives. Based on the co-operative principles especially the democratic member control, co-operatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions (ICA, 2014). Members need to participate active in the general meetings and take control of the process for making managerial decisions.

### **3.3 Members participation in co-operative projects (investments)**

As a business enterprise, co-operatives need to diversify its business so as to increase surplus and competitive advantage aiming to meet members' socio-economic needs and aspirations. This can be done through initiating various business projects (investments) which are managed and governed by leaders and staff on behalf of members. Such projects may include; constructing commercial buildings, installations of machinery, input supply business, marketing

of produce and others. In all these projects, member participation is highly needed. The findings on members' participation in co-operative projects have been presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Stages of member participation in co-operative projects**

Primary AMCOS	Variables on projects implementation						
	Identification	Preparation	Appraisal	Approval and financing	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluating
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Ibadakuli	15	8	2	25	31	8	5
Uzogole	20	13	6	21	28	10	3
Kizumbi	16	23	5	22	23	15	2
<b>Total</b>	51	44	13	68	82	33	10

The findings in Table 1 indicate that in co-operative project cycle, most of the members participate in identifying (51%), approving and financing (68%) and implementation (82%) of the projects. The results depict the nature of participation of most of the co-operatives. The project idea whether coming from the members (through general meeting) or from leaders and/or staff, it must be approved by members before it is operationalized. Once the preparations are ready, the members will be required to approve the project and the financing and later be involved in implementation process, directly and indirectly based on the nature of the project. Monitoring and evaluation are treated as pure leadership and managerial functions hence exclude the members. In this case it is difficult to measure efficiency and effectiveness of the project performance. It is possible for the leadership and staff to collude and benefit from the project or hide any discrepancies likely to cause complaints from members. Despite the technicalities in preparation, appraisal, monitoring and evaluation of the projects, it could be wise to involve members directly (e.g. by inviting some active members in the process) or indirectly (e.g. by regular information on the project progress). This can help to create the sense of ownership, willingness to commit resources and efforts and assure sustainability of such initiatives. During the FGD, the participants revealed that in most cases, the ideas for the projects/investments to be pursued come from the staff and leaders than from members. Once the leaders and staff agreed on the suitability of the idea, and then send it to the members for considerations and approval to proceeding.

Some participants in key informant interview indicated that in most cases members trust their leaders and staff hence they are less likely to refuse the proposal for projects provided that financing will come from AMCOS resources or external support. At one point the findings indicate that leaders and staff are doing their job by identifying business ideas and submit them to the members for further action. On the other side, the process creates questions as to whether all the initiatives are really of the members interests. In reference to the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) principles on "democratic members control" and "members economic participations", it is clear leaders and staff are obliged to adhere to and promote interest of members and ensure that all economic initiatives are of the benefit to members. Democratic practices and values need to be adhered in each stage of the project to ensure protection of members' rights and power.

Looking the co-operative projects beyond primary level, studies by Kanagaraj and Deressa, (2015), Ortmann and King (2007), Chambo (2009) and Mhando and Itani, (2007) revealed the dominance of upper co-operative structure such as Unions in detecting type of projects to be established and approved by the primaries and even being financed by them. Such structures prolong burden to members and operate uncompetitive in the liberalized market as their business are not re-defined by the members. In this case, AMCOS need strong leaders and management to allocate its resources and determine best options to venture for the interests of

members and the organization as whole. The AMCOS need to cultivate the best and flexible leadership and management capacity to promote and protect their interests internally and in the face of external interests as they opt to invest in various opportunities (Anania and Rwekaza, 2016; Costa *et al.*, 2013). Other issues such as openness, accountability and members' participation need to be emphasized as part of promoting corporate governance (Roe, 2006) including in the AMCOS. There is a need for the leaders and management to ensure that co-operatives engage in profitable businesses that promote welfare of members rather than creating a burden to them. There should be efforts to promote members participation in investment in high value shares to make the co-operative competitive and bring high returns (Adu, 2014).

### 3.4 Members perception on the co-operative decision making process

It was of the interest of the study to assess the perceptions of members regarding their participation in decision making process. A number of statements indicating perceptions were given and members were asked to rate their perceptions on each of them through a 5-point Likert scale answers. The description of the scale was as follow; 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = not sure (neutral), 2 = disagree and 1 = strongly disagree. The findings on the members' perceptions on the co-operative decision making process are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Members perceptions on the decision making process in co-operatives**

S/N	Response	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Statements/Percentage scores</b>						
1	Members are well informed about the agenda requiring their decisions in the general meetings	12%	28%	7%	30%	23%
2	Members have more power in making decisions	34%	20%	10%	16%	20%
3	Sometimes leaders and staff tend to influence members to support their decisions	11%	40%	12%	18%	19%
4	Leaders and staff can decide major issues without consulting general meetings	5%	39%	13%	33%	10%
5	Democratic practices are followed in reaching decisions	31%	53%	2%	6%	8%
6	Leaders and staff respects decisions made by members in general meetings and implement them	41%	24%	19%	8%	8%
7	Members receive feedback from leaders and staff on all previous decisions made in general meeting	21%	33%		30%	16%

Table 2 indicates varying members' perceptions on various issues in relation to the decision making process in the AMCOS. When asked whether they are well informed on issues to be decided by them before the meeting, findings indicated that most of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed on this by a total of 53%. Those who either agreed or strongly agreed made a total of 40% of the response. This shows clearly that members are less informed in advance on what is going to be discussed. Therefore members go to the general meeting without prior information on the agenda. By requirements, members must have the meeting documents in advance so as to have enough time to read them before going to the meeting. From the FGD, the participants also revealed that meetings documents are not sent to members in advance so they have to discuss what have been prepared by leaders and staff. The response from leaders and staff in the interviews indicated that issues such as large number of membership, budgetary constraints and scattered of members make it difficult to distribute document in advance to all members. Despite these factors, it could be wide for them to use other alternatives such as posting the agenda in notes boards of AMCOS offices and other public places around to enable members to prepare themselves.

The respondents were also asked the degree of their power in making decisions. The findings showed that a total of 54% of them either agreed or strongly agreed that members have more power in making decisions. A total of 36% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement while 10% remained neutral. The findings mean that averagely, the AMCOS members feel to have more power in making decisions. Co-operative members are the owners of the organizations and by the legal framework they are have the full power to make all major decisions. But on the other side, the findings on those who disagreed, strongly disagreed and those being neutral give the picture that the feeling on members' power is not equally shared i.e. some felt members' power is not fully there. Further, in connection to limited access to the meeting agenda and documents before the meetings may give interpretation that their power is only to decide on what they find at the meeting as brought forward by leaders and staff. It emerged during the FGD where some leaders and staff indicated that the attendance of members in the meeting is not much good despite the fact that the quorum required is met. With low participation is may be interpreted that the power argued to be possessed by members is questionable. The best decisions need to be reached by majority of members and bind all. Average level of participation in meeting shows that members are not fully taking part in decision making process hence the few attending decides for the rest.

It was also found that sometimes leaders and staff tend to influence members on approving decisions they have brought to the meeting as it was agreed or strongly agreed by a total of 51% respondents. On same issues, a total of 37% either disagreed or strongly disagreed while 12% were neutral on the statement that leaders and staff tend to influence members in supporting their decisions. The findings give different interpretations if looked clearly. First, if members are the powerful decision makers but still they are being influenced to follow what leaders and staff have decide, then it brings questions on their power. It should be noted that leaders and staff should only bring the agenda on table and let members' discuss and reach decisions on them. Even for the issues that matters most to members' welfare, still they must let members to decide on their own without influencing them. Second, the observed practice indicates the possibility for leaders and staff to have their own hidden agenda on the issues they propose hence try to put themselves in safe side by tactfully including members' to approve them. In this case, even if something goes wrong they can be in safe side in terms of accountability since members have been involved. As argued by Rwekaza and Nko, (2012), leaders and staff tend to take advantage of limited members participations and inactiveness in meetings to approve agenda that fit their interests while hiding in the shadow of members' approval.

The respondents were also asked if the leaders and staff can make major decisions without consulting members (general meeting). The findings were almost equal to those who agreed or disagreed. It was found that a total of 44% of respondents said that leaders and staff sometimes make major decisions without consulting general meeting while a total of 43% either disagreed or strongly disagreed on this. The findings give the message that members are not the ones who make final decisions all the time. They show that there are circumstances where major decisions can be done by leaders and staff without approval by members while sometime they do so. The findings further reveal the hidden power of the leaders and staff as well as violations of co-operative principles in context of decision making. Major decisions such as entering contract, external financing, areas for investment, selecting input suppliers and others need to get members approval. It is possible that the over trusting nature of members to leaders and management brings to this practice assuming that nothing can go wrong. In practice, co-operative members are the legal owners of their business (Seimu, 2015). Hence the Board or management does not have controlling authority over the co-operative. The members usually plan and form a co-operative and then benefit from it. Their actions determine whether or not the co-operative will be profitable (Trewin, 2004). They must make sure that all decisions made have followed proper channel, enforce implementation and be able to hold leaders and

managers accountable (Romzek, 2000 and Roe, 2006). Members have specific powers under the law and also have powers that are outlined in the co-operatives by-laws. Member must be the one making major decisions such as; adopting the by-laws and other governing instruments and their amendments; electing leaders; approving changes in capital structure, increasing or decreasing capitalization, approving loans and marketing contracts and others (Magigi, 2016; Mlowe *et al.*, 2007).

The respondents were also asked about the democratic practices in reaching decisions. The findings revealed that 84% either agreed or strongly agreed that democratic practices are adhered in reaching decisions. While the rest were neutral and others either disagreed or strongly disagreed. In general the findings prove that democracy exists in AMCOS and it used to govern decision making. Some of the identified practices included; voting for issues needed decision and discussion for reaching consensus between opposing sides. As other types of co-operatives, AMCOS are governed by democratic practices that give every member the voice to be heard, engage in making decisions, resolving differences and convince others on matters that promote their welfare. In similar view, the work by Anania and Rwekaza, (2016) indicated that among the key factors for success in AMCOS is the existence of members commitment to the business and safeguarding co-operative principles and values that promote good governance including making decisions on democratic basis.

The study went further assessing members' perceptions on whether leaders and staff respect decisions made in general meetings and implement them. A total of 65% agreed and strongly agreed on this while 19% were neutral, 8% disagreed and 8% strongly disagreed. The findings prove that leaders and staff have respect on what have been decided by members in general meetings and they abide themselves to implement them. In the FGD, when asked on power of members in making decisions, participants agreed that members are the final decision makers in the AMCOS so the leaders and management have to respect and implement what have been decided. However, in key informant interview, once Co-operative Officer argued that despite the fact that Board and management need to adhere to decisions made in general meeting, there is weak feedback mechanisms for members to assess the extent of implementation of the decisions. In this argument, it can be concluded that without proper follow up and feedback system of the decisions made, it is difficult for members to assess performance of leaders and management and quality of implementation of their decisions. From the findings in relation to feedback on decisions, the study revealed that a total of 54% either agreed or strongly agreed that leaders and staff provide feedback to members on implementation status of previous decisions. However the rest (46%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed on this. Even if majority of members indicated that feedback is provided, still large percent of those disagreeing brings questions. It is likely that the feedback is been provided on some issues while others are left. Further, provided that members rarely keep records of everything prevailed in previous meetings and absence of system of approving minutes of previous meetings then it is difficult for them to recall and follow up the implementation status. Therefore it is important for AMCOS to have feedback mechanisms of what has been implemented based on decisions made (Rwekaza and Anania, 2018). The involvement of members in decision making process and other governance issues is key to the success of any co-operative (Megerssa *et al.*, 2012). The meeting should not be just forums for members to attend but a place where they can participate to build strong co-operatives and their governance (Ngaruko and Lwezaula, 2013).

## **4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **4.1 Conclusion**

In their nature and legal framework, co-operatives of all types including AMCOS put members on top as final decision makers. Members are the key players in promoting good governance practices including decision making accompanied with democratic principles. The participation

of members in decision making process needs to be inclusive of all sex and age. The presence of male dominance and limited youth participations in the studies AMCOS gives picture on the threat of co-operative sustainability and inclusiveness in governing the organizations. As men and women membership not balanced and youth are less involved, means that particachy system of male dominance exist in AMCOS and jeopardize the decision making process and power balance on matters affecting welfare of all members. Also limited youth membership jeopardize the AMCOS' future including the limitation in promoting innovations, creating strong human resources and coping with ever-changing business environment and competition. Meetings are places where members can fully exercise their power and make decisions. Unfortunately, the leaders and staff in studied AMCOS have not given this a priority hence external influence on calling meetings prevails. If meetings are not regularly called, it is difficult for members to understand performance of their AMCOS and make decisions on various issues.

In circumstance where general meetings are called, the nature of members' participation in such meetings is not equal. Members participated actively in electing leaders; follow up of agenda and debates; and in approving budgets and governing instruments including by-laws while less concerning with requesting feedback on issues decided in previous meetings, review of contracts and seeking clarifications of issues or contributing to the meeting agenda. It can be concluded that members participation in meetings is not balance, active in some aspects while remain passive in the other. Issues such as over trusting their leaders and staff are likely to cause such situation where they feel not need to seek detailed clarification of issues from them or engage intensively in debates arising. This may be harmful to the AMCOS as decisions made by approved without safeguarding members' interests provided that also their attendance in meetings is low. Unbalanced members' participations was also revealed in the co-operative projects as they were mostly involved in identifications, approval and financing and in implementation of the projects (investments) while less involved in other stages such as preparations, appraisal, monitoring and evaluations. Hence it may be concluded that members fail to exercise their full power to ensure that they are actively involved in whole project cycles and safeguard their interest. Such passiveness in some process may hinder their control of the businesses and protect all benefits emerging from them and even in making assessment of their performances.

Further, there are variations on perceptions among members concerning the decision making process in their AMCOS. On one side, they revealed to be actively involved making decisions, they sometimes get feedback on previous decisions and democratic practices are followed during the meetings and the leaders and staff respects and implement their decisions. Despite all these to be there, meeting agenda and documents are not reaching members before meetings and during the meetings leaders and staff tend to influence them to support some of the decisions recommended. It may be concluded that participation of members in meetings is subject to scrutiny as it may be seen as participation for compliance rather than engaging in serious discussion and reach consensus on issues requiring approval. If members don't know in advance what will actually trend then they can't prepare themselves well and contribute significantly on the agenda and other emerging issues. In that case, it is ease for them to be convinced by their leaders and management without seriously weighing the proposed issues before endorsing them. It may further be argued that the ownership and accountability of members on decisions made is questionable to some extent.

#### **4.2 Recommendations**

For a co-operative to prosper and sustain in contemporary business environment, the power of members and their participations in various affairs in their organizations must be promoted and protected. Members are in position to make things move or delay. In the context of what have

been revealed in this study and conclusion made, we recommend the following issues to be done to be studied AMCOS and such recommendations may apply to other co-operatives with similar issues on members power and their participation in decision making process:

- (i) The AMCOS leaders and staff need to initiate efforts to promote youth and women in membership and leadership. This can be done through sensitization community programmes and use of existing to attract youth and women to join the AMCOS. The existing members can also take part on this by electing/selecting active youth and women to hold various positions in the AMCOS as a motivation to attract others. Continuous education need to be done to create awareness to the existing members and general community on the need to eradicate cultural practices hindering youth and women participation such as adult-male superiority complexes, mistrust on women and youth and barriers to access and control of land.
- (ii) Leaders and staff need to ensure that meetings are called regularly every year as required by the Co-operative Societies Act of 2013. Members' educations need to be provided continuously so they understand their rights and obligations including demand for general meetings. The DCOs in the area should also be strict in enforcing the conduct of meetings.
- (iii) The AMCOS leaders and staff should make sure that information and documents reach members some days before the meetings. Strategies such as regular advertising of the meetings through public places, religious institutions and community meetings can be used. Where possible, contemporary communication channels such as use of emails, text messaging, mass media advertising (e.g. using community radio stations), bulking message and social media can also serve this purpose.
- (iv) Continuing education to members need to be provided by leaders and staff and other external change agents on their obligations to attending in large numbers and participate actively throughout the meetings to ensure that all decisions made and emerging debates are in favour of their welfare and the AMCOS in whole. The proceedings (minutes) of the meetings must be produced and feedback provided on next general meeting on how issues have been implemented.
- (v) Education and advice to members, leaders and staff need to be provided by change agents and regulators in co-operative sector to change mindset and promote members' participation in whole project cycle. This should also include empowering members on how they can appraise their leaders and management on project performance, design and execute implementation feedback system and other issues in the AMCOS. This will ensure high degree of controls of members in their co-operative institutions.
- (vi) Where possible, adopting the new generation co-operative model in AMCOS is an important policy agenda to promote for the sustainability of agricultural co-operatives in future. Such member-investor co-operatives, will cultivate the required risk taking by the members and will not allow free riding while on the other hand, the co-operators will get the right incentives to sustain the co-operative enterprise in Tanzania. Such an arrangement will attract qualified leadership and management capacity expected in agricultural co-operatives

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