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OPERATIONALIZING FARMERS' COOPERATIVES AS "SOCIAL INNOVATION" IN BHUTAN: LESSONS FROM A MOUNTAIN VILLAGE DAIRY COOPERATIVE

Katsu Masaki
Hirao School of Management, Konan University, Hyogo, Japan 8-33 Takamatsu-cho, Nishinomiya-shi, Hyogo 663-8204 Japan. E-mail: masakik101@gmail.com

Abstract: This study examines how best to address a major issue surrounding farmers' cooperatives (FCs) in Bhutan; they tend to face the challenge of implementing group management in the midst of the difficulty in "inculcating a joint approach," which is said to prevail in rural Bhutan. Against this background, a dairy cooperative from central Bhutan, which has succeeded in fostering cooperation among its members and increasing their cash income from milk supply, is considered. This study draws on the notion of "social innovation" to elucidate the factors that have allowed cooperatives to achieve success in group management. The success of the dairy cooperative cannot be solely attributed to its intra-organizational operations. In line with existing studies on social innovation, the success should also be seen to arise from "other shades of change," that is, extra-organizational, exogenous factors ushered in by a conducive "institutional environment," a "game-changer," and a "narrative of change." These elements positioned the cooperative as a "node" in various existent networks, which enabled it to not only draw on various "useable resources" but also manage the collective enterprise in a "heretical," participatory manner, contrary to the top-down management practices said to prevail among other cooperatives. The case of the dairy cooperative, similar to other examples of successful social innovation initiatives, shows that there is fertile ground for FCs to thrive in Bhutan if driven by a mixed focus on outcomes and relations.

Keywords: Bhutan; farmers' cooperative; Gross National Happiness; group management; social innovation

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1. Introduction

Bhutan is internationally acclaimed as a Gross National Happiness (GNH) country that perceives development as an interdependent economic, ecological, social, cultural, and good governance concern. Thus, GNH defies economism, which equates profit and loss with the dominant pillar of social life. A "GNH economy" aims to promote a "healthy" distribution of income and wealth and a "healthy" balance of population between the towns and the countryside, as well as flourishing social relationships and arrangements that characterize "healthy" communities (Mancall, 2018, p. 10); these characteristics mark a contrast to economism that tends to aggravate them.

As part of its GNH promotion, the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) has been working to create a favorable legal environment and provide the necessary support for farmers' cooperatives (FCs). This is against the background of the country's rapid urbanization, with the urban population projected to increase from 37.8 percent in 2017 to 50.4 percent in 2037, thus reversing the village population that presently accounts for more than 60 percent of the entire population (National Statistics Bureau, 2019, p. xvi). Moreover, the FC sector is conducive to the promotion of a "GNH economy," as cooperatives have long-term, place-based membership and democratic governance structures that uphold community and environmental values and ensure the long-term viability of the organization (Johanisova *et al.*, 2015, pp. 153–154).

Since the Cooperative Act was enacted by the Department of Agricultural Marketing and Cooperative in 2001 (subsequently amended in 2009), the development of the FC sector has gathered pace in Bhutan. However, FCs have not benefited their members, communities, and country as much as they have increased in number (Dendup and Aditto, 2020, p. 1195). According to a study (Wangmo *et al.*, 2021), FCs tend to face challenges in group management (concerning group cohesion, members' sense of ownership, and enforcement of bylaws), technology and finance (lack of access to technologies and credit), agricultural inputs (e.g., seeds, fertilizers, and animal feed), marketing (difficulty in identifying sales channels, transporting products, and competing with others), and retention of members (failure to prevent dropouts and attract new members)[1].

Of these issues, group management is the most fundamental in that it stems from a situation in rural Bhutan, where, as often said, "the essence of trying to address individual problem[s] through [a] joint approach is not inculcated" (Tashi *et al.*, 2022, p. 106, parentheses added). Notably, FCs tend to initially enthuse their members, often waning as they do not always feel empowered

as co-owners (Sonnenberg *et al.*, 2021, p. 152). Moreover, there are "many examples of irreparable breakdowns between cooperative membership and management," thus causing FCs to cease their operations (Sonnenberg *et al.*, 2020, p. 152). RGOB can conduct awareness-raising programs on cooperative modalities and equip farmers with skills, including record keeping, business management, teamwork, and leadership (Dendup and Aditto, 2020, p. 1202). At the same time, these alone do not ensure that "inculcating a joint approach" is promoted: other measures are required for creating necessary conditions for the penetration of "a joint approach" vis-à-vis FCs.

This article explores how best to address this challenge through the notion of "social innovation." The notion fits the purpose of this study that explores ways of "inculcating a joint approach" for the following reasons. First, the group management issue calls for a mixed focus on outcomes and relations. This tallies with the widely used definition of social innovation, "new ideas ... that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relations or collaborations" (Murray *et al.*, 2010, p. 3). Second, there is a need for multiple change processes that foster social "relations or collaborations" and serve as a basis of "inculcating a joint approach." This resonates with a major attribute of social innovation, namely, that "the transformative potential of social innovation increases to the extent that it co-evolves with other shades of change" (Avelino *et al.*, 2019, p. 198).

Considering these attributes of social innovation, this article undertakes a case study of a successful dairy cooperative in central Bhutan that has accorded its members an additional income-earning opportunity while enhancing their sense of mutual trust and obligations. It is an exemplary case of social innovation because of its mixed focus on outcomes and relations; successful social innovation initiatives around the globe attest to the importance of fostering ingenuity through "trusting collectives" rather than "lone creatives" (Amatullo *et al.*, 2022, p. 14); social innovation necessitates both energetic "social heroes" and a conducive "cultural, economic, and institutional environment" to last, grow, or multiply over time (Manzini, 2015, p. 62). Moreover, in line with social innovation practices in different parts of the world, the case of the dairy cooperative was endowed with "other shades of change" or extra-organizational, exogenous factors that have enabled it to succeed in "inculcating a joint approach."

Herein, accordingly, the following questions are addressed: How did the cooperative under study manage to exempt itself from the difficulty in "inculcating a joint approach" said to prevail in rural Bhutan? Who were the

"social heroes" and what "other shades of change" existed to create a conducive "cultural, economic, and institutional environment" conducive to the smooth and effective functioning of the dairy cooperative? From the case study of the dairy cooperative, what lessons does the notion of social innovation hold for the promotion of FCs in Bhutan, so that they can "create new social relations" among the members in ways to advance problem-solving as a "trusting collective"?

2. Social Innovation

Humanity is yet to dispel the age-old trend of "the big dinosaurs of the twentieth century, promoting large production plants, hierarchical system architectures, process simplification, and standardization" (Manzini, 2015, p. 193). "The big dinosaurs" are founded on "what Ernest F. Schumacher termed "the economics of gigantism and automation" in his classic *Small is Beautiful* (2010, p. 79). They prioritize the growth in size, efficiency, and wealth of the economy as a whole, with recourse to the concentration of production bases, which deprives the means of production of the masses and thus turn them as "individual cogs" of the economic "machine," who work only to consume with weak ties with their communities (Gibson-Graham *et al.*, 2013, pp. 2–3).

Meanwhile, there has been a strand of social innovation initiatives, "moving in the opposite direction, toward light, flexible, context-related distributed systems" (Manzini, 2015, p. 193). Social innovation seeks to redress the failure of "the dinosaurs" and to ensure decent living standards for all, a fair distribution of wealth, and the environmental basis of human lives. For this objective, to repeat the aforementioned quote, social innovation initiatives "simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relations or collaborations." Positive social impacts are sought through efforts to generate new ideas and translate them into new solutions, while forging new forms of social relations that rectify extant power dynamics (Ayob *et al.*, 2016, p. 3).

Social innovation represents a "manifestation of historical tensions of the relationship between 'economy' and 'society'" (Logue, 2019, p. 1). While the origin of social innovation can be attributed to the rise of modernity in the 18th century, the notion began to take hold toward the end of the 20th century (Mulgan, 2019, pp. 35–36). Historical examples include trade unions, cooperatives, collective insurance, and publicly financed health schemes, while more recent innovations, such as fair trade, micro-credit, and emissions trading, have become mainstream in today's world (Peredo *et al.*, 2019, p. 108). Among the most recent and noteworthy examples are those promoting

collaborative consumption and peer-to-peer collaboration, as exemplified by car sharing, co-working spaces, community kitchens, and time banking (Wahl, 2016, pp. 66–70).

2.1. A "node" in existent networks

It is formidable to rectify "the big dinosaurs," as pointed out by a prominent proponent of degrowth as follows: "Our society is tied up with an organisation that is based upon endless accumulation" (Latouche, 2009, p. 16). Against this background, a "trusting collective" is called for, as noted above, so that social innovation takes place across the borders of the four sectors, namely, firms, states, civil society movements and organizations, and households; they have their respective base in the market, state, grant economy, and household, while simultaneously operating across their borders (Murray *et al.*, 2010, p. 142).

Social innovation thus entails a complex political process whereby "agents driven by their own interest elucidate their differences and structure (unstable) agreements in order to find solutions for problematic and controversial situations" (Unceta *et al.*, 2017, p. 3). It is hardly attained through "magical efforts by designers which are then revealed to astonished clients" (Amatullo *et al.*, 2022, p. 14). A plurality of moves operates on different levels and logics, and the impact of a particular program is greater than the sum of the results of its respective component projects (Manzini, 2015, p. 91).

Those who spearhead social innovation therefore position themselves as a "node" in various existent networks and utilize "usable resources" accessible to them, including products, services, ideas, and knowledge (Manzini, 2015, p. 4). In pursuing a novel approach to problem-solving, social innovation must be new to its stakeholders and not only more effective but also more just and sustainable than existing alternatives (Phills *et al.*, 2008). It is to "create a kind of *bricolage*, a coming together of elements not previously juxtaposed but which nonetheless fit together to form something new" (McGowan *et al.*, 2017, p. 7). It is a framework project that coordinates various "usable resources" with an eye to transforming social routines (Manzini, 2015, p. 160).

2.2. A "distributed economy"

Among "usable resources" are place-based unique knowledge and cultures. In this regard, a promising approach is to pursue a similar notion of "polycentric governance"; this allows a community of users and producers to co-manage their place-based resources, engage in "commoning" (social organizing), and continually adjust its mode of operations to ever-changing situations,

while sustaining and managing social relations (Fournier, 2013). This aligns with the characteristics of social innovation, namely, collaborative, repeated interactions, care, and maintenance (Murray *et al.*, 2010, p. 141). Social innovation arises from an open-ended, complex process or a small, local, open, connected scenario (Manzini, 2015, pp. 178–180). The "small and local" has an enormous potential in generating "open and connected" systems capable of adapting to and lasting in the present-day intricate, fast-changing, risky state of affairs giving rise to wicked problems.

In the field of economic models, "commoning" can be best promoted in the form of distributed economies; they operate through small-scale production units, located close to the points of demand, and are connected to each other within wider networks of exchange (dos Santos, 2019, p. 27). The distributed modality aims to improve human well-being as well as social equity and cohesion, while lessening environmental impact and resource depletion (dos Santos, 2019, p. 24). Distributed economies can be broadly grouped into "hardware/natural resource-based" (energy generation, food production, water supply/management, distributed manufacturing) and "knowledge/information-based" entities (software development, knowledge generation, distributed design) (dos Santos, 2019, pp. 30–35).

2.3. A "heretical practice"

The process of "commoning" implies combating capitalism that encloses and appropriates commons for continual accumulation (Fournier, 2013). Accordingly, the success of social innovation hinges on multiple change process, as noted above, and occurs through co-evolution with "other shades of change" such as "game-changers" and "narratives of change" (Avelino *et al.*, 2019). "Game-changers" are events, trends, and developments that change the status quo norms and rules of societal interactions. "Game-changers" are mediated by language that "narratives of change" can be drawn on to counter existing framings and discourse.

Thus, social innovation should be promoted as a "heretical practice" that brings anomalies and disharmony to the established order (Sievers, 2020). Individuals and groups are required to engage in a complex "co-design process," while interacting in different manners (from collaborative to confrontational) and on various occasions (from formal meetings to hidden locations), to arrive at a shared plan of action (Manzini, 2015, pp. 48–49). It should revolve around "a circle of questioning, discovering and experimenting, generating new questions and hypotheses as well as knowledge," rather than a linear flow

from anticipated questions, hypotheses, and knowledge to practice (Mulgan, 2019, p. 199).

2.4. A "people-centered" approach

In practicing "a circle of questioning," it is useful to heed "ecologies of knowledge" to not only identify a diverse range of worldviews, values, and epistemologies but also bring otherwise unacknowledged voices to the debate about our common future (Santos, 2016, cited in Banerjee *et al.*, 2020, p. 6). This helps remedy a pitfall of debates on social innovation, in which "social value" tends to be vaguely defined with disregard to a range of understandings across times, people, or situations: "social value is approached as if it were a concept that could be understood unambiguously" (Sievers, 2020, p. 227). What is called for is "a global perspective, engaging with the very different experiences of advocacy, participation, marginality, and precariousness across the global North *and* South" (Banerjee *et al.*, 2020, p. 8).

"A global perspective" necessitates what may be termed "people-centered" social innovation (Banerjee *et al.*, 2020). The latter positions social innovation as an opportunity for those on the political peripheries to liberate themselves from the shackles of capitalism, or more broadly, the existing power dynamics that place the global North at the pinnacle of progress. This implies a departure from the age-old trend of "the economics of gigantism and automation," or "the big dinosaurs of the twentieth century promoting large production plants, hierarchical system architectures, process simplification, and standardization."

In this way, social innovation is realized from an alternative worldview, value system, and epistemology. Transformative innovation can arise from the proliferation of alternatives emerging from the political peripheries and the surge of assertions from "other" worlds (Kothari *et al.*, 2019, p. xxiv, p. xxxiii). By heeding subaltern worlds in this way, new conceptions of "what is possible" can be nurtured beyond the confines of the mainstream stance that works to delegitimize such practices (Escobar, 2020).

2.5. An apt case: Bhutan

"People-centered" social innovation can be potentially promoted under the banner of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted at the United Nations (UN) in September 2015; they supposedly offer "a framework that was more fit-for-purpose to tackle the daunting challenges we face as a global society" (Caballero, 2019, p. 138). Humanity has been grappling with multiple planetary crises encompassing environmental degradation, rising inequalities,

growing hostility, and division. As such, the SDGs may draw on the notion of "social innovation" to explore ways to address global issues, while asserting renewed conceptions of "what is possible."

However, a critical assessment of the SDGs points to their inclination to lapse into presentism, creating a sense that "the problem actually can be solved within the present world order and the existing relations of power" (Ziai, 2016, p. 201), and thus reflect its "enduring refusal ... to learn from the global South" (McEwan, 2019, p. 285). This is attested to by a cross-cultural comparison of three noted visions from the global South–GNH, Ubuntu (South Africa), and Buen Vivir (South America), in addition to the SDGs; the latter "do not effectively address the human–nature–well-being interrelationship" (van Norren, 2020, p. 431). The SDGs implicitly idealize human sovereignty to use the environment for human benefit, free markets' capacity to advance societal welfare, and individual rights rather than collective duties (van Norren, 2020, p. 453). These attributes resonate with "the economics of gigantism and automation," which social innovation aims to redress.

The case of Bhutan's vision of GNH thus helps explore how best to advance a Bhutanese version of "people-centered" social innovation. Notably, GNH is among "experiments in the global South that are rooted in subaltern ontologies, attempting to script alternative models of development and to open new trajectories," together with Ubuntu (South Africa), Buen Vivir (South America), and Swaraj (India) (McEwan, 2019, p. 395). Moreover, GNH is rooted in "Bhutan's traditional socioeconomic system," founded on Buddhist teachings of holistic well-being and oneness with nature (Priesner, 1999, cited in Masaki and Tshering, 2021, p. 279). Social innovation can be pursued in Bhutan, while capitalizing on the following attribute of GNH: GNH pursues an alternative, vernacular pathway founded on a Buddhism-inspired worldview, contrary to the SDGs that downplay the potential inherent in experiments in the global South, such as GNH (Masaki, 2024).

3. A Dairy Cooperative in Central Bhutan

As stated above, the cooperative sector is among a historical example of social innovation that seeks both social and financial returns and thus aims to resolve the "tensions of the relationship between 'economy' and 'society'." This dual nature, or "hybrid organizing" (Logue, 2019, pp. 84–85), resonates with Bhutan's vision of GNH, which perceives development as interdependent economic, ecological, social, cultural, and good governance concerns. Thus, GNH is adept at addressing the ongoing tensions between "economy" and

"society," which social innovation seeks to tackle to counter the prevalence of "the economics of gigantism and automation."

Accordingly, RGOB prioritizes the promotion of FCs. However, the efforts have not been as fruitful in terms of improving rural livelihoods as they have in increasing the number of cooperatives, owing to the aforementioned five major challenges. The group management issue, referred to above as the most formidable challenge, can be deciphered as follows (Sonnenberg *et al.*, 2021, p. 152). First, FCs' underperformance often emanates from top-down processes in which enthusiastic entrepreneurs or government officials fail to empower members as co-owners of their enterprises. Second, in other situations, members fail to understand how their FCs function and thus remain incapable of overseeing the management, or even clash with the management without properly understanding the business challenges that their managers face.

At the same time, as per the title of the report of the College of Natural Resources, there are "successful farmers, agri-enterprises, farmers' groups and cooperatives in Bhutan" (Tashi *et al.*, 2022). What is called for is to dissect how those successful FCs are able to effectively engage in group management, in defiance of the difficulty in "inculcating a joint approach" said to permeate rural Bhutan, referred to in the same report. It notes that a "cooperative sustains when each member realizes common goal[s], shoulders responsibility equally and contributes to the growth of the organization" and "persists on the ground of transparency of its management system and humane quality of the leaders" (Tashi *et al.*, 2022, p. 106).

3.1. Shingkhar: The case village

As an exemplary FC succeeding in "inculcating a joint approach," this section focuses on a dairy cooperative of Shingkhar, a village lying in one of the valleys of Bumthang (a district in central Bhutan). Sihngkhar is home to some 39 households and a little more than 110 people, and it is located at an altitude of 3,400 meters and above. The main occupations of the Shingkharpas (people in Shingkhar) are cattle rearing and farming, with potatoes, buckwheat, barley, and wheat being the major crops. The Shingkharpas also collect mushrooms from nearby forests for in-house consumption and sell them to outside parties. Currently, the dairy cooperative is the major source of income for the Shingkharpas.

Shingkhar is located in the buffer zone of Thrumsingla National Park, which hosts some of the endangered species and faunas. The village is also known for its religious importance: it is one of the Eight Lings ("lings" denotes

holy places) established by Longchen Ramjampa (1308–63, a noted scholar-yogi of Tibetan Buddhism, popularly known as Longchenpa) within Bhutan, who propounded Dzogchen or the great perfection teaching on the basic nature of the mind to liberate people from the glossier levels of delusions. Shingkhar is thus called Shingkhar Dechenling ("dechenling" denotes a blissful place).

Among the distinct features of Shingkhar is its association with a group of those who were born and raised in the village and reside outside, named Shingkhar Dechenling Phendey Tshogpa (SDPT)—the Shingkhar Welfare Association. Of central concern to SDPT, formed on August 1, 2006, has been the reinvigoration of religious festivals and rituals, the mainstay that has historically bound Shinkarpas by reciprocity. Major festivals and rituals are held at Shingkhar Dechenling Lhakhang (temple) and Drogri Rinchen Jungney (popularly called Garkhai). The former is located where the wood ("shing") cabin ("khar") were originally built for Longchenpa to preach to Shingkharpas. The latter temple is on a small hill overlooking the village, where Longchenpa lived and meditated during his stay in Shingkhar.

In Shingkhar, these festivals and rituals, together with the exchange of labor for farming, serve as the mainstay of local institutions of mutual help. Residents collectively organize religious functions throughout the year; some of them act as lay monks ("gomchen"), while others serve in a variety of roles, including masters of ceremonies, dance performers, singers, cooks, and waiters. Out of a sense of belonging to the community, they donate their time, skills, food, and other supplies, in addition to their respective homes for the preparation.

Notably, SDPT's major achievements include the installation of 1,000 Dorji Sempa statutes in Garkhai in 2023 and the revival and conduct of the Kangyur Recitation in 2022. Approximately ten years before these events, two other landmark projects had been achieved: the donation of Longchen Thongdrel or a large scroll painting depicting a seated Longchenpa surrounded by lineage masters and dharma protectors and the resumption of Baza Guru Dungdrup to recite Padmasambhava (the 8th-century Buddhist master) mantras.

Thongdrel is unfurled at Tshechu, typifying the largest festival performed not only in Shingkhar but also throughout the country. In the village, the festival is also called Shingkhar Rabney Chenpo; it was first performed as the consecration ceremony for Shingkhar Lhakhang. Shingkhar Rabney Chenpo combines masked dances and rituals based on Padmasambhava and his teachings, with others related to Longchenpa, Pema Lingpa (a reincarnation of Longchenpa), and local deities. Thongdrel, which is believed to cleanse the

viewer's sins, has contributed to an increase in the number of attendees at Shingkhar Rabney, visiting from outside the village.

SDPT has also been involved in the development of physical infrastructure conducive to the conduct of religious functions. For example, during Shingkhar Rabney, temporary tents as well as other equipment and decorations are procured with the help of SDPT. It has also endeavored to renovate several buildings adjacent to the main hall of Shingkhar Lhakhang, as well as its courtyard and access roads. The development of courtyards and access roads entailed an expansion of the area of Shingkhar Lhakhang, and thus a series of negotiations with landowners. At the request of SDPT, some of them contributed their kitchen gardens adjoining Lhakhang free of cost, at the request of SDPT.

SDPT's support has been instrumental in conserving the village's institutions of mutual support, in tune with the needs and developments of the present era. The ongoing progress in the country's development required residents to purchase daily necessities and meet educational expenses, which made them oscillate between their respective household requirements to secure cash income, their collective obligations, and their respective household requirements. The mutual-help institutions therefore needed to be rejuvenated in a way to capitalize on Shingkharpas' practice of "non-market" transactions, in which they exchange goods and services without monetary returns as a topmost priority.

3.2. Preparing for the cooperative's start-up

Prior to the start of the dairy cooperative, potatoes were the major source of income for Shingkharpas, which were transported annually to and sold in a border town adjacent to India. However, the market price of potatoes is erratic, and the Shingkharpas were long eager to secure more reliable, regular, and higher incomes by forming a dairy cooperative, believed to open up larger local markets for their dairy products. The majority of the households in the village rear milking cows and make cheese and butter mainly for household consumption and offerings for religious festivals and rituals, as well as selling them whenever requested by visitors and their acquaintances on a sporadic basis.

The building and equipment were provided by the government in 2011 for Shingkharpas to initiate a dairy cooperative. However, they remained unused, due to the lack of training on dairy production and accounting, as well as owing to the absence of an awareness-raising program for Shingkharpas. At that point, the village was yet to overcome the aforementioned situation prevalent in rural

Bhutan: "the essence of trying to address individual problems through a joint approach is not inculcated." This had prevented Shingkharpas from starting up a cooperative.

Against this background, SDPT and the author of this article formulated the idea of a project entitled "Promoting Sustainable Livelihoods in Shingkhar through Income Generation and Collective Activities." The project plan was eventually approved by RGOB and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in December 2017. Its major objective was to support the establishment and operation of a dairy cooperative in Shingkhar through a series of activities, including (1) consultative meetings to decide on an organizational setup, (2) repairs to the existing building, and (3) training in milk processing and cooperative management[2].

SDPT assembled a team of project coordinators, who were members of the association based in Thimphu, to oversee the project. The coordinators provided advice on a daily basis and backstopped two youths, also from Shingkhar and residing elsewhere in Bumthang, who drew on their respective work experiences and knowledge to assist the Shingkharpas in establishing a cooperative. One of the two youths works for the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI), while the other is a farmer residing in another village in Chokhor, the central area of Bumthang. Some Thimpu-based project coordinators also attended village meetings in person at key moments. Moreover, one of them prepared a draft bylaw for the dairy cooperative, while referring to other similar examples in Bhutan. He also used his graphic skills to design a label for butter.

During the first half of 2018, a series of village meetings were held in line with the customary practice whereby representatives of all households gathered and discussed matters of concern to the entire community. In the meetings, the cooperative's bylaw was finalized, which stipulated the organizational setup as follows: the members, drawn from all households, would be entitled to monthly payments for their supply of milk at the rate of Nu. ("ngultrum," the currency of Bhutan) 35 per liter. Cottage cheese would be sold for Nu. 60 per ball (cheese is rolled into fist-sized balls), and butter for Nu. 350 per kilogram. Three youths would also be appointed as factory workers, two of whom would engage in dairy production in rotation with the monthly salary of Nu. 5,000.

It was also decided in one of the meetings to start the cooperative in summer, when cattle produced larger quantities of milk, to derive maximum benefits from dairy production. To complete all preparatory activities on time, accordingly, the milk-processing building was repaired in June 2018.

Its foundation had started crumbling as the cattle had entered and trampled thereupon. The building also had to be fenced off and needed a toilet and firewood storage. The youth from Shingkhar, working for the BCCI office in Bumthang, supervised the construction work. He arranged for Shingkharpas to make in-kind contributions worth 55 percent of the total costs incurred for the repair of the building.

The other youth residing in Bumthang had experience working for a well-known dairy cooperative in his neighborhood in Chokhor. He arranged for the three selected youths to receive training at the same cooperative for 10 days in June 2018 and attended the sessions to help the trainees gain hands-on experience and master production skills. The youth working for BCCI prepared a bookkeeping format and ledger, identified sales locations, and procured Thai-made packaging plastics that had been displayed at a trade fair that he attended in Bumthang.

3.3. "Inculcating a joint approach" for the start-up

The cooperative began operations on August 12, 2018, with the help of the two youths based in Bumthang. The farmer initially stayed in the village and gave advice to the factory operators while drawing on his experience working for the above-noted cooperative. The other working for BCCI made arrangements for Shingkhar-made products to be sold both in a shop and at the weekly Sunday market in Chamkhar (the central town of Chokhor). 31 households supplied milk in the first (half-) month, and each household earned an average of Nu. 6,192. The cooperative made a net profit of Nu. 21,919. Cheese and butter were sold out, which proves the narrative shared by those involved in livestock raising in Bhutan that a well-functioning dairy cooperative can quickly find a market outlet.

An issue that afflicted the cooperative from the start was its closure during winter, when the daily milk supply dropped because of cold weather, thus preventing the cooperative from making a profit. During the cold season, when pastures are dry and forage is lacking, cows produce less milk because of their insufficient energy intake. Shingkharpas made hay in summer but were not able to secure sufficient dry grass for their cows, and thus had no option but to let them graze on dry pastureland during winter.

Despite its winter closure, the cooperative continued to produce net profits, enabling its members to increase their average annual household income by half. The milk payments received by each household amounted to Nu. 40,773 in the first year (from August 2018 to July 2019) and Nu. 47,229 in the second

year (from August 2019 to July 2020); these figures are derived by dividing all the 39 households in Shingkhar, not by the milk-supplying households (31 till mid-May 2019, and 33 onwards). The numbers were remarkable considering that the annual average cash income was Nu. 79,618 in 2017 (as per the baseline survey conducted at project inception). The cooperative was closed in August 2020 due to the spread of COVID-19 but resumed operations in August 2021. In the third year (from August 2021 to July 2022), each household received Nu. 59,107 for milk.

The increase in household income was due to various initiatives by different stakeholders to improve the energy intake of cattle. First, the Department of Livestock (DOL) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests distributed, among Shingkharpas, fodder turnips in October 2018 and grass seeds suited for upland cultivation in April 2019, among others. These were realized because of the efforts made by the youth working for BCCI to relay information on the issues faced by the cooperative to the DOL's office in Bumthang. Second, Shingkharpas also started a joint procurement of cow feed with nutritional content. They were able to form a contractual relation with a distributor based in Bumthang for regular deliveries of feed at discounted prices. Third, some of Shingkharpas hoped to make their cow sheds livable for their cows during winter, and rebuilt their wooden cow sheds into stone cow sheds to prevent drafts.

3.4. Capitalizing on local institutions of mutual help

As described thus far, the cooperative's group management went smoothly in defiance of the difficulty in "inculcating a joint approach," namely, the issue that had prevented Shingkharpas from staring a cooperative in 2011. This success can be attributed to local institutions of mutual help, which Shingkharpas drew on when initiating the new cooperative in 2018, just as they did on a daily basis when holding religious functions and during busy farming seasons, as mentioned above. Local transactions of goods and services take place, not only as "market-based" ones among utility-maximizing individuals, but also as a "non-market" basis in line with their sense of mutual trust and obligations as neighbors.

Local institutions of mutual help rendered the dairy cooperative to sustain itself on several grounds. First, some of those who came to supply milk stayed at the factory and helped the operators to weigh the milk brought in by the members and make cheese and butter. This was of help to the operators, who faced difficulty in simultaneously leading their lives as farmers and discharging

their tasks of milk processing. Moreover, their salaries (Nu. 5,000) had been set lower amidst the uncertainty as to how the cooperative would unfold; the cooperative in Chokhor, where training was imparted to the operators, for instance, had over 120 members and earned a net profit more than three times that of the cooperative in Shingkhar. Accordingly, in Chokhor, the operators' starting salary was Nu. 8,000, which could go up to Nu. 10,000 or more, depending on the years of service.

Second, in addition to the voluntary help offered to the operators, hardly seen in other cooperatives, the members raised the salary consecutively; after several revisions, it reached Nu. 8,250 in October 2019. This was despite the milk rate that remained at Nu. 35 until August 2021, which was also lower than Nu. 40 at the cooperative in Chokhor. The members acted proactively to forego their individual gains, out of their sympathy for the operators' plight, as well as their hope to continue to secure an additional source of income. The cooperative was marred by the frequent turnover of staff members. As of July 2021, three years after the start of the cooperative, only one of the original operators remained, while a total of six had left their posts. All had resigned by citing commitments at home related to caring for elders or infants, or agricultural and domestic tasks. Fortunately, replacements were found without difficulty, and the transfer of product-making and bookkeeping skills proceeded smoothly with the help of the farmer in Chokhor.

Third, the cooperative's success was underpinned by "non-market" transactions of goods and services, exchanged for holding festivals and rituals; as described above, Shingkharpas donate their in-kind contributions, including religious offerings and foodstuff for the attendees. Against this backdrop, the additional income generated by the cooperative helped reduce the burden on individual households and gave the members an incentive to retain the cooperatives in a good or better shape for the future. Local institutions of mutual help are at the core of daily life in Shingkhar and serve to bind residents through mutual trust and reciprocity. For Shingkharpas, it was of utmost significance to keep alive the cooperative founded on the village-based membership, to further facilitate "non-market" exchanges required of village festivals and rituals.

4. Conducive "Environment" for the Cooperative, Fostered by "Other Shades of Change"

These roles played by mutual help resonate with one of the abovementioned requirements of social innovation, namely, that its success hinges not only on

"social heroes" but also on a favorable "cultural, economic, and institutional environment" for it to grow and last over time. Accordingly, local institutions of mutual help in Shingkhar served as a context conducive to the success of the cooperative, while also emanating from the "heroic" operators and members who brought the cooperative to success.

At the same time, this does not fully explicate the cooperative's favorable performance, given that similar practices are also commonly seen in rural Bhutan. Existing studies point out that local institutions of mutual help, widely seen in rural Bhutan, could serve to nurture rural entrepreneurship (e.g., Dendup, 2018, pp. 3–4). Nevertheless, this potential is not utilized by many FCs in Bhutan; instead, they hardly succeed in "inculcating a joint approach," thus bringing about "many examples of irreparable breakdowns between cooperative membership and management."

Therefore, a question must be posed as to what enabled Shingkharpas to capitalize on the institutions of mutual help, contrary to other FCs, and unlike their first unsuccessful attempt to start up a cooperative in 2011. In 2018 onwards, Shingkharpas succeeded in "inculcating a joint approach," in line with its aim of social innovation to "simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relations or collaborations." To explicate this achievement, it is useful to draw on the following finding of a social innovation research; "the transformative potential of social innovation increases to the extent that it co-evolves with other shades of change," to repeat the quote above. The success of the dairy cooperative emanated not only from those intra-organizational operations described thus far, but also from "other shades of change" or extra-organizational, exogenous factors.

4.1. Trans-village mutual help

One of the extra-organizational, exogenous factors behind the cooperative's success is the following "institutional environment" unique to the village; its mutual-help practices encompass trans-village ties with those brought up in Shingkhar who are based elsewhere. The cooperative benefited from the assistance extended by the two youths residing in Bumthang and SDPT members living in Thimphu. These "heroes" extended their support, while using their respective knowledge and skills.

This "institutional environment" had been nurtured by years of assistance from SDPT. Owing to SDPT's support, the village's festivals and rituals as well as the underlying institutions of mutual help had been reinvigorated, as explained above. This type of assistance, not widely seen in other villages,

deserves special mention, as it served as the foundation for those living both inside and outside Shingkhar to collaborate with one another for the successful start-up and operation of the cooperative.

SDPT's support fostered what Ivan Illich (1990) calls a "convivial society" whereby Shingkharpas take greater pride in what they contribute to their community, namely, a factor that spilled over to the cooperative managed collectively while drawing on the members' voluntary contributions. Moreover, from a different angle, the overall increase in the number of religious functions and attendees, as a result of years of SDTP's support, motivated Shingkharpas to successfully manage the cooperative, given that the additional cash income from the milk supply eased their in-kind contributions to village festivals and rituals.

4.2. A "game-changer" for community-based resource management

The cooperative's success also stemmed from another exogenous event that occurred in 2011: seven years before the start of the cooperative, a plan was formulated to build a golf course in an open pasture that adjoined the village settlement. The land belongs to the government but has customarily been used by Shingkharpas for grazing their cattle. It also provides a path for them to access the community forest that they co-manage as a source of timber and firewood. Moreover, there are stone monuments related to high monks who are believed to have visited the village in the past.

This event served as a "game-changer" that renewed Shingkharpas' willingness to retain their livelihoods as dairy farmers, and thus to successfully manage the cooperative. The idea had been put forth by a businessperson who obtained clearance from the Tourism Council of Bhutan and the Land Commission. It was subsequently submitted to the village for public consultation, due to concerns voiced by the Department of Forests and Park Services, and because of the dispute between those Shingkharpas in favor of the plan and those against it (Kuensel, 2012); the former hoped that the proprietor would purchase agricultural products from them and provide employment for them, while the latter was concerned about the potential loss of pastures, easy access to the community forest, and the sacred monuments.

After thorough deliberations presided over by a representative of the district administration, Shingkharpas arrived at a consensus to reject the proposal, which led the government to order the withdrawal of the plan. The essence of the decision is summarized in the words of a Buddhist scholar from Bhutan who was spearheading an online petition against the plan: "After all,

the proposal is not for a charitable project but a business venture with vested interests. Unless the village retains a large chunk of ownership or tight control, there is no guarantee that the venture will automatically benefit Shingkhar. In all likelihood, the external investors may bring in their own facilities and staff and take out any profit leaving the villagers only with the dribs and drabs" (Phuntsho, 2011).

The incident served as a "game-changer" promulgating the determination among Shingkharpas to retain control over local resources, particularly the pasture land. It instilled in them this outlook, as it was also reminiscent of a project supported by a foreign donor in the mid-1990s, which did not bring about an enduring success. The donor-assisted project was a commercial logging operation that was subsequently discontinued. Shingkharpas benefited from the construction of a motorable road in 1994 that connected the village to the national highway. It provided cash income, which was unavailable in the village. At the same time, it was also a bitter reminder that exogenous development would not necessarily guarantee long-term prosperity and that the pursuit of short-term profits should not keep them away from caring for their livestock and crops.

4.3. A "narrative of change" towards distributed economies

The "game-changer" was mediated by a "narrative of change," which facilitated Shingkharpas to initiate the dairy cooperative. In this respect, some SDPT members participated in preparatory village meetings to convey the potentiality of the cooperative to improve Shingkharpas' livelihoods. The members drew on the relevant law and rules of the government; it prioritizes the promotion of rural-based producer cooperatives as "a strong and sustainable pillar of the economic development of the Bhutanese society," to usher in "the development of the social capital and strengthening of the democratic process" (Department of Agricultural Marketing and Cooperatives, 2010, p. 3).

More specifically, the SDPT members explained that a cooperative would allow Shingkharpas to meet their common needs without relying on middlepersons or outside traders. It instead promotes self-sufficiency, managing their own labor and other productive resources. In this way, Shingkharpas would benefit from higher returns as cattle herders and lower prices as consumers of cheese and butter. Moreover, as further narrated by the SDPT members, a cooperative would draw its membership from Shingkharpas and uphold community and environmental values, in pursuit of the long-term existence of the organization.

The narrative aligns with the concept of distributed economies, a promising approach to social innovation that promotes small-scale production units close to the points of demand. The SDPT members unwittingly narrated what are generally known as "the win-win benefits" of distributed economies (dos Santos, 2019, pp. 36–40). Contrary to centralized mass production that externalizes its social and environmental harms in pursuit of the accumulation of wealth by the privileged few, distributed economies enable the fulfilment of local needs concerning material well-being, as well as social and environmental harmony.

This "narrative of change" was instrumental in garnering Shingkharpas' commitment to manage the dairy cooperative collectively. This was because it contained four elements required of a narrative ushering in social innovation, namely, problematization, solutions and goals, plots, and actors (Barlagne *et al.*, 2020). Shingkharpas were empowered to understand that an externally driven project should be avoided in favor of a community-based approach (problematization), that a distributed economy should be pursued to set up a small-scale unit of production (the solution and goal), and that a dairy cooperative would be set up (the plot) as a collaborative effort by Shingkharpas (actors).

4.4. A "node" in various networks across sectors

Underlying the cooperative's success in Shingkhar is yet another extra-organizational factor, related to one of the aforementioned attributes of social innovation; the dairy cooperative functioned as a "node" in various existent networks and made use of "useable resources" accessible to its members. More specifically, it served as a "node" of the households, SDPT, DOL, and BCCI, in manners to cut across the four sectors, that is, the public, private, and non-profit sectors, in addition to the households. All Shingkharpas (households) joined the cooperative, and it got its business on track immediately after its start-up, owing to the support from SDPT (a non-profit organization), in addition to the assistance from DOL (a public sector organization) for fodder improvements.

What facilitated the cooperative to serve as the "node" to connect with these and other various stakeholders was the youth working for the BCCI office in Bumthang (a private sector representing organization). Among various types of support extended by the youth, his role as a voluntary "marketer" and "trader" was of particular importance, given that market access is one of the five major challenges plaguing FCs in Bhutan. Having worked for BCCI, he had developed ties with government officials and businesspersons in and around

Chamkhar (the central town of Bumthang), which he drew on to identify sales outlets, including the aforementioned shop and market. In addition, the youth approached his acquaintances in town to put orders together as intermediaries.

Moreover, the youth, also a member of SDPT, frequently visited Shingkhar, which is about a three-hour drive from Chamkhar, to implement various SDPT-related activities. The visits allowed him to not only run such errands but also engage in assisting the cooperative. In this sense, SDPT's support paved the way for the cooperative's success, not only by motivating Shingkharpas to co-manage it but also by enabling the youth to more closely supervise dairy production and sales. He also took the opportunity to attend the cooperative's monthly meetings, in which financial statements were reported and milk payments were made to the members. The meetings were also a forum for addressing various issues, and the BCCI staff member advised on the discussions.

4.5. A "Heretical Practice"

Another extra-organization, exogenous element that underlaid the cooperative's success was the readiness of Shignkharpas and SDPT members to engage in a complex "co-design process" or, to draw on the above-stated quote, "commoning," whereby they thrash out differences and find solutions through collaborative, repeated interactions. This was made possible by the two parties' prior experiences in jointly addressing sensitive and thorny issues on various occasions. For example, the land acquisition for Shingkhar Lhakhang's courtyard expansion had entailed careful negotiations with landowners who would have to give up portions of their plots, as noted above. This type of experiences had instilled in Shingkharpas the mindset of engaging in "a circle of questioning, discovering and experimenting, generating new questions and hypotheses as well as knowledge," to paraphrase the above quote from a study that provides clues to achieving social innovation.

Thus, a stage was in place for Shingkharpas and SDPT members to engage in a series of discussions on how best to use the JICA-supported project for the dairy cooperative. Prior to this project, it had conventionally been taken for granted in the village that a donor-supported project would be led by outsiders (SDPT and JICA personnel, in the case of the dairy cooperative project), with disregard to local needs and sentiments. Their views on donor support had been colored by the logging project stated above, relegating them to wage laborers to help the proprietor make a profit from the nearby forest, only to result in an unexpected shutdown.

The SDPT members involved in the project conveyed their intention to avoid siphoning off project funds and instead promised to channel them to the village. Through thorough discussions, Shingkharpas came to gain a renewed perception of donor support and resolve to leverage it for their own benefit. In this way, they became involved in the JICA-supported project in a "heretical" manner, namely, one of the attributed required of social innovation. In rural Bhutan, in some cases, "groups are formed to harvest the yield [in pursuit of short-term gains] rather than to sow and reap the benefits [through steady, forward-looking, and collaborative endeavors]" (Tashi *et al.*, 2022, p. 106, parentheses added), but Shingkharaps were able to "sow and reap the benefits through the joint approach," making the cooperative a successful joint venture.

Against this background, the cooperative did not emerge from a linear, step-by-step flow from the identification of income-generating needs to the group formation for dairy production and sales. It was a product of a complex "co-design and co-implementation process," as per a requirement of social innovation, and this enabled Shingkharpas to overcome the difficulty in "inculcating a joint approach."

5. Conclusion

As discussed in this study, the notion of social innovation helps explore how best to remedy the situation in Bhutan, where there are "many examples of irreparable breakdowns between cooperative membership and management," to repeat the quote from a study. The dairy cooperative in Shingkhar represents an exemplary case succeeding in "inculcating a joint approach." In line with the existing literature on social innovation, the success of the cooperative can not only be attributed to its intra-organizational operations but also be said to arise from "other shades of change," or extra-organizational, exogenous factors. This tallies with the point made in the introduction, namely, that multiple change processes are required for "inculcating a joint approach" among FC members in Bhutan.

In the case of the cooperative in Shingkhar, those exogenous factors that enabled its effective group management included the aforementioned "institutional environment," "game-changer," and "narrative of change." These forged the Shingkharpas' commitment to sustaining their lives as cattle herders, continuing to retain control over their own labor and local resources, and securing higher incomes through dairy production and sales. The idea that a promising source of their livelihood improvement lied in outside investment was diminished by the aforementioned events concerning the forestry and golf

course projects. The two undertakings instead resolved them to promote a "distributed economy" founded on an autonomous, democratically managed production unit.

SDPT played a key role in activating Shingkharpas' institutions of mutual help or, more broadly, their "civic creativity and problem-solving capacity," an attribute required for social innovation. This had laid the foundation for the smooth and successful start-up of the cooperative, in that SDPT's years of support, particularly for revitalizing the village's religious events, had instilled in Shingkharpas the mindset to engage in collaborative and repeated endeavors to "sow and reap the benefits." This is an unorthodox and "heretical" stance in defiance of the difficulty in "inculcating a joint approach," said to permeate rural Bhutan. Moreover, Shingkharpas' resolve to jointly "sow and reap the benefits" positioned the cooperative as a "node" of various stakeholders, encompassing public- and private-sector entities, as well as those originally from Shingkhar and residing elsewhere.

As stated at the outset, the promotion of FCs is integral to RGOB's efforts to attain the country's vision of a "GNH economy"; it defies economism that equates profit and loss with the dominant pillar of social life. In this respect, the notion of social innovation provides a useful clue as to how best to advance a "GNH economy," especially with the well-functioning FC sector as its key element, in that a major objective of social innovation is to address "historical tensions of the relationship between 'economy' and 'society'." This is especially the case, given that, as noted earlier, social innovation can be successfully promoted while drawing on distinctive cultural norms and institutions. RGOB can draw on this potential of social innovation in its efforts to promote GNH or "Bhutan's traditional socioeconomic system," founded on Buddhist teachings of holistic well-being.

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that first published in the author's previous work (Masaki, 2021), but the article has been rewritten in its entirety in light of the concept of "social innovation."

Notes

1. The middle three items (technology and finance, agricultural inputs, and marketing) can be addressed by boosting RGOB's intervention to subsidize farm equipment and enhance access to credit facilities, deliver farm inputs, and up-scale contract farming and value addition (Wangmo *et al.*, 2021, p. 40). There exists ample scope for RGOB to promote contract farming with local institutions, such as schools, monasteries, and colleges, and assist in processing of products that suit both local and urban markets (Dendup and Aditto, 2020, pp. 1201–1202).
2. This article describes the dairy cooperatives during the JICA-supported project period (April 2018–March 2022). The author has not been able to continue research, but has been informed by SDPT members that the dairy cooperative continues to operate successfully to date.

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