

Transforming Tamu into a Community-Based Socioeconomic Development Platform

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, *Tamu* has been a centre of rural entrepreneurship and a social exchange in Sabah. However, with the modern trends of development, new challenges are presented, and the institution is becoming increasingly burdened by the barriers that undermine its effectiveness as a means of development. Among these barriers are over-dependence on a small local market, persistence in using traditional marketing tactics, limited access to digital infrastructure, and a lack of networking with community-based tourism projects. Thus, cooperatives offer a potential alternative governance structure that can comprehensively address these issues. The cooperative model would provide *Tamu* with a more transparent and accountable administrative framework, while also strengthening the capacity of rural businesses, promoting digital innovation, connecting the market with community-based tourism, and protecting local cultural heritage. The success of implementing this approach heavily depends on the quality of cooperative leadership, particularly in terms of strategic vision, management efficiency, and comprehensive community involvement. Therefore, cooperatives are seen as having the potential to become the main catalyst in the effort to revitalise *Tamu* as a sustainable and relevant rural development institution.

Keywords: *Tamu Desa*, Cooperative Governance, Rural Entrepreneurship, Cooperative-Based Development, Sabah

Introduction

Although modern shopping complexes have taken over the Malaysian urban landscape, traditional markets still hold a unique position in the community's life, such as the *Tamu* in Sabah. *Tamu* is a term that refers to weekly or periodically repeated open-air markets, where local sellers sell a wide variety of goods: agricultural products, traditional food, handicrafts, daily goods (Kurpong & Imang, 2016; Lalim, 2021; Yakin et al., 2022), and herbal medicine

(Foo, 2018). In addition to their economic purpose, *Tamu* is also a place of socialisation, strengthening relationships between communities (Lily et al., 2022; Mapjabil et al., 2020).

In the rural development of Sabah, *Tamu* has assumed a dual role as both a community entrepreneurship platform and a driver of local social interaction (Lalim, 2021; Lily et al., 2024). Traditionally, *Tamu* served as a place where people could exchange their daily needs through barter and acted as a source of information (Yakin et al., 2022). Nowadays, *Tamu* has evolved into a modern-day entrepreneurial hub, where small-scale traders can sell local goods directly to customers without the use of middlemen, while also providing tourists with a unique local cultural experience. The roles not only enhance the economic status of rural communities but also foster a more balanced economic activity between urban and rural regions. Photo 1 shows the variety of products at *Tamu*.



Photo 1a: Local Vegetables



Photo 1b: Local Handycrafts



Photo 1c: Wild Plants



Photo 1d: Traditional Items



Photo 1e: Local Fruits and Vegetables



Photo 1f: Traditional Foods

Photo 1: Some of the Products Sold in *Tamu* (*Tamu* Kota Belud)

Source: Authors' Photo Compilation

Sabah remains one of the states with the highest poverty rate in Malaysia, with some districts recording alarmingly high rates. According to data from the statistics (Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), 2025), Sabah recorded the highest poverty rate in the country in 2022, with an absolute poverty rate of 19.7%, a hardcore poverty rate of 1.2%, and a relative poverty rate of 14.5% respectively. These high percentages indicate that a significant portion of the population, particularly in rural areas, continues to struggle with low standards of living. This situation worsens the socioeconomic gap between urban and rural areas, limiting the capacity of local communities to improve their standard of living.

In this context, the *Tamu Desa* project emerges as an initiative with the potential to help reduce the poverty gap in rural areas by empowering the rural economy through the development of rural entrepreneurship (Utusan Borneo, 2024). The project is not merely a physical platform for trade activities but also aims to enhance the visibility of local products. According to the Minister of Entrepreneur and Cooperative Development (KUSKOP), Datuk Ewon Benedick, a total of 92 *Tamu Desa* projects have been planned for implementation in Sabah and Sarawak in 2024 (Bernama, 2024). The initiative is divided into two phases: Phase 1 comprises 49 projects (36 in Sabah and 13 in Sarawak), while Phase 2 involves 43 projects (18 in Sabah and 25 in Sarawak). These facilities are expected to be fully completed by 2025.

However, to realise *Tamu's* potential as a key driver of rural socioeconomic development, several current issues need to be given critical attention (Kurpong & Imang, 2016). Among these issues that mainly encountered by the rural entrepreneurs, including the *Tamu* traders, are poor access to wider markets (Fabeil et al., 2017), low rates of digitalisation (Murniati et al., 2023; Yakin et al., 2022), and poor associations with community tourism projects (Ismail & Jaafar, 2022). Therefore, a context-specific response is necessary in a systematic way so that *Tamu* can remain relevant and play a main role in inclusive and sustainable rural economic development (Kurpong & Imang, 2016; Yakin et al., 2022). Furthermore, the high percentage of traders who participate in *Tamu* part-time underlines the limited capacity of the market to serve as the primary economic arena for the rural population (Lily et al., 2024). Therefore, these issues justify strategic interventions that would transform *Tamu Desa* into a more sustainable and inclusive development platform in the rural areas.

Thus, cooperatives become one of the means of strengthening the governance of these *Tamu Desa* initiatives. Traditionally, cooperatives have played a crucial role in the socioeconomic development of Sabah, particularly in bolstering rural economies (Tola et al., 2021). Due to the cooperative principles of cooperation and self-reliance, they enable hawkers and small traders to become more competitive and increase their market access (Ishak et al., 2020). Cooperatives can strengthen local resilience by lessening reliance on external private-sector players. In the *Tamu* context, the cooperative management model presents a viable governance paradigm that can address the current issues hindering *Tamu's* effectiveness as a platform for rural entrepreneurship. This type of initiative aligns with national efforts to promote the well-being of rural communities through infrastructure development and targeted financial support (Utusan Borneo, 2024).

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this project depends on how the management system of *Tamu* aligns with the needs of rural entrepreneurs and the extent to which cooperatives can play a more active role in ensuring the continuity and efficacy of *Tamu Desa* as a local

economic driver. Currently, *Tamu* in rural areas are managed by local authorities (Bernama, 2024). The Sabah state government has shown increasing interest in upgrading the *Tamu's* governance, considering cooperatives as alternative management bodies (Bernama, 2024; Nabalu News, 2024). For example, the Malaysia Cooperative Societies Commission (SKM) has conducted briefing and engagement sessions in Kota Belud to guide participants on managing and maintaining *Tamu Desa* facilities through collaboration with community cooperatives (Nabalu News, 2024). The objective is to ensure that the operation of *Tamu Desa* becomes more organised and efficient through the active involvement of local cooperatives. In addition to supporting the empowerment of rural cooperatives, the Institut Koperasi Malaysia conducted an entrepreneurship workshop on 13 June 2025, aimed at fostering innovation, enhancing cooperative governance, and exploring new entrepreneurial opportunities within the local community (Nabalu News, 2025).

While several studies have discussed the cultural and historical significance of *Tamu* in Sabah (Foo, 2018; Kurpong & Imang, 2016; Lalim, 2021; Lily et al., 2024), very few have examined governance issues within the context of *Tamu*. There remains limited literature on how cooperatives could serve as a strategic governance model to address the sustainability challenges of *Tamu* nowadays. This gap is particularly important to address, as community-based development approaches, such as cooperatives, are often overlooked in rural development policy planning, despite their proven effectiveness in many international contexts (Morshidi & Mohd Yusoff, 2024). Hence, this article seeks to discuss the contemporary issues faced by *Tamu* and the potential role of cooperatives as strategic governance entities capable of revitalising the *Tamu Desa* project as a platform for rural entrepreneurship. Using a conceptual approach guided by selected literature, this paper aims to contribute to a new narrative in Sabah's rural development planning that is more community-centred and sustainable.

Contemporary Issues Facing Rural *Tamu*

Rural Location and Dependence on Low-Purchasing-Power Local Visitors

One of the fundamental constraints hindering the development of *Tamu* as a key driver of rural socioeconomic growth is its geographical location, which is often situated far from major economic growth centres (Kurpong & Imang, 2016). Most *Tamu* operate in interior or semi-rural areas with limited access to public transport and quality road infrastructure. This condition restricts the flow of visitors from outside the area and limits connectivity with broader supply chains, including wholesalers and domestic tourists. The geographical isolation of these markets results in a closed, community-oriented marketplace, thereby limiting market expansion and constraining local economic growth.

Moreover, the customer base of *Tamu* primarily comprises local residents, largely from low-income groups, including small-scale farmers and informal sector workers (Foo, 2018; Yakin et al., 2022). Statistics indicate that rural communities in Malaysia, particularly in Sabah, continue to register high poverty rates, including absolute poverty exceeding 30% in several districts (DOSM, 2025). Several districts reported absolute poverty rates exceeding 30%, including Pitas (52.7%), Tongod (50.8%), Kota Marudu (49.9%), Beluran (37.7%), Kudat (34.7%), and Kalabakan (33.3%). This situation creates a demand structure characterised by low-value transactions, whereby consumer purchases are limited to necessities such as vegetables, raw foods, or low-cost products. The dominance of low purchasing power directly

reduces traders' profit margins and discourages business expansion or innovation in product offerings.

In subsistence-oriented rural economies, purchasing power is often linked to seasonal cycles and agricultural yields (Yaakob et al., 2021). Under such conditions, inconsistent household incomes affect consumers' ability to spend regularly at the *Tamu*. Furthermore, the absence of large-scale commercial activity in areas surrounding the *Tamu* narrows opportunities to attract a more diverse customer segment, such as domestic or foreign tourists, or wholesale buyers from other areas. Without a clear strategy to draw in external markets, *Tamu* will remain reliant on small-scale local markets, lacking long-term economic resilience.

Limited Operational Frequency and Lack of Continuity

Another major structural issue that hinders the effectiveness of *Tamu* as a socioeconomic development platform is the periodic and discontinuous nature of its operations. Essentially, *Tamu* is only open once a week, on specific days, typically weekends or market days as designated by local authorities or community leaders, thereby adhering to local cultural practices and logistical constraints. Table 1 shows the list of *Tamu* around Sabah and their respective days. However, this system promotes unstable income and commercial flows among traders.

Table 1

List of Tamu around Sabah

Day	Locations
Monday	1. Kg. Pukak (Kiulu) 2. Kuala Penyu Town
Tuesday	1. Kiulu Town 2. Kuala Penyu 3. Pandasan (Kota Belud) 4. Melalap Tenom 5. Kudat Town
Wednesday	1. Ranau 2. Nabawan 3. Tamparuli 4. Kota Belud 5. Membakut 6. Dongongon 7. Sipitang 8. Dataran Bengkoka (Pitas) 9. Tenom Town 10. Asia City (Kota Kinabalu) 11. Gana (Kota Marudu) 12. Batu 32 Sandakan (Afternoon) 13. <i>Tamu</i> Minggu Pekan Sipitang (Wednesday and Thursday)
Thursday	1. Dongongon (Thursday and Friday) 2. Keningau 3. Tambunan 4. Telipok 5. Sumangkap (Matunggong) 6. Tenghilan Town 7. Pekan Nabalun 8. Papar Town 9. Tandek (Kota Marudu) 10. Lok Kawi (Papar) 11. Sabindo (Kinarut, Papar) 12. Rosok (Kota Belud) 13. Kampung Paris (Kinabatangan, Khamis & Jumaat) 14. <i>Tamu</i> Matunggong Baru 15. <i>Tamu</i> Minggu Pekan Sipitang (Wednesday and Thursday)
Friday	1. Sepulut (Nabawan) 2. Taginambur Batu 10 (Kota Belud) 3. Beaufort Town 4. Kundasang 5. Dongongon (Thursday and Friday) 6. Mesapol (Sipitang) 7. Kampung Paris (Kinabatangan, Khamis & Jumaat)
Saturday	1. Ranau Town (Evening) 2. Nabawan Town 3. Kinarut Town 4. Matunggong 5. Putatan 6. Inanam (Bataras, Kolombong) 7. Mansiat Sook 8. Telupid Town (Evening) 9. Apin-Apin (Keningau) 10. Beaufort Town (6 am - 1 pm) 11. Papar 12. <i>Tamu</i> KRT Kundasang Ranau 13. Sindumin (Sipitang) 14. Pekan Pitas 15. Bukit Garam (Kinabatangan) 16. Melalap (Tenom) 17. Kemabong (Tenom) 18. Bongawan 19. Kunak Town 20. Pekan Tungku (Lahad Datu) 21. Menumbok 22. Kg. Lompios (Kota Belud) 23. <i>Tamu</i> Sosondoton (Kg. Piasau, Kota Belud) 24. <i>Tamu</i> Pekan Beaufort

Day	Locations
Sunday	1. Tuaran 2. Sook 3. Kota Marudu 4. Kota Belud 5. Gaya Street (Kota Kinabalu) 6. Tambunan 7. Putatan 8. Keningau 9. Tawau (6 am - 12 pm) 10. Telupid Town 11. Membakut 12. Papar Town 13. Sikuati (Kudat) 14. <i>Tamu</i> KRT Ranau 15. Menumbok 16. Tenom 17. Kampung Lohan (Ranau) 18. Beluran 19. Kunak Town 20. Batu 16, Gum-Gum (Sandakan) 21. Lahad Datu Town 22. Dongongon (Petronas to Buhavan Square) 23. Ranau (AIM) 24. Pitas Town 25. Kg. Bundu (Kuala Penyu, 6 am - 12 pm) 26. Sukau 27. <i>Tamu</i> Bundu (Kuala Penyu) 28. Gomantong Jaya (Sandakan)
Every 1hb of Month	Pekan Ranau (<i>Tamu</i> Besar Bulanan)
Every 10th	1. Inanam (Kota Kinabalu) 2. <i>Tamu</i> 10 Manggatal (Kota Kinabalu)
Every End of October (Sunday)	1. <i>Tamu</i> Besar Kota Belud

Source: Author's Compilation

Note: The information above has been revised according to the user's compilation. Every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, and any errors are regrettable. Readers are encouraged to verify the schedule independently for the most up-to-date and accurate information.

The weekly operating system limits *Tamu's* ability to operate as a daily, always-present economic centre that would facilitate structured business development. When operating hours are so limited, traders struggle to maintain a commercial pace, develop customer loyalty, or implement effective stock control and logistics systems. In the eyes of the consumer, the reliance on a weekly market makes *Tamu Desa* less applicable in everyday buying, a demand that is being fulfilled more by supermarkets and convenience stores.

This type of small-scale operation also fails to foster the development of a robust rural entrepreneurial ecosystem. Traders rarely consider *Tamu* as their primary source of income due to the low rate of activity, which does not ensure sufficient returns. This situation suggests that entrepreneurship is typically part-time in nature, rather than a full-time occupation that can provide the economic resilience households need, thereby discouraging investment in skills, product innovation, or the adoption of technology.

In addition, inconsistent operating hours and inadequate publicity for schedules often leave external visitors and tourists uncertain, which hinders efforts to market *Tamu* as a viable and sustainable cultural or economic tourism destination.

Lack of Unique Attractions and Product Diversity

The competitiveness of traditional marketplaces highly depends on product differentiation and the overall customer experience, which is what makes them different from the modern retailing environment (Zheng, 2022), including supermarkets and convenience stores. In *Tamu*, the current market has a limited set of unique attractions and a relatively small product line, which limits its capacity to attract external visitors and integrate into the wider tourism and local economies (Foo, 2018; Kurpong & Imang, 2016; Lalim, 2021; Yakin et al., 2022).

Tamu offers a range of basic yet comparatively similar products, including vegetables, traditional foods, farm produce, and everyday household items. Though these items are crucial in maintaining local food security, they are not very diverse and innovative, which

makes the shopping experience rather monotonous and uninteresting to external visitors or tourists.

Not all *Tamu* can highlight the uniqueness of culture, indigenous handicrafts, or ethnic demonstrations as can be seen in large-scale *Tamu*, such as *Tamu* Kota Belud, which successfully attracts tourists because it offers cultural performances, exotic products, and heritage textiles that are not easily found elsewhere.

This lack of appeal is also due to the limited capital, skills, and product development support available to traders. Many rural entrepreneurs lack access to product development training, modern packaging techniques, and basic branding, which can enhance the aesthetic and market value of their products (Zakaria et al., 2022). Without products that offer added value or a compelling story behind them, the tourist market remains stagnant and unable to compete in terms of value proposition.

Moreover, a lack of thematic or clustered product organisation at *Tamu* sites further reduces the overall customer experience. Poor organisation and layout in traditional markets can significantly affect visitor satisfaction and reduce their effectiveness as tourist attractions. A study of traditional markets as tourism destinations in Indonesia emphasised that unorganised layouts and poor visitor navigation can reduce the perceived quality of experience for tourists (Aliyah et al., 2020). Additionally, factors such as market ambience, clarity of product presentation, and the physical arrangement of goods influence the appeal of rural tourism markets (Chee Hoo et al., 2024). This scenario differs from tourist market models in other countries, such as Chatuchak Market in Bangkok (Nguyen et al., 2019) or the Night Market in Luang Prabang (Łuczaj et al., 2021), which utilise product zones, visitor navigation, and visual presentations to create an organised and engaging market experience.

In terms of rural socioeconomic development, product diversity is not only necessary to attract tourists but also as a means of increasing traders' incomes. Through increased product diversity, traders will be able to capture a more diverse range of customer groups, improve their profit margins, and expand their business networks, including partnerships with micro-export agencies, cooperatives, and tourism agencies.

Part-Time Business and Low Entrepreneurial Commitment

Part-time entrepreneurship is a significant obstacle to *Tamu*'s ability to serve as a key driver of socioeconomic development in rural areas (Kindoyop & Othman, 2023; Lily et al., 2022). Most rural *Tamu* traders are not full-time entrepreneurs, but rather farmers, retired persons, or part-time wage earners who find it necessary to venture into the market on a seasonal or periodic basis to earn extra income, rather than making it a full-time occupation.

This trend indicates that *Tamu* has yet to establish a robust and stable economic ecosystem that can attract maximum community participation in rural entrepreneurship. These part-time traders are typically less focused on long-term business growth, spend relatively less on product quality improvements, and engage in minimal marketing or branding efforts. In addition, they rarely participate in training programmes or seek financial facilities because they do not view trading at the *Tamu* as a long-term investment. As a result, many businesses remain at a basic or informal level, showing little growth in terms of sales, customer base, or

business asset development. Consequently, it limits the actual impact of *Tamu* in improving household income and reducing rural poverty, which are central goals in national rural development policy.

Additionally, part-time traders are more susceptible to market uncertainties, such as adverse weather conditions, seasonal fluctuations, or unfair price competition. Without a sustainable operational strategy or sufficient capital reserves, these traders are more likely to cease business operations when faced with minor challenges. This situation leads to instability in the number of active traders, difficulties in coordinating *Tamu* operations, and a diminished customer experience due to inconsistent vendor participation from week to week. The absence of full-time entrepreneurs who can add value to local products, such as food processing, modern packaging, or rebranding agricultural produce, results in a weak and uncompetitive value chain in foreign markets.

Traditional Marketing Approaches and Limited Digitalisation in Tamu

In the modern digital environment, the ability to share information about products and markets via the Internet is central to the survival and competitiveness of any economic system (Md Faudzi et al., 2024), including traditional markets like *Tamu* (Yakin et al., 2022). However, the overwhelming majority of rural entrepreneurs, including those in *Tamu*, still rely on traditional marketing methods, especially word-of-mouth, physical notice boards, and local announcements, all of which are limited in reach and relatively inefficient. Such constant adherence to old approaches has limited the exposure of these markets, making them largely unknown to wider audiences, including external visitors and local tourists (Abas et al., 2023). The issue is compounded by the geographical fact that many *Tamu* are in rural areas with unstable internet access. In some cases, access to the Internet is limited, making it difficult for market operators and traders to exploit digital channels, such as social media and e-commerce tools, or mobile app-based promotional systems (Fang et al., 2022). As such, *Tamu* has not leveraged digital technology to promote local products, disseminate information on operating schedules, or share vital updates related to business and community operations.

Additionally, the lack of a digital promotional strategy hinders the effort to position *Tamu* as a community tourism destination. Modern tourists are becoming increasingly informed through online searches, social media, and travel apps. Unless *Tamu* has a strong online presence, it will continue to be invisible to the outside world, despite having much cultural uniqueness and unique offerings.

Moreover, many rural traders still lack basic digital literacy skills to take advantage of existing platforms (Nipo et al., 2024), including areas such as creating promotional content, managing social media, and utilising e-payment systems. This digital skills gap contributes to a persistent digital divide between urban and rural entrepreneurs, inadvertently positioning *Tamu* at a competitive disadvantage within the modern economic ecosystem.

Cooperatives as Alternative Governance and Economic Catalysts for *Tamu* in Sabah

Considering the various issues affecting the effectiveness of *Tamu* as a rural development platform, community-based approaches are increasingly seen as both relevant and resilient. One of the most promising models for enhancing the governance of *Tamu* is the community cooperative model. Internationally, cooperatives have proven to be effective institutions for

generating grassroots development that is inclusive, democratic, and sustainable, achieved through collective ownership and structured governance.

In Sabah, cooperatives have played a vital role not only in agriculture and retail sectors, but also in strengthening local capacities and optimising existing resources for collective benefit (Tola et al., 2021). Thus, the application of the cooperative model as a governance entity for *Tamu Desa* not only addresses existing structural issues but also opens opportunities for broader integration into rural entrepreneurship, community tourism, and the digital economy. This section explores how cooperatives can serve as a holistic and strategic alternative to reshape the function and value of *Tamu* within a sustainable rural development framework.

Cooperatives as a Structured Governance Entity for Tamu

Tamu is a community economic institution that has long contributed to rural development in Sabah (Kurpong & Imang, 2016; Lily et al., 2022). However, in a modern economy that is highly dynamic and whose management requirements are becoming increasingly complex, the current governance structure that the institution manages, typically via ad hoc committees or local authorities, is facing repeated challenges in terms of operational efficiency, strategic visioning, and the provision of long-term economic value to the local community.

Community cooperatives, therefore, appear to be a potentially complementary governance mechanism, offering a more institutionalised and democratically organised platform for managing the rural economy (Ahmad et al., 2020; Liu & Fu, 2024). Cooperatives, as registered and regulated organisations, are capable of taking on roles such as coordinating *Tamu* working hours, collecting and distributing rental income, maintaining community infrastructure (including stalls, public toilets, parking areas, and sanitation infrastructure), and transparent and centralised registration of vendors. Community cooperatives thus present a logical route to democratise decision-making, institutionalise management processes, and bring greater transparency to rural economic governance.

Furthermore, cooperatives can introduce more consistent and strategic scheduling systems, such as implementing bi-weekly *Tamu* operations, monthly themed markets (e.g., Herbal *Tamu*, Handicraft *Tamu*, Agro *Tamu*), and publicly announced annual *Tamu* calendars. These efforts would not only enhance operational predictability and regularity but also enable traders to plan their inventory, sales strategies, and logistics more effectively.

Revenue collected by cooperatives from *Tamu* operations can be channelled back into the community in the form of physical infrastructure upgrades, such as permanent stall construction, drainage systems, lighting, and basic digital facilities, including Wi-Fi. Cooperatives can also implement inclusive policy mechanisms (e.g., rental discounts for women traders, designated spaces for youth entrepreneurs, or rotation schemes for new vendors), ensuring that *Tamu* governance is responsive to the real needs of the community. Cooperatives will be able to expand *Tamu's* visibility on official tourism channels, such as the lists of recognised tourism destinations by the Ministry of Tourism, the Sabah Tourism Board (STB), and Tourism Malaysia. Moreover, cooperatives can participate in travel fairs and be listed on online tourism websites on behalf of their member households.

Essentially, cooperatives provide a strong foundation to transform *Tamu* from an informal marketplace into a more structured, viable, and sustainable community economic system. This approach not only improves governance but also positions *Tamu* for better integration into Sabah's broader rural development strategies.

Cooperatives as Drivers of Community Entrepreneurship

The *Tamu* entrepreneurial ecosystem comprises a diverse group of traders, including smallholder farmers, elders, and part-time vendors (Kurpong & Imang, 2016; Lalim, 2021). This variety highlights the inclusive nature of *Tamu* as a rural economic zone; however, the professionalism and strength of these local businesses need to be enhanced to promote sustainable growth. Informal or seasonal operations that lack structured support for capacity building, funding, and strategic planning are therefore unlikely to reach their full growth potential (Lily et al., 2024; Yakin et al., 2022).

Community cooperatives become a powerful agent of entrepreneurial change by employing an organised, collective strategy. First, cooperatives can develop and conduct frequent entrepreneurship training programmes, which include financial management, product branding, packaging, online marketing, and expansion strategies. These trainings must be implemented in conjunction with other agencies responsible for training programmes, such as Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA) and Institut Koperasi Malaysia (IKMa), to align with local needs and practical realities.

Second, cooperatives can be utilised to develop microfinance schemes at the community level, enabling access to working capital, business equipment, and product development services. Such schemes can be proactive in attracting more people to participate, especially rural youth and women, and thus encourage them to transition to full-time entrepreneurship rather than part-time trading.

Third, cooperatives can provide shared facilities for value-added production of products, such as community kitchens, packaging centres, and product-processing equipment, thereby lowering the costs of individual traders and simultaneously increasing the marketability of their products by meeting external certifications (e.g., halal certification) and regulations.

Fourth, performance-based incentive systems (e.g., subsidised rental rates, priority trading space, and the opportunity to participate in external markets) can also be established in cooperatives to enhance the motivation of traders to sustain their involvement, thereby fostering a more competitive and inclusive entrepreneurial culture in rural communities.

Most importantly, however, cooperatives develop a shared entrepreneurial identity that puts community success before personal profit. In the long run, the cooperative model may yield a group of professional and self-sufficient rural entrepreneurs prepared to succeed in broader economic environments. In turn, cooperatives go beyond the functions of *Tamu* coordinators to become sustainable and high-impact, community-based institutions for entrepreneurship development.

Cooperatives as Agents for Digital Transformation

In an economy increasingly driven by technology (Fang et al., 2022; Nipo et al., 2024), *Tamu*'s failure to adapt to digital trends represents a significant constraint on its potential to serve as

a driver of rural socioeconomic development. Many *Tamu* in Sabah continue to operate within a traditional ecosystem reliant on word-of-mouth promotion, physical noticeboards, and small-scale local advertisements. The traditional way of marketing not only limits their visibility outside the immediate area but also creates barriers to information access for visitors and prospective buyers, especially younger generations and tourists who rely heavily on online sources.

These challenges are underscored by the persistent digital divide between urban and rural populations, particularly in terms of internet access, device ownership, and digital literacy (Nipo et al., 2024). A high proportion of *Tamu* traders have basic skills in social media engagement, online payments, or online marketplaces. These restrictions hinder the marketing of products, consumer interaction, and involvement in the country's digital economy.

In this regard, cooperatives are well-positioned to lead the digital transformation of *Tamu* governance and development. As collective entities owned by the community, they possess the resources and core competencies required to organise digital efforts that individual traders would not undertake unilaterally.

To begin with, cooperatives can play an essential role in enhancing the digital visibility and operational efficiency of *Tamu* by developing dedicated web-based platforms that provide comprehensive information on market locations, operating hours, trader profiles, product categories, and promotional activities. Such a formal and structured digital presence would significantly enhance the market's accessibility, particularly to visitors and tourists from outside the immediate rural area. Simultaneously, cooperatives can collaborate with local authorities to organise structured digital literacy programmes for *Tamu* traders, equipping them with essential skills in social media marketing, electronic payment systems, and e-commerce engagement. These training initiatives would not only enable traders to promote their products more effectively but also support their inclusion in the broader digital economy.

Beyond digital skills training, cooperatives possess the institutional capacity to facilitate the transformation of rural markets through the establishment of *Tamu*-based enterprises aligned with modern economic structures. By supporting capacity building in areas such as content creation (e.g., photography, videography, and copywriting), social media management (on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok), and customer relationship management, cooperatives can empower *Tamu* traders to extend their market reach, enhance competitiveness, and increase product visibility.

Additionally, the implementation of digital payment systems at *Tamu* sites can replace conventional cash transactions, enhancing operational transparency and enabling the generation of real-time sales data for strategic business analytics. To overcome infrastructural challenges, cooperatives may also collaborate with regulatory and telecommunications bodies, such as the Malaysian Cooperative Societies Commission and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, to enhance internet access in rural areas. Collectively, these efforts would embed *Tamu* into the national digital ecosystem, mitigate

geographic limitations, attract younger entrepreneurial talent, and position rural markets as progressive nodes within Malaysia's evolving rural development agenda.

Cooperatives as Actors in Community-Based Tourism

To position *Tamu* as a catalyst for rural development, integrating it into a broader community-based tourism ecosystem represents a strategic yet underutilised approach. *Tamu* inherently embodies strong cultural tourism potential, offering visitors authentic encounters rooted in local lifestyles, traditional food, indigenous crafts, and agricultural products (Foo, 2018; Yakin et al., 2022). By embedding *Tamu* within eco-tourism packages, rural communities can diversify their economic base while preserving cultural heritage. A relevant example is Kota Belud, a district renowned for its scenic landscapes, ethnic diversity, and cultural vibrancy. The *Tamu* in Kota Belud can be reimagined as a central tourism anchor, complemented by surrounding eco-tourism attractions such as river-based activities along the Kadamaian River and hiking opportunities at Bukit Bongol. Visitors could experience a full-day itinerary that includes early visits to the *Tamu* for traditional breakfast and local crafts, followed by guided jungle trekking, river tubing, or cultural demonstrations in nearby villages.

This integrated model not only enhances the appeal of *Tamu* as a tourism product but also generates new income streams for local residents, encourages environmental conservation, and strengthens the economic resilience of rural areas through multi-sector participation. In this respect, cooperatives can play a crucial role in coordinating activities, ensuring quality assurance, and marketing the combined *Tamu*-eco-tourism experience to domestic and international audiences.

To achieve this, cooperatives can first create community-based tourism packages that enhance *Tamu* participation. For example, orchard tours, traditional cooking lessons, hands-on handicraft activities, and cultural performances can be planned in addition to visits to these markets by both domestic and international visitors. These bundled products not only enhance the overall tourism experience but also create new economic opportunities for traders and the broader community.

Secondly, cooperatives can establish partnerships with homestay operators, local tour guides, and tourism agencies to develop inclusive tourism circuits. *Tamu* can become the central point where tourists can purchase unique local products, such as non-timber forest products, traditional medicines, exotic foods, and ethnic crafts, thus offering platforms to expose them to the culture and earn an income.

Thirdly, the establishment of cooperatives in *Tamu* can enhance the village's infrastructural quality through the installation of signage, distribution of location maps, open demonstration areas, and information counters. These measures collectively help create a more professional and visually appealing image of *Tamu* as a rural tourist destination.

This multifaceted approach not only enhances the profile of *Tamu* but also enables cooperatives and rural communities to generate income through tourism, in addition to traditional buying and selling. In the long term, collaborative involvement in rural tourism will enhance community economic sustainability, local culture, and a more holistic and dignified rural development model.

Cooperatives as Custodians of Heritage and Community Identity

Tamu serves as both an economic platform for rural communities and a social and cultural institution strongly embedded in the local community's history (Kurpong & Imang, 2016; Yakin et al., 2022). It embodies conventional trading practices, inter-ethnic relations, and the articulation of beliefs and standards passed down through generations. However, the growing emphasis on market efficiency and digital integration in rural development risks sidelining its cultural significance. Intangible elements such as oral traditions, trade rituals, and local languages are often excluded from planning frameworks, threatening the continuity of community identity. In this context, cooperatives offer strategic potential to balance economic modernisation with cultural preservation by positioning *Tamu* as both a heritage space and a driver of inclusive rural development.

As a first step, the cooperative can initiate efforts to document the history and narratives of *Tamu* through local research, the collection of oral histories from the elders, and the publication of informational materials in various forms, such as brochures, community exhibitions, or digital content. These efforts not only raise awareness about the culture of the residents but also increase the importance of *Tamu* as a place of historical and cultural value. Furthermore, the cooperative may organise participatory initiatives with the youth, including historical craft workshops, traditional food presentations, and local art events. This project can link the present generation with communal traditions, so reinforcing cultural identity and village cohesion.

The cooperative can emphasise cultural identity in its branding by utilising market names, visual designs that incorporate local ethnic features, and advertising narratives focused on the roots of the *tamu* and its community. This strategy can transform *Tamu* into more than a marketplace; it can evolve into a vibrant emblem of local heritage and a medium to showcase Sabah's rich culture to both domestic and international visitors.

Moreover, cooperatives can act as intermediaries between different groups in the community and authorities, ensuring that development plans are culturally diverse and community-oriented. Such an inclusive practice is key to ensuring that *Tamu* remains a common ground that reflects inter-ethnic harmony and the spirit of community in rural areas. As cooperatives act as both agents and guardians of community culture, *Tamu* can remain a development hub that not only drives economic growth but also preserves its historical roots, social values, and local identity in a significant and sustainable manner.

Inclusive Approaches and Community Participation

The effectiveness of cooperatives in transforming *Tamu* as an instrument for rural socioeconomic development depends not only on its management structure or financial capacity, but more fundamentally, on the comprehensive involvement of the village community itself (Ahmad et al., 2020; Ishak et al., 2020; Tola et al., 2021). An exclusive approach, one that focuses solely on a select few, is at risk of repeating the weaknesses of previous models, which often failed to represent the common interest. Therefore, cooperatives should act as catalysts for an inclusive and community-centred development approach, where every layer of society is given opportunities, a voice, and an active role in the development of *Tamu*.

The cooperative paradigm represents an economic form of participatory democracy, characterised by open membership and shared governance. Such orientation makes the model particularly favourable to the inclusion of historically marginalised groups, such as rural women, youth, micro-traders, and the village poor, into the economic mainstream. Within the *Tamu* setting, cooperatives can introduce specific interventions to capacity building, entrepreneurial literacy, and grassroots leadership development: entrepreneurial training programs among rural women, digital empowerment programs among young people, and special allocation of stalls to emerging vendors, all of which contribute to the development of a more equal and inclusive market.

At the same time, participatory processes should be characterised by long-term consultation and open dialogue in the planning and implementation of cooperation. Market operation mechanics, stall configuration, rental structures, and disposition of cooperative resources should be made by consensus. These processes promote democratic rule, reduce the risk of interest group domination, and ensure that every action in the village serves the common good. By doing this, cooperatives not only increase institutional control of *Tamu* but also foster social unity and a sense of ownership among its inhabitants.

The process of planning and implementation of *Tamu* development should also be based on the practice of consultation and open dialogue. Market operations, stall layout, rental fees and cooperative funds allocation should be decided by consensus. These processes increase openness, eliminate the control of a small group of parties, and ensure that every activity is in the best interest of the community. The practices also enhance the governance of *Tamu* as well as social cohesion and a sense of shared ownership among the village inhabitants.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study examined why rural *Tamu* in Sabah have yet to fulfil their potential as platforms for socioeconomic development despite their historical significance in community. Some of the main issues include the geographic isolation, dependence on the local buyers with low purchasing power, and irregular market schedules have constrained market reach. In addition, a high proportion of part-time *Tamu* operators and low reinvestment levels have reduced the depth of entrepreneurial activity. Limited digital visibility and the absence of an organised management structure have further weakened their capacity to attract visitors and generate sustained income for rural communities.

To address these issues, this study proposes the adoption of a community-based cooperative governance model. Cooperatives can play a central role in formalising key management functions such as trader registration, scheduling of market operations, and maintenance of physical infrastructure. Beyond administrative duties, cooperatives can also facilitate targeted training in areas such as financial literacy, product branding, and digital marketing. They are well positioned to mobilise microfinance mechanisms that enable small traders to move beyond occasional participation and pursue more stable, growth-oriented forms of entrepreneurship. Through this collective structure, traders are better equipped to sustain their businesses and respond to changing market demands.

The implications of these findings are threefold. First, without institutional restructuring and community ownership, *Tamu* is unlikely to progress into a high-impact rural economic platform. Second, cooperatives offer a realistic and locally grounded mechanism for reform, particularly in rural areas. Third, transforming *Tamu* into a digitally integrated, entrepreneur-friendly, and tourism-linked institution will require strategic alignment across governance, economic, and cultural dimensions, with cooperatives positioned as the central organising entity.

In conclusion, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of *Tamu's* current issues and affirms the transformative role of cooperatives in resolving their potential. The findings lay the foundation for policy and institutional reform efforts that centre community-based governance as a path to comprehensive, sustainable rural development in Sabah.

Recommendations

The all-inclusive rural development policies, long-term capacity building, investment in digital infrastructure, and a coordinated effort to develop *Tamu* as a tourism product and a symbol of community heritage should therefore form the basis of the cooperative paradigm for revitalising the indigenous *Tamu* communities. With the support of enabling institutions and broad policy frameworks, cooperatives can not only strengthen *Tamu* as a rural economic centre but also transform it into a living icon of cultural identity, social solidarity, and sustainable community aspirations.

Considering the structural and institutional issues listed above, community-based cooperatives are an effective driver of the overall transformation of *Tamu*. To achieve this potential, several strategic steps are necessary to establish a cooperative role within a sustainable and inclusive framework.

Firstly, the success of this change is determined by one factor that is often ignored: the availability of effective, trustworthy, and visionary cooperative leadership. Leaders play a central role in determining whether an organisation is merely on paper or has practical benefits in a rural setting where governance is weak and community capacity is limited. Integrity leaders can implement transparent and accountable governance systems, fostering trust among members and facilitating strategic partnerships, while also promoting grassroots innovation.

Second, an integrated cooperative model should be established in each rural district as a vital policy tool as soon as possible. Such a model should be characterised by a strong and competitive mandate, open structures aligned with the principles of community-based development, and synergy among local development agencies, state authorities, and grassroots actors in the development of a comprehensive *Tamu* development agenda. This type of cooperative leadership must be democratically elected and continually reinforced through targeted leadership training to develop a professional, ethical, and strategically oriented management team.

Third, the use of capacity-building techniques should extend beyond empowering individual small traders to include the comprehensive institutional strengthening of cooperatives. These actions must enhance both pharmacological and operational control, as well as strategic

planning, adherence to industry standards, such as food safety accreditation and halal certification, and knowledge of digital technologies and online marketing. These programs would transform cooperatives into centres of learning and innovation within the broader rural entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Fourth, investment in digital infrastructure and access to information technology in rural areas should be prioritised to enhance the economic competitiveness of *Tamu*. Cooperatives must become key players in creating digital tools, such as official websites, virtual product catalogs, e-commerce systems, and cashless payment solutions, to ensure they can maximise new opportunities in the growing digital economy.

Fifth, cooperatives should take a central role in the process of incorporating *Tamu* into the community-based tourism network. Cooperatives can collaborate with homestay operators, travel companies, and tourism promotion agencies to develop comprehensive tourism packages that make *Tamu* the centre of rural entrepreneurial and cultural experiences, positioning *Tamu* as a genuine cultural tourism product. In addition, cooperatives may act as guardians of this heritage by recording oral histories, creating community archives, and launching intergenerational programmes to maintain and pass on rural cultural knowledge. Heritage and community symbolism-based branding strategies offer unique solutions that combine economic and social value.

To conclude, a cooperative managed professionally, with the values of social entrepreneurship and a favourable policy environment, can become a central figure in transforming *Tamu* into an inclusive, sustainable, and resilient rural development platform. This kind of strategy not only strengthens *Tamu*'s position as the lifeline of the local economy but also reinvents it as a social institution that represents the collective power, cultural diversity, and developmental goals of rural communities in Malaysia in the digital age.

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