



Village Cooperatives as Instruments for the Fulfillment of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights: A Human Rights-Based Approach

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Abstract

This study examines the role of village cooperatives as instruments for the fulfillment of economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR) through a human rights-based approach (HRBA). The study employs normative legal research using statute, conceptual, and documentary policy-case approaches. Primary legal materials include the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, Law No. 25 of 1992 on Cooperatives, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), International Labour Organization Recommendation No. 193, and Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2025 concerning the acceleration of Village/Subdistrict Cooperatives Merah Putih. Secondary materials consist of scholarly literature and official policy documents. Legal materials are analyzed qualitatively through legal interpretation, systematic legal reasoning, and normative-policy analysis. The analysis shows that village cooperatives have a multidimensional human-rights function: they can expand access to work, income, capital, markets, essential goods, social services, and community participation, while also supporting local solidarity and cultural identity. A documentary policy case of the Village/Subdistrict Cooperatives Merah Putih demonstrates both the scale of the policy opportunity and the governance risks. By 19 July 2026, official government monitoring reported 83,381 legally established cooperatives, 80,977 with SIMKOPDES accounts, 60,786 with business identification numbers, 16,868 completed outlets, and 35,476 personnel being prepared for management and support functions. These figures indicate substantial institutional expansion, but they do not by themselves demonstrate the realization of rights. Therefore, cooperative development must be accompanied by participation, accountability, transparency, non-discrimination, empowerment, and effective remedy. The study proposes a rights-based governance framework that links cooperative capacity, inclusive participation, public accountability, and measurable ESCR outcomes

Keywords: Village Cooperatives, Human Rights-Based Approach, Economic, Social, Cultural Rights (ESCR)



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INTRODUCTION

Human rights are fundamental rights inherent in every person and must be respected, protected, and fulfilled through legal, institutional, and public-policy arrangements. Contemporary human rights discourse recognizes that civil and political rights cannot be separated from economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR). The right to work, the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to health, the right to education, and the right to participate in cultural life are therefore not merely development aspirations; they are dimensions of human dignity and social justice. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) establishes a framework in which states are expected to take appropriate measures toward the progressive realization of these rights while ensuring non-discrimination and equal protection (United Nations, 1966; Alston & Quinn, 1987).

In rural communities, the realization of ESCR is closely connected with access to productive resources, markets, employment, financial services, public services, and opportunities for participation. Rural populations may face structural disadvantages arising from geographical distance, unequal access to infrastructure, limited market power, weak institutional capacity, and restricted access to capital. These conditions make community-based economic institutions particularly relevant to human-rights policy because economic organization can influence whether individuals and communities are able to exercise their rights in practice (United Nations Development Programme, 2010).

Village cooperatives are relevant in this context because their organizational principles are based on voluntary association, democratic participation, member economic participation, concern for community, and collective benefit. These principles are compatible with several core principles of a human rights-based approach (HRBA), especially participation, accountability, non-discrimination, and empowerment. The cooperative is therefore not only a business entity but also a potential institutional mechanism through which communities can collectively organize economic resources and improve their bargaining position (Birchall, 2004, 2013; International Labour Organization, 2002).

The Indonesian constitutional framework provides a strong normative basis for this perspective. Article 33 of the 1945 Constitution places the national economy within the principle of economic organization based on togetherness and the principle of familialism (Nurita et. Al, 2024). Law No. 25 of 1992 on Cooperatives further positions cooperatives as economic organizations based on the principles of kinship and democracy. From a human-rights perspective, these principles are significant because they provide a legal and institutional basis for equitable participation and collective access to economic opportunities. The relationship, however, should not be reduced to a formal similarity between cooperative principles and human-rights principles; it must be examined in terms

of governance, implementation, accountability, and the actual protection of members and communities.

The policy relevance of this issue has increased with the implementation of the Village/Subdistrict Cooperatives Merah Putih program. Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2025 directed ministries, agencies, and local governments to accelerate the establishment, development, and revitalization of 80,000 Village/Subdistrict Cooperatives Merah Putih. The policy envisages cooperative functions that include the provision of basic goods, savings and loans, clinics, pharmacies, cold storage, warehousing, logistics, and other services adapted to village characteristics and potential. The policy therefore provides an important contemporary context for examining how cooperative institutions can contribute to economic, social, and cultural rights while also creating new governance responsibilities (Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia, 2025).

Official monitoring also demonstrates that the program has moved beyond the stage of policy formulation. By 19 July 2026, government reporting recorded 83,381 cooperatives with legal status, 80,977 with SIMKOPDES accounts, 60,786 with business identification numbers, 16,868 completed outlets, 18,521 outlets under construction, and 35,476 personnel being prepared for managerial and supporting functions (Kementerian Koordinator Bidang Pangan, 2026). These figures are important as indicators of institutional expansion, but they cannot be interpreted automatically as evidence that ESCR has been fulfilled. The existence of a cooperative, a legal entity, or an outlet is an institutional output; human-rights fulfillment requires demonstrable access, participation, equality, accountability, and meaningful benefit.

Previous literature has established the contribution of cooperatives to resilience, poverty reduction, social and solidarity economies, and sustainable development (Birchall, 2013; Develtere et al., 2008; Utting, 2015; Wanyama, 2014). Recent scholarship has also linked cooperative governance to environmental, social, and governance principles and to broader debates on institutional accountability (Schlenker et al., 2026). Nevertheless, there remains a conceptual and legal gap in connecting the cooperative as an economic institution with the state duty to respect, protect, and fulfill ESCR. The gap becomes particularly important when large-scale village cooperative policies are implemented rapidly, because institutional expansion may occur faster than the development of participatory governance, transparency, professional management, and safeguards against exclusion or elite capture.

This study therefore asks: (1) how can village cooperatives be conceptualized as instruments for the fulfillment of ESCR within an HRBA; (2) how do cooperative functions relate to economic, social, and cultural rights; (3) what does the contemporary Village/Subdistrict Cooperatives Merah Putih policy illustrate about the opportunities and governance risks of rights-based cooperative development; and (4) what governance strategies are required to strengthen village cooperatives as instruments of empowerment rather than merely formal economic institutions? The study contributes a normative-policy framework that connects cooperative governance with ESCR and provides a rights-based basis for evaluating village cooperative policies

METHOD

This study employs normative legal research (juridical normative research). The method is appropriate because the central objective is to examine the legal and normative relationship between village cooperatives, human rights, ESCR, and cooperative governance. The study does not claim to measure household-level impacts or establish causal effects. Instead, it analyzes legal norms, institutional principles, policy design, and official documentary evidence to construct an argumentative human-rights framework.

Three approaches are used. First, the statute approach examines the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, Law No. 25 of 1992 on Cooperatives, the ICESCR, International Labour Organization Recommendation No. 193, and Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2025. Second, the conceptual approach is used to clarify the concepts of village cooperatives, ESCR, HRBA, participation, accountability, non-discrimination, and empowerment. Third, a documentary policy-case approach is used to examine the Village/Subdistrict Cooperatives Merah Putih program as a contemporary implementation context. The policy case is based on official government documents and monitoring reports rather than field interviews or direct observation; therefore, it is treated as a documentary case illustration, not as an empirical field case study (Rafid, et.al, 2025).

Primary legal materials consist of constitutional provisions, legislation, international human-rights instruments, and government policy instruments. Secondary legal materials consist of books, peer-reviewed journal articles, previous research, and scholarly analyses concerning cooperatives, human rights, development, and social solidarity. Official government reports are used as documentary materials to contextualize the policy case and to identify institutional outputs and governance challenges. Tertiary materials are used only when necessary to clarify legal terminology.

Legal materials were collected through library research and systematic documentary review. Sources were identified from official government and institutional publications and from relevant academic literature. Particular attention was given to sources that directly address cooperative governance, ESCR, HRBA, and the Village/Subdistrict Cooperatives Merah Putih program. The documentary policy case uses dated official information so that institutional outputs are distinguished from normative expectations.

The analysis proceeds in four stages. First, relevant legal norms are identified and interpreted. Second, cooperative principles are mapped against HRBA principles and ESCR obligations. Third, the documentary policy case is examined to identify the relationship between institutional design, service functions, participation, and accountability. Fourth, the findings are synthesized into governance strategies. The analysis uses systematic legal reasoning and qualitative interpretation to distinguish legal obligations, institutional mechanisms, policy outputs, and normative recommendations. This distinction is important because administrative expansion of cooperatives cannot by itself be treated as proof of human-rights fulfillment

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptualization of Village Cooperatives within a Human Rights Framework

A human-rights perspective changes the analytical position of the village cooperative. The cooperative should not be treated solely as an enterprise whose success is

determined by turnover, assets, or surplus. It should also be understood as a community institution through which individuals and groups may exercise economic agency, participate in decision-making, obtain access to resources, and collectively pursue welfare. This does not mean that every cooperative automatically fulfills human rights. Rather, the cooperative becomes a rights-relevant institution when its governance and activities are designed to expand meaningful access, protect members from discrimination and abuse, and make decision-makers accountable.

The relationship between cooperative principles and HRBA can be expressed through four central principles. Participation requires members and affected community groups to have meaningful opportunities to influence decisions rather than merely attend formal meetings. Accountability requires transparent management, accessible information, internal controls, and mechanisms for complaints and remedy. Non-discrimination requires equal access to membership, services, and benefits, including attention to groups that may be structurally disadvantaged. Empowerment requires the development of members' capabilities so that they become active economic subjects rather than passive recipients of assistance (United Nations Development Programme, 2010).

The conceptual relationship is summarized in Table 1. The table also clarifies an important analytical distinction: a cooperative activity is not equivalent to a right being fulfilled. For example, providing a savings-and-loan service can support the right to an adequate standard of living, but the service becomes rights-supporting only when access is fair, terms are transparent, discrimination is prevented, and members have avenues to challenge abusive practices.

Table 1. Mapping Cooperative Functions to ESCR and HRBA Principles

Cooperative function	Relevant ESCR	HRBA principle	Rights-based safeguard
Savings, credit, and financial access	Right to work; adequate standard of living	Non-discrimination; empowerment	Transparent terms, fair access, complaint mechanism
Collective production and marketing	Right to work; livelihood security	Participation; empowerment	Member control, fair benefit distribution
Basic-goods distribution	Adequate standard of living	Accountability; non-discrimination	Affordability, quality, transparent pricing
Health and education-related services	Right to health; right to education	Participation; accountability	Service quality, accessibility, referral to public services
Deliberative cooperative governance	Cultural participation; association and participation	Participation; non-discrimination	Inclusive representation and meaningful deliberation

Source: synthesis of authors based on ICESCR, UNDP-HRBA, ILO Recommendation No. 193, Birchall, and related cooperative/human rights literature.

Village Cooperatives and the Fulfillment of Economic Rights

The first and most direct dimension is the fulfillment of economic rights. Cooperatives can reduce barriers to capital, markets, productive inputs, information, and collective bargaining. Savings and loan activities may improve access to finance; collective procurement may reduce input costs; collective marketing may improve bargaining power; and cooperative distribution channels may shorten the distance between producers and consumers. These mechanisms are particularly relevant to rural communities whose economic position may be weakened by fragmented production and unequal market relationships (Birchall, 2013; Smith & Rothbaum, 2013).

The right to work is also connected to cooperative development. A cooperative can create direct employment in management, logistics, retail, processing, financial services, and other business units. More importantly, it can support self-employment and livelihood security by enabling farmers, fishers, traders, artisans, and micro-enterprises to participate in collective value chains. From an ESCR perspective, the relevant question is therefore not simply whether a cooperative creates jobs, but whether the work is accessible, decent, non-discriminatory, and supported by fair institutional arrangements.

Cooperatives may also support the right to an adequate standard of living through more equitable distribution of economic benefits. Cooperative ownership differs from an arrangement in which economic value is controlled exclusively by external investors because members can participate in governance and share in the economic results. However, distributive benefits are not automatic. Weak management, elite capture, unequal information, excessive dependence on government funds, or concentration of decision-making can undermine the democratic character of the cooperative. Accordingly, the human-rights value of cooperative ownership depends on effective governance (Utting, 2015).

The Indonesian constitutional and statutory framework reinforces this orientation. Article 33 of the 1945 Constitution places economic organization within the principle of togetherness, while Law No. 25 of 1992 recognizes cooperative organization based on kinship and economic democracy. These norms should be interpreted together with human-rights principles so that cooperative development is not evaluated only by business performance but also by equality of access, participation, transparency, and social benefit.

Contribution to Social and Cultural Rights

The social dimension of village cooperatives becomes visible when cooperatives provide or facilitate access to essential goods and services. Cooperative outlets may support food availability and distribution; financial services may help households manage economic risks; and cooperative partnerships may facilitate access to health, education, logistics, or other community services. The relevance to ESCR is strongest where cooperative activities complement public institutions without replacing the state's responsibility to ensure access to essential rights.

The Koperasi Desa/Kelurahan Merah Putih policy illustrates this multidimensional design. Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2025 identifies activities that may include basic-goods procurement, savings and loans, clinics, pharmacies, cold storage, warehousing, and logistics. These functions show that the cooperative is being positioned as a local service

and distribution node rather than merely a financial institution. From an HRBA perspective, such expansion creates opportunities to improve access but simultaneously requires safeguards concerning affordability, non-discrimination, data protection, transparency, quality, and accountability (Khairuddin, 2026).

Cultural rights are less visible in conventional cooperative performance indicators but remain important. Cooperative principles of deliberation, mutual assistance, solidarity, and collective responsibility can reinforce forms of social organization that are embedded in local communities. (Develtere et al, 2008) show that cooperative movements can be connected to collective strategies for overcoming poverty, while the broader social and solidarity economy literature emphasizes the social relationships that accompany economic organization (Utting, 2015). In Indonesia, the principle of gotong royong provides a culturally resonant basis for cooperative organization, but cultural participation should remain voluntary and inclusive rather than being used to justify exclusion or informal domination.

The cultural-rights dimension also requires recognition of diversity within villages. A rights-based cooperative should not assume that a village is socially homogeneous. Women, young people, persons with disabilities, poorer households, minority groups, migrant residents, and different occupational groups may experience different barriers to membership and benefits. Thus, participation must be designed so that formal membership is accompanied by substantive opportunity to influence decisions and obtain services.

Documentary Policy Case: Village/Subdistrict Cooperatives Merah Putih

The Village/Subdistrict Cooperatives Merah Putih program provides a useful documentary policy case because it represents one of the largest recent efforts to institutionalize village-based cooperative infrastructure in Indonesia. Presidential Instruction No. 9 of 2025 instructed the government to accelerate the establishment, development, and revitalization of 80,000 cooperatives and emphasized coordinated action across ministries and local governments. The policy also requires data integration, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting, which are directly relevant to the accountability dimension of HRBA (Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia, 2025).

Official monitoring indicates rapid institutional expansion. As of 19 July 2026, the government reported 83,381 legally established cooperatives, 80,977 with SIMKOPDES accounts, 60,786 with business identification numbers, 16,868 completed outlets, 18,521 outlets under construction, and more than 35,800 locations ready and verified for operations. The government also reported preparation of 35,476 personnel, consisting of 30,000 managers and 5,476 supporting personnel (Kementerian Koordinator Bidang Pangan, 2026). These data demonstrate the scale of institutionalization and the effort to build organizational and physical capacity.

The documentary case, however, also demonstrates why institutional outputs should not be confused with human-rights outcomes. A legally established cooperative is an institutional status; an SIMKOPDES account is a digital-administrative capacity; an NIB indicates business legality; and a completed outlet represents physical infrastructure. None of these indicators alone establishes that poor households have gained fair access to capital,

that women and other potentially excluded groups participate in decision-making, that prices are affordable, or that complaints can be resolved effectively. A rights-based monitoring system therefore needs outcome indicators in addition to administrative indicators.

The policy design also creates governance risks. Large-scale programs involving public funds, village resources, infrastructure, and cooperative management may be exposed to elite capture, conflicts of interest, weak procurement controls, unequal access to information, and symbolic participation. Government monitoring in 2026 has itself emphasized the need to strengthen governance, human resources, and operational readiness. The appropriate legal response is not to reject cooperative expansion, but to embed safeguards from the beginning: transparent membership and service rules, publicly accessible financial information, democratic elections, conflict-of-interest controls, independent oversight, complaint mechanisms, and periodic rights-impact evaluation.

The case therefore supports a central proposition of this study: the success of village cooperatives should be assessed through a dual lens. The first lens measures institutional capacity, including legal status, assets, digital systems, human resources, and business operations. The second lens measures rights realization, including equitable access, participation, non-discrimination, accountability, empowerment, and measurable improvements in access to economic and social opportunities. The second lens is necessary to determine whether cooperative infrastructure actually serves the people for whom the program is intended.

Table 2. Documentary Indicators of the Village/Subdistrict Cooperatives Merah Putih Program

Indicator (19 July 2026)	Official figure	Human-rights interpretation
Legally established cooperatives	83,381	Institutional/legal capacity; not by itself proof of rights realization
SIMKOPDES accounts	80,977	Digital administrative capacity; requires inclusion and data governance
Business Identification Numbers (NIB)	60,786	Business legality; should be linked to accessible and fair economic opportunity
Completed outlets	16,868	Physical service capacity; requires affordability, quality, and non-discrimination
Outlets under construction	18,521	Expansion of infrastructure; requires transparency and community oversight
Personnel being prepared	35,476	Management capacity; requires merit, competence, integrity, and rights-based training

Source: Coordinating Ministry for food Affairs (2026), monitoring data as of July 19, 2026; interpretation of human rights by the author. The table data is consistent with the description in the manuscript which records 83,381 cooperatives with legal entities, 80,977 SIMKOPDES accounts, 60,786 NIB, and 16,868 completed outlets.

Challenges and Strategies for Human Rights-Based Cooperative Governance

The first challenge is managerial and organizational capacity. Rapid formation of cooperatives may produce a gap between legal establishment and professional management.

Cooperative managers need competencies in finance, business planning, risk management, digital systems, member services, procurement, and human-rights governance. Training should therefore move beyond technical bookkeeping and include transparency, anti-discrimination, conflict-of-interest management, complaint handling, and participatory decision-making.

The second challenge is access to capital and technology. Cooperative expansion without sustainable business models can create institutional dependence on government support. Conversely, digitalization without adequate literacy can exclude members who are less familiar with technology. A rights-based strategy should therefore combine digital systems with human assistance, accessible information, and offline channels so that technology improves access rather than creating a new barrier.

The third challenge is participation and accountability. A cooperative may formally hold member meetings while substantive decisions remain concentrated in a small group. Participation should consequently be assessed by the quality of deliberation, access to information, representation of different member groups, and the capacity to influence decisions. Accountability should include internal supervision, financial transparency, external monitoring where appropriate, and accessible complaint and remedy mechanisms.

The fourth challenge is the risk of discrimination and exclusion. Membership rules, service requirements, collateral arrangements, digital registration, or informal social networks may disadvantage particular groups. The cooperative should conduct periodic inclusion reviews and publish clear eligibility criteria, service terms, and benefit-distribution mechanisms. Particular attention should be given to women, youth, persons with disabilities, low-income households, and groups whose economic participation has historically been limited.

The fifth challenge concerns coordination between government and cooperative autonomy. Government support is important for capacity building, infrastructure, and policy alignment, but excessive administrative control can weaken the democratic character of cooperatives. The appropriate relationship is therefore enabling rather than substitutive: government establishes legal safeguards, provides capacity support, monitors public-interest outcomes, and ensures accountability, while cooperative members retain meaningful control over organizational decisions within the law.

Based on these findings, this study proposes a Human Rights-Based Village Cooperative Governance Framework consisting of six mutually reinforcing dimensions: (1) legal recognition and rights alignment; (2) inclusive participation; (3) transparent and accountable governance; (4) non-discrimination and equal access; (5) empowerment and capability development; and (6) outcome-oriented monitoring and remedy. The framework can be used by policymakers and cooperative managers to evaluate whether institutional development is accompanied by substantive rights realization.

Table 3. Human Rights-Based Village Cooperative Governance Framework

Dimension	Core governance requirement	Illustrative indicator
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Legal recognition and rights alignment		Align cooperative rules with constitutional, statutory, and human-rights standards	Rights provisions in statutes/bylaws and service rules
Inclusive participation		Ensure members and affected groups can meaningfully influence decisions	Representation, meeting participation, documented deliberation
Transparency and accountability	and	Provide accessible financial and operational information and oversight	Published reports, audit, conflict-of-interest disclosure
Non-discrimination and equal access	and	Prevent exclusion in membership and services	Access by gender, age, disability, income, and social group
Empowerment and capability	and	Build members' economic and governance capabilities	Training, digital literacy, leadership development
Monitoring and remedy		Measure rights outcomes and provide complaint and remedy channels	Grievance resolution, service outcomes, member satisfaction

Source: synthesis of the author based on the Constitution of 1945, law No. 25 of 1992, ICESCR, UNDP HRBA principles, instruction No. 9 of 2025, and governance literature.

CONCLUSION

Village cooperatives have substantial potential to function as instruments for the fulfillment of economic, social, and cultural rights when they are governed as democratic and accountable community institutions rather than merely as business entities. The normative analysis demonstrates that cooperative principles of togetherness, democratic participation, member economic participation, and concern for community are compatible with key principles of a human rights-based approach, particularly participation, accountability, non-discrimination, and empowerment.

The analysis further shows that cooperatives can contribute to economic rights by expanding access to capital, markets, productive opportunities, and employment; to social rights by facilitating access to essential goods and services; and to cultural rights by strengthening solidarity, deliberation, and community identity. Nevertheless, these contributions are potential mechanisms rather than automatic outcomes. The realization of rights depends on the quality of governance, accessibility of services, equality of participation, transparency, and the existence of effective safeguards and remedies.

The documentary policy case of the Village/Subdistrict Cooperatives Merah Putih demonstrates the scale of the current institutional opportunity. By 19 July 2026, official monitoring recorded 83,381 legally established cooperatives and substantial progress in digital registration, business licensing, outlet construction, and human-resource preparation. These outputs confirm the scale of implementation but do not, by themselves, establish that ESCR have been fulfilled. This distinction is central to evaluating cooperative policy from a human-rights perspective.

Accordingly, strengthening village cooperatives requires a dual accountability framework that measures both institutional performance and rights realization. Future monitoring should include indicators of participation, non-discrimination, affordability,

access to finance and markets, transparency, member satisfaction, grievance resolution, and distributional outcomes alongside conventional business indicators. The Human Rights-Based Village Cooperative Governance Framework proposed in this study provides a normative basis for integrating these dimensions. Its practical value lies in ensuring that cooperative expansion is translated into meaningful empowerment, equitable access, and sustainable improvements in the welfare and dignity of rural communities.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

All authors contributed to the conceptualization, legal-material collection, analysis, drafting, and revision of the manuscript. All authors approved the final version.

AI USAGE STATEMENT

The authors declare that artificial intelligence tools were used only as supporting tools for language editing, grammar checking, organization of the manuscript, and improvement of readability. The legal materials, substantive arguments, interpretation, and conclusions remain the responsibility of the authors.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could influence the analysis or conclusions of this study

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