Ca' Foscari University of Venice

VENICE SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

Working Papers Series

Clara Emefa Asempapa, Andjela Pavlovic, Francesco Rosati and Francesco Rullani

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Working Paper n. 11/2025
November 2025

ISSN: 2239-2734

Funded by the European Union

REBALANCE DEMOCRACY & CAPITALISM

This research has been realized within the Project "REBALANCE – Rebalancing disruptive Business of multinational corporation and global value chains within democratic and inclusive citizenship processes", financed by the European Union's Horizon Europe Programme under Grant Agreement No. 101061342

EMPOWERMENT FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH MULTISTAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS

Clara Emefa ASEMPAPA

Venice School of Management, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy; claraemefa.asempapa@unive.it

Andjela PAVLOVIC

Venice School of Management, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy; andjela.pavlovic@unive.it

Francesco ROSATI

Center for Technology Entrepreneurship, Technical University of Denmark; Venice School of Management, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy; frro@dtu.dk

Francesco RULLANI

Venice School of Management, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy; francesco.rullani@unive.it

(NOVEMBER 2025)

Abstract:
This paper explores how multistakeholder partnerships can empower marginalised beneficiaries across levels of their lives. Drawing on survey data from 129 cocoa farmers in a Fair-Trade project spanning Europe and West Africa, the study applies an abductive approach to investigate the empowerment of beneficiaries mainly in the family and cooperative levels. The findings reveal that empowerment is more observed at the family level than in cooperatives and often occurs independently of direct partner engagement. Beneficiaries who perceive that their cooperative is influential in the partnership feel more empowered both in their families and cooperatives. However, empowerment is not uniformly distributed, as a paradox emerges in one of the cooperatives (Cooperative 3), where familiarity with the partners does not translate into family empowerment due to cultural norms and centralised governance. These insights challenge linear models of empowerment and highlight the importance of intermediary structures and local perceptions. The study offers both theoretical and practical contributions by showing that empowerment depends less on formal inclusion in partnerships and more on perceived legitimacy and trust within local institutions.

Keywords: cross-sector partnership, multistakeholder partnership, empowerment, democratic participation, fair-trade

1 Introduction

Empowerment has been considered for decades a crucial tool for improving outcomes and fostering sustainable growth (Maiorano et al., 2021; Mena et al., 2010). However, the academic literature in management does not explore in depth the mechanisms through which empowerment can be achieved within the context of multistakeholder partnerships (Vestergaard et al., 2020). This paper aimed to address this gap.

Zimmerman (2000) defines empowerment as a process through which individuals can make choices according to the type of life they desire to live. Here, empowerment relates directly to a person's agency (Laszlo et al., 2017): it is a transformative process meant to enhance the agency of marginalised people, enabling them to become active participants in their own development rather than passive recipients of aid. In community development, empowerment is widely regarded as a means to enable marginalised individuals and groups to gain control over their own lives (Duflo, 2012; Ewerling et al., 2017), make strategic decisions (Kabeer, 1994), and obtain resources (Batliwala, 2007). Widening marginalised individuals' participation in the decision-making of the collective entities they belong to is thus clearly an empowerment process that directly links to democracy. Indeed, any empowerment of this type may have precisely the effect of improving the democratic environment where marginalised individuals live, opening up their societies and communities (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998).

In this context, empowerment is also obtained by mobilising a wide series of actors, usually via *"cross-sector partnerships"* or *"multistakeholder partnerships"* (Selsky & Parker, 2005; Stadtler et al., 2024), i.e., across a multiplicity of sectors of society, such as for-profit companies, nonprofit organisations (Austin & Seitanidi, 2014), public authorities, citizens' associations, organised consumers (Maiolini et al., 2023), and so on.

As multistakeholder partnerships of this kind recognise the importance of beneficiary empowerment (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Pike & English, 2022) for addressing grand challenges (Stadtler et al., 2024), the need for effective strategies to achieve this goal becomes more pressing. This paper thus explores empowerment obtained through a multi-stakeholder partnership developed along a supply chain linking the Global North and the Global South. Our conclusions come from the data we gathered through a survey answered by 129 farmers operating in a West African country as beneficiaries of the partnership. The idea is to study how beneficiaries' participation in the partnership correlates with the type and level of their

empowerment, conceived as the acquisition of wider agency in the decision-making processes of the communities they belong to. To investigate this, we adopt an abductive research approach (Seo et al., 2021) that enabled us to begin from unexpected empirical findings. This allowed us to continuously explore how empowerment is perceived and distributed across contextual settings.

2 Theoretical Context

Sen (1999) highlights the importance of empowerment and defines it as the expansion of people's capabilities to lead the kind of lives they value. In this case, empowerment entails eliminating different forms of constraints that hinder individuals' capacity to achieve meaningful and valuable outcomes. This notion of empowerment goes beyond the provision of resources, focusing instead on expanding the choices and opportunities available to individuals and communities, thereby allowing them to act with greater autonomy and self-determination.

In management literature, empowerment is frequently framed as a critical strategy for enhancing employee performance and organisational effectiveness (Conger & Kanungo, 2000). By instilling a sense of ownership, responsibility, and trust, empowerment enables individuals to take initiative, make decisions, and contribute meaningfully to organisational goals. This principle, though rooted in the organisational context, is equally relevant when applied to the empowerment of beneficiaries in multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Furthermore, Kabeer (2001) argues that empowerment involves not only the ability to make choices but also the capacity to act on those choices. Drydyk (2008, p.13) states that "people are empowered to the extent that: (a) they exercise enhanced decision-making and influence over strategic life-choices and barriers to agency and well-being freedom; (b) their capacity for such decision-making and influence has also been enhanced; and (c) they are capable of making these gains prevail, given (i) the capabilities they have and assets they control, individually or collectively, and (ii) the opportunity structure in which they act". This perspective underlines the importance of both individual and collective agency in the empowerment process, emphasising that beneficiaries must be equipped with the skills, knowledge, and resources to translate their newfound autonomy into meaningful action.

In multistakeholder partnerships bridging different sectors of society, empowerment takes the form of a transformative process through which marginalised groups gain the ability to meaningfully participate in decision-making (Van Tulder et al., 2016), serving as the critical bridge between inclusion and agency and enabling their transition from passive participants to

active decision-makers (Ahmadsimab & Chowdhury, 2021; Vestergaard et al., 2020). This should be the case within their communities (families, cooperatives, etc) but also within the partnership itself.

The literature on partnerships with a social aim has shown that empowerment thrives when beneficiaries are actively involved in designing and implementing activities, because that way they are contextually relevant and directly address the needs and aspirations of the communities (Vestergaard et al., 2020). This enhances the sustainability and impact of the partnerships, as it fosters beneficiaries' sense of ownership, ensuring long-term commitment to the initiatives (Aga et al., 2018). This participatory approach also bridges gaps between stakeholders, aligning goals and resources more effectively (Brett, 2003). Moreover, it ensures that the interventions are tailored to their unique social, economic, and cultural contexts. For example, Stadtler et al. (2024) highlight that empowerment is more likely to occur when partnerships actively include marginalised actors in decision-making processes together with other stakeholders, enabling them to access resources, influence goals, and engage more effectively in decision-making (Burt et al., 2021; Kwon et al., 2020). Furthermore, Halevy et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of trust-building, particularly in partnerships where power dynamics can marginalise certain groups.

In this context, the link between beneficiaries' participation in multistakeholder partnerships and the empowerment these partnerships can generate for the very same beneficiaries improves their democratic participation in the local communities, thus holding great relevance. In other words, empowerment by means of multistakeholder partnerships is achieved when beneficiaries acquire the agency to influence decisions, shape outcomes, and access critical resources within their communities (Radoynovska, 2024; Stadtler et al., 2024). However, this process should be realised through their active participation in the partnership decision-making processes. Democracy should be the outcome as well as the means through which empowerment is pursued and achieved.

Following this line of thought, in this paper, we study the correlation between the participation of the beneficiaries in the decision-making process in a multi-stakeholder partnership established across societal sectors and the level of empowerment such a partnership generates for them in terms of higher participation in the decision-making process of the communities they belong to (families and cooperatives). The empirical focus is on a Fairtrade project developed by a partnership that spans firms, social enterprises, and cooperatives across Europe and West Africa, and that moves along the cocoa global supply chain.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Setting

This study is situated within the context of the Fair-Trade project in a West African Country. This is a collaborative initiative involving a European Fair-Trade firm, a European Retailer, a Local subsidiary of another Fair-Trade organisation, and cooperatives of cocoa farmers. It involves industrial partners, other Fair-Trade organisations, and small agricultural producers to address community needs through structured development activities over 4-5 years. The initiative promotes corporate social innovation through ethical supply chains by emphasising sustainable growth tailored to the social, economic, and environmental contexts of producer communities.

To do so, the partnership focuses on four interconnected components of the project's operational structure: (i*) integrated nutrient management and transformation of agricultural practices* through demonstration fields, compost sites, and tree nurseries in order to enhance biodiversity, improve soil fertility, and increase yields; (ii) *income diversification* through intercropping and alternative income sources, such as converting cocoa byproducts into marketable goods to reduce mono-crop vulnerabilities and foster ecological sustainability and economic resilience (long-term benefits over short-term costs); (iii) *digitalisation and mobile payment systems* via the Smart Farm Digital platform to reconfigure farmer-buyer relationships by enhancing transparency and efficiency; (iv) *post-harvest management* including centralised fermentation and drying techniques, to improve the quality of cocoa beans projecting the role of knowledge-sharing and experimentation in achieving quality standards that align with global market demands. By identifying these activities as a priority for the local community, the partnership contributes to the enhancement of knowledge when it comes to the agricultural practices, as well as to access to resources, as the main instruments of empowerment.

3.2 Research Approach: Abductive Reasoning

This study adopts an abductive reasoning approach (Seo et al., 2021) to explore how multistakeholder partnerships empower marginalised beneficiaries by enhancing their participation in the decision-making processes within their communities and in the partnership itself. Abduction, distinct from deduction and induction, is a logic of inquiry that begins with surprising empirical observations and seeks to generate plausible explanations by continuously moving between theory and data (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This approach was

particularly suited for our investigation, given the complexity of empowerment processes and the socio-cultural embeddedness of participation dynamics in the West African context.

Initially, our research design and survey were guided by established empowerment frameworks. However, during the pilot phase, unexpected response patterns such as uniformly positive answers to some dichotomous questions prompted us to go back to the drawing board and review our understanding of how empowerment is experienced and communicated by the beneficiaries. Rather than relying solely on pre-defined theoretical constructs, we adapted our instrument to extract richer, context-sensitive narratives by including some open-ended and ranking questions. This flexibility enabled us to identify locally significant indicators of empowerment, such as perceived improvements in farming practices and partnership influence.

Our abductive approach allowed us to continuously refine our analytical lens in response to emergent patterns in the data. For instance, the finding that beneficiaries who knew fewer partners in the partnership reported greater empowerment within families challenged the assumptions about direct engagement as a necessity for empowerment and agency. Instead, it led us to re-examine the role of local organisations like cooperatives and the subjective value that beneficiaries place on being heard. In line with abductive logic, these insights were not treated as anomalies to be dismissed but rather, after having made sure data were indeed reliable, as generative starting points for theory development.

All in all, abductive reasoning strengthened our methodological choices by fostering a dynamic interplay between the empirical evidence and theoretical reflection. It enabled us to remain open to the complexities and contradictions inherent in the empowerment processes and provided a flexible yet rigorous pathway for building empirically grounded, context-sensitive explanations of democratic participation in multistakeholder partnerships.

3.3 Data Collection

This study employs a survey methodology to collect data on the empowerment of beneficiaries in the observed partnership. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed to measure various dimensions of empowerment. The survey was administered to a sample of beneficiaries from four cooperatives that participated in the project.

To capture the empowerment of the beneficiaries, we prepared a survey based on a proposed methodology by D. Maiorano et al. (2021), measuring empowerment on different levels and based on different environments the individuals find themselves in, such as at a personal level, at home, and in a cooperative. As proposed by this methodology, we have also

inserted a control question of the willingness of the participants in taking decisions if given the opportunity. This question served to exclude possible negative answers due to a lack of personal preferences in participating in the decision-making processes.

The initial survey was set as dichotomous, with answer options set as YES or NO. Initially, we believed that this kind of survey would be the clearest one, but as we experienced language barriers, the survey needed to be translated from English into French and then into Ewe, the local language. Therefore, we believed that the short answers would provide us with the best answers, minimising the possibility of error due to the translation process. However, after testing the survey on five participants, we realised that questions were posed in the wrong way, leading to all affirmative answers. Therefore, we changed the questions so that most of them were open-ended or ranking questions, in a way that they were more descriptive in their character and gave value to the activities done by the project. This way, we took out the pressure from the participants to assess everything as positive by providing us with examples of how their agricultural practices have improved and how that translates to their overall improvement in life as a consequence of these activities, which we then used in our analysis as a proxy for empowerment.

The final survey was administered in one wave to 129 farmers by Local Fair Trade Organisation agents in the field through the use of a mobile app. The survey was developed in English, translated into French, and administered in Ewe. This survey sought to retrieve insights from farmers regarding their demographic and family profiles, decision-making roles within their families and cooperatives, their perceptions of and benefits derived from the Fair-Trade Project, the roles of partner organizations (European Firm, European Fair-Trade Organization, and Local Fair-Trade Organization), and their overall satisfaction with the arrangements and activities facilitated by the partnership.

Although this paper is based on the analysis of the quantitative survey data, it forms part of a broader project involving both quantitative and qualitative data. Following the survey, we conducted a couple of follow-up qualitative interviews with staff from the local Fair-Trade organisation. These interviews allowed us to clarify and interpret some unexpected results from the survey. This complemented and enriched the quantitative findings, providing a broader perspective on the research phenomenon.

3.4 Data

The collected data were then analysed using descriptive statistics to summarise the

responses, and inferential statistics to examine relationships between empowerment, conceived as expansion of decision rights, and thus an expansion of democratic participation, and knowledge of the partners, considered as an indication of beneficiaries' involvement in the decision processes of the partnership. We gathered the following variables:

Dependent variable

To capture the improvement in the decision-making ability of the beneficiaries, we used the answers to two main questions: *"Since the agroforestry project, do your opinions count more in major decisions in your [family/cooperative]?"*. These two dichotomous variables (YES/NO) detect the effectiveness of the multistakeholder partnership to empower the beneficiaries, granting them a larger participation in the decision-making process of their families and the cooperative of reference. As the statistics in Table 1 show, we were able to express the question in such a way to avoid homogeneous answers, relying on 85% of 1's for the family question and 58% of 1's for the cooperative question.

Independent variable

We sought to capture the level of participation of each beneficiary in the decision-making processes of the multi-stakeholder partnership. The survey contains questions meant to capture whether beneficiaries know the partner organisations that are part of the consortium. We assumed that beneficiaries who are directly involved in the partnership's decision-making would interact with the other partners and thus know who they are. Thus, we coded the answers *"I do not know"* as indicative of a limited direct participation in the decision-making of the project's consortium. We detected whether each beneficiary knows all three, two, one, or none of the partners, and elaborated a variable ranging from 0 (knowledge of all partners) to 3 (no partner is known) that could capture the *Number of unknown partners* to be conceived as a proxy of the beneficiary's direct involvement in the partnership's decision making. We also tried to know if the respondents believe the opinions of their cooperatives are considered in the partnership *(Cooperative counts in project)*, and if they give value to being part of the decision-making processes in their family *(Want to decide (family))* or in the cooperative *(Want to decide (cooperative))*.

Controls

Several other variables are present in the survey that can be used to control for a series of different contingencies. We also know if they are Decision makers already, male or Female, and the Number of their children under 14, the size of their families (Small Family (1-3

members) - Medium Family (4-6) - Large Family (7 or more)), and whether they are married. The following tables 1, 2a, and 2b report descriptive statistics and correlations for the mentioned variables.

3.5 Data Analysis

3.5.1 Descriptive Statistics

From Table 1, it is noticeable that a substantial majority of respondents (85%) reported increased influence over major family decisions, whereas less than 60% indicated the same within their cooperatives. This suggests that the benefits of the partnership have been much more integrated into family life than into the cooperatives, which potentially have more rigid structures within formal organisations and may be influenced by pre-existing power dynamics and established protocols (Maurer, Bach & Oertel, 2023).

Furthermore, a strong desire for participation is evident. Over 90% of respondents expressed a wish to be involved in decision-making at both the family and cooperative levels. This affirms empowerment as a relevant outcome for farmers and proactively addresses potential pessimism that low cooperative empowerment reflects a lack of interest.

Another key observation concerns the beneficiaries' familiarity with the partners in the project. All farmers know one partner organisation (the Local subsidiary of the second Fair Trade organisation), while there is significant variability in their knowledge of the two other partners. This heterogeneity in knowing the partners, combined with our finding that beneficiaries have generally been empowered by the project, especially within families, suggests that limited awareness does not necessarily equate to diminished benefits.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
...family	129	.853	.356	0	1
...cooperative	129	.589	.494	0	1
Num. of unknown partners	129	.899	.846	0	2
Cooperative counts in the project	129	.434	.498	0	1
Want to decide (cooperative)	129	.907	.292	0	1
Want to decide (family)	129	.884	.322	0	1
Decision maker already	129	.837	.371	0	1
Female	129	.178	.384	0	1

Num. of children under 14	129	1.744	1.264	0	6
Small family (1-2 members)	129	.248	.434	0	1
Medium family (4-6 members)	129	.419	.495	0	1
Married	129	.961	.195	0	1

3.5.2 Inferential Statistics

Table 2a and 2b report Pearson correlations among the study variables, and although the coefficients are modest in magnitude due to the use of dichotomous coding, the significant patterns offer valuable insights for theory development and model specification.

First, Family Empowerment correlates positively with two theoretically pivotal predictors: Partners are unknown *(r = .365*)* and desire to have a voice at the family level *(r = .668*).* The former gives support to our claim that being on the periphery of the partnership might go hand in hand with having a greater voice at the family level. The latter establishes construct validity: beneficiaries who want to decide are indeed more likely to feel empowered, highlighting motivational foundations of empowerment and agency.

Turning to Cooperative Empowerment, its only significant correlation is *Cooperative counts in the project (r = .223*).* This suggests that when farmers believe their cooperative has a voice in comparison to its external partners, they also feel more empowered within that organisation.

The dummy for Female is negatively correlated with both family empowerment *(r = –.206*)* in Table 2a and decision-maker already status *(r = –.210*)*, in Table 2b, drawing attention to gendered power disparities.

Finally, the absence of collinearity red flags (no coefficients exceed |0.8| apart from predictable categorical oppositions) reassures us that the regression models in the subsequent Findings section will not suffer from severe multicollinearity. In short, the correlation matrix both validates our conceptual priors, linking partner unawareness to family-level empowerment, which enriches the storyline developed in later sections.

Table 2a Pairwise Correlations *(* shows significance at p<.05) – part I*

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) …family	1.000				

(2) …cooperative	-0.080	1.000			
(3) Num. of unknown partners	0.365*	-0.137	1.000		
(4) Cooperative counts in the project	-0.121	0.223*	-0.192*	1.000	
(5) Want to decide (cooperative)	0.168	0.058	-0.070	-0.043	1.000
(6) Want to decide (family)	0.668*	-0.057	0.358*	-0.121	0.300*
(7) Decision maker already	0.231*	0.059	0.097	0.132	0.003
(8) Female	-0.206*	-0.105	-0.064	-0.040	-0.199*
(9) Num. of children < 14	-0.050	-0.045	0.100	-0.070	0.210*
(10) Small family (1-2 members)	-0.116	0.042	0.166	0.113	0.187*
(11) Medium family (4-6 members)	0.087	0.102	0.027	0.018	-0.053
(12) Married	0.143	0.086	0.024	0.014	0.074

Table 2b Pairwise Correlations *(* shows significance at p<.05) – part II*

Variables	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
(7) Decision maker already	0.233*	1.000				
(8) Female	-0.210*	-0.727*	1.000			
(9) Num. of children < 14	0.080	0.060	-0.082	1.000		
(10) Small family (1-2)	-0.128	-0.038	0.154	-0.411*	1.000	
(11) Medium family (4-6)	-0.035	0.076	-0.149	-0.027	-0.487*	1.000
(12) Married	0.178*	0.020	-0.011	-0.009	-0.071	0.008

4 Findings

4.1 Probit Models of Empowerment

As the dependent variables are dichotomous, we run regressions employing Probit models. Table 3 presents two models, one predicting Family Empowerment (Model 1) and Cooperative Empowerment (Model 2) based on the question *"since the agroforestry project, do your opinions count more in major decisions in your... [family/cooperative]?"*

Table 3 Probit Model with Standard Errors

"Since the agroforestry project, do your opinions count more in major decisions in your...?"	(1) Family	(2) Cooperative
Num. of unknown partners	.6**	-.13
	(.28)	(.16)
Cooperative counts in project	-.3	.53**
	(.32)	(.24)
Want to decide (cooperative)	.29	.31
	(.71)	(.44)
Want to decide (family)	2.09***	-.05
	(.54)	(.43)
Decision maker already	.69	-.23
	(.52)	(.45)
Female	.06	-.47
	(.54)	(.44)
Num. of children under 14	-.24	0
	(.15)	(.11)
Small Family (1-3 members)	.05	.28
	(.4)	(.35)
Medium Family (4-6) members	.69*	.37
	(.42)	(2.9)
Married	.4	-.62
	(.44)	(.74)
Constant	-1.79**	.54
	(.86)	(.99)
Observations	129	129
Pseudo R^2	.49	.07

Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

Large Family (7 or more members) is the baseline

****p<.01, **p<.05, *p<.1*

In Model 1, which looks at the determinants of Family Empowerment, a significant predictor is *Want to Decide (Family)*. With a coefficient of *2.09 ($p < .001$)*, desire to have a greater voice at the family level emerges as the most powerful driver of perceived empowerment. Also, the coefficient for Num of unknown partners is positive and statistically significant *($\beta = 0.60$, $p < .05$)*. This finding substantiates our proposition that peripheral positioning within the partnership can, under certain conditions, foster empowerment at the family level.

The results also show that household structure matters. Respondents from medium-sized families (4–6 members) are more likely to feel empowered than those from large households *(β = 0.69, $p < .10$)*. Other controls, including gender, marital status, and pre-existing decision-maker role, are non-significant, suggesting that the project's empowerment effect cuts across these demographic lines once motivational and positional factors are accounted for. Model fit is robust, with a pseudo-R2 of .49, indicating that nearly half of the variance in family empowerment is explained by the predictors.

Model 2, by contrast, shows that the determinant of cooperative empowerment is modest (pseudo-R^2 = .07). Most predictors exhibit negligible or non-significant effects, with one relevant exception: *cooperative counts in the project (β = 0.53, $p < .05$)*. This variable captures the respondents' perception that their cooperative's voice is heard by external partners. The finding suggests that when farmers believe their cooperative is influential externally, they also feel more empowered internally. This difference between family and cooperative levels reinforces our earlier argument that empowerment pathways operate differently across levels of social clusters.

The stark difference in pseudo-R2 values highlights a key insight: empowerment outcomes seem easier to explain at the family level than within the cooperative level. Family empowerment hinges on personal motivation and indirect project engagement, whereas cooperative empowerment appears contingent upon collective legitimacy regarding the partnership, a dynamic less tied to individual characteristics. The absence of significant gender effects in both models challenges stereotypical assumptions that women uniformly experience lesser empowerment. However, Tables 2a and 2b caution that gendered processes may unfold through unmeasured interaction effects, warranting more analysis.

The exploration developed up to now was possible because we pooled all answers from different cooperatives. However, it is very likely that members of the same cooperative exhibit similar patterns for what concerns some of the key determinants of empowerment. We decided to include cooperatives' fixed effects into the previous regressions. While results relative to empowerment in the cooperative are strengthened and enriched by new significant coefficients, like that of *Want to decide (family)*, calling for a more nuanced relationship between the two spheres of empowerment (the family and the cooperative), we could not estimate any model for family empowerment. This outcome led us to investigate more in detail the differences among cooperatives and their role in determining the results we observed for the pooled regression. These helped us pinpoint *Cooperative 3* as the outlier: its members report a remarkably lower

voice at the family level and were among the least interested in acquiring it; however, they had the highest familiarity with the external partners. This anomaly prompted a deeper dive to understand what was influencing the phenomenon. In the subsequent subsection, we contrast Cooperative 3's position with its peer cooperatives.

4.2 Pathways in Beneficiary Empowerment

4.2.1 Empowerment at the Family Level

Table 4 shows members who have reported having an increase or not in how much their voices are heard at the family level.

Table 4: Family Empowerment

Cooperative	No	Yes
Cooperative 0		20
Cooperative 1	1	10
Cooperative 2		53
Cooperative 3	16	2
Cooperative 5	2	26
Total	**19**	**110**

To further understand this phenomenon, we cross-tabulated cooperative membership with our coding of beneficiaries' open-ended explanations of why and how the project affected their voice (or not), both at the family level.

Table 5: Reason for Increase (or not) Voice at the Family Level

Code	Label	Other Cooperatives	Cooperative 3
1	*Benefit from the project*	48.65%	0%
2	*Improved financial situation*	32.43%	0%
3	*Increased/improved responsibilities in the household*	16.22%	5.56%
4	*Traditional roles*	1.80%	88.89%
5	*Other/ personal*	0.90%	5.56%

Pearson $Chi^2 = 102.14$ Prob = 0.0000

Among the other cooperatives, the explanations mainly group around Code 1 (Benefit from project activities – 49%) and Code 2 (Improved financial situation – 32%). These

respondents frame empowerment as a material dividend: better farming, higher yields, and cash inflows translate into having a greater voice at home. A further 16% resort to Code 3 (Increased household responsibilities), as expressed in the quotes below

"I take full care of family responsibilities"- farmer from Cooperative 2

"I make decisions related to the future of our children. I take care of family expenses"- farmer from Cooperative 2

"By regular intervention as needed by the household"- farmer from Cooperative 1

In a very stark contrast, members of Cooperative 3 overwhelmingly attribute their limited empowerment to Code 4 (Traditional roles - 89%). The open-ended questions show references to cultural stances that defer to male heads, as seen below:

"Since I am already the father of the family, so all decisions are made by me"- farmer from cooperative 3

"Woman doesn't decide"-farmer from cooperative 3

Virtually none mention project benefits or finances. This reinforces a cultural-norm explanation, where gendered tradition seems to dominate cooperative 3. This indicates that material project inputs alone do not overturn domestic hierarchies

4.2.2 Desired Pathways to Family Empowerment

To explore some dimensions of empowerment, we cross-tabulated cooperative membership with our codes for why and how beneficiaries who desire or do not greater family decision-making power. Table 6 contrasts Cooperative 3 with the four other cooperatives.

Table 6: Reasons for Desiring (or not) more Participation at the Family Level

Code	Description	Other Cooperatives	Cooperative 3
1	*Shape farming practices*	45.95%	0%
2	*Secure financial stability*	9.91%	0%
3	*Manage family well-being and planning*	14.41%	5.56%
4	*Traditional roles*	22.52%	88.89%
5	*Other/ personal*	7.21%	5.56%

Pearson $Chi^2 = 32.50$ Prob = 0.0000

The distribution is heavily skewed. Among the other cooperatives, nearly half chose shaping farming practices (Code 1). A further 10% cite financial security (Code 2) and 14% emphasise family future planning (Code 3). Collectively, these answers frame empowerment

in terms of acquiring better farming skills, safeguarding income, and steering household well-being and future.

By contrast, a huge chunk of cooperative 3 respondents do not have any desire to increase their voice at the family level, and they overwhelmingly gravitate to traditional roles (Code 4, 89%) as a reason, highlighting a strong cultural preference in that cooperative. This is reflected by these quotes:

"Since with us it is the man who decides"- female farmer from cooperative 3

"I am already a decision maker"- male farmer from cooperative 3

Virtually no cooperative 3 farmer links desire for family empowerment to farming decision-making or financial strategizing.

4.2.3 Empowerment at the Cooperative Level

To further understand this phenomenon, we cross-tabulated cooperative membership with beneficiaries' open-ended explanations of why and how the project affected their voice at both the cooperative levels.

Table 7: Reasons for Increase (or not) in Voice at the Cooperative Level

Code	Label	Other Cooperatives	Cooperative 3
1	*Contribution to sustainable farming activities*	14.41%	0%
2	*Opportunities for income and resource management*	1.80%	5.56%
3	*Participation in decision-making/ Part of leadership*	36.94%	77.78%
4	*Lack of access to leadership and decision-making structures*	39.64%	11.11%
5	*Other/ personal*	7.21%	5.56%

Pearson $Chi^2 = 13.19$ Prob = 0.0104

The patterns at the cooperative levels are more subtle. The respondents were split in their answers between Code 3 (Participation in decision-making/leadership - 37%) and Code 4 (Lack of access to leadership structures- 40%). The contrast indicates heterogeneity: some farmers who feel empowered at the cooperative level would like to do so through new committee roles, while those who do not feel empowered at the cooperative level perceive exclusion as the reason, perhaps reflecting cooperative life-cycle tensions.

Cooperative 3 farmers, on the other hand, concentrate on Code 3 (78%), meaning they would frame empowerment at the cooperative level by participating more in the decision-making activities of the cooperative. Unlike the story at the family level, at the cooperative level, Cooperative 3 members appear to seek more power through leadership positions that satisfy internal narratives of participation, whereas other cooperatives exhibit a broader spectrum, ranging from empowerment to continued marginalisation.

4.2.4 Desired Pathways to Cooperative Empowerment

We also cross-tabulated why and how beneficiaries would desire a greater voice inside their cooperative. Table 8 summarises the distribution.

Table 8: Reasons for Desiring (or not) More Participation at the Cooperative Level

Code	*Description*	Other Cooperatives	Cooperative 3
1	*Improving farming practices and sustainability*	46.85%	0%
2	*Improving economic opportunities and market access*	15.32%	0%
3	*Community development and knowledge sharing*	15.32%	0%
4	*Leadership roles and power dynamics*	15.32%	100%
5	*Other / Personal*	7.21%	0%

Pearson $Chi^2 = 56.18$ Prob = 0.0000

Here, the patterns in the cooperative are even more polarised than on the family level. Cooperative 3 farmers unanimously shoulder their empowerment desires in Code 4 (leadership roles and power dynamics). This suggests that visible authority positions are perceived as the primary, if not sole, route to influence within their cooperative.

"No need, I'm already involved"- farmer from Cooperative 3

"I would like to be more involved in big meetings"- farmer from Cooperative 3

"I wish we were more involved"- farmer from Cooperative 3

By contrast, respondents in the other 4 cooperatives show a diversified view: nearly half prioritise contributions to sustainable farming activities (Code 1), while substantial minorities emphasise economic/market opportunities (Code 2) and community development and knowledge sharing (Code 3). These desires reflect a more functional concept of empowerment at the cooperative level, one centred on tangible improvements to farming practices, income, and collective learning rather than positional authority.

This glaring contrast sheds light on earlier findings, which showed that cooperative counts in the project predicted empowerment at the cooperative level, while knowing all the partners did not. For farmers in the other cooperatives, aside from cooperative 3, empowerment stems from the cooperative's role as an operational intermediary. Hence, perceptions of external voice matter. For cooperative 3, empowerment is equated with capturing internal leadership slots, showing that external legitimacy plays a secondary role.

We also examined why and how respondents believe the opinions of their cooperative are taken into consideration regarding the entire project. Table 9 cross-tabulates this.

Table 9: Reasons for Perceived Influence (or not) of Cooperative's Voice in Project

Code	Description	Other Cooperatives	Cooperative 3
0	*No answer*	61.26%	33.33%
1	*Involvement in shaping agroforestry activities*	9.91.32%	0%
2	*Access to resources and economic benefits*	4.50%	0%
3	*Participation in cooperative decisions and planning*	9.91%	5.56%
4	*Collaborating with project partners*	10.81%	61.11%
5	*Other / Personal*	3.60%	0%

Pearson $Chi^2 = 27.64$ Prob = 0.0000

Two things stand out. First, respondents in the other cooperatives offer a diversified operational "wish-list" for their cooperatives: about 10% hope to influence agroforestry plans (Code 1), another 10% aim to sit at decision-making tables (Code 3), and about 11% seek closer collaboration with external partners (Code 4). Yet a majority (61%) provide no answer (Code 0), perhaps signalling satisfaction with current arrangements or limited awareness of the scope of the powers of the cooperative.

Subsequently, Cooperative 3 farmers display a sharply focused ambition: 61% want deeper collaboration with project partners (Code 4), and they supply nearly half of all such responses in the dataset despite their small sample share. This finding merges with earlier results showing Cooperative 3's fixation on authority and legitimacy signs. This shows that partnership collaboration appears to be the primary avenue through which Cooperative 3 members believe they can elevate their cooperative's standing in the project.

Here, the difference suggests that the other cooperatives are oblivious about the *empowerment of their cooperative*, while those who do majorly perceive it, do so through internal operational levers, such as agroforestry design of the project, resource allocation, etc.

On the flip side, Cooperative 3 looks outward, setting its sights on external partner engagement. This outward direction may compensate for Cooperative 3's weaker decision-making structures, reinforced by this quote:

> *"[Cooperative 3's] origin still shapes the management style: people often see [the President] as the boss, and her voice carries the greatest weight whenever decisions are made."- Staff from Local Fair-Trade Organisation*

4.2.5 Alignment Between Empowerment at the Family and Cooperative Levels

To examine how family-level rationales map onto cooperative rationales, we produced a full cross-tabulation of empowerment at family and cooperative levels in Table 11. The association is highly significant *($\chi^2 = 61.72, p < 0.001$)*, confirming that beneficiaries tend to hold internally coherent narratives across levels.

Table 11: Alignment between Empowerment at the Family and Cooperative Levels

Family	Cooperative	Key Implication
(1) Benefit from the project activities	*12.96 %* contribution to sustainable farming activities (Code 1), *12.96 %* Participation in decision-making/ Part of leadership (Code 3), *62.96 %* Lack of access to leadership and decision-making structures (Code 4), *11.11 %* other (Code 5)	Beneficiaries who highlight project benefits at home often still perceive exclusion at the cooperative level, signalling a "private gains / public gaps" paradox.
(2) Improved financial situation	25.00 % contribution to sustainable farming activities (Code 1), 55.56 % Participation in decision-making/ Part of leadership (Code 3), 16.67 % Lack of access to leadership and decision-making structures (Code 4),	Financially motivated families seek to translate income gains into formal organisational roles, linking money to voice.
(3) Increased/ improved responsibilities in the household	5.26 % Opportunities for income and resource management (Code 2), 73.68 % Participation in decision-making/ Part of leadership (Code 3), 15.79 % Lack of access to leadership and decision-making structures (Code 4)	When new responsibilities arise at home, beneficiaries aim to mirror that empowerment inside the cooperative, highlighting role symmetry.
(4) Traditional roles	5.56 % Opportunities for income and resource management (Code 2), 72.22 % Participation in decision-making/ Part of leadership (Code 3), 16.67 % Lack of access to leadership and decision-making structures (Code 4)	Even tradition-anchored families desire a cooperative voice, but they frame it through leadership positions rather than systemic change, echoing Cooperative 3's authority-seeking pattern.

(5) Other	Split 50 % leadership participation, 50 % personal reasons	Too small for firm inference; represents idiosyncratic cases.

Pearson $Chi^2 = 61.72$ Prob = 0.0000

Two inescapable insights emerge. Firstly, leadership hunger appears across all bases. Except for the (1) Benefit from the project activities cluster, a majority within every family level rationale aspire to leadership participation (Code 3) in cooperatives. Leadership roles emerge as the primary currency of organisational empowerment. Secondly, there appears to be a disjunction concerning the benefits of the project activities at the family level. Respondents who emphasise concrete project benefits overwhelmingly feel excluded at the cooperative level (63 % choose Code 4). Visible gains at the family level may heighten awareness of difficult decision structures, driving frustration.

4.2.6 Family Level Determinants and Perceived Influence of Cooperative

To understand further, we checked beneficiaries' desired modes of partnership engagement (Table 12). The association is significant *($\chi^2 = 50.04$, $p = 0.0002$).*

Table 12: Family Level Determinants and Perceived Influence of Cooperatives' Voices

Family	Pathway of Coop's Voice within the Partnership	Key Implication
(1) Benefit from the project activities	57.4 % Null (Code 0), 18.5 % Involvement in shaping agroforestry activities (Code 1), 18.5 % Collaborating with project partners (Code 4).	Project-benefit families either feel content (Code 0) or wish to channel gains into field-level agroforestry adjustments and partnership visibility, reinforcing the "private gain–public contribution" cycle.
(2) Improved financial situation	63.9 % Null, 11.1 % Access to resources and economic benefits (Code 2), 16.7 % Participation in cooperative decisions and planning (Code 3).	Financially motivated families also tend to be passive, suggesting satisfaction or limited knowledge, while the rest focus on gaining resources and economic benefits or participation in planning.
(3) Increased/ improved responsibilities in the household	57.9 % Null, 26.3 % Participation in cooperative decisions and planning (Code 3), 10.5 % Collaborating with project partners (Code 4).	The few responsibility-heavy families who are not passive strive to translate that into a cooperative voice, mirroring their domestic planner role.
(4) Traditional roles	44.4 % Null, 50.0 % Collaborating with project partners (Code 4),	Tradition-anchored beneficiaries look outward to external partners for legitimacy rather than internal operational levers, consistent with Cooperative 3's external-authority pattern.

(5) Other	Even split between Null and partner collaboration.	Too sparse for robust inference.

Pearson $Chi^2 = 50.04$ Prob = 0.0002

From the table, we can observe a high null baseline (code 0) across rationales, signalling either satisfaction with current operations or lack of clarity about the role their cooperatives play in the project. Here, there is external alignment for traditional stance in terms of gender roles, which tend to disproportionately favour partner collaboration (Code 4), reinforcing their authority-seeking, outward-looking orientation. There is some pragmatism among the financially motivated as these improved-finance families lean toward accessing resources & economic benefits (Code 2), consistent with their market-oriented cooperative desires.

5 Discussion

5.1 Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships as Engines of Democratic Empowerment: Potential of Cross-Sector Collaboration

Our findings confirm the long-held proposition that multi-stakeholder partnerships can act as democratic engines by empowering marginalised communities to enter collective decision-making (Stadtler et al., 2024; Van Tulder et al., 2016). Beneficiaries who perceive that their cooperative is heard by external partners report greater voice in family and cooperative matters, highlighting the value of institutional inclusion and participatory design (Austin & Seitanidi, 2014; Vestergaard et al., 2020). When cooperatives gain a seat at the negotiating table, beneficiaries see tangible evidence that their circumstances matter, which in turn fosters trust, open dialogue, and willingness to invest in future collaboration (Halevy et al., 2019).

Yet our results also warn against assuming a simple inclusion-equals-empowerment equation. Beneficiaries often equate empowerment with local decision spaces, families, village units, and cooperative executive committees, rather than with direct interaction with diverse partners. This finding reaffirms Van Tulder et al.'s (2016) assertion that effective partnerships empower not by bypassing intermediaries but by reinforcing them, thus making the partnership succeed democratically. By channelling resources, legitimacy, and information through trusted cooperative structures, multistakeholder partnerships avoid the top-down pitfalls that typically plague development interventions (Brett, 2003).

Another democratic bonus emerges from activity-level empowerment. When farmers

co-design agroforestry activities or post-harvest protocols, they acquire hard skills, experience immediate agronomic pay-offs, and develop a sense of ownership over project outcomes, thereby aligning with Sen's (1999) capability framework. These micro-level decisions enhance broader local capabilities. Trust becomes a reinforcing loop, open communication reduces information asymmetries, nurtures mutual accountability, and lays the groundwork for sustainable collaboration (Aga et al., 2018; Halevy et al., 2019).

5.2 Complex Pathways to Empowerment: Intermediaries, Peripheries and Unexpected Winners

Contrary to linear empowerment models, our abductive analysis reveals a multi-tiered and sometimes counterintuitive pathway. The strongest family-level gains accumulate not to the most integrated farmers but to those on the edge of the partnership, meaning beneficiaries who know few, if any, of the project upstream partners. These beneficiaries leverage the cooperatives as brokerage nodes. When the cooperative is perceived as influential, peripheral actors amplify their voices through it. Here, the willingness to participate and the belief that *my cooperative is heard* are the primary drivers of empowerment, eclipsing demographic factors such as gender or educational attainment (Kabeer, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000).

Intermediaries, in this context, act as *empowerment multipliers*. They translate project jargon, aggregate member concerns, and represent collective demands in decision-making spaces. Where intermediaries are weak or viewed as extensions of external interests, empowerment outcomes are limited. Conversely, when intermediaries are trusted and visibly effective, even beneficiaries without direct partner contact feel authorised to experiment, question, and negotiate (Ahmadsimab & Chowdhury, 2021; Selsky & Parker, 2005).

5.3 Local Perceptions of Participation and the Cooperative 3 Puzzle

Participation is invariably filtered through local cognitive frames. Across most study sites, beneficiaries perceive empowerment within the familiar and trusted community-based systems, such as families and cooperatives, rather than through direct relationships with international partners. This affirms Ewerling et al. (2017), who emphasise that empowerment is embedded in local social contexts. In our findings, what matters most is whether the leaders of the cooperatives listen to the farmers, not whether the farmers themselves interact directly with the international partners.

Cooperative 3 confirms this narrative because its members possess unusually high

awareness of every external partner, yet this familiarity does not translate into stronger family empowerment. Two contextual factors help to explain this. Firstly, cooperative 3 operates along the border, close to another country, where cultural and economic practices are different. This difference may encourage short-termism among members of cooperative 3, especially if they rely on the farm produce as a transactional cash crop rather than a long-term asset (Maiorano et al., 2021). This explanation was supported through a follow-up interview with a staff in the Local Fair-Trade Organisation, as part of the broader research. The interviewee explained:

> *"Yes, I think that social influence [Cooperative 3 being the only cooperative close to the border] ... [Neighbouring country] people have some habits and kind of characteristics, social practices that can influence the farmers in [Cooperative 3]. For example, for the zone, [Neighbouring country] people, they don't like to rent land, for example. So, this can influence also people in the same zone."- Staff from Local Fair-Trade Organisation*

Secondly, cooperative governance is highly centralised around its charismatic founder and leader, who exercises control over warehousing, fund distribution, and collector appointments. In such a context, beneficiaries may perceive themselves as working for the leader rather than as autonomous members of a mutual enterprise (Batliwala, 2007; Drydyk, 2008)

These dynamics help showcase a beneficiary-inclusion paradox: high partner visibility can coexist with muted domestic agency when structural conditions, such as centralised leadership, constrain genuine deliberation attempts. Empowerment in such cases does not arise from access to new partners alone but from transformation in the internal community governance.

6 Conclusion

This study provides real insights into how multistakeholder partnerships drive beneficiary empowerment. Our findings show that empowerment is not merely a function of direct engagement with external partners but is deeply shaped by local intermediary structures, cultural stance, and perceived legitimacy. Additionally, this study shows the democratic potential of multistakeholder partnerships. By enabling marginalised actors to exercise voice through community structures, such partnerships deepen local democratic participation.

This study contributes to the empowerment literature by demonstrating that indirect participation, mediated through trusted intermediaries, can be just as, if not more, effective than

direct involvement with external actors. This complements prior literature emphasising agency and capability (Kabeer, 2001; Sen, 1999) by showing that empowerment emerges from localised trust networks and perceived voice, even at the periphery of formal decision-making structures.

Furthermore, our results challenge assumptions about visibility and access. In *Cooperative 3*, high awareness of project partners did not yield greater empowerment at the family level, highlighting the *beneficiary-inclusion paradox*. Here, centralised leadership and external orientation limited domestic agency. These findings enrich the literature on partnership governance (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Vestergaard et al., 2020) by showing that internal community governance can constrain or enable empowerment regardless of external openness.

Managerially, this implies that when designing such projects, there should be an investment in strengthening cooperative structures to ensure their legitimacy and inclusivity. Multistakeholder partnerships geared towards empowerment must favour governance structures tailored to the cultural context. Governance roles must resonate with distinct beneficiary motives: authority seekers, entrepreneurial actors, caretaking stewards, and technically oriented sustainability advocates (Laszlo et al., 2017; Sen, 1999). Also, since the nature of beneficiary accepted narratives evolves over time, governance models should be adaptive. This resonates with Kabeer's (2001) emphasis on not only expanding choice, as per Sen's argument (1999), but enabling action and sustaining agency. Future research should adopt longitudinal studies to further assess how empowerment evolves over time and under changing project conditions.

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