

ALIGNING HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT WITH COOPERATIVE VALUES: A PARTICIPATORY FRAMEWORK FOR TERTIARY INSTITUTION COOPERATIVES IN NIGERIA

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ARTICLE INFO

Article No.: 0257

Accepted Date: 13/03/2026

Published Date: 31/03/2026

Type: Research

ABSTRACT

Cooperative enterprises increasingly adopt formal human resource management (HRM) practices to enhance efficiency and accountability; however, such systems are often derived from hierarchical organizations and may conflict with cooperative principles of democratic participation, equity, and collective ownership. This conceptual paper addresses the limited theoretical understanding of how HRM can be designed to align with cooperative values, particularly within tertiary institution cooperatives in developing contexts. Drawing on Stakeholder Theory and Humanistic HRM, the study develops a participatory HRM framework that conceptualizes HRM as a bundle of interrelated practices – participative decision-making and cooperative education and training. The model proposes that participatory HRM practices influence member commitment and cooperative performance both directly and indirectly through reward equity as a mediating mechanism. In addition, value–HRM alignment is introduced as a moderating condition that strengthens the effectiveness of participatory HRM practices when they are consistent with cooperative principles. By integrating participation, fairness, and value alignment into a coherent framework, the study contributes to HRM and cooperative literature by advancing a context-sensitive and value-driven model of people management. The paper also provides a foundation for future empirical research and practical insights for strengthening cooperative governance and performance.

Keywords: Participatory HRM; Cooperative Governance; Value–HRM Alignment; Reward Equity; Tertiary Institution Cooperatives

Introduction

Cooperative enterprises represent a distinctive organizational form characterized by democratic governance, collective ownership, and member participation. Unlike investor-owned firms that prioritize shareholder value, cooperatives are established to meet the socio-economic needs of their members, who simultaneously function as owners, users, and beneficiaries (Birchall, 2011; International Cooperative Alliance [ICA], 2015). Within tertiary institutions, cooperatives play an important role in providing financial services, welfare support, and entrepreneurial opportunities for both staff and students (Odetola & Etuk, 2017).

Despite their participatory orientation, cooperatives increasingly operate in environments characterized by demands for efficiency, accountability, and professional management. Tertiary institutions, in particular, are shaped by formal administrative systems and performance expectations that encourage the adoption of structured management practices (Altbach et al., 2009). In response, many cooperatives have introduced formal human resource management (HRM) systems to enhance cooperative performance and administrative capacity.

However, most HRM models originate from hierarchical, investor-owned organizations where authority is centralized and performance is primarily evaluated through individual productivity and competitive incentives (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). When such models are transferred to cooperative settings, they may conflict with core cooperative principles such as democratic participation, equity, and collective responsibility (Novkovic, 2008; Novkovic & Miner, 2015). This misalignment raises important questions about how HRM practices can be adapted to reflect the unique characteristics of cooperative enterprises.

These challenges are particularly evident in tertiary institution cooperatives, which operate within complex institutional environments and heterogeneous membership structures. Membership often comprises both students and staff, whose levels of commitment, tenure, and organizational interests differ significantly (Agbo, 2010; Odetola & Etuk, 2017). In addition, these cooperatives are embedded within institutional bureaucracies that may constrain autonomy and shape governance processes (Wanyama, 2016). Such conditions create difficulties in sustaining participation, ensuring continuity, and maintaining effective management systems.

While existing studies have examined cooperative governance, financial management, and member participation, the role of HRM in shaping cooperative effectiveness remains underexplored (Davis, 2001; Cornforth, 2004). More importantly, there is limited theoretical work explaining how HRM practices can be designed to align with cooperative values while simultaneously supporting organizational performance. This gap is particularly significant in developing country contexts, where cooperative institutions play important socio-economic roles but often operate with limited managerial capacity, leading to challenges in effectively implementing HRM practices that align with both cooperative values and organisational performance.

This paper addresses this gap by developing a participatory human resource management (HRM) framework for cooperative enterprises in tertiary institutions. Drawing on Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and Humanistic HRM (Budd, 2004; Pirson & Lawrence, 2010), the study conceptualizes HRM as a bundle of participatory practices—specifically participative decision-making and cooperative education and training—that jointly influence cooperative outcomes. The framework further positions reward equity as a mediating mechanism and value–HRM alignment as a moderating condition shaping the effectiveness of HRM practices.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the HRM challenges facing cooperative enterprises in tertiary institutions;
2. Integrate cooperative principles with contemporary HRM theory;

3. Develop a participatory HRM framework aligned with cooperative values; and
4. Propose theoretically grounded relationships linking HRM practices to member commitment and cooperative performance.

Literature Review

Cooperatives in Tertiary Institutions: Organizational Complexity and Governance Tensions

Cooperatives within tertiary institutions represent a hybrid organizational form that combines the socio-economic orientation of cooperative enterprises with the bureaucratic structures of higher education systems. Unlike conventional firms, cooperatives are member-owned and democratically governed organizations established to meet shared economic and social needs (Birchall, 2014; International Cooperative Alliance [ICA], 2015). However, when embedded within tertiary institutions, they operate under dual institutional logics: cooperative principles and formal administrative regulations.

This dual embeddedness creates inherent governance tensions. On one hand, cooperative principles emphasize democratic participation and member control; on the other, institutional environments impose hierarchical procedures and regulatory constraints (Altbach et al., 2009; Wanyama, 2016). While some studies argue that institutional affiliation enhances legitimacy and access to resources, others suggest that it may weaken participatory governance by introducing bureaucratic rigidity (Cornforth, 2004). This tension highlights a key limitation in existing literature, which often treats cooperative governance as inherently participatory without sufficiently accounting for contextual constraints.

A further complexity arises from the heterogeneous nature of membership. Tertiary institution cooperatives typically comprise both students and staff, whose time horizons, commitment levels, and organizational interests differ significantly (Agbo, 2010; Odetola & Etuk, 2017). While this diversity can enhance adaptability, it may also undermine continuity and institutional memory, particularly in student-dominated cooperatives. Existing studies acknowledge these challenges but provide limited insight into how management systems can address them effectively.

Despite their socio-economic importance – particularly in promoting financial inclusion, savings culture, and welfare support (Birchall & Simmons, 2009) – many tertiary institution cooperatives continue to operate with weak administrative structures and limited professional management capacity (Wanyama, 2016). This suggests that governance challenges are not solely structural but also managerial. However, the role of human resource management (HRM) in addressing these challenges remains insufficiently explored.

Human Resource Management in Cooperative Contexts: Tensions and Adaptation

Human resource management (HRM) is widely recognized as a critical determinant of organizational effectiveness, influencing commitment, performance, and institutional sustainability (Guest, 2017; Jiang et al., 2012). In conventional organizations, HRM practices are typically designed to enhance efficiency through structured practices such as training, incentives, and performance control (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). However, their applicability to cooperative enterprises remains contested.

A central limitation in existing HRM literature is its grounding in hierarchical, investor-owned firms, where managerial authority and individual performance are dominant (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). In contrast, cooperatives operate on principles of democratic participation, collective ownership, and shared responsibility (Birchall, 2011). This fundamental difference challenges the direct transfer of conventional HRM models to cooperative contexts.

Empirical studies suggest that the uncritical adoption of corporate HRM practices may generate institutional misfit in cooperatives. Practices that emphasize hierarchy, individual

incentives, or centralized control can undermine trust, reduce participation, and weaken cooperative identity (Novkovic, 2008; Novkovic & Miner, 2015). However, the literature is not entirely consistent. Some scholars argue that formal HRM practices can improve accountability and performance in cooperatives (Davis, 2001; Mazzarol et al., 2014), suggesting that the issue is not the adoption of HRM per se but its design and implementation.

This debate reveals a critical gap: existing studies focus on whether HRM should be adopted in cooperatives but pay less attention to how HRM practices should be configured to align with cooperative values. Recent research points toward a contextualized perspective, emphasizing that HRM effectiveness depends on alignment with organizational identity and governance structures (Cooke et al., 2020; Basterretxea et al., 2019).

Building on this perspective, this study conceptualizes HRM as a participatory bundle of practices, specifically participative decision-making and cooperative education and training, which jointly shape cooperative outcomes. In addition, reward equity is treated as a mechanism through which these practices influence member attitudes, while value alignment conditions their effectiveness. This approach shifts the focus from isolated practices to integrated systems that reflect cooperative principles.

Theoretical Foundations: Integrating Stakeholder Theory and Humanistic HRM

The development of a cooperative-orientated HRM framework requires a theoretical foundation capable of capturing both the multi-stakeholder nature of cooperatives and the normative dimensions of people management. This study draws on Stakeholder Theory and Humanistic HRM as complementary perspectives.

Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) posits that organizations must consider the interests of all stakeholders rather than prioritising shareholders alone. In cooperatives, this perspective is particularly relevant, as members simultaneously function as owners, users, and beneficiaries (Birchall, 2011). However, while Stakeholder Theory identifies whose interests matter, it provides limited guidance on how management systems should be designed to balance these interests. This represents a key limitation when applied to internal organizational processes such as HRM.

Humanistic HRM addresses this limitation by emphasizing dignity, fairness, and participation in organizational practices (Budd, 2004; Pirson & Lawrence, 2010). Unlike instrumental approaches that treat individuals as resources to be optimised, Humanistic HRM advocates for people-centred systems that promote voice, empowerment, and meaningful engagement. These principles align closely with cooperative values, particularly equity, solidarity, and democratic participation (ICA, 2015).

The integration of these perspectives provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding HRM in cooperatives. Stakeholder theory explains why participation and inclusion are necessary, while Humanistic HRM explains how such practices should be designed. Together, they support the argument that HRM in cooperatives must be both participatory and value-driven.

Building on this foundation, this study proposes that participatory HRM practices influence cooperative outcomes through two key mechanisms: fairness-based processes (reward equity) and value-based alignment (value-HRM alignment). This dual-mechanism perspective extends existing HRM research by incorporating both psychological and contextual dimensions of effectiveness.

Hypothesis Development and Conceptual Framework

Drawing on Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and Humanistic HRM theory (Budd, 2004; Pirson & Lawrence, 2010), this paper proposes that HRM practices in cooperative enterprises must be participatory, equitable, and value-driven in order to support cooperative governance and cooperative performance. Unlike conventional organizations where employees are

primarily contractual workers, cooperative members represent multiple roles simultaneously as owners, users, and beneficiaries (Birchall, 2011). Consequently, HRM practices that strengthen participation, fairness, and collective learning are likely to enhance member commitment and cooperative performance.

Building on HRM literature, this study conceptualizes HRM practices as a participatory bundle rather than isolated activities. Specifically, participative decision-making and cooperative education and training are treated as complementary dimensions of a broader participatory HRM system. This approach is consistent with prior research emphasizing that internally consistent bundles of participatory HRM practices exert stronger effects on organizational outcomes than individual practices implemented in isolation (Jiang et al., 2012; Guest, 2017).

Within this framework, reward equity is conceptualized as a mediating mechanism reflecting members' perceptions of fairness arising from participatory HRM practices, while value-HRM alignment is treated as a moderating construct that conditions the effectiveness of HRM practices in cooperative enterprises. Accordingly, this study adopts a parsimonious model that focuses on a limited number of theoretically grounded constructs to enhance clarity and analytical precision.

Participative Decision-Making and Member Commitment

Participative decision-making is a defining feature of cooperative organizations. Cooperative governance structures are built on democratic principles that allow members to participate in shaping organizational policies and strategic decisions (Spear, 2004). Participation not only strengthens organizational transparency but also enhances members' psychological attachment to the cooperative by giving them a sense of ownership and influence.

From the perspective of stakeholder theory, participation enables organizations to incorporate the interests and perspectives of key stakeholders in decision-making processes (Freeman, 1984). When cooperative members perceive that their voices are heard and respected, they are more likely to develop stronger identification with the organisation and demonstrate higher levels of commitment. Empirical research on participatory management similarly suggests that employee involvement enhances motivation, trust, and organizational loyalty (Jiang et al., 2012).

Cooperative Education and Training and Cooperative Performance

Education and training constitute one of the fundamental principles of cooperative development. The International Cooperative Alliance identifies cooperative education as essential for enabling members, leaders, and employees to understand cooperative values, governance structures, and operational responsibilities (ICA, 2015). In tertiary institution cooperatives, where leadership positions may frequently change due to student turnover, continuous training is particularly important for sustaining organizational competence.

Human resource management literature consistently highlights training and development as critical drivers of organizational performance because they enhance skills, knowledge, and managerial capacity (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). In cooperative settings, training programmes not only improve technical capabilities but also reinforce cooperative identity and shared values. When members understand both the operational and ideological foundations of cooperatives, they are better equipped to contribute effectively to governance and management processes.

Participatory HRM Practices and Cooperative Outcomes

Taken together, participative decision-making and cooperative education and training form a coherent participatory HRM system that is expected to influence both member attitudes and organizational outcomes. Rather than operating independently, these practices reinforce one

another by simultaneously enhancing member involvement, capability, and shared understanding of cooperative principles.

Accordingly, the combined effect of participatory HRM practices is expected to strengthen both member commitment and cooperative performance.

H1: Participatory HRM practices positively influence member commitment in cooperative enterprises.

H2: Participatory HRM practices positively influence cooperative performance.

Reward Equity as a Mediating Mechanism

Equity and fairness are core principles underlying cooperative organizations. Unlike profit-maximising firms where rewards may be heavily differentiated according to individual performance, cooperatives emphasize fair distribution of benefits among members in accordance with their participation and contribution (Novkovic, 2008).

Equity Theory (Adams, 1965) suggests that individuals evaluate organizational fairness by comparing their contributions and rewards with those of others. When individuals perceive inequity in reward distribution, dissatisfaction and disengagement may occur. In cooperative organizations, perceptions of fairness are particularly important because members expect equitable treatment consistent with cooperative values.

Transparent and equitable reward systems, including fair dividend allocation, access to cooperative services, and recognition of member contributions, can therefore strengthen trust and commitment within the cooperative. In this context, reward equity functions as a mechanism through which participatory HRM practices influence member attitudes.

H3: Reward equity mediates the relationship between participatory HRM practices and member commitment in cooperative enterprises.

Value–HRM Alignment and Cooperative Performance

While HRM practices can improve organizational outcomes, their effectiveness in cooperatives depends on whether they are aligned with cooperative values and governance principles. The concept of value–HRM alignment reflects the extent to which HRM policies reinforce cooperative ideals such as participation, equity, and collective responsibility.

When participatory HRM practices are consistent with cooperative principles, members are more likely to perceive the organisation as legitimate and trustworthy. Conversely, HRM practices that mirror hierarchical corporate models may undermine democratic participation and weaken cooperative identity (Novkovic & Miner, 2015). From a Humanistic HRM perspective, alignment between organizational values and management practices enhances dignity, engagement, and collective commitment (Pirson & Lawrence, 2010).

Therefore, the relationship between participatory HRM practices and cooperative outcomes is expected to be stronger when HRM practices reflect cooperative values.

H4: Value–HRM alignment strengthens the positive relationship between participatory HRM practices and cooperative performance.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework developed in this study integrates participatory human resource management (HRM) practices with cooperative outcomes through both direct and indirect relationships. Consistent with a systems perspective, participatory HRM practices are conceptualized as a bundle of interrelated practices, specifically participative decision-making and cooperative education and training, which operate jointly rather than independently.

Within this framework, participatory HRM practices are posited to influence two key outcome variables: member commitment and cooperative performance. The model assumes that

when these practices are implemented as a coherent system, they enhance both the psychological attachment of members and the overall effectiveness of the cooperative.

The framework further incorporates reward equity as a mediating mechanism linking participatory HRM practices to member commitment. It is proposed that participatory HRM practices shape members' perceptions of fairness in the distribution of benefits and opportunities, and these perceptions, in turn, strengthen commitment to the cooperative. In this sense, reward equity explains how and why participatory HRM practices influence member attitudes.

In addition, the framework introduces value–HRM alignment as a moderating construct that conditions the relationship between participatory HRM practices and cooperative performance. Specifically, the positive effects of participatory HRM practices on performance are expected to be stronger when HRM practices are aligned with cooperative values such as democratic participation, equity, and collective responsibility. Conversely, misalignment between participatory HRM practices and cooperative principles may weaken their effectiveness.

Overall, the conceptual framework advances a multi-layered and interactional perspective of HRM in cooperative enterprises. It emphasizes that organizational outcomes are not determined solely by the adoption of participatory HRM practices but also by the extent to which these practices are perceived as fair and aligned with the underlying values of the cooperative. By integrating direct, mediating, and moderating relationships, the model provides a coherent and empirically testable explanation of how participatory HRM practices influence member commitment and cooperative performance in tertiary institution cooperatives.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a theory-building conceptual research design to develop a participatory human resource management (HRM) framework for cooperative enterprises. Conceptual research focuses on the systematic integration and extension of existing theories to generate new theoretical insights and propositions (Jaakkola, 2020). This approach is appropriate given the limited theoretical development at the intersection of HRM and cooperative governance.

The study follows an integrative theory development approach, combining theory synthesis and theory elaboration (MacInnis, 2011). Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and Humanistic HRM (Budd, 2004; Pirson & Lawrence, 2010) provide the foundational lenses for understanding the multi-stakeholder and value-driven nature of HRM in cooperatives.

Building on these perspectives, the study conceptualizes HRM as a bundle of participatory practices, specifically participative decision-making and cooperative education and training, rather than as isolated activities. The framework further incorporates reward equity as a mediating mechanism and value–HRM alignment as a moderating construct, linking participatory HRM practices to cooperative outcomes.

Literature Selection and Analytical Procedure

A structured and purposive literature review was conducted using major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The selection of sources was guided by three criteria:

1. Relevance to human resource management and cooperative governance;
2. Theoretical or empirical contribution to understanding participation, fairness, and organizational performance;
3. Recency and publication quality, with emphasis on peer-reviewed journals.

The analytical procedure followed three stages. First, key constructs relevant to the study – participative decision-making, cooperative education and training, reward equity, and value alignment – were identified from the literature. Second, relationships among these constructs were

examined across theoretical perspectives, particularly Stakeholder Theory and Humanistic HRM. Third, these insights were synthesised into a coherent conceptual framework linking participatory HRM practices to cooperative outcomes through mediating and moderating mechanisms. This structured approach enhances transparency and ensures that the model is grounded in established literature while addressing identified gaps.

Model Development and Rigour

The conceptual framework was developed using a causal and relational logic, linking participatory HRM practices to cooperative outcomes through theoretically grounded mechanisms. In line with strategic HRM literature, the study adopts a systems perspective, treating participatory HRM practices as a complementary bundle whose combined effects are expected to be stronger than those of individual practices (Jiang et al., 2012; Guest, 2017).

The model incorporates:

1. **Direct relationships** between participatory HRM practices and cooperative outcomes;
2. **Indirect effects** through reward equity as a mediating mechanism;
3. **Conditional effects** through value–HRM alignment as a moderating construct.

Rigour is ensured through:

- 1) **Theoretical grounding** in established frameworks (Freeman, 1984; Budd, 2004);
- 2) **Internal logical consistency** between constructs and relationships;
- 3) **Clarity and parsimony** by focusing on a limited number of well-defined variables;
- 4) **Empirical testability**, as the proposed relationships can be examined using quantitative methods in future research.

Although conceptual in nature, the framework is explicitly designed to support empirical validation, thereby contributing to both theory development and future research. This approach enhances theoretical rigour by ensuring internal consistency between constructs, relationships, and underlying theoretical assumptions. (Whetten, 1989)

Discussion

This study develops a conceptual framework that positions human resource management (HRM) in cooperative enterprises as a participatory and value-driven system, rather than a purely administrative function. By integrating participative decision-making and cooperative education as a bundle of participatory HRM practices, the model responds to calls for more context-sensitive HRM approaches beyond hierarchical, investor-owned settings (Guest, 2017; Jiang et al., 2012; Brewster et al., 2016).

A key insight from the framework is that HRM effectiveness in cooperatives is contingent on both implementation and interpretation. While participatory HRM practices are expected to directly enhance member commitment and cooperative performance, their effects operate through underlying mechanisms. This aligns with HRM research emphasizing that the impact of HRM practices is mediated by employee perceptions and attitudes rather than being purely structural (Jiang et al., 2012).

First, the inclusion of reward equity as a mediating mechanism underscores the central role of fairness in cooperative contexts. Drawing on equity theory (Adams, 1965) and organizational justice literature (Colquitt et al., 2013), the model suggests that participatory HRM practices shape members' perceptions of fairness, which in turn influence commitment. This is particularly important in cooperatives, where trust and collective engagement are foundational (Cornforth, 2004; Novkovic, 2008). The framework therefore extends existing HRM literature by demonstrating that fairness is not merely an outcome of HRM practices but a key pathway through which these systems affect member attitudes.

Second, the moderating role of value–HRM alignment highlights the importance of contextual and normative fit. While mainstream HRM research often assumes the universal applicability of practices (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020), cooperative studies emphasize the centrality of values such as participation, equity, and collective ownership (International Cooperative Alliance [ICA], 2015; Novkovic & Miner, 2015). The model, therefore, suggests that participatory HRM practices are most effective when they reinforce, rather than contradict, these principles. This supports emerging arguments in contextualized HRM literature that effectiveness depends on alignment with organizational identity (Cooke et al., 2020; Basterretxea et al., 2019).

Taken together, the framework advances a more nuanced understanding of HRM in cooperative enterprises. It demonstrates that HRM effectiveness depends not only on the adoption of practices but also on how these practices are perceived and aligned with cooperative values. This perspective contributes to both HRM and cooperative literature by integrating structural, psychological, and contextual dimensions of people management.

Practical and Managerial Implications

The proposed framework has important implications for cooperative leaders, tertiary institution administrators, and policymakers. It suggests that improving cooperative performance requires not only formal governance structures but also participatory and value-aligned HRM practices.

First, participative decision-making should be institutionalized as an ongoing management practice. Prior research indicates that inclusive governance structures enhance trust, transparency, and member commitment (Spear, 2004; Cornforth, 2004). Mechanisms such as consultative committees and open communication channels can therefore strengthen member engagement.

Second, cooperative education and training should be treated as a strategic function. Consistent with HRM literature linking training to organisational effectiveness (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020; Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009), continuous capacity development is particularly important in tertiary institution cooperatives characterized by leadership turnover (Agbo, 2010).

Third, the model highlights the importance of reward equity and transparency. Drawing on equity theory (Adams, 1965) and justice research (Colquitt et al., 2013), fair and transparent systems of benefit distribution and recognition are essential for sustaining trust and participation in cooperative organizations (Novkovic, 2008).

Finally, the concept of value–HRM alignment emphasises the need for context-sensitive HRM design. The uncritical adoption of corporate participatory HRM practices may generate institutional misfit and undermine cooperative identity (Novkovic & Miner, 2015). Instead, HRM practices should be designed to reinforce cooperative values such as democratic participation and collective responsibility. Institutional support from tertiary institutions and regulatory bodies can further enhance these practices (Wanyama, 2016).

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

This study addressed a central question in cooperative and human resource management (HRM) research: how HRM practices can be designed to support cooperative enterprises without undermining their member-orientated principles. In response, it developed a participatory HRM framework grounded in Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and Humanistic HRM (Budd, 2004; Pirson & Lawrence, 2010).

The study argues that HRM in cooperatives must be understood as a participatory and value-driven system, where effectiveness depends not only on the adoption of practices but also on their perceived fairness and alignment with cooperative principles. By introducing reward equity as a mediating mechanism (Adams, 1965) and value–HRM alignment as a moderating

condition, the framework extends existing HRM research by incorporating both psychological and contextual dimensions of effectiveness.

This contribution responds to calls for greater contextualisation of HRM theory beyond corporate environments (Guest, 2017; Cooke et al., 2020) and highlights the importance of aligning management practices with organizational values in cooperative enterprises (Novkovic, 2008; ICA, 2015).

Despite these contributions, the study is conceptual in nature. Future research should empirically test the proposed relationships across different cooperative contexts using quantitative and qualitative approaches (Jiang & Messersmith, 2018). Comparative and longitudinal studies would further enhance understanding of how participatory HRM practices evolve and influence cooperative sustainability.

In conclusion, aligning participatory HRM practices with cooperative values represents a critical pathway for strengthening member commitment and enhancing cooperative performance in complex institutional environments.

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