

Social Capital, Ecological Production, and Communicative Dynamics in the Tunceli/Ovacık Women's Cooperativism Model

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the local cooperativism experiences that emerged in the province of Tunceli and its districts (Ovacık, Hozat, Mazgirt) through a holistic approach encompassing gender, social capital, ecological production, and communicative networks. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological design, it focuses on the institutionalization process of the 'Ovacık Doğal' (Ovacık Natural) model—a self-reliant, publicist approach developed without initial capital or subsidies—through female entrepreneurship and collective women's labor. Within the scope of the field research, semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with key actors of the local government of the era, representatives of the Tunceli Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TTSO), cooperative founders, field coordinators, and female producers were subjected to discourse and content analysis. The findings demonstrate that these cooperatives explicitly reject hierarchical employer-employee structures, operating instead through horizontal decision-making (consensus) mechanisms, job rotation, and traditional collective labor practices (imece). The structural constraints imposed by geographic isolation, harsh winter conditions, and elevated logistical costs are mitigated through consumption cooperatives, hometown solidarity networks, regional logistics hubs, and shared transport strategies. The ecological production practices of female partners—centered on heirloom seeds (such as kara kılçık wheat), endemic flora (mountain garlic, medicinal herbs), and a nature-respecting ethos rooted in Alevism—converge with digital storytelling on social media (specifically Instagram) to establish a bond of spiritual trust with consumers. In conclusion, the study reveals that this publicist model, standing in opposition to profit-oriented market dynamics, fosters women's social agency, builds intergenerational bridges via youth digital engagement, and offers a sustainable rural development framework for food sovereignty.

Keywords: Ovacık Doğal, Women's Cooperatives, Ecological Agriculture, Social Capital, Solidarity Networks, Tunceli, Fatih Mehmet Maçoğlu

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1. Introduction

Since the foundation of the Republic in Turkey (1923), profound transformations have been taking place within local administrations and the social structure. These dynamics, historically shaped by waves of mass rural-to-urban migration, are currently being exacerbated by exorbitant agricultural input costs, the ecological degradation induced by the climate crisis, and market crises. Consequently, small-scale producers confront substantial barriers in market access in the face of industrial agricultural policies and global food chains (Köymen, 2014). In particular, neoliberal policies and the withdrawal of traditional state subsidies have weakened agricultural production areas and led to the depopulation of villages through the dispossession of smallholder farmers. This resulting destructive structure renders the development of alternative models for local-scale development and food security both inevitable and imperative. Amidst these pursuits, the cooperative movement flourishing in Tunceli province and the districts of Ovacık, Hozat, and Mazgirt stands out not merely as an economic solidarity model, but also as a unique public practice centering on gender equality, food sovereignty, and ecological production (McMichael, 2009). Founded on an approach that is capital-free, grant-free, and based entirely on the self-reliance of local producers, this structure has institutionalized around the 'Ovacık Doğal' brand, bringing a distinctive momentum to the literature on cooperativism in Turkey. In the historical and institutional development of the model, two primary actor groups play a pivotal role.

Fatih Mehmet Maçoğlu served as the Mayor of Ovacık between 2014 and 2019, and as the Mayor of Tunceli between 2019 and 2024 (being the first to be elected from the TKP list). This local governance approach, the foundations of which were laid in Ovacık and subsequently transferred to the provincial center, functioned as a catalyst in the preservation of heirloom seeds, the free allocation of land to producers, and the

promotion of collective production based on the *imece* (collective labor) method. The public municipalism model developed in this regard approached cooperativism not merely as a process of commercial commodity production, but transformed it into a socio-economic foundation of solidarity that ensures the participation of the local populace, particularly women, in decision-making mechanisms.

Secondly, during the stages of acquiring legal status for the process, managing relations with official authorities, navigating registration procedures, and establishing the legal entities of women's cooperatives, regional actors such as the Tunceli Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TTSO) served as a critical bureaucratic bridge. As articulated by TTSO President Hasan Hüseyin Çoşkun, the guidance and technical support provided by the institution constituted a strategic threshold in introducing local products to the national market and rendering women's labor visible (Çoşkun, Interview, p. 1). Within this movement, which took shape under the shadow of the challenging geographical conditions and the traditional structure of the Eastern Anatolia Region, women have both broken free from the constraints of domestic labor and achieved their economic independence through the production of heirloom *karakılçık* wheat, mountain garlic, and region-specific natural products (Karakaya, 2018).

From an institutional perspective, the process diverges significantly from classical development models dependent on external capital or state aid, relying instead on a public and self-reliant approach based on local resources, the culture of *imece* (collective labor), and local government support (Polanyi, 2001). With the opening of the means of production (land, seeds, resources) to the public, local development has transformed into a practice of collective solidarity. Fatih Mehmet Maçoğlu articulates the fundamental philosophy and organizational method behind this model with the following words:

“Cooperativization is the joint decision of the Ovacık People's Assembly, our local government

staff, and our advisors. Observing the cessation of production and the out-migration of young people, we developed a public intervention. I never maintained the distance of a 'mayor' within the cooperative; I personally participated in every stage of the labor in the field, from sowing to harvest. In our understanding, administrative management and practical labor are inseparable” (Maçoğlu, Interview, p. 1).

This protective umbrella provided by the Ovacık Municipal Administration and the understanding of *imece* (collective labor) in the field have constituted a vital foundation for the institutionalization of the cooperativization process and the development of resistance against capital pressure (Harvey, 2012). Social capital, which is the most fundamental dynamic of the process, is defined as trust, solidarity networks, and the capacity for collective action (Putnam, 1993; Bourdieu, 1986). The social capital shaped around women's cooperativism in Tunceli and its districts has transcended traditional ties (kinship, fellow citizenship) and acquired an institutional and societal character. At this point, the support of institutional structures such as the Tunceli Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TTSO) has played a leverage role in women's transition from informal or concealed domestic labor into legal, registered, and recognized economic actors (Molyneux, 2002). Both the TTSO's guidance in overcoming bureaucratic obstacles and the spatial and logistical facilities provided by the local government have increased women's self-confidence and enabled them to take a direct part in decision-making mechanisms.

This study aims to examine the Tunceli/Ovacık Women's Cooperative Model, which developed under the local governance practices of Mayor F. Mehmet Maçoğlu's term and the support of institutional structures such as the Tunceli Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TTSO), through a holistic approach within the framework of social capital, ecological sustainability, logistical barriers, and digital communication opportunities.

2. Methodology

This research was designed within the framework of a qualitative research design to examine in depth the women's cooperative experience developing in Tunceli province and its districts (Ovacık, Hozat, Mazgirt) along the axes of social capital, ecological production practices, institutional collaborations, and communicative dynamics (Creswell, 2013). The study adopted a phenomenological design, which examines the subjective perceptions and meaning-making processes of individuals experiencing a specific phenomenon regarding this experience. In this direction, the public cooperative model symbolized by the 'Ovacık Doğal' brand and the transformation of this model within women's cooperatives were addressed as the fundamental phenomenon of investigation. The study group of the research was determined by utilizing a combination of criterion sampling and snowball sampling techniques, which are purposive sampling methods frequently preferred in qualitative research (Patton, 2014). Within the scope of the field study, interviews were conducted with six key actors representing the institutional, administrative, and producer dimensions of the model:

- Local Government Actor of the Period: Fatih Mehmet Maçoğlu (*Former Mayor of Ovacık and Tunceli*)
- Institutional Stakeholder Representative: Hasan Hüseyin Çoşkun (*President of the Tunceli Chamber of Commerce and Industry - TTSO*)
- Tunceli Producing Women's Cooperative Representative: Saniye İldeniz (*Cooperative Board Member / Producer - Brown Bread*)
- Zembul Women's Initiative Cooperative Representative: Yıldız Zembul (*Collective Manager / Management Supervisor*)
- Hozat Women's Initiative Cooperative Representative: Nermin Akbalık (*Cooperative and Field Coordinator*)
- Mazgirt Women's Initiative Cooperative Representative: Özgül Tosun (*Acting President*)

The research data were obtained through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in face-to-face and online environments within the scope of field studies carried out in central Tunceli, Ovacık, Hozat, and Mazgirt in 2026. The interview form was structured around main themes such as local government support, institutional collaborations, decision-making mechanisms, ecological agricultural practices, logistical barriers, and social media usage. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, then transcribed verbatim and transferred to the database. Subsequently, in the analysis of the data obtained from the field study, content analysis and discourse analysis methods were utilized in combination (Krippendorff, 2004; Fairclough, 1992). The interview transcripts were systematically divided into thematic categories; the participants' anti-hierarchical attitudes, emphases on subjectivation, and discourses regarding social solidarity were analyzed in accordance with the principles of critical discourse analysis.

3. Field Findings and Discussion

3.1. 'Ovacık Doğal': Local Government and Cooperative Synergy During the Fatih Mehmet Maçoğlu Period

Interview data draw attention to the 'facilitating' role of local government in the success of the model, which started in Ovacık and spread to Tunceli city center and other districts (Hozat, Mazgirt). During Fatih Mehmet Maçoğlu's term as mayor (178-190), opening municipal lands to cultivation and providing seed support directly encouraged production; this process, which began without capital, soon transformed into the nationally recognized 'Ovacık Doğal' brand. F. Mehmet Maçoğlu, the Mayor of that period, describes the beginning of the process and the scale it reached as follows:

"We set out not to make a profit, but to protect our land and provide healthy food to our people. The municipality and the people entering the field through collective labor ignited the first spark. Initially, by the decision of the Ovacık People's

Assembly, we produced chickpeas and dry beans through collective effort with 15 households in the village of Kızık. When we transitioned to the Dersim (Tunceli) Mayoralty, our vision expanded; in Tozkoparan and Yeniköy, we provided seed support to youth and women on 178-190 decares of land and purchased what they produced as a cooperative" (Maçoğlu, Interview, p. 1).

As emphasized by F. Mehmet Maçoğlu, this model transformed over time into a mass solidarity network spreading across Turkey:

"This success spread in waves across the entire country. Thanks to networks involving over 100 cooperatives, we were instrumental in opening new production areas in provinces such as Bursa and Malatya. Today, there are 155 partner cooperatives in 41 provinces inspired by the 'Ovacık Natural Model'. Consumer cooperatives and sales stores were opened in 24 different locations, ranging from Çorlu to Istanbul, Izmir, Köyceğiz, and Antalya. In this process, we did not give a single penny of cash to the cooperative from the municipal budget or from myself. Everything rose through production power and solidarity" (Maçoğlu, Interview, p. 2).

3.2. Construction of Women's Subjectivity and Grant Independence

One of the most critical transformations of the model is that women shifted from being a passive labor force in the field to becoming managerial and decision-making subjects. F. Mehmet Maçoğlu expresses this institutional and mental transformation of women as follows:

"Around 2016, women were mostly in physical labor-intensive areas such as labor, sifting, and packaging. Our goal was for women to be decision-makers. In 2019, our Mayor Mustafa Sarıgül formalized this labor and established the Ovacık Women's Initiative Production and Business Cooperative. Today, women take part in the management and presidency of the cooperative" (Maçoğlu, Interview, p. 2).

Carried out without capital and grants, this model also brought technical and structural difficulties. F. Mehmet Maçoğlu summarizes the initial inexperience and how it was overcome through solidarity networks as follows:

“Because we chose a model without capital, without grants, and based on self-reliance, in the early periods we experienced serious difficulties in packaging, standard packing, and Ministry of Agriculture approval processes. Since we had no commercial capital, we struggled with transportation and packaging procurement; however, we overcame these initial inexperience without 'becoming merchants', by activating solidarity networks” (Maçoğlu, Interview, p. 3).

3.3. Ecological Agriculture, Clean Food, and Healing Culture

Ecological sustainability and traditional agricultural knowledge constitute one of the most fundamental pillars of the model. F. Mehmet Maçoğlu explains how they integrated their ecological attitudes and ancient healing culture into production as follows:

“The Ovacık plain has immense ecological potential. We strictly rejected the use of chemical fertilizers and poison (pesticides). By not working with producers who use poison, we safeguarded the health of the soil and the consumer. The healing culture that our women partners learned from their ancestors directly shaped our production language and product diversity” (Maçoğlu, Interview, p. 3).

The 'social logistics' and external communication strategy developed against the high shipping costs brought by geographical isolation and distance to metropolises is conveyed by F. Mehmet Maçoğlu in these words:

“Ovacık's harsh winter conditions and distance to big cities turned logistics into a crisis. To overcome this, instead of shipping products individually, we made bulk shipments through consumer cooperatives, compatriot networks, and friendly municipalities. 24 sales cooperatives functioned as warehouses. By emphasizing 'clean

and fair food' rather than 'cheap product' in our communication, we ensured that consumers embraced this labor” (Maçoğlu, Interview, p. 4).

Emphasizing the principles of independence, F. Mehmet Maçoğlu, the mayor of Ovacık at the time, concludes the use of social capital with the following words:

“In order to protect our independence, we did not accept a cash budget, grants, or sponsorships from any institution. Our capital is social trust. Compatriot associations and professional chambers did not give us a budget; however, they provided logistical support, spatial area allocation, and built communication bridges” (Maçoğlu, Interview, p. 5).

3.4. Tunceli Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TTSO) Macro Vision and Institutional Role

The interview conducted with Hasan Hüseyin Coşkun, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Tunceli Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TTSO), offers critical data regarding the direction of local development and the role of institutional stakeholders in regions where industrialization opportunities are limited.

TTSO President H. Hüseyin Coşkun defines women's cooperatives as a strategic tool that transforms micro-scale local production into an organized commercial power. In Tunceli, where industrial infrastructure is weak, branding products like Pülümür salt and Ovacık beans ensures that value added remains in the city, while migration pressure is reduced by creating an area for flexible entrepreneurship. In the planned 'Handicrafts and Local Products Bazaar' project aimed at overcoming the space and market crisis, it is targeted to prioritize women's cooperatives and allocate a fair display quota to surrounding districts (Coşkun, Interview, p. 1).

TTSO plays a facilitating role in bureaucratic processes, certification, and geographical indication registrations, as in the case of 'Pülümür Natural Resource Salt'. Taking a rational approach to the logistics crisis, the Chamber

states that cargo protocols have no commercial viability for low-volume and heavy products; therefore, niche products with small volume, long shelf life, and high added value are encouraged. When the desired market volume is reached, corporate discount protocols are planned to be made with cargo companies (Coşkun, Interview, p. 2).

TTSO President H. Hüseyin Coşkun proposes the 'Local Government-TTSO-Cooperative Triple Synergy Model' to break grant dependency. According to this model, local governments should secure the market through real estate allocation and public procurement guarantees; TTSO should overcome bureaucratic obstacles and establish market connections (B2B, chain stores, trade fairs) through e-commerce/finance training; and cooperatives should move away from grant expectations and professionalize their financial structures by allocating a portion of their income to depreciation and working capital (Coşkun, Interview, p. 2).

4. Actors of Women's Cooperativism in Tunceli: Subjective Experiences and Institutional Roles

In this section, selected Women's Cooperatives from the field in Tunceli will be introduced using purposive sampling. Women's cooperativism developing in Tunceli and its districts is based on a unique organizational model adapted to the geographical, cultural, and economic conditions of the region. When the field experiences conveyed by women taking responsibility and the strategic approaches of institutional representatives are evaluated together, it is seen that these structures are not merely micro-enterprises producing traditional food, but strategic structures transforming the urban economy through non-hierarchical internal communication, preserving ancient memory, logistical resilience, digital representation, and institutional integration.

4.1. Tunceli Producing Women's Cooperative (Tunceli Center / Brown Bread)

- **Interviewee:** Saniye İlideniz (born in 1964, Mazgirt Aktarla / Kurgurik).
- **Role in the Cooperative:** Cooperative Board Member and Producer.
- **Transmission of Ancient Knowledge and Ecological Production:** Stating that she 'received the hand' from her grandmother Zeynep Ana at the age of 7 and learned traditional healing and production knowledge, İlideniz carries this cultural heritage into contemporary production. She produces registered vinegars from nearly 70 endemic plants and seeds collected from the mountains of Tunceli, such as lemon balm, plantain, thyme, milk thistle, gundelia, valonia oak, and sage. Furthermore, expanding the process she started by planting 2 tins of ancestral seed karakılçık wheat, she produces 'Brown Bread' (Esmer Ekmek) on a griddle (sac) using low-gluten flour and traditional sourdough.
- **Traditional Belief, Worship, and Motivation:** Saniye İlideniz, a board member of the Tunceli Producing Women's Cooperative, aligns her devotion to the land and production with Alevi faith culture, defining producing as 'an act of worship and service to humanity.' She expresses her spiritual connection with nature with the words: "If the bee does not land on the flower, the flower does not yield honey; we are also looking for bees." She notes that she provides scholarships for 5 students from her earnings and that production serves as an avenue for her to keep human values alive.
- **Academic and Media Channels, Digital Usage:** Her vinegars were registered under the Ministry of Agriculture's "My Sister" (Kız Kardeşim) project and exhibited at the Gastronomy Department of Munzur University, where Saniye İlideniz began teaching classes on fermented products (pickles, vinegar, etc.). Being featured in 5 episodes of the documentary "Human and Life in Anatolia" (Anadolu'da İnsan ve Yaşam), which has been broadcast on TRT for 5 years, increased product recognition. To create a sense of trust on social media, she shares the

mountains where endemic plants are gathered and the stages of production; regarding digital tools, she utilizes the support of younger partners.

- **Institutional Relations and Experienced Challenges:** She states that the Governorship and relevant official institutions covering the cooperative's shop rent, electricity, and water expenses is a major advantage during periods when production is disrupted due to winter conditions. However, she voices that the economic shortages experienced because the cooperative was established with a grant in the initial period and lacked equity capital were overcome through solidarity and individual effort (İldeniz, Interview, pp. 178-190).

4.2. Tunceli Center Zembul Women's Initiative Production and Business Cooperative

- **Interviewee:** Yıldız Zembul.
- **Role in the Cooperative:** Collective Manager / Method Coordinator.
- **Establishment and Staff Structure:** Established on February 1, 2020, by 7 female partners, the cooperative's board of directors consists of 3 people. A total of 15 women actively work within the organization. Its primary field of activity is local food production and restaurant management. In addition to the food served in the restaurant, bakery products, traditional pastries, and desserts are manufactured within the cooperative. The workflow is divided into three main sections: Service, Hot Kitchen, and Production (Workshop).
- **Internal Communication, Decision-Making, and Conflict Management:** A short team meeting is held every morning before work to evaluate the day's schedule, reservations, special orders, and distribution of work. Instead of a corporate-style boss-worker hierarchy, a collective model is applied. In high-volume orders or changes in working hours, decisions are not made unilaterally by management; evaluation meetings are held with the women working in

production, and the workload is distributed fairly. To prevent conflicts, planning is done together with workers in the field, while face-to-face listening and problem-oriented analysis methods are used in cases of disagreements.

- **External Communication and Procurement:** In supply processes, long-term relationships of trust are established by giving preference to local producers. Hygiene, quality, naturalness, and continuity in production are taken as key criteria in product selection (Zembul, Interview, pp. 178-190).

4.3. Hozat Women's Initiative Production and Business Cooperative

- **Interviewee:** Nermin Akbalık (1974, Türk Taner-Hozat).
- **Role in the Cooperative:** Production Supervisor (Field and Operations Coordination).
- **Internal Communication and Shift Management:** The daily work routine is determined through meetings held the evening before. Tasks such as passing fruits and vegetables through machines to remove seeds, lighting the cauldron fire, washing and boiling jars and lids, along with cooking and cleaning duties, are carried out through job rotation among employees. In cases where orders cannot meet deadlines, management and workers come together to present their objections and rationale, and overtime or staff reinforcement is implemented based on a joint decision.
- **Field Procurement and Persuasion Methods:** Mainly fruits and vegetables (rosehip, grape, mulberry, etc.) and pulses are processed. By sending word to the villages, daily purchase quantities and per-kilogram prices are determined for pesticide-free, clean, trash-free, and rot-free raw materials, and direct purchasing is conducted.
- **Winter Conditions and Logistical Challenges:** The geographical structure and winter climate directly affect production. In cases where roads are closed for 178-190 days due to snowfall and vehicles cannot enter the villages,

women are forced to carry products and raw materials on their backs or using sleds.

- **Official Institutions and Digital Usage:** She states that verbal communication established with official institutions is positive, but in practice, they do not receive sufficient infrastructure and financial support. They do not yet have an e-commerce website; sales and representation are conducted solely through Instagram. It is noted that women who initially struggled to step in front of the camera overcame these hesitations over time, taking pride in promoting the work they produce. Refunds or new product shipments are provided for items damaged in shipping.

- **Personal Transformation and Demands:** She states that taking on responsibility in the cooperative has increased her self-confidence, developed her ability to express herself, and served as an example for her children and the women in the district. Emphasizing that their main shortcoming is producing in a narrow and inadequate space, she requests building their own spacious operational facility on treasury land allocated by the Governorship or relevant institutions and procuring a service vehicle (Akbalık, Interview, pp. 178-190).

4.4. Mazgirt Women's Initiative Production and Business Cooperative

- **Interviewee:** Özgül Tosun (Previous President: Nergis Değirmenci).

- **Role in the Cooperative:** Acting Cooperative President.

- **Establishment and Internal Operations:** Established in 2021, the cooperative's management consists of 3 people. Daily routine tasks center around baking products like **erişte** (traditional noodles) and pasta, as well as sorting and packaging dry foods. Because there are a limited number of members and employees, communication is conducted face-to-face. Vertical hierarchy is rejected in management; issues and task distributions are resolved through collective intelligence by

gathering together, and every woman is encouraged to take initiative.

- **Rural Procurement and Supervision:** Product raw materials are sourced from the villages of Mazgirt. Thanks to communication maintained with villagers throughout the year, the process from planting to harvesting is observed and supervised on-site. Pricing is determined jointly by coming together with village producers.

- **Geographical Obstacles and Logistics:** Due to Mazgirt's distance from the central city and limited courier options, problems occur in product shipments. This obstacle is resolved by transporting products to Tunceli Center once or twice a week using rented vehicles.

- **Digital Representation and Customer Relations:** An e-commerce website is not used; sales are managed on Instagram using a warm, personal tone faithful to local culture. The core principle is making women's labor visible and ensuring women have a say over the value they produce. Customer satisfaction is maintained by supplying replacements for products broken or damaged during shipping.

- **Sustainability Obstacles and Institutional Needs:** Depopulation in the district, the loss of the young demographic, and the decline in agricultural production threaten the cooperative's sustainability. She states that official institutions perform hygiene inspections, but support in terms of development and infrastructure remains insufficient; to survive in the district, there is a need for more concrete cooperation and institutional solidarity with public entities (Tosun, Interview, pp. 178-190).

5. Actors and Findings of Women's Cooperatives in Tunceli

Women's cooperativism developing in Tunceli and its associated districts relies on a unique model of local organization adapted to the region's geographical, cultural, and economic conditions. When evaluating the qualitative data provided by women in the field alongside the

strategic approaches of institutional representatives, these structures prove to be more than micro-enterprises producing traditional foods; they act as holistic agents of social transformation that foster collective solidarity, preserve ancient ecological memory, build logistical resilience, and drive local development. Field findings show that one of the core supporting pillars of women's cooperativism in Tunceli is intergenerational cultural transmission and ecological practices.

Table1. Operational Dynamics and Management Models of Women's Cooperatives in Tunceli

Cooperative	Prominent Decision-Making and Communication Model	Conflict and Shift Management
Zembul Women's Cooperative (Tunceli Center)	Short team meetings every morning before shifts; horizontal coordination between service, hot kitchen, and the production workshop.	In high-volume orders, the workload is distributed fairly. Issues are resolved through face-to-face listening and analysis.
Hozat Women's Cooperative (Hozat)	Evaluation meetings held the evening before; job rotation in raw material processing and the kitchen.	Under order pressure, management and staff jointly decide to plan overtime or additional personnel.
Mazgirt Women's Cooperative (Mazgirt)	Face-to-face, sincere, and non-hierarchical communication	Problems are solved through collective wisdom, and

	due to its limited membership structure.	every woman is encouraged to take initiative.
Tunceli Producing Women's Cooperative (Tunceli Center)	Intergenerational knowledge integration; equal say in decision-making processes for older women with traditional knowledge and young partners.	The master-apprentice relationship in the transfer of knowledge and experience resolves disputes through 'consent production' and master wisdom.

The first core dimension emerging in this process is the approach to ecological production shaped by oral culture, traditional healing, and belief systems. The Tunceli Producing Women's Cooperative acts as a flagship regarding 'Ancestral Seeds' and 'Traditional Healing.' Through the example of Saniye İldeniz, the transmission of 'receiving the hand' passed down from Zeynep Ana directly corresponds, ethnographically and sociologically, to the 'Reverence for Nature and Lokma Culture' in the Alevi-Bektashi faith. Nearly 70 endemic plants and seeds gathered from the region's mountains—such as lemon balm, plantain, thyme, milk thistle, gundelia, valonia oak, and sage—are utilized as raw materials in the production of registered vinegars. Starting with two tins of *karakılçık* wheat (ancestral seed), the process acquired a commercial identity through the production of 'Brown Bread' (*Esmer Ekmek*), baked on a griddle (*sac*) using low-gluten flour and traditional sourdough. This devotion to nature and production is directly linked to the understanding of 'production as worship and service to humanity' within the Alevi

faith culture. Indeed, the producer's remark, "If the bee does not land on the

flower, the flower does not yield honey; we are also looking for bees," symbolizes the organic bond between humans, nature, and labor, while the resulting providing scholarships to students from the profits serves as a concrete demonstration of directly converting economic yield into social benefit.

The most prominent organizational feature common to all four examined cooperatives is the rejection of the boss-worker vertical hierarchy in traditional corporate models and the adoption of a participatory/collective management model in its place.

Cooperatives also serve as a reliable market and financial foothold for small producers in the center and districts. The Hozat and Mazgirt cooperatives source raw materials such as rosehip, grape, mulberry, and local legumes directly from villagers. Daily purchase prices and quantities are determined jointly by observing clean product criteria such as being chemical-free, rot-free, and trash-free. Raw materials collected in the districts are processed in central structures such as the Tunceli Producing Women's Cooperative and Zembul, transforming them into registered vinegars, fermented foods, and local cuisine menus, turning them into high value-added final products. As in the example of Mazgirt, thanks to continuous communication maintained with villagers throughout the year, all stages from the planting of raw materials to the harvest are inspected on-site; thus, product quality is guaranteed while still in the field. Although Tunceli's mountainous terrain and harsh winter climate directly affect access to raw materials and the transportation of products to the market, women develop flexible logistic resilience mechanisms. During periods in Hozat when roads are closed due to snow, raw materials are carried by women on their backs or on sleds; while Mazgirt's distance from the center is overcome through weekly rented shared vehicles.

For products broken or damaged during shipping, unconditional replacement or refunds build high trust and loyalty among customers.

In terms of digital representation and institutional relations; in the absence of professional e-commerce websites, sales and communication are mainly conducted via Instagram. Women who initially struggled to appear on camera overcame these reservations as they showcased the value they produced, managing the process with the digital support of younger partners. As in the case of the Tunceli Producing Women's Cooperative, the registration of products under the Ministry of Agriculture's 'Kız Kardeşim' (My Sister) project, their exhibition at the Munzur University Gastronomy Department, and being featured in TRT documentaries have increased the national legitimacy of the model.

Finally, when examining sustainability obstacles; although temporary rent and utility support provided by public institutions are protective during crises, insufficient equity capital and limited production areas increase vulnerability. Furthermore, heavy outward migration, loss of the young population, and declining agricultural production in districts like Hozat and Mazgirt constitute the primary structural risk threatening the long-term raw material and member sustainability of the cooperatives. Institutional expectations in this regard lean toward the allocation of large physical spaces/land for production, public service vehicle support, and the implementation of sustainable purchasing-guaranteed cooperation protocols with local governments, rather than cash grants.

5. EVALUATION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study conducted on women's cooperatives operating in the province of Tunceli and the districts of Ovacık, Hozat, and Mazgirt reveals that rural and local development dynamics cannot be interpreted solely through economic capital accumulation; social memory, faith culture, women's solidarity, publicist municipalism, and geographic resilience elements

are also essential founding components of the process. The 'Ovacık Doğal' (Ovacık Natural) approach, whose foundations were laid during Fatih Mehmet Maçoğlu's mayoral tenure in Ovacık through seed support, public/popular solidarity taking to the fields in the spirit of collective labor (*imece*), and local councils, gave birth over time to a unique 'Eco-Social Development Model' through female entrepreneurship, institutional collaborations, and an inter-district production network. When the data obtained from field research are evaluated within the framework of the local government vision of the era, the institutional efforts of the Tunceli Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TTSO), and the dynamics of the four women's cooperatives, a multidimensional structure comes to the fore. The capital-free and grant-free production model initiated by Fatih Mehmet Maçoğlu during his presidency of the Ovacık Municipality and later carried to the Tunceli city center transformed the cultivation of land from profit-driven commodity production into a form of public solidarity. Women who were initially involved in physical labor processes in the fields (hoeing, sifting, packaging) ceased to be passive production workers and became active subjects making decisions and managing budgets as a result of acquiring legal entity status through the 'Ovacık Doğal' process and subsequent district organizations. This mental and institutional leap has been the most strategic achievement building women's social and individual self-confidence locally.

In all examined cooperative structures (Zembul, Hozat, Mazgirt), the traditional boss-worker hierarchy has been firmly rejected. Decisions are made through morning/evening evaluation meetings, job rotation, and consensus principles rather than top-down directives. The Zembul Women's Cooperative has institutionalized a non-hierarchical division of labor and a face-to-face problem-solving approach in its daily restaurant/kitchen operations. Meanwhile, the Hozat and Mazgirt Women's Cooperatives, despite limited resources, eliminate the distinction between manager and producer,

carrying out overtime and field work through collective responsibility. This proves that the cooperatives function not merely as food-manufacturing micro-enterprises, but as socio-psychologically safe havens and spaces of solidarity for women.

The approach to production embodied in the example of the Tunceli Producing Women's Cooperative (Esmer Ekmek) carries the region's ancient healing and agricultural memory into the future. Transforming ancestral *karakılçık* wheat seeds into sourdough griddle bread (*sac ekmeği*) and producing fermented vinegars with nearly 70 endemic plants collected from the mountains of Tunceli preserves biological and cultural diversity. This ecological stance gains a moral and spiritual footing as production motivation merges with values of the Alevi faith culture (viewing production as worship and service to humanity), love of nature, and providing scholarships to students with a portion of the earnings. The cold winter seasons of Turkey's Eastern Anatolia region, the rugged terrain, and the exorbitant shipping costs stemming from distance to major metropolises are the greatest obstacles to production. This geographical isolation is overcome within the framework of the Ovacık Doğal model through bulk shipments conducted via 24 consumer cooperatives established in metropolises, solidarity warehouses, and friendly municipalities; and in rural districts such as Hozat and Mazgirt, through the flexible logistics solutions of women who carry products on their backs when roads are closed by snow or rent weekly shared vehicles. Accepting no outside cash grants or capital, this system eases shipping crises and geographical obstacles through social capital networks based on social trust rather than money.

On the bureaucratic and commercial side of the process, the Tunceli Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TTSO) serves as a strategic bridge. As emphasized by TTSO President H. Hüseyin Coşkun; geographical indication registrations (such as Pülümür Salt), hygiene certification, and prioritizing women's cooperatives in the planned

'Handicrafts and Local Products Bazaar' transform scattered female labor into a registered commercial power. TTISO charts a sustainable commercial route on a macro scale by encouraging the production of long-shelf-life, high value-added niche products rather than low-volume/high-shipping-cost goods.

Despite the lack of professional e-commerce websites, all of the cooperatives use social media (especially Instagram) very actively as a communication and marketing channel. Transparently sharing mountain foraging, natural production processes, and raw kitchen footage builds "spiritual trust" among consumers. The compensation approach applied in cases of breakage/damage during logistics increases customer loyalty. The combination of older women's traditional agricultural knowledge with the digital literacy of the youth has established a strong intergenerational bridge in the process.

The most critical dilemma revealed by field findings is that relations with official institutions largely remain at the level of 'verbal sympathy' and fail to translate into concrete infrastructure and strategic development support. Although temporary space or expense exemptions provided by governorships and municipalities are protective during crises, the lack of treasury land allocation, professional production facilities, equipment, and service vehicles limits growth. Furthermore, heavy outward migration, loss of the young population, and declining agricultural production in districts like Hozat and Mazgirt constitute the primary structural risk threatening the long-term raw material supply and member sustainability of the cooperatives. Overcoming the fragile structures of women's cooperatives in Tunceli to transform them into sustainable, scalable, and permanent corporate entities is only possible through a Triple Synergy Model to be established among Public/Local Government, Professional Chambers (TTISO/Academia), and Cooperative Internal Managements. The strategic responsibilities falling upon each actor of this tripod and the policies to be implemented are based on specific principles:

The public and civil administration network (Local Governments, Governorship, and Ministries), which constitutes the first pillar of the model, must establish an infrastructural and legal umbrella that protects cooperatives from the destructive competition of market conditions. In this context; relevant ministries and local governments should provide women's cooperatives with spacious production areas compliant with hygiene standards, cold storage facilities, modern processing facilities, and allocations of treasury land suitable for cultivation. Public logistics networks should be established to alleviate transportation constraints in rural districts; and market security should be provided by defining purchase-guaranteed quotas for women's cooperatives in food and consumer goods procurement by public institutions (hospitals, schools, daycares, public social facilities). Institutional and academic support networks, such as the Tunceli Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TTISO), Munzur University, and the Eastern Anatolia Development Agency (SERKA), which constitute the second pillar of the model, should serve as a lever in the registration, branding, and professionalization of production processes. Accordingly; geographical indication registrations and hygiene/quality certification processes of regional niche products should be directly conducted under the guidance of TTISO. Technical consultancy units offering continuous service within Munzur University and SERKA should be established in fields such as e-commerce, B2B marketing, digital transformation, financial literacy, and trademark registration to encourage the integration of youth into cooperative processes. The internal management network of the cooperatives themselves, which constitutes the third and most critical pillar of the model, must move beyond the culture of grant dependency and align its financial structure with a rational and professional approach. In this framework, instead of setting aside continuous expectations of external grants or aid and directly distributing generated revenue to partners, cooperatives should strengthen their

financial equity by reserving a portion for machinery depreciation, operating capital, and contingency reserves. To prevent heavy outward migration in districts and inject fresh blood into cooperatives, specialized grant, entrepreneurship credit, and insurance premium support mechanisms aimed at young female partners should be structured, combining the ancient production knowledge of older women with the

dynamism and digital skills of youth under an institutional roof. In conclusion; this Eco-Social Synergy offered by the Tunceli/Ovacık Women's Cooperative Model is not merely a local example of solidarity, but clearly proves that when public protection, institutional guidance, and collective women's labor combine, a sustainable food sovereignty and alternative development model can be built against neo-liberal market conditions.

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