



**HAL**  
open science

## How can farmers' organisations be strengthened?

Denis Pesche

► **To cite this version:**

Denis Pesche. How can farmers' organisations be strengthened?. The Courier ACP-UE, 2002. hal-01699200

**HAL Id: hal-01699200**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01699200>**

Submitted on 2 Feb 2018

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# How can farmers' organisations be strengthened?

The development strategies of national governments and other donors often include the strengthening of farmers' organisations (FOs) as one of their aims. This reflects a desire to involve communities in defining and implementing their own rural development and their own strategies to alleviate poverty. Denis Pesche<sup>1</sup> argues that the range of their services and their sizeable contribution to general welfare justifies efforts to ensure that they are properly funded from both public and private sources.

The 1980s and 1990s were years of growth for FOs in developing countries, both at local level and higher (national and international, with FO federations and networks). FOs perform many roles, generally combining a number of different functions. This is either because of deficiencies in their environment or because a combination of roles is necessary if they are to provide their members with services and at the same time achieve a higher national political profile. Also, a farmers' organisation that is too specialised can be vulnerable in the unstable environment of rural affairs in developing countries.

FOs frequently perform three major roles. The first is to provide services to their members: these may be technical (promoting technical innovation to improve their members' income); or economic (FOs may be full economic operators through the harvesting and marketing of their produce or the supply of agricultural inputs).

The second is to represent their members' interests and, more widely, the interests of farmers and others living in rural areas (without their having necessarily to be members of the FO). This role may have many facets, including the formulation of claims in negotiations, drawing-up proposals to contribute to the definition of agricultural and rural policies, and involvement in the management of agricultural sectors.

Finally they may also be involved in local development, providing social investment (schools, health centres, literacy programmes and so on). So, given the shortfall in state or local and community services, they provide amenities that everyone needs. By being active in this area FOs also help strengthen local democracy and participation.

In most cases farmers' organisations have very limited human and financial resources in comparison with their ambitions and the obligation to maintain a balance between their internal and external work

## Maintaining a balance in an often hostile environment

Irrespective of the roles they assume, FOs necessarily have to combine internal and external work. Their internal work aims to consolidate their operations and to respond to their members' expectations. They need to build the organisation through regular meetings at various levels. These strengthen their members' feeling of belonging, and develop and maintain the organisation's legitimacy.

Their external work is aimed more at guaranteeing recognition for FOs and developing partnerships with other players. This requires forging relationships, communicating and sometimes negotiating with many external contacts. These contacts may include the state, technical services, private sector, NGOs and donors.

In most cases FOs have very limited human and financial resources by comparison with their ambitions and the obligation to maintain a balance between their internal and external work. This tension between internal dynamic and external relations makes them vulnerable and sometimes makes it difficult for them to carry through the tasks they set themselves. They operate in an environment that is often unfavourable towards them. Relevant legislation is often ill-adapted; governments are frequently reluctant to allow the development of what they see as competitors for power; and their members are often widely spread.

## Supporting the organisation as well as the activities

The FOs' partners, particularly donors, have to pay attention to three key factors that will enable the FOs to manage this delicate balance. A better equilibrium has to be found between the institutional strengthening of FOs and support for their activities. It is a mistake to rely solely on FOs' internal financial

IFAD/Jean-Philippe Audinet



resources (contributions and the profit margin on economic activities) to bridge the gap between their ambitions and the means at their disposal.

Other sources of finance have to be found to enable FOs to develop their capabilities. Moreover, it is important for these funds to be managed directly by the FOs themselves, thereby enhancing their management abilities. At present much outside support focuses on just a few activities, with no direct concern for the overall strengthening of their capacities in the long term.

Those anxious to consolidate the FOs sometimes come up against the stumbling block of heavy, centralised financial procedures that perpetuate government control of payment decisions and guidelines. Often they are able to finance FO-led activities, but cannot bring them the long-term, stable resources they need to give them strength (hiring workers, organising meetings, studies, etc.).

An organisation may recruit an employee to lead and monitor an FO action, but at the end of the programme the new member of staff has to leave. This is the kind of thing that keeps FOs in a position of weakness and provides ammunition for their detractors. It highlights their limitations and so traps them in a vicious circle.

Priority should be given to setting up financial mechanisms that promote procedural transparency and, above all, flexibility to respond to needs that are often fragmented. These mechanisms ought to be governed by FO representatives, as this contributes to strengthening their ability to manage and make decisions.

### Legitimacy and working with the state

Those wanting to support FOs should also be aware of the issue of their legitimacy and representative nature. They are often criticised for being unrepresentative of rural communities as a whole. In no country is there a farmers' organisation that can completely repudiate this charge. But the real question that should be posed is whether FOs are legitimate, whether they are deeply rooted in the rural world, and whether they respond to the interests of their members. Clearly an important objective of institutional support should be to strengthen their legitimacy and improve the degree to which they really represent their communities.

Another key factor is constructive dialogue with the state. Although the authorities declare their good will towards FOs in rural sector strategy papers, they often in practice show strong resistance to an increase in FO power. Poorly paid middle ranking or local civil servants tend to preserve their powers and social status by retaining a monopoly over certain functions, often generating illegal income.

Moreover, the prospect of greater external financing for FOs merely reinforces the tendency for them to be regarded as competitors for international aid. Rather than compartmentalising outside help (the state on the one hand and FOs on the other), what is really needed is support for initiatives that bring public sector players and FOs together in joint activities.

This needs dialogue and balanced negotiations in order to avoid simply applying ready-made solutions. The institutional strengthening of FOs engaged in this type of dialogue is vital to its quality. So, of course, is the strengthening or reform of the public apparatus.



IFAD/Horst Wagner

Farmers' organisations may also be involved in local development, providing social investment (schools, health centres, literacy programmes and so on)

In certain situations, the presence of expatriate agents within the FOs enhances relationships with the government and strengthens the FOs themselves. But their involvement requires a finely honed ability to listen and the ability to respect the FO's inherent rhythm and its approach – rather than wanting to take over.

### The "global" dimension

A functional and many-sided approach to drawing-up "global" programmes to strengthen POs is the third key factor. The purpose of an FO is to be a community player, a vehicle for its members' aspirations. Such aspirations rarely amount to mere financial rewards. Members of rural communities naturally want to influence the decisions that affect their own environment in order to enhance the quality of their lives.

This global dimension to FOs is rarely understood by external partners, who often reduce rural policy to cross-disciplinary intervention or to a product-specific sum paid out by different departments or even different ministries, when what is really needed is coordinated funding.

In the face of this, FOs are forced to enter into a multiplicity of relationships and to set up a number of activity programmes. This consumes a large part of their meagre resources. One possible solution is for FOs to draw up programmes that combine both activities and institutional strengthening, and that are likely to receive funding from a variety of sources – coordinating their involvement in a shared institutional development programme.

Finally, it is essential for agencies that collaborate with FOs and also for governments to try to better understand developments in the rural environment and to listen to FOs through a dialogue with their managers and members. It is crucial that they understand what FOs are, what they can achieve and how best they can work with other players. ■

1. Inter-Réseaux Rural Development 32 rue Le Peletier 75009 Paris.  
[www.inter-reseaux.org](http://www.inter-reseaux.org)