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FORMAL FARMERS ORGANISATIONS IN THE AGRICULTURAL TECHNOLOGY SYSTEM: CURRENT ROLES AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

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Farmers organisations (FOs) need to be relatively sophisticated and well-funded to become involved in agricultural technology development and transfer. This is because of the complexity of understanding members technological needs and of building productive partnerships with other technology suppliers. Only small-scale initiatives are likely to be possible for organisations which have limited capacity. Such initiatives usually rely on leaders existing knowledge of or access to improved technologies. Organisations with relatively homogenous membership and with close links to the market (which helps both to set quality standards and to generate money for the organisation itself) are generally better able to get involved in technology than their larger, more political counterparts. The attitude of the public and private technology suppliers is also likely to be a critical factor in determining whether farmers organisations will be successful in their technology-related activities, as is the support of donors and/or NGOs on the capacity-building and financial sides.

Policy Conclusions

- The ability of large membership organisations to play the role of a technology pressure group, and thereby ensure that agricultural technology systems meet their members needs, has been overstated. If such organisations are to work effectively with the technology system, they will need to be strengthened and supported financially.
- Organisations with market links tend to be the most successful in assisting members to meet their technology needs. However, these organisations have shown little desire to act as technology pressure groups. Providing resources to support them in this will therefore generate limited benefits.
- Donors play a critical role in providing financial support to farmers organisations. This should probably be complemented by more technical assistance, more small-scale activities and more general capacity-building over a long period if the role played by these organisations is to expand. However, most farmers organisations have their own institutional objectives (which may not include technology) and donors cannot always expect their agenda to dominate.
- There is no strong evidence that the pressure of farmers organisations can force the opening up of reluctant agricultural technology systems. Donors wishing to see change will also therefore need to work with the public sector, possibly earmarking funds for research and extension with farmers organisations.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the extent to which formal farmers or producers organisations can contribute to increasing the effectiveness of agricultural technology development and transfer has been much debated. During the 1970s and 1980s it became widely recognised that farmers themselves are an important source of agricultural innovation. Much attention was paid to developing new methods of trying to incorporate them into the research and extension system. However it soon became apparent that these new methods, though valuable, had serious limitations: the operational costs of working with farmers on a large scale were high, and farmer participation was rarely a systematic part of the process of technology development and transfer. In addition, because researchers were often working with individual farmers (for example in on-farm trials) there was little sense in which the new methods were building towards a future where farmers would be empowered to make their own demands on the system.

Working with groups seemed to offer a partial solution. Many donor-funded projects looked to improve their effectiveness and efficiency through sponsoring the formation of groups to meet their immediate project objectives. At the same time, Training and Visit extension systems began to move from working with individual often isolated contact farmers to working with groups. However, farmers were still operating very

much from the position of junior partner; the agenda remained firmly with the researchers and extensionists (and donors) themselves. It was they who decided when groups should be consulted and, often, who should be a member of a particular group. Because the groups were almost exclusively technology- focused they tended to be small and apolitical. There were few cases in which they had matured into independently powerful organisations capable of articulating demand; usually when researchers withdrew, the groups would collapse.

NGOs too were investing large amounts of money and effort in group formation for consciousness-raising and empowerment. It was, however, still quite rare for NGO- sponsored groups (or NGOs themselves) to have the capacity, technical skills or inclination to engage with technology providers over a prolonged period. These groups were therefore contributing little to the goal of making national agricultural research systems in developing countries accountable to their clients on a systematic basis.

In recognition of this, attention turned to more formally constituted farmers organisations (the developing country equivalents of the powerful agricultural unions in Europe and North America). Such organisations were perceived to have both political power and an ability to generate resources from their members. This would put them in a position not only to articulate demands but also to ensure their satisfaction. They could operate at many different levels from the national to the local and from adaptive research and extension through to overall technology priority-setting and form multiple linkages with the technology system. They seemed like the ideal candidates both to increase the reach of technology, by undertaking operational technology activities and disseminating the results to members, and to change the overall relationships in technology generation, through lobbying and other policy-level activities (Christoplos, 1996). Put another way, in uniting their members, farmers organisations are thought to be able to perform both efficiency and claims functions (Stewart, 1996).

Can farmers organisations increase the reach of technology?

Formal farmers organisations should be well-placed to play a functional role in the agricultural technology system, helping to increase members exposure to new technologies and drawing members accumulated experience into trials and research in which they become involved. This, in turn, should increase both the effectiveness and the efficiency of the agricultural technology system. It is assumed not only that they are well-acquainted with their members needs, but also that they have direct access to members and are able to act as channels for horizontal learning and information sharing between different groups of members. At the same time they should be able to distribute the physical inputs (for example planting material and fertilisers) in which much technology is embedded, perhaps even overseeing quality standards for the inputs and developing recommendations for their use amongst different sub-sets of members. If this were true, they would stand at the interface between highly dispersed members and often over-centralised technology generation and dissemination bodies.

In an environment which is becoming ever more market- oriented, and in which there is a tendency for low-resource farmers to be neglected, increasing the efficiency of technology supply is a critical concern. This is, in fact, the area of technology in which farmers organisations have had the greatest success, as Box 1 shows. However, the costs of working through large, formal farmers organisations have proved to be higher than was anticipated. The fact that these are organisations of the people might be an advantage in some ways, but it also brings disadvantages in terms of the replication of existing social hierarchies within organisations (so the needs of the poorest members are still neglected), weak management (leading to poor accountability to members) and difficulties with both raising and controlling finances. Overall levels of success in increasing the reach of technology are limited by:

- *Statutory barriers:* farmers organisations may be prohibited from engagement in seed multiplication and input supply. In China, for example, they are allowed to act as agents of supply and marketing cooperatives but not to sell fertilisers and agro-chemicals on their own account (which reduces their ability to raise revenues).
- *Lack of resources:* this limits the breadth and depth of technology-related activity. It also means that leaders are over-extended; externally-focused activities (such as participating in committees and interacting with donors) often occupy them to the detriment of vital internal organisation-building.
- *Complexity of members needs:* large organisations struggle to understand their members technology needs. These may be very diverse and poorly understood by members themselves, if they have had limited or no contact with external

Box 1. Increasing the reach of technology: Examples

In Bolivia, CORACA-Potosi (the economic arm of a political union) with the assistance of SNV of the Netherlands has a scheme for bulking up potato seed which it then sells, or distributes on credit, to its members. It has worked with domestically-based, donor- funded potato projects which have provided planting material and technical assistance.

In Zimbabwe, clubs affiliated to the Zimbabwe Farmers Union (which represents more than 164,000 subsistence and small-scale commercial farmers) have tested new seeds and organised cross visits by farmers. Supported by the NGO ITDG (Intermediate Technology Development Group), clubs in one

technology agents in the past. It is only when members produce a single cash crop for sale that their technology needs tend to be relatively homogenous; the fact that producers are constrained to respond to market demand limits the range of options which they can pursue.

- *Poor internal communications in large organisations:* formal structures are rarely operational and organisations themselves are often over-centralised. This means that organisations are often unaware of members needs or else unable to prioritise them.

Different organisations have had different levels of success in increasing the reach of technology, but few have achieved as much in this area as might have been hoped.

In general, the more commercial aspects of technology supply, such as input provision, are probably better performed by smaller organisations with a narrower range of institutional objectives. Packaging research results to make them more accessible to members may be feasible for larger organisations but requires significant effort to be put into capacity-building. The potential of such capacity- building seems, however, to be strong; there is certainly a good deal of scope for farmers organisations to become involved in farmer-to-farmer extension activities.

Have farmers organisations changed overall relations within the agricultural technology system?

The apparent advantage of formal farmers organisations over researcher-created groups is not that they will necessarily function better in any single research endeavour, but that, because they exist independently of the research and extension bodies with which they are associated, they will over time be able to alter the fundamentals of the way in which the system operates. Through their lobbying/claims activities and by acting as pressure-groups, it is widely assumed that they will be able to change the agenda of agricultural development so that it becomes more relevant to members needs. This will ensure their representation on key committees where farmers viewpoints can be brought together with scientific perspectives on what is feasible and desirable in the long term. It will also enable them to cement structural and operational linkages with the technology system. In this way their input into the technology decision-making process will be institutionalised. Resulting technology systems will be more accountable to their clients and therefore more effective.

area have also arranged for members to visit research stations and organised field days.

In China, many farmers technical associations invite staff of public sector research and extension organisations to sit on their boards. These people are then able to feed technical information direct to members, in return for which they are paid or share in members increased profits.

In India, the Lahoul Potato Society (with 2,000 members in Himachal Pradesh) works with the public sector to introduce new technologies to members and has established rules and systems for members production of certified potato seed.

Box 2. Increasing capacity for technology involvement areas for attention

Identifying and prioritising members production problems
If farmers organisations are to maintain their legitimacy as representatives of large groups of farmers they need to develop transparent priority-setting procedures. In large organisations, problem identification and priority-setting is probably best done on a commodity-by- commodity basis incorporating market information into the decision-making process where relevant. Special attention will need to be devoted to ensuring that the needs of the poorest members are not neglected.

Increasing technical capacity
If farmers organisations have reliable access to technically-trained personnel, their credibility in the technology area is likely to be enhanced. In-house agronomists can assist in: problem identification; the search for likely solutions; training and sensitisation of members to the potential benefits of agricultural technology; and improving the quality of interactions with research and extension personnel. Where resource constraints prevent organisations from employing their own technical personnel, it may be important to encourage external resource people with technical skills to support them so that technical options can still be generated internally.

Developing relations with the technology system
A chief reason why farmers are unable to access technology is because they are unaware of how and where it is developed and who the key decision-makers are. Investment in understanding the system and developing cross-cutting webs of formal and informal relations over a long period of time is unlikely to be wasted. Ideally, organisations should be able to engage simultaneously at all stages of technology development. However, organisations of low-resource farmers are unlikely to have this capacity and will probably need to take a much more incremental approach. Donors, with insider knowledge of the technology system should be able to assist in this area.

Increasing their resource base and improving financial management
Technology involvement tends to be expensive. Those organisations which are renowned for their success in the technology area (such as the El Ceibo federation of cocoa cooperatives in Bolivia) tend not to represent the poorest farmers and have often received significant amounts of donor money. It is not sufficient simply to improve access to funds; organisations need to be able to manage that money efficiently. This is one problem which is often overlooked by enthusiastic, financially-constrained leaders. The Malian Union of Cotton and Food Crop Producers (SYCOV), for example, is lobbying to be able to access a percentage of its members cotton payments directly. This would generate more than $1 million per annum for the organisation. Since SYCOV has neither a functioning office nor paid staff it is unclear how this sum would be accounted for or how expenditure priorities would be developed within the organisation (Bingen et al., 1995). Poor management and subsequent allegations of corruption can effectively destroy organisations as both potential donors and members themselves quickly become disaffected.

However, evidence to support this hypothesis is weak. There are few farmers organisations in developing countries which have a systematic influence on the way in which agricultural technology systems evolve. This may be because many farmers organisations are young and institutionally immature (few were formed before the 1980s and many have come into being only in the 1990s). It may also be because their priorities lie elsewhere. Farmers organisations whether in developed or developing countries rarely coalesce around technology issues. Exceptions to this general rule do occur for example when groups face a crisis and technology activities are part of a multi-faceted response or when technology is included as part of a market-entry strategy (as in China) but they are rare.

There are a variety of reasons why technology is seldom the primary concern of farmers organisations. These include the fact that involvement in technology tends to be costly, risky and long-term. By contrast, success in achieving prominent political goals, such as securing better access to land or higher prices for members produce, is highly visible. It may also be critical to members livelihoods over the short-term. If so, it can do much to increase membership of and thence the revenue flowing to an organisation. In addition, members views on issues such as price tend to be uniform, while the technological concerns of most low- resource farmers are highly site- and situation-specific. Indeed, this brings us back to the original reason why forward-thinking researchers believed that working with farmers organisations was essential. They foresaw that the public sector alone would never have the resources to develop technologies appropriate for the diverse agro- ecological conditions facing low-income farmers. They therefore looked for intermediaries to perform this task with them. However, the intermediaries, though organisations of the farmers themselves, have often proved unwilling or unable to take on this challenge.

Other limiting factors for farmers organisations are:

- *They have little leverage and few means to ensure that their views are heeded:* the fact that they sit on committees does not mean that they can necessarily wield influence. They are particularly constrained by their financial weakness which is usually overcome only when they have access to significant amounts of donor money or are mandated to collect levies on crop sales. In rare instances, such as in Brazil in the 1990s, rural unions representing small farmers have been able to call effective rural strikes to draw attention to their cause.

- *Members do not prioritise this area of activity:* low- resource farmers, whose needs have been so neglected in the past, are seldom aware of the potential benefits of technology. This is particularly true in countries such as South Africa where there has been no on-farm research in poor areas and where extension officers working with low-resource farmers have had very limited technical back-up. While members remain ignorant of the potential of technology, it is unlikely that they will put pressure on their representative organisations to work in the technology sphere.

- *Political interference by farmers unions in objective science is discounted:* large claims-oriented unions are often considered to be too political to be taken seriously by researchers and technology decision-makers. While this is clearly not the case in that priority-setting at least is an inherently political task it can prevent such organisations from gaining access or mean that their views are systematically discounted.

- *Research and extension priorities are never made explicit:* often research and extension priorities develop in an *ad hoc* or organic way as the result of hundreds of separate underlying decisions. Where this is the case, precedent is often the guiding principle for future decision-taking and this pattern is difficult to dislodge.

Taken together, these factors mean that many farmers organisations have had neither the inclination nor the means to force the opening up of technology systems which are reluctant to embrace the views of their members. The fact that farmers organisations exist does not, therefore, mean that low-resource and independently powerless farmers have been empowered.

That said, the increased visibility that such organisations bring to the cause of low-resource farmers might, over time, contribute to an incremental re-orientation of technology systems to meet these people s needs. Certainly, success for farmers organisations in other areas of agricultural policy is likely to increase the overall standing of low-resource farmers. However, farmers organisations are likely to have to be brought into the technology sphere in an incremental way if initial inexperience is not to damage their credibility. Funds destined for research and extension might need to be earmarked for use with farmers organisations, even if the organisations play only a consultative role at the outset.

Thinking strategically about involvement in technology

Farmers organisations are not the panacea for which many have been looking. It cannot automatically be assumed that they will be able to make technology systems more responsive to the needs of low-resource members. However, farmers organisations which do wish to play a continuing role in the technology area need to think strategically, to increase their professionalism, and to focus on a limited number of areas (Box 2 details some key concerns). This is true whether they wish to work as partners in adaptive research endeavours, to take on dissemination functions themselves, or to influence the overall direction and volume of technology supply. Increased professionalisation might not be attractive to some farmers organisations, particularly to those whose leaders pride themselves on their grassroots affiliations. However, movement in this direction should demonstrate to other often sceptical and dismissive members of the technology system that farmers organisations are committed to this area. Gaining the goodwill of others is a critical first step; it is rare that farmers organisations can force the opening up of reluctant technology systems without first courting broad political support.

Box 3. Examples of the new influences faced by farmers organisations

	Benefits	Disadvantages
Privatisation and introduction of user- pays principle	Clients are more important	Lack of resources becomes a greater handicap for FOs
Reduction in scale of public sector efforts; emphasis on multi-institution approaches to development	'Space ' created for FOs and partnerships actively sought by retrenching departments	Complete government with-drawal reduces partnership scope and increases institutional over-load on FOs
Decentralisation of government	Decision-making at lower levels is easier to influence	Increased number of decision-making points increases costs of operation for FOs
Move to regional research initiatives	More forward looking researchers and cost-effective research?	Reduction in scope for local influence and increase in cost and complexity of interaction

Farmers organisations in a changing world

The environment facing farmers organisations is changing. In particular the public sector role is being reduced and a new emphasis is being placed on creating space for the private sector and developing institutional partnerships for services provision and natural resource management.

Overall, these are favourable developments for farmers organisations. However, the trends are not all positive, as Box 3 argues. Certainly, if farmers organisations are to capitalise on the positive aspects of the changes, they must be dynamic, flexible and probably somewhat

opportunistic. This is a lesson which can be learnt from farmers organisations in Europe which have evolved different structures, norms and operating procedures over time as a response to changes in their environment. Some developing country organisations have already demonstrated their responsiveness and willingness to change. For example, the Zimbabwe Farmers Union has recently instituted commodity committees and is undertaking a programme of decentralisation while the National African Farmers Union in South Africa has adopted a provincial structure to match the largely federal structure of agricultural policy-making in the country. Building capacity below central level can have a significant impact on technology involvement since, increasingly, technology decision-making takes place at the programme or sub-station level.

The problem revisited

It remains common to hear the view that farmers organisations should be incorporated into the technology development and transfer process in order to make this more client-oriented and agricultural technology systems as a whole more accountable. While this sentiment is laudable, examples of successful involvement by large, formal farmers organisations in the technology area are still few. Many of the benefits of farmer participation in research and extension therefore remain to be captured. More thought needs to be put into devising appropriate mechanisms for working with farmers organisations as well as for increasing the technological capacity of the organisations themselves. Perhaps the key to the whole area lies in creating amongst low-resource farmers a sense of owning the technology systems. This is likely to be a long-term and difficult process, given the past isolation of technology systems from their clients. If, however, such a process is not embarked upon the problem of unresponsive or only patchily responsive technology systems is likely to remain with us for many years and a valuable opportunity will have been missed.

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