

POSSIBLE ROLES OF FARMERS' ORGANIZATIONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Agricultural extension organizations in Bangladesh often work through groups of farmers. This can be an effective approach to extension. Not only because Lewin (1953) has shown nearly 50 years ago that in a programme of change it is often more effective to change groups of people than to try to change individual behaviour. Also farmers' organizations play in many countries an important role in agricultural development. In Bangladesh, these organizations are still weak, but the groups of farmers with which extension is now working could become nucleus of the farmers' organizations in the future. To be able to contribute to their growth it is important that extension agents realize which roles farmers' organization can play in agricultural development. That is a reason to discuss in this article what we see as possible roles of these organizations.

Before proceeding further, it should be clarified that our discussion is not only based on the literature, it is also accompanied by our observations of the 'roles' which these organizations play in different countries. We will use these observations to illustrate some of the roles farmers' organizations can play in response to new opportunities apparent at present throughout the world. In many countries for example, we see a change from a top-down approach of agricultural development, in which government officers decide which changes are good for farmers to a participatory approach in which farmers decide which support they require from the government in the development process. Quite often farmers organizations express these needs on behalf of their members to the government. We also see that a number of roles in the development process can be performed more

effectively by farmers themselves through their own organizations than by government agencies.

2. EDUCATIONAL ROLES

Agricultural development cannot be realized without competent farmers. Bangladeshi farmers are known for their relatively high level of competence. However, in many countries productivity in agriculture per man and per unit area is increasing rapidly. As a result, a farmer who is considered to be competent at this moment, will not be able to compete on the world market 10 years from now, unless he/she learns new competencies. Farmers' organizations help their members in different ways to acquire these competencies. Some of these are briefly noted below:

2.1 Organize meetings and courses, where extension agents, teachers and researchers discuss research findings and experiences with farmers

Through this effort, the farmers decide on which topic they need a lecture, a demonstration or a course instead of the old way in which extension agents make this decision. The board members of the farmers organization may consult with extension agents and others about possible topics, but the final choice is theirs. The local farmers' organization performs also organizational tasks, such as arranging for the meeting hall. This gives the extension agents more time to perform their professional roles.

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2.2 Organize study clubs, where farmers exchange experiences and conduct experiments often with the help of extension agents and researchers

An interesting example is the Farmers' Field Schools for Integrated Pest Management (IPM) in rice in Indonesia. Chemical pest control has caused serious problems in that country, because it not only kills the dangerous insects, but also their enemies. After a serious outbreak of the brown plant hopper, the government has forbidden the use of most insecticides in rice and has started a programme of IPM with the help of the FAO. IPM replaces most of the pesticides by emphasizing on ecological balance between different insects in each field. This only works if farmers have this knowledge. Extension agents can never make the required observations for all fields. Hence, a massive training programme through Farmers Field Schools was started in which farmers learn from their own observations of insect populations about ecology. The trainer is not teacher, who tells farmers what they should do, but a facilitator who helps farmers to make the necessary observations and to draw correct conclusions from these observations. This has increased farm income, not only because it reduced the costs of pesticides, but also increased rice yields. In the rice fields, farmers not only observed insects, but also other management practices, e.g. irrigation. (Van de Fliert, 1993, Roling and Van de Fliert, 1994).

The Indonesian extension service now realizes that success in farming not only depends on the adoption of new technologies, but that the management of these technologies is at least as important. As the Farmers' Field Schools proved to be an effective tool to increase the managerial capabilities of the farmers, they became the basis of the Indonesian extension approach, which resulted in an average rice yield of 4380 kg/ha in 1993. The major difficulty in introducing this approach is that it requires a change in the attitude of the extension agents towards the farmers in order to be able to act as a facilitator of the farmers own learning process rather than an expert, who tells farmers what they should do.

Many industrial countries have a different kind of study clubs, which help farmers to increase their managerial ability. A group of about 10 farmers studies the optimal way of growing a crop by visiting regularly each field and discussing the management of this field. The local extension agent may be present at these visits, not in the last place because he learns a lot from these visits and discussions. These study clubs are a way to organize farmer-to-farmer extension. In India one asks leaders of successful clubs to tell farmers in neighbouring villages about their experiences. For a small payment he often does a more effective job than a government extension agent. These study clubs are also an effective way to integrate indigenous and scientific knowledge (Wareni, 1991).

2.3 Establish and manage vocational agricultural schools and training centers for farmers, usually with a subsidy from the government

In many European countries, vocational agricultural school and courses are an effective way to increase the competence of young farmers. Many experts are convinced that their role in agricultural development is at least as large as the role of agricultural extension and research. In most developing countries, agricultural schools train government officers, but not farmers. In Europe, it is no exception that these schools are owned by farmers' organization, but the government will only subsidise this kind of education, if there is a guarantee that it is of good quality.

2.4 Employ extension agents, probably financed partly by the government

In countries as Denmark and Taiwan, for a long time many extension agents are employed by farmers' organizations (Lionberger and Chang, 1970). With the recent tendency towards privatization of extension, other countries have followed this example. In this setting, extension agents have to serve the needs of farmers. A problem can be that farmers may feel more a need for services than for education. They may for example, expect the extension agent to

identify pest in their crop for them rather than to teach the members of the organization to identify these pests themselves.

2.5 Organize farm youth clubs where boys and girls learn mainly through experience certain professional and managerial skills and which contribute to their cultural development

The USA has exported their 4-H clubs philosophy to many different countries. In many European countries one find clubs for youth from about 16 to 25 years, which are related to the organizations for adult farmers and farm women.

2.6 Publish a farm journal and other publications, which provide farmers with information they need for managerial decisions. In some countries educational radio and TV programmes are also used

In industrial countries, farm journals play a major role in informing farmers about new scientific developments and new market opportunities. Some of these journals are published commercially, others by farmers' organizations. The latter kind plays also a useful role in the communication from the board members of this organization to the rank and file. The communication from the ordinary member to the elected board members is often more difficult to organize in the larger, national farmers organizations.

3. COMMERCIAL AND ORGANIZATION ROLES

3.1 Organize input supply, marketing and processing of farm products and credit supply through cooperatives

If this is not well organized, a change from subsistence to commercial agriculture cannot be realized. The experience in industrial countries is that input supply and marketing processes are most efficient, if farmers' cooperatives compete with private enterprise. This competition makes it nearly impossible for private traders to exploit farmers, because if they try to do so they loose

many customers to the cooperatives. At the same time, private project forces the cooperative to work in a flexible and non-bureaucratic way. .

In many developing countries these cooperatives have had much less success. This is partly because they have often been organized by the government for the farmers rather than by the farmers themselves as happened in industrial countries.

Credit cooperatives may increase the access of local people to outside funds, but an important role is often to stimulate savings and to make local saving available to entrepreneurs, who invest them in a profitable way.

3.2 Provide services to members such as artificial insemination, soil testing, dairy herd testing, accounting and legal advice

When the provision of these services is the responsibility of a farmers' organization, which also bears the costs, it is often done in a more effective and less costly way than when it is done by the government. It forces these organizations to provide only those services which farmers really need.

3.3 Organize quality control of seeds and of animals (herdbook)

3.4 Test the quality of inputs sold by commercial companies and cooperatives

This is a way to prevent exploitation of farmers by traders, who fear that the farmers' organization publishes that they have tried to cheat farmers by selling an inferior product. In some developing countries, a somewhat similar role is performed by the consumers union.

4. MANAGE COMMON PROPERTY

4.1 Manage communal grazing land, forests, irrigation and drainage systems, roads, etc

A task of these organizations is often to mobilize local resources for development, e.g., surplus labour for the construction and maintenance of irrigation works and roads.

In many countries there is long tradition of local irrigation systems, which are managed successfully by farmers who profit from this system. In recent decades many governments have invested in large scale irrigation projects, which are managed by government employees. Often they do not perform this job properly. The experience is that management by representatives of farmers at the local level is usually more effective. Farmers can even play a useful role in designing these projects (Chambers, 1988, Korten and Siy, 1988).

5. DEFEND COLLECTIVE INTEREST OF MEMBERS

5.1 Influence government policies, e.g. price, tax, zoning and environmental policies

In nearly all industrial countries, prices for agricultural products are higher than world market prices, whereas they are lower in most developing countries. One reason is that in industrial countries farmers have organized themselves in effective pressure groups to influence government policies. In most developing countries, farmers' organizations are quite weak and urban people have a relatively large political influence.

5.2 Influence government agencies in such a way that they provide the services farmers need, e.g. by participating in the planning of research and extension programmes

In many industrial countries, farmers' organizations are represented in the boards of research institutes. The representatives see it as their task to ensure that the researchers do research which is really relevant for solving farmers' problems. In many developing countries, it helps researchers more to get a promotion, if they publish an article in an international journal than if they develop new technologies which are widely used by farmers. An ISNAR study shows that cooperation between farmers and researchers in on-farm trials can play a useful role in developing new technologies which help to solve farmers' problems. There is also a rapidly increasing

interest shown by researchers to organize experimentation in cooperation with farmers. (Okali, Sumberg and Farrington, 1994).

In the past it was often clearly regulated who could make which use of common property, e.g. forests or rivers. With increased population density and faster communication this regulation has changed with a greater scope of free access for all. As a result, the property is overused to such an extent that the productivity has seriously decreased. One alternative is regulation by the national government, but this is seldom effective. Another possibility is to establish a property users association, which can regulate its use and has the power to enforce these rules in a more befitting manner.

5.3 Organize public relations for agri-culture

In many industrial countries, urban people get more and more interested in the way farmers manage their farms. This is partly a result of environmental problems caused by modern farming practices. This results in many government rules regarding farming. Farmers often feel that many of these rules are not based on a proper understanding of the real situation on their farms and on the consequences these rules have for national income and employment in agriculture. Therefore, they expect their organizations to spend part of their membership fee on public relations campaigns to increase the understanding urban people have of farmers' problems and possible ways to solve these problems.

In many developing countries it may be more important to focus on the environmental problems caused by factories, which cause serious damage to farming and fishing.

6. RELIGIOUS, CULTURAL AND RECREATIONAL ROLES

Examples are managing a temple, music, theater and sports groups

A good description of the way these roles are performed by a farmers' union in a developing country has been provided by Arnaiz, Merrill-Sands and Mukwende (1995). Their study is a

part of large ODI/ISNAR study on the roles of farmers' organizations in the supply of better technologies for farmers and improving their access to the available technologies.

7. OBJECTIVES

It can be useful to compare our classification of roles of farmers' organizations with Garforth and Munro's (1995) classification of objectives of rural people's organization in Northern Thailand. The following roles are suggested:

- to mobilize local resources for development,
- to gain access to outside credit,
- to gain access to, and share technology and skills either in agricultural production or in non-agricultural income generating activities,
- to manage local resources fairly and without conflict,
- to help each other, in agricultural activities,
- to increase members' bargaining power (in buying inputs and in marketing), and
- to enhance recreation (especially for youth groups).

There is considerable overlap in both classifications, but also some differences in emphasis.

In the past agricultural extension has supported individual decision making by farmers, e.g. adoption of modern varieties. In the present situation collective decision making by farmers becomes increasingly important for agricultural development. We think of soil erosion control, irrigation management, input supply and marketing, IPM, etc. This collective decision making can either be done by the local government or by farmers' organizations. Often these organizations can do this in the most effective way. If farmers through their organizations play a role in making these decisions, they are often more inclined to accept and implement them than when the local government makes these collective decisions.

8 MEMBERS AND NON-MEMBERS

An organization can only be effective if the members have strong common interests. They should realize that they can achieve their own interests better by cooperating with others than by working with their own. It helps when people are able and willing to take a long term view. In the competition between farmers cooperatives and private traders, the traders may offer higher prices to farmers in the hope to kill the cooperative and thus to be able to make more profit in the long run. In such a situation it can be in the long term interest of the farmers to stick together and accept a somewhat lower income in the short run. For farmers, who can hardly survive from their meagre income it may be difficult to follow this strategy.

The need for a common interest among the members also implies that it is not always desirable that all farmers belong to the same organization. It can for example, be desirable to have separate organization for livestock keepers and vegetable growers, for men and women or for farm youth.

Usually only a section of the farmers is member of a farmers' organization. The more well-to-do and better educated, male farmers are more likely to be a member, and among the members this same group is more likely to be a broad member. They may have different interests from the poorer, less educated and female farmers. Ray (1986) gives a lively description how in Bangladesh leaders may use their position to promote their own interests at the expense of the interests of their villagers. Poor peasants are exploited even when they join the cooperative society that exists for the very purpose of procuring fertilizers. Although the government distributes fertilizers through cooperatives, these are normally under control of the rural rich, who not only extract from the poor a higher price than officially stipulated, but also adulterate fertilizers. The poor farmers know and have to tolerate this, because if they fail to keep contact with the rich villagers, they might not get any fertilizers at all. Also politicians often try to use successful organizations to increase their power and to get more votes. This may destroy the organization.

Extension agents often prefer to work with members of organizations rather than with farmers who did not join a farmers' organization. One reason is that they can reach through these organization farmers more effectively but another reason is that in this way they try to prevent the trouble that the broad members of the farmers' organization can create for them.

There can also be a free rider problem in that only the members pay for the costs of the farmers' organization, but also non-members profit from it, e.g. when the organization succeeds in changing government price policies. Therefore, the organization may not be able to survive unless it also provides valuable services to which only the members have access.

9. DEVELOPMENT OF FARMERS' ORGANIZATIONS

In many developing countries, a large proportion of the farmers' organizations have been developed by the government. It is no exception that these organizations are in fact more government departments than organizations through which farmers manage themselves their own affairs. Consequently, the farmers do not feel responsible that these organizations would perform their task well. In these kind of credit organizations, for instance, the repayment rate of loans is often very low and therefore the organization is not sustainable. A World Bank evaluation report noted that agricultural projects including group participation often did not work because the groups were not committed to the project and acted more as an extension of the government than as organizations representing beneficiaries (Hussi, 1993).

In industrial countries, on the other hand, most farmers' organizations are organized by farmers themselves without any interferences of the government. The government has stimulated this development by formulating a legal frame work, e.g. a cooperative law, and the educational policy. vocational agricultural schools may have included in their curriculum how one keeps accounts in a farmers' organizations or how one can conduct a meeting. These subjects are also taught in adult education courses organized by vocational agricultural schools, folk high

school or the board of cooperatives. What decisions the general meeting or the board of the organization took was not considered to be the business of the government. This has often resulted in very strong organizations. In the Netherlands for example, with 5% of the labour force working in agriculture, a few years ago 3 of the 15 ministers were from former employees of farmers unions. Also in a list of the 50 commercial companies of the largest sales, one finds about 10 farmers' cooperatives.

In many industrialized countries members of the local elite, priests, school teachers etc., have assisted farmers start organizations, because they felt responsible to help decrease the poverty among the farm population. Now farmers have a much higher level of education and an experience over some generations in running their own organizations. As a result, the role of this elite has become negligible. With the increase in their size the role of managers employed by farmers' unions and cooperatives has increased in importance at the expense of the role of the elected board members.

In developing countries we see also that NGOs supported by foreign donors help farmers to organize themselves. This can have the disadvantage that these organizations work at a cost level which is normal in industrialized countries, but what cannot be paid for in a developing country, e.g. with regard to office equipment and transport.

It is possible to have separate organizations for different roles, but often one farmers' organization provides several of the roles mentioned above, e.g. cooperative may also teach its member to produce good quality products. Which combination of roles one farmers' organization can best provide depends on the local situation. It is for example, more difficult to manage an organization which performs many different roles than one which performs only one role. Therefore, the availability of capable leaders is one factor that determines which combination of roles is desirable.

It can be wise to start only a few or even one of these roles and to add other roles after the organization has gained in strength and experience. It is better to do a few things well than to do many things and as a result, do them poorly.

Most developing countries have had for centuries various kinds of indigenous organizations. The way modern farmers' organizations are organized can be based either on this indigenous tradition or on the experience with similar organization as in industrialized countries. Often the last way is chosen, because that is the only way foreign experts and foreign educated local officials know. It is no exception, however, that traditions are more effective, on condition that one realizes that these organizations have to operate in a very different environment from what it was some generations ago. Therefore, it is necessary to adjust the local traditions to the needs of the changing environment (Cernea, 1991).

In many countries the role of women in agriculture is increasing. One reason is that they are responsible for homestead production and with increased income the demand for homestead products (fruits, vegetables and animal products) grows more rapidly than the demand for crops. Another reason is that men are increasingly look for a better paying job in urban areas. Indian farmers during some personal interview opined that in their society women are expected to keep quiet in a meeting, unless they are asked to say something. There is an exception, however, for the representative of the Mahila Mandal, the women group, who can present the views of her group, whenever she thinks that this might be useful. In such a situation women's groups can play a very useful role in rural development.

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