

“Nothing about us without us!”

The strength of organisations

Whatever farmers want to achieve, they are more likely to achieve it if they get organised. This is why Agriterra, a Dutch organisation for agricultural development co-operation, supports associations of farmers, regardless of their type.

Jur Schuurman and Ninoska González Herrera

According to surveys, 14 percent of the readers of this magazine are farmers. We would like the other 86% to imagine that they are precisely that – farmers in developing countries. Your situation? You make ends meet, but you want more: you want to get ahead. Perhaps you want better roads for bringing your produce to the market; or fiscal legislation that doesn’t squeeze agriculture dry; or a better price for your product. Maybe you want all of the above – or other things that can make life better for you and your family.

All these very different aspirations have one thing in common: you have more chance of making them real if you do not act on your own. Being part of an organisation is the best way to make sure that your interests are not overlooked or ignored.

Speaking for themselves National farmers’ unions that lobby for their members’ interests and local co-operative societies that are part of the value chain in which farmers work are both membership organisations. These are associations in which the members rule, and through which they speak for

themselves. Agriterra does not look favourably upon the growth of rural NGOs elaborating programmes and projects, making choices and advocating policies on behalf of people they do not represent. It is far more sustainable and authentic to enable organised farmers to think about the problems and how to solve them. Agriterra helps to make this happen.

How? A farmers’ organisation has to know what its members’ concerns are, so that it can “translate” them into coherent policy proposals and economic initiatives. This means that the organisation has to consult its members on a regular basis, have the results documented and systematise them into proposals. To this end, Agriterra offers a toolbox: the Participatory Generation of Policy Proposals (or PGPP) method. Proposals come forward that are demonstrably produced by membership consultations, and what’s more: they are actually accepted and supported by other stakeholders!

A promising tool A PGPP workshop organised in November 2011 helped leaders and members of Bolivia’s national farmers’ network, CIOEC, examine a bill already submitted to Parliament, and identify a set of proposals for its approval. Originally drafted in 2003, this bill includes a series of measures to diversify production and support small-scale farmers, providing financial assistance and also setting up a new vice-ministry for family farming. As a result of the meeting and discussions, CIOEC sent a new proposal to Parliament in August, and is actively working with different political parties to get it approved.

The PGPP approach also looks very promising in Africa’s Great Lakes Region, where nine organisations (from Congo DR, Burundi and Rwanda) participated in a first training in the method in June 2012, in

Goma (Congo DR). People were enthusiastic and felt taken seriously. As one of the participants said, “*faire quelque chose pour moi sans moi, c’est le faire contre moi*”. In other words, nothing about us without us!

This is exactly the principle that Agriterra adheres to. And not just because proposals and ideas improve when they are based on what the direct stakeholders think and want. The farmer in Goma said it clearly: if you don’t consult me, you work against me. Not to be consulted, or not to participate in debates, undermines democracy and sustainable development, because people will not feel really involved. And that participation can only have a sustainable form in associations.

An old example Travelling through America in the 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville praised the role of associations. He observed how they enhanced co-operation between individuals to make things happen, and also as schools for building democracy: “*In order that men remain civilised or become so, the art of associating must be developed and perfected among them in the same ratio as equality of conditions increases*” (De Tocqueville, A., 1835/1840, *Democracy in America*).

Agriterra works in the spirit of De Tocqueville, sharing his core assumption about the strength of joint forces – the way that ultimately leads to farmers improving their lives because they join an organisation that truly belongs to them and offers them the services they need: *their* farmers’ association. That is how Ms Elizabeth Florence Mwewa and her colleagues (see below) got ahead.

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Ms Mwewa and the Cotton Association of Zambia

Elizabeth Florence Mwewa, a cotton farmer in Chivumba (in the Petauke District, in Zambia’s Eastern Province), is one of the many members of both the Cotton Association of Zambia and the Zambia National Farmers’ Union. Looking back, she sees a turning point when, in 2007, the Extension and Training Officer of the Cotton Association organised and conducted a seed cotton production training which specifically looked at the factors that lead to

low yields. “I was one of the participants who joined the course in Nyamphondolo, and this is how I came to know about the Cotton Based Farming System. This is the crop production system that my family has adopted, growing cotton in combination with other carefully selected crops that are beneficial to each other.”

Mrs Mwewa has seen higher yields, but also better prices, as these are negotiated by the Cotton Association of Zambia. As a result, her household’s income has significantly improved, and she was therefore able to pay boarding fees for a child between 2007 and 2011, so he could complete his secondary education.

But Mrs Mwewa not only receives benefits; she also passes them on, thanks to the organisational structure of which she is part and parcel. She is now a CAZ Study Circle Organizer in Nyamphondolo, and she has eight functional cotton study circle groups. “I have participated in the hosting of on-farm demonstrations and also in many field days. The extension approach has since changed to study circles which saw me trained as a Study Circle Organiser. Both systems have helped me acquire and continue to acquire knowledge and skills in crop production and marketing, and I am proud to share this with other farmers.”



Photo: Agriterra