

Agricultural Extension in South Asia

Farmers' Organizations in Bangladesh: A Mapping and Capacity Assessment

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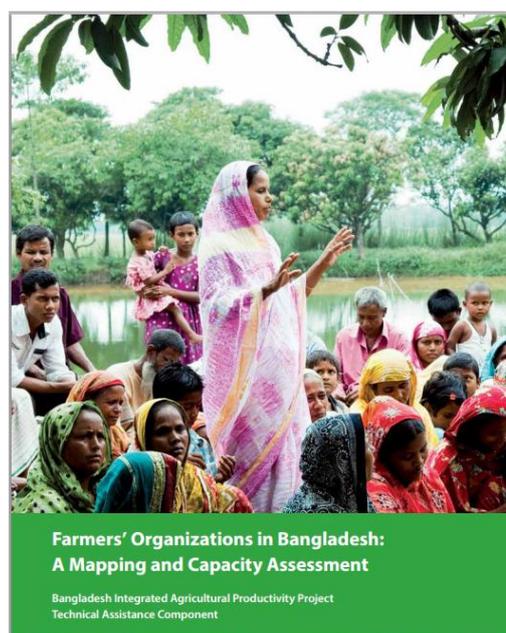
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Farmer organizations are crucial both on the demand and the supply side of Rural Advisory Services (RAS). On the demand side, they identify and synthesize needs, demands, and solutions for farmers. They contribute to monitoring and evaluation of RAS and participate in policy formulation. On the supply side, producer organizations provide and co-finance RAS activities. These ideas were clearly articulated in the 4th GFRAS (Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services) Annual Meeting (24-26 Sept 2013, Berlin) and also at the side event organized by GFRAS and FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) recently (20 February 2014, Rome) at the IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development) Farmers' Forum.

This exploratory study report on Farmers' Organizations in Bangladesh from FAO is highly relevant in this context. The study was undertaken by the Bangladesh Integrated Agricultural Productivity Project (IAPP) Technical Assistance Component (iappta.fao.org) to fill the knowledge gap on FOs and to analyze their capacity needs so that they can become strong and legitimate partners in agricultural and rural development interventions.

The study found a total of 198,114 FOs throughout different regions of Bangladesh. Most of the FOs are very small (around 25-50 members) and are at the community level. There are few organizations at the district and regional levels and very few at the national level. Of these 198,114 FOs, there are 4144 that are federated at some level (union, upzila, district, national). Few of them were fully autonomous (12).



Majority of FOs are formed with support from (and most are still facilitated by) projects of different extension agencies of the Government or of the National or International NGOs. The organizations have been created in most cases, as a channel for the delivery of project activities, services and goods, rather than as sustainable rural institutions. This project based FOs tend to lack plans for sustainability after the withdrawal of project assistance.

The report divides FOs into 4 categories according to their origin viz, autonomously formed, with support from Government extension agencies, with support from International NGOs and with support from National NGOs. The report presents many successful cases of the FOs under each of the above mentioned categories. The cases are developed on the basis of service provision, partnership, organizational structure, advocacy, growth, performance and sustainability, federation and marketing support.

An important finding throughout is that the FOs are still largely considered as the 'beneficiaries' of project and programme activities. They are still not really seen as true partners in the development

and implementations of investment programmes. Major constraints identified relate to their organizational management, financial management, project cycle management and networking, lobbying and advocacy. The report also identified common features of successful, sustainable FOs: autonomy, inclusive leadership, a strong membership base, needs-based service provision and a clear, 'owned' purpose.

Different FOs have different purposes (e.g. some focus on advocacy, others on market access). They will, therefore, require different capacities in order to achieve their organizational goals. Six areas identified for improvement are:

- Institutional development capacities
- Business and market related service provision
- Facilitation skills of those working with FOs
- Access to credit
- Post harvest and value addition technology
- Strengthening the enabling environment for FO development

The report has identified the following activities for enhancing the capacity of FOs:

- FO-to-FO exchange
- Training for FOs
- Capacity development of those facilitating the development of FOs
- Ensuring participation of CSOs and FOs in the Government decision making bodies and
- Facilitation of dialogue between stakeholders to address enabling environment issues

Through the combination of these activities, the IAPP project aims to empower FOs so that they can become pro-active stakeholders in the investment programming cycle. This would enable them to influence both the policies pertaining to and the design, implementation and evaluation processes of investment projects in agriculture, food security and nutrition.

The findings of this study are based on a two stage mapping exercise (initial and detailed) and the report provides detailed methodology on qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. A modified snowball technique was followed to develop an inventory of FOs with different extension organizations. The constraints and capacity needs are scored and ranked. The research team organized focus group discussions and key informant interviews with members of FOs, undertook bilateral discussions with NGOs working with FOs and reviewed policies relevant to FO development and their registration process.

Studies like these are important in other developing countries too as policy makers are increasingly emphasizing the involvement of FOs in investment programming to ensure more effective interventions. Understanding the landscape and capacities of FOs is also critical for RAS as they can play a very important role in provision of extension services as well as improving its relevance. I hope reports like these will encourage other donors, investors and planners to initiate similar studies in other countries. They are a valuable tool for those looking to work with FOs, strengthen their capacities, and engage them as partners.

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