

GFRAS is the GLOBAL FORUM FOR RURAL ADVISORY SERVICES. GFRAS is made up of various stakeholders worldwide who have an interest and role in rural advisory services. The mission of this forum is to provide advocacy and leadership on pluralistic, demand-driven rural advisory services. GFRAS does this in the context of the global development agenda, with a goal of promoting sustainable growth and reducing poverty.

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Cover photo: A group of cocoa producers participates in a farmer field school. Credit: Nestle

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Executive summary

This Position Paper was written to raise awareness of the roles of producer organisations in rural advisory services, and to contribute to discussions about how their effectiveness in these roles can be increased so that they contribute to improved livelihoods and poverty reduction. It is aimed at all actors involved in the provision of rural advisory services, including producer organisations themselves.

We argue that rural advisory services will contribute to improved rural livelihoods and poverty reduction if they are demand-driven and pluralistic. Demand-orientation ensures that services meet the expressed needs of farmers. Pluralism – the co-existence of a variety of rural advisory service providers with specific comparative advantages – ensures that services can match the diversity of rural livelihoods.

We first set the scene by explaining how we use two key terms, rural advisory services and agricultural innovation systems. We go on to describe the range and functions of producer organisations, explain their role in rural advisory services and describe how they fit into agricultural innovation systems.

We continue by presenting examples of the different ways that producer organisations are involved in the supply of and demand for rural advisory services. In doing so, we illustrate the comparative advantages of these organisations in providing demand-oriented

services, as well as some of the challenges they face. We continue by discussing how they contribute to the effectiveness of rural advisory services, and their economic, environmental, and social sustainability.

We close the paper with a series of recommendations to different actors involved in the provision of rural advisory services – whether decision-makers, managers, researchers, development partners, or producer organisations themselves – about how to strengthen producer organisations and make them more demand-oriented.

We conclude that to build effectively on their advantages, producer organisations should:

- increase their capacities in good governance, organisational management, and federal-level coordination
- develop mechanisms for delivering financially sustainable rural advisory services
- promote a better understanding among farmers of the role of producer organisations in demand-driven rural advisory services
- intensify their partnerships with other actors in the agricultural innovation system
- increase their capacity to provide rural advisory services, especially concerning demand-orientation, brokerage, flexibility, and communication.

1. Introduction

Why this Position Paper?

Farmers need more than just labour and land to maintain and develop the sustainability and productivity of their livelihoods. They also need inputs like seeds and fertilisers, as well as knowledge and information about different aspects of agricultural production, processing, management, marketing, and finance. These needs can be met through the provision of a range of rural advisory services.

In agricultural systems across the world, rural advisory services are provided by private, public, and civil society organisations. There is considerable evidence to show that producer organisations play an important role in helping farmers access rural advisory services (Davis et al. 2012, FAO 2010, Rondot and Collion 2001, Wennink and Heemskerk 2006).

We argue that rural advisory services will contribute to improved agricultural livelihoods and poverty reduction if they are demand-driven and pluralistic. Demand-orientation ensures that services meet the expressed needs of farmers. Pluralism – the co-existence of a variety of rural advisory service providers with specific comparative advantages – ensures that services can match the diversity of rural livelihoods.

The first purpose of this paper is to bring together evidence which shows that in many different countries, producer organisations already have a special role, both in articulating farmers' demands and in supplying and financing diverse rural advisory services. Our second purpose is to reflect on how producer organisations can be more effective in this role, contributing to sustainable, demand-driven rural advisory services that take into account economic, social, and environmental considerations with a long-term perspective.

We draw on a review of literature, a summary of discussions at the 4th Annual Meeting of the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services and a subsequent e-dialogue on the role of producer organisations in rural advisory services (GFRAS 2014), and consultations with producer organisations in Antigua and Barbuda, India, and Indonesia.

Setting the scene: Rural advisory services and agricultural innovation systems

The delivery of services to farmers in developing countries has changed dramatically over the last forty years. In the mid-1970s, agricultural extension services were largely delivered by the public sector, with networks of extension agents providing skills and information to individual farmers through the widely used 'training and visit' model of technology transfer (Anderson 2007). In many places, a parallel system supplied subsidised agricultural inputs through government agencies.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, there was widespread privatisation and decentralisation of rural service delivery, a reduction in investment in public services, and a growing emphasis on the commercialisation of small-scale agriculture. These trends contributed to the gradual replacement of the public sector-dominated system of rural advisory services delivery with a more diverse set of service providers.

The services themselves have also changed. In addition to the more traditional functions of delivering information about new varieties or agricultural production techniques, rural advisory services may now also include coaching farmers on how to improve market access, supporting them to deal with changing patterns of risk, or sharing knowledge on environmental protection. There are many definitions of rural advisory services. GFRAS' view is shown in the box below.

What are rural advisory services?

Rural advisory services are all the different activities that provide the information and services needed and demanded by farmers and other actors in rural settings, to assist them in improving their livelihoods by developing their technical, organisational, and management skills and practices.

Source: Adapted from GFRAS 2011

New approaches have emerged to provide farmers with the advisory services they need. Decentralisation has placed responsibility for delivering publicly funded services in the hands of people in lower levels of government, who often contract out delivery to civil society and private-sector organisations. These public–private partnerships often involve farmer organisations in planning and priority-setting.

The way that resource-poor farmers access and use information and knowledge has changed, shaped by these new actors, practices, and relationships that have come to characterise agriculture (World Bank 2006 and 2012). Conventional assumptions about the linear movement of new agricultural knowledge – from scientists via extension agents to farmers – are no longer valid. Instead, the concept of agricultural innovation systems has been developed to acknowledge the complexity of relationships between multiple heterogenous actors, and the importance of non-linear learning processes, feedback loops, and other complex interactions that occur between them (Spielman et al. 2010). It also serves to highlight the

What is an agricultural innovation system?

An **agricultural innovation system** is a single unit comprising all the interrelated actors involved in agricultural innovation in a particular place, their actions and interactions, and the formal and informal rules that condition their behaviour.

Agricultural innovation can include the adoption of a new agricultural technology by farmers, but also a range of other processes including the reorganisation of marketing strategies by a group of smallholders, the use of a new learning and teaching method by agricultural extension agents, or the introduction of a new processing technique by an agro-industrial company.

Innovation is any knowledge introduced into, and used in, an economic or social process.

Source: Adapted from OECD 1999, World Bank 2006, Spielman et al. 2010, World Bank 2012



Multiple actors are now involved in the supply of rural advisory services. This field school in Tanzania, where community-based agricultural extension worker Anna Basili (centre) is shown training a group of farmers, illustrates this trend. While Anna is a government employee, the field school has been organised by a private seed company, Tanseed International, and is also supported by the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT/Centro Internacional de Mejoramiento de Maíz y Trigo).

possibility that agricultural innovation can occur at any point in the system, and does not always originate with researchers.

Rural advisory services play an important role in promoting and supporting agricultural innovation. They contribute to effective agricultural innovation systems by facilitating access to information, supporting the organisation of producers, brokering interactions, and providing other services needed and demanded by rural actors to develop their skills and practices.

How do producer organisations fit into agricultural innovation systems and rural advisory services?

The past few decades have witnessed the emergence of a wide range of producer organisations, and an increase in their number. This has been partly in response to the spaces created by the gradual decline of public investment, management, and support to the agricultural sector. Producer organisations are increasingly being asked to play a central role in driving agricultural transformation processes (Thompson et al. 2009). Many are involved in the delivery of rural advisory services.

Producer organisations are diverse in structure, and vary from place to place. For example, in India, the National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development recognises a group as a producers' organisation if it is formed by a group of producers, registered as a legal entity, has shareholders who are producers, works for the benefit of its members, and shares its profits (Bijman et al. 2012). In Southern Africa, producer groups are far more likely to take the form of farmer unions, associations, or cooperatives (Jere 2005). In Bolivia, rural producer organisations are units of family farmers who have come together to buy and sell collectively and improve the marketing of their products; they are registered under Bolivian law as non-profit organisations with social goals (Storbakk 2013).

Producer organisations contribute to rural advisory services in many different ways. To illustrate this diversity, when a group of representatives of Indonesian farmer organisations met in 2014 to reflect

What are producer organisations?

Producer organisations are voluntary membership organisations of agricultural producers. They can be organised and structured as associations, societies, cooperatives, farmers' groups, unions, federations, or even firms. They exist to promote the interests of farmers and to work for their economic and social benefit. Most producer organisations provide services that directly or indirectly support agricultural production.

Source: Adapted from Rondot and Collion 2001, Bijman and Wollni 2008

on their role in rural advisory services, they included in their list of activities the following: enhancing human resources; linking with stakeholders in other villages; establishing legal organisations with a right to deliver services; providing forums for communication; cooperating with financial institutions to assist their members; reviewing agriculture-related regulations; and coordinating with the rural government to accommodate farmers' needs (Puantani 2014).

Producer organisations are not exclusively rural. Examples of advisory services supplied by urban producer organisations (FAO 2006) include:

- knowledge sharing through information and communication technologies (ICTs) in Accra, Ghana
- enabling members' access to credit in Antananarivo, Madagascar
- assisting producers with transparent processes of land distribution in Harare, Zimbabwe
- enabling access to fodder production licenses in Hyderabad, India
- providing linkages with city institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

This diversity illustrates the pluralism in advisory services that many producer organisations – both rural and urban – provide for their members. The exact mix of services any producer organisation is involved in depends on their objectives, activities, scale of operation, the commodities they deal with, and their position in and influence over value chains.

A typology of farmer organisations based on research in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Malawi (Thompson et al. 2009) suggests four broad categories: market-oriented; input-oriented; extension-oriented; and policy and advocacy. In Table 1 we draw from the wider literature to show an example of a producer organisation for each category.

These categories are useful for mapping the terrain, but most producer organisations are a mixture of some or all of these functions. The identity of a producer organisation will vary according to its origins and context, be shaped by economic change and policy trends, and may well shift during the lifetime of the organisation. Box 1 presents a portrait of a producer group in Uganda, and discusses how it has evolved.

The story of the Tukwatamise group illustrates how one producer organisation can take up a succession

of functions and provide different advisory services to its members. But it also shows how producer organisations are shaped by the context of the agricultural innovation system they are part of, thanks to their many connections with other actors in the system. In the case of Tukwatamise, these actors include the Inter-Group Association (IGA), other producer organisations, and the local government and international development partners involved in the Uganda Land Management Programme (ULAMP). Across the world, producer organisations have linkages with a wide range of different actors. Examples include:

- the Ghana National Association of Farmers and Fishermen, which provides a functional linkage between its members and researchers through the establishment and performance of specific on-farm trials (FAO 2012)

Table 1. Types and examples of producer organisations

Market-oriented	APROCOMI ¹ is a producer organisation in rural Bolivia, formed by farmers with the objective of improving the sales of <i>amaranth</i> , one of their two principal crops. The group began with a focus on efficient storage, but after securing NGO funding, it also built a small transformation plant to process raw <i>amaranth</i> into a range of products. These are marketed through a regional producers' organisation in the nearest major city, Sucre.
Input-oriented	A network of farm input shops in Niger, initially supported by FAO but now made up of independent shops owned by producer organisations, have adapted the supply of inputs to the needs of poor farmers. The working capital of each input shop is made up from contributions from members of the farmer organisation that owns it. The unique feature of the shops is selling small packages of inputs for cash at cost price, which meets the needs of farmers with very little financial capital.
Extension-oriented	The Kalando Push–Pull Farmers' Group is one of many in Western Kenya which exist to promote the spread of 'push–pull', an intercrop system that tackles two of the main pest constraints to cereal production. The 15 members, who include one farmer-teacher from Kalando, meet every fortnight with an extension worker from the international research centre that developed push–pull. The group members share information about the technology through their own social networks.
Policy and advocacy	The Kenya National Farmers' Union lobbies to promote and protect farmers' interests, and represents farmers on various forums. Similarly, the services provided by Zambia National Farmers Union to its members include negotiations with government on issues related to farmer's interests, taxes, legislation, and property rights, as well lobbying activities.

Sources: Storbakk 2011, FAO 2012, Khan et al. 2010, Sumelius 2011

Box 1. Tukwatamise group, Mbarara District, Uganda

Tukwatamise was originally an informal, traditional social group, a loose association of neighbours and extended family in Uganda's Bukiro sub-county. In 2002, the group became involved in ULAMP, a multidisciplinary project funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and implemented by the local government in Mbarara District, aimed at improving the food security and incomes of small-scale land users. The results of this engagement transformed the 15-member group into a more business-like producer organisation.

ULAMP provided Tukwatamise members with knowledge and inputs to develop more sustainable land management practices, including rainwater harvesting, mulching, use of legumes, and plant population planning. Training and inputs were also given for banana production, beekeeping, and dairy goat rearing. Two farmers were selected to become farmer-trainers, and participated in extra capacity building not just about the technical content of the land management package, but also on how to help form new groups.

Once the group members had used their new skills to successfully establish banana production, Tukwatamise joined a parish-wide apex organisation,

IGA, which sells their crop. Members say they have no problem with the 10% commission IGA charges on sales, as the collective marketing enables them to get better prices. They also pointed out that the IGA serves as an advocate for them by voicing the interests of community groups at the parish and sub-county administration, and influencing development priorities.

Each member of the group contributes a fixed monthly amount to a savings and credit scheme. One half goes to a rotational credit scheme and the other to a group savings fund. Money raised from the sale of bananas is also used to buy young goats which are fattened and sold at double the price after six months. Income from this livestock trade is given out as loans to member at an interest rate of 10% a month. To improve production, Tukwatamise plans to start a scheme for supplying inputs to its members.

Tukwatamise's farmer-trainers are now part of a sub-county association which provides training on request to new and existing groups, in exchange for meals and transport costs. The IGA also organises regular exchange and learning visits between groups where knowledge, skills, and experiences are shared.

Source: Abaru et al. 2006

- Peruvian cacao cooperatives, which have partnered with a marketing company to obtain certification for organic cacao production (GFRAS 2012)
 - cotton farmer groups in Burkina Faso, which have engaged with government officials about price-setting mechanisms and production incentives, and with a cotton company on the price of seed (Faure and Kleene 2004)
 - the Zambia Dairy Processors Association and the Zambia Coffee Growers Association, which provide an institutional frame for cooperation with international donors (Sumelius 2011)
 - milk producer cooperatives in India, which have worked with a range of different government agencies and programmes – including training and employment support for women, strengthening milk production infrastructure, and feed and fodder development – to strengthen their contribution to extension and advisory services (Chander and Sulaiman 2014).
- Producer organisations are a vital node in agricultural innovation systems, whether they link their members with agribusinesses, research organisations, NGOs, government, or other providers of rural advisory services.

¹ Asociación de Productores de la Cuenca del Río Milanés (Association of Producers from Cuenca del Rio Milanés)

The advantages and strengths of producer organisations in rural advisory services

Many producer organisations have strengths that give them advantages in providing demand-oriented rural advisory services. The set of qualities and attributes that enables them to perform successfully includes:

- knowledge about producers' needs, demands, and contexts
- the trust of their members, which gives them legitimacy
- capacity and space to encourage farmers' learning and testing of innovations

- scope for linking producers to other actors in agricultural systems
- experience in activities that complement rural advisory services, especially in financial services and advocacy on rural issues.

In the next two sections, we illustrate some of the many ways that producer organisations with these attributes make a positive contribution to articulating the demands and needs of their members for rural advisory services, and to directly or indirectly ensuring that these services are supplied. We also discuss the challenges that they face in taking up these roles effectively.

2. The role of producer organisations demanding and supplying rural advisory services

Demand articulation, service provision, and financing are key elements of rural advisory services to which producer organisations contribute, often in collaboration with other actors. In this section, we draw on examples that illustrate the strengths of producer organisations on the demand and supply sides, before going on to discuss some of the challenges they face in achieving their potential.

Demand side: Strengths and challenges

Demand-orientation is a mechanism to increase the relevance, effectiveness, and accountability of rural advisory services for producers and their livelihoods. It is based on a process of organising and clustering individual needs, and transforming them into collective and well-articulated demands. Producer organisations are well-placed to identify and synthesise needs and solutions for farmers, and thus to participate in agricultural policy processes that contribute to the monitoring and evaluation of rural advisory services (CaFAN 2014).

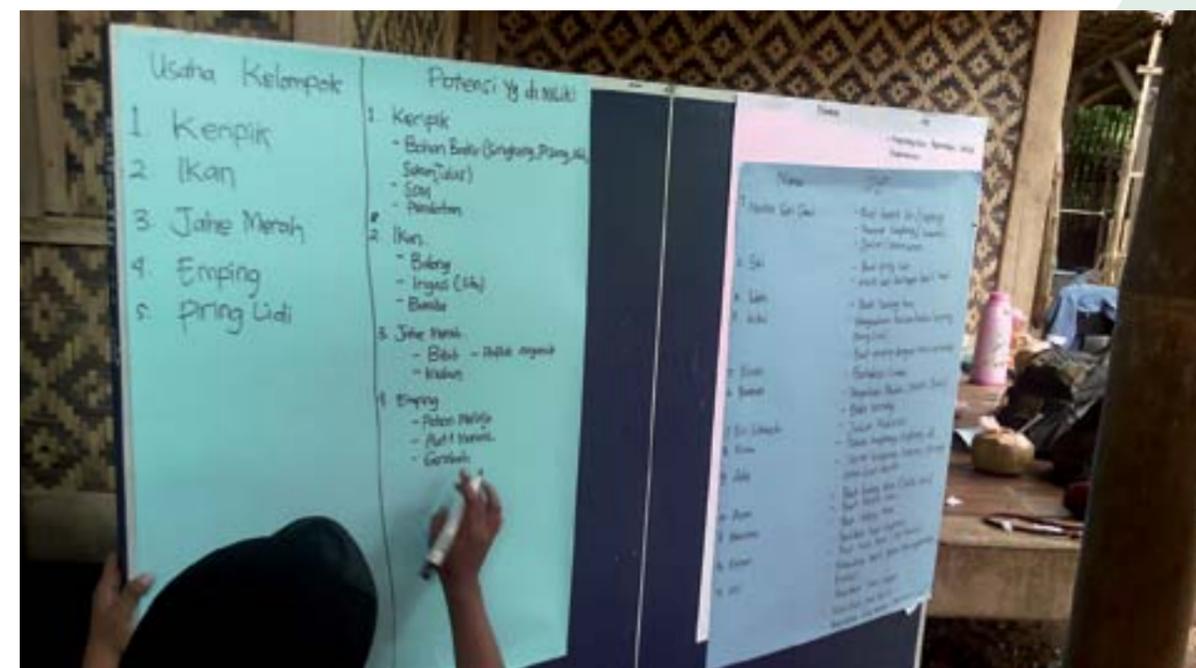
Processes of developing demand-orientation frequently follow a sequence which has five stages:

- identifying individual needs
- working with producers in groups to exchange and prioritise ideas
- formulating and articulating demands
- negotiating about rural advisory services
- monitoring and evaluating services once they are delivered.

Producer organisations can play a part in the different steps of this process. Doing so successfully requires awareness of demand-orientation, and capacities that range from listening, analysis, and facilitation to brokering and negotiation.

Identifying individual needs

There are many different approaches to the identification of individual needs, and many different tools and processes can be used. In India, for example, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a membership-based trade union, aims to organise rural women – most of whom are farmers,



In this needs assessment process in a village in Indonesia's Lebak District, members of the village business group discuss and prioritise their needs, facilitated by staff from Puantani.

and many of whom are illiterate – for self-reliance. SEWA follows a series of steps in its work, the first of which is awareness-raising. This stage comprises door-to-door visits in villages, followed by meetings which give villagers the opportunity to come together, share their concerns and needs, and discuss potential solutions (FAO 2012).

A range of participatory enquiry methods are also used to learn from farmers about their needs. In Tanzania, an initiative to establish a farmer-innovation platform to respond to farmers' demands was implemented by the Moduli District Farmers Association. These were identified through a participatory needs assessment undertaken farmer groups in collaboration with the local cooperative college (Masandika and Mgandaluma 2006).

Exchanging and prioritising ideas

The identification of individual needs is often followed by facilitated group processes of exchange and prioritisation to organise individual needs into shared priorities and demands at the group or community level, or beyond. An effective process of representation and the growth of trust between group members are often reported as important ingredients for building shared priorities. In Box 2, Nati, a Chinese farmer, narrates the process of her involvement in a group formed to implement a community development project. This included a participatory planning process, implemented by a village-level working group, to decide priorities for action. Their activities eventually resulted in an effective village-level irrigation system, increasing the productivity of farm households.

Formulating and articulating demands

In the case of Nati's group, the exchange and prioritisation stage led to the development and implementation of a community-level intervention. For other organisations involved in demand-oriented rural advisory services – especially those that are advocacy or policy-oriented – this stage leads into a more detailed formulation and articulation of demands. This often takes place beyond the village level and involves regional or national federations or networks of producer organisations. In Nepal, for example, a programme of farmer-to-farmer extension led to the formation of district-based

Box 2. Building respect and representation at the village level in China

Nati is a farmer from Muguba village in Ximeng County, Yunnan Province, China, and a member of the Lahu ethnic minority. She became involved in a community group set up through the Poor Rural Communities Development Project (PRCDP) in 2004. What follows is the translated, edited transcript of a speech she gave about the experience to a workshop in 2009.

"In August 2004, our village set up a project working group. We organised the dissemination and participatory planning meeting, which I attended as group leader in Muguba. The project working group was elected by the representatives of different wealth groups. Each group contributed 20% of the representatives. At least 35% had to be women. [The working group held] interviews – poor households, women, men – and special household interviews – such as divorced households – to discuss priorities and ideas.

Women's participation was very weak at the beginning, especially during the mixed group discussion by men and women. But gradually women gained respect from both the men and the working group, and they contributed more ideas, especially concerning their vision for a better future. Everybody contributed their own ideas on the main difficulties of the village. When we selected the projects, each household had at least one representative participating in the discussion.

PRCDP was implemented in our village with the participation of the villagers throughout the entire project cycle, including deciding the components, monitoring and supervision, management and certification. Compared with the way in which projects were implemented in the past, the villagers feel much more satisfied."

Source: Nati 2011

farmer-to-farmer committees. Their job was not just to identify and work with experienced lead farmers, but to facilitate contact and agreements between them and farmers groups, ensuring that the groups had control over the training they received, and final say in selecting trainers (WOCAT 2009). In Tanzania, a farmer-led network with national coverage links

local farmer groups for advocacy and delivers training on leadership and communication to improve representation and advocacy. It aims to ensure that groups are capable of pursuing the interests of their members (Kaburire and Ruvuga 2006).

Box 3 shows in detail how one regional network, the Caribbean Farmers' Network (CaFAN), used a workshop format to formulate a needs-based policy

position for their work, thereby strengthening the hand of producer organisations in rural advisory services.

Negotiations about rural advisory services

Many producer organisations use their collective strength and bargaining power to represent their members in negotiations on rural advisory services. This can include leveraging financial and non-financial inputs, services, and appropriate technologies, and

Box 3. CaFAN Regional Workshop: Articulating demands, developing a policy position

CaFAN is a regional farmer organisation. It is founded on a belief in collaborative partnerships to raise income, improve food security, and benefit the environment. It works with its partners – which include GFRAS and the government rural advisory services of the CaFAN member states – to broker collaborative partnerships that bring the knowledge and demands of farmers and their representatives into agricultural and extension policy processes in Antigua and Barbuda. An important aspect of this work is holding knowledge and learning events.

In early 2014, GFRAS invited affiliates from its regional networks across the world to convene dialogues with producer organisations about their role in rural advisory services. CaFAN hosted one of these dialogues.² They aimed to strengthen awareness of the role of producer organisations, and increase their participation in national and local policy and service delivery spaces.

The CaFAN dialogue took the form of a two-day workshop hosted by a producer organisation, the Team Fresh Produce Cooperative, and co-facilitated by CaFAN and the Chief Extension Officer of the Ministry of Agriculture. Participants from across the agricultural innovation system of Antigua and Barbuda were invited to the dialogue. They ranged from government extension officers to input supply companies, and hotel purchasing managers to producer organisation representatives.

To set the stage for the dialogue, a survey was conducted among a sample of farmers, asking them to "assist CaFAN in lobbying for adequate policy enactment for improved livelihoods". The questionnaire sought farmers' opinions on the functions of producer

organisations in rural advisory services, and priority areas for them to try and influence agricultural policy.

One of the challenges in amplifying the voice of producer organisations in agricultural policy spaces is the need to develop a clear position based not only on an understanding of farmers' needs and demands, but also on an understanding of the current approaches, practices, and language used in the sector. Farmers' responses to the questionnaire revealed that many of them did not recognise the concept of rural advisory services. They also identified some of the limitations of existing agricultural extension services, and began to develop priority target areas. These findings were used to refine the objectives of the workshop and inform its design, and to feed the dialogue between participants.

Over two days, the 25 participants engaged in constructive and critical thinking using a mixture of presentations, question-and-answer sessions, an interactive lecture method, and small-group work. They learned more about the roles of producer organisations in rural advisory services, and identified which were most important to them. They also worked to identify and bridge the gap between input suppliers, consumers, and producer organisations, and to promote the development of collaborative arrangements between producer organisations and other actors. They ended the workshop by identifying a series of recommendations for action (summarised in section 4).

This dialogue strengthened the formulation and articulation of a demand-driven agenda for CaFAN's future work on building farmers' capacities and lobbying for their rights.

Source: CaFAN 2014

² Findings of the other two dialogues, in India and Indonesia, are documented by Chander and Sulaiman (2014) and Puantani (2014) respectively. Their recommendations are discussed in section 4.

working to reduce transaction costs. Table 2 illustrates how such negotiations take place in a variety of forums and policy spaces at different levels.

Monitoring and evaluating services

As these examples show, producer organisations link their members to other actors through their negotiations on rural advisory services. Ensuring that there is feedback throughout this chain of actors, reaching all the way back to producers, is the final stage in a virtuous cycle of demand-orientation. Monitoring and evaluation is a particularly important way of ensuring that this essential feedback is systematic, and contributes to learning and legitimacy.

Monitoring and evaluation is usually required by funding partners. It aims to assess progress towards objectives set in planning activities, operational programmes, and services, as well as the efficiency and effectiveness of those objectives. Producer organisations often undertake the monitoring and evaluation of their operational programmes by selecting common performance indicators that are a close match with their members’ expectations.

PASAOP³, a World Bank-funded pilot programme to outsource agricultural extension in areas of Mali outside its commercial cotton and rice producing zones provides an example of how monitoring and

evaluation is intended to fit into a framework for demand-driven rural advisory services (Traoré and Wennink 2008). Table 3 shows the different actors involved in the process of outsourcing extension services at different levels, from the village to the province, and their respective responsibilities for contributing to effective feedback within the new structure for demand-driven services.

A study of PASAOP found that although monitoring and evaluation was implemented according to this framework, it tended to focus on inputs – for example, whether or not contracts were being issued, or extension agents were carrying out the contracted number of visits – rather than on the outputs, outcomes, or impacts of extension services for the farmers themselves. It also found that some of the actors involved, all of whom were mostly accustomed to a ‘training and visit’ system of extension, had difficulty adjusting to their roles and responsibilities under the new, demand-driven system. There was a stark contrast between the prospects for outsourcing agricultural extension in the pilot programme area and the situation in the cotton- and rice-producing areas, where a longer history of farmer-led initiatives and commercialisation provided a foundation for the effective involvement of producer organisations in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of agricultural research and extension services.

Table 2. Forums and policy spaces for engaging with producer organisations

Local policy processes	An urban producer group in Rosario, Argentina, was able to contribute to its participatory municipal budgeting process – in which citizens can participate in decision-making on the allocation of public resources – and secure some funding for agro-industry. As one of its members pointed out, “we could not have done this individually” (FAO 2006: 37).
Specialist forums for agricultural research and extension	In Benin, the national federation of village farmer groups attends a national private-sector platform that allocates resources to public-sector research and extension through a central fund.
National policy processes	Producer groups involved in Tanzania’s Agriculture Non-State Actor Forum contributed to producing proposals to tackle areas where national agricultural policy was problematic for smallholders. This culminated in a petition calling for the government to allocate 10% of the national budget to agriculture, which was signed by 16,000 farmers and other citizens and personally delivered to the President in 2012.

Sources: FAO 2006, Wennink and Heemskerk 2006, VSO 2012

3 Programme d’Appui aux Services Agricoles et aux Organisations Paysannes (Support Programme for Agricultural Services and Peasant Organisations)



Farmer groups like this one in Dinajpur District, Bangladesh, are an important channel for sharing knowledge on new technologies, in this case on behalf of an international research centre.

Table 3. Stakeholder roles in monitoring and evaluation of outsourcing agricultural extension services, Mali

Stakeholder	Representatives of...	Tasks
Village committee	Farmers – men, women, and youth Community authorities Contracted service providers	Participatory identification of demand for services Monitoring and evaluation
Municipal coordination committee	Local farmer organisations Municipal council and agricultural extension officers	Aggregation of village demands Proposal selection Contracting and disbursement Monitoring and evaluation
District technical support committee	District agricultural extension services	Training extension agents Monitoring and supervision
District steering committee	Municipal and district councils District agricultural extension officers Chamber of agriculture Research users’ committee	Mobilisation of funds Evaluation and supervision
Provincial technical support committee	Provincial agricultural services Chamber of agriculture	Monitoring and supervision
Provincial steering committee	Provincial council and commissioners Provincial agricultural services Chamber of agriculture Research users’ committee	Evaluation and supervision

Source: Adapted from Traoré and Wennink 2008: 138

Demand-side challenges

Looking across all the different stages of developing demand-oriented rural advisory services, several challenges are particularly relevant to the prospect of producer organisations effectively taking up their assigned role. Prospects of success are highest when members are involved in the production and marketing of a commodity, have access to diverse sources of income, or are bound together by cultural or economic activities. In the absence of these circumstances, producer organisations tend to be weaker and less able to influence more powerful actors with the needs and demands of their members (Hussein 2001).

Producer organisations need considerable capacity to respond to demands, not only from their members, but also from other partners. External actors, especially donors, may demand the use of particular tools and methodologies for delivering, monitoring and evaluating rural advisory services, and developing a culture of results-orientation. In the case of monitoring and evaluation, conventional data collection systems are often inappropriate for producers' contexts, and capacities may be too low to contribute to learning within producer groups (Gaitano 2011). This challenge has been met by the development of user-friendly participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) systems, which provide partners with the information they need, and are useful for the producers collecting data. Rodriguez et al. (2012) document the development of a PM&E system by farmer associations in Mozambique which involved a five-step process to collect and analyse information about the success of work the groups had done to adapt to climate change. One participant, Antonio Tivane, commented that "the PM&E system has good information, because from it we can control the activity and see if something is not working right to improve it" (Rodriguez et al. 2012: 39).

In addition to adequate capacity, strong social capital within producer organisations is vital to becoming demand-driven. A study of two rural producer organisations in Bolivia (Storbakk 2013) found that the lack of social capital within and between communities meant that members' participation was very superficial. This meant that ordinary members were distanced from leaders, leading to a situation

where partner NGOs and government actors had much more influence over the direction and practices of the organisation than the members themselves. Similar findings are reported for semi-arid Kenya (Bymolt et al. 2011), while Traoré and Wennink (2008) concluded that the main weakness in institutionalising demand-driven and downwardly accountable approaches to agricultural extension in dryland Mali was the lack of effective representation in village farmer groups.

Experience from the dairy sector in India (Chander and Sulaiman 2014) also points to lack of accountability as a reason for failure of producer organisations. A nationwide system of village-level Primary Milk Producers' Cooperative Societies, established for over 50 years, is principally focused on milk marketing – avoiding the exploitation of dairy farmers by middlemen – but is also a channel for other advisory services. A brainstorming session with dairy farmers in Uttar Pradesh found that they had lost their enthusiasm for these producer organisations after experiencing corruption and political intervention. In their view, one route for reviving the cooperatives was honest and efficient leadership.

Supply side: Strengths and challenges

The supply side of rural advisory services involves two aspects – provision and financing. Producer organisations – often in partnership with other actors – have an increasingly important role in both activities in many countries.

Providing rural advisory services

Many producer organisations are involved in the provision of rural advisory services to their members, including:

- knowledge services, such as providing information and training on agricultural technologies, brokering relationships with agricultural researchers, and facilitating ongoing peer-learning processes
- economic advisory services, such as enhancing market understanding and marketing relationships, strengthening business planning and management, and quality control and certification
- facilitating the supply of input services, not only seed and fertilisers but also equipment for processing.

As Table 4 shows, knowledge services tend to be provided by extension-oriented producer organisations, economic advisory services by market-oriented producer organisations, and input services by input-oriented producer organisations. Capacity building, rather than being a stand-alone service, is an activity that cuts across all three of these broad categories.

Producer organisations have unique strengths in delivering these diverse services. The first is the flexibility to engage at different stages of the value chain, as several examples in Table Four show. This flexibility allows them to broker relationships for their members, to be effective in collective bargaining, and to successfully embed producers in the economic networks that they need to access wider markets.

The facilitation of peer learning between members and organisations is a second particular strength of producer organisations. Approaches such as farmer-to-farmer extension and farmer field schools have been shown to be a good fit with producer groups in many locations, particularly for those delivering extension-oriented services. Box 4 discusses the evolution of farmer field schools, and some of their impacts on farmers and their groups and communities.

One of the benefits of the farmer field school approach is that it consciously builds on participatory and accountable relationships between members and outsiders. This quality of accountability is often seen as a third strength of producer organisations in supplying rural advisory services in general, alongside flexibility and peer-learning capacities. Well-functioning producer organisations have the advantage of being accountable to their members, which stimulates the provision of unconditional, unbiased advice with impact on members' livelihoods. But, as we have already noted in our discussion of the challenges of developing demand-driven rural advisory services, this is not always the case. As representatives of Indonesian farmer organisations noted, they have experienced many farmer groups that are vehicles for the personal interest and gain of rural government personnel (Puantani 2014).

In some cases, the challenge of building accountability in service provision has been met by developing structures such as constitutions, manuals of procedure, and strategic plans (see, for example, SFOAP 2014). But a study of downward accountability in farmer organisations in sub-Saharan Africa (Mbeche and Dorward 2014) concludes that while appropriate structures and rules are important, so too is strong state regulation for corporate accountability,



Farmer field schools, like this one in Fayoum, Egypt, create learning spaces to encourage farmers to discuss and test their own innovations.

Table 4. Services provided by producer organisations

Knowledge services	<p>In India, the Krishikabandhu Farmer Producer Company Limited trained its members on a new technology for producing red gram, setting up a nursery to grow saplings, and sharing knowledge on how to plant them out. The Kirtinagar Valley Association trained its members – female smallholder farmers – in spice seed production to produce certified seeds for producer groups (SFAC 2013).</p> <p>In Rwanda, the Imbaraga Farmer Syndicate, together with a national network of producer organisations and NGOs, provided potato production research services to their members. The Syndicate also partnered with the district agricultural extension service to develop a farmer-to-farmer extension programme. Producers also learned about market norms and standards with which technologies have to comply (Fané et al. 2006).</p> <p>In Benin, the UCP⁴, an apex organisation of village producer groups, provided information and training on the use of new inputs to all its members. A training-of-trainers approach saw trainees selected from village cotton-producers groups go on to train other group members (Nederlof et al. 2011).</p> <p>In Transmara, Kenya, the Cereal Growers Association was established to support 54 farmer groups in marketing their cereals. It also organised field days and demonstration plots, and facilitated trainings in partnership with other stakeholders along the value chain, covering seed selection, planting and weeding techniques, conservation farming, and post-harvest handling (Bymolt et al. 2011).</p>
Economic services	<p>In Kerala, India, the Vanilla India Producer Company Limited (a cooperative) worked in tandem with vanilla growers to produce high-quality beans and extracts, and marketed them professionally to ensure dividends and bonuses for its members (Murray 2009).</p> <p>In Madhya Pradesh, India, the NGO Action for Social Advancement worked with smallholder cotton producers to get better prices for the crops by improving links to the value chain. Farmer producer organisations established village-wide procurement centres, where farmers brought their cotton to be weighed and quality controlled. They also entered into formal bulk-supply agreements with nine ginners, effectively cutting out middlemen (SFAC 2013).</p> <p>In Côte d'Ivoire, the Cyber-Seed system of rice cooperatives acted as an information platform that allowed users, sellers, and buyers to request and receive real-time information on prices, quality, and availability of stocks by categories of seed, region, locality, and producer organisation (FAO 2011).</p> <p>In Benin, a cashew growers' association negotiated prices and contracts with bulk cashew buyers (Heemskerck et al. 2008).</p>
Input supply and processing services	<p>In India, the Devbhumi Natural Products Producer Company Limited promoted primary producers, most of them women, to set up processing facilities for organic spices, honey, and silk. This improved members' capacities in processing, sorting and grading, and hygiene (SFAC 2013).</p> <p>In Bolivia, the economic arm of a political union produced a scheme for bulking-up potato seed, which it then sold, or distributed on credit, to members (Carney 1996).</p> <p>In Uganda, the High Banana Growers and Marketing Association provided members with access to value-adding technologies such as ripening chambers, and processing into crisps, flour, and chapattis (Nyang et al. 2010).</p> <p>In China, the Forest Farmers Group near Yonggan City was formed so that members could pool their resources in a shared-stock forest farm. This allowed members to use their growing trees to guarantee loans from a local credit cooperative, buy more woodland, and create a unit large enough to support a processing factory to add value to the timber crop (FAO et al. 2012).</p>

4 Union Communale des Producteurs de Cotonis (Union of Cotton Producers)

Box 4. Farmer field schools: "Our classroom is in the shade"

A farmer field school is a group-based learning approach that facilitates farmers to observe and analyse their agro-ecosystems, learn new techniques, solve problems, and make decisions. Farmer field schools emerged in Indonesia in the 1980s in response to the problem of growing pesticide resistance in a range of rice-pest species. FAO supported a large-scale, decentralised programme that aimed to educate farmers about integrated pest management, in which a range of pest control techniques are used to reduce dependence on chemical controls.

During these early farmer field schools, groups of farmers from the same location met regularly with a facilitator – sometimes an extension agent, sometimes a researcher – to carry out experiential learning activities including experiments and regular field observations. These activities, lasting for the duration of a whole agricultural season, encouraged peer learning and strengthened communication. They allowed farmers to collectively build on their own understanding of the ecology of their rice fields and the relationships between plants and insects, at the same time as building and strengthening their own groups. The knowledge they gained enabled them to make their own locally-specific decisions about crop management practices.

The farmer field school approach – with many context-specific variants – has spread beyond Indonesia, and beyond the rice sector. The concepts of non-formal adult education that underpin farmer field schools have proven relevant across the many cultures in which the farmer field school approach has been used, in over 90 countries.

A synthesis of 25 evaluations of farmer field schools, mostly in Indonesia, found that as well as delivering learning about pest management, there were "remarkable, widespread and lasting developmental impacts ... farmer field schools stimulated continued learning, and strengthened social and political skills, which apparently prompted a range of local activities, relationships and policies related to improved agro-ecosystem management" (Van den Berg 2004: 3).

In Kenya's Bungoma District, the approach arrived in 1997, when four farmer field school groups were started by government extension workers. Demand soon exceeded supply and farmer-teachers who trained in the first schools helped spread the approach, supported by government partners and later by FAO. "A field school is a farmer's resource centre for new ideas," said Vincent Okumo, one of the network's facilitators. "When our eyes are opened to new knowledge, we start to see many more possibilities" (icipe 2011: 9).

By 2000, there were 48 schools and a network was formed. Network chairperson Peter Waboya, a smallholder maize farmer, explained that each group has a learning field, and that each field must have a tree. "Our classroom," he said, "is in the shade." Reflecting on nearly 15 years of involvement in the farmer field school network, Peter observed that "before, I was just a farmer. I have gained much. I am trained, computer-literate, a facilitator ... And I am still doing it – still training farmers" (Interview transcript).

Sources: Van den Berg 2004, FAO 2011, icipe 2011

transparent information provision about the actions of the leaders of farmer organisations, and the presence of strong independent NGOs. Furthermore, attention is needed to developing means of legitimising rights, building poor people's capacity to challenge exclusion, and moving from rights to obligations regarding information provision.

Financing rural advisory services

As well as provision, producer organisations are also involved in financing rural advisory services. The mixture of mechanisms and partnerships through which these services are financed still

includes public-sector funding, particularly directed towards resource-poor farmers and interventions that need a long-term perspective such as soil fertility and watershed management (Schmidt and Fischler 2012). But a range of private-sector funding mechanisms has also emerged. Embedded services – where the funding and delivery of advisory services are associated with a business transaction in a value chain – are increasingly common. Advice is linked to the sale of agricultural inputs, with the cost built into the price of the input when it is sold, or to the procurement of agricultural products by a processor or trader (Schmidt 2013).

Many producers – both individually and through their organisations – contribute towards the cost of the rural advisory services they receive. Most producer organisations also have some income, and they can decide to use it to finance knowledge or extension services for their members, or to co-finance services provided by partners. Producer organisations derive their income from membership fees, and internal income from the kind of economic and input supply services described in Table Four. They can administer commodity-specific levies or user charges for extension services, or the sale of surplus produce from research or training plots (Beynon 1996). They can also receive financial support from regional or apex organisations, as in the case of the Uganda Cooperative Alliance, which – with support from the Swedish Cooperative Center and the Canadian Cooperative Association – established a matching grant programme to help member societies fund projects ranging from grinding-mill operations to the construction of stores (IFAP 2010). Co-financing with partners can increase producers' appreciation of the value of rural advisory services, and contribute positively to accountability, demand-orientation, and ultimately organisational sustainability.

The strengths of embedded services like these include the potential to reach many producers by working at a large scale, the financial sustainability offered by building the costs of advice into a business transaction, complementarity with public-service provision, and the relatively high quality of advice (Schmidt 2013). Nonetheless, there are also challenges, particularly concerning inequality – whether these services reach men and women equally, or extend to poorer farmers in remote areas – and the danger of neglecting public interest subjects of rural advice, such as biodiversity and soil conservation, in favour of advice on commodity-based farming and marketing.

Box 5. Embedded rural advisory services in Bangladesh

Since 2010, the Samriddhi programme, funded by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, has triggered the formation and capacity building of more than 3,000 groups of local service providers (LSPs) and 58 services providers' associations (SPAs) in 17 districts of northern Bangladesh.

Networks of LSPs – ordinary producers, embedded in the local community – sell agricultural inputs, at the same time as providing farmers with affordable technical, business, and finance services. SPAs coordinate and monitor LSP services, manage service centres, and broker business contracts with private companies for the purchase and marketing of inputs. Service centres are hubs for input sales, training, and demonstrations of new techniques.

LSPs derive an income from commissions on their sales of inputs and products, and SPAs derive an income from charging membership fees for LSPs and commissions from the sale of inputs. SPAs save their income and use it to train LSPs and buy farm implements.

This system provides producers with linkages to numerous market actors, but means that LSPs and SPAs remain relatively independent from private-sector companies. These companies, together with the line agencies of government extension providers and NGOs, have begun to use SPA members as resource people, engaging them to provide technical training on their behalf.

This method of rural advisory service delivery has reached 900,000 producers. They are provided with relevant, accessible services that are affordable, within a system that ensures LSPs continuously upgrade their skills and knowledge to ensure the relevance and high quality of the service they are providing.

Source: Nath 2013

3. Contributing to sustainable rural advisory services

Sustainable rural advisory services take into account economic, social, and environmental considerations, and have a long-term perspective. Producer organisations can make key contributions to each of these dimensions of sustainability, but to do so effectively they must themselves be sustainable in terms of their own governance and management.

Institutional sustainability and governance

The institutional sustainability of producer organisations in different places has been reported as dependent on a range of factors, including:

- the density and diversity of membership, decision-making by members, meeting attendance, and high levels of trust and solidarity, Western Kenya (Wambugu et al. 2009)
- social capital such as ethnically-based social affiliations within producer organisations, Tanzania (Isham 2002)
- internal group dynamics, and the nature of extension support, Nepal (Dhakal 2013)
- partnerships that draw on combined public and private investments, Malawi (Chirwa 2008).

A review of effective producer organisations in forestry, which draws on examples from many different countries, suggests that the requirements for a strong organisation are "a clear sense of purpose, and to be well structured and inclusive ... It needs to represent a substantial proportion of the producers – both women and men – in its area of operation, and it must have strong governance and administrative structures. Members need to be keen and active, which is most likely to happen when they enjoy clear benefits such as member-only services or information. Firm, accountable leadership is important, although too much reliance on a charismatic leader can affect organisational sustainability. Transparency in financial dealings is crucial" (FAO et al. 2012: 6).

This is a useful road map to the different qualities that matter for sustainable producer organisations. But cases where all these requirements are fulfilled simultaneously are rare, and groups with different agricultural and economic starting points in different cultural contexts evolve in different forms. Box 6 describes the example of a successful producer organisation in China which originated through the activities of a local entrepreneur. Strength of leadership



Engaging producers in conversations about group governance – the subject of this farmer focus group discussion in Sulawesi, Indonesia – is an important part of building organisational sustainability.

and economic benefits for members were key to establishing the group, and a clear organisational structure has been important in maintaining it.

In contrast to this example, many producer organisations are formed as a response to an

Box 6. Bringing hazelnuts to market in China

A retired military leader was the guiding force behind the Lisiling hazelnut professional cooperative in Xinghua village, Liaoning Province, China. At the end of his career in the military, Li Shoufa came back to his home village in the wooded mountainous area of Liaoning Province and wanted to improve local livelihoods. Only 10% of the land was suitable for farming and commercial timber species do not thrive. But wild hazel was abundant and there was a good market for hazelnuts.

So Li Shoufa encouraged villagers to join him in planting more hazel trees, and in 2008 he registered the Lisiling Hazelnut Professional Cooperative and established it with a Board of Directors and Supervisory Board. The Lisiling Hazelnut Association was established the following year to promote the cooperative. The operating model aimed to ensure that production, collection, processing, marketing, and management were carried out jointly by members for maximum efficiency.

Farmers joined voluntarily, with a view to doing business independently and taking responsibility for their own profits or losses. Production was established on more than 600 hectares, the cooperative held seminars on nut production and planting skills, and most of the inputs needed were allocated by the cooperative to ensure full control. Farmers' incomes have risen more than tenfold as a result of these activities.

Having been set up as a farmers' professional cooperative, the Lisiling Hazelnut Professional Cooperative was subject to specific legislation that ensures sound institutional practices. In future, it will have to develop a broader leadership base so that progress can continue when Li Shoufa is no longer involved.

Source: FAO et al. 2012

external stimulus which channels resources – financial, social, or human – towards a particular set of activities. Whether the external trigger to forming a producer organisation is a programme or policy of a government, a national or international NGO, or a development cooperation partner, one common challenge for institutional sustainability is how to survive once the policy or programme has ended. Many programmes and policies now contain elements specifically targeted at building institutional sustainability in the long term, including participatory appraisal and adult education methods, training on group dynamics, and rotational credit schemes to build group capital and a culture of saving and financial management (for example, SFAC 2013, Abaru et al. 2006). Diversifying income sources and elaborating strategies for succession also increase the chances of sustainability.

Successful and stable producer organisations can in turn make important contributions to the sustainability of rural advisory services. They are particularly important in three areas: building partnerships and accessing resources for economic sustainability, fostering social inclusion, and taking a collective approach to tackling environmental problems.

Building partnerships and accessing resources

The multi-functionality of producer organisations and their capacity to generate an internal income contributes to the economic sustainability of their rural advisory services. Internal incomes, however, rarely match the costs of provision, so many producer organisations have become adept at forming partnerships with other actors in the agricultural innovation system as a way of strengthening their human, financial, and social capital, and of accessing services.

An example from Uganda's Kabale district shows how one farmer group, faced with a crisis in economic sustainability, was able to use a network of partners to open up a new area of economic activity.

The story of the NFG shows how increasing the economic sustainability of smallholder farmer groups can be a long-term process that requires a combination

Box 7. Building on partnerships to find new potato-marketing opportunities in Uganda

The Nyabyumba Farmers' Group (NFG) was formed in 1998, with support from international NGO Africare, to increase the supply of retail potatoes in local markets. Potato productivity was low because the quality of local seed potato stock was poor. With assistance from the Regional Potato Research Network and the National Agricultural Research Organisation, the 20 members of NFG began to produce seed potatoes, mostly for supply to NGOs who were distributing them to farmers free of charge. This activity continued successfully until 2004 – so successfully that the local market became flooded with potatoes, and led to a decline in income from sales and demand for seed.

Faced with this crisis in the economic sustainability of the group, NFG turned to its partners, who put the group in touch with the international research centre CIAT.⁵ CIAT supported NFG and its partners in a participatory process of action-based market research to develop their business by finding new markets. Building on NFG's existing network of relationships, a working group was formed that evaluated local resources, identified comparative advantages, and prepared an action plan. This led to farmers, with the support of a market facilitator and a market analyst, mapping the potato-marketing chain and setting out to collect missing information, before developing a marketing strategy.

Based on the findings from the market chain analysis, the NFG decided to focus on developing supplies

for a multinational fast food restaurant in Kampala, the capital city, whose customers consume large quantities of fresh potatoes every month. Although the restaurant's high demand fell within the uppermost limits of possible supply by the farmer group, it also offered an opportunity to develop a long-term, higher-value business relationship. The group met with the representatives of the restaurant to ascertain what would be needed to supply the business with potatoes, and then engaged with its partners in a process of assessing what would be needed for NFG members to meet the restaurant's demands for quality control and timing.

The NFG was able to make the many changes needed to increase its market performance and strengthen its economic sustainability – which included significant alterations to agronomic practices – through building on the large stock of social capital it had already established with its existing partners, who assisted in brokering the new relationship with the restaurant. The history of the group meant that it had already developed shared norms, appropriate leadership, and interdependence among group members. The chairman of the group also had an entrepreneurial flair and had already secured the trust of the members, which was important for rapid decision-making in successful marketing.

Source: Kaganzi et al. 2008

of social, technical, and marketing skills, which can be acquired through the further development of existing partnerships that are based on trust. Factors in the NFG's success also included administrative and organisational expertise, a good reputation, and the confidence gained from members having already successfully worked together.

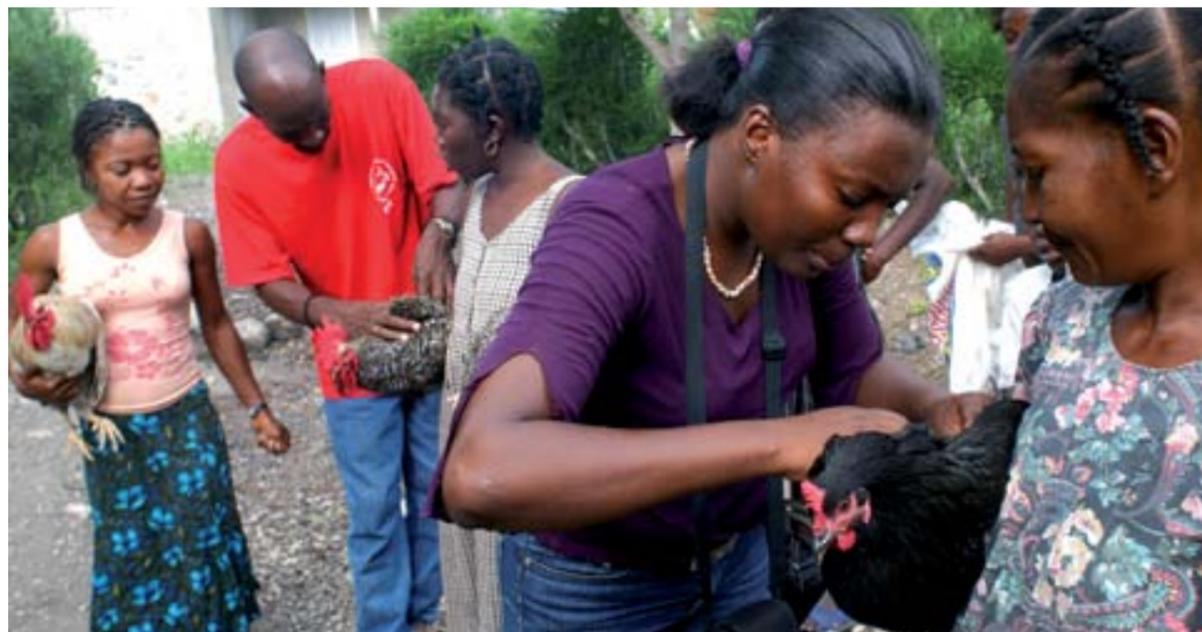
Social inclusion

Another starting point for contributing to sustainable rural advisory services is to ensure the inclusion of groups of people – such as women, young people, ethnic minorities, and the disabled – who find it difficult to access rural advisory services. By targeting

such groups, too often ignored in rural development, producer organisations have made relevant contributions to strengthening social inclusion at household, organisational, and system level. They have been particularly effective in ensuring equal access to services for men and women.

A longitudinal study of the impact of a farmer field school programme in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda (Davis et al. 2012) offers evidence of the benefits of an inclusive approach to providing rural advisory services. Half of the participants in the programme's FSS groups were women, and the study concluded that the programme appeared to be more beneficial for female-headed households than for male-headed

⁵ Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical (International Center for Tropical Agriculture)



Female extension workers like this one – employed by an NGO delivering an FAO-funded humanitarian assistance project in Haiti – are very important in encouraging women's participation in producer organisations and understanding their demands for rural advisory services.

households. It also promoted social inclusion by being open to people without much formal education. The programme's demonstration sites, experiential learning methods, and group approaches successfully allowed people with low literacy levels to participate and benefit.

The farmer field school approach has also been used to facilitate youth inclusion in farmer organisations in the West Bank, Palestine, where the Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools combined an eight-month vocational training in beekeeping skills with techniques to develop young peoples' entrepreneurial and agricultural skills, and build their self-esteem. Once they had graduated from field schools, young people were enrolled in either local farmers' or women's cooperatives, where they could continue to learn and provide peer support and sustain the long-term impact of the intervention (FAO 2012).

As well as encouraging the participation of women and other social groups, producer organisations can be a space in which the gendered dynamics of agricultural production can be analysed and understood in order to develop services that meet the different needs of male and female producers. In Svay Rieng Province of Cambodia, agricultural extension has traditionally focused on men, overlooking the

role that women play in producing and marketing vegetables. International NGO SNV has worked with the Cambodian Federation of Agricultural Producers (CFAP) to enhance the quality of agricultural advisory services by focusing explicitly on the differentiated roles of male and female farmers within household vegetable businesses, and developing women's entrepreneurship, marketing, and leadership skills. The capacity of female farmers to make decisions on how and when to harvest and sell their produce was enhanced. More broadly, the collaboration with CFAP enabled the expansion of gender-sensitive advisory approaches to other agricultural sub-sectors. CFAP staff went on to replicate the approach to analyse gender relations with producer groups involved in rice production and chicken rearing in three other provinces of Cambodia (SNV 2012).

The East African and Cambodian examples both illustrate how gender-mixed groups can deliver rural advisory services that include and benefit women, and how involving men can play a crucial role in building acceptance of women's changing roles in the household and community that result from some interventions. But there are also many examples of women-only groups formed around the delivery of various rural advisory services, in which women support each other in building their skills and

capacities. Examples include women's groups for food processing, capacity building, and use of ICTs in Afghanistan, for collective sales of cereals, rice, and onions in Mali, and for small-scale gardening in Senegal (Elbehri and Lee 2011), and a women's cooperative for collecting, processing, and trading *marula* fruit in Namibia (FAO et al. 2012).

Producer organisations can also become involved in initiatives to improve the gender balance in resource management systems. In Burkina Faso, women have traditional access and management rights over shea nut trees, but men own the land. This has led to conflicts between female shea harvesters and male landowners, traditional authorities, and environmental protection agencies. The 300-member Shea Products Women's Association of Houet worked with international NGO SNV to map the power relations between all actors involved in the management of shea parks. This led to the creation of a multi-actor platform and a dialogue on the equitable sharing of natural resources. SNV worked with the women's association to build their negotiation and leadership skills, and this helped the association successfully participate in the dialogue and obtain clearer harvesting rights and ownership of some formerly public land (SNV 2012).

Knowledge and capacity for sustainable environmental practices

Facing long-term environmental challenges – from declining soil fertility to deforestation and changing patterns of climate, pests, and diseases – is an ever-present necessity for rural people trying to gain a livelihood. Producer organisations – like the association of agroforestry producers in Brazil discussed in Box 8 – are often formed around an environmental or natural resource management issue, which shape their activities and the kind of advisory services they develop and provide.

This association of agroforesters are just one among countless others who work to reduce the environmental costs of farming through the spread of tools, techniques, and approaches for sustainable natural resource management. Often, as in the case of the RECA project (see Box 8), this takes the form of incentives for tackling environmental issues, which are often linked to knowledge services for building understanding of environmental changes and risks. In other cases, producer organisations also oversee certification and marketing systems for products from sustainable agricultural systems. Membership of the Organic Producers and Processors Association



This potato farmer is part of an initiative which promotes the *in situ* conservation and monitoring of native potatoes in the Andes region. As well as contributing to the protection and sustainable use of agro-biodiversity, the group hosts a market where producers sell their potatoes.

Box 8. Preventing deforestation and recovering degraded land in northern Brazil

For decades, the region of Abuna in Brazil was considered a largely unproductive landscape. But in the 1980s the Brazilian government encouraged farmers across the country to migrate to the area by offering them parcels of newly cleared forest land. Many migrants had difficulty adapting, and attempts to grow crops like cassava and corn were disastrous. Farmers were forced to clear more forest in the hope of obtaining income. This brought them into dispute with the *seringueiros*, the region's indigenous rubber tappers, who relied on the forest for their livelihoods.

Against this background of tension and dispute, a small group of settler farmers approached the *seringueiros* for guidance on agricultural practices that suit the local environment. These conversations led to the creation of the Association of Smallholder Agroforestry Producers, founded with the aim of developing livelihood options based on the forest ecosystem. Their first activity – pooling resources to buy cows, whose calves are returned to the association for distribution to another family – was successful, and the group began putting together proposals for projects to improve the productivity of the forest ecosystems. They eventually attracted funding from Dutch NGO CEBEMO⁶ for an economic reforestation project, RECA.⁷

The early stages of the project focused on developing a system of productive reforestation and agroforestry that would generate income without degrading land. The first resources allocated to the project were

used to replant 200 hectares of degraded forest with three selected native trees species to maintain soil fertility, expand economic options with non-timber forest products, and provide shade. The association, in tandem with the *seringueiros* and local church leaders, recruited 86 families who were each given a sum of money to plant up to three hectares, in exchange for a pledge to 'repay' the finance in the form of collectively-pooled produce.

Since 1989, RECA has grown from 86 to over 300 families of small agroforestry producers, who farm some 1,800 hectares, integrating native fruit and timber trees into their production systems. The association buys the raw tree products from farmers and operates three fruit-pulp processing agribusinesses to add value to the produce. It also runs a learning centre for the dissemination of agroforestry techniques and a marketing centre.

RECA has worked through a community-based model of sustainable agroforestry to reclaim degraded land, and to provide an alternative to intensive and unsustainable land management or extractive industries such as mining and logging. The association has successfully fostered a conservation ethic among local farmers, who now view the forests and local ecosystems as fragile natural assets that require protection and renewal. Illegal fishing, poaching, and logging have all been reduced.

Source: UNDP 2012

of Zambia, for example, includes 30,000 organic producers and 19 companies, certified producers, and cooperative societies and provides technical advice and training on organic methods of production, production quality, and hygiene for products, as well as advice on technical standards (Sumelius 2011).

Producer organisations have come to prominence at the same time as community-based approaches to sustainable natural resource management have become more widespread, with the result that producer organisations often get involved in decision-

making about rules and practices for sustainable environmental management. For example, the Cananéia Oyster Producers' Cooperative in Brazil was created during the 1990s to support the community in establishing new rules and practices to reconcile oyster harvesting with the conservation of local mangrove forests and their high biodiversity. Cooperative members were allowed three harvests a year and receive twice as much for their oysters as they had formerly received from market intermediaries (Diegues 2008).

4. Strengthening the role of producer organisations in rural advisory services

Our aim in gathering the information to write this paper was to raise awareness and initiate discussions about how producer organisations can play a more effective role in demand-driven, pluralistic rural advisory services, so that they contribute to improved livelihoods and poverty reduction.

In our introduction, we noted that this paper draws on several different sources, including a literature review, the 4th GFRAS Annual Meeting discussions and subsequent e-dialogue, and three regional consultations with a range of stakeholders. In this section, we draw together recommendations from across all our sources, which together map out an agenda of priorities for the future activities of different stakeholders in strengthening producer organisations.

Recommendations from consultations with producer organisations

Participants in the regional consultations included producers, representatives of their organisations at the local, regional, and national levels, government staff ranging from local extension officers to national government actors, businesses with an interest in agricultural value chains, and NGOs. In each consultation, mixed groups reflected on the role of producer organisations in rural advisory services and what could be done to strengthen them in their particular contexts. They made the following set of recommendations.

Participants in the Antigua and Barbuda consultation (CaFAN 2014; see also Box 3) noted that there is a lack of understanding among producers themselves of the potential role of producer organisations in rural advisory services. They recommended:

- a national educational campaign, targeted at producers, about the benefits of producer organisations
- that the government work towards creating an enabling environment for producer organisations to effectively provide demand-driven rural advisory

services to their members, with suggestions for possible mechanisms including the formation of a national agricultural board and subsidies for young, female, and smallholder farmers

- creating a mechanism to continue the dialogue started at the consultation, to foster and create further synergies between agricultural producers and potential markets in the tourism sector, and to develop positions for future engagement in policy processes.

The Indian consultation (Chander and Sulaiman 2014) focused on strengthening the delivery of extension services by milk producer cooperatives in India. These producer organisations, first established over 50 years ago and focused on collective milk marketing, are widespread and have an organisational infrastructure comprising district-level Milk Unions and a state-level Milk Federation. The consultation combined an e-discussion, a survey of member and non-member dairy farmers, and face-to-face dialogues with farmer members and officials of dairy cooperatives and milk unions. Participants discussed what would be needed to stimulate demand for advisory services and to support milk producer cooperatives to supply them. They recommended that:

- milk producer cooperatives should have greater involvement in livestock-sector policy processes, and in supplying rural advisory services
- milk producer cooperatives develop working relationships with specialists from local universities and state animal husbandry departments to: enhance the quality of extension provision; learn how to involve member producers and cooperative staff in identifying problems and the design and delivery of services; recognise the importance of female extension workers in sharing technologies with women dairy farmers; and use extension approaches that encourage the horizontal transfer of technologies and information between progressive farmers
- milk producer cooperatives address existing challenges in the quantity and quality of human resources, and long-standing difficulties in financial management and administration

⁶ Roman Catholic Mediation Board for Financing of Development Programmes

⁷ Projeto Reflorestamento Econômico Consorciado e Adensado (Syndicated Economic Reforestation Programme)



In India, ICTs – particularly mobile phones – are increasingly used to disseminate extension information to producers, and are also potentially a tool for ensuring transparency and accountability.

- Milk Unions and Milk Federations create an infrastructure for training dairy producers and dairy cooperative staff, perhaps through the mechanism of an 'extension wing' at the national level to coordinate activities
- further exploration of the role of ICTs in both strengthening extension provision and enhancing the transparency and effective functioning of dairy cooperatives.

The Indonesian consultation (Puantani 2014) focused on how producer organisations fit into the country's current policy and practices on rural advisory services, and what would be needed to give them a more significant role. A literature review and detailed analysis of existing policies for agriculture and rural development were carried out, as well as a consultation and dialogue with farmer organisations and government stakeholders from the ministries of agriculture and rural development. The policy analysis concluded that neither the government's rural policy (Act No. 6, 2014) nor its farmer protection and empowerment policy (Act No. 19, 2013) clearly provide a space for farmer organisations to participate in the supply of rural advisory services, but that there are some implicit opportunities that could be developed. The literature review concluded that Indonesian

central and local government had yet to significantly involve communities in delivering extension services. In light of these findings, participants in the Indonesia consultation recommended:

- to local and national government, that it should revise Rural Act No. 6 (2014) and Farmers' Empowerment and Protection Act No. 19 (2013) so that they clearly ensure the involvement of farmer organisations in rural advisory services, and that it should include farmer organisations in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the services it delivers
- to farmer organisations, that they should lobby for the revision of Rural Act No. 6 (2014) and Farmers' Empowerment and Protection Act No. 19 (2013) so that they make specific reference to farmer organisations as well as individual farmers, but that they should utilise the possible opportunities offered in those acts to become involved in existing rural advisory services
- to NGOs, that they should build mutually beneficial synergies with farmer organisations related to rural advisory services, and provide empowerment activities to the farmer organisations in order to increase the capacity of farmers and their organisation at the rural level towards innovation in rural advisory services.

The recommendations from these three consultations – which refer to specific sectors, legal systems, and extension policies and practices – echo some of the challenges in the supply of and demand for rural advisory services that we have already discussed. They contribute to a broader discussion about what different types of actors need to do in order for producer organisations to play their role more effectively.

Recommendations for producer organisations

Our second set of recommendations – aimed broadly at producer organisations themselves – are drawn from the 4th GFRAS Annual Meeting and the subsequent e-dialogue, a literature review, and our own experience in working with producer organisations to advocate for demand-driven, pluralistic rural advisory services.

Regarding their general functioning, we recommend that producer organisations:

- focus on improving their governance and organisational capacity
- continue high-level, evidence-based advocacy and awareness raising for pluralistic rural advisory services and policies that support them
- take a lead in initiating accountable, multi-stakeholder decision-making platforms for rural advisory services, and ensure that farmers are involved.

To improve their performance on the demand side of rural advisory services, we recommend that producer organisations:

- increase grassroots orientation and strengthen their democratic principles in governance, decision-making, and representation
- elaborate baseline information on demands and needs using methods that allow the participation of all members
- use this information as the basis for expressing clear demands for rural advisory services
- devise appropriate systems for collecting feedback from producers, and increase their use of and involvement in monitoring and evaluation.

To improve their performance on the supply side of rural advisory services, we recommend that producer organisations:

- take into account the full range of members' activities and needs
- foster links between members and leaders, and among members, to facilitate farmer-to-farmer extension and demand-orientation
- focus on providing some direct and visible benefits to members, while looking towards the long term
- be prepared to adapt strategies for activities and training to contextual change and shifting needs and demands
- repackage the information that producers need to make it accessible and understandable to them, including translation into different languages and dialects, and using different communication tools
- ensure that advisory staff have access to continuing education, professional development, guidance, and appropriate equipment
- select lead farmers and motivate them through non-financial and financial incentives, appropriate training material, and technical and logistical support.

To improve their economic sustainability, we recommend that producer organisations:

- develop mechanisms to make the services they provide financially sustainable, such as co-financing, service fees, and embedded services
- strengthen their business orientation and management capacities
- work with volunteers and use ICTs as inexpensive ways of sharing information
- enhance linkages and partnerships with other actors in the agricultural innovation system
- elaborate long-term financial strategies when entering partnerships.

To improve the environmental and social sustainability of their rural advisory services, we recommended that producer organisations:

- establish structures that respond to gender-specific needs, and provide conditions and incentives to work towards gender-balanced activities
- create structures and incentives that motivate the youth to engage and also give them a say in rural advisory services

- budget for measures to reduce exclusion by encouraging the participation of all social groups involved in agriculture
- build services on existing structures and local initiatives
- reflect environmental concerns in the design of all activities.
- strengthen the capacities of producer organisations in all the key areas identified above
- respond to demands articulated by producer organisations
- consider producer organisations as partners rather than as beneficiaries
- endorse transparency on what resources can be provided under which conditions
- provide clear opportunities for change as incentive for producer organisations to enter partnerships
- invest in exchange and partnerships with producer organisations
- establish and apply financial mechanisms that correspond to producers' demands and consider sustainability aspects
- advocate for improvements in rural infrastructure.

Recommendations for other actors involved in rural advisory services

A range of different actors can support producer organisations in fulfilling their roles in supplying and demanding rural advisory services. We recommend that they:

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