

Les organisations de producteurs en Afrique de l'Ouest et du Centre : attentes fortes, dures réalités

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Summary

1. This study, entitled "Producers' organizations in West and Central Africa: high expectations, hard realities", presents the main findings of a work conducted in 2012 for the Foundation for World Agriculture and Rurality. It is based on three detailed reports that analyse the situation of producers' organizations in two West African countries - Burkina Faso and Ghana - and one Central African country - Cameroon¹.
2. In the wake of African states' independence, producers' organizations (POs) were legally constituted in terms that proclaimed heavy state involvement. This was due both to a desire for political control of the rural sector, and to a particularly 'top-down' view of agricultural development. This state involvement was especially heavy in the value chains exporting to the world market, on account of their importance in financing the budget and maintaining the trade balance.
3. The years between 1980 and 1990 were characterized by structural adjustment in the economies of West and Central Africa. In the agricultural sector, this meant that the state withdrew from research, extension services, production and marketing. It also meant internal and external trade liberalization. State withdrawal was accompanied by the swift, and widespread, transfer of powers from state authorities to socio-professional organizations, with the latter largely unready to accept these new responsibilities.
4. However, most states kept a watchful eye on the POs' organizational structures. This was done either through legal frameworks or, more insidiously, through political intervention in the functioning of organizations, the appointment of representatives and the provision of technical and financial support.
5. In general, by channelling state support and international aid to the agricultural sector through the POs, states and funding organizations encouraged the creation of numerous producers' organizations that were opportunistic and project-based in nature. This had a negative impact on the creation of self-governing, independent organizations meant to create and implement collective strategies. This particular dynamic seriously affects the democratic functioning of the majority of POs. Nevertheless, in all of the countries under consideration, there are genuine producers' organizations structured in terms of economic functions. These include, especially, supplying inputs, harvesting, storage and collective marketing, as well as product processing.

¹ The country reports are available on the website at www.fondation-farm.org.

6. In most countries, there is little distinction between organizations that are economic in nature and union organizations. Most of the national umbrella organizations² for farmers bring together organizations with differing legal statuses and a multiplicity of aims. The same is true of their regional counterparts. There are West African PO networks such as the Network of Farmers' and Agricultural Producers' Organizations of West Africa (ROPPA), and the Billital Maroobé Network. In the centre, there is the Regional Platform of Farmers' Organizations in Central Africa (PROPAC). Finally, there is the Pan-African Farmers' Organization (PAFO) covering the whole continent.
7. This combination of economic and union functions is both a strength and a weakness for the POs. It enables them to influence the content of agricultural policies at national level, and on a regional scale. However, at the same time it exacerbates government fears about the emergence of strong counter-weights, and increases attempts at manipulation.
8. These risks are increased by the difficulty, experienced by the vast majority of organizations, of adhering strictly to their statutory commitments. National legislation on cooperatives and organizations has been amended on numerous occasions. In all the countries studied, i.e. Ghana, Burkina Faso and Cameroon, a very significant number of organizations do not comply with legal requirements. This might involve constitutions not being updated, general assemblies not held on a regular basis, minutes of meetings not provided to the authorities, appointments to elected offices not renewed, or gaps in the regular presentation of certified accounts.
9. The current situation for POs reflects the particular context in which a significant sub-section of organizations has emerged (created to obtain support and resources). This is the result of internal factors (including illiteracy among members, including elected members of grassroots organizations; limited resources; dubious conduct on the part of certain elected members; lack of transparency in administration; and poor understanding of legislation and obligations) and external factors (such as the complexity of legislation, and an unfavourable political and institutional environment that do not encourage the successful development of organizations). The absence, distance or serious lack of monitoring and control on the part of state bodies responsible for cooperatives and other forms of organization do not incite POs to improve their practices.
10. The profile of producers' organizations is highly heterogeneous in the three countries studied. In general, the more organized POs are involved in value chains that represent strategic exports for the state, e.g. cotton, coffee and cocoa. In these value chains, PO structure, from village to national scale, has always been included in the value chain promotional strategy. However, these POs are highly dependent on public policies inasmuch as they represent instruments for implementing such policies.

² In this report, an 'umbrella organization' means an association of producers' organizations with economic or commercial objectives, or with the objective of providing representation or union protection.

11. In the value chains intended for the domestic market, mainly cereals, animal products and most fruit and vegetables, the landscape is much more fragmented. Until the rise in international agricultural prices of 2007-2008, states showed little interest in food production, which did not encourage the creation of strong organizations. This was despite the fact that the vast majority of producers were concerned with agricultural produce. Nevertheless, in various countries, there are organizations which have succeeded in establishing sustainable economic services. In general, however, these POs depend heavily on external financial support, e.g. from the state, NGOs and international funding organizations. They struggle to develop sustainable, self-supporting economic models based on their internal resources. Their technical capacities are often limited.

12. Overall, at country level, and always with the exception of the export value chains, producers' organizations have little influence either in input supply or in marketing agricultural products. Of course, there are some outstanding POs that provide vital services to their members. These include delivering high quality inputs, in a timely fashion and at negotiated prices, as well as harvesting, storage and efficient use of products through standardization and differentiated marketing. However, such organizations are the exception.

13. This observation, which may seem harsh, should lead all the stakeholders to question their strategies. These include: states, farmers' organizations, their umbrella organizations and networks, as well as technical and financial partners such as NGOs and funding organizations. Most of the actors invest great hopes in the POs. This, along with the charisma of their leaders, has meant that they have become credible participants in negotiating public policy. Since the beginning of the 2000s, POs have played an important role in reforming agricultural policies at regional and continental level. At regional level this includes ECOWAP and PAU in West Africa, and in PAC/AC in central Africa. At continental level, it extends to the Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme launched by NEPAD. They have also influenced trade policy reform affecting agricultural products in areas such as common external tariffs, and economic partnership agreement with the European Union. POs have achieved some important victories. However, in general, these have not yet been reflected in the effective application of policies such as food sovereignty, recognition of family farms, priority for regional integration and community preference.

14. In the area of programme implementation, POs have also managed to position themselves as key actors. However, the partnerships available frequently lack sufficient flexibility to cope with the actual capacities of organizations and their working dynamic. As such, the uptake ability of POs remains limited and the risks of malfunction are high. The habitual competition among institutions and supporting organizations, diversity of partnership modalities and the lack of coordination among partners exacerbate the difficulties for POs of managing external support.

15. Nevertheless, the vital role of POs in managing the shared interests of producers, and in influencing both public policies and modalities of organization and payment within value chains is not called into question. On the contrary, our purpose is to consider how POs might eventually play a greater role in the modernization of agriculture and in market regulation. As such, it is vital to find ways that make it possible to support them without stifling them, and without exacerbating their difficulties, while respecting their independence and obligations.

16. The analysis based of the surveys carried out in the three countries considered can lead to the following recommendations. Support for POs should begin with the implementation of basic policy tools accessible to the majority of producers and organizations. The most important question here is that of funding for the agriculture and agrifood value chains. POs enable their members to access credit. However, they cannot mitigate market imperfections that are reflected in prohibitive interest rates for small producers. Public policy must therefore resume a significant role in the area of organizational modalities and market regulation. The emphasis placed on strengthening food security creates opportunities for increased involvement of POs in creating and managing agricultural stocks. On all these points, the raft of one-off, isolated, localized projects and programmes may at best provide some references, without enabling to scale up, especially as the methods of those projects and programmes differ. Along with regional institutions, development actors and POs, states must address this as a matter of priority.

17. Another crucial area is that of risk management. The 2011 meeting of the G20 agriculture ministers demonstrated the need for farmers, and especially small farmers, to be able to protect themselves against weather-related and economic hazards in order to improve their incomes, increase their investments and obtain loans more easily. An idea gaining ground is that of systematically including the question of risks in agricultural policies, and of giving producers a toolkit to deal with them. POs can play an important role in creating, publicizing and managing index insurance products. These would allow compensation for harvest and livestock losses due to weather conditions. POs are also key actors in developing contractualization with upstream and downstream operators in order to secure input supplies, safeguard sales outlets and mitigate fluctuations in agricultural prices. However, the POs' actions will not fully bear fruit unless the state establishes a global risk-management framework. This would involve establishing economic and social safety nets; supporting public-private partnerships; and creating an appropriate economic, taxation and legal environment. The latter requires the development of structured, interprofessional organizations that would give POs a real ability to represent producers in the various value chains.

18. Finally, cooperative organizations will very shortly face standardization of their legal status and operations in line with the new provisions of the OHADA (Organization for the Harmonization of Business Law in Africa) Uniform Act on Cooperatives. Most of them have are unaware of this and do not know what it involves. The states involved have not yet amended their legislation. All cooperatives should have amended their legal status by 15 May 2013. However, for the vast majority of them, that seems impossible.

19. Given the specific characteristics of the agricultural sector, there should be discussion of the relevance of certain provisions in the Uniform Act. This should also cover better differentiation of regulatory frameworks depending on the organizational structure of POs, e.g. grassroots cooperatives, unions, federations etc., and on their area of intervention. Furthermore, there is need for discussion on the best way of supporting cooperative organizations in the agricultural sector. This would involve regulatory provisions that are appropriate to the capacities of actors, and that make it possible to support the operational changes required of POs. In effect, POs must become more independent, in financial terms and vis-à-vis governments. They must improve their internal democratic processes, strengthen their managerial capacities, and safeguard their activities in a market that is increasingly competitive and subject to increasingly strict quality standards. This raises the question of how to adapt the content of the OHADA Uniform Act, and make the conditions of application more flexible so that POs are not left behind, their vulnerability increased, on account of inappropriate legal frameworks.

20. Faced with the challenge of significantly increasing agricultural production to feed a growing population, and one in the process of rapid urbanization, some African governments might be tempted to opt for agro-industrial models, based on large-scale operations and extensive use of waged labour. The economic effectiveness of such models is debatable, and the risks that they bring, in political and social terms, are huge. In this context, creating the right conditions for developing producers' organizations, in order to make them key economic actors, by favouring access to markets for small and medium-sized operations, and by facilitating their integration into competitive value chains, is a considerable stake that goes far beyond the agricultural sector.



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