

# **Use of civil society organisations to raise the voice of the poor in agricultural policy**

This paper was produced by the Agriculture and Natural Resources Team of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) in collaboration with Anthony Bebbington, Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester and John Thompson, International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), London

The authors are grateful to the UK Food Group for their additional contributions and comments.

The paper reflects work in progress towards the development of new guidelines for agricultural policy in DFID. It does not necessarily reflect the views and policy of DFID.

This (working/supporting) paper is intended to stimulate public discussion. It is not necessarily DFID or UK Government policy.

September 2004

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## Executive summary

This working paper examines how civil society organisations (CSOs) – particularly those representing poor and marginalised rural people – can inform and influence the processes of agricultural policy formulation and implementation. We summarise the role of different interest groups in shaping ‘pro-poor’ agricultural development and explain how poor people can gain ‘voice’ to express their views and shape policy processes in a meaningful way. Efforts are made to clarify the meaning of ‘civil society’ and two common approaches to conceptualising the role of civil society in development are compared and contrasted. A typology is then introduced to provide a framework for understanding the common institutional forms and functions adopted by these CSOs in the agricultural sector.

The current state of knowledge on these organisations and institutions is examined in some depth. The paper makes it clear that analysing power relations and confronting imbalances in those relationships is the starting point for bringing the poor into the agricultural policy process. We also trace the shifting, and sometimes conflicting, views of civil society’s role in improving the active participation of rural people in key policy arenas over the past half century. These shifting viewpoints are linked closely to the dominant narratives that have shaped policy discourses on agricultural development. Each of the narratives makes an authoritative, and sometimes compelling, case for strengthening the role of civil society in relation to the state and the market in agricultural development, claiming at least some degree of scientific legitimacy and calling for a particular policy response.

In all cases, two recurrent themes can be identified: that rural people’s membership organisations are better able to represent the poor than non-government organisations (NGOs); and that grassroots organisations are preferable to those induced from the outside. The problem is that external support agencies and private companies frequently fail to recognise the authority of these local organisations, establishing relations with other intermediary organisations (e.g. urban-based NGOs, private buyers, etc.) instead, and undermining the legitimacy of the very organisations they wish to strengthen.

This analysis brings us to the identification of three pathways that can lead to the emergence of strong rural CSOs:

1. Independent pathways from below
2. Collaboration between local and external civil society organisations
3. State–society synergy.

All three pathways lead to perhaps the greatest challenge facing CSOs: how to form federations or other social networks that will increase the bargaining power of the poor in policy processes, improve technology development and service delivery to their members, and enhance access to and control of key natural resources or supply chains. The closing discussion in Section 2 makes it clear that enabling CSOs to ‘scale up’ successfully means improving their knowledge, capacities and tactics to negotiate with private and public authorities, providing new financial instruments in the form of subsidies, grants, low-interest loans and income-generating schemes to fund their activities, and ensuring that women have a real voice in decision making at all levels.

What we don't know about the role of CSOs in raising the voice of the poor in agricultural policy is as great, if not greater, than what we know. Gaps in our knowledge include the actual costs of building and sustaining producer organisations, shifting gender dynamics and their impacts on the performance of local organisations, the changing role of the state, the difficulty of reconciling the voices of rich and poor in membership organisations, and the challenge of creating real rural empowerment in different agricultural environments.

Finally, we present a brief review of the remaining knowledge gap, which relates back to the points raised in the previous section. Two areas are highlighted in particular: civil society organisations and key policy processes. The paper ends with a number of unanswered questions on CSOs and their role in agricultural policy processes – both public and private – which require further research and elaboration.

## **1. What is the issue and why is it important?**

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are among the most important and potentially legitimate actors that can promote pro-poor agricultural development. The term relates to all voluntary associations and social groups in a given community, formal (e.g. trade unions, farmers' organisations) and informal (e.g. user groups). Civil society therefore occupies the domain between the state and the marketplace.

CSOs provide a basis for collective action, therefore are often considered to play a part in making government work better for the poor. In practice, most citizens who influence policy, whether in North or South, do so by working through some collective action or CSO. In recent years, CSOs have shifted their emphasis away from traditional service delivery and towards increased engagement in policy processes.

This working paper examines how CSOs represent the poor and work towards pro-poor agricultural policy formulation and implementation in developing countries. It particularly highlights the potential of CSO participation to add value to Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) processes and to transform policy environments for agriculture in ways that are beneficial to the poor.

### **1.1 Interest groups, agricultural policy and the poor**

#### **Interest groups**

In many developing countries, agricultural and rural policies favour some groups, commodities and places more than others. Discussions in the literature revolve around whether these policy biases should be understood in terms of urban bias (Lipton, 1977), the differential power of different social classes (Byres, 1981) or a combination of the two (Corbridge, 1982). Some argue that 'urban bias may be harder to counteract now than in the past' (Maxwell, 2004). The extent of inequities in agricultural policy implies that 'pro-poor' agricultural development will not happen by itself or even with the goodwill of policymakers and agricultural entrepreneurs. Rather, agricultural development largely

depends on the relative ability of different interest groups to negotiate political and economic relationships.

The range of interest groups and actors working to foster pro-poor agricultural development includes international development agencies, donors, reformist governments, political parties, non-government organisations (NGOs) and religious organisations. Different organisations have different interests and will pursue different forms of pro-poor agricultural development.

## **Agricultural policy**

Policy is understood here to be a course of action designed to achieve particular goals or targets. This is not synonymous with state-defined 'public policy'. Other actors (e.g. medium- and large-scale agricultural businesses and development agencies) can exert a significant influence on policy regarding agricultural livelihood opportunities for the poor. The policies of these other actors take on particular significance when state and public sector agencies are chronically weak.

Policy formulation has traditionally been viewed as a linear process. Civil servants, who report to a designated head or body of people, set formal policy and may establish guiding and implementing institutions through a rational decision making process. However, policies do not exist independently of people. Inevitably, they are shaped by the views of policymakers, and by groups of people who are affected by policy outcomes. The processes of reform are thus rarely the products of rational decisions, but of history, politics, decisions and negotiation by different stakeholders. There will be multiple entry points and various opportunities for participation by CSOs throughout different phases of the policy cycle (policy analysis and formulation, policy adoption, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation).

Although, in principle, involving CSOs should improve citizens' access to the policy process, Thomson (2000) highlights a number of important pre-conditions:

- CSOs must themselves be open and accessible to the grassroots, in particular the poor and marginalised;
- CSOs must themselves feel there are incentives to engage in policy debate, given their constrained resources and manpower; and
- there must be a perception of potential benefit and relevance to their organisational aims.

Governments and donor agencies are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of farmer participation in agricultural policy making, and therefore support capacity building of rural organisations. However, this requires institutional frameworks that recognise their potential role, and mechanisms for farmers to voice their concerns at the local, national and international levels of policy. These mechanisms are still lacking in most contexts, particularly as agri-food systems become more influenced by global economic trends (Pimbert et al., 2001).

## **Power relationships**

Power relationships typically work against the poor, and commentators agree that the capacity of the poor to identify their own requirements, address them where possible from their own resources, and make demands on government where appropriate need to be strengthened. (e.g. Farrington and Luttrell, 2004). The failure of land reform is often believed to reflect the lack of voice of the rural poor. Power imbalances – a rural bloc versus an urban bloc, or peasants and the landless versus other groups, or men’s interests versus those of women – have long been taken to explain policy and public expenditure and subsidy biases against small farm agriculture.

Power imbalances are particularly resistant to change and there are different reasons to explain this:

- the dispersed nature of rural populations complicates efforts to organise claim making and to foster protests against agricultural policy;
- the important role of patron–client relationships in the survival strategies of the poor discourages overt participation in concerted efforts to express rural voice;
- information constraints in rural areas; and
- the increased presence of global agri-food chains in rural areas and overall concentration of production and marketing in the recent period since agricultural liberalisation means that small-scale producers are relatively less powerful (see Fox and Vorley, 2004 – DFID Working Paper 13; Thompson and Vorley, forthcoming; CIRAD/ODI, 2001).

## **Voice in agricultural policy**

To exercise voice is not merely to speak, but to be heard and to make a difference. We need to know, therefore, how the poor are able to influence agricultural policy through CSOs, in terms of policy formulation and implementation. The objectives might be to ensure that pro-poor agricultural policy commitments are respected in practice; or to challenge and adapt the implementation of other agriculture-related policies so they become more pro-poor.

Complicating the concept of ‘voice’ is the fact that the poor will inevitably have different concerns and interests in agricultural policy outcomes. These differences relate to different causes, types and degrees of poverty and are due to factors such as gender, age, health status, source of livelihood, asset ownership and location. For example, rural poverty is particularly concentrated among landless agricultural labourers and households for whom food production is an important part of their survival strategies (CPRC, 2004). The landless but physically able might be expected to seek land redistribution and/or agricultural employment generation. Examples of other social groups’ agricultural policy interests might include:

- female headed households – land ownership rights;
- less poor – technology and marketing support;
- rural poor – better on-farm agricultural income, for instance through commodity price increases; and
- urban poor – cheap food through price controls or via policies that promote larger-scale agricultural production that can produce food at lower unit costs.

Even this simple urban/rural poor distinction is complicated by the tendency of poor farmers with very limited land holdings to consume purchased food, as well as the increasing tendency for poor households to combine rural and urban activities within their livelihood strategies (Tacoli, 2003). Therefore, *there is no single voice of the poor in agricultural policy*.

Given the diverse needs of different groups, policies determining production possibilities for the poor (e.g. land and water administration policy)<sup>1</sup> can be as important as policies that have more direct effects on production and marketing (e.g. research and extension and price policies).

## **2. Current evidence: what do we know?**

### **2.1 Civil society organisations: clarifications and typologies**

#### **What is civil society?**

Civil society can be conceptualised in two broad ways (Edwards, 2004; Howell and Pearce, 2001; Lewis, 2002). The first and most common conceptualisation understands civil society as comprising non-market organisations that are between the household and the state. Sometimes referred to as the 'associationalist approach', this includes:

- NGOs, such as those implementing agricultural development interventions or rural policy think tanks (Farrington et al., 1993);
- professional associations (of agronomists, academics, etc.);
- social movements, e.g. farmers' movements in India (Bentall and Corbridge, 1996), membership organisations, e.g. farmer organisations in West Africa (Bosc et al., 2001; Collion and Rondot, 1998);
- trade unions, e.g. peasant unions in Bolivia (Bebbington, 1996); and
- traditional informal organisations.

'Associationalist' civil society is often assumed to be 'a good thing' (Edwards, 2004). By implication, strengthening CSOs is inherently desirable because, among other things, it will lead to more inclusive, representative societies. However, there is no inherent reason why any of these organisations will favour the poor or serve to project the voice of the poor in society (Lewis, 2002; Mamdani, 1996). Another problem with the associational view is that the line between civil society and the state is often blurred and porous. Staff from agricultural NGOs can move into and out of senior positions in government and multilateral agencies.

A second interpretation understands civil society as the sphere within which public debate occurs and in which dominant ideas about how society ought to be organised are discussed and formed. This might be referred to as a 'public sphere' or 'deliberative' understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> Rural health and education policies also influence production possibilities, but are excluded here for reasons of focus.

civil society. Examples of ideas that might be debated and formed at different levels of society include:

- national level – the desirability of national food security, or the place of small-scale and family farmers in national identity. Such ideas have significant influences on the directions taken by agricultural policy;
- local level – the extent to which local government should invest fiscal transfers in agriculture through mechanisms such as participatory budgeting; and
- community level – the role of women in local leadership.

In this approach, the primary interest is to protect and enlarge the spheres of public debate, and to enhance scope for participation by excluded groups (e.g. landless poor, rural women). Strategies for enhancing the voice of the rural poor in public debate can be direct (e.g. by strengthening farmer organisations' ability to articulate their views) or indirect (e.g. through efforts to create new arenas for policy deliberation or publicising research that argues the case for increased participation of the poor in agricultural technology development).

## Typologies of organisations

There are many types of agriculture-related CSOs, which have different origins, forms and functions (Table 1). For example, those distinguished by their form can be represented as:

- civil society as associations;
- civil society as a public sphere;
- organisations of which rural people (including the poor) are members;
- non-membership organisations made of professionals and activists;
- organisations that exist at different scales; and
- informal and formal organisations.

**Table 1. Typologies of Civil Society Organisations**

<b>Membership/ Non-membership</b>	<b>Formal/ Informal</b>	<b>Scale</b>	<b>Examples of types of organisation at different scales</b>
Membership	Formal	Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Village committee</li> <li>• Producer organisations</li> <li>• Farmer unions</li> <li>• Landless workers union</li> </ul>
		Sub-national	
		National	
		International	
	Informal	Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traditional authorities</li> <li>• Farmer networks</li> <li>• Social movements</li> </ul>
		Sub-national	
		National	
		International	
Non-membership	Formal	Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NGO</li> <li>• Church</li> <li>• Professional associations</li> </ul>
		Sub-national	
		National	
		International	
	Informal	Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activist networks</li> <li>• Policy networks</li> </ul>
		Sub-national	
		National	
		International	

Functional classifications are also important, as organisations clearly have different roles. A simple classification according to the primary function of groups (adapted from Collion and Rondot, 1998) is as follows:

- advocacy organisations – representing and/or lobbying on agricultural policy;
- service provision organisations – supporting people with technology, marketing, information, training etc.; and
- governance organisations – governing their membership.

Advocacy organisations appear to be the most relevant vehicles for raising the voice of the poor, although service provision organisations also project voice at certain times. For instance, when the 10,000 strong onion and potato growers' organisation 'Federation of the Fouta Djallon Producers' in Guinea partnered with the public research and extension service to contract technology support services, it was also voicing particular member preferences for the types of research and extension they required (Collion and Rondot, 1998).

## **Regional variations**

There are significant regional variations in the type and strength of different CSOs. In Latin America, there has been a long tradition of peasant mobilisation by popular movements to influence change. Given this strong political tradition and knowledge of political systems, CSOs in almost every country throughout Latin America are trying to influence national and local policy. In Africa, the picture is very different. African civil society is weaker than in other parts of the developing world. NGOs are a relatively recent phenomenon and have less capacity and experience in policy advocacy.

## **2.2 Shifting views on civil society participation in agricultural policy**

While the principle of civil society participation in agricultural policy has a long history, it was only in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that more organised approaches to fostering participation began in earnest. These took different forms, depending largely on who was initiating the process.

### **Civil society at the local level**

#### **Local agricultural development programmes**

In state- and donor-led initiatives, the primary focus of such participation was often local. Principles of community development were brought into agricultural programmes, and local organisations were given roles in organising and commenting on local agricultural development strategy. As a result, during the 1970s and 1980s, there was an increase in literature linking community development, local organisations, agriculture and natural resource management (e.g. Esman and Uphoff, 1984). The case for enhancing voice in the administration and adaptation of agricultural policy was made convincingly – for water management, seed systems, technology development, forest management and agricultural cooperatives of various types.

## **Participatory research**

Experience in farmer participation in crop and livestock research also grew during the late 1970s and 1980s. The emphasis was on incorporating the voice of the poor into research agendas (Chambers et al., 1989; Rhoades and Booth, 1982). However, in most cases, the vehicles for this voice were not institutionalised, nor based in civil society. Instead, researchers consulted with farmers, conducted research on farmers' land, and then aimed to channel their findings into basic and strategic research agendas.

Both of these approaches brought frustrations. Community development and participatory research repeatedly encountered policy and other constraints at sub-national and national levels and these constraints needed higher order forms of organising voice and influencing policy (Scoones and Thompson, 1994). Meanwhile, higher order organisations proved to be prone to internal conflict, party political influence and elite control.

## **Civil society at the meso-level**

In the face of these constraints and difficulties, research and practice in the late 1980s and 1990s looked to meso-level civil society institutions to become vehicles for raising the voice of the poor in agricultural policy (Vorley et al., 2002). Attention turned particularly to intermediary NGOs (Carroll, 1992; Farrington et al., 1993) and newer forms of social movement and federations.

## **Non-government organisations**

It has been argued, and often proven, that NGOs are better able to bridge gaps between policies and the rural poor, and can foster participatory processes and channel concerns back into research and extension discussions and other types of agricultural policy in which they participate. They are professional, committed to the poor and relatively protected from the worst interferences of party politics.

NGOs have often played important roles in informing agricultural policy, internationally, nationally and sub-nationally. International organisations often consult with them on policy issues and underlying ideas. This can also happen at national levels, although the quality of the consultation often depends on the political conjuncture of the moment. It is perhaps at decentralised (state, departmental, provincial) levels that such interactions are most fluid and fruitful, because inter-organisational relationships are often also based on personal and face-to-face relationships between government and NGO staff (Farrington et al., 1993). At this level, given the limited scope that sub-national governments generally have on agricultural policy, the influence exercised is more on the ways in which policies are translated into programmes and particular activities.

## **Federation and producer organisations**

Rural people's commodity- and area-based federations and producer organisations are considered to bring together the advantages of local and national membership, while avoiding their disadvantages (Hinchcliffe et al., 1999). They are sufficiently close to the grassroots to ensure some degree of accountability and have better access to member concerns. They operate at a regional level and so are better able to address policy and economic constraints than local organisations. They are also assumed to be somewhat

more practical and aware of the marketing and service needs of their members than more politically-oriented national organisations.

## **Unions**

Thomson (2000) notes that unions often have easier access to ministries and politicians than issue-based organisations. Some farmers' unions in Africa have had very close relationships with governing parties, and farmers' movements in South Asia have, at certain times, made similar connections. In the agricultural sector, however, such access can be biased in favour of large-scale farmers, whose unions tend to be better funded and who can often employ highly skilled professionals to make their case for them.

## **Farmer movements**

Other initiatives operating at the national level generally come from different sources. Socialist, communist and nationalist parties aim to build national small-scale farmer movements as a means of consolidating a rural power base and exercising pressure on the state. The agricultural concerns of such movements are of a different order, including land reform and policies to protect and support the small farm sector. These movements – although vocal and occasionally able to mobilise massive numbers – typically have great difficulty in establishing a strong presence and legitimacy at a local level and are subject to political and leadership tensions. They attract some donor support, primarily from European NGOs.

## **Strengths and weaknesses of different CSOs**

Large-scale research programmes on agricultural development NGOs and producer federations have delivered more measured conclusions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of different types of organisation<sup>2</sup>. Farrington et al. (1993) suggests that NGOs have roles to play, but their performance and accountability has been exaggerated and their ability or inclination to foster participatory processes varies greatly. Their relationships with rural social movements are often difficult because social movements argue that the NGOs exercise too much influence over agenda setting and resources. In addition, Bebbington et al. (1996) says that although federations are interesting, their levels of capacity are variable and they have been unable to make their voice heard on many national policy issues. They are also inefficient and depend on external grant funding.

Perhaps reflecting such conclusions, recent years have seen greater interest in larger-scale, mass-based, rural movements on the grounds that only they can address the political economy of rural poverty and agricultural stagnation in the small farm sector. This trend appears to draw inspiration from India and Brazil. The experience of Kerala has led some to conclude that the voice of the poor will only be heard consistently in policy debates through mass movements linked to political parties (Harriss, 2002). Similar conclusions are drawn from the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil (Wolford, 2004).

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<sup>2</sup> These were led by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the International Service for National Agricultural Research (ISNAR), Centre de coopération internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement (CIRAD), the World Bank, the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), the Inter-American Foundation and others.

## **The importance of legitimacy**

Discussions of the role of CSOs keep returning to two key questions:

1. Are rural people's membership organisations better at representing the needs and views of the poor than NGOs?
2. Are 'bottom-up' organisations preferable to those that have been induced from the outside?

The balance of opinion seems to answer 'yes' to both questions; however, what appears to matter most is the organisation's legitimacy. Farmers' organisations might be nationally visible and ostensibly representative of the poor, but their presence at the grassroots is so weak that in practice they are not legitimate representatives. NGOs or activists might be formally unaccountable to the poor, but their means of working and track record may give them great legitimacy, especially when they are well informed about people's concerns. However, government, donor, business and other actors do not always ask if the organisations they are talking to are legitimate in this way. In some cases, they deliberately talk to organisations that are not (or not the only) legitimate vehicles for the poor, but whose interests and/or style of engaging are more congruent with that of the public or donor agency.

## **Conclusions regarding the role of CSOs**

Recent literature suggests there is no 'magic bullet'<sup>3</sup>. Different organisations play different roles and have different strengths in bringing the voice of the poor into agricultural policy. The main implication, perhaps, is that actors must understand the organisational landscape in which they are operating.

## **2.3 Pathways to a strong rural civil society**

Research indicates there are many different ways in which strong rural CSOs can emerge. Studies in Indonesia (Bebbington et al., forthcoming) and Mexico (Fox, 1996) suggest three general pathways: a) independent pathways from below; b) collaboration between local and external CSOs; and c) state–society synergy pathways.

### **Independent pathways from below**

'Bottom-up' organisations with their roots in traditional arrangements have played various roles in local agricultural development and have represented local voices to external agencies (Esman and Uphoff, 1984). In Sumatra, for instance, traditional *adat* village governance institutions have recently re-emerged after the 'New Order' period of Suharto's regime and began dealing with issues of agricultural tenure and representing local concerns to external actors (Bebbington et al., forthcoming).

While the traditional basis of many such organisations gives them legitimacy, it often means they are not internally democratic and they are dominated by traditional leaders.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Edwards and Gaventa (2001) on social movements and 'global citizen action' and Edwards and Hulme (1995) on NGOs.

Although they are 'at the sharp end' of agricultural policy implementation, they rarely project the voice of the poor in policy debates.

### **Collaboration between local and external civil society organisations**

This is the most common pathway and can take many forms. A review of 12 federations of rural organisations, whose primary concerns related to agricultural development, suggested that the strongest (i.e. most able to project members' concerns in negotiations with government, donors and market actors) had benefited from an extended period of support from NGOs or religious leaders (Carroll and Bebbington, 2001). In most cases, external actors were involved in creating the organisations, which suggests that strong organisations can be induced from the outside. Likewise, the emergence of strong, vocal farmers' movements in India has often involved non-farmer, but charismatic, leadership (Bentall and Corbridge, 1996; Brass, 1995).

These studies show, however, that the method of collaboration is critical. The most fruitful collaborations involve intensive 'software' support, in which external actors accompany, advise, suggest systems and so on over a long period, but do not intervene in decision making. Such collaborations can help existing organisations become more vocal.

In Indonesia, NGOs and lawyers assisted village organisations in negotiating with agri-business on land, labour and pricing issues (Bebbington et al., forthcoming). In Namibia, NGOs and cooperatives were jointly consulted on the design of new legislation for farmer groups. This led to laws easing restrictions on local groups registering as cooperatives (World Bank, 1995). Indeed, there are many documented and anecdotal cases of collaboration between membership and non-membership CSOs that have been successful in projecting the concerns of the poor into agricultural policy domains. Anecdotal evidence includes pressure by an NGO chief executive in India (formerly a senior civil servant) that led to new government guidelines on joint forest management. Similarly, pressure by academics and retired civil servants in India succeeded in influencing a Supreme Court to force government to change its food buffer stocks policy, with knock-on effects on other policy domains such as guaranteed purchase schemes and foreign trade in cereals.

### **State–society synergy pathways**

Research has identified cases in which public sector workers helped create and consolidate rural organisations, or projected their concerns into policy debates. In the Philippines, for instance, lobbying by radical civil servants together with professional organisations led to the widespread implementation of participatory irrigation management (a model which subsequently spread to other countries). In Mexico, reformist officials helped consolidate smallholder marketing organisations (Fox, 1996). State–society synergies are, however, more prone to the intermediation of party politics and, at times, corruption.

CSOs can also be included in more formalised state–society fora. In Namibia, for example, the Division of Rural Development of the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Rural Development has a rural development committee, which includes members of NGOs, international agencies and civil servants. They meet on a regular basis to discuss policy and programme issues.

## 2.4 Strategies for scaling upwards and outwards

### Networks

Civil society organisations need access to policymakers to put their points across, which underlines the importance of building strong networks (North–North, North–South, or South–South) that take strategic access into account. With North–South networks, each have different strengths – Southern NGOs have local knowledge, contacts and connections, while Northern NGOs bring resources, technology and information.

At the national level, it is recognised that the quality of the relationships between CSOs and other organisations (e.g. research and extension institutes, ministries of agriculture, etc.) depend largely on interpersonal networks. These, in turn, are based partly on other institutions (such as political parties, universities, social movements, churches) through which people have come to know each other and realise they have shared commitments. For instance, the participation of NGO staff in groups framing agricultural policy in Chile reflects the voice of the underlying networks, as much as the NGOs. The problem of elevating the voice of the poor in such discussions is that the strongest networks are often those linking elite and business groups with government rather than those linking ultimately to the poor. International influence on agricultural policy also depends greatly on networks. Networks for the poor at international level are very weak, and so involving the voice of the poor in such discussions is difficult.

NGO networks and umbrella groups have had only partial success in exercising pro-poor influence in agricultural development. Networks face consistent difficulties in funding their existence and activities, member NGOs place their own organisational needs before those of the umbrella group, and the networks can become one more NGO rather than a representative body of member NGOs. Crucially, the capacity for agricultural policy analysis within networks (and member NGOs) is often limited.

### Federations

One reason for federating is to increase the leverage of CSOs in policy and political debates. Individual NGOs and membership organisations have less legitimacy when lobbying alone. NGOs in particular suffer from the legitimacy problem because they do not formally represent the poor. Federations of NGOs and membership organisations that aim to influence agricultural policy often include interests other than agriculture, for example:

- landless people's movements (e.g. the one-million-strong O Movimento Dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra (MST) in Brazil and the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP) in the Philippines)<sup>4</sup>;

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<sup>4</sup>The Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) is the largest social movement in Latin America. MST in Brazil has gained international recognition and even has its own website in Portuguese, English, French, Spanish and Italian ([www.mstbrazil.org/](http://www.mstbrazil.org/)). KMP is a nationwide federation of Philippine organisations, which claims to have "effective leadership" of over 800,000 landless peasants, small-scale farmers, farm workers, subsistence fishermen, peasant women and rural youth. It also maintains its own website ([www.geocities.com/kmp\\_ph/index.html](http://www.geocities.com/kmp_ph/index.html)).

- indigenous people's movements (e.g. the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities in Ecuador and the Coordinating Body for the Indigenous Peoples' Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA);
- peasant movements (e.g. Réseau des Organisations Paysannes de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (ROPPA) in West Africa); and
- various national federations of producer organisations in Benin, Mali and Senegal (GRAF/GRET/IIED, 2003).

These broad-based federations bring wide agendas (e.g. concerning land redistribution, political participation and decentralisation) to agricultural policy debates. As a result, discussions about agriculture are not informed by agricultural concerns alone. This can complicate policy debates and lead to charges of politicisation, as interactions between Bolivian peasant movements, Indian farmers' movements and their respective governments have demonstrated. However, there can also be important shifts in the balance of power in favour of the rural poor, as the rise of producer organisations in West Africa illustrates (Box 1).

### **BOX 1. Producer Organisations, Collective Action and Institutional Transformation in West Africa**

In most rural societies, traditional organisations have an inward-oriented or 'bonding' function to facilitate collective action, mitigate against the uncertainties of agricultural production and regulate relationships within the group. In contrast, formal producer organisations (POs) perform a 'bridging' function to organise relationships between the group and the outside world (Bosc et al., 2001).

Producer organisations cover a wide range of activities, from management of common woodland or pasture resources, water user associations, collection and sale of a particular crop and providing access to fertiliser, seed and credit. Grouping together through collective action enables producers to take advantage of economies of scale, and they can make their voices heard in government policy and decision making. Additionally, producers hope to increase their negotiating power with companies buying their crop, which is becoming more necessary as globalisation brings an increased concentration and integration of agri-business throughout the world. In some cases, producer organisations have also provided a valuable bridging function between farmers and sources of technical expertise, such as research and extension structures. Foreign aid funds have often been instrumental in strengthening the role that POs can play. However, there is a risk that the leadership will become increasingly distant from the interests and needs of the membership.

Over the past decade, many POs have become established and strengthened their positions at local, national and sub-regional levels in West Africa. These organisations are partly the result of government withdrawal from important sectors of the rural economy, including agricultural input supply and marketing. They have emerged in a context of political liberalisation, and now represent a political force of which governments must take notice. This became clear from the strike by Mali's cotton farmers in the 2001 season, due to low prices and continued waste and corruption within the Compagnie Malienne pour le

Développement des Textiles. The strike cut output by half, with many cotton farmers switching to maize and other cash crops for that season (Toulmin and Guèye, 2003).

Examples of producer organisations (POs) operating at a national level include the Comité National de Concertation des Ruraux (CNCR) in Senegal, the Fédération des Unions des Producteurs (FUPRO) in Benin, and the Syndicat des Exploitants Agricoles à l'Office du Niger (SEXAGON) in Mali (GRAF/GRET/IIED, 2003). The CNCR provides an interesting case. It brings together a series of PO federations in Senegal, and has become a central actor in dialogue between government, donors and producers on agricultural strategy and related issues, such as land tenure. Such POs have the advantage of providing a channel to make the case for greater support to agriculture in general, and to take account of the particular constraints faced by smallholders. Policy and decision making in government tend to follow both formal and informal procedures. Smallholders often lack access to informal mechanisms that operate via personal contact networks; neither can they lobby through high-level political contacts, as these are usually the preserve of powerful economic actors, such as large commercial farmers and agribusiness. Thus, POs need to make best use of official channels and opportunities to give voice to the needs of less powerful actors.

At sub-regional level, there has been growing interest in federations as a means of putting pressure on governments and regional institutions to take notice of producer interests when negotiating processes related to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reforms and the Cotonou trade negotiations [do these need some explanation?]. Examples of such federations include the Association Cotonnière Africaine, the Union of Chambers of Agriculture for West Africa and ROPPA (see earlier in this section). ROPPA and its members have been particularly vocal in supporting family farming and are opposed to the agribusiness model being promoted by some as the means to 'modernise' agriculture. 'This vision [in support of family farming] has been inspired by a global perception of the role of agriculture in society, not only for producing food and fibre but also performing many other economic, social and environmental functions' (Belières et al., 2002). Thus, the argument made by ROPPA and others supports broader debates regarding the 'multi-functionality' of agriculture and the consequent need to avoid a purely economic or market-based approach (Toulmin and Guèye, 2003).

Federations bring the voice of the poor to agricultural policy in important ways. The activities of the MST have led to the redistribution of over 1000 large rural properties since 1984 (Wolford, 2004) and farmer federations operating within Senegal's Agricultural Services and Producer Organisations Project have become increasingly involved in discussions of macroeconomic and political issues (Collion and Rondot, 2001). In some instances, federations linking different national farmer and peasant organisations have been able to influence regional and international policy. For instance, the Central American federation (ASOCODE) was able to voice members' concerns within food and agriculture (if not macroeconomic) policy debates (Edelman, 1998). It would seem that the influence exercised on agricultural policy by broad-based membership organisations can surpass that of NGO federations and individual NGOs.

In cases where federations have the necessary resources (which usually means they bring together less poor as well as the poorest farmers), they have contracted technology development from national research services, for example, farmer organisations in Mali (World Bank, 1995). In such cases, organisations are not influencing overall agricultural research policy, but the type of work done using existing public resources.

One of the disadvantages of federations is the cost involved. In addition, the greater the number of members in an umbrella group, the harder it becomes to find common platforms. As a result, the federation may take a more generic position regarding policy debate. Individual organisations and their members often find it hard to see the benefits to the organisation of 'higher scale' activities and may become less inclined to be involved. Recognising this, some federations and confederations offer tangible benefits to members (e.g. insurance) to maintain their involvement (Collion and Rondot, 1998). Box 2 highlights some of the weaknesses of federations of organisations.

### **BOX 2. Limitations of Peasant Economic Organisations in the Andean Highlands**

New forms of economic organisation formed by small-scale producers and family farmers are likely to play a major role in eliminating rural poverty and keeping family-based farming viable. However, we do not fully understand how producer organisations (as opposed to traditional political organisations or cooperatives) work as social mechanisms and help their members adapt to the realities of economic liberalisation.

A DFID-funded policy research project, led by Diego Muñoz in association with the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and Programa de Investigación Estratégica en Bolivia (PIEB) ran from 2000 to 2003 (Muñoz, 2004). The project sought to:

- understand the role of Peasant Economic Organisations (Organizaciones económicas campesinas or OECAs) in the agricultural economy and their relation with public policy;
- assess the effects that the OECAs have and could have on peasant families and communities;
- determine alternative public policies and processes that could support and strengthen OECAs; and
- identify public policies and processes that can obstruct and limit the role of OECAs.

The research revealed four main areas of vulnerability, which should be carefully considered before promoting OECAs as a means of 'pro-poor' agricultural development:

**1. Lack of financial accountability and strong leadership.** Leaders of some OECAs had a tendency to respond to their own objectives rather than the broader goals of their members. This, compounded by poor financial accounting and limited transparency in decision making, led to lack of trust, which in turn fostered division rather than unity among members.

**2. Lack of business acumen.** Many OECAs come together for quite prosaic reasons – perhaps to act as local 'partners' in a slaughterhouse project or to buy a truck to transport goods to and from market. Transforming these 'paper organisations' into effective capitalist actors able to compete in the modern marketplace requires internal strategic planning for business development, which is frequently lacking in most OECAs.

**3. Lack of political influence.** OECAs often fall between two legal stools. Many are informal organisations and therefore have problems getting credit from private banks. But neither are they legally recognised Grassroots Territorial Organisations (Organizaciones Territoriales de Base), which means that they have problems getting state resources linked to decentralisation policies. In a policy environment that is highly politicised, OECAs find that they have to be politically active in order to influence the way in which government allocations are made to local municipalities and to direct such resources towards investment in agricultural development. This requires considerable political skill and insider knowledge, which is often in short supply in these organisations.

**4. Lack of market power.** Rapid economic liberalisation has produced a kind of market 'free for all' where OECAs have little access to strategic knowledge and information to give them a comparative advantage over other competitors. Thus, they frequently find themselves competing in niche markets where margins are low or negotiating with other market actors who are better positioned to set the rules of the game. In addition, the most innovative and enterprising members sometimes become frustrated by what they perceive as their organisations' slow response to new market opportunities and break away to set up their own independent businesses. The result is that the poorest and most marginal members are left behind.

In Bolivia and elsewhere, new forms of confederation are required if OECAs are to participate in national and global markets from a position of strength. OECAs are nevertheless important vehicles for learning and training leaders or managers who then go on to form more purely commercial enterprises. In this respect, OECAs play an important role as intermediary organisations in the transition from state-managed to free market agrifood economies.

## Journalism and research

As noted earlier, the 'deliberative' or 'public sphere' view of civil society means bringing more voices into public debate. This can be done directly or indirectly, by producing and circulating information on the ideas, needs and views of the poor. Journalism and certain types of research have key roles to play in highlighting such views. For instance, commentators suggested that India avoided widespread famine in the 1960s partly because a free and active press prevented the state from continuing with agricultural and other policies that were manifestly urban biased (Corbridge, 1997). Donors are used to working with the products of research, although not usually with the explicit goal of strengthening the public sphere. Rather, they support agricultural research to provide a direct input into policy formation and technology development.

Civil society plays an important role in generating good quality independent research to influence policy debates and generate policy choices. Despite widespread agreement among development agencies and development research institutes on the need to strengthen the interface between the voice of the poor and pro-poor policy, and on the importance of research for evidence-based policy, the field is under-resourced. Although CSOs increasingly recognise the need to use evidence and engage with policy processes more effectively, and Southern development research institutes and think tanks are emerging to fill that role, they often have poor capacity to provide policy advice and

connections between them are weak (ODI, 2004). Policymakers bemoan the inability of many researchers to make their findings accessible, digestible and on time for policy discussions. Partners in Southern development research institutes increasingly demand long-term capacity building support, for example the Botswana Institute for Development Policy Analysis, and the Namibian Economic Policy Research Unit.

## **2.5 Poverty, organisation and networks: bridging the gaps**

In general, the poor lack access to formal networks. In addition, the relative costs of organising networks are greater for poor people. It is therefore particularly difficult to build CSOs that project the voice of the poor in policy debates, creating connections between the concerns of the poor and agricultural policy – particularly the further away that policy debates occur from poor people. There are different ways to bridge these gaps, although, at present, these are often informal processes. However, if such processes can be institutionalised, they can become the first step in building new types of formal arrangements for raising the voice of the poor.

### **Consultations with proxy institutions**

Policymakers most frequently consult with NGOs or bodies such as the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP) as proxies for the poor. The validity of such approaches depends entirely on the quality of these organisations' own relationships with the poor (see earlier discussion of NGOs under 'Networks' and 'Federations').

### **Direct consultations with the poor**

This is the principle underlying the participatory approach to agricultural development. In the early years, the emphasis was on seeking ideas from the poor about technology, natural resource management etc. Interactions were informal and, although they were often repeated, they did not necessarily lead to formal institutional arrangements for eliciting the views of the poor. In later years, similar approaches were used to elicit views on policy – or at least views that would have implications for policy. The 'Voices of the Poor' initiative of the World Bank<sup>5</sup> was a large-scale exercise of this type, and had many implications for agriculture. A slightly more structured approach – targeting specific domains of agricultural policy – is 'citizen's juries' (Smith and Wales, 1999), which have been used in contexts as diverse as India (Pimbert and Wakeford, 2002) and the UK (O'Brien, 2003; Kenyon and Nevin, 2001). These interactions are more formal, although they do not necessarily lead to enduring institutional arrangements through which poor people can express their views (Box 3).

#### **BOX 3. Prajateerpu: A Citizen's Jury on Food Futures in India**

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<sup>5</sup> The World Bank's Voices of the Poor initiative consulted 60,000 people in 60 countries and produced numerous reports and several books (e.g. Narayan and Petesch, 2002; Narayan et al., 2000). Some of the researchers on the Voices project have published criticisms, pointing out that there were multiple filters before the supposedly 'unmediated' voices appeared in the final publication. Others have questioned its methodological integrity, stating: 'Serious flaws in the approach of the study throw into question exactly whose voices are calling for the reconceptualisation of development' (Pender, 2001). For further information, see the Voices of the Poor website ([www.worldbank.org/poverty/voices/index.htm](http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/voices/index.htm)).

A 'citizens' jury' is a means of providing concerned citizens with information that allows them to develop arguments and influence those with power over their lives. It is based on the conviction that non-experts can make informed recommendations on issues concerning the current and future well being of their fellow citizens. Citizen's juries require a number of people and perspectives, an opportunity to interrogate them, clearly presented information and a facilitator who ensures balanced debate.

Prajateerpu, a citizens' jury on food and farming futures in Andhra Pradesh, India, was an exercise in deliberative democracy involving marginal farmers (Pimbert and Wakeford, 2002). The jury comprised small-scale and marginal farmers, including *adivasi* (indigenous) people, and small-scale traders, food processors and consumers. Over two-thirds of the jury were women. The hearings took place in Medak District over one week in 2001. The jury members were presented with three different scenarios, each of which was advocated by key proponents representing government, the private sector and civil society groups. It was up to the jury to decide which of the three scenarios would provide them with the best opportunities to enhance their livelihoods, food security and environment.

**Scenario 1: Vision 2020.** This scenario was put forward by the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh and supported by a World Bank loan. It proposed consolidation of small farms and rapid increases in mechanisation and modernisation. Production enhancing technologies, such as genetic modification, would be introduced in farming and food processing, reducing the number of people on the land from 70 per cent to 40 per cent by 2020.

**Scenario 2: An export-based cash crop model of organic production.** This vision was based on proposals from the International Forum for Organic Agriculture (IFOAM) and the International Trade Centre (UNCTAD/WTO) for environmentally friendly farming linked to national and international markets. The vision is driven by the demand from supermarkets in the North for cheap organic produce and compliance with new eco-labelling standards.

**Scenario 3: Localised food systems.** This scenario was based on increased self-reliance for rural communities, low external input agriculture, re-localisation of food production, markets and local economies, with long distance trade in goods that are surplus to production or not produced locally.

The jury/scenario workshop process was overseen by an independent panel: a group of external observers drawn from a variety of interest groups. It was their role to ensure that each 'Food Future' was presented in a fair and unprejudiced way, and that the process was trustworthy and not taken over by any one interest group. The key conclusions reached by the jury – their 'vision' – included a desire for:

- food and farming for self-reliance and community control over resources; and
- maintaining healthy soils, diverse crops, trees and livestock, and building on indigenous knowledge, practical skills and local institutions;

And opposition to:

- the proposed reduction of those making their living from the land from 70%–40%;
- land consolidation and displacement of rural people;

- contract farming;
- labour-displacing mechanisation;
- genetically modified crops – including Vitamin A rice & Bt cotton; and
- loss of control over medicinal plants, including exports.

Prajateerpu shows how the poor and marginalised can be included in the policy process. The jury outcomes and the controversy around it sparked considerable public debate regarding the framing and implementation of policies on food and agriculture in Andhra Pradesh. Whether this debate can translate into real policy change and democratic pluralism remains to be seen (Scoones and Thompson, 2003).

## 2.6 Civil society participation in PRSP processes

Since 1999, Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) processes have provided an important opportunity for CSOs to engage with governments and help ensure that the rural poor have voice and opportunity to influence policy. Supported by the World Bank, PRSP processes can open up the debate on national policy and generate discussion over genuine policy choices.

From the perspective of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and donor agencies in particular, participation by local CSOs is expected to broaden national ownership of policy beyond the level of the government. However, interpretations of the principle of civil society participation vary between IFIs, civil society and governments. Underpinning these variations is the difference between civil society participation as a means for effective poverty reduction, and participation as a means for non-governmental actors to gain voice in their country's policy making and political processes (McGee et al., 2001).

McGee et al. (2001) presents a review of the experiences and influence of civil society participation in the development of PRSPs in sub-Saharan Africa. In practice, 'participation' in the first round of PRSP formulation has been limited mainly to consultation, leading to frustration among many civil society actors. Moreover, the consultation practices adopted have been flawed in many respects, especially in terms of weak provision of information to civil society. There are several reasons why consultation was the only realistic expectation in many countries; these relate to lack of state capacity, time pressure to produce policy, and limited exposure of governments to civil society. The value added by civil society participation includes:

- ensuring a participatory process takes place by increasing sharing of information;
- broadening the range of the PRSP process and enhancing its quality;
- influencing the content of PRSPs, particularly in drawing attention to issues of marginalisation, exclusion, regional differences in deprivation and a more multi-dimensional analysis of the causes of poverty;
- shifting the power balance between donors and governments;
- changing attitudes among governments, e.g. forging links between participatory processes and governance issues ; and
- generating examples of good participatory practice.

PRSP processes have created a more open dialogue between civil society and government than previously existed. Networks of policy advocates have sprung up or have been strengthened in numbers, capacity, confidence, contacts and influence. Some of these represent people or interests that were previously very marginal (e.g. the Pastoralist Strategy Group in Kenya, described by McGee et al., 2001). International NGOs are helping to strengthen the capacity of national civil society structures to engage with PRSP processes. In general, however, it is large, national NGOs based in capital cities and other urban areas that have participated most in consultations about the policy content of PRSPs. Rural NGOs have been much less active (Driscoll et al., 2004).

An important factor in assessing participation by civil society in government-led PRSP processes is whether participatory processes take place within civil society, lending legitimacy, representation, transparency and credibility to the inputs the CSOs bring to the dialogue with government. In some cases, representation is limited by lack of capacity to outreach and consult constituencies; in others because the CSOs are dominated by urban professionals who do not relate well to poor communities, or by interest groups more interested in pressing their own case. Pressures of conditionality and shortage of time often prevent governments, IFIs, donors and CSOs themselves fully exploring the representation of key participants and their ability to express the concerns of the poor.

Despite some negative factors, participation and lobbying by NGOs has successfully affected agriculture-related strategies and policy content (Driscoll et al., 2004). For example:

- In Zambia, civil society made inputs to the PRSP by forming working groups along similar lines to those of government but extending their remit to better reflect issues of concern to the poor, adding 'Growth, Agriculture and Food Security' to the theme of Agriculture.
- In Kenya, the CSO Pastoralist Strategy Group lobbied successfully for pastoralist areas and concerns to be covered by the Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) and then incorporated into the PRSP.
- Civil society lobbying for broader 'sustainable livelihood' perspectives in Bolivia, Kenya and Zambia seems to have tempered traditional agricultural policies (McGee et al., 2001).
- In the Bolivia PRSP, small-scale producers received recognition as a sub-sector requiring supportive policies to enhance their potential contribution to growth.
- NGOs in Mozambique were instrumental in making local communities aware of the threat of land reforms. Their subsequent campaign for the law to be revised was largely successful.

## **2.7 Areas of concern: sustainability and gender**

### **Financing civil society institutions in rural areas**

NGOs, producers' organisations, social movements and most forms of non-traditional CSO often have difficulty financing their activities. In many cases these institutions depend on subsidies and grants from third party sources. NGOs have great difficulty in raising resources domestically, except when they can secure government contracts. The short-term nature and preconditions of these contracts do not support capacity building, which

needs to be medium- or long-term and adaptive). It is also difficult to use government resources to support groups that are lobbying against government policy. While donor funding can support long-term capacity building, this funding remains uncertain.

With the very significant exception of organisations based on micro-financial services, savings and credit, membership organisations of poor people have great difficulty generating resources from their members. They may therefore move into economic activities to generate income and fund their activities (Bebbington, 1996; Thorp et al., forthcoming). A frequent problem with this option is that the logic of such activities – demands for quality products, pressure to reduce bulking costs, the need to ensure credit is repaid etc. – encourage the organisation to focus their activities on the less poor who are less of a risk (Bebbington, 1996). With time, the organisation's attention may turn away from its poorest members. This is less likely to happen, however, when an organisation's economic activities require the participation of small-scale producers. This happens most frequently when the organisation needs large quantities of raw material, and needs to purchase products from smallholders. This occurred in the successful cases of the Colombian Federation of Coffee Producers (Thorp, 2002) and the sugar cooperatives of Western India.

The problems of financing on-going activities are compounded by concerns about the financial and time constraints of creating organisations, which can take decades to become consolidated.

## **Gender and voice**

Although the role of women in agriculture is becoming increasingly recognised, rural institutions tend to maintain the male dominance that characterises many rural societies. Raising the voice of poor women in discussions of agriculture therefore presents a particular challenge. NGOs and women's self-help organisations can play an important role in improving women's access to technology and services and helping them to articulate their concerns.

As Nagar and Raju (2003) note with reference to India, there are many obstacles preventing women's concerns being raised within NGOs. Broad social structures, such as caste and class, can influence the way women are treated by NGOs, and can limit their voice, even if they do the same kind of work as men. A similar situation has been observed in Bangladesh by Lewis and Siddiqi (2004). Furthermore, NGOs' reliance on government contracts and concerns for their own financial sustainability have been seen to dissuade organisations from addressing more structural obstacles to the voice of poor women farmers (Nagar and Raju, 2003; Lewis and Siddiqi, (2004). Women suffer discrimination within many large-scale membership organisations, including traditional community-level organisations (Deere and Leon, 2001). In Ecuador, for instance, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) estimated that less than 10 per cent of the members of community assemblies were women, and that women held only 1 per cent of leadership positions (cited in Deere and Leon, 2001).

A large barrier to women's voice in such organisations is that participation is often linked to land tenure, the rules of which tend to favour male ownership. In this regard, the success

of women's and indigenous movements in shaping new agrarian legislation to be more inclusive of women's tenure rights is very significant (Whitehead and Tsikata, 2003; Deere and Leon, 2001). This case demonstrates that large-scale organisations can enhance the voice of women in policy and institutions.

## **3. What we don't know: areas of remaining debate and disagreement**

### **3.1. Civil society organisations**

#### **Sustainability of CSOs**

The success or failure of the collective action strategies of CSOs depends on a complex mix of factors:

- **internal:** values, standards of conduct, formal rules, mechanisms for enforcing rules and commitments, types of leadership;
- **external:** communication and cooperation among various stakeholders, links to positive 'drivers of change'; and
- **contextual:** in cultural terms: individualism versus solidarity; in economic terms: competition versus cooperation; and in political terms: autocracy versus democracy.

Getting the blend of internal and external factors right is perhaps the greatest challenge to the long-term sustainability of CSOs.

There are many concerns about the costs of organisation and administration in farmers' organisations. Few empirical studies have calculated the actual costs and benefits involved in creating and sustaining these organisations, neither have they compared such costs with those of other rural institutions. The investment costs required to achieve sustainability are far from clear.

#### **Gender dimensions of rural institutions**

It is often difficult for women leaders and members to voice their concerns about gender dynamics within CSOs. Given that their primary concern is frequently to strengthen the organisation (Deere and Leon, 2001), women leaders can sometimes shy away from criticising their organisation's patriarchy and the male dominated voices it projects into agricultural debates. While observers frequently comment on this problem, gender dynamics within CSOs are poorly understood, and opinions are divided as to the seriousness of the issue.

#### **Direct support or supporting an enabling environment**

Given the importance of information and knowledge in supporting the emergence of strong CSOs, there is uncertainty as to the role of bilateral and multilateral donors in providing direct support. We know from repeated experience that disbursing too much money too quickly to membership organisations can distort and damage them. So, can large-scale

donors – and in particular their agricultural and rural development programmes – find ways of providing intensive support to CSOs?

World Bank publications recognise this problem, suggesting that in many cases donors should concentrate on facilitating enabling policies and institutions (such as demand-driven agricultural investment funds) rather than 'use their financial power to impose changes on cooperative members and promoters' (World Bank, 1995; see also World Bank, 2003; Collion and Rondot, 2001).

Whether the Bank (and other influential donors) can follow this sound advice remains to be seen. Generally speaking, the collective action strategies of the rural poor require forms of organisation based on the principle of achieving objectives gradually, starting with those that are less complex (building human and social capital) and moving on to those of greater complexity (eliminating poverty, modifying power relationships and deepening democracy). The policies and strategies of some international agencies, governments and donors, which demand immediate and visible results against complex development objectives within three to five years (frequently the time horizon of many country strategies), may be dramatic but they will not be effective, much less sustainable.

A corollary point of debate is whether donors should focus on supporting producer and membership organisations indirectly, via support to NGOs who would then work directly with the membership organisations. While successful organisations have often emerged in partnership with NGOs, there are also many examples of NGOs who cannot let go of their organisation, and who therefore truncate its development (Lewis and Siddiqi, forthcoming; Nagar and Raju, 2003). The conditions under which NGOs can support membership organisations without creating dependencies are still not well understood.

## **The role of the state**

The state exerts a large influence on the capacity of CSOs to project the voices of the poor. This role can be very positive, for example, when the state creates demand-driven agricultural service funds, or when state reformists help strengthen producer organisations and peasant movements. However, it can also be negative, when government and governing parties quash such organisations, turn them into instruments of their own political strategies or deliberately create barriers to the organisation process. Opinions are therefore divided on how far and in what ways it is feasible to work with governments to create more opportunities for the poor to be heard.

## **The role of the private sector**

The private sector has considerable influence over the ability of CSOs to participate successfully in restructuring agri-food markets. As a result of concerns about food safety standards, quality and convenience, consumers can expect to buy a diverse range of foods at an affordable price. The rise of the supermarket format has accompanied the globalisation of supply chains and in some respects is driving their transformation (Reardon, et al. 2003). This opens up new opportunities for agricultural producers in developing countries, whose livelihoods depend on finding markets for their produce. But there are fears that the way these supply chains are managed – through standards and

certification processes – are also a potential barrier for smaller, under-resourced producers. Given the importance of these producers for rural poverty reduction and sustainable development, this is a major concern (see Fox and Vorley, 2004: Working Paper 13).

In order to participate in restructured markets, small-scale producers typically find they must 'cooperate to compete' (Berdegué, 2001). Traditionally, this type of market-oriented collective action was managed through farmer cooperatives and similar economic organisations, but many of these are poorly equipped to respond to the new private standards and are unable to negotiate with key private actors in the supply chain. It is generally agreed that finding an organisational form that allows small-scale producers to compete successfully in the marketplace and influence private policy is critical for promoting pro-poor agricultural development. However, it is far from certain what the precise modalities are.

### **How to reconcile the voices of rich and poor in membership organisations**

Reviews of membership organisations have concluded that 'successful groups among the poor tend to exclude the layers below' (Thorp et al., forthcoming). This is especially the case for groups whose functions relate primarily to economic service provision, marketing etc. (Thorp et al., forthcoming; Bebbington, 1996). Discussions of farmers' movements generally conclude that the demands of these movements are biased towards the needs of rich producers, or at least those who produce a surplus (Brass, 1995). They tend not to voice concerns of particular relevance to the rural poor, such as minimum agricultural wages, agricultural and rural labour opportunities and harassment (Brass, 1995). Instead, they make demands for higher crop prices and direct subsidies that, in leading to higher profits, would ultimately fund the substitution of capital for labour (Banaji, 1994).

Some authors are less sure about this conclusion. For instance, Omvedt (1994) argues that Indian farmers' demands for higher crop prices would allow more surplus retention in rural areas, creating investment capital that would allow rural industrialisation and increase job opportunities for the poor. Varshney (1995) concludes that poor farmers benefit from supporting these movements, although they would gain even more if lobbying focused on agricultural policies that cut production costs rather than raising prices and subsidising production. Thorp et al. (forthcoming) are also cautious in extrapolating too much from their conclusions on the exclusion of the poor within membership organisations. Even if the voices and interests of some layers of the poorest are excluded in such organisations, some poor voices are still likely to be included. They suggest that the implication is not to work against such organisations or to criticise them too much, but to support additional organisations that specifically represent the poorest members of society.

### **Which organisations, which environments, which agricultural policy?**

There are several different views on the types of organisations that are most effective in projecting the voices of different levels of the rural poor in issues of agricultural policy.

Agricultural systems can be characterised in terms of their agro-ecological potential (high vs. low potential land) and socio-economic conditions (labour availability, degree of market

liberalisation/integration, quality of infrastructure etc.). These classifications can help identify the most appropriate forms of agricultural research and policy to pursue in different environments. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) has developed a typology to guide agricultural research decisions, with a particular aim to produce 'pro-poor agricultural research agendas' (Hazell and Haddad, 2001). The IFPRI framework seeks to prioritise the inter-regional allocation of resources to reduce poverty nationally and to define the type of research most appropriate for each major sub-region in medium- and low-income countries. A key question posed by the typology is: 'How empowered are the region's poor?' The authors suggest that the existing nature and level of empowerment should have implications for agricultural policy priorities in any given region. At the same time, ways of fostering empowerment through agricultural policy should vary according to regional characteristics. Yet the actual typology of policies and environments finally proposed by IFPRI to guide policy decisions does not include a component for analysing the degree to which poor people have become empowered.

This inconsistency reflects more general gaps in thinking (not just in IFPRI) on:

- how existing civil society arrangements influence, and how are they influenced by, agricultural policy?
- do these arrangements benefit the rural poor – and if not, why not?
- how might approaches to rural empowerment vary depending on other key environmental, socio-economic and political characteristics of the region and its agricultural systems? For instance, in what context might agricultural policy aim to foster advocacy groups, marketing groups, value adding groups or particular types of governance groups?

Any framework seeking to guide strategic decisions related to agricultural policy must first tackle these thorny questions and address the links between organisational forms and functions and their relation to rural people's empowerment.

## **3.2. Policy processes**

### **Policy networks**

While policy networks have become more prominent in recent years, their importance to organised forms of lobbying, advocacy and consultation remains unclear. Neither do we know how well donor agencies understand the operation of policy networks or how they engage in constructive dialogue with them, especially when their staff lack country experience and contacts. Some authors therefore doubt the practical utility of focusing on such networks.

### **CSOs and political mobilisation of the poor**

Opinions differ on what are the most effective strategies through which the rural poor can project their concerns and influence policy. The crude distinction is between protest/oppositional strategies and negotiated, reformist strategies, although there are many shades between the two extremes.

Political parties continue to be the major vehicle linking citizens and the state. Through them, actors can gain a seat at the table in policy debates. NGOs and membership

organisations have long debated if and how they should engage with political parties. In some cases, political parties have fostered civil society organisations.

In Brazil, the MST (discussed in Section 2.4) has links with the Workers Party and now the government and in India, farmers' organisations are linked to the Communist Party and state government of Kerala. The experiences of these organisations suggest that such linkages are crucial for sustained projection of the concerns of the poor into agricultural policy. Yet the risks of co-optation and politicisation remain strong, and many organisations have been terminally damaged by such relationships.

## **Public debate on agricultural policy**

The role played by research of various kinds (academic, applied, investigative/journalistic etc.) in influencing agricultural policy remains poorly understood and contested. Some argue that the new poverty agenda and concerns to show 'impact' might draw resources away from research. Yet the information produced by research can make an important contribution to public debate and opinion formation. Research on agriculture and poverty can also be conducted in such a way that its very process expands and strengthens a deliberative civil society. Links between research and journalism on agricultural and rural issues have been little explored – in practice or in research.

## **Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers**

The galvanising effect of PRSP processes on civil society and the measures taken to increase CSOs' capacity for advocacy have been critical in enabling civil society to prove itself in these new arenas (McGee et al., 2001). Civil society participation can add considerable value to PRSP processes, but this potential is underused. In practice, 'participation' has often been limited to consultation. McGee et al., (2001) identifies the following knowledge gaps:

- flaws in the consultation process need to be addressed and practices need to go beyond consultation to genuine engagement, achieved through civil society taking a strong role in monitoring;
- unrealistic expectations need to be revised so as to preserve and enhance morale and commitment to participation; and
- it remains a concern that some of the main CSO actors in PRSPs do not have broad legitimacy as representatives of the poor. Attention to participatory practices within CSOs that have spoken on behalf of the poor in PRSP formulation merits greater attention.

## **4. Closing the evidence gap**

Each of the issues identified in the previous section leads directly to an evidence gap that requires further research. Given the political nature and the complexity of these issues, answers are unlikely to be found in formal research processes, accompanied by dialogue and policy processes.

## 4.1 Creating and sustaining civil society organisations

CSOs are not necessarily inclusive. There may be entry barriers for the poorest of the poor who lack the minimum assets and, in general, do not belong to formal groups. The cost of reaching the unorganised can be high, but projects financed by donors may help improve inclusion, and make sure that the voices of the poorest are heard in policy development processes.

Some unanswered questions include:

- What are the real costs of creating and sustaining producer and other forms of rural membership organisations? How do they relate to the benefits?
- To what extent do CSOs exclude women's voices, and under what conditions have women gained more space inside membership organisations to voice their views on agricultural development?
- In what specific ways has government been able to foster civil society participation in agricultural policy processes?
- How can pro-poor reformists in government create room for manoeuvre and how are they best supported?
- Which types of organisations are best at giving voice to the interests of specific strata among the rural poor in different agro-ecological and socio-economic settings?
- Under what conditions can poor people's voices be heard in, and projected by, membership organisations that also involve wealthier farmers?
- How do institutional arrangements for enhancing the voice of the poor vary according to the other characteristics of a region's agricultural sector (such as the openness of its markets, quality of infrastructure, labour supply etc.)?
- In what regional and political economic circumstances is it preferable to foster advocacy groups, and in which marketing groups? Are there certain types of agricultural political economy in which it is preferable to pursue voice indirectly (through other kinds of civil society arrangement) and types under which it is better to build membership organisations?

## 4.2 Policy processes

Investments to strengthen the capacity of CSOs to represent the interests of poor and marginalised people need to promote an enabling environment through policy dialogue with government and, increasingly, through more effective engagement in PRSP processes. This might entail, for example:

- obtaining formal (i.e. legal) recognition of those organisations from the state;
- ensuring that CSOs are seen as full partners in the 'pro-poor agricultural growth' agenda and not peripheral to it;
- formation and strengthening of national, regional and international networks;
- establishing dialogue between policymakers and CSO researchers and policy analysts; and
- providing up-to-date information to CSOs to facilitate their participation in developing agriculture and rural development policies and preparing and implementing poverty reduction strategies.

More knowledge needs to be gained in several areas to help guide the right investments:

- What investments are needed to help CSOs become more effective at participating in (public and private) policy processes:
  - Internal governance structures and accountability mechanisms?
  - Internal and external information systems?
  - Capacity to articulate members' needs and negotiate?
  - Technical and managerial capacity to implement activities?
  - Strategic capabilities for policy analysis and defining a vision and strategy to achieve objectives?
  - Tactical capabilities for negotiating with powerful public and private actors and creating 'room to manoeuvre'?
- How can civil society organisations engage with political parties on issues of agricultural policy without being co-opted or 'captured' by politicians?
- How can non-formal policy networks be identified and understood relatively quickly?
- How can external support agencies engage with networks in efforts to promote the voice of the poor in agricultural policy?
- How can research be more closely linked to agricultural policy processes in a way that brings poor people and their concerns more fully into public debate?
- How can CSOs work with other actors in the agri-food system to inform and influence private standard setting and certification processes and ensure that they are not exclusionary?

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