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Rural Producer Organizations (RPOs), empowerment of farmers and results of collective action

Introductory note

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1. Growing recognition of the role of RPOs

The economic and institutional context of agriculture and other rural activities (livestock breeding, small-scale fishing) has over the past 25 years undergone profound changes: State withdrawal from agricultural support and privatizations, market liberalization, democratization of public life and administrative decentralization, etc. The reforms undertaken changed the farmers' production conditions and, especially, the conditions of family farms which constitute the most widespread form of agricultural organization in the world. The impacts of reforms were particularly felt in most countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia where the majority of the world's rural populations are concentrated as well as the bulk of active farmers (estimated at 1.350 billion by the FAO) whose number continues to increase in spite of rapid urbanization.

Some farmers have been able to maximize the opportunities afforded by market liberalization. Such is not the case with many smallholders who are facing a number of economic difficulties: disorganization of product supply and marketing that are reorganizing at varying pace depending on the place and product concerned, increasing scarcity and rising cost of credit, price instability, strong competition for the supply of export and national markets, all compounded by the lack of infrastructure and limited access to support services (information, training, counseling) in some places.

In many regions of the world, particularly where rain-fed farming is carried out, production conditions have deteriorated and living conditions are extremely difficult as testified by the high prevalence of poverty (70% of the world poor live in rural areas), the precarious food situation (according to the FAO, three quarters of the 800 million people suffering from chronic malnutrition live in rural areas) and an intensification of migration, since remittances have become vital for the survival of many families.

It is against this background that RPOs have developed, over the past 10 to 15 years, and are gradually asserting themselves as full-fledged actors of agricultural and rural

development. Such “assertion” (Hirschman, 1970) is gaining increased and renewed attention from institutional actors. There is consensus, though sometimes ambiguous, about the fact that RPOs must make an important contribution in determining and implementing sustainable pro-poor development strategies, and their (current and potential) role is vital in three main areas:

- (i) First of all, to provide services tailored to the demands and resources of their members: information, training, access to technologies (research, agricultural counseling); organization of input supply and output marketing; access to credits; management of natural resources (water, pastures, forest, fisheries resources, etc).
- (ii) Secondly, to improve the market-empowerment of rural producers: enhancing their bargaining power vis-à-vis other economic stakeholders (suppliers, processors, traders); active contribution to the design and implementation of new forms of coordination that are being constructed within commodity sectors.
- (iii) Lastly, to leverage decision-making at local, national, sub-regional and international levels, in order to foster agricultural and rural policies that mainstream the peculiarities of family farming and their key role in poverty alleviation and maintaining societal balance.

This brief introduction addresses three questions:

- What have been the major developments in the life of RPOs over the past 15 years?
- How and to what extent does the action of RPOs improve the production and living conditions of smallholders that are the majority therein?
- What are the main challenges and constraints of collective action both in terms of the functioning of RPOs and in terms of relations with other actors?

2. Unprecedented and diversified organization dynamics

In most African, Asian and Latin American countries, RPOs experience important developments and sometimes restructuring. In spite of considerable differences between countries, two trends stand out: the multiplication of local groups and the enhancement of federation dynamics.

Multiplication of local groups

State withdrawal and democratization (though sometimes mitigated) of public life encouraged the empowerment of grassroots organizations hitherto under the supervision of public authorities, and the creation or consolidation of very diverse local groups. In sub-Saharan Africa, recent surveys highlight the scope of the phenomenon: 65% of the villages investigated in Senegal (De Janry and Sadoulet, 2004) have at least one group and this is the same situation for 91% of villages in Burkina Faso (Arcand, 2004). The average rate of formal rural household membership in at least one group is 67% in Senegal and 62% in Burkina Faso. Though fragmented, available data for other countries point to a rapid increase in the number of local groups. Thus, in the departments of Zou and Collines (Benin), between 1987 and 2001, the number of village groups rose from 52 to 578. Women’s groups which were inexistent in the late 1980s were estimated at 250 in 2001, (Agoua and Mercoiret, 2000). In Tanzania, many groups have been set up in recent times: the MVIWATA network estimates that there are over one thousand

grassroots groups made up of 5 to 20 persons, which belong to the hundred or so local networks it coordinates (Kaburire and Ruvuga, 2006). The same developments can be observed in most countries (Cameroon, Chad, Ghana, Kenya, etc.).

In most Latin American countries, local groups are also in thousands. This is the case in Andean countries where cooperatives and local groups of diverse statuses co-exist. In Ecuador for instance, in 1993, there were nearly 3000 grassroots organizations including 600 emerging associations (Santana, 1997) ; in 2003, FENOCIN² alone claimed 1300 grassroots member organizations bringing together 200 000 families spread over 18 provinces, etc. South Cone countries have a strong cooperative tradition linked in part, and in some cases, to agricultural reform policies. In most countries, cooperatives and producer associations co-exist. Such is the case for instance in Brazil where the "associativismo" is very active in Nordeste and in the south of the country and is taking root too in Cerrados (Sperry, 2003).

In Asia, the situation varies from country to country but the developments seem globally to be the same. Cooperatives are numerous in India: there are 135 000 cooperatives with a membership of 150 million farmers accounting for an estimated turnover of US\$3.5 billion in 1998 (Draperi, 2003). Far-reaching reforms are affecting Chinese cooperatives, some of which are becoming "autonomous", and new forms of grassroots organizations are seeing the light of day, namely Farmers Professional Associations (FPA), though still in the minority (World Bank, 2006). In Vietnam, the amendment of the legal framework of cooperatives has led to profound changes in their functioning and to the establishment of many groups of voluntary farmers. In Indonesia, grassroots groups are also numerous. They include certain "Kelempok Tani" that are still operational, cooperatives or groups bringing together farmers and fishermen (Bourgeois, 2003).

Rural producer organization dynamics at local level constitute a "hard fact" ("fait collectif massif") (Olivier de Sardan, 1994). Despite their extreme diversity, the following four remarks may be made about them:

- (i) Local groups adopt very diverse statutes, subject to laws in force: the legal frameworks of cooperatives evolve in all countries³ ; new legal frameworks are also enacted and many other organizations are being set up on the side of cooperatives from which they seek to distinguish themselves, even if they adopt the main principles and characteristics of cooperatives: groups, associations, etc.
- (ii) Schematically, two major categories of local organizations may be identified:
 - Specialized groups, often related to a sector, and which perform one or several economic (supply, marketing, processing, etc.) and sometimes technical (information, counseling) functions;
 - Multi-sector groups that strive to take into account the diversity of the economic and social activities of their members. They themselves are hardly dedicated to a single type of production.

² FENOCIN : Federacion nacional de organizaciones campesinas, indigenas y negras

³ Cf. especially the United Nations General Assembly, 58th session, the role of cooperatives in social development I, Secretary General's report, July 2003.

- (iii) At least from the outset, the proliferation of local groups is translated by massive recruitment. In sub-Saharan Africa for instance, members of many organizations (particularly multi-sector organizations) make up the majority of socially vulnerable groups (poor farmers, young people, and women) and women's associations and groups are growing in numbers. The same developments are observable in Andean countries for instance.
- (iv) Grassroots organizations have varied levels of activity. While some account for huge volumes of activities, others have a genuine social base but "are idling" for want of ideas, technical support and adequate resources⁴. The level of activity of local groups and their performances are linked to their capacity to pool resources and thus connect to the outside world. Such capacity is much more important for local groups dedicated to a commodity that is strategic for national economy (cotton, rice, cocoa, etc.), than for groups that are members of a second degree organization or "isolated groups" that only bank on their own strengths.⁵

Enhancement of federative dynamics

In countries of the North, farmers have a long history of leveraging political decision-making. During the reforms of the past two decades, they were able to secure deadlines, special dispensations, compensatory and support measures from public authorities.

Such has not been the case in many other countries where economic and institutional reforms were largely imposed on farmers and their organizations that were often poorly structured at national level, that in some places remained dependent on the development bodies that initiated them, and where they originated from farmers themselves, have generally gained little recognition from institutional actors and public authorities. However, the situation is changing and in most African and Latin American countries, and in some Asian countries, RPOs at national and sub-regional levels are intensifying and restructuring.

In sub-Saharan Africa (Mercoiret, 2006), federative organizations are being set up at regional and national levels around the main sectors (cotton, cocoa, rice, livestock breeding, fishing, etc.), and around savings and loans (in Benin for instance). Sometimes, they however assemble regional multi-sector organizations (the case of FONGS – Action Paysanne in Senegal). The grouping of federations of sometimes very different nature and backgrounds in national coordinations is becoming a general trend (Kenya, Tanzania, Senegal, Chad, Guinea, etc.) even if they are faced with considerable obstacles in some countries. The displacement of some decision-making circles at sub-regional level within the framework of regional integration leads national federations to unite: hence the set up of the Network of Producer Organizations and Agricultural Producers of West Africa (ROPPA), the Regional Platform of Central African Producer Organizations (PROPAC) and the Eastern African Farmer Federation (EAFF).

In Latin America, the crises and changes that affected family farming exacerbated significantly the diversity of rural family situations. Major unions and "gremial" entities have

⁴ Examples abound in Africa (Lavigne - Delville, 1994), in Senegal (de Janvry and Sadoulet, 2004) in Burkina Faso, (Arcand, 2004), in Benin, (Agoua et Mercoiret), in Chad (Cirad, 1996), etc.

⁵ One of the advantages of World Bank-funded agricultural services support programmes is actually to help isolated groups emerge from their isolation. Such was the case for instance of PSAPOP in Senegal (Saliou Sarr, 2006).

had to adjust to the highly diversified demands arising from such changes and sometimes have significantly restructured their programs and modes of operation (Del Pozo, 1997). Among the many developments that took place, one may cite two: first, the creation of (regional and national) organizations focused on production and marketing such as the National Coordination of Coffee Producers' Organizations (CNO) in Mexico (Celis Calbejas, 2000) ; second, the empowerment of indigenous organizations that introduced the cultural issue in public debate. New organizations are being set up in some countries. An example of such organizations is the Mesa Nacional Campesina in Costa Rica. Sub-regional organizations are also being born, such as COPROFAM (Coordinadora de las Organizaciones de Productores del MERCOSUR) for instance.

Lastly, it should be noted that the importance of international debate for the future of rural actors has led to networking between organizations on different continents, to their frequent accession to international federations such as IFAP and Via Campesina for agriculture and the World Fishermen's Forum (WFF). Though still rare, international farmer federations may launch common initiatives as demonstrated by a joint paper presented in 2000 at the UN Economic and Social Council.⁶

3. RPO action improves the production and living conditions of rural populations and changes relations between rural societies and their environment

Throughout the world, RPOs have recorded numerous successes in terms of support to technical innovation, provision of services to farmers (information, training, agricultural counseling), organization of supply, improved access to credits and marketing of farm products. Their leverage on political decision-making is increasing though it remains varied and the results of some negotiations with public authorities do not always have the expected impact and are sometimes even challenged. During the upcoming sessions of this workshop, success cases shall be presented alongside the issues they raise and the problems encountered. Failures have also been recorded and many actions have culminated in "half successes" that satisfy neither members, leaders of organizations nor their external partners. Though mitigated, these results however constitute undeniable progress as compared to the past situation and their effects may not be immediately visible and measurable.

This observation leads us to raise four questions that may inform the reflection on the assessment of results obtained.

(i) The nature of results

Through their action, RPOs obtain various kinds of results that are not given equal consideration:

- First, there are technical results (improvement of output, management of water) and economic results (economies of scale generated, impact of actions on farmers' income): they are of key and quantifiable.

⁶ UN Economic and Social Council. Commission on Sustainable Development – 8th session, - 24 April - 5 May 2000 –, Secretary General's Note for the Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue on Sustainable Agriculture, Addendum 2: Discussion paper prepared by the IFAP and Via Campesina.

- Second, there are qualitative results which may concern production practices (product quality, environment-friendly practices, management of pastures or of the impact for instance of actions on households food security). They are sometimes very difficult to measure precisely.
- There is also RPO leverage on political decision-making: such leverage is not easy to assess notwithstanding the fact that all negotiations require huge investments by RPOs in time and resources.
- Lastly, there are results related to institutional enhancement, assessment of which is always delicate. The existence of an RPO depends largely on the material results that it helps to secure. However, its long-term efficiency also depends on its share capital. Now, while it is acknowledged that share capital augments the returns of physical and human capital and that it acts as a “shift factor (or exponent) of the entire production function” (Serageldin and Grootaert, 1998), one should recognize that its enhancement requires significant efforts whose “return” is not measurable in the short-term. With regard to RPOs, many examples show that major successes that are quantifiable and assessable are always the result of accumulation of very small actions sometimes over long periods, and in every domain, which when considered separately may be insignificant but which, day after day, have provided proximity solutions to the concrete problems facing rural populations, built their trust in the efficiency of collective action and strengthened the links between members.

(ii) *The context impacts the results obtained*

RPOs act within an economic and institutional environment marked by very many constraints that hamper their initiatives and jeopardize their results: inadequacy of some legal frameworks, lack of transparency that characterizes many transactions and decisions, difficult access to credits, scarcity and instability of service delivery, “unfair” competition to supply markets, very limited (or lack of) support from public authorities, etc. Results assessment cannot be divorced from the context in which such results were obtained and their improvement requires that efforts be made to render such context more conducive.

(iii) *Diversely realistic and negotiated action programs*

The experiences and capacities of RPOs to design action programs that are tailored to the situations of their members vary significantly. Their capacities to negotiate external assistance which is indispensable for the implementation of such action programs also vary. For young organizations, this sometimes results in programs consistent with their priorities but inadequate in view of their capacities, and in some cases, in disappointing results that may weaken the internal and external credibility of these organizations. Adjustment of priorities and of internal dynamics of organizations to the requirements of external actors, which are interacting with rural populations, sometimes causes many misunderstandings and mutual frustrations particularly when they are not explained and negotiated.

(iv) *RPO contribution to social balance*

The contribution of RPOs to social balance is generally not taken into account while assessing their results because it is diffuse and difficult to quantify. Yet, it is very important and has two main dimensions:

- Based on the experience gained within each organization and on the relations established with external actors, RPOs are gradually building the confidence of rural populations in their own potential and creating conducive conditions for better controlled changes. They encourage "learning, that is discovery, creation and acquisition by the relevant actors of new relational models, new modes of thought, in short new collective capacities" (Crozier, 1977) that contribute to the construction of more democratic societies.
- The role of RPOs seems particularly important in societies experiencing rapid population and economic transitions. In many places, the degradation of living conditions leads to massive rural migration of all segments of the rural population, particularly the youth and those among them who are better trained. Once the urban centre cannot provide enough jobs and in the absence of social safety nets that can cater for the demographic challenge, international migration is increasingly taking root as the most credible alternative. One is obliged to admit that such migration is an unrealistic solution which sometimes engenders extreme situations. Through their actions, RPOs are contributing even modestly to uncovering new alternatives: at local level, they are stimulating innovations in every domain, improving the living environment and rekindling hope. Through their action on public policies, they are striving to create conditions that are more favorable to family farmers' initiatives in agriculture and activity diversification.

4. In their internal operation and interactions with local societies and external actors, RPOs are faced with many difficulties inherent to any collective action.

Though it is often considered as a solution, organizations are always a problem and RPOs are not an exception to the rule as testified by the many tensions that characterize their life and the "weariness" often felt by their leaders.

RPOs are intermediation structures that act as interface between rural societies and their environment. Their aim is to regulate relations between farmers and external economic, institutional and political actors (Mercoiret, Berthomé, 1997). Because of their position, RPOs are "hybrids" (Olivier de Sardan, 1994) that are influenced at once by the characteristics of local societies from which they originate, and by the environment in which they operate. Peculiar constraints therefore arise once issues of "cooperation and conflict" (Crozier, 1977) which are at the core of collective action are raised within the organization (between the different members), between the RPO as collective actor and other forms of social control that exist in the local society, between the RPO and the multiple external actors with which it interacts.

- (i) *A recurrent problem to which RPOs are confronted is the "discipline" of members. The "free-rider" (Olson, 1966) strategy which consists in tapping the organization without assuming the attendant costs (without investing in collective action) applies aptly to the practices of some members. Such strategy is encouraged particularly in emerging organizations or those where material results are limited by three factors: low general incentives proposed, the impossibility of instituting "selective incentives" and the difficulty in applying sanctions (for statutory or social reasons). The limited practical commitment of some members is observable in major federative organizations*

(contrary to the Olsonian theory) and also in very small groups. The different attitudes of organization members are not simply due to size effect (M. Douglas, 1999) or to the short-term material benefits for members. (E. Neveu, 1996).

- (ii) *Considering the heterogeneity of members' situations, the diversity of interests (material and social) and the attendant priorities is always a source of tension within the organization.* In many cases, organizations are "inclusive" from the start (de Janvry, 2004) but tend to become more "exclusive" as they gradually develop their activities (through members selection for instance). Such trend can be verified when organizations specialize, when they seek to reduce transaction costs (by excluding smallholders, remote producers, for instance). Such processes enhance the economic efficiency of the organization but may impede its internal cohesion (if some members of the group have difficulty assuming the social cost of excluding other members) and, they may generate tensions within the local community, which may in turn, affect the RPO's economic performance. In general (M. Haubert, 1997), the economic and social viability of an organization are complementary but also contradictory once the good functioning of the RPO as an enterprise requires that it ceases to operate as an association. This is partially what happens with European cooperatives once the concentration process they establish to face competition from firms leads to the distancing of members from decision-making centers with the consequence often being their greater volatility and demands (Mauget, 2003). To boost the economic efficiency of the RPO without jeopardizing its social viability, one way out may be ensuring transparency for all operations. This requires that decisions made be negotiated within the RPO, and that solutions be designed jointly by and for the various categories of members concerned (creation of another group for instance).
- (iii) *The issue of power is part of collective action* and refers mainly to the role of leaders. Like in every collective action system, RPOs are always a power stake and their organization and functioning cannot be apprehended outside the strategies of the different categories of stakeholders. RPO leaders play the role of "mediator" between local actors and external actors and they are able to play this role of intermediary because their legitimacy is recognized by the two parties. Such double legitimacy derives from the fact that they have preserved their status in local societies and, by virtue of their personal experiences, master the "codes" of external actors. It is these special skills of mediator that permit negotiation between local societies and external actors: they continuously strive to articulate different logics and "meaning systems". This explains why contrary to the wish expressed by many external actors, mediators are not and cannot be "statistically representative" of the farmers for whom they speak (Mercoiret, 2006). The special position of RPO leaders is a source of power as long as they are trusted by the two parties and the outcomes of their actions are considered as deserving such confidence. When member-participation is weak, or when the organization is instrumented by specific actors, its efficiency declines more or less rapidly. Indeed, RPO leaders and members are and remain interdependent. The role of "leaders" is key in developing RPOs into "interest groups" (for instance with the creation of federative organizations representing the interests of rural peoples). Through "an enmeshment of initiatives and transactions" (Offerlé, 1994), they

are the “entrepreneurs” of the construction of the group and it is they who format and voice the interests they defend.

- (iv) *As an intermediation structure, RPOs enjoy a certain degree of autonomy* from local societies and external actors and it is such relative autonomy that enables the group to innovate: be it on important changes in production techniques, putting in place marketing mechanisms or instituting new types of relations between members and the outside world. Such innovative capacity through collective action is however limited to what is acceptable at a given moment by local societies and by the material and institutional conditions of the environment. Very poor results affect the social credibility of the organization, thus reducing its bargaining power and its ability to innovate. In this regard, it should be noted that in many countries, RPOs generally enjoy very few (or none at all) of the conditions that contributed to the “success” of agricultural organizations in the North : sustainable funding mechanisms, State support, creation of forums for fair and transparent consultation, a conducive economic environment for their initiatives, access to information and training, etc.

Conclusion,

Three main points may be underscored:

- RPOs emerge (or restructure) during “crisis” periods marked by rapid transformation and modernization of agriculture, by greater market integration of rural populations or by a change of the conditions under which such integration occurs. Basing on the initiatives of specific actors (“mediators”), RPOs strive on the one hand to support the changes that occur and on the other hand to negotiate conditions (general and particular) so that the rural populations may undertake changes and restructuring of their activities under favorable conditions: nature and pace of the changes, associated measures, etc.
- The experience of countries of the North shows that the modernization of agriculture and development of its competitiveness was accompanied by drastic reduction of the number of farmers. This situation was only socially acceptable because it occurred within a favorable global economic environment and was strongly supported by the State and agricultural organizations, socially and economically (creation of jobs). A duplication of the same experience in many countries of the South is not advisable from the political and social standpoints, firstly because the global context has changed, and secondly because in most countries, there is no economic sector likely to absorb population migrating out of agriculture, and opportunities of international migration have reduced significantly. Therefore, agricultural and rural activities will for a long time remain the main source of employment.
- RPOs may play a greater role in ongoing changes and changes that would be necessary in the future, by helping to valorize the extraordinary and historic adaptation capacity of family farmers. However, RPOs do not (no longer) and cannot be simple instruments for the implementation of decisions reached without prior consultation with farmers, or else forfeit the social legitimacy which they need in order to operate.

This presupposes:

- That RPOs be involved, in accordance with equitable institutional modalities, in the preparation of public policies based on negotiated compromises;
- That RPOs should access institutional and financial resources needed for the production of public goods to which they contribute, in addition to the economic functions they perform.

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