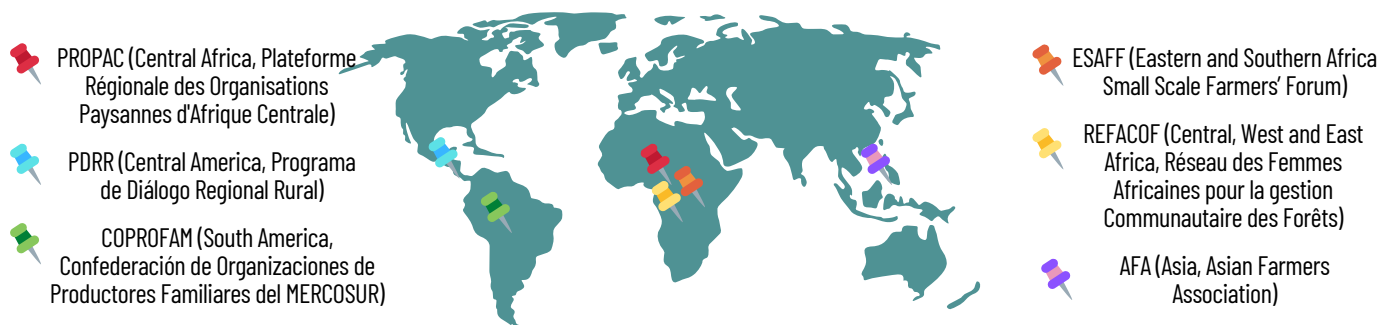


Lessons learned 2022 Women and cooperativism



This document presents the main findings of the project *Enabling Family Farming Organisations (FFOs) to champion rural women economic empowerment and resilience through associativism and cooperativism*, funded by the Forest and Farm Facility. It is led by the World Rural Forum, in collaboration with six regional family farming organisations, members of its network:



Twenty-three (23) successful experiences have been identified and analysed, looking for the key elements of success, the main challenges and the role of women-led cooperatives and associations in cooperativism and associativism. This document is based on these experiences and the dialogue established among the women from these cooperatives and from FFOs. The project consisted of several phases: identification and collection of experiences, organisation of two webinars, and drafting of an advocacy document for the promotion of political and legal frameworks favourable to the development of women's cooperatives.

Numerous meetings were held between the participation organisations to elaborate this document and the whole process. This document is complemented by the document on *Public Policy Recommendations for Women and Cooperativism*.

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Why does the project focus on women's empowerment?



Rural women are key players in achieving economic, environmental and social changes needed for sustainable development. Yet, in order to achieve this, the underlying causes of discrimination and inequality should be addressed, such as the lack of access to and ownership of property and land, limited access to credit and access to factors of production, lack of involvement in decision making and unavailability of quality health care and education, etc.

The United Nations Decade for Family Farming (UNFFF) reaffirms that the empowerment of women and girls will make a critical contribution to sustainable development,

Global agricultural production could increase by

30%

if women had the same opportunities and access to resources as men

stressing the importance of policies and strategies to recognize their fundamental role in food security and nutrition and address it through integral responses.

Women are unique service providers and resilience builders, combining income-generating work with unpaid household responsibilities: this is their “triple role” – production, reproduction/care and social role.

Their main barriers to policy participation are the entrenched socio-cultural norms, their lack of time due to this triple role and their severe lack of access to services and resources.



INTRODUCTION

Why does the project focus on cooperatives[1]?



This type of organisation overcomes the economic and social disadvantages identified by individual producers, as well as improving incomes, access to resources and knowledge, and enhancing the value of producers in society.

The experience of many agri-food cooperatives around the world shows that improved access to jointly managed information, tools and services increases production and marketing of products, generates employment (especially in rural areas), improves members' livelihoods and has a direct impact on food security.



Through their 7 principles[2], their mode of organisation and governance, their diversity in terms of products and services provided, the sharing of means and resources, the link with communities, cooperatives contribute particularly to the empowerment of rural women.

It is worth noting that cooperatives, regardless of commodity type of crop they produce, share the same long-term visions and objectives:



to ensure the sustainability and diversity of food production from an environmental, social and economic point of view;



to contribute to food security and sovereignty and community livelihoods;



to fight against inequalities of women and children and against rural poverty;



to address climate change, access to land and improve rural livelihoods.

[1] In all the countries analysed, there is not always a specific legal status or register for cooperatives.

[2] Voluntary and open membership, Democratic Member Control, Member Economic Participation, Autonomy and Independence, Education, Training, and Information, Cooperation among Cooperatives, Concern for Community. To see more, please consult the International Cooperative Alliance's website, <https://www.ica.coop>.



KEY ELEMENTS OF COOPERATIVES FOR FAMILY FARMING

1. *Sharing resources as a means of growth*

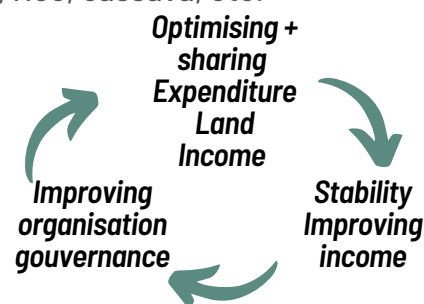
Many cooperatives are formed firstly for economic and technical reasons, in order to share production costs and consolidate products. They are organised around one or more defined types of commodities, generating raw products - groundnuts, rice, cassava, etc.

Through this pooling, the members optimise i) expenditure, ii) land, since members share parcels and improve the use of their own, and iii) increase their income. It provides stability for members, which allows them to improve the organisation, governance and purposes of the group.

Several outcomes can be observed:



- the procurement of more efficient equipment, cooperative members were able to optimise cost and increase their productivity;
- diversification of products as a result of farm diversification and skills improvement, enabling the cooperative's commercial offer to be expanded. Improving technical and business skills is one of the main outcomes of cooperatives;
- processing is also central for cooperatives, scaling up their work, incomes, technical skills, and getting more recognition by their pairs and the community;
- introduction of adapted and better packaging, and therefore better marketing services and/or better visibility of the products on the markets.



The experiences analysed clearly pointed out that being in a cooperative also allows members to choose the type of crop best suited to the land, the climatic constraints, generating income guaranteeing a decent standard of living. Crops that were unprofitable and not valued are abandoned in favour of others - for instance, potatoes in favour of coriander - or are revalued by the cooperative - for example, the pitaya.

As the cooperative grows, as it stabilises, its members may gain access to better or new marketing channels: members may organise themselves to access markets, to organise public transport in their communities.

The positive effects of the cooperatives' operation generate a virtuous circle: the women realize that by being together they are stronger, and they are therefore more motivated and empowered to carry out their activities and scale them up, diversifying their roles.

2. *The crucial importance of networking and visibility*

One of the fundamental key elements linked to the cooperatives is **networking** and belonging to a network, enabling the strengthening of alliances at local, regional and national level, and contributing significantly to the visibility of the cooperative's products and work.



“Networking gives women greater legitimacy, contributing to higher incomes, economic stability, and therefore better living conditions, for them, their families and by extension their communities.”

Recognition and legitimacy



The experiences pointed out that cooperatives allow women to be recognised by the community and the authorities, not only for the quality of their product and their technical knowledge, but also for their role in these networks. Indeed, cooperatives usually belong to other larger cooperatives or farmers' organisations, for example at regional level, which are themselves part of organisations at national level. The visibility of cooperatives and their products is central to their economic sustainability.

Advocacy



Many farmers' organisations that support cooperatives carry out their **advocacy** action with local, regional and national authorities, and even internationally when they are integrated into networks with a wider scope. The accompaniment of national farmers' organisations to cooperatives is thus fundamental.

Communication



These organisations increasingly see the value of communicating on the activities of their members, the cooperatives, as communication :



strengthens their advocacy activity,



allows them to exchange experiences and practices with other structures,



participates in the empowerment of women, valorising their work and their history; they may be led to present their experience in local, national and even international spaces.

3. Provision of economic and legal services

Cooperatives provide a framework for their members to develop their work in a more organised, professional and legal way. Income and savings are shared and redistributed, enabling i) to improve the cooperatives technical capacity and equipment; ii) its members to secure and manage a stable income, which has a positive impact on their livelihood and their position in their family and community.

In addition, some offer other financial services to their members: microfinance, loans, not only related to their activity as farmers, but also addressing personal requests.

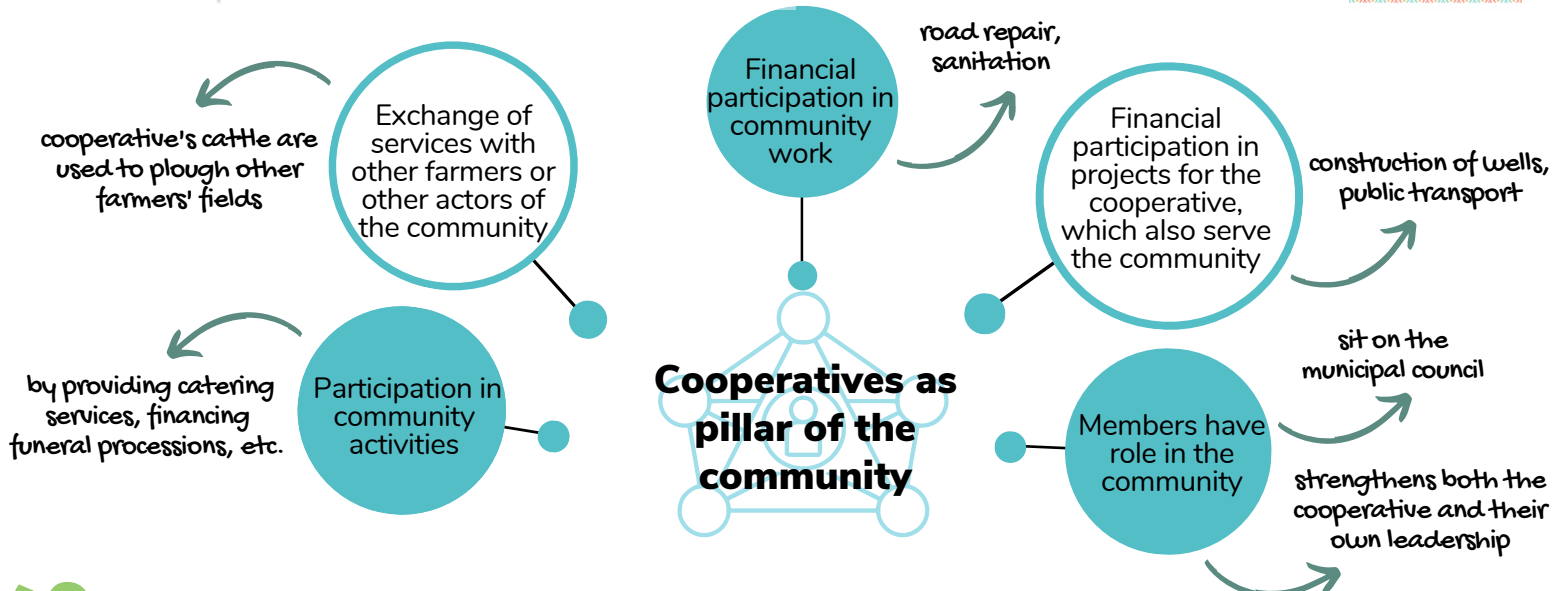
By providing a legal framework for members' activities, cooperatives strengthen their legitimacy and leadership and therefore their visibility, and their role as a provider of quality products for the community. This brings a change in the way members organise themselves: medium and long-term planning, savings, financial management.

Also, cooperatives can reach the capacity to broker partnerships with bigger cooperatives and businesses, which would not possible if smallholder farmers don't come together as a group.

4. Cooperatives as pillar of the community

Networking does not only mean working with other farmer organisations at different levels, but also working with the community where the cooperative is located. This is the seventh pillar of cooperativism.





Cooperatives provide many services, both for the community and its members, such as employment, nutritious food, childcare, housing, savings, and land.

Cooperatives can be a bridge between communities, as they can:



include people from the community of different faiths or cultural backgrounds;

adopt in their practices the religious and cultural customs of the community;

provide awareness raising on cultural and religious differences and the importance of a sustainable and pacific coexistence.

5. Leadership and empowerment as a motor to strengthen cooperatives and individuals

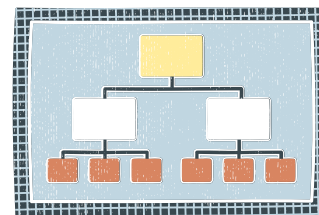
The cooperative is not only a space for technical learning, but also for social and even political learning, for personal and collective growth. Thus, the training of members is considered essential, in order to ensure, beyond their technical skills, their awareness, notably in terms of their rights, which is particularly relevant for women. They are not always aware of their economic, social and land rights, and the cooperative is often the means for them to access this information. This is particularly important for women's self-reliance, strengthening their leadership capacities and generating a direct impact in their livelihood.

The range of training is very wide: from the most technical aspects, for example on seed production and agro-ecological practices, to training in decision-making and awareness-raising on gender issues, including gender-based violence. It is interesting to note that these trainings are not only given to the women of the cooperative: in some cases, trainings on masculinities are given to men, involving the men of the community, not only the members.

Cooperatives, as a pillar of the community, also provide a support role to their members: again, not only technical and economic, but also personal. Thus, some cooperatives provide psycho-social support to their members, especially in cases of gender-based violence.

Governance within the cooperative is also a factor of leadership and empowerment. Indeed, the very principles of cooperatives' governance, which is intended to be transparent and democratic, leads women to participate and take a significant part in them.

In the case of cooperatives composed of men and women, women are present in all these bodies and working groups, and through this practice gain confidence and leadership, and can move into different functions within the cooperative. Depending on their position, they also participate in the external activities of the cooperative: again, they are not only linked to the economic and technical dimensions, but also to advocacy, networking and alliances.



In addition to governing bodies such as the board or the general assembly, cooperatives are usually composed of different working groups: technical, gender, marketing, etc.

In the cases analysed, the stability and recognition given to the members, as well as the increase in their self-confidence, allow them to project themselves concretely into the future. Members are thus led to scale up their activities, to organise 3 or 5 year plans: purchase of equipment, diversification, improvement of technical capacities, access to new local and regional markets, for example.

6. Advocacy work and the key link with the authorities

In general, cooperatives are part of networks of cooperatives or local, regional or national agricultural organisations. Their relation with the authorities may not be only at the local level, with the municipality or leaders of their community, but also at the regional or national levels.

The members of the cooperatives emphasise the importance of the links with the authorities, whether to be able to set up their activity, to have access to markets, to manage the land, to increase their activity, and to improve the working and living conditions of their members and their community, specially providing rural development services: improvement of roads, health services and water access, among others.



The link with local authorities increases the recognition by the whole community

If cooperative members are received by community leaders, this reflects the importance of their role within the community. This recognition also contributes to changing mentalities and practices, showing that women can have a leadership role, being recognised for their productive, economic and social function.

7. The importance of supportive policy and legal frameworks for cooperativism and rural women

In this sense of the importance of accompaniment, and the necessary link with the authorities, it is crucial that local and national policy frameworks promotes and strengthen cooperatives and rural women and that other public policies and measures are in place to allow them to develop their crucial role towards sustainable food systems and livelihoods. Some cooperatives participate in the definition of these frameworks, through their advocacy actions.

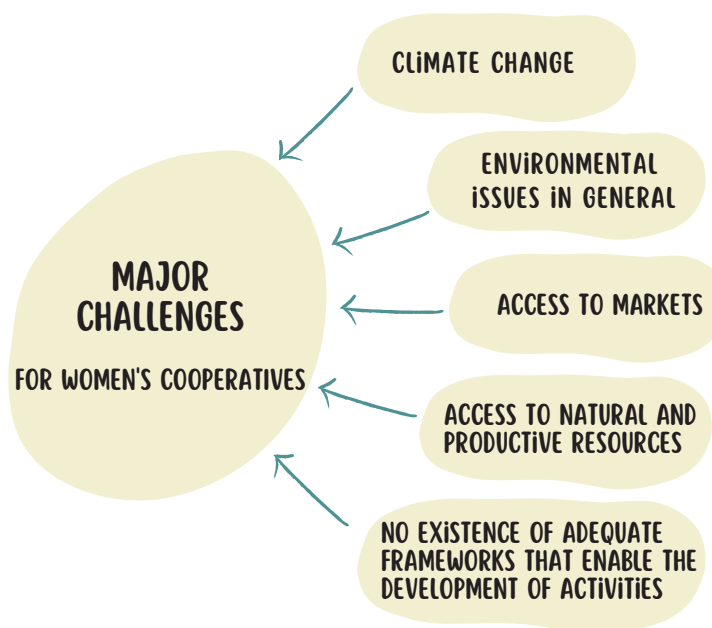
For more information on public policy recommendations in favour of cooperatives and rural women, please consult the dedicated document, *Public Policy Recommendations for Women and Cooperativism*.



CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES ATTENDED BY WOMEN COOPERATIVES

1. Challenges faced by cooperatives

The difficulties encountered by cooperatives are linked to internal and external factors.



Also, depending on the local culture, women may not be allowed by men to work in the cooperative, or may be frowned upon for doing so, as it transgresses gender traditional norms" that women should stay at home.

Moreover, despite the great advances that cooperatives and associativity bring to the sustainability and viability of women's family farming, they face specific problems related to lack of recognition, lack of infrastructure such as transport, insufficient market access - often due to this lack of infrastructure.

It is also possible to observe problems of illiteracy and difficulties in following the cooperative's standards among members.

2. Agroecology and climate change as a basis for sustainable family farming

With a view to sustainable practices, and also in view of their size and type of farming, many cooperatives practice agriculture that respects people and the environment, and some of them practice agroecology from the beginning of their creation or gradually adopt it; agroecology being understood as applying ecological principles to agricultural systems and practices. Cooperatives see benefits in terms of costs, yield and product quality, sustainable use of soil, water, and landscapes.

These practices contribute to the resilience of farmers, through their work in mitigation and adaptation to climate change, which is increasingly central to the concerns of agricultural actors, including cooperatives. Some cooperatives are adopting climate change mitigation and adaptation practices: type of crop, irrigation system, circular economy - by using local inputs or by being themselves suppliers of inputs to other local actors -, optimisation of transportation, for example.

3. Gender at the heart of the construction and functioning of women's cooperatives

Often, women's cooperatives that were formed for technical and economic reasons



gradually integrate gender dimensions to address specific women challenges.

The process of gender mainstreaming is diverse across regions, cultures and organisations. While some cooperatives are formed for purely economic reasons, as seen above, some take this dimension into account from the beginning, being created precisely to be able to better assert women's rights, or even to address women specific challenges: access to land or other productive assets, access to credit or financial resources, for example.

It can be observed that in some cases the cooperative was established and promoted by one or more women leaders, trying to address women challenges such as:

- women were not valued, economically and socially;
- their rights were not recognised;
- some crops were neglected or were not interesting to cultivate but the women had the potential to revive them.

In this respect, women's cooperatives have a double impact:



at the level of the cooperatives, of the group itself, as a group of women;



at the individual level, as a woman.

Indeed, the capacity building processes inherent to cooperatives allow them to stabilise and consolidate their governance system, their economic model with a long term view.

On the other hand, these collective and member-related processes – training, savings systems, income generation, etc. – have positive consequences for women as individuals: improved income, greater profitability and satisfaction, which in turn leads to improved self-confidence, enhanced leadership skills and, ultimately, empower them. These positive effects are also reflected in the families of the members and in the community as a whole.

Access to land is difficult for women, depending on the region, culture and customary rules: women are forbidden to inherit or own land; problems with the land registration and property titles have been identified in several countries and region.

