

Social Organisations of Agricultural Producers in Latin America and Europe: Lessons learned and challenges

In an effort to improve knowledge about and positively impact local realities, IPES and ETC-Urban Agriculture, in partnership with local institutions and researchers and with the support of IDRC (Canada), carried out between 2005 and 2006 a project entitled "Social organisations of urban and periurban producers (SOUPP): management models and innovative alliances for political influence".



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The analysis of the case studies showed that farmers' organisations are strongly influenced by two factors: the profile of its members and the context where they operate. The study gave insights on the relationship between the success of organisations for accessing resources and influencing public policy and their management models. It also identified indicators for evaluating the effectiveness of these organisations, and a set of actions for strengthening them were suggested.

PROFILES

The organisations constitute a legitimate representational space for a diverse group of agriculturalists, varying from the urban poor who carry out organic farming in vacant urban spaces to traditional farmers whose lands have been surrounded by urban growth and who still maintain some of their rural agricultural practices. The different types of producer organisations studied reflect this diversity. Four profiles of farmers were identified.

The first group of urban farmers consists of the poor and unemployed people (many of whom were originally rural migrants) who live in intra-urban areas.

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They are engaged in organic production, both for their own consumption (in their backyards) as well as for processing and sale. They tend to have some experience with participation in social, political and labour organisations.

A second group is made up of poor farmers located in periurban areas, engaged in conventional farming (although it is possible that some are in the process of converting to organic production). These, often more traditional, farmers have less organisational experience given their social and cultural traditions. Within this group two main subgroups can be distinguished: a) the poor farmers who migrated to the city, with little education (sometimes illiterate); and b) those farmers whose farms gradually have been surrounded by urban development, mostly with basic education.

The third group is completely different and made up of urban gardeners engaged in providing recreational and other services. Their experience in social and political organisations varies.

Finally, a fourth group is composed of new organic farmers of urban non-farming origins (for example, academics, organic

ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED IN THE SOUPP PROJECT

- Amsterdam Gardeners' Association** – BVV (Netherlands)
- Association of Organic Farmers of Uruguay** – APODU (Uruguay)
- Biokultura Association of Central Hungary** – BCHA (Hungary)
- PROVE Producers Association** – ASPROVE (Brazil)
- Las Vertientes Cooperative in Villa El Salvador** (Peru)
- Alternative Health Centre of Muribeca** – CESAM, Jaboatão dos Guararapes (Brazil)
- Duinboeren Platform** (Netherlands)
- Network of *Huerteras and Huerteros* (urban gardeners) of Rosario** (Argentina)

produce consumers, etc.). They are located in periurban areas and often participate in social organisations. These farmers are committed to organic farming, commercialisation, research and service provision (and to a lesser extent, processing).

MAIN ACTIVITIES AND MANAGEMENT

There are three central motivations for creating farmers' organisations: 1) to

improve members' quality of life and income, 2) to increase their access to resources, or 3) to increase their political influence and/or confront external threats in a collective way. The organisations can emerge out of the initiative of the farmers themselves or out of the concern of an external institution wishing to organise and strengthen them.

The organisations carry out three basic kinds of activities or services for their members: a) support services (training, legal support, input provision, etc.); b) promotion and support of activities to improve income generation (e.g. joint processing and commercialisation); and c) lobbying and establishing alliances with external stakeholders to improve access to resources, respond to external threats and enhance political influence.

Without underestimating the importance of proper internal organisation and availability of funding, the study revealed that how well an organisation functions is key to its success. Good results in terms of access to resources and political influence are achieved by organisations with shared values, clear and agreed objectives and strategies and democratic decision making.

A good example of an organisation that functions well is the "Huerteros" Network in Rosario, which, despite its informal nature and still weak internal organisation, has proven to be able to influence policymakers, participate in urban land use planning and gain access to resources (land and water) and national and international cooperation funds (see page 10).

Internal organisation is relevant but not necessarily key for the sustainability of farmers' organisations. Strengthening the functioning of the organisations

seems to be more important to guarantee their sustainability. The "Las Vertientes" cooperative, founded in 1969 to improve production and secure title deeds for members' lands, managed to set up a good infrastructure with paid staff and acquire the land titles, but in the last years it has become almost inoperative due to internal problems and loss of unity, common values and trust.

The member profiles of an organisation (origin, initial income level, social and cultural tradition, educational and participation background) influence the definition of shared values and objectives, procedures and common trust. Nevertheless, context also influences the functioning (objectives, strategies, alliances, procedures) and internal organisation (availability of infrastructure, financial resources, training and others).

TYPES OF ORGANISATIONS

Two broad types of urban producers' organisations were identified, with different management models and subsequent results in accessing resources and influencing public policies:

- a) sponsored/supported organisations and
- b) self-organised organisations or those formed out of the interests of the members.

Sponsored / supported organisations emerge as a result of the interest of external stakeholders. They include organisations initiated by anti-poverty and socio-economic inclusion programmes sponsored by the Catholic church or the government. These organisations were created to support poor (migrant) farmers working and living in intra-urban areas. The organisations are dependent on this permanent external support. They achieve good results in terms of accessing

resources and receiving training (for processing their products). In addition they perform well on participation of their members and the improvement of self-esteem, social inclusion and empowerment, particularly of women, who manage to take part in management and representational spheres within the organisation. This is fundamentally due to the political interest of the sponsoring organisations, which include these issues in their working agenda.

However, despite this external support and a positive context, there is no guarantee that such organisations will be sustainable. This will depend in part on the strength of their internal organisation but mainly on their functioning. An example is ASPROVE, an association initiated by the state government of Brasilia in an attempt to improve the social status of its members through the creation of agribusinesses (see also UAM 16). Despite positive achievements in terms of production, processing and commercialisation, the organisation disappeared after the new state government withdrew its support.

Self-organised organisations (those formed out of the interest of members) tend to focus on traditional practices, organic-ecological agriculture, or advocacy. They are formed in response to a specific need or in pursuit of a specific goal and usually concentrate on one commodity. Typical members are urban gardeners, (new) organic farmers, and conventional periurban farmers.

Organisations formed by (new) organic farmers stand out in their great capacity to wield political influence, due, among other factors, to the presence of shared values, a high level of commitment among members to the organisation (and to an alternative model of production and life) and a strong capacity to establish strategic alliances.

The effective functioning of these organisations allows them to achieve good results in terms of improving their members' income, developing innovative commercialisation strategies and improving the environment and landscape. Nevertheless, they face weaknesses in obtaining resources for processing their products, and in establishing alliances with the more conventional farmers' organisations, or equitable

Table: Indicators of Functioning and Internal Organisation

Functioning	Internal organisation
Existence of clear, shared objectives.	Availability of infrastructure and an administrative/accounting system.
Existence of defined strategies.	Availability of human and financial resources.
Capacity for establishing strategic alliances.	Existence of a permanent management structure.
Presence of shared values.	Regular elections and rotation of positions.
Existence of agreed-upon procedures for making decisions on internal issues (alliances, marketing, production, etc.).	Equitable access to management and representative posts.
Equal access to benefits.	Commitment of members to the administration and maintenance of the organisation.

access of women to management and representational positions. An example is APODU in Uruguay, which has several commercialisation channels, influence on public policy related to organic production and keeps strong alliances with several key stakeholders (see page 11).

The traditional organisations have shown that it is possible to achieve significant changes in the attitudes of members who tend to be risk-averse and who are not accustomed to participating in collective efforts. These organisations get good results in access to resources like land and water, they improve incomes and win political and social recognition. Nevertheless, they have still not been able to make progress in terms of the participation and empowerment of women, and in some cases, face serious threats to their survival because of the low levels of collective commitment to the operation of the organisation. An example of this is the Dutch Duinboeren Platform, which has been able to implement a variety of innovative projects (eco-health, alternative commercialisation, etc.), but faces difficulties in incorporating a great number of its members, who prefer to stay on the sidelines waiting to see how these experiments develop.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Well-organised and effective producer organisations have a better negotiating

position and greater access to resources, inputs, services and markets. Above all, their contributions to the creation of public policies related to urban agriculture are recognised and valued. Strengthening these organisations appears to be a key factor, notably in ensuring the recognition, legitimacy, representation and participation of farmers' groups as urban stakeholders. Based on participatory action-oriented analysis of the organisations involved in the project, an Inter-regional Agenda was developed. The Agenda proposes activities that organisations and actors interested in supporting them could implement to improve their functioning and internal management and then achieve better results in accessing resources and influencing public policies (see the box on page 8).

In order to strengthen urban agricultural producers' organisations, concrete and specific agendas need to be formed for each of these groups. It is advised that they review periodically their vision and common objectives, and establish participatory mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating their performance and their internal and external communication. The organisations need to identify strategies that will help them diversify their markets, offer new products and/or services, and expand their sources of income. This implies an improvement in their systems of production, and the development of micro-enterprises that

add value to their production. They should also try to join forces with organisations with similar objectives, establishing strategic alliances, for instance with universities, NGOs, the private sector and the public sector.

Finally, in order to improve their access to resources and their ability to influence public policy and practice, they need to learn to cooperate with other stakeholders, establishing win-win relationships, and using complementary strategies (lobbying, communication, information, mobilisation, etc.) that can guarantee their effective participation in local political processes dealing with the management and planning of the areas where they carry out their activities.

NOTES

1) Information on the project, the case studies, the comparative study of the experiences, photos and other related documents are available at <http://www.ipes.org/au/osaup/>.

Bibliography

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as installation of adequate administrative and management systems.

3) Planning, implementation and monitoring of core activities – UPOs need assistance in improving the way they perform their principal activities, e.g. provision of training and technical assistance, marketing of products or management of a savings and credit scheme. Support activities may include strategy development, training, technical assistance, supply of market information, etc.

4) External linkages – UPOs need to develop specific skills on how to build and maintain strategic partnerships with other urban actors, such as private enterprises, credit institutions, government agencies, municipal departments, NGOs, universities, and CBOs.

5) Capital and infrastructure development – UPOs need to develop their capacity

to make savings and generate capital for maintenance of existing infrastructure and investment in new infrastructure. Entering each subsequent stage in the development of the UPO requires another level of profits/savings to enable a growing working capital and new investments. Support organisations are needed to assist in strategy development and technical assistance, to supply subsidies, grants and credit or to participate as (co-)investor.

CHALLENGES

Despite increasing initiatives, still relatively little is known about how informal groups and networks of urban farmers function and how to help these groups develop into micro-enterprises and formal organisations with a sustainable market position. Support to UPOs needs to be adapted to their specific situation

and orientation. The high diversity of UPOs needs to be acknowledged, which includes understanding and sometimes accepting the specific needs and wishes of their members. This means understanding context, perspective, and institutional organisation and operation. Through participatory action research in particular, the existing potentials of urban farmers' organisations can be further explored and developed.

NOTES

(1) We use the term urban "producer" rather than urban "farmer" because it covers all aspects of agricultural production, including livestock and fisheries and the processing of agricultural products on-farm or in other premises. We focus on small "urban producers" to indicate low-income people whose livelihood depends on urban agriculture-related activities. In this issue we will abbreviate urban producers' organisations as UPOs.