



FARMERS' ORGANISATIONS

A HANDBOOK



ANDREAS
HERMES
AKADEMIE



Deutscher
Bauernverband



WORLD FARMERS'
ORGANISATION

IMPRINT

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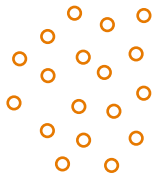
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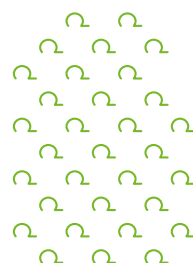


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Editors:

Andreas Hermes Akademie (AHA)
im Bildungswerk der Deutschen
Landwirtschaft e.V. and
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A HANDBOOK





FOREWORD, PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Farmers feed the world. This simple truth, so often repeated and so rarely acted upon with sufficient resolve, lies at the heart of this handbook and at the heart of the mission of the World Farmers' Organisation. The over 600 million farms in the world, more than 90% of them family farms, continue to nourish our global population. They do, however, not work in isolation. Our strength and resilience depend critically on how well we are organised, and how well our organisations are understood, supported and led.

This handbook is a landmark contribution to a field that has long deserved rigorous, practical, and globally informed attention. Born from a simple conversation, shaped through the collaboration between the World Farmers' Organisation and the Andreas Hermes Akademie, and enriched by the experience of practitioners and farmer leaders from every corner of the world, this is exactly the resource that those of us working in agricultural advocacy have been waiting for.

Farmers have always known, intuitively and from hard experience, that collective action is more powerful than individual effort. From informal village groups to national federations, from cooperatives negotiating with global buyers to international networks engaging at the World Trade Organisation, farmers' organisations are the structured expression of this truth. They are not merely service providers. They are expressions of solidarity, agents of transformation, and guardians of rural identity.

I recognise in these pages what I encounter every day: the decisive importance of genuine representation with a mandate earned from the grassroots, not a privilege assumed from above. The strength of a farmers' organisation is ultimately measured not by the tables it sits at, but by how faithfully it carries the voice of those it represents. Equally, good governance is not bureaucracy but it is trust, made visible through transparent structures and democratic practice, the essential infrastructure that allows organisations to grow and endure through changing seasons.

Climate change, digital transformation, demographic shifts, and geopolitical tensions are reshaping food systems in ways that demand strong, well-organised farmers' organisations. These are not a luxury, but a strategic necessity.

I encourage every reader, be it a farmer, a leader, or a policymaker, to engage with this book with an eye toward action. The future of agriculture must be built with and by farmers, not merely for them.

Arnold Puech Pays d'Alissac,
President of the World Farmers' Organisations

For as long as people have cultivated the land, they have also come together to support one another. Whether sharing tools, exchanging seeds, building water systems, or standing up to unfair treatment, farming has always gone hand in hand with cooperation. In every corner of the world, farmers have organised themselves to face the challenges that no one can face alone.

Today, this tradition lives on in farmers' organisations: groups that are created by farmers, for farmers, to protect their interests, strengthen their voices, and improve their livelihoods. These organisations are as varied as the landscapes they originate from. Some are small, informal village associations, others are national unions or regional federations. Some focus on improving market access, others on influencing government policies or assisting members to learn new skills. Together, they form the backbone of agri-food systems and rural societies.

In an era where fewer and fewer people are directly involved in food production, the importance of strong, well-organised farmers' organisations is growing. Their ability to represent farmers' voices, to defend their rights, to enhance competitiveness and profitability, improve livelihoods, and contribute to sustainable agriculture is more critical than ever. At the same time, farmers' organisations are still too often underrepresented in decision-making processes, and their role is not always fully understood by those shaping agricultural and food systems. Or, as a Kiswahili proverb says: "*Umoja ni nguvu, utengano ni udhaifu*" – unity is strength, separation is weakness.

Farmers' organisations are not just service providers or meeting places. They are expressions of solidarity, built on the idea that farmers are stronger together than apart. It is the collective approach that helps individual farmers overcome obstacles and strengthens the overall resilience of the farming community. To respond to the needs of their farmers and the realities of cultures, countries, and continents, farmers' organisations differ not only in size and scope, but also in structure, focus, and effectiveness. Some grow out of grassroots movements, others are formed by outside actors. Some thrive, while others struggle.

This book is an attempt to make sense of this variation and diversity. It brings together knowledge and experiences from around the world to help the reader understand how farmers can organise themselves effectively, and how organisations can become stronger, fairer, and more impactful. What sets this handbook apart is its practical orientation: it is not an academic publication, but a guide for practitioners, built on real-world experience, best practices, and lessons learned from farmers' organisations across different regions.

The idea for this book was born several years ago during a conversation on the sidelines of a training course for young leaders in agriculture. In a moment of conversation – both thoughtful and informal – it became clear that while farmers' organisations play a crucial role worldwide, there was no single resource that brought together practical knowledge on how they function, how they succeed, and how they can be strengthened. Drawing on our extensive experience in global agricultural dialogue, we recognised this gap and helped initiate the idea of developing such a compendium.

This handbook is intended for those who are active in farmers' organisations – farmers, elected representatives, managers, and staff – as well as for policymakers, development partners, and others who work with or support them. It aims to provide practical guidance, inspire reflection, and encourage learning from others, while always remaining rooted in the specific realities and identities of each organisation.

We hope that this book will serve not only as a source of knowledge, but also as a tool for strengthening farmers' organisations and, ultimately, the communities and food systems they sustain.

Dr. Andreas Quiring,
CEO of AHA

Dr. Theo de Jager,
*Executive Chair of SAAI and
former president of the WFO*

This book is the result of the shared knowledge and experience, reflection, exchange, and collaboration by many committed individuals and organisations who believe in the strength of farmers' organising themselves.

It is Dr. Theo de Jager, then president of the World Farmers Organisation (WFO) and an inspired farmer himself, who took the initiative and approached the Andreas Hermes Akademie (AHA) with the idea for this handbook. His vision was met with great enthusiasm as it was clear that such publication was long missing. AHA, the capacity building organisation rooted in the system of German farmers' organisations and sectoral stakeholders, with over 75 years in accompanying farmers, leaders and organisations in their development and growth, and 20 years of working internationally in strengthening farmers' organisations, was well placed to take on this project together with the WFO.

A very special appreciation goes to Philipp Conze-Roos, former Deputy Director of AHA International. Together with Dr. Theo de Jager he became the main author of this book, having structured and drafted its core elements. It is thanks to his deep understanding of the matter, his clarity, hard work, and strong commitment that the idea evolved into a finished publication.

From the earliest conversations to its completion, the project benefited from the support, expertise, critical reflection of Dr. Andreas Qiring, CEO of AHA, and Nicole Bolomey, Director of AHA International. Their strategic reflections, written contributions, and careful reviews helped shape the direction, substance, and form of the book.

Our gratitude also goes to Desiree Dietvorst with her remarkable ability to fuse contributions from several authors and perspectives. Her work in interviewing for contributions, combining and structuring texts, refining language, and smoothing the edges between chapters greatly contributed to the coherence and accessibility of the manuscript.

At WFO, the project was greatly supported by Arianna Giuliadori and Dr. Andrea Porro, former and current CEO, under the dedicated leadership of the WFO President, Arnold Puech d'Alissac and the WFO board members. For this we are grateful.

Both at WFO and AHA, this publication was a team effort. Our thanks go to Dr. Julian Friesinger (AHA) for his significant contribution in concept development, drafting, and reviewing some chapters, and Ambra Raggi (WFO) for her operational support. We also thank the interns and students – Johanna Schönberger, Jonas von der Decken, Julia Seeling, Birte von Lehsten – whose research assistance, enthusiasm, and fresh perspectives enriched the process. Most importantly, we thank Marieke Behrens, Programme Manager at AHA, for taking on the challenging task of project coordination, keeping the initiative alive and kicking even in periods where other duties slowed down the process.

We thankfully acknowledge the institutional backing of the German Farmers' Association (DBV), founding member and key stakeholder of AHA, namely through President Joachim Rukwied, Vice-President Susanne Schulze Bockeloh, and the Director at the DBV Brussels office Florian Dalstein.

At the heart of this book are the realities of farmers' organisations around the world. Next to WFO and DBV, the authors benefitted from years and decades of cooperation, accompaniment, joint activities, and exchanges with farmers' organisations in many countries, regions and continents. It is the members of the WFO as well as partner organisations of AHA that allowed us to harness experiences and share the lessons learned in this book. These farmers' organisations are too numerous to be named individually, yet it is their trust, openness, and willingness to share only made this publication possible.

Our appreciation also goes to AgriCord and its network of agri-agencies for their valuable contributions, particularly in identifying case studies and thereby allowing us to benefit from their experiences across the globe. The alliance as a whole provides an inspiring platform linking like-minded institutions.

It is programmes by the German Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Regional Identity (BMLEH) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) that supported our work financially over many years. We are grateful to many in both ministries for believing in and supporting the need for strong, professional member-based farmers' organisations. This includes the implementing agencies of the ministries, GFA Consulting Group and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), conducting many visionary projects in the agriculture and rural development space. As AHA, we are particularly thankful to GIZ and the numerous people who have managed global and bilateral programmes over past decades for engaging us in efforts to strengthening farmers' organisations.

This book would not have been possible without the financial support of the BMZ through the Global Project Strengthening Agricultural and Food Systems Transformation (GV StäBo). Managed by GIZ, and headed in the recent years by Sarah Lena Jensen, this project has supported the capacity building of farmers' organisations in Africa and India for over a decade. We warmly thank Sarah Lena Jensen for her flexibility and trust in our approach enabling us to work in close and adaptive collaboration with our partners and creating the space necessary to develop this handbook alongside ongoing programme activities.

This handbook is therefore not the work of a single author or institution. It is the outcome of a community of practitioners, partners, and farmers who share the conviction that knowledge grows stronger when it is shared.

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Impact of the Young Leaders'
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- Over 100 young agripreneurs have undergone ARS's transformative Young Leaders Incubation Programme (YLIP) since 2021
- YLIP is unique due to a "depth, not breadth" approach: in-depth coaching and training format for a highly selected group that builds strong peer networks of future leaders
- All participants are mentored through their national farmers' organisations as future leaders in the agri-food sector
- Alumni consistently highlight 3 main areas of change: Business growth, improved conflict and people management & increased in engagement

YOUTH

BUSINESS MODELS

Gugulethu Mahlangu



...Climate smart farming systems that integrate aquaponics, and insect farming to revive indigenous crops.

Elizabeth Maanda Sianga



INTRODUCTION

Farmers are the backbone of the world's food systems. They nourish populations through the food they produce, but also sustain communities, and anchor rural economies. While the role of farming has evolved over time, the need for strong, representative structures through which farmers organise themselves has remained constant and is now more important than ever. Farmers' organisations play a decisive role in improving livelihoods, building resilience, and shaping agricultural policies. They exist to serve the collective interests of their members, whether through marketing, knowledge sharing, capacity building, or advocacy. In a context of shifting global priorities, climate pressure, market volatility, and demographic change, farmers' organisations help ensure that those who produce the world's food remain visible, viable, and influential.

This book focuses on member-based farmers' organisations; structures created, governed, and owned by the farmers themselves. These include associations, cooperatives, producer companies, federations, and unions, among others. While many other actors support farmers (such as NGOs, foundations, and donors) this book centres on organisations where farmers retain ownership and control.

Understanding farmers' organisations is not straightforward. They vary significantly by purpose, by the types of farmers they serve, by legal format, by governance style, and by the level at which they operate, from local to the global. Many farmers' organisations overlap in function or evolve over time, while others defy neat categorisation altogether. This diversity is a strength, but it can also make farmers' organisations more difficult to analyse, support, and strengthen effectively.

This book aims to provide some guidance in navigating the complexity. It does not offer a rigid typology or universal blueprint but rather a framework to foster a better understanding of the wide range of farmers' organisations and the

roles they play. By highlighting key distinctions, recurring patterns, and practical lessons, it equips readers with the means to identify, support, and work effectively with these organisations. The book is divided into four parts:

PART 1 | TYPES AND STRUCTURES OF FARMERS'

ORGANISATIONS: This first section explores how farmers' organisations can be differentiated based on their purpose, organisational type, legal format, governance characteristics, and level of operation.

PART 2 | KEY FUNCTIONS AND SERVICES OF FARMERS'

ORGANISATIONS: This part focuses on what farmers' organisations actually do, from lobbying and policy engagement to services, extension, capacity building, and member support. It looks at how functions vary, based on context and capacity, and what makes the organisations effective.

PART 3 | GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT:

Strategic leadership and professional management is of central importance to effective representation. This section discusses models of representation, accountability, leadership, financial oversight, and the balance between a strong board and professional management. It also introduces the idea of 'internal energy' as a spectrum that reflects the vitality and momentum within any organisation, regardless of its structure or size.

This book seeks to inform and inspire all those active in shaping their own farmers' organisation, men and women farmers, farmer leaders and elected representatives, as well as managers and staff of farmers' organisations. Further, the book also wishes to reach agricultural ministries and policymakers, development partners, agri-food industry partners, and anyone else seeking to support or collaborate with farmers' organisations more effectively. Throughout the book, the focus is on clarity, accessibility, and practical relevance. Rather than prescribing solutions the book offers experiences, guiding principles, and reference points that readers can apply to their own realities.



1

TYPES AND STRUCTURES OF FARMERS' ORGANISATIONS

Member-based farmers' organisations are those formed, governed, and owned by farmers themselves to serve their shared interests. They include cooperatives, associations, unions, federations, and other entities rooted in farmer participation and collective action. While there are also non-member-based entities that support farmers, such as NGOs, trusts, and foundations, these are not the central focus of the book. They are referenced where relevant, particularly when they interact with or influence the work of member-based organisations, but are not the primary subject of analysis.

Understanding farmers' organisations is not always straightforward. They can be categorised in multiple, sometimes overlapping ways: by the benefits and services they offer (e.g. advocacy, market access, information), by the type of farmers they serve (e.g. smallholders or commercial producers), by the legal format under which they are registered (e.g. association, cooperative, or company), or by their internal governance arrangements. These perspectives each highlight essential aspects of how farmers' organisations' function and who they serve, but they do not always align neatly. For instance, while a cooperative is clearly defined all over the world by its shareholding structure and purpose of delivering economic benefit to its members, an advocacy platform or movement may select from a range of legal formats depending on national law or strategic priorities.

There is no single classification system that can fully capture the diversity of farmers' organisations. This section of the book unpacks that complexity by offering a set of complementary perspectives that help organising and making sense of the field. The aim is not to impose rigid categories, but to provide the reader with a practical framework for recognising patterns, identifying opportunities, and supporting institutional development.

The perspectives used to differentiate farmers' organisations in this part of the book are:

- I. The **purpose** of the organisation, as reflected in the benefits and services offered to members.
- II. The **type of organisation**, such as general affairs bodies, commodity-focused entities, or those representing specific constituencies.
- III. The **legal format**, for instance association, cooperative, or company, and what this implies for rights, obligations, and financial flows.
- IV. The organisation's **governance characteristics**, especially in terms of representation, leadership selection, and the relationship between members and management.
- V. The organisation's **level of operation**, ranging from local associations to continental and international networks.

1.1 PURPOSE

Farmer organisations are established to serve the needs of their members. Even if outside forces and demands may play a substantive role in the creation of an organisation, the purpose must reflect the members' needs for the organisation to survive and flourish. While specific services vary, most organisations offer a mix of benefits. To better understand their diversity, it is helpful to group these benefits

into four broad categories: economic, political, technical and social. These categories often overlap; for example, economic services may include technical training, while political advocacy can support financial or infrastructural goals. Understanding these main functions helps organisations align their services with member priorities and external expectations.

Main purpose and focus of the farmers' organisation

	Economic	Political	Technical	Social
Expected impact of benefits and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members directly benefit financially. • They develop competitiveness and profit based on higher turnover and/or reduced costs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members benefit from improved framework conditions and from generally strengthened civil society. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members have access to knowledge, skill improvement, and services that support them in their production. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members benefit as individuals, employers or employees in a farm business, and as a community. • Benefits often extend to society at large.
Example of impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint sales or procurement with better prices, new markets, value addition, lower post-harvest losses, joint mechanization. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stable and fair land rights, levelled playing field. • Better access to inputs, markets, workforce, and machinery. • Improved public rural infrastructure. • Protection from dumping prices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical innovation on the farm, including knowledge of inputs, seeds, or soil health. • Improved entrepreneurial and managerial skills. • Improved coordination within the value chain. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved level of literacy, hygiene, access to water. • Inclusion and equal treatment of women and (other) vulnerable groups. • Safety nets in cases of hardship. • Support with post-crisis recovery.
Links between categories of benefits and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depends on good framework conditions resulting from political work. • Technical benefits support members in their economic activity. • Increased income allows investment in social development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct effects on economic framework conditions for the sector. • Sets framework also for investments in innovation, infrastructure. • Defines the legal framework for the organisational set-up. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination within value chain is often linked to advocacy for improved policy. • Technical improvements increase market competitiveness and economic results. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depends on internal and external funding or on profits from economic activities.

The following section outlines each purpose in detail and illustrates how it contributes to the success and sustainability of farmer organisations.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Farmer organisations primarily create economic benefits by strengthening their members' market position. Through joint purchasing of inputs and collective selling of produce, members can take advantage of economies of scale. Bulk input procurement allows organisations to negotiate better prices (especially beneficial for small-scale farmers) and improves access to high-quality supplies. In addition, joint selling improves farmers' bargaining power, enabling them to access more profitable markets and receive higher prices.

Collective storage is a key service to increase revenue. Together with professional marketing it allows organisations to plan the sale of products at times of favourable market conditions. In some cases, organisations can pre-finance these transactions, by paying farmers upon delivery (after the harvest) and recovering costs after the produce is sold. A premium may be handed to the farmers, if sales were more profitable than expected. This model not only benefits farmers but also helps the organisation generate income to cover its own operating costs, to build capital reserves, or to distribute dividends to members.

Farmer organisations aiming for economic benefits may also invest in value addition, such as processing, packaging, or branding. Processing opens new markets and increases profit margins.

Beyond direct trading activities, joint procurement can support quality control systems for inputs and products, strengthening the organisation's market reputation. Quality assurance schemes, branding, or certification can enable producers to command premium prices. Access to financial services, including

loans or pre-harvest finance, is improved when facilitated through a collective structure. Many farmer organisations connect their members with financial institutions, insurance providers, or donors, helping members access resources that would otherwise be unavailable individually.

Economic benefits are highly versatile and can take many forms, from single-product to multi-product groups, or from single-service to multi-service models. The scope and goals of the organisation are defined by its members. Common examples of organisations oriented towards economic benefits include cooperatives, producer companies, farmer-led enterprises, and larger-scale unions. The economic services of such organisations often overlap with other categories of benefit. For example, input suppliers may offer training on proper usage (technical benefits), while belonging to an organisation reduces individual risk by offering group support mechanisms, such as emergency loans during hardship, reinforcing the value of collective action (social benefits).

POLITICAL BENEFITS

Farmer organisations play an important political role by representing the collective voice of their members in public and policy arenas. Through dialogue with governments and private sector stakeholders, they lobby for fairer policies, better services, and more favourable market conditions. To do this effectively, strong organisations first engage with their members to understand their needs and expectations. They then use this input to develop clear policy positions and promote these positions through targeted advocacy.

Political engagement takes place at multiple levels: local, national, regional, and international. At the local level, farmer organisations may lobby for improved rural infrastructure, access to extension services, or a more responsive local government. At the national level, the focus often shifts to agricultural policy, trade rules,

labour laws, and tax regimes that impact the farming sector. Large private sector players such as rural development banks, insurance companies, and the food retail industry also often must be addressed at national level. Some well-organised farmer platforms also operate at the international level, engaging in policy dialogues on climate finance, food systems governance, or trade agreements, often in partnership with national delegations or regional platforms. International policies may seem far away, but they represent interesting tools to leverage government at national level. Treaties that governments have signed in the context of international organisations or mechanisms such as the World Trade Organization, the UN, or the Paris Agreement on climate change are legally binding and have clauses on domestication. Advocacy organisations at national and local levels may use such policies for the benefit of their members, pushing governments to implement what was signed.

Farmer organisations that are politically active must ensure to be well governed and internally transparent. Without legitimacy in the eyes of their own members (losing members' trust), they risk being sidelined or becoming co-opted by external actors (like governments or donors) who may use the organisation for their own purposes without genuinely considering the members' interests. A unified voice significantly strengthens advocacy efforts. Fragmentation, where multiple farmer organisations speak in competing voices, can undermine the credibility of the farming sector and limit its political influence. Farmer organisations are encouraged to coordinate and build alliances, both within and across sectors, to maximise their collective leverage. The size of a farmers' organisation matters: a large membership signals legitimacy and increases political weight. But numbers are not enough. Effective organisations invest in professional communication to build recognition and to galvanise support. This may include engaging with the media, organising public events, and maintaining a strong online

presence. Transparency and visibility enhance credibility, and credibility is key to influencing decision-makers.

Political organisations also must ensure their independence from the government, political parties, or powerful industries. This may be challenging when looking for funds for the running of the organisation. However, it is crucial to ensure the voice of the farmers is genuine and cannot be bought by any outside entity.

TECHNICAL BENEFITS

To optimise their farming operations, individual farmers must navigate a wide range of technical challenges. These include issues related to production, soil or animal health, mechanization, input procurement, marketing of outputs, certification, farm management, workforce supervision, and adapting to changing climatic and environmental conditions. Addressing these challenges requires not only knowledge but also access to trusted, timely, and practical support.

In many countries, technical advice has traditionally been provided by government extension services or agricultural chambers. Over time, this role has expanded to include NGOs, agro-industry actors, and private consultants offering specialised services, from guidance on inputs to mechanisation and tax advice. However, farmers' organisations are particularly well positioned to meet these technical needs. Their strong connection to the farming community enables them to better understand their members' realities and build the trust required for effective learning and skill-sharing. By offering relevant, high-quality technical support, farmer organisations can also create a reliable source of income. Many farmers are willing to pay for advisory services that clearly improve productivity, efficiency and income. This makes technical support both a service to members and a potential revenue stream for the organisation itself.

Technically focused organisations aim to increase the competitiveness of their members. They do this by coordinating value chain activities, promoting innovation, supporting the development of better inputs, and contributing to standard-setting and regulation. Their role in quality assurance and improvement is vital, especially in sectors where compliance with quality and safety standards are critical to market access.

Technically focused farmer organisations often collaborate with research institutions, universities, and industry players. These partnerships allow them to access the latest innovations and deliver this knowledge through demonstration plots, training programmes, farmer field schools, and specialised fairs. Strong links to machinery and equipment manufacturers further support the dissemination of practical technologies tailored to members' needs.

Coordination across the value chain enhances overall efficiency and supports stronger collective outcomes. As such, commodity-specific organisations often specialise in technical support to improve the performance of all actors involved. Their expertise makes them suitable partners for governments, sometimes even taking over public functions, such as extension or quality control. Many of these organisations are financed through levies on production or sales (either voluntary or compulsory) allowing for sustainable service delivery. Because they typically focus on a single commodity or group of related products, these organisations can offer highly specialised, state-of-the-art technical support. Their effectiveness and relative financial stability make them highly attractive to farmers, even though they may be less visible to the public than farmer organisations who are engaged in broader political advocacy.

SOCIAL BENEFITS

Social benefits tend to not be the primary purpose of farmer organisations. This role is more often associated with community-based groups, NGOs, faith-based organisations, government or donor programmes. However, because farmer organisations bring together individuals who often work in remote, challenging environments and whose livelihoods are tightly interwoven with their families, these organisations inevitably engage with social needs as part of their broader purpose.

Farming communities face unique challenges. Many are composed of (smallholder) family farms, where professional and personal life are closely linked. As member-driven bodies, farmer organisations cannot ignore the living and working conditions of their members. For example, they may provide support to women farmers during pregnancy and childbirth or organise assistance for injured or ill members. Pension coverage is rare for self-employed farmers, and access to emergency financial support is often limited. In response, some organisations develop informal social protection systems, such as mutual assistance schemes or sickness support networks.

These efforts are sometimes undertaken in collaboration with other actors, such as religious groups, cooperatives, or local charities, thus allowing for shared responsibility in providing social safety nets. By filling such gaps, farmer organisations help to strengthen the resilience of rural communities and farming families, ensuring continuity of production, even in times of hardship.

Social benefits can also produce positive spillovers in other areas. Members who are more food-secure, better educated, and socially stable are more likely to participate actively in economic or political activities. Social services can support inter-generational transfer of

farms, by making it easier for older farmers to retire with a peace of mind and to allow younger ones to take over. Moreover, inclusive and democratically governed organisations contribute to building a vibrant civil society, and this enhances their broader legitimacy and public support.

While this book primarily focuses on farmer organisations oriented toward economic,

technical, and political goals, it recognises that many also offer valuable social services. These additional functions reinforce the attractiveness of membership and strengthen the long-term sustainability of the organisation. Moreover, being a member of a farmers' organisation itself has in most cases a social function. It is also about belonging: knowing that one is not alone, but part of a community with shared challenges and mutual support.

1.2 COMMON TYPES OF FARMERS' ORGANISATIONS

Farmer organisations are formed in response to the specific needs, priorities, and identities of their members. As mentioned above, they take on a variety of forms and functions, which can be grouped into broad types based on their purpose, target group, scope of activities, or organisational structure.

One key distinction lies between **general-purpose** and **specialised farmer organisations**. Specialised farmer organisations focus on specific commodities, products, services, target groups, or shared challenges. These may be cooperatives formed for joint production, storage, marketing or procurement, associations of women or youth farmers, or groups organised around particular farming methods, such as organic agriculture or irrigation farming. By concentrating on clearly defined needs, specialised organisations can deliver tailored services and build strong internal cohesion. In many cases, these specialised bodies are members of larger general affairs organisations, thereby creating opportunities for coordination and joint advocacy on issues concerning farmers at large.

General-purpose organisations (sometimes referred to as general affairs organisations) serve a broad farming constituency. They address a wide range of political, technical, economic, and social issues affecting farmers across different commodities, production systems, demographics, or regions. These organisations are often national associations structured along administrative lines (e.g. village, district, province). Next to this administration-related structuring, they may incorporate specialised organisations, as mentioned above. Collective action reinforces the voice of the farmers in the policy environment, but is not without challenges, given the sometimes-diverging interests of different types of farmers. The wide membership of general-purpose organisations, however, gives them substantial legitimacy and bargaining power in representing farmers' collective interests.

Understanding the diverse landscape of farmer organisations is key to engaging effectively with the farming sector. Several common types of farmer organisations are explored in more detail, illustrating how their structure, purpose,

and membership reflect the realities of the farmers they serve. A coordinated approach, with clearly defined roles among farmer organisations, strengthens the farming sector and enables them to speak with a unified voice in the interest of all farmers.

GENERAL-AFFAIRS FARMERS' ORGANISATIONS

General-affairs farmer organisations, sometimes also known as farmers' unions, aim to represent all farmers within a specific geographic area, whether at the local, provincial, national, or even international level. They are structured to reflect the administrative hierarchy of a country: local-level groups and cooperatives form the foundation, which are then organised into district or county structures, and subsequently into provincial and national bodies. This layered system allows farmer organisations to mirror government structures enabling these to engage effectively with public institutions on matters of policy and service delivery.

General-purpose or general-affairs organisations play a key role in lobbying for farmers interests, advocacy, and representation. Local general-affairs organisations typically focus on influencing municipal-level policies and addressing community-level challenges, while provincial and national bodies advocate at higher levels of government on broader sectoral issues. At all levels, they act as the legitimate voice of farmers, promoting collective interests through structured dialogue.

When deciding about the structure of a general affairs farmers' organisation, it is useful to reflect on the intricacies of the government structures, both administrative and political. Governance levels, where elections are held, are most relevant for topics to be addressed with politicians, gaining their support and reminding them of their election promises later. Administrative levels are key when it comes to service delivery

and support in all processes in the daily life and work of the farmers and the organisation. Often, compromises need to be made or clever structural solutions found in order to keep the governance of the farmers' organisation lean and effective.

Unlike specialised organisations that focus on a specific commodity or target group, general-affairs organisations are open to all farmers. Their responsibility is to serve the entire farming community, including smallholders, commercial farmers, and all types of farming enterprises in between. Internally, this can be demanding, as members do not all agree. They may come from organic or conventional farming backgrounds, from large- or small-scale operations, and from very different sectors, regions and organisational cultures. Finding a common voice therefore requires strong facilitation and communication by the secretariat and elected leadership, as well as well-chosen communication tools, time, and sustained effort to build positions that are supported by the majority of the members.

This wide range of membership enables general-affairs organisations to deliver general services, such as information sharing, policy engagement, and coordination across sub-sectors, without being tied to one specific value chain, service area, or farmer-type. By providing an umbrella for specialised farmer organisations, they also foster collaboration among groups with diverse interests.

The more inclusive a general-affairs organisation is, the stronger its mandate, and the more influential its voice when negotiating on behalf of the farming community. Often, governments are also interested in having one strong counterpart, speaking for all farmers rather than a fragmented landscape of farmers' organisations. Where this is the case, the government may have the power to 'divide and rule' the farmers constituency, but also the burden to meet with all factions and act as a facilitator to find common ground. This should not be the role of government – it is for the

The German Farmers' Association (DBV)

The German Farmers' Association (DBV) represents about 90% of all farmers in the country, from small side-businesses to large-scale farms. Its comprehensive structure makes it an umbrella organisation for everyone. The membership is composed of 18 regional farmers' organisations covering the whole country, which again have some 300 county associations. The German Raiffeisen Association (DRV), as the apex body of all agricultural cooperatives, and the Association of Agricultural Education (vlf) also have full membership in the DBV. Additionally, 45 associate members that represent specific sub-sectors (e.g. dairy, forestry, barley, tree nurseries, etc.) and agricultural service providers (e.g. machinery rings, bookkeepers) connect the general affairs federation to important actors, without voting rights. The associations for rural woman and for rural youth are also associate members. In this way, all different perspectives and expectations are gathered under one roof, allowing the DBV to speak authentically for the whole sector.

The DBV speaks on behalf of this broad, heterogeneous mix of farmers, for all farmers, while the specific needs of sub-sectors or specific target groups are dealt with by their respective organisations, which are also under the umbrella of the DBV.

Source:

🔗 <https://www.bauernverband.de/>

farmers to find a common voice and speak, as much as possible, as one.

Typical issues on the agenda of general-affairs organisations include conditions around local production, market access, infrastructure, environmental management, security, and access to water or natural resources. These organisations also serve as key platforms for introducing innovation, facilitating knowledge sharing, and fostering social interaction, which is especially useful in rural areas where farmers may otherwise be isolated.

Importantly, general affairs organisations act as entry points for farmers' involvement in broader civil society, appointing representatives to participate in forums such as local (production or mechanisation) cooperatives, security committees, animal health boards, wildfire associations, and even school or church councils. In this way, they help to embed the farming community within the broader social fabric of rural life.

COOPERATIVES

Alongside general interest organisations, cooperatives are among the oldest and most widespread types of farmer organisations. They emerged in the 19th century as mutual self-help organisations, enabling farmers to pool resources, reduce risks, and strengthen their economic position through collective action. What sets cooperatives apart from commercially oriented enterprises is their democratic character: one member, one vote.

While general-affairs organisations represent farmers' broader interests, such as advocacy, policy engagement, or service coordination, cooperatives focus on economic collaboration and commercial activities. They typically operate along the upstream or downstream segments of the agricultural value chain, addressing input supply, processing, and marketing.

Cooperatives enable all farmers, including smallholders, to pool resources and thereby benefit from economies of scale. Together, members can access shared infrastructure, such as tractors, machinery for field work, drying or milling equipment, packaging plants, or marketing services. Acting collectively strengthens bargaining power, reduces transaction costs, increases the size of potential investments, and facilitates access to financial and technical services. Examples include upstream processes like the joint sourcing of seeds, fertiliser, and other inputs. Cooperatives may invest in shared ownership of warehouses, machinery for seed cleaning, tilling, or harvesting, and mechanized value addition such as oil and juice extraction units. The increased volume and coordination provided by cooperatives strengthens farmers' negotiating power when selling their products, getting better prices, providing certification services, or accessing more complicated markets.

A successful cooperative can transform the livelihood of its members, almost like a 'magic wand'. Individually, farmers may struggle to access markets, loans, or equipment. But as a group, they can become a credible and viable business partner capable of negotiating better prices or terms. The cooperative becomes a platform for mechanisation, logistics, financial access, and value addition that would be out of reach for most individual members.

Over time, some cooperatives grow into large businesses. Mergers between local cooperatives can lead to national or even international operations. When managed well, such growth benefits members, via discounted services, or even a share in the profits through dividends paid out at the end of the season. However, challenges arise when these cooperatives expand into commercial ventures and attract external investors. In some such cases, ownership may then shift from the members to independent boards or shareholders, thus distancing the organisation from its original farmer base and eroding member engagement.

KAN Jabung Syariah East Java

KAN Jabung is a strong example of a multi-faceted sugar and dairy cooperative in Indonesia. After a slow and challenging start as a sugar-cane producing FO in the 1980s, it has diversified into the dairy sector with a central dairy farm. It currently employs approx. 2,400 members.

In order to secure a sustainable business, the cooperative has developed additional services, such as

- **Sugar cane business:**
 - › Collection, processing, and sale of sugar cane
 - › Distribution of fertiliser to farmers
- **Dairy business:**
 - › Production and distribution of animal feed
 - › Technical guidance and training for dairy farmers
 - › Animal health and artificial insemination services
 - › Waste management programme (biogas)
 - › Logistics services with cooling facilities and storage
 - › Laboratory analysis and quality control
 - › Processing into marketable milk and yoghurt products under their own brand
- **Retail business with 14 shops**
- **Micro-finance loans and fee collection**

Source:

🔗 <https://kanjabung.com/>

Farmer Producer Companies in India

The Republic of India, in 2003, opted for the creation of a new format called the Farmer Producer Company (FPC) under the Companies Act, thus creating an alternative form of collaborative, member-based business development. FPCs are an attempt to harness the strength of collaborative, farmer-based business developments outside of the cooperative system. The FPC combines the solidarity aspects of a cooperative with more modern economic approaches in management (e.g. tradable shares within the membership). FPCs are registered as private limited companies under the Companies Act 2013 but maintain the 'one member, one vote' principle. Its shareholders are farmers – individual or groups of small-scale and marginal farmers.

The government of India is promoting FPC creation through incentives and financial and technical support with a goal to establish 10,000 FPCs by 2028. While this has led to the successful registration of many FPCs, this governmental push is also a challenge for a form of farmers' organisation that hinges on the intrinsic motivation of its members to take full ownership and shape their own FPC.

Source:

AHA, C. Shambu Prasad et al.:
"Farming Futures – Reimagining
Producer Organisations in India",
2023 downloaded from

🔗 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370121308_Producer_organisations_as_21st-century_farmer_institutions

Governance and a strong sense of ownership are critical: if farmer members lose control or participation declines, the cooperative may shift from a farmer-driven enterprise to a standard business or association. In response, farmers sometimes leave to form new cooperatives, particularly around specific commodities or value chains.

While government plays a critical role in providing the legal framework, cooperatives are defined as member-governed autonomous entities. However, in countries under socialist rule, this autonomy was often compromised as government representatives entered the cooperatives' governance. This changed the power dynamics and flow of benefits and often alienated the members. In some formerly socialist countries, the political baggage associated with past state control still lingers, even if there are ample initiatives to give cooperatives a new, clean start. Therefore, cooperatives only slowly make their way back. Some successful initiatives include the Organisation for the Harmonisation of Business Law in Africa (OHADA), adopting its 'Uniform Act on Cooperatives' in 2010, harmonising the cooperative law in its 17 West- and Central African member states.

Farmers have at times also opted to use other legal formats like self-help groups or business associations, while still adopting cooperative principles in practice. However, the advantage of the worldwide movement of cooperatives with clear guidelines, exchange formats, and 200 years of experience is not easy to replicate. Ultimately, the strength of a cooperative lies in its ability to remain member-driven and responsive to farmers' needs, with shared ownership, trust, and clear benefits at the heart of its success.

COMMODITY ORGANISATIONS

Commodity organisations (or commodity associations) are structured around a single agricultural product or commodity, such as maize,

dairy, or coffee. Unlike cooperatives, which are owned and governed exclusively by farmers for collective commercial benefit, commodity organisations bring together a broader group of stakeholders along the entire value chain. This includes farmers, processors, traders, exporters, and sometimes even retailers and service providers – all working with the same commodity.

Commodity organisations are often formed to professionalise a growing sector. As government is involved in promoting promising sectors, especially with regards to export, there is a genuine interest in the existence of commodity organisations. However, in order to play its crucial role in a professional and transparent manner, the independence, internal ownership, and member-based self-governance of commodity organisations is key.

Commodity organisations operate at various levels: local, district or county, provincial, national, and even international. For example, the International Dairy Federation coordinates global knowledge and advocacy on dairy-related matters. At the national level, commodity organisations promote specific products and represent the shared interests of value chain actors from the farm gate to the consumer's plate.

Where cooperatives primarily serve as business vehicles for collective production, processing, or marketing, commodity organisations function as collaborative platforms. They facilitate knowledge sharing, shape policy, and protect shared interests, particularly in areas such as trade regulation, health and safety standards, logistics, and market access. Their advocacy often extends beyond the farming community, bringing together all actors in the value chain to maintain competitiveness and resilience. Commodity organisations are often the leading voices against unfair trade practices such as dumping. They are also key sources of technical information and market knowledge and frequently spearhead initiatives in response to market disruptions.

Often, commodity organisations are affiliated with general-affairs farmer organisations. This connection allows them to benefit from broader sector coordination and advocacy platforms, while still maintaining a clear focus on their specific commodity.

International Dairy Federation (IDF)

Since 1903, the International Dairy Federation (IDF) has been the global organisation promoting the dairy sector for all stakeholders, from production to consumers. Based in Brussels, Belgium, it brings together the expertise and science in the sector to secure safe and sustainable dairy products. To do this, it supports the development of science-based standards, of adequate policies, practices, and regulations.

Over 1,200 highly qualified dairy experts from 40 member countries around the world provide a permanent source of authoritative technical and scientific knowledge and information regarding the dairy sector. They converse with other stakeholders from research and science, politics, and related organisations and industries. With its members, the IDF represents two thirds of global milk production.

In carrying out its work, it focuses on animal health and welfare, dairy science and technology, economics and policies, the environment, farm management, food standards, hygiene and safety, marketing, methods of analysis and sampling, and nutrition and health. Publication (online and offline) and events are channels of dissemination. Farmers are involved at all levels, national and global, both with their respective dairy association or boards, and in the governance of the IDF.

Source:

📄 <https://fil-idf.org/>

Special cases are the 'Interprofessions' in West Africa and the Commodity Councils in East Africa. Both these organisations formalise collaboration across all actors in a value chain, often institutionalised through public-private partnerships or recognised by law. They set official and formal industry standards, manage levies, and coordinate sector development strategies.

Financially, commodity organisations are often among the strongest structures in organised agriculture. They may be funded through levies that are linked to production volumes or sales. Typically, such levies are either statutory (mandated by government) or voluntary (agreed by sector stakeholders). The ability of commodity organisations to charge levies provides a stable income and a basis for long-term planning, technical service provision, and advocacy.

WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

Women farmer organisations represent a specialised form of general interest organisation, created to address the specific challenges and needs of women in agriculture. While they often mirror the structure of other general-purpose organisations, their focus is on empowering women producers through tailored services such as capacity building, training, and collective business ventures. In some countries, women farmers play an active role in the early stages of product processing. They often form women-producer business groups, which can evolve into cooperatives or become the foundation for business wings within their farmer organisations.

Beyond economic goals, women's organisations often incorporate a strong social component.

Interprofession de la Filière de Riz au Mali (IFRIZ-M)

'Interprofessions' are formal platforms in West Africa that bring together the different stakeholders of a whole sector. Often, these are organised with governmental support. They encompass all value levels: from inputs to production and processing to markets.

IFRIZ in Mali was set up in 1999 as an approach to support the implementation of governmental policies in the strategically important rice sector. A technical team composed of representatives from value chain levels and the government coordinated the key steps:

- Definition of goals for the sector
- Analysis and mobilisation of stakeholders
- Definition of structures of IFRIZ, which also included the forming of structures in the different stakeholder groups

- Definition of statutes and regulations
- Preparation and realisation of a constituting general assembly
- Registration
- Support in formulation of vision, strategy, etc.

Already in this process, many participants benefitted from the dialogue between the value chain levels, which again strengthened the process.

These days, IFRIZ is a key partner for the government in policy development and implementation.

Source:
CGIAR

They may work on issues like food security, poverty reduction, girls' education, general literacy, and improving rural nutrition. These organisations offer a safe and supportive space for women to organise, learn, and advocate for their interests, especially where their voice is underrepresented in mainstream farmer organisations. Lobbying efforts by these organisations typically centre on gender-specific concerns such as land rights, inheritance laws, collateral and access to credit, market access, education, and protection from gender-based violence. They also campaign for structural changes that allow women to balance farming with family responsibilities. By focusing on women's experiences, these organisations build resilience, promote long-term thinking, and contribute to the overall strengthening of rural communities.

Women's organisations are especially relevant in contexts where gender inequality persists, including areas affected by conflict or in cases of weak (and/or discriminatory) governance. Sometimes, these organisations extend beyond farming to include rural women working in related sectors, such as food processing or community development. Financial sustainability of women's organisations remains a challenge, as many rely on external support, particularly from NGOs and development partners. While this funding can be essential, it often comes with donor-driven agendas that may not fully align with the priorities of local members.

Over time, as women take on stronger roles within mainstream farmer organisations, separate women's organisations may evolve or be merged with broader structures. Nonetheless, their past and ongoing contributions to more inclusive agricultural development remains vital.

The Specific Union for Productive Farmer Women in Jordan (SUWFJ)

Founded in 2007, the SUFWJ has grown into an organisation with 22 local associations that include more than 5,000 individual women farmers. They face several problems that are specific for women, e.g. lack of access to land, which in turn does not allow them to join the General Farmers Union. Similarly, access to finance is a challenge.

The SUFWJ advocates successfully to address such issues and to support equal rights and conditions for women in agriculture.

On a personal level, many women farmers face the dual burden of farm work and household tasks. They have to deal with harassment at work and have little chance to defend themselves without risk of additional problems. Access to education, and especially to leadership training, is limited. The SUFWJ provides them with a safe haven and opportunities to increase their capacities.

Acknowledging climate change challenges, the SUFWJ also trains its members on sustainable farming practices, such as water conservation techniques and renewable energies.

Source:

🔗 <https://www.developmentaid.org/news-stream/post/172674/hero-stories-empowering-women-farmers>

(Interview with SUWFJ founder)

YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

Young farmers often bring energy, ambition, and fresh ideas to agriculture. They are keen to innovate, test new approaches, and tap into emerging markets. However, they frequently struggle to find space in traditional farmer organisations and seek platforms that reflect their interests and communication styles.

Young farmer organisations cater specifically to young farmers, agricultural students, and rural youth, usually up to an age limit of around 35 years old. They focus on community building, access to innovation, leadership development, and tailored lobbying. In countries where agriculture is not seen as an attractive career, young farmer organisations play a critical role by offering relatable role models and showing viable, successful pathways into farming. Due to the natural high turnover of members, youth organisations face unique challenges in maintaining continuity, while the typical characteristics of their target group set a high bar for continued engagement. Members of these organisations thrive on independence, learning through experience, and a culture that tolerates mistakes, all key elements for leadership

development. Overbearing control by parent organisations or lack of autonomy often stifles growth. A healthy young farmer organisation maintains its own agenda and spirit, distinct from any 'parent' body yet ideally creates a pipeline for future leaders to transition into broader farmer structures. Supporting youth structures is therefore a strategic investment in the future of organised agriculture.

Youth activities often include 'Young Farmer of the Year' competitions, exchange programmes, scholarships, educational tours, and (international) networking. These initiatives help build confidence and lasting networks, benefiting members throughout their careers. As young farmers often lack financial resources, their organisations usually depend on a mixture of membership fees, grants, sponsorships, projects, and other fundraising. But as their value lies in fostering leadership, vision, and the next generation of advocates, creating a seamless transition from youth to general organisations ensures that these investments pay off in the long term. In fact, building and sustaining young farmers' organisations is the biggest and wisest investment a farmers' organisation can make.

A strong youth organisation – BDL in Germany

The BDL, the German Rural Youth Association, with its over 100,000 members has a federal structure with member organisations from local to regional to national level. They offer capacity building for members, hold community events, and are an engaged and sought-after partner in policy discussions.

A special characteristic: from the beginning in 1949, they have installed two presidents and four vice-presidents, always gender-balanced. This balance is also visible in the composition of the membership.

The BDL is a member of the CEJA, the European Council of Young Farmers. The presidents of the BDL are also members of the Board of the German Farmers Association (DBV).

Source:

☞ <https://www.landjugend.de/>

Training programmes to harness the next generation of leaders

While technical expertise can normally be secured through employment and engagement of experts, organisations need to invest in the development of future leadership in its own structures. This investment includes the deepening of leadership skills, but very much also the transfer of knowledge and attitudes from generation to generation.

Many FOs have established internal training programmes for this purpose:

- WFO Gymnasium by the World Farmers Organisation, with a global training programme of 1 year for young leaders from all continents
- SACAU 'Young Leader Incubation Programme', and the ROPPA 'Programme d'incubation des jeunes leaders' for young leaders from their members states
- Youth Leadership Training Programme by AFA, the Asian Farmers' Association for Sustainable Rural Development
- DBV TopKurs in Germany, run by AHA, a yearly leadership training course for young farmers since 1947

Note that some may depend on external funding and run out when sponsorship stops.

While most training programmes have a short duration, sometimes with several sessions, there is a special format in northern Europe

that has shown high effectiveness over the past decades: the 'long courses'. In Germany, many of the regional FOs invest in such long courses, and the TOP Kurs of AHA is equivalent to the national level.

Participants spend between 6 weeks and 6 months together, and while learning skills relevant for their individual business as entrepreneurs and engagement in the FOs, they also benefit from being outside of their familiar environment and together with a crowd of peers. Under the guidance of the trainers, but also by the social dynamics of the group, they grow and mature and learn how to voice their views and to manage themselves. It is this growth of personality, the understanding to be responsible for yourself, and the challenge to face the dynamics of the group, that makes these courses so valuable. Many alumni of such courses can be found in the leadership of their FOs.

Sources:

- ☞ <https://www.wfo-oma.org/>
- ☞ <https://sacau.org/>
- ☞ <https://roppa-afrique.org/fr/>
- ☞ <https://asianfarmers.org/>
- ☞ <https://www.andreas-hermes-akademie.de/>

SMALLHOLDER FARMER ORGANISATIONS

Although general purpose farmer organisations often aim to serve farms of all sizes, the needs of small-scale farmers often require more targeted attention. Small-scale farmers include those active in subsistence farming, those transitioning to a more business-led approach, and part-time

farmers. Given the limited scale of production, it may be very challenging, if not impossible, to generate a stable livelihood from the available land. This precarious nature of small-scale farming also affects the organisation: members may have limited ability to pay for the very services they most need. Many smallholders therefore combine farming with off-farm income,

and agricultural production may remain partly subsistence-oriented. These realities influence both the priorities and operating model of smallholder organisations.

One distinctive feature is a stronger emphasis on basic service provision and livelihood support. Smallholder organisations often prioritise access to inputs, extension and advisory support, basic financial services, storage facilities, and market linkages. Compared to organisations representing larger commercial farmers, the focus is typically less on expanding large-scale agribusiness operations and more on improving productivity, food security, and income stability.

In Least-Developed-Countries (LDCs), financial sustainability is often a structural challenge. Where members' financial capacity is limited, membership contributions alone may not be sufficient to sustain professional services or a permanent secretariat. As a result,

many smallholder organisations combine membership-based income with project or programme support from governments, development partners, or NGOs. Such support can be essential for capacity building and investment, it also calls for strong governance to ensure that the organisation remains member-driven and accountable to its constituency.

For this reason, many successful smallholder organisations are embedded into multi-level farmer structures, linking local groups to regional or national umbrella organisations. This can strengthen advocacy, professional management, and access to wider networks while keeping representation rooted at grassroots level. In some cases, mutual financial support within broader structures can play a role, where the financial strength of larger-scale members helps fund core secretariat functions and creates momentum that benefits the wider membership.

NASFAM – National Union of Small-Scale Farmers of Malawi

Founded in 1998, NASFAM has grown to serve over 300,000 small-scale farmers in Malawi. They accompany farmers to join in clubs of 10-15 members, which in turn form action groups and further develop into what are referred to as associations, which again are served by 12 special Innovation and Productivity Centres (IPCs) of NASFAM. Advisors help the farmers in production technologies and storage. Currently, NASFAM represents over 130,000 farmers in 54 associations, which deliver the produce of the farmers to the union.

At the union level, a separate entity transforms the produce into marketable products, which are then distributed all over the country to consumers in shops and supermarkets under the NASFAM brand.

Additionally, NASFAM plays a vital role in policy development, representing the voice of small-scale farmers to their government. NASFAM is active in social media (e.g. Facebook) where they present a modern image of farming.

Source:
AHA

FEDERATIONS AND CONFEDERATIONS

Federations and confederations are umbrella structures that link multiple farmer organisations across levels, such as local, national, regional, or continental. They represent a structural evolution, where smaller or more localised organisations join forces to amplify their voice and coordinate action. The key distinction lies in autonomy and authority: in a federation, member organisations delegate part of their decision-making power to a central body. This allows for stronger coordination, binding decisions, and a unified approach to advocacy or service delivery. Federations are usually more hierarchical and operate under a centralised governance model.

In contrast, a confederation is a looser alliance of independent organisations. Its central structure has a limited mandate, typically coordinating joint efforts or external representation – while policy decisions remain with the individual members. Confederations emphasise diversity and flexibility.

Both structures serve to amplify their voices, visibility, and influence, particularly in national or international arenas. Federations are more common at the national level, enabling grassroots organisations to speak with one voice. Confederations are typically found at the national, regional, or continental level, where diversity of context (e.g. different national laws, farming systems, or political cultures) makes looser cooperation more appropriate. Though both models offer platforms for collaboration, the choice between them reflects a strategic balance: the desire for unity and efficiency versus the need for autonomy and adaptability.

In the case of West Africa, which is modelled on the system of France, the national apex farmer organisation is always a confederation. Its members are theme- and value-chain-oriented federations.

EAFF – East African Farmers' Federation

EAFF is the umbrella body of farmers in East Africa. From each of the 10 countries, up to 5 members are permitted, typically representing a mix of national FOs from general-affairs federations, unions, a commodity organisation, women and youth FOs. The EAFF represents the interests of farmers within the East African Community (EAC). It coordinates the efforts between its member FOs to address topics both on a national and regional level, as EAC decisions depend on the national governments. Its e-granary market match-making service for certain commodities is a direct service for approx. 15,000 farmers in 3 countries.

SACAU – Southern African Confederation of Agricultural Unions

SACAU is the apex regional body representing farmers' organisations across Southern Africa, bringing together 20 national member organisations from 13 countries. As a confederation, SACAU provides a platform for its members to share perspectives, coordinate positions, and collaborate on issues affecting the agricultural sector across the region. It focuses on matters of common interest to its members that require attention and coordination at regional, continental, and global levels, including issues related to climate change, trade, food systems, and farmer representation in policy dialogue.

SACAU's role is to facilitate dialogue, knowledge exchange, and collective engagement among its members, while respecting the autonomy and decision-making authority of each national organisation. SACAU engages with farmers by working through its member national farmers' organisations.

ROPPA – Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest

ROPPA, the umbrella FO in West Africa is a special case. Formally, it is registered as a regional association located in Burkina Faso. It considers itself as a network ('réseau'), as its 13 members platforms (one per country) bring together organisations of crop farmers, livestock farmers, pastoralists, fishermen, women, and young people, forming a network of over 150 national farmers' organisations with various legal statuses (federations, associations, unions, etc.).

At regional level, ROPPA addresses regional and international issues and acts as a coordinating and pooling body. Its positions and strategic directions are based on a consensus reached collectively with its member platforms, which are themselves required to consult their own grassroots organisations. To ensure an inclusive approach, the network has established 'colleges' dedicated to women and young people, both within national platforms and at regional level. At the same time, the umbrella of ROPPA allows for the establishment of sectoral frameworks (cadres) to coordinate efforts for their developments, e.g. for rice, fisheries, horticulture, livestock, and cereals. ROPPA Farmers' University (UPR) 'Mamadou Cissokho' is the main training and capacity-building mechanism for farmers' organisations in the region.

ROPPA, EAFF, SACAU as well as PROPAC for Central Africa and UMNAGRI for Northern Africa are the five constituent members of the continental umbrella body PAFO.

Source:

EAFF – East African Farmers' Federation / SACAU – Southern African Confederation of Agricultural Unions / ROPPA – Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest

STUDY GROUPS

Study groups are informal, loosely structured gatherings of farmers and other stakeholders, typically formed around a specific product or emerging agricultural technology. Unlike broader commodity organisations, study groups focus narrowly on one product, especially where scientific or technical knowledge is still evolving. These groups serve as spaces for peer learning, experimentation, and shared problem-solving. Participants share experiences, ask questions, trial outcomes, consult literature, and other sources of information to deepen their understanding. The structure is typically autonomous and not formally linked to general or commodity-based farmer organisations.

Research and development (R&D) often plays a central role in study group activities. Beyond farmers, participants may include scientists, researchers, input suppliers, value chain actors, market players, or financiers – in short, anyone with a stake in the product's advancement.

Often, study groups eventually evolve into (or become integrated by) more formal structures, such as commodity organisations. The defining feature of a study group is a pioneering spirit, a drive to explore, learn, and innovate collectively in areas where knowledge is still being built.

1.3 LEGAL STRUCTURES OF FARMERS' ORGANISATIONS

Before organising themselves, farmers often operate individually, each facing unique challenges with little communication among colleagues or peers. They may even see one another as competitors, particularly during harvest time when they seek the same buyers. Yet cooperation often emerges, whether triggered by economic opportunity, shared challenges in the market or in the regulatory environment, or in the form of a collective response to crises as droughts, floods, or pandemics.

In such contexts, informal organisations of farmers often arise. These are typically grassroots, volunteer-driven groups built around mutual interests and community engagement. While many remain informal and effective for years, others may choose to formalise over time, depending on internal needs and opportunities or informed by external conditions such as the need for legal frameworks or registration requirements from potential partners.

INFORMAL FARMER GROUPS: A FLEXIBLE STARTING POINT

Informal organisations of farmers can take many forms. They tend to be loosely structured, with limited administrative burden, and are often based on trust, shared leadership, and mutual aid. Examples include: self-help groups, which unite around a specific problem that requires collective action; producer groups, which facilitate joint marketing, purchasing, or processing (a potential precursor of cooperatives); common interest groups, often formed for lobbying or advocacy on a temporary basis; savings and credit groups, where pooled

participant contributions provide rotating credit (sometimes a precursor to formal SACCOs); risk-sharing groups, offering support during hardship (may evolve into formal insurance schemes); project-driven groups, formed around a single initiative (for example a bridge, borehole or dam) and the aforementioned study groups.

These informal groups often extend beyond the farming community to include broader rural populations. Their fluid structure allows for easy entry and exit, and they often rely on strong local personalities for leadership. Informal groups can also provide valuable learning spaces where participants develop conflict resolution and management skills and build organisational culture. However, the lack of defined roles and processes can limit long-term effectiveness.

FROM INFORMALITY TO FORMALISATION

When an informal group matures, members may seek greater stability, professional support, or access to resources. This can prompt a transition toward formalisation. The shift typically brings defined governance and management structures, transparent roles and responsibilities, more documentation, and compliance and accountability requirements. While this may reduce some of the community spirit and flexibility of informal groups, it also opens new possibilities, such as greater access to finance, professional staffing, recognition of legal status, and a culture of long-term strategic planning creating the required stability for investments.

The decision to formalise should ideally stem from within the group, based on shared goals and ambition. Potential growth and the interest

of more people or organisations to become a member of an existing entity also calls for formalisation. Sometimes, an (additional) incentive comes from external players, such as governments, donors, or private sector partners, as these may require a formalised structure as a precondition for collaboration or funding. Although such demands may be relevant – i.e. to organise a commercial value chain – it must be emphasised that special attention needs to be paid to the issue of ownership by its members for an organisation to become and remain viable.

In principle, formalisation means becoming a legally registered and recognised organisation. This allows the FO to operate as a legal entity, sign contracts, open bank accounts, and manage assets in its own name, to hire and fire staff and to rent offices, and to accumulate (and distribute) capital.

External support by a lawyer, an organisational advisor, relevant government entities, or just an experienced partner may be helpful during this transition, especially when those in charge are unfamiliar with formal organisational systems. Also, registration involves cost and therefore finances must be considered before getting started. It is important to ensure that any outside support does not foster dependency or weaken internal ownership.

Once the decision to formalise has been made, the next step is to select an appropriate legal form. This choice depends on national legal frameworks and on the farmer organisation's purpose: should the organisation be a service-oriented membership association, will it focus on lobbying and advocacy, shall it rather become a commercially oriented enterprise, or is a hybrid the best fit for members' interests? Should it therefore rather be registered as a non-profit or a for-profit entity? Is it meant to be an organisation of individual members, or will the membership consist of groups or organisations?

In the process towards formalisation, these questions help members to define what the organisation should achieve, how it must operate, and be governed, and what legal obligations it must meet. Most countries offer a legal framework for formalisation, enabling public authorities to engage more effectively with farmer organisations. While this can unlock greater access to support and partnership opportunities, it also requires compliance with tax laws and other statutory regulations. The following section explores the main legal structures available to farmer organisations and the strategic considerations involved in choosing among them.

When establishing a farmer organisation, one of the most critical early decisions is selecting a legal format that aligns with its mission and planned activities. Legal formats determine how the organisation is recognised under national law, the structure of its governance, the rights and responsibilities of its members and its board, the organisation's financial and tax obligations, and its eligibility for grants or for engaging in business activities. Broadly, these formats fall into two categories: non-profit entities, such as associations, organisations with a mutual benefit purpose, and companies limited by guarantee; and for-profit entities, such as cooperatives or farmer-owned limited companies. Each legal format offers different advantages, depending on whether the organisation aims to focus on advocacy, training, and representation (common for non-profit organisations), or commercial trading, input supply, and value addition (for-profit organisations). Farmer organisations may also adopt hybrid models, which combine a non-profit main structure with a for-profit subsidiary.

Becoming a formal FO – Matulatula Agrarian Reform Community Cooperative (MarCCO)

When, in the late 1990s, citrus farmers in Matulatula in the Oriental Mindoro region of the Philippines talked about their problems, they discovered that they all suffered from the same challenges: they had to accept the low prices set by middlemen to get their fruits sold. Until they could access better markets and add value to the produce, the prices would stay low, and their earnings remain limited. Over time, they banded together, pooling their produce and gaining better negotiating power. They discovered this could improve their livelihoods.

In March 1998, they finally officially registered and organised their sales business jointly. They benefitted from governmental advice and an existing legal framework to be set up as a so-called Agrarian Reform Cooperative, which was specially introduced for marginal farmers.

Even so, the income was limited, as they only sold fresh, raw goods with a limited shelf life. With assistance from external partners like AsiaDRRHA, they managed to develop a business plan and invest into the

establishment of a processing facility for bottled juice.

Over time, typical challenges appeared, e.g. governance, access to capital, and maintaining a high production quality. Their entering a new market was also not welcomed by existing juice producers. By meeting commercial standards for packaging, consistency and supply chain reliability, MarCCO was able to secure distribution deals with major retailers within the whole province.

MarCCO now has 331 farmer members, a strong brand for its juice, and a stable business. It has joined, as an FO, further farmer organisations on a higher level, to benefit from their capacity and lobby and advocacy work.

Source:
AsiaDRRHA

THE PROCESS OF FORMALISATION

As farmer groups transition from informal cooperation to a formal organisation, registration is often the first visible step: it gives the group legal recognition and a formal identity in the eyes of the state and other partners. This registration process can be quick and straightforward in some countries but lengthy and sensitive in others. In some cases, especially for regional or international farmer organisations, registration may involve additional choices about the legal 'home' of the organisation and how it is recognised across borders.

But formalisation involves more than registration, it also entails establishing and documenting the organisation's rules. The process typically starts with clarifying the organisation's purpose and membership base, followed by drafting and adopting core governing documents that define how it will work in practice. These usually include a constitution or statutes, setting out the organisation's purpose and values, its governing bodies and their mandates, election and decision-making rules, accountability and financial controls, conflict resolution and, where relevant, dissolution. Once these foundations have been agreed upon, the organisation will often develop a second layer of bylaws or rules

of procedure that translate broad principles into practical routines. For example, these may cover who qualifies for membership, how meetings are convened, what is expected of office bearers in terms of roles and behaviour,

and how committees or advisory bodies operate. Finally, as activities expand, more operational rules and regulations may be added for specific areas, such as financial procedures, bookkeeping, administration, staffing, or travel.

The process of registering a farming organisation varies greatly from country to country. In some places, it is a straightforward 'single-window' process, whereby an organisation submits the necessary documents and receives confirmation within days. Rwanda is often cited as an example of a more streamlined approach, with services set up to reduce the number of offices that organisations have to visit.

In other contexts, however, registration can be slow, complex, and costly in practice, even if it appears simple on paper. The process may involve multiple institutions, such as a registrar for associations or cooperatives, local government offices, sector ministries, and sometimes tax authorities. Requirements may include identity documents, minutes from a founding assembly meeting, a membership list, approved statutes or a constitution, proof of address, and details of elected office-bearers. Delays are common when offices are under-resourced or when procedures are unclear. Applicants may also be sent back repeatedly to 'fix' minor issues.

In some countries, registration processes can also be vulnerable to informal payments or political gatekeeping. Organisations may feel pressured to align with local power structures, use specific intermediaries, or to 'pay to move the file'. Where this risk exists, it is helpful to keep the process as transparent as possible by following written procedures, requesting receipts for any payments, keeping copies of all submissions, and involving more than one office bearer in interactions with officials.

Regional or international farmer organisations often face an additional layer of complexity: not only do they need to register somewhere, they also need to operate credibly across multiple jurisdictions. In practice, this usually involves choosing a legal 'home country' in which the organisation is formally incorporated (for example, as an association, non-profit entity, foundation, or cooperative federation under that country's law). The organisation may then need to take additional steps to be recognised or to be able to operate in other countries. These steps may include registering as a foreign entity, signing host-country agreements, opening compliant bank accounts, and meeting specific reporting requirements for cross-border funding.

If an organisation works closely with intergovernmental bodies, it may also seek a formal cooperation agreement or recognition status to support its participation in regional processes. As these pathways vary widely by region and country, international organisations usually benefit from seeking early legal advice and making a deliberate choice of 'host' jurisdiction that offers clear non-profit rules, workable banking arrangements, and predictable compliance requirements.

A practical approach is to treat registration as a project, assigning responsibility, collecting information early, budgeting time and small administrative costs, and speaking to other organisations that have recently registered to find out what actually happens in practice.

In practice, these documents are usually drafted by a small working group, reviewed with members, and formally adopted at a founding meeting or general assembly. They are then updated over time as the organisation grows.

The different types of governing document and their typical contents are discussed in more detail in Part 3 (Governance and Management).

NOT-FOR-PROFIT LEGAL FORMATS

The section discusses the main legal formats available to farmer organisations, and clarify how they differ in governance and regulation, so that farmer leaders can choose the most suitable legal format for their organisation's goals.

Associations

Associations are the most common legal format used by not-for-profit, member-based farmer organisations; particularly those focused on advocacy, capacity-building, knowledge-sharing, and representing members' interests. Found in most countries, they are typically registered under civil society legislation or laws specifically governing associations.

Associations operate on the principle of democratic governance, often encapsulated in the motto 'one member, one vote', which ensures equality, regardless of farm size or financial contribution. Depending on the context, associations can include both individual farmer members and organisational members (i.e. farmer groups, cooperatives, commodity organisations). Some statutes also allow for different membership categories, such as ordinary members with full voting rights and associate members (such as agro-dealers, NGOs, service providers) with limited or no voting rights but who may pay higher fees. Associations with very different members (e.g. a small number of large-scale commercial farmers as well as many smallholders) face the challenge of ensuring a balance in voting

power, to make sure they serve the needs of all their members equally.

Associations are not-for-profit by law. While they may generate income from their activities, such as offering training, certification, marketing services, or event organisation, they are not allowed to distribute profits to their members. Instead, surpluses must be reinvested in pursuit of the organisation's objectives. In practice, many associations run income-generating services like cooperative marketing or digital advisory platforms or even start business arms (hybrid model) but care must be taken to preserve the association's not-for-profit status.

The association format is particularly well-suited for organisations operating at the grassroots or intermediary level, where the focus is on collective voice, inclusiveness, accountability, and service delivery. It offers a relatively flexible set-up, often with lower registration requirements and fewer tax obligations than commercial entities.

Associations also face challenges. Their core mandate, advocacy, advice, mobilisation, information dissemination, and training often does not generate sufficient revenue to sustain operations. As they grow, associations may struggle with professionalisation, balancing democratic participation with the need for operational efficiency. Without strong internal governance and active member engagement, associations can risk becoming inactive or donor-dependent. Still, many associations evolve into powerful platforms, especially when linked to national umbrella bodies.

KENAFF Meru County Farmers' Association (Kenya)

This county association with over 10,000 members is part of the Kenyan National Farmers' Federation (KENAFF). It is registered under the Kenyan Societies Act. With support from national headquarters, it employs a manager (coordinator) who oversees the delivery of services (e.g. mechanisation, training, etc.); sometimes in cooperation with development partners. Its main task is to advocate and lobby in the name of the farmers to the county government.

In 2024, the board consisted of 9 people (5 male, 4 female), including special representatives for women, youth, and commodities. The yearly membership fee for normal members is 1,000 Kenyan shillings (KSh), while member organisations like commodity associations pay a multiple of that.

It has been able to mobilise some agro-dealers as associate members, willing to pay a fee for membership in exchange for promoting themselves to the farmers. A yearly audit secures the compliance of the financial management.

Source:
KENAFF

Kenya Livestock Producer Association (KLPA)

KLPA is a national commodity association, bringing together all farmers that engage in livestock keeping from bees to cattle. It represents approx. 1.5 million Kenyan farmers that are individual members or join through farmer groups, cooperatives, self-help groups, or community-based organisations. Also, bigger corporate organisations are members of KLPA.

With more than 1,500 field experts, KLPA provides advisory services to farmers and offers access to educational materials and good farming practices. Together with cooperation partners, it facilitates access to finance, to quality and certified farming inputs, and to market linkages. The mobile phone platform "DigiFarm", operated by Safaricom, is the key channel to promote and realise these services.

Additionally, more than 300 livestock trade fairs have been organised across the country.

Since its foundation in 2004, KLPA has linked up with national and international networks and FOs. Together with its huge membership, this gives it the clout to play a key role in advising government by participating in agricultural policy formulation regarding livestock.

Source:
🌐 <https://www.klpakenya.org/>

Federations and confederations

Federations and confederations are apex-level, legally registered entities composed of member organisations, with members typically being associations or unions. As legal formats, they are primarily established under national association or civil society law, and function as non-profit, membership-based organisations with democratic governance structures. They are designed to serve and represent member organisations, especially at national, regional, or continental levels. Their primary functions include lobbying and advocacy, coordination of joint programmes or campaigns, capacity building of member organisations (governance, accountability), dissemination of knowledge and information and, sometimes, shared services such as legal advice, internal audits, or communications support.

The distinction between a federation and confederation also has implications for the legal structure: a federation is a more integrated structure: member organisations delegate part of their decision-making power to the central body, which holds stronger authority. Federations are typically more centralised, with clear mandates. Their bylaws often allow the central body to make binding decisions, coordinate regional services, or manage funds on behalf of members. A confederation, by contrast, is a looser alliance. Member organisations retain high degrees of independence, and the central body primarily acts as a platform for knowledge sharing and (voluntary) collaboration. Decisions at the confederation level are usually non-binding, and there is greater tolerance for political, economic, and structural diversity among members. In both models, the general assembly (comprised of member representatives) remains the highest decision-making body, with an elected board to oversee operations. A secretariat carries out day-to-day work, with confederations usually having leaner operational structures.

When federations or confederations operate across borders, such as in regional or continental

structures, they must choose a country of legal registration. This decision will affect legal compliance and standards of registration, employment laws, and rules of jurisdiction (in case of contracts or conflicts). Some federations are registered in jurisdictions with favourable NGO laws, while others formalise under international legal agreements or regional harmonisation frameworks.

Though most federations and confederations are composed of organisational members only, mixed models exist, particularly when national structures historically admitted both organisations and individuals. In such cases, the constitution must define voting rights, representation mechanisms, membership fees, and the responsibilities for each membership category. Some (con)federations differentiate between ordinary and associate members, the latter often being donors, research institutions, or service providers without voting rights.

Sustaining federations and confederations financially is a challenge. The membership fees that they tend to rely on may be modest. To strengthen financial sustainability, these organisations often develop a business wing (e.g. consulting, or service delivery), and/or a development wing (to partner with donors or manage grants and projects). In these cases, the legal entity remains in a not-for-profit format, but the organisational structure becomes a hybrid, especially if subsidiaries are incorporated as separate for-profit entities.

Company limited by guarantee

In some Anglophone countries, the legal format of a company limited by guarantee (CLG) is a widely used alternative to associations for farmer organisations that wish to operate as non-profit legal entities while benefiting from a business-like structure.

A company limited by guarantee is incorporated under company law, but unlike conventional companies, it does not have share capital

or shareholders. Instead, it is controlled by guarantors, individuals, or organisations that agree to pay a nominal sum (often symbolic, such as \$1) in the event of the company terminating its operations. This structure allows the organisation to function as a registered legal entity, with the capacity to enter contracts, hold assets, open bank accounts, and employ staff, while at the same time maintaining a non-profit mandate. Although these companies can generate income through services, training, or the implementation of (project) activities, any profits must be retained for the benefit of the organisation and the distribution of dividends to members (or guarantors) is not permitted.

The governance structure of a company limited by guarantee tends to be less participatory than that of an association. The legal and strategic control is usually by a small number of board members (or founding guarantors), rather than being distributed among members. As such, CLGs may lack the grassroots democratic

character of other more member-driven legal formats. The format of a company limited by guarantee is attractive for not-for-profit organisations that are engaged in business-like activities of service delivery, training, or consultancy.

Mutual benefit organisation

Mutual benefit organisations, or 'mutuals', are member-based organisations that operate on principles of solidarity, risk-sharing, and self-help, and typically offering insurance-like services to their members. Widely used in Anglophone countries, mutuals are especially relevant in rural and agricultural settings, where access to conventional insurance and financial services is limited.

The core function of a mutual is to pool resources through member contributions or premiums, which are then used to provide support in times of need, such as crop failure, livestock loss, flood or drought damage, health emergencies, or funeral costs. The mutuals' members are both

Companies owned by the WLV – Westphalian Farmers' Association (Germany)

The WLV is one of the 16 member-FOs of the German Farmers Association (DBV) at the regional level. Like other FOs on the same level, it has developed services that have grown into independent, formally registered companies, now assisting not only its own members.

One example is a publishing house specialising in agricultural topics with various regional and national periodicals, owned jointly by the WLV, the Westphalian Cooperative Federation (Raiffeisenverband) and the Westphalian Landscape Foundation. It is also active in other countries. More than 900 employees provide information to farmers but also target the urban public with a popular magazine.

Additionally, the WLV (co-)owns several specialised companies that focus on financial and bookkeeping services for farmers, advisory services for farmers on photovoltaics or wind energy, an insurance brokerage, a tax advisory unit, and an event & conference location on a former farm.

All this generates income and financial stability for the work of the federation.

Source:

☞ <https://wlv.de/>

☞ <https://www.lv.de/>

its owners and beneficiaries. Their contributions form a collective risk buffer, enabling members to protect themselves against shocks that could otherwise undermine their livelihoods.

Mutuals are governed by member-elected boards, with voting rights often tied to the fulfilment of financial obligations. For example, non-payment of premiums may lead to the suspension of voting rights, or even of membership. Mutuals reinforce responsibility and accountability within a group.

Given that mutuals manage financial contributions and compensation schemes, they are often subject to stricter regulatory oversight than other not-for-profit formats. Legal requirements may include registration with financial supervisory authorities, the maintenance of minimum reserves, transparent governance procedures, and periodic financial audits. In many countries, specific legislation exists to guide the formation and supervision of mutuals.

While mutuals are generally not for profit, they are designed to be financially self-sustaining. Any surplus is typically used to strengthen the risk pool, improve services, or lower future premiums. Importantly, mutuals cannot distribute profits to members, which distinguishes them from for-profit insurance providers.

FOR-PROFIT LEGAL FORMATS

Cooperatives

Cooperatives are person-centred rather than capital-centred businesses. Their defining feature is that they are commercially active enterprises, member-owned and controlled, and democratically governed to generate profit for their members. Cooperatives have been around for 200 years and are present in key sectors such as finance and housing as consumer and producer cooperatives. While diverse forms have evolved over time and cooperative legislation is always at national

level, cooperatives remain a very unified and unique form of member-based, for-profit organisation.

Cooperatives are registered and governed under national cooperative legislation, sometimes overseen by dedicated cooperative authorities or ministries. A defining feature is democratic member control; each member typically has the same voting rights ('one member, one vote'). This differs from shareholding companies, where voting power is usually linked to the number of shares held. Some countries also recognise cooperative-like structures that sit between cooperatives and companies. In these the voting power may be partly linked to shareholding, capital contribution, or usage. Regardless of the voting structure, any surplus or profit, is commonly allocated based on members' participation (e.g. the volume of trade through the cooperative) and/or as a return (dividend) linked to the capital invested.

Cooperatives are subject to taxation like other businesses but can access certain incentives or exemptions, depending on national policies. Their flexibility, farmer ownership, and reinvestment in local economies make them especially suited to value chain development, input supply, processing, marketing, and even retail or financial services. Some large cooperatives also run their own retail outlets or financial services. When professionally managed, cooperatives can become major players in national agribusiness landscapes.

A key challenge arises when highly successful cooperatives attract considerable external capital, such as commercial investors or large buyers. While external investment can unlock growth, it also brings the risk of diluting member control. To safeguard the cooperative identity and mission, strong governance frameworks, legal safeguards, and member participation are essential.

Two levels of cooperatives are typically recognised:

- **Primary cooperatives:** these bring together individual farmers at a local level to jointly procure inputs, process produce, manage storage, or access services like transport and finance. They can own physical infrastructure such as drying facilities, storage units, or processing equipment and are often the backbone of grassroots economic empowerment.
- **Secondary cooperatives (unions):** formed by a group of primary cooperatives, these function at the regional or national level to undertake bulk procurement, branding, export, accessing finance, or large-scale processing. Unions are

particularly important when more capital and professional management are needed. They also provide support services such as training, legal compliance, and auditing to their member cooperatives.

In some regions, cooperative laws are harmonised across countries (e.g. the OHADA legal system in West Africa) offering a unified framework for registration and cross-border collaboration.

Cooperatives are organised in national, regional, and one global cooperative network, the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA). The Brussels-based Alliance currently has 320 member organisations in 106 countries representing 1 billion members from all sectors of the economy, including agriculture, banking,

OHADA – a harmonised legal framework for cooperatives in West Africa

The Organisation for the Harmonization of Business Law in Africa provides a unified legal framework for business organisations across 17 West and Central African countries. Its Uniform Act on Cooperative Societies (2010) establishes a common legal basis for the formation, management, and dissolution of cooperatives.

The framework defines key cooperative principles such as member ownership, democratic governance ('one member, one vote'), and surplus distribution based on member participation, while also introducing clear legal and financial requirements. Two main legal forms are recognised: simplified cooperatives (SCOOPS), typically for smaller groups, and cooperatives with a board of directors (COOP-CA) for larger, more complex organisations.

The registration process requires a constituent general assembly (minimum 15 members)

to adopt statutes and elect the leadership, the opening of a bank account with partial capitalisation, and formal member share contributions. To ensure financial stability, cooperatives must allocate at least 20% of annual net surplus to a reserve fund until it reaches 30% of total capital.

By harmonising cooperative legislation across multiple countries, the OHADA system strengthens legal certainty, financial discipline, and cross-border recognition, supporting the professionalisation and scaling of farmer organisations in the region.

Source:

🔗 <https://www.ohada.org/>

fisheries, health, housing, insurance, and industry & services. Founded in 1895, it unites, represents, and serves its member cooperatives through representation, advice, expertise, and sharing knowledge.

Saving and credit cooperatives

Next to producer cooperatives, there are a range of other specialised cooperatives, including for housing, consumers, and workers. In the financial sector, cooperatives have a long history. Some of the biggest banks, such as saving & credit cooperatives, cooperative banks, and

credit unions are based on the cooperative system. In the rural sector, this includes the German Volks- und Raiffeisenbanken, the French Credit Agricole, the Indian Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS), or the Brazilian Sicoob, Sicredi, and Cresol, just to name a few.

Financial cooperatives are a great way for local farmers to start grassroots saving and lending.

Savings and credit cooperatives (SACCOs) are member-owned, community-based financial service providers. While their core purpose is to serve their members rather than external shareholders, SACCOs generate income through interest on loans and fees for services, income that is reinvested into the cooperative or redistributed among members in proportion to their usage.

SACCOs play a critical role in improving financial access in rural areas, where formal banking systems are often absent or poorly adapted to the realities of smallholder agriculture. They enable farmers to save collectively and access credit at fair interest rates, structured in a way that reflects seasonal cash flows and agricultural cycles. This makes SACCOs particularly well-suited to the needs of farmer communities, where liquidity can vary significantly throughout the year.

Many SACCOs evolve from more informal models such as village savings and loan associations (VSLAs). Over time, as they become more structured and financially robust, they may formalise into registered SACCOs. As SACCOs, they often offer additional services such as mobile banking, crop insurance, or agricultural investment products.

Despite being member-controlled and community-oriented, SACCOs are fundamentally business entities. Their legal format allows them to sign contracts, open bank accounts, hold assets, and generate surpluses. This places them in the for-profit category, though with a cooperative mindset that prioritises member

CRESOL – Financial cooperatives serving family farmers in Brazil

The CRESOL network in Brazil illustrates how savings and credit cooperatives can improve financial access in rural areas. Founded in the 1990s to serve family farmers who had limited access to commercial banks, CRESOL provides member-owned savings and credit services tailored to agricultural needs.

Local cooperatives are owned and governed by their members and offer services such as savings accounts, agricultural loans, and payment systems. Credit products are designed around the seasonal income patterns of farming households, allowing members to invest in production while managing fluctuating cash flows.

The CRESOL system shows how financial cooperatives can evolve into professional, regulated institutions while remaining rooted in community ownership and focused on the needs of smallholder farmers.

Source:
CRESOL

welfare and long-term sustainability over short-term profit.

SACCOs are usually subject to strict legal and regulatory oversight. This may include registration with national financial regulatory authorities, requirements for audited financial statements, and the need to retain minimum capital reserves. The regulatory framework ensures financial stability and member protection but also demands a high degree of financial literacy and governance.

Private limited companies

Some farmer organisations choose to establish or invest in private limited companies (Ltd, GmbH, SARL) as part of their strategies for income diversification, value chain integration, or service delivery. These companies are registered under national company law and have a clearly defined shareholder structure. Shareholders may include individual farmers, cooperatives, federations, or even strategic external partners. Voting rights and profit distribution are generally tied to the number of shares held, in contrast to the democratic

principle of 'one member, one vote' found in associations or cooperatives.

The private limited company model offers key advantages: it enables external capital mobilisation, professional management, and financial autonomy, often with fewer restrictions on commercial activity. For example, a national farmers' union may own a private limited company that provides services such as bookkeeping, tax advice, input supply, agricultural consultancy, renewable energy solutions, or logistics support tailored to smallholder needs.

This format is particularly suited to commercial activities such as processing facilities, consulting services, publishing houses, financial products, and member-oriented agribusiness operations. Private companies allow external investment, professional staffing, operational flexibility, and increased financial autonomy, making them an attractive organisational structure for farmer-led initiatives seeking sustainable commercial development and diversified service provision.

Typical examples for agricultural and rural companies owned by groups of farmers or by FOs

Any business opportunity may be viable to form companies. Sometimes, an FO may set up or buy a company, and sometimes it is just a group of farmers that invest in new businesses, as they see an entrepreneurial opportunity. Often, starting a business is also a pathway for family members who want to or need to find a job outside the farm.

Typical businesses can include:

- Mechanisation services and logistics
- Input supply or output processing
- Energy production and sales (e.g. wind/solar energy, biogas)

- Advisory services
- Publication, information, training
- Agri-tourism

Due to their expertise in the sector and their access to land and resources, farmers can have a competitive advantage compared to outside actors.

Source:
AHA

However, this model also carries risks. The shareholder structure may encourage elite capture if ownership becomes concentrated. If the company's activities begin to compete with the interests of its members, or if profit motives overshadow service provision, the broader mission of the farmer organisation can be compromised. Transparency, oversight, and clearly defined boundaries are critical to ensuring that the company remains aligned with farmer priorities.

Public limited companies

Public limited companies (PLC, AG) are an uncommon legal format for farmer organisations, but may arise when a farmer-owned enterprise grows large enough to raise capital through public share offerings. This model allows external investors, such

as institutional funds, private individuals, or development financiers, to purchase shares, thereby injecting substantial capital into the business.

Transitioning into a public limited company imposes strict legal requirements, including obligations of financial reporting, transparency, corporate governance, and shareholder accountability. While this structure can support large-scale investment and expansion, particularly in export-oriented ventures or cross-border agricultural trading companies, it also poses a considerable risk of the erosion of farmers' influence and control. To mitigate this, farmer organisations may seek to retain a majority shareholding through federated cooperatives or umbrella bodies. However, this control can easily be diluted over time, especially when shares are traded on public markets. Maintaining a focus on farmers' priorities requires good governance and transparent shareholder agreements.

Public limited companies are best suited for large-scale, capital-intensive agribusiness initiatives, involving multiple producer organisations, such as export or cross-border trading companies, where benefits of external investment outweigh the potential loss of member-driven control.

HYBRID MODELS COMBINING NON-PROFIT AND FOR-PROFIT LEGAL FORMATS

In practice, many successful farmer organisations adopt a hybrid structure, combining the strengths of both non-profit and for-profit formats. Usually in these cases, the non-profit entity, such as an association, union, or federation, handles governance, membership, representation, advocacy, and training. Alongside this, one or more for-profit subsidiaries are established to conduct commercial operations, including input supply, processing, value addition, marketing,

Farmers starting a company – Die Eiermacher in Austria

In 1986, a few poultry farmers in Schlierbach in Austria joined hands and started a limited liability company for the packaging and sale of eggs. The company grew, changed its seat to Kremsmünster and renamed itself to Die Eiermacher ('The Egg-Makers'). The business expanded with the introduction of a hatching facility and a state-of-art slaughterhouse. Besides chicken, production expended into ducks and quail. In a country of 9.2 million inhabitants, 4 million eggs leave the packaging house of Die Eiermacher – every week! Around 150 people are employed in the various business units.

Source:

🔗 <https://www.eiermacher.at/>

or service delivery. This model enables organisations to engage competitively in the market while maintaining their core mission and their political independence. The non-profit wing secures inclusive membership, manages donor relations, and acts as a legitimate voice for farmers. The business wing, structured as a cooperative, private limited company, or other commercial entity, provides revenue generation and professional service delivery, often with more flexibility than the non-profit arm.

To function effectively, hybrid structures require:

- Clear separation of functions (e.g. governance vs. commerce)
- Robust internal governance and accountability mechanisms
- Transparent financial management across both/all entities
- Shared strategic vision to prevent misalignment or mission drift

Risks emerge when the commercial arm becomes so successful that it overshadows the advocacy role of the main organisation or creates tensions over resource allocation and priorities. Without proper checks, the profit motive may compromise democratic decision-making. Effort should be made to ensure that both/all wings remain committed to the original aim of farmer empowerment. Maintaining regular dialogue between the management of both/all wings is necessary to ensure alignment with the founding vision.

Business wing – Tanzania Horticulture Association (TAHA)

TAHA is organised in two parts: a non-profit development division that focuses on the development of small-holder farmers and policy advocacy, and a commercial division for business operations. The business wing provides stability and financial resources to run the activities on the development division.

The membership of TAHA consists of large-scale producers (so-called 'comprehensive members'), but also 'allied members' from service providers to financial institutions, and 'associate members', which are small-scale producers, groups, and processors.

Under the brand TAHA Fresh, for example, the commercial division provides services for members to access markets. This includes logistics, cargo handling, and consolidation for air and sea freight, and is especially important during times of disrupted trade routes, e.g. as it was periodically during the COVID crisis. TAHA aggregates and coordinates the export and market development activities of its members. TAHA invests in infrastructure, processing, and facilities to improve market access, also for smallholders. Capacity-building activities in this division focus on entrepreneurial skills, but also compliance with standards and regulations.

Source:
TAHA, AHA

The table below summarises key elements for each legal format:

Non-profit legal formats		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Focus on service, advocacy, or mutual benefit › Profits are reinvested, not distributed to members 	
Associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent for member-based collaboration, especially where democratic legitimacy (one member, one vote), inclusiveness, and collective action are key • Examples are registered societies, and civil associations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common for advocacy, training, representation • Usually tax-exempt, cannot distribute profits • Often the legal format of choice for general affairs unions, youth and women's groups, and advocacy-oriented coalitions.
Federations and confederations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apex organisations composed of member farmer organisations, whereby federations have stronger central authority, while confederations preserve more member autonomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on advocacy, capacity building, and coordination across regions or countries. • Registered as not-for-profit bodies, often under association law
Companies limited by guarantee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Function like associations, but are registered under company law • Provide a robust legal identity and the ability to operate efficiently and transparently, especially where financial institutions, formal markets or donors demand a higher degree of legal certainty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Profits are reinvested; dividends are not paid out to members • Requires attention to governance and accountability to ensure that members remain meaningfully engaged and represented
Mutual benefit organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An effective structure for delivering community-based insurance services, particularly in rural settings where commercial insurance may be inaccessible or unaffordable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strength lies in member ownership, mutual accountability, and the ability to respond quickly to crises; a valuable tool for increasing resilience among smallholder farmers and rural populations
For-profit legal formats		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Focus on commercial activity › May distribute profits to members or shareholders 	
Savings & credit cooperatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member-owned financial cooperatives offering savings and credit services and a valuable tool for rural financial access • For-profit entities but based on mutual/self-help principles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governed by elected boards and usually tightly regulated due to financial risk exposure
Commercial cooperatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member-owned commercial enterprises, where profits are shared among members through dividends • Providers of services like input supply, processing, and marketing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must balance commercial operations with member ownership and democratic decision-making • 'One Member - One Vote'
Private limited companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For-profit companies owned by farmer organisations or individual farmers, registered under company law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for external investment and offers service provision that can be upscaled • Often used as a business arm of non-profit organisations or unions
Public limited companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less common format for farmer organisations, but used by large-scale for-profit firms that issue public shares, (possibly often evolving from successful farmer organisation ventures) • Enables capital build-up, often has professional management, and is a faster decision-making model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May include external investors and is subject to strict legal and reporting requirements • Suitable for export, cross-border trade, or agribusiness expansion
Non-profit/for-profit		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Combines non-profit core function with for-profit commercial activity 	
Hybrid models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combines a non-profit FO for governance and advocacy with a for-profit subsidiary for business activities (by the same organisation) • Requires strong governance and clear separation of roles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preserves core non-profit function of advocacy and representation mission, while enabling commercial activity and access to external (donor) finance

OTHER

Foundations and trusts

Foundations and trusts are typically used for philanthropic, educational, or development purposes. They are governed by a board of trustees and are not membership-based. While not suited to democratic farmer representation, they may support FOs by providing grants, training, or infrastructure. Foundations can complement FOs but are rarely used as the legal base for membership-based farmer organisations.

Non-governmental organisations

Non-governmental organisations (NGO) are not-for-profit voluntary civil society groups organised on a local, national, or international level to address issues in support of the public good. They are often found in social, environmental, developmental, or human rights fields, but are also active in the agricultural space; i.e. to support smallholders' development.

NGOs differ from associations in that they are generally not member-based. This is reflected in their governance systems that are less representative. NGOs may be registered under different laws depending on the country, including as foundations, companies, or associations.

NGOs can grow rather powerful depending on their mission, professionalism in public relations and fundraising. When it comes to the representation of civil society in national and international institutions, NGOs have grown to occupy important political spaces, sometimes in cooperation, sometimes in competition to member-based farmer organisations.

Agri-agencies

Various farmers' organisations engage in project activity and capacity-building of their own or fellow FOs nationally and worldwide. For this purpose, some set up project units or even separate capacity-building institutions – agri-agencies (AAs).

Separating the project and capacity building institution from the FO may be advantageous as the AA may operate more independently, acquire public funding, and focus on project delivery rather than FO mandates. Internationally active AAs may mobilise funding from multilateral and developmental institutions, share the experiences from their parent organisations, bring in experts for peer-to-peer exchanges, organise study tours, and provide trainings in their own or other countries. Being rooted in an FO, agri-agencies have a deep understanding of the overall FO system and are well placed to develop partnerships with FOs on an equal footing. They engage with technical and financial development partners, foundations, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) to coordinate their efforts with international cooperation.

AgriCord: an alliance of agri-agencies

AgriCord is a global alliance of 13 agri-agencies mandated by farmers' organisations and their cooperative businesses from countries in Africa, Asia, Canada, the European Union, and Latin America.

Jointly they acquire funds from national and international financial partners to engage in the strengthening of FOs in over 70 countries. As a network, they cooperate on projects to make best use of their diverse capacities and share their learning experiences. The goal is to strengthen the FO system as a whole and connect FOs to international platforms.

1.4 GOVERNANCE CHARACTERISTICS

A further lens through which to understand the diversity of farmer organisations is governance: how decisions are made, who holds authority, and how leadership is held to account. Across all types and formats, whether cooperatives, associations, federations, or companies, governance determines how power flows between members, boards, and managers and to whom the organisation is ultimately accountable.

While this section introduces governance as one of the key perspectives for understanding farmer organisations (alongside the type of organisation and its legal format), it does so only in general terms. The aim is to highlight how governance features such as representation, accountability, and decision-making structures intersect with the different forms discussed so far. A more in-depth discussion of governance follows in Part 3, which explores internal roles and responsibilities, elements of successful leadership, strategic planning, and financial oversight.

A crucial axis of the government dimension is the relationship between members and the board. In some structures, such as cooperatives and associations, boards are elected by the general membership, with each member typically having one vote. In others, like companies or limited liability structures, voting rights may correspond to shareholding, allowing those with more capital to wield greater influence. This distinction derives from deeper differences in ownership structure. In cooperatives, members are both clients and owners of the organisation, while in associations, members pay a regular fee without holding a stake in its assets or profits.

These models shape not only how decisions are made, but also how organisations retain their membership base. For example, cooperatives usually require farmers to purchase shares up front, making them co-owners of assets such as machines, equipment, or infrastructure. Dividends may be paid, but only if the cooperative makes a profit. Active member engagement is essential for the cooperative's success, scale, and viability. Associations, by contrast, operate on membership fees and offer no dividend, and thus must continuously prove their value to retain members.

Accountability mechanisms also vary. In some organisations transparency is ensured through annual general meetings (AGMs), rotating board elections, and audited financial reports. In others, particularly larger or more top-down organisations, members may have little practical influence over decisions. Some associations or federations offer layered membership models. For example, smallholder groups or cooperatives may join as collective members, while individual farmers join directly. Others may offer 'associate membership' to stakeholders like service providers or agri-businesses, who pay higher fees in exchange for access, but who do not have voting rights.

Ultimately, what matters most is not the legal format on paper, but how governance plays out in practice. A cooperative may claim to operate democratically, but in practice be dominated by a few large producers; an association may have inclusive structures, but suffer from limited member engagement and weak accountability, with its assemblies being irregular or poorly attended.

Good governance goes beyond definitions of legal structure, as it requires adherence to clear lines of accountability and needs mechanisms that ensure leadership remains truly

representative. Strong governance depends not just on rules but on commitment and trust, so that power is always exercised in service of those the organisation was created to support.

Key characteristics discussed so far, are summarised in the table below:

Characteristic	Example	Characteristic	Example
Type of farmer organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General affairs or farmers' union • Cooperative, commodity association • Women or youth organisation • Federation, confederation (apex organisation) 	Membership basis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual farmers • Groups of farmers • Both • Member categories such as ordinary members or associate members
Main purpose or function of the organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political (lobby & advocacy) • Economic (input supply, market access, credit) • Technical (advice, information, skills) • Social (hardship support) 	Board structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected by members • Appointed • Self-renewing (e.g. foundation)
Profit orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-profit • For-profit • Hybrid 	Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To members (via AGMs, reporting) • To founders or donors • Mixed
Legal format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Association • Federation, confederation • Cooperative • Company • Hybrid 	Voting rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One member, one vote • Proportional to shares • No voting rights (e.g. some foundations)
Ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member-owned • Board-owned / hybrid • Owned by external stakeholders (e.g. donors or public sector) 	Member influence on strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High (AGM-driven) • Medium • Low
		Ability to distribute surplus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allowed (co-ops, for-profits) • Not allowed (associations, most NGOs)

1.5 LEVELS AT WHICH FARMERS' ORGANISATIONS OPERATE

Farmers' organisations are formed at different levels: from grassroots village groups to international advocacy bodies. While these levels relate to one another through shared representation, complementary roles, or strategic alliances, each level serves a distinct function while contributing to a broader ecosystem of representation and action.

In fact, farming is arguably the most globally organised profession, with farmer organisations structured to protect and promote the interests of their members across nearly every country and continent. The multi-tiered structures allow even the most deprived smallholders to engage, directly or indirectly, in shaping policies, negotiating with governments, and participating in global debates. Each level adds a layer of institutional complexity, and influence, while (ideally) remaining connected to the voices and interests of its grassroots members.

Farmers organisations with a representative function and political mandate are created at those levels, where government administration and/or elected representations are present and can be addressed. Commodity and economically oriented organisations may, for example, choose to form along geographic divisions, related to the crops grown.

Local and sub-national organisations often address service delivery, local economies, and resource access. Higher up the scale, the focus shifts toward policy development, lobbying, and coordination across larger constituencies. Clear definition of roles and coordination between levels are critical to avoid duplication and ensure efficient use of resources.

The typical advocacy structure of farmer organisations is pyramid-shaped, including:

- Local associations (village or town level), focused on local concerns and services
- District or county-level structures that coordinate local associations and lobby local authorities
- Provincial or state-level organisations, especially relevant in federal systems representing farmers' interests at decentralised government entities
- National federations or unions that influence national agricultural policies
- Regional organisations (e.g. federations or confederations), which work across countries within a shared economic or geographic zone
- Continental platforms engaging with institutions like the African Union or European Union
- Global-level representation in international forums such as UN agencies

How an American farmer is linked to the global FO level

Here is an example of how a (fictional) farmer in the United States, 'Farmer Joe', a corn and soybean grower in Iowa, is represented through a cooperative structure from the local to the global level. Joe runs a family farm in central Iowa. He needs to purchase supplies like seeds and fertiliser efficiently and find the best market for his grain.

He joins a local agricultural cooperative, such as Central Valley Ag (CVA), which operates many local grain elevators and supply stores across Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska. Joe's local cooperative is part of a larger, often 'mixed' or 'federated', regional system that provides a wider range of services and market access.

Central Valley Ag is a member of larger entities or may have business relationships with large regional cooperatives like CHS Inc. or Land O'Lakes. These large regional co-ops have national reach, processing commodities and marketing them under own brands. They also lobby on national policy issues through organisations like the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives (NCFC), which acts as 'the voice of America's farmer cooperatives' in Washington D.C., representing the interests of nearly all U.S. farmers and ranchers who are members of cooperatives.

Joe's commodities are often sold on the global market, and national policy can impact his livelihood. Large regional co-ops like CHS or Land O'Lakes are active in international markets, exporting U.S. grain and other products worldwide, and sometimes engaging in international development or joint ventures to strengthen their global position.

The NCFC is a member of international cooperative bodies, such as the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), which provides global representation for the cooperative movement, ensuring that American farmers' concerns are considered in international dialogue with organisations like the United Nations and the FAO.

This system provides Farmer Joe with collective power and a voice that he would not have as an individual producer in a vast and complex agricultural market.

Source:

- 🔗 <https://www.cvacoop.com/>
- 🔗 <https://www.croplife.com/top100/company/central-valley-ag-cooperative/>
- 🔗 <https://www.landolakesinc.com/>
- 🔗 <https://www.chsinc.com/>
- 🔗 <https://ncfc.org/>

The following section outlines the levels of organisations, highlighting their respective roles, mandates, and forms of coordination, from local associations to global platforms. While the names and structures vary, core functions at different levels tend to follow a similar logic across regions.

Importantly, the levels described do not always follow a strict hierarchy. Membership in one level does not automatically lead to affiliation at a higher one. Some national or even global farmers' organisations admit individual farmers as members. Others remain unaffiliated with higher-tier bodies. For example, the World

Farmers Organisation (WFO) only includes national-level members, excluding regional and continental organisations as members. Understanding these operational tiers is especially important for practitioners, policymakers, and donors trying to navigate or support the farmers' organisation landscape effectively.

LOCAL AND/OR VILLAGE LEVEL ORGANISATIONS

At the basis are local or village-level organisations, where farmers unite to address shared, practical needs. These groups often include farmers

producing similar crops or raising similar livestock and are deeply embedded in the community. Their focus is on immediate challenges: infrastructure, pests, water, security, or a response to floods and droughts. Often, farmers join several FOs in parallel, depending on the benefit they need. They could be a member in one or several cooperatives or set up a farmers-owned company to benefit from the business.

These organisations are usually voluntary and member-led, with roles such as chair, secretary, or treasurer filled by the members themselves. They are funded by modest membership fees and managed through direct participation. Advocacy is directed at local or traditional authorities, meetings are frequent and pragmatic, focusing on tangible outcomes rather than policy goals. The strength of these organisations lies in high legitimacy and peer-to-peer solidarity. This low-cost, high-involvement model builds strong cohesion and allows for rapid mobilisation during crises.

DISTRICT AND/OR COUNTY ORGANISATIONS

At the second level, district or county organisations bring together multiple local groups, the members are no longer farmers but farmer-based structures. They coordinate input from across a wider area and to address broader issues such as market access, regional infrastructure, disease control or agricultural extension.

These organisations may operate offices and have part-time or full-time staff. Funding is often passed up from local member groups and may be supplemented by (agribusiness) sponsors or public-private projects, who see value in reaching a wider rural constituency. District-level organisations serve as intermediaries between grassroots and provincial actors, facilitating dialogue, logistics, and information flow.

STATE AND/OR PROVINCIAL ORGANISATIONS

These organisations represent farmers across a province or federal state and are typically more formal and better resourced. They engage with second-tier government bodies on matters such as land policy, taxation, regional trade, or environmental regulations.

Staffed by professionals and based in regional capitals or major agricultural centres, these organisations have offices and often host substructures for youth, women, or specific farming categories. Funding flows upward from lower levels and may be complemented by donors or income from events such as agriculture fairs. Care must be taken to avoid over-reliance on government funding, which may affect independence.

Provincial organisations may operate autonomously, particularly in federal systems, and have mandates to engage on complex policy issues such as land tenure, environmental regulations, taxation, or regional trade. They often lead responses to regional crises such as natural disasters or epidemics. Legitimacy depends on strong grassroots connections and demonstrated capacity to represent diverse farmer interests.

NATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

The national level FOs represent probably the most important level within the FO system. They are apex bodies that engage directly with national governments and policymaking institutions. They consolidate input from provincial or state levels and represent the agricultural sector on issues like subsidy reform, trade regulation, taxation, agriculture research, and food security. At the same time, they engage in activities on an international level as a member of regional, continental, or global FOs. National FOs are therefore the cornerstone connecting the different levels of the FO system.

Headquartered in capital cities, they rely on input from state and provincial levels and require clear mandates to maintain legitimacy. Their strength depends on representativeness, independence, and transparency. However, in many countries, unity among national organisations is lacking, often due to ideological, regional, or historical divisions, thereby diluting negotiating power. When unity is achieved, national organisations can wield substantial influence. Leadership at this level may become a training ground for future politicians, representing both opportunity and risk. Maintaining the focus on farmer needs, rather than political gain, is critical.

REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Regional (supranational) farmers' organisations (RFOs) bring together national structures from neighbouring countries. They often engage with regional economic communities (e.g. SADC, ECOWAS, the EU) and address transboundary issues such as trade barriers, regional climate risks, cross-border pests, or harmonisation of agricultural standards. They help harmonise policy, share expertise, and lead flagship projects, although the diversity of member contexts often complicates consensus-building and decision-making

Africa is particularly well organised at this level, with five key regional federations.

North Africa	UMNAGRI	L'Union Maghrébine et Nord-Africaine des Agriculteurs
Central Africa	PROPAC	Plateforme Régionale des Organisations Paysannes d'Afrique Centrale
East Africa	EAFF	East Africa Farmers Federation
West Africa	ROPPA	Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest
Southern Africa	SACAU	Southern African Confederation of Agricultural Unions

Funding is a constant concern, as RFOs have limited ability to raise substantial membership fees. Donor support plays a vital role in many regions, but care must be given to ensure that external interests do not undermine internal priorities. Governance must reflect geographic and linguistic diversity, and secretariats are key in maintaining operational continuity.

CONTINENTAL ORGANISATIONS

Continental organisations are federations of regional or national structures, advocating on behalf of farmers at the level of continental institutions such as the African Union or the European Commission. Continental platforms may focus on specific sectors (e.g. smallholders, organic farming) or aim to represent broad agricultural constituencies.

Decision-making tends to be decentralised, with regions retaining autonomy. Rotating presidencies and inclusive governance are essential to ensure fairness and legitimacy. Funding pressures are high, given the reliance on member contributions and limited commercial income. Sponsorship and donor funding are common but must not interfere in core policy processes. Continental organisations can serve as knowledge hubs and innovation platforms, but their relevance depends on active coordination with regional and national levels.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

International farmers' organisations, like the World Farmers Organisation (WFO), operate at the highest level of advocacy, engaging with global institutions such as the FAO, IFAD, and WFP. They represent farmers in global debates on climate, trade, and sustainability. While their visibility is high, the challenge of international farmers' organisations is to remain rooted in grassroots legitimacy while participating in

Supranational farmers' organisations

The membership structure of supranational FOs is diverse. There are global FOs that bring national FOs together, like the World Farmers' Organisation (WFO). There is the Intercontinental Network of Organic Farmers Organisations (INOFO), where organic farmers' organisations on a local and/or national level may be direct members. The World Rural Forum invites many FOs from various levels, but also many non-farmers' organisations.

In Africa, national FOs often are members of five regional FOs, which again form the Pan-African Farmers' Organisation (PAFO). Each regional FO has its own specific set-up. EAFF, for East Africa, allows up to 5 national FOs per country to join. They represent all sizes of businesses, and large-scale farmers may have a strong influence. ROPPA, covering West Africa, however, is focusing on the interests of small-scale farmers and has a centralised structure with one national FO platform representing a country. SACAU in Southern Africa is a confederation; i.e. a looser group of national FOs, with one or two members per country. These differences are historical and have major consequences on daily work and in the cooperation on a continental level in the Pan-African Farmers' Organisation (PAFO).

Interestingly, there are some national FOs that sign up to more than one regional FO.

As the WFO only accepts national FOs as members, neither of the above-mentioned regional FOs from Africa can join the WFO. Only their national FO members can be part of the WFO.

Another special case is the SAAI – a family farmers' organisation covering several countries in Southern Africa – formed to address land rights issues. Here, individual farmers join the supranational FO directly. There is no sub-national or national level at all.

Source:

- 🔗 <https://www.wfo-oma.org/>
- 🔗 <https://info.org/>
- 🔗 <https://pafo-africa.org/en/home/>
- 🔗 <https://www.eaffu.org/>
- 🔗 <https://roppa-afrique.org/about-us/>
- 🔗 <https://sacau.org/>
- 🔗 <https://saai.org/en/>

high-level diplomacy. Global campaigns and alliances can shape agricultural policy and innovation.

Funding remains a challenge, as member fees are essential, but often insufficient. At this level, professional staffing is essential for maintaining international engagement. These international structures offer learning opportunities, amplify farmer concerns, and create alliances that enhance resilience, equity, and innovation across agricultural sectors worldwide.

Legal registration of any international organisation, from regional to global, is a challenge, as registration is a national process. Legislation on the registration of internationally

active organisations varies greatly and not all countries provide a sound legal basis. This concerns aspects like taxation, employment of local and international staff, and more. In addition, host countries may offer land or even buildings for an internationally active organisation, depending on its political attractiveness and clout.

All of this will be laid out in a host-country agreement. The decision regarding where to headquarter an international organisation must therefore be subject to careful consideration. Once registered in a host country, moving becomes quite a challenge so considering all critical elements, including the above-mentioned, is well advised.



2

KEY FUNCTIONS AND SERVICES OF FARMERS' ORGANISATIONS



Farmers' organisations (FO) perform a wide range of functions to serve their members. While priorities may differ depending on context, history, and membership, most organisations engage in a combination of core and complementary functions. These are often linked to the type of organisation but may adapt over time to the changing environment and needs of the members. Functions describe what an organisation does to fulfil its purpose and deliver value to its members.

In Part 1, the purpose was grouped into four broad *benefit categories* that farmers' organisations typically offer their members: political, economic, technical, and social. This Part 2 discusses the *functions* and services of farmers' organisations, meaning the practical ways in which farmers' organisations deliver these benefits. The key functions of farmers' organisations can be grouped into the following categories:

- 1. REPRESENTATION:** Ensuring that members have a collective voice and are formally represented in governance structures and decision-making processes.
- 2. LOBBY & ADVOCACY:** Influencing policy, legislation, and institutional frameworks to protect and promote farmers' interests, with strategic communication as a central tool.
- 3. ECONOMIC FUNCTIONS AND SERVICES:** Improving members' productivity, profitability, income, and resilience through access to inputs, markets, infrastructure, and business support, while leveraging the economic power of joint activity.
- 4. CAPACITY BUILDING AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING:** Strengthening members' skills, organisational learning, and innovation through training, extension, and peer-to-peer exchange.
- 5. PARTNERSHIPS & NETWORKING:** Building alliances with other organisations, stakeholders, and sectors to enhance reach, credibility, and resource mobilisation.

6. SOCIAL SUPPORT & SOLIDARITY: Addressing social and community needs, such as inclusion, safety, and security especially in remote rural areas.

These functions are not isolated, but interconnected, and evolve as organisations grow and mature, moving from core mandates (i.e. representation, advocacy) to enabling functions (i.e. services, capacity building) and finally to broader, context-dependent functions (i.e. networking, social support). Together, these functions make farmers' organisations key actors in agricultural transformation and rural development.

The table below relates back to the description of benefits in Part 1. It shows how the different functions are related to the four benefit categories and further connect to actions and service delivery.

Member benefit category	Related FO functions	Areas of action
Political	Representation, lobbying and advocacy, networking	Giving members a voice, speaking on their behalf, influencing policy, building alliances
Economic	Economic services, partnerships	Improving access to markets, inputs, finance and infrastructure and leveraging the economic benefit of joint activity
Technical	Capacity building and knowledge sharing, economic services	Strengthening skills, improving productivity, introducing innovation
Social	Social support and solidarity, partnerships and networking	Community-building, offering mutual support, fostering inclusion

The following sections look at each function in detail, describing the areas of action, offering guiding principles, examples, and practical advice for implementation.

2.1 REPRESENTATION

The most fundamental function of any farmers' organisation is representation, speaking on behalf of farmers and making sure that their voices are united and heard in spaces where decisions are made that affect their lives and livelihoods. This involves farmers' representatives sitting at the table with public institutions, private sector actors, and other civil society stakeholders to articulate the needs, concerns, and priorities of the farming community.

Representation is not a personal role: it is a mandate. A representative in an organisation does not speak as an individual, but as the collective voice of the membership, notwithstanding if the person is an elected representative or a staff member (i.e. CEO) with delegated powers. This requires clarity about what members want, as well as regular communication to ensure continued alignment between the person acting as a representative and the constituency. The wider the constituency that an organisation represents, the stronger its legitimacy and the more weight its voice carries in public and political arenas.

Representation is expressed through many forms and activities. FOs may participate in advisory boards, technical working groups, community development platforms, civil society forums, or agricultural committees or councils. They may be invited to comment on policy drafts, engage with donor strategies, or speak in the media. At times, representatives are asked to participate in events that are related to the agricultural domain, such as land reform panels, community or education initiatives, where farmers' perspectives are also essential.

Effective representation requires more than just attendance. It requires strategic choices about which tables to sit at, and when. A key skill is knowing where decisions are made, when policies are planned and budgets set, and how

to ensure the organisation is present at the right time through the right people. In many cases, gaining access to such spaces requires effort. When a FO is still new or not yet widely recognised, it may need to actively advocate for its place at the table. Over time, if the FO has established its credibility and made constructive contributions, participation can become institutionalised, through a reserved seat in consultations or a formal advisory role.

As organisations gain visibility, legitimacy, and experience, the number of invitations to participate increases, bringing the need to prioritise. Some invitations simply aim for 'ticking the box' of stakeholder inclusion, while others genuinely ask farmer representatives to shape decisions. Effective FOs can distinguish between the two and will allocate scarce time and resources, including the capacity of staff and elected representatives, to processes where their contribution can make a tangible difference.

Representation can be delegated, but this requires care. In technical discussions, the organisation should always aim to send the most competent person available; ideally someone with specific expertise. In practice, however, invitations are often addressed to individuals by name, especially where a trusted representative has built a strong personal reputation. This underscores the importance of having a well-prepared and diverse leadership and team, informed and well-equipped to represent farmers credibly and confidently across a wide range of topics.

Ultimately, good representation builds trust, not only between farmers and their organisation, but also between the organisation and its external partners. Representation is both a right and a responsibility. When done well, it enables farmers to shape the systems that shape their future.

2.2 LOBBYING AND ADVOCACY

Lobbying and advocacy (L&A) are core functions of every farmers' organisation, regardless of size, legal structure, or level of operation. Effective L&A is the art of influencing policies, regulations, and other decisions that influence the sector, farmers' businesses, as well as their livelihoods. L&A does this by addressing the enabling environment, ranging from access to finance, inputs, or markets to the security of assets, infrastructure, legislation, budgets, and the direction of long-term agriculture development. Strong influence on policy processes is one of the clearest benchmarks of mature and effective organisation.

Lobbying refers to the practice of convincing decision-makers (e.g. in government or parliament) of the farmers' position, through evidence, dialogue, and negotiation. Advocacy is broader and can encompass a wide range of strategies to influence policy outcomes, from public campaigns, petitions and media engagement, even litigation. Where lobbying relies on persuasion, advocacy combines persuasion with mobilisation and public pressure.

Both functions depend on values and interests. Values, such as fairness, autonomy, custodianship of the land, or cultural identity, form the basis of what farmers perceive as desirable or reasonable. Interests translate these values into concrete priorities such as input affordability, market access, climate resilience, infrastructure, or protection of people and property. Values are foundational; a farmers' organisation must never compromise on its values, even as it negotiates flexible solutions.

Farmers' organisations participate in a range of forums: policy consultations, technical committees, public dialogues, regulatory bodies, advisory councils, and media engagements.

Because farmers are only one constituency among many, representatives must articulate members' views while also responding to the arguments and proposals of others. Knowing where to be present, and at what time, is a strategic skill. Policy processes follow planning and budgeting cycles. Drafts may be discussed months before they reach the parliament or council. Understanding these cycles helps organisations align their advocacy with key moments in the policy process, rather than reacting after decisions have already been made.

Farmers' organisations advocate at every level of governance, and their influence as a constituency grows when each tier in the pyramid plays its role:

- Local farmers' associations engage with municipalities and traditional authorities on immediate issues such as local roads, security, water infrastructure, or markets.
- District or county organisations coordinate inputs across local groups and address regional infrastructure, land-use planning, and service delivery.
- Provincial or state organisations focus on second-tier legislation such as education, extension systems, taxation, or regional economic development.
- National farmers' organisations influence national budgets, trade policy, standards, and sectoral strategies.
- Regional farmers' federations (e.g. EAFF, SACAU, ROPPA in Eastern, Southern and Western Africa, or COPA-COGECA in Europe) engage with regional economic communities (i.e. EAC, SADC or ECOWAS) on cross-border issues such as trade, pests, or harmonisation of standards.

- Continental organisations (such as PAFO) represent farmers at continental governance bodies such as the African Union or European Union.
- Global farmers' platforms (e.g. the WFO) represent the voice of farmers in global settings; i.e. in UN bodies such as the FAO, IFAD, WFP, and CFS.

The guiding principle is simple: the closer an organisation is to the issue, the better it can mobilise in support of farmers; the broader the issue, the more a higher-level FO can coordinate and amplify the farmers' voice. Internally, representation occurs both within and between different levels of the FO structure, for instance when a provincial FO speaks on behalf of its district-level affiliates. Specialised topics, such as seeds, livestock, organic farming, or the interests of women and young farmers, may require specialised associations to lead. Such a division of roles should not be imposed from above but rather negotiated among organisations to avoid duplication and ensure that critical issues do not fall between institutional cracks.

One of the greatest strengths of the farmers' organisation system is its ability to connect a single farmer's concern to global platforms

DEVELOPING AND DEFENDING A (POLICY) POSITION

To influence policy effectively, a farmers' organisation must start from a clear and well-articulated position. A position is the organisation's stance on a specific issue, based on member interests, needs, values, and evidence, from which it can engage in advocacy and dialogue. A position paper is the formal expression of this stance. It presents the rationale behind the farmers' organisation's viewpoint on a given issue, and outlines recommendations for action, change, or reform.

Position papers are essential tools for structured advocacy, whether responding to an existing policy proposal (reactive) or introducing an issue to shape future policymaking (proactive). For example, a reactive position may emerge when government proposes changes to input subsidies, whereupon the farmers' organisation develops a position paper analysing the implications and putting forward alternatives, asking government support for agroecological practices or incentives for climate-resilient seed varieties. A proactive position, by contrast, may arise when the FO wishes to put an issue on the policy agenda, even before any formal legislation exists, such as the conservation and promotion of indigenous livestock breeds. Both approaches require clarity, credibility, and member backing.

Typical structure of a position paper

- Title that clearly names the issue at hand.
- Background setting: what is the context? Which policies does the problem refer to? Who should feel addressed by this paper?
- Problems and the negative effects it may cause. Quantification of effects and further impact they have, also on others.
- Demands to the addressed stakeholder and propositions for changes that may solve the problem.
- Reasons for the selected solutions and expected positive effects in the short, medium, and long term.

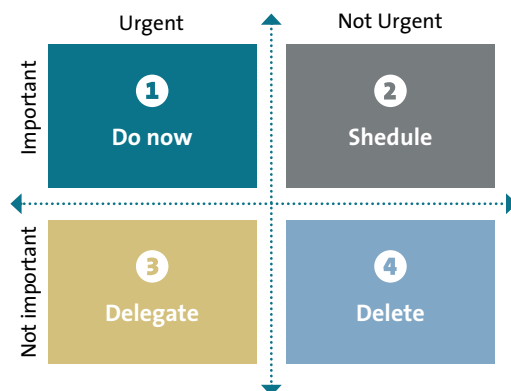
Source:
AHA

It is important to note that a position is not merely an opinion. It should reflect broad-based member consensus, and it must be built on evidence, observation, and scientific data wherever possible. Credible positions are rooted in facts and articulated in ways that make them convincing and constructive for engagement with both policymakers and the public.

In developing a position, organisations should:

- **Engage their members:**
This includes listening actively to concerns, using participatory tools such as meetings, surveys, and issue-based consultations.
- **Identify priorities:**
Topics should be assessed based on importance and urgency. Tools such as the Eisenhower Matrix can help structure these decisions.
- **Frame values clearly:**
Member needs often arise from shared values. These may relate to identity, livelihoods, or culture. Negotiation may be flexible, values are non-negotiable.
- **Secure a mandate:**
Legitimate advocacy requires endorsement by the membership. This can be gained through general assemblies or other representative processes of member engagement.
- **Be alert:**
FOs should be attentive to policy developments and political cycles to be able to intervene at the right time. Waiting too long weakens the advocacy impact.

Eisenhower Matrix



Developing a position is not always straightforward. In cases of a large and diverse membership – for example, when smallholders and commercial farmers are represented by the same organisation – consensus may take time and skilful alignment processes. Some positions are formed quickly in response to urgent threats, while others may evolve over years of dialogue and deliberation.

Whether working at local, national, or international levels, a well-developed position enables a farmers' organisation to engage meaningfully in public debate. When done properly, it not only shapes policy outcomes but strengthens internal coherence and credibility. Over time, this capacity becomes part of the FO's strength and its ability to act proactively rather than reactively.

ACCESS, UNITY, AND AUTHORITY IN ADVOCACY

Effective advocacy is not merely about presenting sound arguments or having the opportunity to meet with policymakers. At its core, advocacy requires access, unity of voice, and authority, three interrelated conditions that determine whether an organisation will be heard, taken seriously, and is able to influence outcomes.

Access to policymakers

Many FOs struggle with advocacy simply because they lack direct access to policymakers. Without that access, even the strongest arguments fall on deaf ears. This is often due to a perceived lack of legitimacy: when policymakers question whether an organisation truly represents the farming constituency, they may dismiss it. A clear, democratic mandate is essential in this regard. An FO must be able to trace its positions back to decisions taken by its members, ideally in a general assembly or any other legitimate forum. Being able to say 'this is our shared position, endorsed by our members' is what gives representatives the right to speak on behalf of the farming community.

Access to decision-makers is often shaped by political context. A government led by, for example, a green party may be more receptive to organic farming groups than to traditional producer organisations. However, such access is rarely static and may shift with changing administrations or evolving priorities. This makes it even more important for diverse organisations to seek common ground and align their positions where possible, as this unity will strengthen their collective voice.

Networking is a core element in gaining access to relevant rooms and people. Often, connections that start off informally, say at a dinner party or in the corridors of conferences, lay the groundwork for the more formal exchanges. Getting the chance to speak with policy-makers on diverse topics may help to better understand on what basis to build an argument and how to advocate successfully. Respectful relationship with the staff around policymakers is equally important. It is often them in charge of the politician's agenda; granting or delaying a meeting request. Policymakers are people, and people like to converse in friendly contexts. Politeness, respect, good communication skills, and effective communication techniques (see below) help to ensure access is granted on a continuous and sustainable basis.

Unity – in agriculture and about agriculture

Unity, as a major source of strength in advocacy, can take different forms. Unity **in** agriculture exists when there is a single representative national FO that speaks on behalf of all farmers in the country. This is the most powerful form of representation. Unfortunately, in many countries, several national-level farmers' organisations exist at the same time, often formed around different interests or ideologies. This fragmentation weakens advocacy. Policymakers are then able to cherry-pick who to listen to or play FOs off against one another, thus undermining their collective strength and influence. 'Divide and rule' may be used against the farmers thus making it impossible for them to successfully shape policy.

Unity **about** agriculture is a more limited form of consensus and occurs when different FOs with divergent agendas agree on specific issues and adopt common positions for selected advocacy goals. Often, unity in agriculture is rare, due to the diversity of farmers' needs and backgrounds and unity about agriculture is the next best option pursued.

Where one single FO is not feasible, unity forums offer a practical solution. Here, different FOs come together under one umbrella to coordinate positions, select representatives, and speak with one voice. This allows diversity to continue while building strategic consensus where it matters. Without such coordination, FOs risk being excluded from decision-making processes. As the saying goes: 'if you are not at the table, you are likely to be on the menu'.

Unity in agriculture – The South African Agri-Sector Unity Forum

The structure of agriculture in the Republic of South Africa is very diverse. There are many large-scale commercial farmers, but also a great number of small-scale farmers. At the national level, it started with a unified South African Agricultural Union (SAAU) in 1904 as an apex body to the different farmers' organisations in the country. With the new political set-up in the 1990s, the Transvaal Agricultural Union (TAU) left the SAAU and later became active at the national level. The SAAU changed its name to AgriSA in 1999. In 2002, the Agribusiness Chamber decided to leave AgriSA and work independently under the name Agbiz.

At the same time, small-scale farmers formed their own organisations, as they did not feel they were being adequately represented. 1991 was the beginning of NAFU, the National African Farmers' Union, which was founded to safeguard the interests of black farmers. In 2011, AFASA, the African Farmers Association of South Africa split off and developed independently.

This broad mix of voices made it difficult to learn, 'what farmers want'. Who should represent farmers vis-à-vis government? Over time, key leaders within these organisations realised that the sector's influence would remain limited as long as it stayed fragmented. Hence why the Agri-Sector Unity Forum (ASUF) was established in 2011. It created a forum where white and black producers could work together to address important agricultural issues.

The following organisations were founding members of this informal organisation:

- AgriSA (established commercial farmers)
- TAU SA (established commercial farmers)
- African Farmers Association of South Africa (AFASA, smallholder farmers)
- NAFU (smallholder farmers)
- Agbiz (agribusiness)
- SAAPA – South African Agro-Processors Association

With ASUF, the sector can formulate joint positions, while leaving enough space for the member organisations to promote their individual interests. Since its establishment, ASUF has advocated for the continuous growth of agriculture and commented on both the wage situation and the approach of agricultural broad-based economic empowerment (AgriBEE). The fact that this heterogeneous group of FOs was able to develop a joint position on land reform was arguably a milestone.

At the same time, such unity is always fragile and depends on leaders that drive the process. Over the years, ASUF has lost a lot of energy, and is currently not particularly visible.

Source:

- ☞ <https://agrisa.org.za/>
- ☞ <https://www.tlu.co.za/en/>
- ☞ <https://afasa.org.za/>
- ☞ https://pmg.org.za/files/docs/100917nafu-edit_o.pdf
- ☞ https://www.rural21.com/fileadmin/downloads/2013/en-04/rural2013_04-S18-21.pdf
- ☞ <https://www.farmersweekly.co.za/agri-news/south-africa/black-white-commercial-and-smallholder-farmers-take-hands/>

Building authority and gaining influence

Access and unity are reinforced by authority, credibility, and negotiating power (or what is often referred to as 'clout'). Policymakers may disagree with an FO's stance, but if the organisation has clout, they cannot afford to ignore it. Several elements strengthen an FO's clout or authority:

- **Numbers:** The proportion of the farmer population that the farmers' organisation represents. High membership coverage increases authority and leverage.
- **Credibility:** Media visibility, quality of arguments, evidence-based positions, charismatic and well-informed leadership.
- **Track record:** A history of effective mobilisation and constructive engagement.
- **Stamina:** The ability to persist over time, to campaign consistently, and to remain engaged even when advocacy becomes difficult or unpopular. Stamina also depends on internal structures, financial sustainability, and a supportive membership base.

A farmers' organisation with all four elements in balance will be an effective player in policy dialogue. In practice, however, organisations tend to be stronger in one area than in another. A large membership alone is insufficient if members cannot be mobilised, or if the organisation lacks public credibility. Likewise, an organisation may have strong leadership but be undermined by a weak mandate as it only represents a small share of the farmers' demographic. To maintain strength and authority, farmers' organisations must remain in close contact with their members. Engaged members provide an organisation with legitimacy, manpower, and resilience. When members see how advocacy benefits them directly, they are more likely to participate and support long-term campaigns.

Serious clout – example of the LTO in the Netherlands

The Dutch national farmers' organization LTO (Land- en Tuinbouw Organisatie) represents 35,000 out of a total of 51,000 farmers in the Netherlands. This is a scope of representation of almost 70%, which explains why the government takes the LTO's role seriously.

The most prominent advocacy efforts by LTO in recent years have centred around the Dutch government's proposed measures to address nitrogen emissions to secure ground water quality, which heavily impact the agricultural sector. The LTO frequently engages in public dialogue and releases detailed position papers, advocating for policies that support farmers' incomes while fostering sustainable practices. They push for a 'green transition' where farmers are central to the solution, not just the problem. The LTO uses its platforms (website, social media, press releases) to provide members and the public with information on complex issues like the annual nutrient cycle assessment (ANCA) and government regulations. While the LTO has denounced illegal blockades, it has been involved in structured protests and demonstrations as a form of high-profile advocacy. These events, often involving tractors in public spaces (e.g. The Hague), are designed to draw significant media attention to the challenges farmers face and their opposition to certain government policies, particularly those related to reducing livestock numbers. In the end, the LTO's media campaigns did not prevent the implementation of strict nitrogen reduction targets, but they significantly shaped the political conversation, highlighted the existential threat faced by farmers, and forced major political realignments that changed the government's initial strategy.

Source:

🔗 <https://www.lto.nl/>

🔗 <https://spheresofinfluence.ca/nitrogen-crisis-in-the-netherlands/>

Indirect access: second track diplomacy

When direct access to policymakers is blocked, second-track (or track II) diplomacy may offer an alternative. This involves working through trusted intermediaries who already have the necessary access, such as researchers, academics, think tanks, media allies, or respected public figures. These actors can present or amplify the FO's position from a different angle, often with greater influence. In this approach, the FO focuses on influencing the influencers. This strategy has a long and positive track record in policy advocacy far beyond the farming sector.

PERSUASION VERSUS CO-OPTION

Advocacy is ultimately about influencing decisions, and farmers' organisations use two very different pathways to do so: persuasion and co-option. Understanding the difference is essential, especially in contexts where governments actively shape or steer farmers' organisations.

Persuasion relies on skill, credible arguments, and the ability to mobilise public opinion. It is the craft of bringing farmers' voices to government, grounded in facts, clear reasoning, and compelling stories that give data a human face. Persuasion requires thorough preparation. Organisations must base their stance on facts, clarify in advance what is non-negotiable, and agree internally on the extent to which compromise is possible. A negotiation team should be strategically assembled, with some members pushing for ambitious targets, others protecting the minimum acceptable outcome, and rehearsals or 'dry runs' should be held to reveal weaknesses in arguments before facing policymakers. Much of the success of advocacy lies in this preparation: entering the room with clarity, coherence, and confidence.

Co-option, by contrast, occurs when the influence flows the other way around. In many countries, particularly where governments fund

or supervise farmers' organisations, it is common for policymakers to use FOs to transmit the government's agenda to farmers. Farmer leaders may feel included and valued, but instead of representing their farmers' interests upward, the organisation becomes a channel for government messaging downward.

Both models exist in practice and are easy to keep apart: persuasion is taking farmers' voices to government, while co-option is bringing the government's voice to farmers. Farmers' organisations must recognise this by guarding their autonomy and ensuring that access and friendly relations with government do not come at the expense of their independence.

Persuasion can take a soft or hard form. Soft persuasion operates within political processes, such as dialogue, committees, parliamentary engagement, and negotiation. Hard persuasion emerges when these avenues fail and organisations allow the conflict to spill over into public demonstrations or other disruptive actions. Both are on the same spectrum of influence, the choice depends on context, mandate, and the readiness of members to mobilise.

Finally, the strength of persuasion rests on four elements: force, fear, funds, and fairness.

- **Force** refers to the size of the constituency and the ability to pursue legal options.
- **Fear** refers to the degree to which policymakers fear the consequences of ignoring farmers.
- **Funds** are the resources required to consult members, communicate, and campaign.
- **Fairness** symbolises the extent to which the public sees farmers' demands as legitimate.

ENGAGING THE RIGHT STAKEHOLDERS

To achieve their objectives, farmers' organisations must engage strategically with three key groups of stakeholders: the public sector, the private sector, and civil society, as each plays an important but different role in shaping the environment in which farmers operate.

The public sector: The public sector sets the policy framework, regulates agricultural activity, builds infrastructure, and provides services that affect farmers. Key public stakeholders include:

- International intergovernmental bodies with their relevant governance entities and secretariats.
- National and local governments, especially ministries of agriculture and rural development, as well as decentralised agencies at provincial or district levels.
- Parliaments and councils, where laws and budgets are presented, debated, and passed, including parliamentary committees, such as for agriculture and other relevant areas.
- Regulatory and standard-setting bodies; e.g. bureaus of standards, food safety authorities, and certification agencies.
- Government-funded institutions; e.g. public research institutes and agricultural colleges.
- Development partners and donor agencies, as these are also financed from public sources and often advise on agriculture strategy even to the extent of influencing national policy.

Building relationships with both senior officials and mid-level advisors is essential. While ministers, or permanent secretaries, may make final decisions, their advisors often shape them. FOs that are recognised as informed and constructive partners will have most influence. It is important to note that while FOs should

engage different political parties in dialogue, they themselves must remain non-partisan to maintain independence and credibility. This non-partisanship will also enable them to be able to be a continuous public sector partner even after government changes.

The private sector: FOs are key players in agricultural value chains and must actively engage other private actors who influence prices, inputs, services, and market access. Relevant private sector stakeholders include:

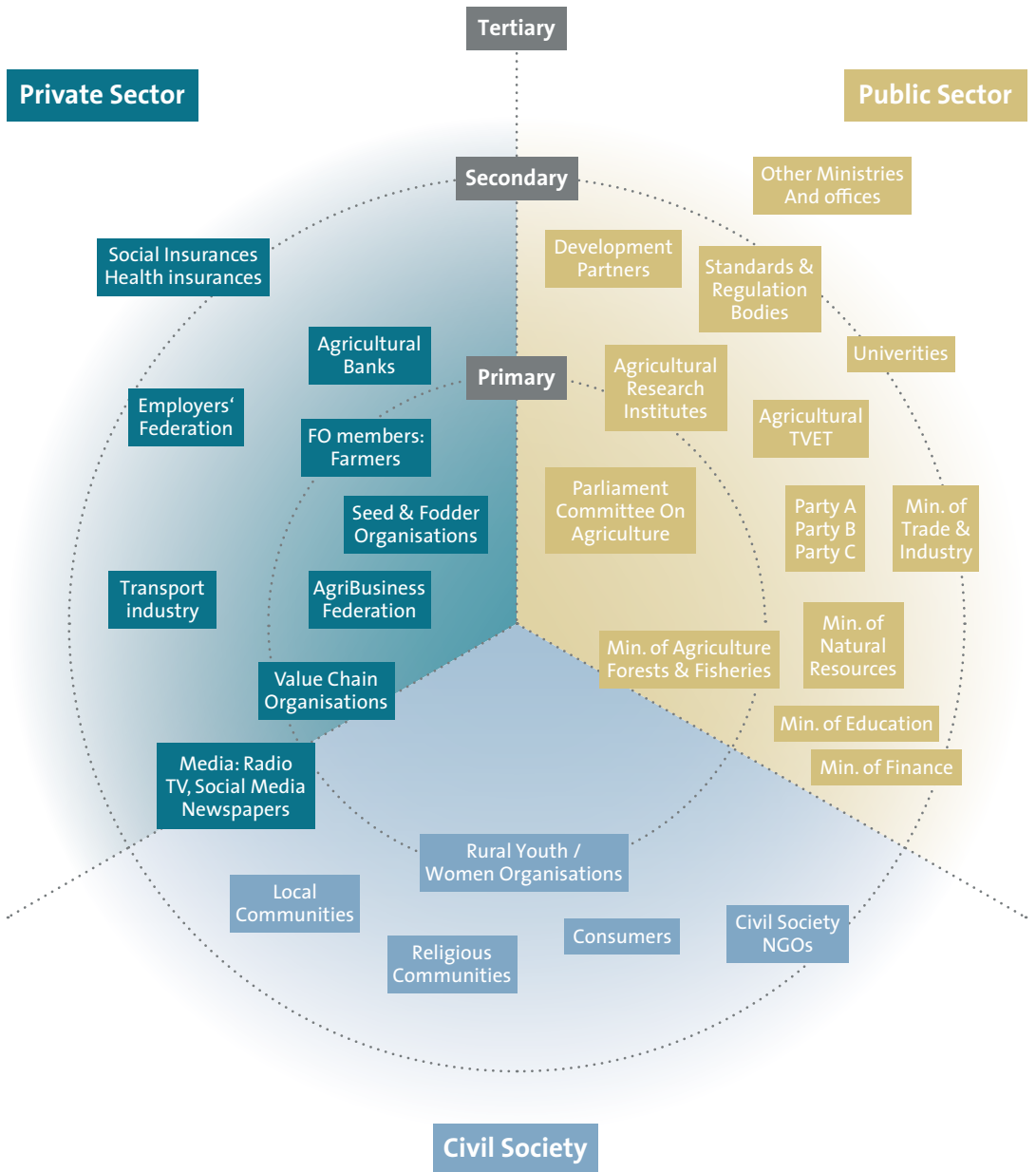
- Input suppliers, processors, retailers, traders, and exporters.
- Cooperative and agricultural banks, development finance institutions, and insurers.
- Value chain platforms, such as inter-professions or chambers of agriculture.
- Umbrella private sector bodies, including federations of employers or trade unions.
- Traditional leaders, as these often play a critical role in rural economies, such as in cases of land management, and dispute resolution.

In this commercial, private sector landscape, FOs must represent farmers' interests, advocate for fairer terms, and ensure that the voice of producers is heard in economic discussions. Sometimes, FOs may engage directly with private companies or sit on advisory boards, provided they have the professional capacity to do so.

Civil society: A wide range of actors make up the civil society landscape, all influencing the social and political environment around agriculture in different ways:

- Consumers, the largest and most powerful group, are both voters and market actors. When public opinion aligns with farmers' demands, governments are more likely to respond.

- NGOs, especially in rural development, food security, youth, gender, health, or education.
- Environmental groups, which may appear to oppose farmers but can also be allies in promoting sustainable land use, agroforestry, climate-smart agriculture or biodiversity.
- Faith-based organisations, especially those that support rural livelihoods (including women and youth) and community development.
- Media, as this shapes public discourse and influences decision-makers.



Strategic alliances with civil society actors, particularly where interests overlap, can strengthen an organisations' advocacy efforts. However, when engaging with civil society, FOs must not only build alliances but also remain alert to the narratives that shape public opinion. Misconceptions or negative portrayals of agriculture, whether about environmental impacts, animal welfare, or subsidies, can influence consumers' attitudes and political priorities. FOs therefore need to monitor these narratives and respond actively, ensuring that the voice of farmers is heard, facts are respected, and public support is maintained. This is not only a matter of advocacy, but a vital element of effective communication.

COMMUNICATION

Effective communication is a central tool of advocacy and a strategic function at the heart of every modern farmers' organisation. It enables dialogue in two directions: outward (external) to policy- and decisionmakers, the public, and other stakeholders; and inward (internal) to members. A well-functioning FO not only represents farmers but also serves as a platform for listening, informing, and aligning diverse farmers' voices. Without clear, consistent communication, even the most impactful advocacy or service efforts may be misunderstood or ignored.

Cooperation across all levels for food system development

The development of food systems of the future is one of the mega topics for the world, and for FOs. As part of delivering their 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations has started a global process to discuss ways to end hunger in the world. This has led to a UN Food systems Summit in 2021, where all countries pledged their national goals and pathways to contribute to this eminent goal.

The example of Senegal was a good model of how to engage all levels. The national FO platform the CNCR (Conseil National de Concertation et de Coopération des Ruraux) was invited by the government to co-chair the national committee for the development of the so-called 'national pathway'. In this role, the CNCR coordinated a process that mobilised both farmer representatives and other stakeholders on a local and sub-national level to formulate their views. The outcome of these meetings was later aggregated and compiled on a national level. Being part of the coordinating structure allowed the CNCR to secure that the views of farmers as producers as well as consumers were well

considered. The whole process was carried by the involvement of a broad diversity of stakeholders. With this backing, Senegal pledged its goals in the UN Food Systems Summit in September 2021 in New York. Additionally to the different state leaders, the president of the World Farmers' Organisation (WFO) presented its views at the global summit.

In parallel, the CNCR was a driving force of this process on the regional level, through its membership in ROPPA (Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest), the West-African umbrella FO; which again addresses the issue of food system development to the West-African states and the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), and through its membership in PAFO, the Pan-African Farmers' Organisation, as well as to the African Union.

Source:
CNCR

To be effective, internal and external flows of communication must be balanced. Internal communication has several goals, which will be touched upon in the section on governance, as well as on information services. Generally, it keeps members informed about opportunities, regulations, and FO activities. It allows members to voice their concerns and their priorities, thus providing the basis for shared policy positions and advocacy agendas.

External communication includes dialogue with policymakers, value chain actors, other farmers' organisations, media, and the wider public, particularly consumers. FOs must develop the capacity to engage with each of these audiences effectively, often requiring tailored messages and formats.

Given its importance, communication is no longer a secondary function but must instead be recognised as a core professional pillar within every farmers' organisation. Appointing a dedicated communications officer has become indispensable. To ensure impact, FOs should develop a clear and consistent communication strategy. This includes regular reporting of agreed key messages, and visual branding such as the use of logos and design templates. Strong branding builds trust, visibility, and recognition. Clear and repeated messaging reinforces the organisation's positions and values. In contrast, conflicting messages from different FO leaders can damage credibility and public trust. When multiple FOs operate in the same country or region, collaboration in public communication can help avoid confusion and maximise impact, especially if the organisations are aligned on core issues. Where possible, different FOs should coordinate press releases, co-sign public statements, and share platforms to amplify their farmers' voices.

A further key objective of external communication is to engage with the wider public, as this too is part of successful

advocacy. Public opinion influences political will and shapes market behaviour. In many countries, especially where urbanisation is high, the connection between consumers and agriculture has weakened. Yet consumers hold significant power as voters, as customers, and increasingly as social influencers. This makes consumers both the FO's greatest ally as well as a potential adversary. Public campaigns, farmers' markets, open farm days and agricultural fairs are vital opportunities to (re) build trust and awareness. These encounters allow farmers to share their realities directly with consumers, by explaining what farming means, the constraints they face, and how they contribute to food security, healthy lifestyles, and rural livelihoods. Direct interaction at such events helps bridge the gap between rural producers and urban consumers.

In a context where consumers increasingly demand transparency about production processes, (often linked to climate impact, biodiversity, 'One Health'-thinking, or animal welfare) many national and supranational farmers' organisations invest deliberately in building the image and integrity of the farming profession. This includes monitoring levels of public trust and designing communication approaches that keep farmers' perspectives visible and credible. Such efforts become particularly important during periods of tension; for example, when protests disrupt daily life and the use of large machinery in cities risks undermining public sympathy for farmers' concerns.

Social media has become an indispensable tool in FO communication. Unlike traditional media, it allows organisations to reach audiences directly, without going through traditional media's editorial control, and instead putting their own narratives in the public domain. Communication via social media is cost-effective, immediate, and interactive. However, to use it effectively, FOs must treat social media as a professional channel, not as

an afterthought. Platforms and algorithms evolve rapidly, meaning that investing in professional support, in the form of training, outsourced content creation or public relations advice, can significantly improve impact. Planning is essential: social media posts should be regular, messages must be consistent, and their visual identity strong. Importantly, social media is a two-way channel. Comment features allow the public to respond, creating space for engagement but also, potential for conflict. FOs must monitor, moderate, and respond thoughtfully, and address criticism factually and respectfully. Ignoring criticism or failing to engage can harm credibility, while transparent and confident responses can strengthen it.

Digital tools also enable grassroots mobilisation. A viral video or hashtag can energise members, influence consumers, and apply pressure on decision-makers, especially in moments of crisis or opportunity. In this sense, digital communication has become a new form of advocacy power.

THE LOBBYING AND ADVOCACY PROCESS

Lobbying and advocacy, or L&A, is not a single event, but a structured process with a clear trajectory from identifying a problem to implementing required change and monitoring results. While different organisations may approach this in different ways, the consecutive phases described below provide a practical roadmap for farmers' organisations at any level.



1

Identify the issue and consult the constituency

Strong advocacy starts with a clear understanding of what matters most to farmers. This requires staying alert to developments in the policy environment, while at the same time maintaining an open communication channel with the membership. Taking time to engage (board) members early on creates ownership, legitimacy, and ensures a clear mandate for the L&A team.

Key steps in this first phase include:

- **Monitor the policy and legal environment** and scan developments for emerging threats or opportunities.
- **Consult with members.** Use existing structures and meetings, as well as purpose-designed surveys to understand your member's pressure points.
- **Set clear priorities** to focus efforts and avoid spreading resources too thinly.
- **Frame a general goal** to reflect what change is aiming for and why it matters.
- **Confirm the mandate** from members or the board depending on the issue at hand.
- **Form an ad-hoc or standing advocacy team** to contribute to and guide the L&A process.
- **Clarify boundaries** and agree on non-negotiable outcomes, acceptable compromises, and available resources.

2

Gather evidence and define your position

To be convincing it is essential to base arguments on solid facts. One needs to understand the problem in depth, explore

various possible solutions, and finally agree on a clear position that can be defended both internally and externally. This phase ensures that the farmers' organisation speaks with one voice and gives credibility and strength to the negotiation.

Steps in this phase include:

- **Clarify the issue** and sharpen focus and scope, especially where problems are still loosely defined.
- **Collect facts and figures**, including member data, research, policy papers, or stakeholder reports. Key questions may focus on the number of members affected; specific groups (e.g. youth, women, smallholders) impacted differently; effects (e.g. market access, income, input costs, labour); and external contributing factors (e.g. regulatory, environmental, economic).
- **Analyse the landscape** of other groups affected that may serve as potential allies. Understand their interests and potential influence.
- **Evaluate possible solutions**, weighing different options avoid proposing unrealistic or one-sided solutions. Compare their impact using relevant indicators (such as impact on income, complexity, feasibility) and anticipate possible side-effects for others.
- **Select a preferred option**, based on the above research and mandate.
- **Formulate a clear position** on a proposed solution, expected outcomes and impact, and the key arguments supporting it.
- **Align internally** by presenting the position to the board or the members. Confirm their support and the mandate of the L&A team.

3 Plan your strategy

With a clear position and mandate in place, you will prepare for action by planning, building alliances, and thinking ahead. A well-thought-through strategy boosts the confidence of those involved, greatly increases the chances of success, and transforms advocacy from 'a leap of faith' into a calculated, collective effort.

Key steps include:

- **Extend the stakeholder map** and define who needs to be addressed: those who may support the position, those who may oppose it, and those who can be neutralised or persuaded.
- **Refine your arguments** to suit the different audiences. A single position may need to be framed in multiple ways, depending on to whom it is being presented. Beyond the farmers, arguments should show the benefits to those whose support could be decisive.
- **Define the approach and tools**, bearing in mind that negotiation is an art, not a science. The use of appropriate communication and negotiation tools and techniques, as described in many books, is useful and may lead to better outcomes. For example, design a sequence and stage types of communication from an informal dialogue to a public campaign.
- **Clarify the room for negotiation**, agree on the 'must-haves' that cannot be compromised on, and the 'nice-to-haves' that are desirable but negotiable. Special clarity is needed around 'red lines' in a position, meaning the points beyond which an agreement becomes unacceptable. Knowing these distinctions early on, helps set realistic expectations and guides decisions, even when outside pressure is applied at a later stage in the process.
- **Assemble and train a negotiation team** (a sub-set of the L&A team, perhaps reinforced

by other eloquent experts). Select people not just for their knowledge or seniority, but for their skills, their ability to generate trust and to act as part of a team. As is the case in sport, different roles are needed: some will push the agenda (the 'hawks'), others will broker compromise (the 'doves'), and someone must coordinate and lead.

- **Ensure resources are available.** Take stock of the FO's financial means, available time, human capacity, and the strength of internal consensus. The strategy must match the organisation's real ability to follow through.
- **Have a 'dry run' rehearsal.** Before formal negotiations begin, simulate the discussion within the organisation. Anticipate possible counter-arguments and reactions. This helps sharpen the lines of reasoning and it will test the team's unity and resilience under pressure.

4 Engage, negotiate, and advocate

This is the core phase of any L&A effort, where all preparation is put to the test. It is at this stage that positions are presented publicly, allies are mobilised, and conversations with decision-makers begin. The quality of engagement, the ability to build alliances, and the skill with which negotiations are conducted will often determine whether the effort succeeds or falls short. Strategic communication and trusted relationships become powerful tools in this phase. Engagement and negotiation are not just about pushing a message, they are also about listening, building trust, and finding common ground. Well-managed advocacy not only increases the chances of success in the current campaign but also strengthens relationships and credibility for the future.

Key steps are:

- **Launch the L&A campaign** based on the

agreed strategy. Ensure all allies, decision-makers, and potential opponents, know that you are prepared for meaningful dialogue.

- **Build alliances and coalitions** to amplify your voice and strengthen negotiating power. Focus on potential supporters of your proposal, but do not ignore those who don't. Identify common interests and potential mutual gains; approach sceptics with empathy and look for win-win solutions.
- **Engage the public:** Build public support through publicity and (social) media messaging where possible. Personal stories, illustrating the impact of a specific policy on certain farmers, are more powerful than statistics alone. Always keep the tone constructive and avoid actions that could harm long-term relations.
- **Enter negotiations:** Present your proposal clearly and listen closely to the responses. Understand the interests behind others' positions and be open to adjusting details without crossing your red lines. Focus on win-wins and avoid framing the discussions as zero-sum (or 'winner takes all') scenarios.
- **Remember your mandate,** protect the defined 'must-haves', and pursue the 'nice-to-haves'. Avoid conceding too early but also avoid rigid positions and opinions that block progress.
- **Use the right platforms:** Some contexts call for formal roundtables or public consultations, others for informal one-on-one meetings or quiet diplomacy. Select the right option based on what will be most effective and remain flexible as the dynamics in the process evolve.
- **Manage expectations within the organisation:** Not all members will agree with every outcome. Clear communication about progress, trade-offs, and why decisions were taken helps maintain consensus and unity, especially when compromises are required.

Key elements of the negotiation model of Harvard Business School

- **Focus on people:** The person at the table opposite you is not an enemy, but a person you will negotiate with. He/she just represents a different view, but remains a person, with whom you need to build and keep a relationship.
- **Focus on interests, not on positions:** in negotiations, people tend to express their position and demands. If you understand the underlying needs and interests, it is easier to identify solutions that can be accepted by everyone. Try to understand your negotiation partner, and the expectations he is facing from his superiors.
- **Be creative:** Use creativity to find many possible solutions, then evaluate and select. Focus on mutual benefits.
- **Help the other side to accept the solution:** the other person will need to explain the result to his constituency. To this end, you can jointly develop justifications to increase acceptance.
- **Have objective, quantifiable criteria:** Be sure that you can express, what is important for you. Define indicators and targets.
- **What are your limits?** Know the limits that you will not accept and be prepared to stop the negotiation if there is no possible solution, or the offer of the other side is just too far from your expectations.
- **BATNA:** BATNA means the 'best alternative to a negotiated agreement'. Consider a situation with several options on the table. Be aware which one would be the next best option that you could agree on, if the current approach does not work. Having this in mind allows you to think more freely and come up with new ideas.

Source:
AHA

5

Formalise, follow up, and adjust

This final phase turns negotiation results into actionable and measurable commitments. It ensures that agreements are not just words but become next steps in a pathway that delivers real change for farmers. Clarity of roles, accountability for actions, and consistency in the direction taken are all important. Acquiring an agreement is not the end of the process, but rather the start of ensuring that farmers' voices translate into action. By staying engaged, by tracking commitments, and by being ready to adapt, farmers' organisations can turn advocacy into sustained impact.

Key steps include:

- **Document the agreement clearly** by listing in detail what has been agreed to, by whom, by when, and with what expected outcome. The more precise the wording, the less room there is for misinterpretation, doubt, or delay.
- **Ensure shared understanding:** Draft the agreement, fairly, and transparently, to reflect all sides and ensure that it includes next steps complete with dates, responsibilities, and procedures. Signing the document adds weight and mobilises commitment.

Association Nationale des Organisations Professionnelles d'Éleveurs de Ruminants (ANOPER)

The Association Nationale des Organisations Professionnelles d'Éleveurs de Ruminants (ANOPER) influences agricultural land policy in Benin by advocating for pastoralists' land rights, engaging in national policy forums, and collaborating with partners to develop on-the-ground projects that address land-use conflicts. By representing the interests of herders, ANOPER works to secure access to essential resources like grazing areas and water, which are increasingly threatened by urbanisation and in concurrence with farming activities.

ANOPER played a crucial role in the development of Benin's pastoral code, using a multi-pronged strategy that combined national-level policy advocacy with bottom-up member mobilisation. By participating in official drafting commissions, consulting widely with its members, and collaborating with national and international partners, ANOPER effectively influenced the new legislation to better protect the rights of pastoralists and propose solutions to regulate the co-existence of farmers and herders.

ANOPER ensured that pastoralists' voices were heard directly in the creation of the pastoral code. They participated in drafting committees alongside government officials, legal experts, and other stakeholders to shape the text from the ground up. A major contribution was defining key concepts related to pastoralism within the law, such as 'agropastoralism', 'transhumance routes', and 'reception zones'. This helped create a clear and favourable institutional framework for pastoral activities. ANOPER's advocacy focused on the need for a secure environment for pastoralists. The organisation pushed for legal provisions that would protect herders' access to grazing lands and transhumance corridors, addressing long-standing conflicts with farmers.

Support from various international partners, such as the Coopération Suisse (project AP-OSP) and Afdi (Agriculteurs Français et Développement International), as well as bodies such as the International Land Coalition, strengthened their position and provided

- **Plan the follow-up:** Agreements should include a mechanism for monitoring. Who is responsible for what? How will progress be measured and reported? What happens if planned action falls behind?
- **Celebrate progress and communicate results:** Share negotiation outcomes with members. Highlight improvements, acknowledge contributions, and remain transparent about any delays or ongoing challenges.
- **Track implementation and evaluate impact.** Hold decision-makers and implementers accountable: monitor deadlines and milestones. Are members seeing the promised changes? Are there unintended side effects? Are further adjustments needed? This reflection helps build credibility and prepares the ground for future advocacy.
- **Respond when nothing moves:** In some cases, despite the best efforts, decision-makers do not act. If the issue remains urgent, a 'stepping-up' of the action may be needed, including holding public campaigns or peaceful mobilisation. Such action must always be well-prepared and disciplined. Poorly managed protests may damage the FO's reputation and can undermine the cause itself.

greater access to technical and financial resources for their advocacy campaigns. This helped to formulate a positive perspective for a future livestock sector. The new law was presented as a way to enhance products, secure finances, and improve access to social services for herders, aligning with ANOPER's mission.

ANOPER used its multi-tiered organisational structure, which extends from the national level down to local groups, to gather input from its grassroots members. By holding meetings and consultations at the local level, ANOPER ensured the pastoral code reflected the realities and priorities of herders. This consultation process was crucial for incorporating pastoralists' indigenous knowledge and practices into the formal legal framework. This ensured that the new code was both legally sound and culturally appropriate for the communities it aimed to protect. It was promulgated in April 2019.

Following the law's adoption, ANOPER played a key role in popularising its provisions

among its members. This involved conducting awareness campaigns and providing training sessions to ensure that herders and local community members understood their new rights and responsibilities. By mobilising and informing its members, ANOPER strengthened its legitimacy as the representative body for Benin's pastoralists. This ensured that the new pastoral code would be effectively implemented and enforced at the local level, backed by a well-informed and organised community.

Source:
Afdi

2.3 SERVICE DELIVERY

Services are a fundamental element of member-based organisations. In broader terms, the functions of lobbying and advocacy, networking, capacity-building, and social support are performed by FOs through the delivery of a wide range of services. In this chapter, the focus will be on services aiming at the economic benefit of members, supporting them in developing their businesses, becoming more competitive, gaining higher income, and reducing costs. These services may be technical, financial, or economic, and include information services. In this book we may at times summarise them under the term 'economic services'.

While aimed at the growth and success of the farmers, services also benefit the farmers' organisation both directly and indirectly. For one, the provision of well-targeted professional services may tighten the members' attachment to the FO. In addition, many services constitute a business model for the FO, allowing it to generate income and foster its financial stability. This is true for cooperatives and associations given that non-profit organisations, in most countries, are permitted to charge for services, as long as the revenue is reinvested in the organisation forwarding its purpose.

TYPES OF SERVICES: AN INTRODUCTION

Improving members' productivity, profitability, and resilience is at the heart of many farmers' organisations. One of the most important enabling functions of an FO is therefore to increase members' access to economic services, either by linking them to existing offers or by providing such services directly. These services support agricultural production and marketing and include access to inputs, credit, transport, storage, processing, market intelligence, and many others.

Economic services are provided by a range of actors in the sector, including government, chambers of agriculture, NGOs, development partners, and private businesses. One of the key service providers, however, is the FO. A substantial number of farmers' organisations render specific services to farmers, especially where other providers are not available, too expensive, or existing offers are not well adapted to the needs of farmers. This can include facilitating financing and banking services – for example, through representation on the board or advisory council of a land or agricultural bank, or through farmer-owned cooperative banking models (such as Rabobank in the Netherlands).

Some of the most successful national farmers' organisations use the bargaining power of their large membership to leverage services at a reduced price while also earning a fee for the running of the service at the FO. This helps farmers access products and services at below-market prices and helps sustain the running of the FO.

A special case is insurance services. National farmers' organisations in different parts of the world foster the resilience of their farmers by providing insurance services. They may do so by owning or managing insurance companies, or by acting as brokers for farmers to access crop insurance, input insurance, or short-term insurance products on workable terms. This not only builds on the large numbers of potential subscribers, but also on the possibility to tailor the insurance to the exact needs of the member farmers. In addition, where governments do not adequately cover disaster relief, farmers' organisations may help farmers survive shocks such as droughts, floods, fires, hail, or storms, often in partnership with welfare institutions and other stakeholders.

Services for economic resilience provided by farmers' organisations

Crop insurance and risk protection: Insurance is one of the clearest examples of a service that directly strengthens resilience. Examples include the JA Group in Japan (often via JA Zen-Noh), and in Italy organisations such as Coldiretti and CIA–Agricoltori Italiani. In the United States, comparable roles are played by the American Farm Bureau Federation and the National Farmers Union.

Disaster aid where public support is limited: Other resilience-oriented services include disaster aid where that function is not covered by governments. In South Africa, farmers who fall victim to droughts, floods, fires, or hail and

windstorms are assisted to survive through both national and provincial farmers' organisations acting in partnership with welfare institutions. SAAI takes the lead, along with the Agri-SA-affiliated Agri Northwest, in an umbrella initiative known as the 'Manna vir die Boere' Bureau, which brings together nine organisations to pool access and resources and coordinate aid needed for farmers to stay on their farms.

Source:
AHA

In some contexts, farmers' organisations also support members through technical services that directly increase productivity or reduce risk. This can include jointly owning machinery, organising machinery, and providing repair and maintenance support (for example through coordinated service providers or repair networks). Partnerships between government agencies and farmers' organisations may contribute to mitigating crises through cooperation and the division of labour in animal disease control. At local level, some farmer associations also facilitate operational services using drone or satellite technology, for example targeted spraying or locust control, where feasible and permitted.

An economic service that some farmers' organisations provide is the organisation and management of farmers' markets. These markets create a direct link between producers and consumers, especially in towns and cities.

By shortening the value chain, farmers' markets can improve farmers' margins and, in some cases, offer consumers better value, because fewer intermediaries are involved. Farmers' markets also deliver benefits that go beyond purely commercial services. They can strengthen relationships and understanding between producers and consumers, improve the public image of farming, and build trust between urban consumers and rural producers.

Finally, providing access and sharing information is a core element of service delivery of any farmers' organisation. This may include weather-related information, animal health, market opportunities, political or community-related information, and depends much on existing information sources and particular farmers' needs. Often, information that has been analysed and interpreted for the members is more useful and gives an added value.

Farmers' markets as a farmers' organisation service

In Italy, a well-known farmer-led market network is Campagna Amica, a division of Coldiretti, which hosts regular (often weekly) markets and brings consumers and producers together in cities and large towns. This model illustrates how a farmers' organisation can support direct marketing at scale, with clear benefits for visibility, market access, and consumer trust. In countries where national farmers' organisations run or coordinate

farmers' markets, these initiatives have also been linked through a global umbrella structure: the World Farmers Market Coalition, headquartered in Rome.

Source:

<https://www.worldfarmersmarketscoalition.org/>

It is fair to say that farmers' organisations play an enormous role in mapping, improving, brokering, and delivering services to ensure that their members are thriving and not left behind. To structure and inspire the discussion, the table

below offers an overview of possible categories of services and selected examples. This is by no means extensive as services for farmers are and should be adapting to new challenges and new opportunities every day.

Category	Examples of economic services
Inputs & production	Joint procurement of seeds, fertilizers, agrochemicals, or veterinary supplies; joint fuel purchases
Mechanisation services	(Shared) hiring/buying of machines; i.e. for land preparation (terracing, tilling), crop protection, harvesting, value addition, etc. Including machinery and equipment maintenance and repair
Financial and insurance Services	Community-managed (micro) finance groups (Village Savings and Loan Association, SACCOs), credit facilitation, insurance brokerage, support to business planning
Infrastructure	Collection centres or points, (shared) storage, feeder roads, transport logistics, market infrastructure (shades, lock-ups, water supply)
Natural resources management	Protection and management of watershed, rainwater harvesting, joint climate change adaptation and mitigation, disaster risk management
Energy	Joint local production and usage of energy with a particular focus on renewables
Processing & value addition	Cleaning, grading, milling, processing, packaging, cold storage, branding, certification, labelling, and traceability (place of origin)
Marketing & sales	Collective/aggregated marketing, price negotiation, linking to buyers, product promotion (e.g. at farmers' markets, fairs, or online)
Information sharing	Market information, local price updates, comparisons between input providers, buyer directories, information on taxes and transport, weather alerts, pest alerts
Business support	Legal or tax advisory services, audit and accounting services, support to market analysis and business planning

UNDERSTANDING THE LANDSCAPE OF EXISTING SERVICES

Before a farmers' organisation decides to design and deliver any new service, it is essential to understand the existing service landscape. Identifying what is already available and accessible, evaluating whether it meets the needs of members, and determining where improvements or additional services are necessary is a key enabling function. This helps to avoid duplication, ensures that available resources are used effectively, and creates opportunities for collaboration or negotiation with other service providers.

A systematic and encompassing mapping of available economic services should look at the wider picture. It may include:

- Public programmes and facilities, including extension services, input subsidies, credit schemes, or infrastructure support.
- National policies and sector strategies, which often include service components that may not always reach the local level or be responsive to needs of specific types of farmers.
- Private sector services, such as embedded services provided by buyers or suppliers (inputs, extension, sales as part of commodity marketing).
- Development partner projects (including by NGOs), which may provide technical support, training, value addition, or financial services to specific groups.
- Other membership-based organisations, such as cooperatives, producer groups, or other farmers' organisations (including affiliated FOs) that offer services in the same region.

Such analysis provides a baseline for identifying service gaps, duplications, or potential synergies between service providers and informs strategic

decisions on where the FO can best intervene, either by providing the service itself, or by collaborating with other service providers.

When evaluating existing services, the focus should be on the relevance and performance from the perspective of the FO's members. Aspects include service awareness, accessibility, costs, affordability, quality, and alignment with priorities of an FO's member farmers. Both users and non-users of services can offer valuable insights into barriers, bottlenecks, and potential improvements. Member feedback through surveys, focus groups, or individual conversations can help generate this information. Questions might include:

- Are you aware of the service?
- Have you used it, and how would you rate its usefulness, quality, and cost?
- How relevant is the service to your farming activities?
- What other services do you feel are lacking?

Analysing this data helps ensure that investments in new or improved services are demand-driven and well targeted. Even a basic analysis using an Excel spreadsheet or other tools can provide meaningful visualisations and insights. Presenting results to the FO board or general assembly can then support transparent, shared decision-making and strategic alignment.

Sometimes services that are already in place (whether offered by the FO itself or by external actors) are underutilised or suboptimal in design. In such cases, there may be opportunities to increase impact through adaptation or upgrading. For example, tailoring services to specific subgroups (such as youth or women), combining or packaging services to improve their uptake, or negotiating favourable terms with external providers, are ways to enhance the value of a service.

Where services are limited in outreach or quality, FOs may advocate for improvements by the public or private providers. The FO's proximity to farmers and its understanding of local circumstances makes it an effective negotiator to increase the provider's responsiveness and accountability.

Private companies often offer product-related services, such as training, product-related input supply, or post-production marketing, as part of their business model. While some of these services are essential (i.e. on how to use a product safely) and many may be generally valuable, they also carry risks, including dependency or price manipulation. Engaging on behalf of member-farmers in negotiating services from private sector companies may strengthen the bargaining power and checks and balances of the farmers and increase the relevance of the FO for its members. Concerns may also arise with donor-funded programmes, as many bypass FOs, prioritising their short-term goals over the engagement with the FO system.

Rather than dismissing services by commercial or development actors, FOs can engage as a broker and intermediary in service delivery. Also, the FO may consider services by competitors as a reference or benchmark to explore whether and how comparable services could be offered under their own umbrella, possibly with more transparency, inclusion, and long-term sustainability. Analysing the business logic of these offers can help FOs identify where they might compete, collaborate, or provide complementary alternatives.

In many cases, it may not be necessary, or indeed strategic, for an FO to provide services directly. By aggregating demand, negotiating with existing service providers, and brokering access for members, the organisation can add significant value for their members. This approach can generate a (modest) income through commissions or service fees, while keeping risks low. Who provides the service

matters less than whether it serves the interests of members in a sustainable, inclusive, and cost-effective manner. FOs are particularly well placed to ensure that services reflect local priorities and are designed in ways that empower rather than exclude farmers.

The decision to broker, (co-)deliver, or provide a service directly is guided by the importance of the service to members and the comparative advantage of the FO in providing the service. In critical areas such as input access, storage, processing, or market integration, FOs may choose to build their own delivery capacities over time. In other cases, acting as an intermediary or advocate may be the better option. A sound understanding of the existing service landscape, combined with a clear assessment of member needs as well as a strategic, realistic, and feasible vision for the FO, lays the foundation for effective service provision, whether directly or in partnership with others.

FROM ADVOCACY TO ACTION

While advocacy remains a core function of most FOs, there are situations where dialogue and lobbying are not enough to meet members' needs, especially when policy frameworks are inadequate, implementation fails, or government's capacity is weak. In such contexts, some FOs choose to move beyond advocacy and take direct action to deliver concrete solutions. This is a pragmatic response to unmet farmer needs and strengthens the FO's value to its members.

'Beyond advocacy' is not about abandoning dialogue, but about recognising when it is time to act. This approach is action-oriented and member-driven, and typically takes the form of projects, campaigns, or new services, especially in areas such as input supply, market access, infrastructure, and resilience-building. Importantly, these actions often emerge from the very issues raised during advocacy, when

lobbying uncovers gaps that no one else is filling. For FOs whose members are systematically bypassed and under-served, such as smallholders in remote areas, stepping in directly may be the only solution to bridge critical gaps. In these cases, advocacy is not abandoned but complemented by service delivery.

Beyond advocacy – how an FO saved family wine producers during Covid

During the Covid pandemic, the retail sale of alcohol was banned in South Africa. While large vineyards had the buffer of being able to ride out the period and restart once the ban was lifted, smaller farmers were unable to cushion the impact. Family wine producers in particular were at risk of bankruptcy. The Saai organisation was set up specifically to protect and promote such family businesses. They digitalised the family wineries and offered an online service: you could take a virtual tour of the vineyard, listen to the farmer's winemaking philosophy and then order bottles by post. Saai sponsored the logistics of the operation. This innovative and quick response to what was quickly becoming a crisis for the family business had a number of spin-off benefits for the organisation. Overnight, Saai became the largest representative of wine growers in South Africa; the data gathered on wine consumption and preferences was used to promote the industry; and the innovation attracted the attention of international players. One of these was the global platform World Farmers Market Coalition, which invited Saai to join its board.

Source:

🔗 Saai, <https://www.wineland.co.za/saai-launches-the-wine-farmer-to-ease-pressure-on-family-wine-farmers/>

These efforts represent a shift from representing farmers' interests to implementing solutions, and in doing so, these activities can lay the groundwork for sustainable economic services, so that going 'beyond advocacy' ultimately evolves and matures into long-term service provision. What begins as a response to a crisis or policy vacuum may become a permanent service offer (and even a business opportunity), especially when the FO shows that it can deliver the service better, more reliably, affordably, or accessibly than others.

Services born from emergencies and short-term challenges are often set up differently from those planned and designed in a more structured manner to become a permanent part of the FO's portfolio. They may draw on resources (i.e. human capital) that are not available at the same intensity long term, or may be standing on a weak institutional or legal footing. Once a crisis is over it may be useful to analyse the emergency services in order to understand if and how they may be institutionalised for longer-term delivery. This requires a round of careful planning and long-term thinking. Where emergency funding (i.e. by government institutions) is involved, the challenge of delivering without these funds may be unsustainable.

FROM DESIGN TO DELIVERY

Providing services is one of the most visible and valued functions of a farmers' organisation, but it is also one of the most demanding. Based on the above assessments, each service must be designed, financed, delivered, managed, and monitored with the same attention as a business. Keeping this in mind, it is vital to conduct some kind of feasibility to ensure energies are invested in a sustainable undertaking. Key considerations before deciding to design and develop a service may include the assessment of:

- The existing service landscape; understanding markets, offers, competitors and potential partners.
- Members' (and other customers') needs, interests, priorities, and their potential and willingness to spend funds on specific services.
- Internal capacity and funds of the FO to develop a service.
- External resources to support the development of a service.

The choice of a future service is often tricky, as many services may be needed and not enough resources are available. Not every service will suit every member. Differences in location, production type, farm size, and financial capacity must be considered. Some FOs have developed specific programmes for small-scale or youth farmers, or for members focused on certain commodities. Prioritising and targeting services towards selected groups improves efficiency and impact, but it also requires careful communication and inclusive design.

Once a strategic decision has been taken on the type of service to be developed, it is advisable to undertake a (business) planning process, even if services are meant to be for free. Such a process helps to understand if resources are available over time, customers or other interested parties are ready and capable to pay for or fund the service, and if internal as well as external capacities are available to ensure long-term delivery of the service. More details on such a business planning process can be found in Part 3.

Most new services benefit from a test phase. Piloting allows the FO to refine its offer, test farmers' demand, expose weaknesses in design and correct mistakes before scaling up. Pilot phases may reveal hidden costs or operational bottlenecks. Budgeting for adjustments to the service during a start-up phase is an important

part of realistic financial planning. Where possible, services should be designed to run independently of day-to-day FO management and contribute to long-term FO sustainability. In all cases, FOs must anticipate a learning curve. New services take time to refine.

Once services are available, communication is essential. Services must be advertised, clearly explained, and widely promoted. Even a well-designed service can fail if members do not know it exists or are unaware of how to use it.

Ultimately, delivering strong economic services is not just about solving problems, but about building credibility, strengthening member loyalty, and increasing the value of FO membership. Done well, it reinforces the FO's core identity: a practical, member-led organisation that exists to enable better farming and more profitable and resilient rural livelihoods. Therefore, it is good practice to monitor and evaluate services. This may not need external evaluators – as is the case for development projects – but it does require a system of tracking customers' satisfaction and feedback, their short-term benefits, mid-term changes, and long-term impacts. Numbers and stories will be useful in highlighting the quality of service delivery, justifying costs and price-setting, and reinforcing the relevance and value of the FO.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Designing a service is also a financial decision, as every service delivery carries costs. Resources are limited, and expectations are high. Will the service be free, subsidised for members, or fully paid by all users? Can it break even or generate a profit? Does the service delivery rely on third-party funding? And if so, under what conditions? External donors or sponsors can be useful allies, but they often come with their own agenda. FOs must protect their independence and stay focused on member priorities. A 'free' service

that erodes trust, credibility, or accountability can cost more than it delivers. In many cases, however, a well-managed service may generate surplus income that strengthens the FO's long-term financial resilience.

Before seeking external resources to run a service, it is worth asking how costs can be minimised without compromising quality. Some services can be run at relatively low cost, especially when they draw on existing facilities or the skills and goodwill of members. Many FOs have successfully mobilised internal capacity by engaging members as trainers, advisors, or service facilitators, either on a volunteer basis or in exchange for small incentives. This not only reduces costs but also builds ownership, trust, and local relevance. Practical cost-reduction questions include:

- Can services be delivered close to where members live and work?
- Can services be delivered through digital means in order to increase access and reduce travel cost?
- Are there affordable but adequate materials available?
- Can training events be held in low-cost community venues?
- Is it necessary to pay external providers, or can skilled members be involved?

Where costs cannot be fully recovered from users, or where initial investment is needed to launch a service, FOs may turn to donors, development partners, or commercial sponsors. These partnerships can be valuable, but they also require careful negotiation. External funding often comes with expectations, visibility requirements, or strategic interests. Preserving the FO's independence and member focus must remain the priority.

An interesting option is to group those who benefited and increased their profit margins through services and invite them to mentor new participants. Alumni of training formats are a typical group that is prepared to invest in the very training that helped them succeed. Universities sometimes use alumni to create a 'friends of ...' organisation, supporting the continuation of the cherished services.

Réseau des Organisations Paysannes pour une Synergie d'Action au Burkina (ROPASA-B)

The ROPASA-B and some of its member organisations have introduced entrepreneurship training for their members. When the funding by an international partner had to be reduced, the FO decided to introduce some saving measures to allow training to continue:

- Participants bring food and prepare the luncheons jointly
- Training takes place in local groups, allowing the trainer to travel, while the participants sleep at home

Teacher-training has produced a pool of competent local trainers, who work at local rates. Currently, ROPASA receives only a small fixed sum per participant from donors and organises the service without operating at a loss.

Source:
ROPASA-B

When working with donors or sponsors, it is often helpful to present a clear proposal that includes a strong business model and a path towards financial sustainability. Donors may be more inclined to support services that demonstrate a realistic plan for continuation beyond the funding period. Commercial sponsors, such as input suppliers, financial institutions, or agri-businesses, may be willing to fund or co-fund services in exchange for brand visibility or market access. This could include co-hosting events, placing advertisements, or branding training materials. However, the FO should avoid exclusivity arrangements that limit member choice or create dependencies.

Services may also be extended to non-members to broaden the impact and generate additional FO revenue. In such cases, members should

retain clear benefits and advantages over non-members – such as discounted pricing, priority access, or packages of offers – in order to underline the value of FO membership, and to encourage others to join the organisation.

Ultimately, strong services depend not only on technical design, but also on commercial acumen and financial discipline. As FOs expand their service portfolio, they must aim to strike a careful balance between ambition and capacity, inclusion and viability, innovation, and sustainability.

As mentioned earlier, charging the members or outside customers for accessing services is not limited to economically oriented organisations. Even associations, the typical non-profit member-based format of a farmers' organisation, can have an income, provided this income is

Demeter certification service by the BDAI

The Biodynamic Association of India (BDAI) reacted positively when approached by the AHA in 2017 to select a service that it wanted to establish. Funding through the AgriCord 'Farmers Fighting Poverty' programme and organisational development support through its member the AHA accompanied the process and ensured timely and professional project completion.

The BDAI was interested in establishing an India-based certification service for its members, integrated within BDAI and fully compliant with the biodynamic principles of Demeter. The project proposal included the necessary training courses and negotiations with the headquarters of Demeter International, as well as flexible funding, travel, and project adjustments along the way. The BDAI developed a business model and defined a level of service quality and a price to secure a profit margin for itself. Following validation and accreditation from Demeter

International, which constituted the official permission for BDAI to certify according to the standards, BDAI started the service. Since then, the BDAI's members no longer have to pay expensive international auditors for the certification of products. They organise themselves into groups and get certification from their own FO.

The role of the project, in this case, was to fund the setting-up of a long-term service. The AHA advised and accompanied the BDAI from the drafting of the project proposal all the way through to the finalised business plan, including financial support for the travel and training activities.

Source:
AHA

reinvested in the organisation fostering its mandate. Associations may also establish their own business wings, cooperatives, commercial ventures, or even banks to professionalise and streamline service delivery. This diversity reflects both the challenges farmers face and the flexibility of FOs in addressing them.

FARMER'S ORGANISATION LEVELS AND ECONOMIES OF SCALE

Farmers' organisations are typically structured across multiple levels, from grassroots cooperatives and associations (the lower level) to umbrella bodies such as unions and federations. Generally, the lowest-level FOs have individual farmers as direct members while the members of upper-level organisations are groups or FOs. Service delivery has to respond to these aspects in order for each level of organisation to remain true to its mandate and not interfere with the mandate of other levels.

Determining at which level a particular service should be delivered is not just a question of mandate. It is strategic for any FO system to find an optimal 'division of labour' depending on cost-efficiency, scale of demand, available capacity, and the nature of the service. In general, lower-level FOs are well suited to deliver direct, localised services to farmers, while higher-level FOs can deliver services that require scale, coordination across districts or regions, or high-level partnerships and investments.

A sound division of labour between FOs can capitalise on economies of scale, reduce overlap, and allow for better specialisation across the FO system. For example, it is often inefficient for a small FO to procure storage or engage in export negotiations. A well-functioning higher-level FO can centralise these functions for greater effectiveness. The table below gives examples of how specific services may be provided at different levels of the FO system:

Type of service	Lower-level FO:	Lower-level FO:
Inputs & infrastructure	Organises mechanisation services and local storage facilities	Negotiates discounted prices for machinery and equipment; provides centralised repair services
Veterinary	Organises local vaccination campaigns and animal health extension	Advocates for national-level training of farm veterinarians; advises on control of diseases of national importance
Finance & risk management	Facilitates loans through local banks	Organises and manages savings and credit cooperatives; brokers insurance schemes
Information	Shares local market updates and weather forecasts	Runs digital (marketing) platforms; informs and updates on trade regulation, including (import and export) taxes
Extension & advisory	Provides extension and conducts farm visits	Organises dialogue and study visits for elected (board) members or for staff of lower-level FOs
Marketing & sales	Takes care of output marketing for members' products	Coordinates the export of products from member FOs
Innovation & research	Runs local trials and farm demonstration plots	Partners with companies and research institutes to promote value chain-wide, commodity-based innovations
Consumer outreach	Hosts local trade fairs, farmers' markets, and links farmers to local buyers	Coordinates national-level agriculture trade fairs, supports certification and branding initiatives, advertises on digital platforms

This kind of functional distribution allows farmers' organisations to align their service delivery to what they can do best at their level, thereby maximising impact while avoiding duplication. Still, these distinctions should not be rigid. Services often emerge organically at the level where the demand is strongest and the solution most feasible. Regular consultation across the FO system is important to decide what makes the most sense from a member and efficiency point of view.

BENEFITS FOR MEMBERS AND FOR THE ORGANISATION

For any service to be valuable, it must meet real, relevant needs. These needs should be assessed carefully, whether through surveys, discussions, or informal feedback, and validated by the members themselves. Importantly, the focus should go beyond what is explicitly requested to include what is required for long-term improvement in livelihoods.

Effective services help members increase productivity, reduce costs, and improve market access, ultimately leading to better income and resilience. Examples include:

- Access to innovation and mechanisation
- Improved finance through cooperatives or partnerships
- Information services such as market prices, weather updates, and legal advice
- Training and peer learning, which build knowledge and self-confidence

Services also strengthen the social fabric of the FO: members feel more connected, supported, and engaged. Some may take on leadership roles, contribute machinery or skills, or become peer trainers, thereby turning service delivery into a source of empowerment and even side

income. When members pay for services, even modestly, it encourages ownership and sets a standard for quality. It also fosters sustainability and reduces dependency on donors.

But service provision is not just a response to member expectations; it is a key driver of growth and stability for the FO itself. Benefits for the farmers' organisation include:

- Financial income: particularly from input supply, marketing, training, or advisory services
- Stronger member loyalty: satisfied members are more likely to renew fees and stay engaged
- Reputation: increased productivity and competitiveness of members translate to better reputation and more visibility
- Growth in membership boosts revenue and allows for economies of scale
- Stronger advocacy: a larger, more organised base gives the FO more political weight
- Attraction of partners and donors: professional service delivery builds credibility and trust

A growing and more successful FO can professionalise further, employing staff, expanding services, and allowing its leaders to focus on strategy and representation. When delivering relevant, high-quality services, the FO will be recognised not just as a voice for its members, but as a business partner and development actor in its own right.

Fatima Multi-Purpose Primary Cooperative (Fatima MPC)

Fatima MPC in Leyte, Philippines has been active since 1996. Under a strongly female leadership, it has developed into an organisation of 14,500 members, most of which are farmers, spanning 27 municipalities. They produce cassava and other root crops which are processed on a cooperative basis.

To increase the productivity and income of its members, Fatima MPC has introduced a range of services. The cooperative offers advanced technical farming support and high-quality farming materials, including planting materials and fertilizers, to help members improve their yields. By operating a processing plant and a retail store, Fatima MPC helps members find a market for their root crops and other produce. The cooperative buys raw materials, processes them into higher-value goods, and then sells them through its channels.

Through partnerships with other organisations, the cooperative provides training and capacity-building opportunities to its members. This includes training on advanced farming techniques, technical support, and guidance on inputs. With its interest to support the community, the cooperative also empowers the livelihood skills and the social entrepreneurship capacity of women. Finally, using its own capital and that of partner organisations, Fatima MPC lends out funds at affordable rates to members for their operations on the farm or to invest in machinery. The cooperative also offers its own machinery services to members. The processing plant that transforms members' output into marketable, branded consumer and wholesale products creates jobs for member families and others.

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Source:

Agriterra

The National Farmers' Union (NFU) in England

Founded in 1908, the NFU represents approx. 44,000 farmers across England and Wales. With groups and committees on a local, county, and regional level, the NFU provides political representation and is active in lobbying and advocacy on behalf of its members.

Members also appreciate the support given through a broad range of services:

- NFU CallFirst, a hotline for quick support on legal, technical, and environmental issues
- NFU Contract Checking Service
- NFU Farm Safety Support, to help comply with health and safety regulations
- NFU Rural Surveyor Firms, which offer support in land and property matters
- NFU Energy, to assist in energy-related matters
- NFU Legal Assistance Scheme, to help farmers in case of legal disputes
- Access to legal firms that are specialised in agricultural issues
- In cooperation with commercial partners,

farmers have access to products and services at discounted rates; e.g. for vehicles, fuel, tires, software, etc.

- NFU Mutual, in cooperation with an associated insurance company, offers attractive and specialised insurance products for NFU members
- Events and fairs provide opportunities to learn and inform, but also to socialise among farmers
- Publications and online resources offer access to a broad range of knowledge and information

With this specialised programme of services, the NFU is attractive both to member farmers and cooperation partners who appreciate the organised access to this target group. This allows the NFU to negotiate very good terms with commercial partners for the access to its members.

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Source:

🔗 <https://www.nfuonline.com/>

2.4 CAPACITY-BUILDING AND KNOWLEDGE-SHARING

Capacity-building and knowledge-sharing is about strengthening both the organisation and the people it serves. This chapter therefore looks at two closely linked areas: (i) training and skills development and (ii) extension, advisory, and peer-to-peer learning.

Training and skills development includes the internal capacities of the farmers' organisation itself (for example leadership, governance, management, communication, and operational skills), but also the practical skills development of farmers and farm workers. Extension, advisory, and peer-to-peer learning then focuses on how knowledge is shared and applied in practice, whether through formal advisory services, farmer-to-farmer dialogue, or digital channels. Some of the organisational capacities required to deliver these functions effectively, and how they relate to governance and management, will be taken up again in Part 3 of this handbook in more detail.

TRAINING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Farmers' organisations are only as strong as the people who make them work: The farmers at the grassroots, the staff and volunteers who support daily operations, and the leaders who represent their interests in broader arenas. Building the capacity of these individuals and of the organisation, is therefore of key importance to everything a farmers' organisation aims to do.

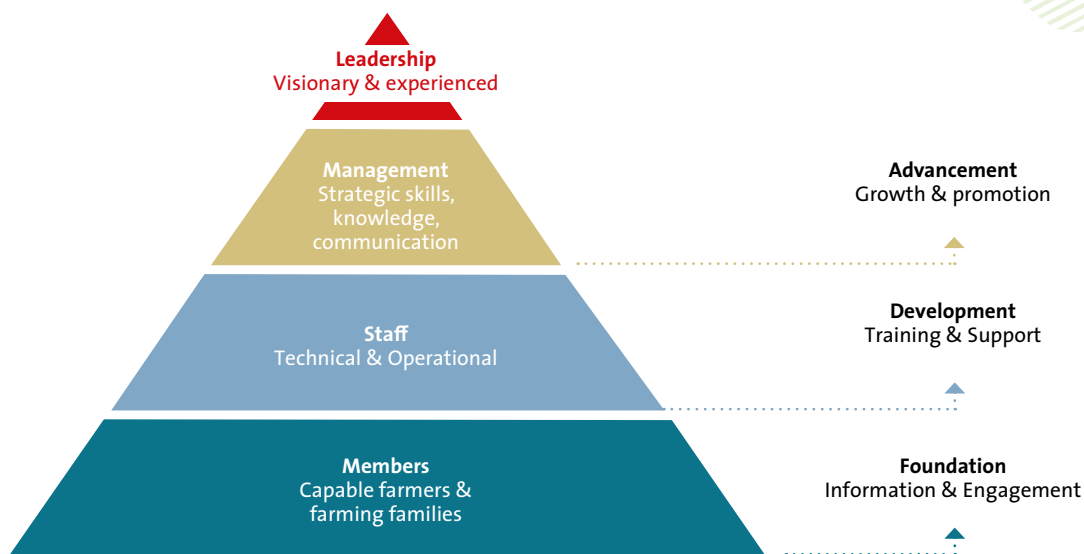
Capacity development refers both to strengthening what the FO, as an organisation, can do, and to identify who within the organisation is able to do it. It includes internal skills and knowledge, leadership

and communication, as well as the tools and resources required to operate effectively. Knowledge sharing, in turn, is what makes this development sustainable: it ensures that experience circulates within the organisation and is passed from one generation, one region, or one leadership cycle to the next.

There are two key dimensions to capacity-building: the so-called 'hardware' side, such as offices, vehicles, computers, internet access, phones, and meeting venues. These are important, and without them an organisation struggles to function efficiently. But the more important dimension is human capital. Having the right people in the right roles, and equipping them with the skills, confidence, and understanding to do their jobs, is the cornerstone of a strong and sustainable FO. Investing in this capacity takes time and effort, but it pays off more than any other input.

A useful way to think about human capacity is to imagine the FO as a pyramid. Leadership sits at the top, supported by strong management and skilled staff. At the base of the pyramid are the members, the farmers, who must also be informed, engaged, and capable of participating in the life of the organisation.

In such a structure, each person occupies a 'cell' corresponding to the responsibilities and expectations of their role. The goal is to match each person to a cell they can fill and to then provide the necessary support so that they grow in confidence and competence. As individuals develop, they may be promoted to cells with greater responsibility. But where someone is overburdened or has been given tasks that are poorly aligned to their capacity, the organisation



must either support them more closely or consider redeploying them to a better-fitting role. If too many cells in the pyramid remain unfilled or unstable, the whole structure becomes fragile.

Leadership development is a central part of capacity-building. It does not start and end with electing a good chairperson. It involves continuous investment in attitude, knowledge, skills, insight, communication, strategic thinking, and, over time, the development of wisdom. Leaders must be able to represent members' interests, respond to shifting opportunities and risks, and navigate complex systems with both flexibility and clarity. A strategic plan on paper is only as strong as the people charged with implementing it.

Capacity-building is not just something that happens to staff and leaders. It is something that needs to be cultivated at every level. Members who understand how their organisation works, who feel confident to speak up and to contribute, and who are familiar with new technologies or farming techniques, are better able to shape the organisation to meet their needs.

Higher-level FOs also have an important role to play in strengthening the capacity of their

member organisations. This includes training, shared tools and systems, legal or financial advice, and organising exchange forums for specific staff roles (e.g. accountants, advisors, logistics support).

Many farmers' organisations strengthen capacity and build skills through practical training for farmers, farm workers, staff, and leaders. Training is often linked to real operational needs or new regulations and may range from short accredited courses (for example first aid and workplace health care) to farm and food law, basic finance, fire-fighting, plant and animal health, safe agrochemical management and application, the use of mechanisation, and digital tools. Increasingly, organisations also use digital channels to support learning at scale, including structured knowledge platforms and social media channels that share guidance, updates, and examples of good practice.

Ultimately, capacity-building is not a checklist, it is a culture. Strong farmers' organisations actively seek to learn, reflect, and improve. They ask for feedback, invest in new ideas, and treat mistakes as part of the process. They encourage curiosity, reward initiative, and make room for internal

training and growth. Even when budgets are tight, these kinds of investments are possible. And they are important because an organisation that learns is an organisation that grows.

EXTENSION, ADVISORY, AND PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING

Where public extension services are weak or uneven, farmers' organisations often help to close the gap by providing advisory and extension support directly, or by organising access to credible advisers. In practical terms, extension means more than 'skills training' – it is the ongoing support that helps farmers apply knowledge in real conditions and as part of day-to-day practice. This can include seasonal guidance on production decisions, addressing pests and diseases, interpreting new standards or regulations, supporting record-keeping, and linking farmers to research, veterinarians, input suppliers, or inspection and certification services. In some cases, extension support is delivered through farmers' organisations' staff or lead farmers; in others, the organisation coordinates external specialists and helps ensure that advice is relevant, trusted, and accessible.

Peer-to-peer learning remains one of the most affordable and effective ways to build capability. Farmers, staff, and leaders often learn fastest through exchange visits, mentoring relationships, roundtables, demo-farm activities, and practical discussion groups. Structured formats, such as workshops or mentoring programmes that pair experienced members with younger members, can be effective.

Informal opportunities also matter, for example conversations at trade fairs, time set aside after official meetings, or local discussion groups that meet regularly around shared challenges. These spaces allow knowledge to flow, strengthen relationships, and build an open culture where asking for help and sharing advice becomes normal.

Learning and network activities of the SRA in Argentina

The Sociedad Rural Argentina (SRA) is one of Argentina's most prominent and historic farmers' organisations, representing landowners and producers across the country. It was founded in 1866.

Apart from services and lobby and advocacy work, it engages in providing opportunities for members to network and learn.

- Training courses, workshops, seminars, and conferences are where members receive direct input and also network and mingle. This is an important element of community-building and strengthening the ties between the organisation and the individual member
- The yearly *Exposición Rural* ('rural exhibition') features livestock shows, agricultural machinery exhibits, trade discussions, and educational talks, functioning as a vital learning and networking opportunity.
- Networking events: regular meetings, regional gatherings, and forums are held to facilitate dialogue and knowledge-sharing among members, fostering a strong professional network within the agricultural community.
- Publications and information services: the SRA provides members with access to relevant industry information, technical reports, and publications to keep them informed of the latest developments and best practices.

Source:

🔗 <https://www.sra.ar/>

Digital tools can complement in-person learning by widening reach and improving continuity, for example through WhatsApp groups for local leaders, online Q&A sessions, short explainer videos, or curated guidance shared through organisational platforms. Used well, these channels help extend advisory support to remote areas and keep members informed during fast-moving situations such as disease outbreaks, extreme weather events, or sudden market changes. The overall aim is not only to transfer information, but to build confidence, problem-solving ability, and the habit of continuous improvement across the organisation.

Beyond peer-to-peer learning and advisory support, many national farmers' organisations also contribute to longer-term capacity development through more formal pathways. This can include training and education platforms, bursaries and scholarships for aspirant farmers, and practical career-entry opportunities

such as internships. In some cases, organisations help connect labour demand and labour supply by advertising jobs on farms, seasonal vacancies, or placements within particular value chains. Some platforms match opportunities across borders, helping young farmers build experience internationally via structured databases linking applicants and available placements.

Information as a service

In most countries, farmers' organisations communicate continuously with individual farmers and their own substructures by sharing agricultural news and practical information, hosting libraries and knowledge platforms, and issuing commentary, position statements, and media declarations on behalf of farmers. They may also create and maintain channels for time-sensitive information such as disaster alerts, animal or plant disease updates, market opportunities, and extension or training opportunities.

2.5 PARTNERSHIPS AND NETWORKING

Strong partnerships and dynamic networks are not add-ons for a successful farmers' organisation; they are a core function. Even though advocacy and service provision often get more attention, the ability to build and sustain relationships – with other FOs, with strategic allies, and even with critics – can deeply influence the outreach, resilience, and impact of an organisation. This section explores how FOs can actively develop their networking and partnership roles: locally, nationally, and internationally; horizontally among peers; and vertically with allies in different sectors or levels.

At its core, networking is about recognising shared interests, even where these are not immediately obvious. What may begin as isolated advocacy efforts can, through strategic exchange, evolve into collective action with much greater leverage. A clear example: farmers across France, the Netherlands, and Germany were each fighting separate national policies, from land use restrictions to diesel subsidies, but it was only when they connected across borders that they realised the common root cause: farmers were being blamed for climate and biodiversity crises.

By joining forces and engaging directly at the EU level, they achieved more than any national campaign alone could have delivered. Such experiences show that looking beyond one's immediate context, be it across borders, commodities, or sectors, can reveal powerful opportunities for cooperation. However, this kind of insight does not happen automatically; it requires networks that foster open communication, recognise shared goals, and build trust among members.

ALLIES BEYOND THE FARMERS' ORGANISATION

Partnerships do not always need to be with other farmer groups. Traditional leaders, for instance, can be highly effective allies, especially in communal areas. Their systems of authority often mirror public structures (e.g. at local to regional levels and regarding thematic areas), while their functions often mirror those of FOs (mobilising communities, consulting on rural issues, and disseminating information). In some cases, inviting collaboration with traditional

authorities has significantly expanded the reach and legitimacy of FO's advocacy and development efforts.

FOs may also benefit from partnerships with institutions that influence agricultural policy. Parliamentary committees on agriculture, for instance, often provide an entry point for advocacy. Where such bodies are weak or under-resourced, they may be more open to external input and scientific argumentation, that FOs can provide.

FOs have also had success partnering with the international (development) community and recognised non-state actors' groups. Joining forces with consumer associations and agribusiness networks may increase political leverage in the national and international context, for example in the climate arena. Where national governments are unresponsive, using their commitments at international level by appealing to international legal mechanisms or other nations can sometimes create pressure or lead to protective outcomes.

The Farmers' Constituency within the UNFCCC

The Farmers' Constituency is a broad and diverse network comprising more than 70 global, regional, and national farmers' organisations and agricultural NGOs. It represents the collective voice of farmers within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process, ensuring their meaningful representation and active participation in international climate negotiations.

Its members reflect the full diversity of the farming community, producing food, fibre, fuel, and a wide range of ecosystem services for the global population, while making a significant contribution to global climate action. The

Constituency brings together crop and livestock farmers, horticultural producers, pastoralists, ranchers, foresters, and aquaculturists; women, young and Indigenous farmers; farmer organisations and co-operatives; family farms and agricultural enterprises; farm workers, landowners, and tenants; as well as agricultural and other NGOs working directly with farmers on the ground.

As an official observer platform, the Constituency works to ensure that farmers' perspectives are recognised within the UNFCCC process and that their knowledge, experience, and priorities are reflected in relevant decisions.

THE ROLE OF HIGHER-LEVEL FOS

Higher-level FOs (such as national associations, unions, or federations) have an important role in facilitating inter-FO networking. This includes building both vertical networks (between levels of FOs) and horizontal networks (between peer organisations). Vertical networks provide pathways for the flow of information, services, and accountability between levels. Horizontal networks allow peer FOs, which often face similar challenges, to share solutions, jointly procure services, or coordinate advocacy positions.

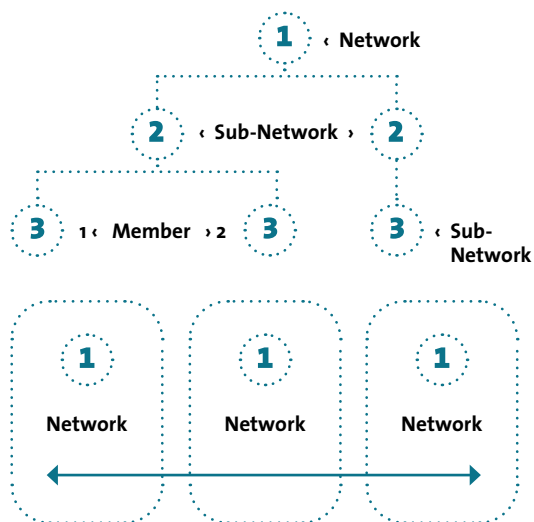
Whether in vertical or horizontal networks, higher-level FOs have a unique responsibility to act as enablers. They can bring together smaller or local organisations, create structures for collaboration, and ensure that weaker or informal groups are not left out of broader processes. Higher-level FOs are also well placed to establish cross-sectoral and multi-actor networks, including with processors, traders, researchers, or employers' associations, that address shared concerns across value chains or

In doing so, it supports the agricultural sector's capacity for climate adaptation and mitigation, while contributing to efforts to minimise and address loss and damage in agriculture.

The Constituency was established in early 2009. Following the creation of the WFO in 2011, the WFO progressively assumed the coordination role, leading regular meetings, joint advocacy initiatives, and official submissions on behalf of farmers' organisations worldwide.

Source:
WFO

political agendas. These broader alliances can be particularly effective in cases of lobbying for policy change, coordinating large-scale services, or driving sector-wide innovation.



ONLINE NETWORKS AND PLATFORMS

Digital technologies have opened new and cost-effective ways to keep networks active, especially across wide geographic distances. Online meetings, discussion platforms, and peer-to-peer exchanges became the norm during the Covid-19 pandemic, and many FOs have continued using them, with good results. The cost advantage is clear: no need to hire a meeting venue, no transport costs for participants – just the need for coordination and facilitation. But successful online networking still needs to be well-designed. Clear topics, predictable schedules, reminders, interesting interactive formats, and good moderation can make online knowledge-sharing highly effective. When participants are actively engaged, whether as presenters, facilitators, or simply as contributors, digital networks can be just as dynamic and effective as in-person networks. Higher-level FOs can play an important enabling role here too: by hosting regional or national online platforms, facilitating exchanges between local FOs, or sharing expert inputs that can be accessed by all members.

The NFO online exchange platform by PAFO

In 2023, PAFO, the Pan-African Farmers' Organisation, started an online platform, together with its regional FO (RFO) members, to regularly bring together experts from the national FO level. For each session, a topic of common interest is selected from a list of topics proposed by the member organisations. The format includes a presentation of a case by the proposing party, elaborating how it is addressed and solved in his/her FO. Topics include, lobbying and advocacy, climate-smart agriculture, member data management, etc.

The thought behind this is: learning is easier using examples presented by your peers. They have similar frameworks and problems. And very often, good solutions are already available in the system. They just need to be shared.

For this purpose, 15 moderators have been trained in the RFOs to lead the sessions on Zoom, also for the use within the RFOs and on national level. A coordinator in PAFO manages the process with scheduling the events and inviting the FOs. He/she prepares the sessions with the selected moderator.

Source:
PAFO

DESIGNING SUITABLE NETWORK FORMATS

Networks can take many forms, from formal learning partnerships to informal farmer meet-ups. Choosing the right format matters and depends on the purpose, the participants, and the setting. Some helpful questions for FOs when designing a network activity include:

- What is the goal? A one-time exchange or an ongoing space?

- Who should be involved?
All members, or a subgroup?
- Should the event be structured or informal? In-person or online?
- Are there sensitive topics, or should external partners be invited?
- Will participants benefit from expert input? Should they help shape the agenda?

Some formats that have worked well in practice include:

- Peer-to-peer exchanges on members' farms with rotating hosting
- Presidents' round-table discussions between FO or cooperative leaders
- Mentoring programmes connecting senior and junior farmers (especially mentoring in women's networks)
- Online countrywide networking between member FOs
- Farmers' organisation booths or stands at local markets as informal contact points
- WhatsApp groups connecting members across levels

Ultimately, a network should reflect the character and goals of the FO, not just replicate what has worked elsewhere. Networks do not thrive on structure alone. Much depends on the attitude and behaviour of those involved. The following helps to sustain a healthy, resilient network: openness to share and receive knowledge; willingness to learn from others; trust and honesty, even when disagreeing; helping others, knowing that the same assistance will be returned; and self-awareness of how one contributes to group dynamics.

Conflict is a part of human interaction and will therefore likely be a part of every networking effort, sooner or later. Managing conflict constructively can spark innovation. Leaders play a key role here, not only in setting the tone and showing the way, but in ensuring that networks remain member-driven and respectful of diverse views.

2.6 SOCIAL SUPPORT AND SOLIDARITY

While the core functions of farmers' organisations tend to focus on economic, technical, and political goals, one of their most powerful and often overlooked roles is that of fostering solidarity among members. This kind of support is not just a side benefit, as it can be essential in building trust, resilience, and long-term engagement within the organisation.

FOs bring people together around shared challenges and goals. While farmers often join an FO for practical reasons, to access services, markets, or representation, what keeps them involved is also something deeper: a sense of belonging. This feeling grows through participation, mutual exchange, and the recognition that every member's voice matters. Over time, these bonds often extend beyond purely transactional or professional relationships. Members begin to look out for one another, offering help in times of crisis and hardship, and joining forces in the face of external pressures. Especially in rural areas where formal support systems are weak, this informal network of solidarity can make a real difference in people's lives.

Being aware of social dynamics is all part of good governance. FOs that pay attention to these issues prove to their members that all contributions matter. Over time, this builds cohesion and strengthens the FO's capacity to act collectively. When members feel connected (to each other, to the leadership, to the mission) they are more likely to contribute actively, trust decisions, and remain committed even in difficult times. Creating an inclusive and supportive environment benefits not just individual members, but the organisation as a whole. Members who feel welcome

and respected are more likely to participate fully, whether in service-oriented activities, democratic processes, or public advocacy. Inclusive organisations are also better equipped to represent the diversity of farming realities within their membership, which in turn strengthens their legitimacy and reach.

Solidarity within an FO can be expressed in small but meaningful ways: checking in on members who are ill, coordinating help after a disaster, or simply creating room for social interaction at meetings. It may also take more formal forms, such as member-to-member mentoring, emotional support networks, or initiatives to include vulnerable or marginalised members more actively.

FOs have also shown their value in moments of crisis, such as during droughts, pandemics, or political instability. In such situations, it is often the FO that becomes the first point of contact for struggling farmers. FOs have mobilised food aid, helped members access emergency funding or relief programmes, and even supported mental wellbeing. These crisis responses may not be part of the FO's original mandate, but they reflect the strength of the relationships and trust that have been built over time. In fact, it is often in these moments of need, that FO's reputation as an anchor in the community is reinforced.

When managed well, the social support and solidarity within FOs can create a strong foundation for economic resilience, political participation, and organisational growth. Thus, even if it is not a core mandate, fostering solidarity should be considered a strategic function of farmers' organisations.



3

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

The third part of this book introduces the foundations of good governance in farmers' organisations: the principles, rules, structures, and practices that help an organisation function effectively, remain accountable to its members, and that enables it to build trust over time.

3.1 GOVERNANCE IN FARMERS' ORGANISATIONS

WHY GOVERNANCE MATTERS

Governance is one of the most important subjects in this handbook because it so often determines whether a farmers' organisation functions, struggles, or eventually fails. Many farmers' organisations have been weakened, paralysed, or even destroyed by governance problems. In that sense, poor governance is an organisation's greatest internal risk. Some of the oldest and strongest farmers' organisations have been crippled, not by a lack of purpose or members, but by weak structures, unclear rules, internal conflict, and poor leadership practice.

At its core, governance is about how decisions are made and exercised in an organised, accountable way. In a private business, a single owner may carry the risks and make decisions largely on his or her own. A member-based organisation is different. Here, those in leadership positions make decisions on behalf of others and are accountable to the membership. This makes governance both more demanding and more important. Decisions cannot simply depend on personalities or short-term interests. They must be guided by agreed rules, transparent procedures, and a clear understanding of the organisation's purpose.

Good governance matters because members need to know that their organisation is being

run in a way that protects and promotes their interests. It also matters because partners, donors, banks, public institutions, and other stakeholders need to know that the organisation is credible, predictable, and trustworthy. Poor governance rarely remains an internal matter. It damages relationships, weakens legitimacy, and can make cooperation difficult or impossible.

Governance is not only about control. It is also about continuity. Farmers' organisations often experience regular turnover in leadership, which makes governance training and institutional memory especially important. Just because someone has risen through the ranks or has been elected to office does not mean that they automatically understand governance. For this reason, investment in governance capacity building must be continuous. A strong farmers' organisation does not depend only on good people, but also on good systems that guide and support them.

PRINCIPLES OF GOOD GOVERNANCE

Governance is about running a farmers' organisation according to agreed rules and procedures. These rules are typically set out in the constitution, statutes, by-laws, and internal procedures of the organisation. They define how

decisions are made, who is responsible for what, how leaders are chosen and held to account, and how members participate in shaping the organisation. Good governance, then, is about doing the right thing according to transparent and accepted rules and avoiding actions that fall outside these rules.

Although governance structures differ from one organisation to another, and from one country to the next, a few broad principles should apply across the board. The first is **member orientation**. A farmers' organisation exists to serve its members. Whatever the organisation does, and whatever those engaged in it decide, should ultimately be tested against one basic question: does this benefit the members? Member orientation means listening to members, taking their needs seriously, and recognising that they are the true owners of the organisation. It also means maintaining regular contact with them and ensuring that the governance of the organisation does not become detached from the people it is meant to serve.

A second core principle is **democratic practice**. In member-based organisations, decisions should not rest in the hands of one person or a small self-appointed group. Members cannot govern the organisation directly on a daily basis, but they can elect representatives to do so on their behalf. This requires fair and trusted procedures for participation and elections. Elections should be facilitated in a way that all potential voters have a chance to participate. A committee in charge of elections, representing the different groups of membership, helps to ensure the integrity of the results. Elections should be free from pressure, open to all who meet the conditions set out in the statutes, and managed in a way that is transparent and credible. Where election processes are weak, conflict can easily arise, and the damage to the organisation can be long-lasting.

A third principle is **transparency and accountability**. Members and partners alike

need to be able to see how the organisation is run, how decisions are made, and how responsibilities are exercised. This includes regular meetings, proper reporting, sound financial management, and clear records. Accountability also means that office bearers (meaning the president, treasurer, and the secretary in a board) and representatives can be challenged, warned, or removed if they misuse their mandate or fail in their duties. Without accountability, democratic structures easily become hollow.

Good governance is also shaped **by culture, identity, and values**. Every organisation is rooted in a particular social and cultural setting. Large organisations may contain different regional, professional, or generational cultures within them. These differences can enrich the organisation, but they can also create tension if values and expectations are not openly acknowledged and managed. Shared identity and joint principles help the organisation remain cohesive, especially in times of crisis or change. For this reason, leaders and managers need to invest not only in structures and procedures but also in nurturing a shared sense of purpose and belonging.

In the end, good governance rests on a combination of principles and practice: clear structures, sound rules, regular meetings, planning, reporting, and financial discipline, all grounded in trust and member ownership. These building blocks are discussed in the sections that follow.

GOVERNING DOCUMENTS AND INTERNAL RULES

The basis of a rules-based organisation is its constitution, statutes, or both. The distinction between these documents is not always clear-cut. Some farmers' organisations work primarily with a constitution, others with

statutes, and some use both. The constitution is often the foundational document, while statutes, by-laws, or similar instruments provide further interpretation and detail. Together, these documents represent the mandatory, legally binding foundation of an organisation. They define its internal framework and make it possible for members, leaders, and staff to work together in a clear and predictable way.

These rules matter because members need to know that they can trust leaders and officials to protect and promote their interests, and to handle the organisation's assets and resources with care on their behalf. They also matter because partners, regulators, and the wider public need transparency and predictability in the way the organisation is run. It is difficult for a farmers' organisation to build legitimacy, attract support, or sustain trust if governance is weak or if its internal rules are unclear.

The structure and content of these documents are often influenced by the legal form of the farmers' organisation and by national law. In many countries, specific legislation exists for associations, cooperatives, or related forms of organisation. In West Africa, for example, member states of the Organisation for the Harmonisation of Business Law in Africa (OHADA) harmonised the cooperative legislation by domesticating the 2010 'Uniform Act on Cooperatives'. When setting up or revising a formal farmers' organisation, it is therefore important to consult the relevant laws and, where necessary, seek legal or technical advice. Having clarity at this stage helps to prevent internal conflict and regulatory problems further down the line.

In general, these internal governing documents operate at different levels. The most fundamental principles are set out in the **constitution or statutes**. These usually include the purpose and values of the organisation, membership rights, the composition and mandates of its organs, election procedures, decision-making rules, financial control

processes, accountability, conflict resolution, and, where relevant, the process for dissolution. Because these are the organisation's most important rules, they are usually more difficult to change and often require a decision of the general assembly.

A second layer consists of **by-laws or rules of procedure**. These build on the constitution and provide more detailed guidance on how the organisation functions. This may include questions such as who can become a member, who may sit on the board, how meetings are convened, how officers and representatives are expected to behave, what rules apply in cases of conflict, and how committees or advisory bodies are formed and used. These documents translate broad principles into workable procedures.

At a more operational level, organisations may also adopt **regulations and operating manuals** for specific areas of work. These can cover financial processes and bookkeeping, administrative procedures, competence profiles for key positions, salary structures, leave arrangements, travel rules, and related matters. Because these are closer to day-to-day practice, they can usually be adapted more easily as the organisation develops.

Even informal groups can benefit from following these principles. Even though they may not be legally required to have formal statutes, it is still useful to write down agreed rules, roles, and procedures for future reference. This can help prevent misunderstanding, especially when the group grows or begins to handle money, assets, or external partnerships.

The more operational a rule is, the easier it should be to adjust it when circumstances change. The more fundamental it is, the more stable it should remain. For this reason, it is important to think carefully about which aspects are best defined in the constitution or statutes, which are better dealt with in by-laws, and which are best described in operating manuals.

All these documents should be in writing, accessible, and regularly reviewed. Rules that are unknown, outdated, or unevenly applied do not strengthen governance. At the same time, rules only have real value if they are followed and monitored. Written rules must therefore be linked to documentation, reporting, and oversight, so that non-compliance can be identified early and addressed either by restoring compliance or, where justified, by revising the rules through a proper and transparent process.

Good governing documents are not merely formal requirements. They are practical tools that create predictability, protect the rights of members, and establish checks and balances against misuse of power. They also help ensure that, whatever support structures or staff may exist, the final authority remains with the farmers through the general assembly and their elected representatives.

ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES

Farmers' organisations work best when roles, responsibilities, and organisational structures are clearly defined. As soon as an organisation grows beyond a small informal group, the division of labour becomes both necessary and potentially difficult. Different people take on different tasks, decisions need to be coordinated, and information must flow between members, elected leaders, and staff. If roles are unclear, gaps, duplication, and tension are almost inevitable. Clear structures do not remove conflict, but they make it easier to know who is responsible for what, who takes decisions, and how accountability should work.

In most member-based farmers' organisations, the basic structure is relatively simple. The general assembly is the highest organ because the members are the ultimate owners of the organisation. The assembly elects the board

and delegates a mostly legally defined set of powers to this board. These mainly revolve around the provision of strategic direction and oversight but may also include managerial duties. Where resources allow, the organisation employs a secretariat, management, and staff, to handle day-to-day operations. Around these core structures, there may also be committees, working groups, or advisory bodies that support the work of the organisation in more specialised areas.

The FO can be thought of as a system of interconnected functions. Key decisions and strategic directions are set at the highest policy level, oversight is exercised by elected representatives, daily operations are coordinated through management and staff, and support functions keep the organisation running in the background. Communication with members and with the outside world ensures that the organisation remains responsive and relevant. Every part has its role, but none can work well in isolation.

The general assembly

A central place in the internal framework is occupied by the general assembly (GA) as it is the highest decision-making statutory body, and representative of the organisation. It is here that members have the final say on major rules and policies, elect their representatives, and review the performance of the organisation based on reports and audits. It is the forum through which member ownership is expressed and governance is renewed. The general assembly is an institution, not just a meeting!

In most farmers' organisations, the general assembly is legally required to convene annually (ordinary general assembly) and fulfil its core governance functions. If need be, there may be extraordinary GA gatherings during the year. Whether elections are held in every GA or just in certain years is laid out in the governing documents.

All members must have access to the general assembly. In organisations that are made up of lower-level organisations, each member organisation is usually represented through a defined number of delegates. The right to vote is often linked to statutory conditions, including the payment of membership fees.

In practice, the ordinary general assembly is often held under the term annual general meetings (AGM). The AGM often includes two components. One component, the GA, covers internal matters, such as policies, elections, reports, and accountability, and is accessible only to members. Another component benefits from the presence of a large number of members, but is more outward-looking. It includes invited speakers, panel discussions, and information sessions relevant to farming businesses. This section may also be open to partners of the organisation.

Each general assembly needs an appropriate advance notice as defined in the statutes and a clear agenda.

Typical responsibilities of the ordinary general assembly include:

- Receiving the board's report on the preceding year, including key developments and an outlook for the coming year.
- Receiving and approving the audited financial statements and auditor's report.
- Approving the work of the board.
- Approving the financial plan or budget for the upcoming period.
- Electing board members and, where applicable, internal auditors or other oversight bodies.
- Adopting or amending the constitution, by-laws, and other key governance instruments.

Although such meetings may appear routine, their decisions have actual legal and organisational consequences. For this reason, the proceedings and decisions of the general assembly must be carefully documented as part of the organisation's formal records.

The board

Below the general assembly sits the board, which is responsible for leadership, oversight, and strategic direction between assemblies. The board, sometimes referred to as 'the board of directors' or 'board of governors', does not replace the members but acts on their behalf and within the mandate or delegated powers that they have been granted. The board is therefore accountable both upwards to the members and, where relevant, downwards to the structures or staff it supervises.

As member-based organisations, farmers' organisations usually elect this body through the general assembly. In smaller organisations and at primary level, board members are often elected directly in a free and secret vote. In larger or more complex organisations, elections may take place through an electoral college, whereby regional or lower-level representatives elect the next level of leadership.

The board's mandate is defined by law and the organisation's governing documents. These documents should clearly state the delegation of powers. They outline which decisions may be taken by management, which decisions require board approval, and which decisions must be referred to the general assembly. The size of a board varies, but in most countries a minimum of 3 is dictated by the office-bearer functions (president, treasurer, secretary), while very large boards are avoided, as they can be costly and slow. It is recommended to choose an uneven number of members, as the voting on decisions may be smoother. Many organisations try to balance representation with efficiency. One way of doing so is to create an executive board (or executive committee): a small, empowered

subset of the larger board of directors tasked with managing key decision-making and operational oversight between regular board meetings. Its duties may include:

- **Chairperson or president:** sets the agenda and chairs meetings.
- **Treasurer:** oversees finances.
- **Secretary:** manages the operations of the organisation, handles documentation and communication. Where a CEO or general manager is hired to lead the organisation, most of the secretary's functions are delegated.
- In addition, many boards have a vice-chairperson or vice-president who acts as substitute for the chair in their absence.

Some organisations also assign additional responsibilities to the board, such as communication, advocacy, managing members, or liaising with umbrella structures. Larger boards may include regional representatives, representatives of target groups such as women or young people, and representatives of specific subsectors or commodity groups. In some cases, external experts may be invited

to board discussions in an advisory capacity, though they usually have no voting rights.

Board terms should strike a balance between continuity and renewal. Two to three-year terms are common and often work well. Very short terms may undermine continuity and institutional memory, while very long terms can entrench individuals. Re-election is often permitted once or even twice, depending on the total number of years this results in. Note that continuity is key to a well-working board. It is therefore recommended that board terms be staggered, ensuring that no more than one-third of the directors are up for election or re-election in any given year.

The smooth transition between outgoing and incoming board members, as well as the transition between office bearers is particularly important. Some FOs choose modalities for outgoing office bearers to coach the new ones, while newly elected board members may shadow some more experienced board members.

Work as a board member incurs costs, particularly for travel, meetings, and related expenses. These should be handled transparently. Holding a board position should not constitute a source of income.

The complex composition of a national board – the FNSEA in France

FNSEA, the *Fédération nationale des syndicats d'exploitants agricoles*, is the national apex organisation of the French agriculture sector. It represents over 212,000 farmers who are organised into 22 regional and 95 departmental federations and unions and 31 specialised associations covering specific sectors; and 21,000 farmers organised into 4 social sections (women farmers, landowners, dairy farmers, and former farmers). The 'Jeunes Agriculteurs' is the young farmers' organisation belonging to FNSEA.

The extended board, the *conseil d'administration* has 68 members, who are elected members representing the different types of members.

- 43 representatives of the regional and local structures
- 11 representatives of the sectoral organisations
- 10 representatives of the social sections
- 4 representatives of the young farmers

Reimbursements are merely there to cover genuine expenses. Where external funding supports board operations, written travel and per diem rules are usually required to help protect the organisation's credibility.

The secretariat, staff, and daily operations

If the organisation can afford it, it may employ staff to handle its daily business. The transition from being run by the board to becoming an organisation whose operations are managed by a secretariat is challenging. It often starts with an accountant being hired, followed by a manager, and then additional team members. The secretariat takes care of administration, communication, service delivery, finance, event and meeting coordination, and the implementation of decisions taken by the board and general assembly. The clearer the delegation of powers, and thus the distinction between the board's governance role and the secretariat's operational role, the more effectively the organisation usually becomes. In practice, however, this distinction is not always observed perfectly, particularly in smaller organisations where elected leaders also carry out operational tasks. Nevertheless, it remains an important principle: the board governs and oversees, while management and staff implement and manage daily operations.

Committees, working groups, and advisory bodies

Many farming organisations establish supporting structures to strengthen governance and improve decision-making processes. These may include committees, working groups, internal audit bodies, advisory committees, or scientific councils. Their purpose is not to replace the board or general assembly, but rather to provide specialised input, carry out specific tasks or offer an additional layer of scrutiny. As with the organisation's main governing bodies, rules are needed for these supporting structures. Who can serve on them? How are they elected, selected, and appointed? What exactly is their mandate? How do they report, and to whom? Can members of such bodies be removed, and if so, under what circumstances and by what means? These matters should be defined in the rules of procedure to avoid confusion and conflict further down the line.

Roles within the wider FO system

Farmers' organisations do not operate in isolation. They form part of a wider system of FOs that may include informal groups, local associations, cooperatives, unions, federations, and international umbrella (or apex) organisations. While this system is highly diverse, it also offers great opportunities for cooperation and synergy.

A selection of this extended board constitutes the bureau or executive board, which takes care of daily business. The bureau consists of

- the president, the first and the second vice-president
- the treasurer
- 5 more vice-presidents
- 12 members

From the employed management staff, the secretary general and three deputy secretaries are also part of the bureau.

Source:

🔗 <https://www.fnsea.fr/>

🔗 <https://www.horizons-journal.fr/>

lequipe-dirigeante-de-la-fnsea-renouvelee

However, organisations may also compete with one another for members, visibility, or influence. This makes clarifying roles important not only within organisations, but also between them. For example, who is best placed to speak on general national policy issues? Which organisation should engage with commodity-specific matters? At what level of the FO system should local infrastructure be dealt with? And at what level should continental matters be addressed?

Having clear answers to these questions helps to avoid duplication, rivalry, and wasted resources. In a robust FO system, organisations define their roles in relation to one another and collaborate where it adds value for their members. In this sense, good governance is not only internal. It also involves understanding where an organisation sits within the broader landscape and how it can contribute most effectively to the collective strength of organised farmers.

MEETINGS, RECORDING, AND REPORTING

Good governance depends not only on having the right rules and structures, but also on meeting regularly, recording decisions properly, and reporting on what has been done. While these three functions are closely linked, they are not the same. Meetings are where decisions are made and oversight is exercised. Recording ensures that these decisions and discussions are documented and preserved. Reporting uses this information to track progress, support accountability, and inform future action.

Meetings

After clear organisational structures, regular meetings are one of the most important elements of good governance. Meetings are where decisions are made, progress is reviewed, representation takes place and oversight is exercised. Meetings can be general assemblies, board meetings, committee meetings,

Role definition between FOs

The national FO platform of Burkina Faso, the Confédération Paysanne de Faso (CPF), is the biggest umbrella organisation of FOs and their farmer members in the country. 15 national sector and special group organisations belong to the CPF, from the banana producer FO to one for rural women. The Union Nationale des Producteurs de Riz du Burkina (UNPRB, for rice producers) participates in the national platform as well.

With their annual fees, the members contribute to the financial stability of the CPF. Additionally, they provide information about the economic and political development of their sub-sector to the platform, so that CPF can aggregate this and use it for its lobbying and advocacy work. The UNPRB, for example, has realised surveys among its members to substantiate its demands towards politics. Jointly with the CPF, they have

lobbied for the inclusion of the rice farmers in the national procurement processes.

The CPF supports its members and their farmers in various ways through its service centre. A storage facility allows farmers to bring their goods to the attractive markets in the capital, and to sell and ship them through the CPF online shop. Support is also given to the member-FOs of the CPF through finance and accounting consultancy, including audits carried out by internal experts, in order to secure the correct financial management of the national sector FOs.

Source:
CPF & UNPRB

management meetings, or meetings between different levels of the organisation.

Meetings provide a platform for members and affiliates to be represented and have their voices heard. In this sense, meetings are not merely administrative necessities. They also form part of how member ownership is exercised in practice. For example, a local association may be represented at district level, while a district structure may be represented at provincial level. In each case, meetings establish the link between representation and accountability.

For meetings to contribute to good governance, they must be more than just formal routines. Difficult questions must be asked, and leaders should not shy away from them. Good governance requires openness to scrutiny and a willingness to provide clear answers on behalf of the organisation. This is how an organisation becomes accountable for its internal decisions and for how it represents its members to the outside world.

Regularity matters, because if meetings are too infrequent, oversight weakens and decisions lose momentum. If meetings are too frequent or poorly prepared, they can consume time without adding much value. What matters is that meetings are focused, properly convened, and linked to clear outputs, responsibilities, and follow-up.

Meetings benefit from good moderation. Where difficult conversations are held and challenging decisions are required, experienced moderators using appropriate methods and tools can come in handy to ensure everyone is and feels heard, potential conflicts are managed, and decisions are taken in a transparent and just manner.

Recording

Once decisions have been taken, they need to be recorded. Administration has the important task of keeping records. This includes minutes of meetings, financial records, contracts, strategic plans, interactions with external stakeholders,

and member data. In a well-run organisation, these records form the organisation's institutional memory. They make it possible to trace decisions, understand why they were taken, and return to the original wording or intent when disagreements arise.

Human memory is selective and often unreliable. For this reason, written records are essential. At the same time, record keeping should remain practical. The challenge is to keep documentation clear and concise without leaving out important points. It is equally important to store documents in a way that allows them to be found again easily. A sensible filing and archiving system, whether paper-based or digital, saves time and reduces confusion.

Typical categories of records include:

- Governing documents such as the constitution, by-laws, and rules of procedure.
- Minutes of meetings, including general assemblies, board meetings, committee meetings, and relevant meetings with members or external stakeholders.
- Strategic and operational documents, such as vision, mission statements, strategic plans, annual work plans, and budgets.
- Contracts, including staff contracts and agreements with external partners.
- Progress records and implementation notes.
- Financial documents, including bookkeeping records, balance sheets, profit and loss statements, and audit reports.
- Member data and related membership records.
- Records required for quality assurance, standards, or certification processes, where applicable.

A key responsibility of administration is also the management of member data and member services. This can easily become a heavy burden for farmers' organisations, especially as they grow. In addition, there is often substantial administrative work linked to communication, for example disseminating information about plans and activities, maintaining the organisation's website or communication platforms, and supporting communication with members and the wider public.

Reporting

Recording information is not the same as reporting. Recording involves documenting and storing what happened. Reporting builds on this by using the information to monitor progress, account for actions taken and inform future decisions. In other words, reports transform records into accountability and learning.

Reporting is required at various levels: while minutes confirm what was agreed, progress reports demonstrate what has actually been implemented and to what effect. Financial statements demonstrate how resources were utilised. Reports to members, the board or external partners explain what has been achieved, where problems have arisen and what needs to happen next.

Many organisations hold numerous meetings and produce lots of records but then fail to follow up on whether the decisions made have been implemented. This is a common weakness. Good governance requires not only the documentation of decisions, but also the reporting of progress, the identification of delays or deviations, and the questioning of why these occurred.

For this reason, it is helpful to define clear indicators and reference points for plans and decisions, whether they are strategic, operational, or financial. These do not need to be overly complicated, but they should enable the organisation to assess its progress. Indicators can also support communication by providing

factual information on progress, challenges, and results. Ideally, the system should provide useful oversight without becoming so burdensome that it distracts from the organisation's real work.

Financial reporting deserves special attention within the broader field of reporting. Financial management is one of the areas in which governance failures can cause the most damage. For this reason, leaders should never treat financial oversight as a purely technical matter to be left entirely to others. While good leaders may not be accountants, they still are responsible for ensuring that reliable systems are in place and that they receive the necessary information to exercise oversight.

In this regard, the treasurer plays a very important role, as he or she is mandated to oversee the financial processes and to ensure that rules are followed. The organisation's procedures should clearly state who is authorised to make which financial decisions and payments, and how these individuals are held accountable. Both internal and external auditors have a role to play, and their findings should be taken seriously (see chapter on financial management).

ACCOUNTABILITY, OVERSIGHT, AND DISCIPLINE

Good governance depends not only on clear roles and good intentions, but also on accountability. Those who hold office or carry responsibility in a farmers' organisation must be answerable for how they use their mandate, how they manage resources, and whether they act in line with the organisation's rules and interests. Accountability is what connects authority to responsibility. Without it, trust weakens and governance structures easily become hollow.

At the most basic level, accountability begins with the members. In a member-based organisation, leaders and office bearers do not

govern in their own right. They do so on behalf of the membership and within the framework set by the organisation's constitution, statutes, and decisions of the general assembly. This means they must be able to explain what they did, why they did it, and with what results. Reporting, meetings, and elections are all part of this chain of accountability.

Oversight supports accountability. It ensures that decisions are not only taken, but also reviewed, questioned, and, where necessary, corrected. Oversight takes different forms. The general assembly exercises oversight over the board. The board, in turn, oversees management and staff. Internal committees or specific office bearers, such as the treasurer, may have additional oversight responsibilities in areas such as finance, auditing, or compliance. External auditors can add another layer of control and help ensure that the organisation complies with legal and financial standards and reaches the goals it has set out for itself.

Supporting structures can strengthen oversight if they are properly defined and used. These may include internal audit bodies, boards of auditors, legal or scientific advisory committees, or other working groups with a clear mandate. Such bodies can help the organisation ask difficult questions, identify risks early, and improve decision-making quality. However, they only contribute positively if their role is clear, they report to the correct organ and there is no conflict of interests.

Discipline is the other side of accountability. A farmers' organisation needs fair and transparent procedures for dealing with misconduct, negligence, abuse of power, or repeated failure to fulfil agreed responsibilities. This should not be left to improvisation or end in personal conflict. The rules should define what kinds of conduct are unacceptable, what procedures apply when concerns are raised, who has the authority to investigate or act, and how warnings, suspension, dismissal, or

replacement are handled. These procedures should protect both the organisation and the individual concerned by ensuring that action is taken according to rules rather than personal preference. This is particularly important in elected structures. Representatives who misuse their office or consistently neglect their duties should not remain in their positions until the next election. At the same time, removal or disciplinary action should never become a tool for power struggles or personal revenge. Good disciplinary procedures therefore need to combine firmness with fairness, and clarity with due process.

In practice, accountability and discipline are often tested when an organisation is under pressure, for example during financial difficulty, internal conflict, or leadership transition. This is when strong governance foundations matter most. If the rules are known, if oversight structures work, and if people trust that concerns will be handled fairly, the organisation is much more likely to withstand pressure and emerge stronger.

Responsibility and capacity

Accountability also depends on ensuring that responsibility is matched with capacity. In a farmers' organisation, responsibility does not lie solely with the chairperson, the board, or the management team. Staff and ordinary members may be assigned roles in committees, working groups, service delivery, or representation, for which they are responsible. While many responsibilities are explicitly defined in the statutes and rules, further roles often emerge as the organisation develops and new activities arise.

Those who elect or appoint someone to a role should have confidence in their ability to fulfil it. This is particularly important in leadership roles and in any position involving authority over assets, decisions, or funds. Clear role descriptions help to prevent governance problems. A realistic assessment of skills and integrity is equally important. Newly elected board members and

newly recruited management and staff may also need to be trained for their particular position. Do not take for granted that a newly elected person has all prerequisite skills and experiences to fulfil his or her duties. An introduction to the function as well as some introductory training units ranging from attitude, technical and leadership skills, to communication should be standard practice.

One practical safeguard is to define decision-making authority in a structured way. There is nothing wrong with limiting power. These limits can be built into internal rules so that routine decisions can be made efficiently while larger or higher-risk decisions require approval

at the appropriate level. For instance, financial spending-powers can be delegated to staff within agreed limits. Larger expenditures may require management sign-off and, beyond a certain level, board approval. This approach helps to manage risk and maintain oversight while avoiding micromanagement of minor decisions.

Where there is concern that a role may be misused, stronger reporting and closer follow-up can mitigate risk and enable early corrective action. Ultimately, however, the most effective protection is to appoint the right people, define mandates clearly and ensure that accountability systems are consistently applied.

3.2 LEADERSHIP

GENERAL REFLECTIONS

Essentially, farmers are decision-makers and leaders on their own land. They face very high risks and must navigate their businesses through the forces of nature, the market, the economy, consumer demands, and trends. Consequently, they have high expectations of the leaders in their FO, and do not tolerate someone who is all style and no substance. As experienced practitioners, farmers expect their leaders to act and lead by example.

Leaders need to have visionary and strategic thinking. The capacity to invest in the pursuit of a long-term goal runs parallel to the willingness to tackle adversity and take difficult decisions. Stagnation happens when leadership becomes merely filling a position. Some may see leadership as a position associated with prestige and profile rather than being a service, a sacrifice, or a calling. This is wrong

and will not lead to a successful organisation. Leadership is an action! This includes the consultation of people and data, the wisdom to select, interpret, and use it wisely. Leading an FO means searching for preferred outcomes, establishing clear goals (that may not always be apparent to the constituency), presenting these goals as a vision, creating a plan to achieve them, and motivating the constituency to follow the leader in pursuing the vision. That is what leadership is about: aspiring to make a difference. In other words: The key to great leadership lies not in the role, but in the goal.

Leadership is an art, but also a craft. Some key characteristics of an excellent leader may be something one is born with. In many regions, leadership is trained from young age in traditional institutions, sports teams, scouts, or in other activities. Parenting or growing up in a large family, serve as informal leadership training. However, many aspects of leadership

are taught and can be trained. The most dominant or expressive person may not be the best leader, while hidden talents, with coaching or training, can grow into sound leaders. For any individual wishing to be a good leader, and for any farmers' organisation wanting to be led by competent people, leadership training is advised.

Leaders not only lead others. They also lead themselves. Emotional stability and resilience help to navigate difficult periods. The best leaders can never be everybody's friend. They cannot be popular with everyone because they are someone's leader. There is no such thing as a good leader who leads from the heart only; intelligent leadership also comes from the mind. Sound leadership is an act of the will rather than an emotional response. Such a leader cannot have thin skin. There will always be criticism and murmurs of discontent amongst the constituency and elsewhere. No leaders reach their destination without facing criticism. If they are constantly tripped up by it, they should recognise that there might be someone better suited to the role.

What distinguishes excellent leaders from great ones is the ability to guide their constituents into uncharted territory of risk and uncertainty when it is the only way to navigate dark patches. Leading a constituency beyond its comfort zone is the challenge of the exceptional leader. This is the Moses prototype: a leader who knows where they are going and can inspire their people to follow into uncharted territory, even if success is not guaranteed.

A wise leader surrounds themselves with other leaders. This ensures continuity. It is an investment in the future of an organisation that goes beyond the prestige of one position. Every leader owes it to their organisation to ensure there is a strong leader ready to succeed them, guaranteeing the organisation's future.

MANDATE, JUDGEMENT, AND COMMUNICATION

There are two drivers for leaders to guide their action. The first is the **mandate**. It describes the formal authority conferred to a leader by the members and gives the leader the trust and power to act. The mandate delineates the scope of the leadership and is based on the values and governing documents of the organisation. Just as this mandate is granted, so can it be withdrawn. If leaders go beyond the mandate, if they act outside of the constitution or agreed principles, they should be questioned by the members, and risk being replaced. An unmandated leader is dangerous to any organisation and to the interests and values of the members.

The second driver is **judgement**. No leader is guided by the mandate only. It will provide a framework and broad guidance. But decision-making, particularly in difficult situations, is an art that asks for something more: judgement. New dynamics, shocks, and emerging trends sometimes force decisions that were not anticipated. In such moments, sound leadership requires principled judgement: understanding whose interests are involved, identifying the underlying needs, values, and constraints, weighing options, and choosing a direction that remains consistent with the organisation's purpose.

Leadership is **communication**. Leaders must also be able to communicate well – both internally (to people inside the organisation), and externally (to people outside of it). As mentioned, leadership can be understood as a service to the members, and as such the skill of active listening to the constituency is key. The farmers must trust that leaders have heard and understood their plight, and that decisions are being made to improve their situation. This also implies that leaders have to be skilled communicators vis-a-vis their constituency to convey and explain decisions: not only what

was decided, but why. This is essential in a member-based organisation, where legitimacy is continuously renewed through member engagement.

LEADERSHIP STYLES, LEADING TEAMS, AND BUILDING ALLIES

Leadership is not about domination, but a service to the members of an organisation. Having said that, **leadership styles** vary greatly. Some leaders decide alone; some consult in smaller or wider circles; others use participatory approaches where the team bears significant responsibility for decision-making; and then there are those who use even more inclusive approaches of co-creation and power sharing. Leadership style depends on organisational culture, the people involved, and the specific situation. The leadership approach must fit the organisation and its people, it must protect legitimacy and produce results.

In general, participatory processes may take longer, but they often generate stronger ownership of outcomes. At the same time, leadership sometimes requires firm direction, especially in crises. The key is that whatever style is used, it remains anchored in mandate, transparency, and accountability.

There are examples where large farmers movements have been led by leaders with a military background. The advantage may have been in their trained ability for strategically scanning the environment, evaluating the area, and opposing positions, balancing forces and capabilities, mobilising people, and implementing under pressure. Others were led by people with a great political skillset, performing as excellent negotiators and tacticians. Yet other farmers' organisations have chosen female leaders with excellent communication skills mitigating tensions and finding common ground in times of crisis.

Whatever the choice of a leader and leadership style, it is important to remember that the membership of a farmers' organisation is voluntary and often difficult to recruit and maintain. Farmers' organisations and their leaders experience bottom-up pressure, which in military-style organisations are absent. Top-down command systems rarely work with member-based organisation. Being a farmers' leader is an action, not a position.

Leadership can be a shared task, a team effort.

A leadership team can improve the quality of decision-making through more resources, engagement, and knowledge. The clearer the roles and responsibilities within the leadership group, the easier it is to lead and the less conflict is caused by potentially overlapping mandates. One of the biggest tasks of a leader is to bring the right people together and facilitate purposeful exchange. This includes making deliberate choices about the balance in a leadership team: analytical and innovative people; thinkers and doers; internal and external perspectives; and people affected by decisions alongside people with technical expertise. From there, leadership requires an agreed path, a realistic timeline, and clear milestones, with regular review and adjustment where needed.

A strong leader needs allies. This is not about avoiding disagreement; it is about building enough trust and working relationships that differences can be handled constructively and the organisation remains cohesive when external pressure rises.

SUCCESSION AND KNOWING WHEN TO LEAVE

Every leader has a limited shelf life. Every leadership position has an expiry date. Besides respecting the terms assigned to the position in the governing documents, an excellent leader knows when to step down. That moment comes sooner rather than later. An excellent leader

should leave while people think they could have stayed a little longer, rather than staying on when people think they should have left by now.

History is unforgiving. People remember last impressions. Once a leader has left, there should be no turning back. Do not lead from the grave. A truly great leader can pass the baton to their successor and offer advice when needed but allows the successor to lead. Leaders can reinvent themselves and use their hard-gained experience and good reputation to contribute elsewhere. There will always be a demand for proper leadership. Great leaders cannot be kept down; they will lead when time and circumstances call for it.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Leadership is not the same as management. Leadership is about direction, judgement, and mobilisation: leading others towards a future goal. Management is about systems and skills: organising people, finances, operations, and delivery. A good manager does not always have to be a strong leader, although it helps. Equally, a strong leader may not possess every management skill, although these skills strengthen leadership. In practice, farmers'

organisations need both. Leadership provides vision and momentum; management turns decisions into day-to-day delivery. Where the distinction is unclear, organisations may either become energetic but ineffective, or technically competent but disconnected from members.

There are historic and cultural differences in what is understood and acceptable in leadership and management. Broadly speaking, in some spheres, the elected farmer leaders are the sole representatives of the organization to the outside world. Only board members will be invited to political or technical fora to represent the FO and raise critical topics, while the manager merely executes without representative or expert function. In other spheres, it is acceptable and daily practice for the manager of an FO to speak on behalf of the organisation as an expert and representative. It is for every organisation to decide, which powers to delegate to which role and function.

The next chapter therefore focuses on practical management, examining how farmers' organisations plan and organise work, manage people and information, and maintain the operational discipline required to deliver on member priorities.

3.3 MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

VISION, MISSION, AND STRATEGIC DIRECTION

Farmers' organisations need more than good intentions. Only when members, leaders, and staff share a clear understanding of joint goals is the energy generated to move in the same direction. In practice, this means moving from a long-term vision to a practical strategy and an operational plan. Strategy also forces choices: it often means saying 'no' to attractive options so that effort is not spread too thin. Vision, mission, and strategy serve different purposes and work best when they are kept simple and used as reference points in daily decisions.

Vision: the desired future

The vision describes the desired future state: what success looks like when the organisation has achieved its main goals. It should be ambitious enough to inspire, but clear enough that members can recognise it and commit their time and resources. A good vision provides direction for members, leaders, and staff, and helps external stakeholders understand what the organisation is working towards. A useful way to test a vision is to ask whether members can genuinely sign up to it and whether it speaks to the farmers the organisation aims to serve.

Mission: why the organisation exists

The mission gives purpose and anchors the organisation in its values and attitudes. It describes why the organisation exists, who it serves, and how it intends to act. In many organisations, fundamental principles

are already stated in the statutes or other governing documents. The mission should stay aligned with those principles.

Examples of FO vision and mission statements

Central Valley Ag (Cooperative from Nebraska, USA)

- Vision: to be a world-class cooperative ensuring the long-term success of our employees and customers.
- Mission: embracing the cooperative spirit to deliver value to our members.

CACVRA (Cooperativa Agraria Cafetalera Valle Río Apurímac Ltda, Peru)

- Vision: to be a recognised exporting cooperative within the national and international market, in the field of organic and fair-trade cocoa and coffee, and to always be at the forefront of environmental conservation.
- Mission: we are a cooperative producing and exporting organic and sustainable cocoa, which adapts to the needs of buyers, with our organisation being in a constant state of innovation.

Source:

🔗 <https://www.cvacoop.com/about>

🔗 <https://www.cacvra.com/nosotros/>

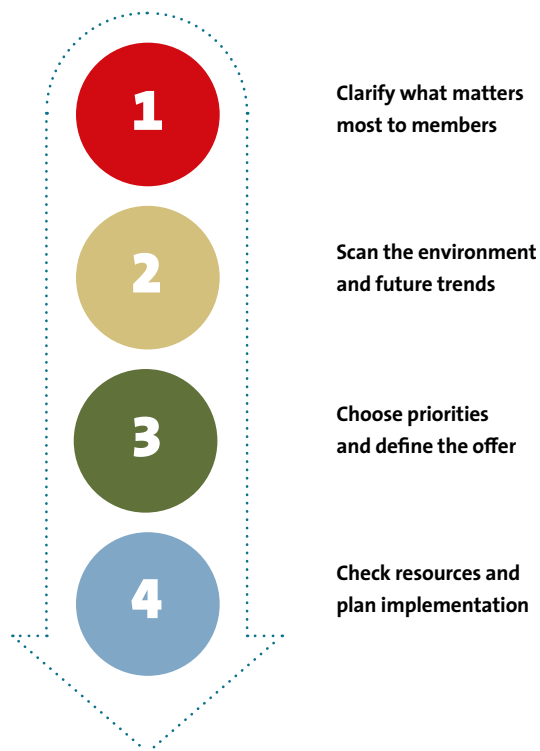
Strategy: the chosen path

Vision and mission provide direction, but they do not determine day-to-day choices.

The strategy is the document that selects one pathway and translates broad ambition into priorities along a time-line and for a defined period. Many organisations work with a three to five-year strategy, which can be revisited as circumstances change.

Strategy development is challenging because it requires deliberate selection. There are usually many possible routes to the vision. The organisation cannot pursue all of them at once. If different groups walk in different directions, even with good intentions, energy is lost and the organisation may fail to deliver. This is why it is essential that the agreed strategy is understood across the organisation and followed consistently.

Developing a strategy in a practical way does not need to be complicated, but it does need to be grounded in reality and based on member needs. A practical approach includes four steps:



1 Clarify what matters most to members

Member input is the starting point. Needs may differ by region, commodity, or farm size, and not every need can be addressed at once. The strategy should focus on what is most important and most feasible.

2 Scan the environment and future trends

The strategy should reflect the context in which members farm: market developments, policy trends, climate risks, changing consumer expectations, competing service providers, and the positions and interests of other stakeholders.

3 Choose priorities and define the offer

Based on the vision and mission, the organisation selects the services, products, or roles it will prioritise. This includes choices about quality, delivery channels, and who the target group is. It also requires a clear view of what the organisation will not do at this stage.

4 Check resources and plan implementation

For the strategy to work, it must match capacity. This includes people and skills, access to knowledge and infrastructure, and time and finances. If resources are limited, targets should be small and realistic. A realistic strategy that can be implemented is more effective than an ambitious strategy that remains on paper.

Strategy is also closely connected to the organisation's business model and funding approach (see sections below). Changes in one often require changes in the other. Where resources do not suffice, organisations may look for external support, which increases the importance of financial discipline and clear

decision-making so that the organisation remains focused on member priorities.

To keep the strategy practical and implementable, it helps to test it against a short set of questions before it is adopted and communicated.

After priorities are agreed, they need to be translated into an **operational plan**: concrete steps, responsibilities, timelines, and costs. Plans should be specific enough to guide implementation, but flexible enough to adjust as reality changes. A useful operational plan typically clarifies: the key activities for the next twelve months; who leads each activity and who supports activities; timing and sequencing; resources and budget required; milestones for board and member oversight.

BUSINESS MODELS OF FARMERS' ORGANISATIONS

A **business model** is the overall concept that helps a farmers' organisation secure financial stability and independence in the interest of its members. It brings together the key elements that shape the organisation's 'economic engine': what the organisation offers, who it serves, how activities are delivered, what resources are required, what costs arise, and how income is generated to cover those costs. A good business model remains realistic and can adapt to changes in the external environment and to new strategic directions.

The distinction between profit-oriented and non-profit-oriented farmers' organisations influences the business model, but all member-based organisations, regardless of legal format, face the same basic task: covering costs reliably while staying focused on member priorities.

The business model explains, in words (and ideally in a simple visual), how the organisation intends to work sustainably. It clarifies the main income streams and cost drivers, the resources required (people, systems, facilities, vehicles,

IT), the partnerships needed, and the practical assumptions that must hold true for the organisation to remain viable.

Some services are expected by members for free, but they still produce costs. Those costs must be covered through other income sources. Where affordability differs across member groups, it can be better to use targeted discounts rather than lowering prices for everyone.

The business model should also take management capacity seriously. Introducing and running services requires time and competence. If management is overloaded with activities that do not generate benefits for members, overall performance suffers. A realistic business model therefore considers not only what the organisation wants to do, but what it can deliver well.

Business model development is usually iterative and works best when decision-makers share a common picture of how the organisation will remain sustainable. Visualising the interdependencies often helps.

In practice, member-based organisations operate based on several business dimensions:

1. The **member-business** (governance and member functions): membership is the backbone of the organisation, but it does not come for free. Even the most basic member-based organisation must run statutory and governance functions (a general assembly, board, elections), manage members, communicate, and, where relevant, represent members through lobbying and advocacy. Members contribute through membership fees (often in associations) or shares (often in cooperatives) and expect benefits in return. In most cases, these contributions are far from able to cover the costs of the basic functions of an FO.

2. The **product and service business** (income-generating activities): to remain financially stable, many organisations develop income-generating activities such as input procurement, marketing, storage, processing, training, advisory services, information services, or other fee-based services. In cooperatives, this is often the core and starting point of activity. In associations, the provision of paid services is not always established. It may however be crucial to finance representation and advocacy work and to strengthen independence.

These dimensions reinforce each other where both are in place. A strong membership base increases both volume and trust. The more members that buy inputs through the organisation or market produce collectively, the stronger the bargaining position becomes, as does the potential to generate a margin. This margin can then be used to strengthen the organisation's core membership functions, for instance by financing staff, improving services, or building reserves. The same logic applies to associations: a larger, engaged membership base makes services more viable and justifies membership fees, while visible and tangible benefits increases the association's attractiveness for (potential) members.

However, not every farmers' organisation develops a service and trading dimension. Some organisations remain focused on representation and coordination, funding their work primarily through membership contributions.

3. Sometimes organisations supplement membership fees and service-based income with project funding. **Donor-funded projects** may help to retain staff and pay for overheads. But, given the live-cycle of a project – which often ends after 3–5 years – the funding is much more volatile, creating a risk for the sustainability of the organisation.

For more on business models and sustainable financing see also 'Financing farmers' organisations'.

The business plan, a reality check for sustainable income generation

A **business plan** is a time-bound plan and calculation for a defined period (often one year) or for a specific activity (a service, an investment, a project). It estimates costs and revenues and shows whether the activity is affordable and how it will be financed. Any development, project, or service in an FO should be backed up by a business plan. This ensures that ideas are feasible and energies are not invested in dead-end projects.

The project or service-related business plan does not substitute the yearly financial plan and budget for approval through the governance structures mentioned in an earlier chapter.

MANAGING MEMBERS

Farmers' organisations are member-based organisations, therefore their reason for existence is to serve members' interests, and the strength of the membership base has a fundamental effect on what the organisation can achieve. In general terms, a larger and more active membership enables stronger bargaining power, better economies of scale, a wider range of services, and greater legitimacy in policy engagement. Members also form a resource in their own right: they bring energy, expertise, and leadership into the organisation.

At the same time, members do not simply 'exist'. They need to be gained through reputation and outreach and retained through effective and visible value. Membership management thus deserves continuous attention from leaders and management. Larger organisations often have membership departments, and some assign a specific board member to keep an eye on member expectations and their fulfilment.

Getting new members

Getting new members is as important as retaining existing members. The strongest driver of membership growth is a clear record of benefits: when farmers see that the organisation delivers, visibility and word of mouth become the most cost-effective recruitment channels. Member acquisition is easier when three conditions are in place:

- Reputation and trust: a credible organisation with a clear voice, good governance, and visible results attracts members.
- An affordable and fair offer: membership fees and service costs need to be realistic, and the use of funds should be careful and transparent.
- A clear value proposition: potential members need to understand, in simple terms, what they gain by joining.

New organisations often rely on the reputation of initiators and early leaders because benefits may not yet be proven. In such cases, the cause that triggered the formation of the organisation can be the binding element that mobilises early membership.

Practical channels for recruitment include local media, information stands, public meetings, guest invitations to selected events, and targeted outreach where farmers already gather (markets, community meetings, faith-based gatherings). But the most effective channel is often the satisfied members speaking to neighbours and friends. Farmers like to learn from farmers. So, existing members that can link the benefits of their own membership directly to the other farmer's situation and needs are the best advertisement.

Where marketing materials are used, they should be built around a small number of clear messages that everyone in the organisation can repeat consistently. A professional first

impression matters, including correct contact details and a clean intake process.

Member recruitment does not end when someone agrees to join. The first steps after sign-up can shape long-term engagement. A simple intake process typically includes:

- A standardised application form with the necessary data fields.
- Prompt entry into the membership register and a welcome message.
- Clear and simple payment procedures for the first fee or contribution.
- An invitation to the next relevant meeting or activity.
- Ongoing communication so that new members quickly understand how the organisation works.

These steps do not require large budgets, but they do require discipline and consistency.

Member data management

Managing member data is one of the most underestimated yet important issues in farmers' organisations. At a minimum, the organisation needs to have an up-to-date list of members and a record of membership fee payments. Many organisations still manage this on paper or in spreadsheets, but larger organisations benefit from a digital member database or a customer relationship management system (CRM).

A more developed member database can store additional information, such as a basic member profile (including farm type and size, products, and interests), participation history, communication preferences, and organisational roles, alongside contact and payment information. This improves communication and enables services to be tailored to different groups of members. It also facilitates credible

monitoring and evaluation, particularly when external funding is involved.

Data governance matters. Member information should be treated as a core organisational asset. If data is shared with partners, the roles and permissions of those involved must be clear, and the organisation must retain control over how its member data is used.

Payment systems should be as simple as possible, whether they involve direct debits, bank transfers, mobile money, or cash payments. Where fees are collected manually, receipts and documentation must be consistent and auditable. Delayed payments should be followed up promptly, both to protect income and to establish whether the issue is hardship, administrative friction, or dissatisfaction. Many constitutions link voting rights to fee payments, and these rules must be applied consistently.

Making sure members stay active

Once people have joined, they need to experience the benefits of membership. Otherwise, they become inactive, stop paying fees or reduce their business with the organisation. This creates both a financial problem and a loss of organisational strength.

The core principle is straightforward: expectations must be met continuously and added value must be visible. Members should be able to look back over a year and conclude that they received more benefits than they paid in fees or contributions. This benefit could be monetary, such as better prices or lower costs; practical, such as better access to inputs, markets, or services; or enabling, such as training, information, networks, and a sense of belonging. Two points deserve emphasis:

Member data management – ESNAU in Eswatini

The Eswatini National Agricultural Union (ESNAU) has introduced a digital system to manage its membership base. While communication via WhatsApp and further communication channels via social media, website and e-mail have been functioning for some time, a special membership app now allows members to stay in constant contact with their FO.

The dedicated ESNAU app is connected to the membership database and therefore allows members to update any information about their status, address, and business by themselves. It also gives access to services, both as information about them and for registration and use of services.

All this is based on a digital membership card which simplifies the communication and

access. The card can be used to confirm the membership in purchase transactions with other suppliers to receive special discounts. With the card, members can sign up for activities and services of ESNAU, which makes it easier for the FO to manage these.

The digital membership card and digital communication is also intended to enhance the farmers' identification with the organisation and to mobilize them in their participation and engagement.

Source:
ESNAU

- Good governance is essential. Irregularities, non-compliance, or vague management decisions can quickly destroy trust and reputation, triggering membership exit.
- Fair treatment matters. Members observe how their money is used, how consistently services are delivered, and whether particular groups are favoured at the expense of others.

Two groups that are sometimes at odds in terms of service delivery are existing versus new members. Donor-funded projects may prioritise funds for the growth of membership over the satisfaction of existing members. It is the duty of the FO to ensure existing members are not disenfranchised by projects that invest in future members.

The diversity of members also needs to be recognised. Specific forums or sub-structures could benefit women, young people, small-scale producers, commodity groups, and those engaged in processing, allowing them to address their issues. This could be achieved through committees, working groups or dedicated gatherings, without fragmenting the organisation.

Retaining members who are drifting away

Size matters for financial, economic, and political reasons, but having a large membership base of inactive members is counterproductive. A cooperative with many registered members but low delivery volumes cannot generate economies of scale. Similarly, an association with many names on paper but low fee compliance loses both revenue and legitimacy.

There are usually early warning signs of disengagement, and these include: declining attendance at meetings, reduced use of services or business activity, a lack of responsiveness to communication, and late or missing fee payments.

Disengagement should trigger reflection. A decline in activity may reflect the personal situation of the farmer, in which case support may be needed, or dissatisfaction with governance or services. Proactive outreach at this stage can provide valuable insight and, in some cases, lead to renewed engagement. It is also good practice to review inactive and dormant members at least once a year to identify areas for improvement.

Analysing dormant members – the ACPCU in Uganda

ACPCU, the Ankole Coffee Producers' Cooperative Union in Uganda conducted a survey among the 26 member cooperatives, to find out barriers and facilitators of farmer engagement and their expectations of their primary cooperatives and ACPCU at large. Apart from talking to active, normal members, they identified members that had no active business with their cooperatives anymore (but stayed as members). These dormant members benefitted from dividends but did not contribute to the business. The analysis identified several reasons, e.g. the need to pre-finance output sales. ACPCU

has developed various activities to reactivate dormant members and increase their business relation. As a result, there has an increase in member engagement from 69% to 77%. Additionally, member marketing initiatives have enabled the union to market herself beyond members. Currently member societies have increased from 26 in 2022 to 38 in 2025.

Source:
ACPCU

Finally, former members can be a source of organisational learning. Although exit interviews can be uncomfortable, they provide direct feedback on areas that the organisation needs to strengthen. In some cases, learning and improvement can also create the basis for former members to rejoin.

MANAGING THE BOARD, MANAGEMENT, AND STAFF

As farming organisations grow, they often reach a point where the voluntary working contribution by board members can no longer cover all day-to-day tasks. While employing staff can bring professionalism, continuity, and capacity to an organisation, it also introduces management responsibilities. Often, the transition from a board-managed organisation to a secretariat is a challenging chicken-and-egg situation: funds are required to hire people, but people are required to acquire funds. Volunteers and interns may help as interim solutions. Once starting capital is available, choices are made as to the sequence of hiring. A project manager may be a sound early acquisition, as he or she has a skillset that is most helpful to develop revenue streams through projects and services. An accountant may also be useful, but accounting can be outsourced more easily since it is a commonly available service. Be aware that most skills can be brought in from consultants. However, consultants are (much) more expensive than staff, and in the mid-to-long-term this is 'lost' investment, as outsourcing does not build any knowledge, skills, or experience within the organisation. A special case is the secondment of staff. Donors or other well-wishers may provide staff that they hire and send to the FO. This is not ideal as the loyalty and reporting duties of that person is split. A more sustainable option is to receive funds but keep the hiring process internal. In this way, the person is clearly a part of the FO and no reporting or loyalty issues arise.

Staff must be selected carefully, deployed appropriately, and managed well to perform fully. Before hiring, clarify the prospective duties and the skillset required. Translate the tasks into a competence profile, clarify the position and salary level at which a person is hired and who he or she will report to. Ensure that the people involved in the recruitment process and interviews are competent and relevant. The selection process should consider more than just formal qualifications. Interviews should assess technical competence and consider whether the candidate would be a good fit for the team and the organisational culture. Values, work ethics, and genuine motivation matter. While it may not always be possible to find the 'perfect' fit, the decision should be made with these broader factors in mind rather than just certificates and experience only.

Once a person joins, the onboarding phase is often crucial. New staff need to be introduced to the organisation's culture, strategy, members, services and working style, including rules and procedures and informal routines that shape daily cooperation. One effective approach is to assign a 'buddy' to help the new person through their first days and be available to answer questions. Investing in sound recruitment and onboarding is not a luxury, but a necessity to protect against high turnover and the recurring loss of time and quality.

Managing staff also involves basic human resources processes such as contracting, staff records, salaries and accounting, social security contributions, and rules around leave and sickness. Leading the team is about enabling them to work well. Clear goals and boundaries help staff to perform with confidence. Roles should be designed to avoid gaps and unnecessary overlap, and decision-making responsibilities should be clearly defined. If a manager constantly intrudes into the work of others, accountability and motivation are weakened. Conversely, delegating tasks to motivated and capable staff reduces the

burden on managers and allows staff to grow into their roles. Fair discipline is important too, but it works best when combined with predictable expectations, good information flow, and respect for people's dignity. Judging staff in front of others undermines the team and damages trust.

Teams are not made up of identical people, and this can be a strength if managed well. Some team members implement quickly; others coordinate, plan, or spot risks. Some contribute deep expertise, while others keep morale high and support communication. Effective management creates space for people to do what they are best at while ensuring the team is aligned around shared goals. Micromanagement, where every step is checked and corrected, is typically demotivating and slows the organisation down.

Teams also evolve over time. In a new team, it is normal for there to be a 'forming' phase, during which people learn how others work. This may be followed by a 'storming' phase involving friction, overly ambitious targets, or confusion about procedures. At this point, management must often step in to restore calm, clarity, and internal cooperation. Over time, a 'norming' phase may emerge as rules and habits stabilise. Finally, the team enters a 'performing' phase, delivering effectively. While these shifts are not automatic, they are easier to navigate when leadership focuses on clarity, fairness, and consistent communication.

MANAGING OPERATIONS, ASSETS, AND EVENTS

Farmers' organisations require physical and digital infrastructure to support their work, strengthen their identity, and facilitate member participation. They also require the ability to bring members and partners together through meetings and events that respect people's time while achieving tangible results.

Facilities and equipment

Depending on its resources, an organisation may require its own office space and facilities. This strengthens the organisation's identity and becomes essential once staff are employed. Ideally, the location should be accessible to members and situated in a central area. Facilities may be owned or rented by the organisation, or provided by partners. If external partners provide premises, the organisation must ensure that its independence remains clear and visible. Practical dependence can quickly be interpreted as political dependence, and a spatial mix-up may result in an institutional mix-up.

A functional office requires basic meeting facilities, ideally including simple moderation equipment such as noticeboards or flip charts, and reliable internet or video connections. Investment in IT and office equipment can be costly but is now a basic organisational requirement, including computers, software, stable connectivity, Wi-Fi, and appropriate data storage solutions. Without these, administration and communication can become slow, unreliable, and costly in terms of staff time.

Where an organisation runs economic activities, additional infrastructure may be required, including storage, processing, logistics and mechanisation. Such investments are sometimes supported by donors or NGOs. In these cases, the guiding principle should be alignment with the organisation's priorities. Investments should be driven by the specific requirements of members, and in line with the organisation's strategy, rather than by external preferences.

Donated equipment, such as agricultural machinery, poses a particular risk. Without strong internal ownership, an organisation may not understand the real value of the equipment, or neglect maintenance, and repairs. Many machines become idle due to minor technical issues because a maintenance budget, spare parts plan, or designated responsible person has not

been defined. Good planning therefore involves transparency regarding the investment value, a jointly developed business plan demonstrating how the asset will generate returns, and a realistic approach to the management of the service the equipment helps to provide, including repairs, maintenance, and replacement. Rather than acquiring equipment in isolation, assets should be introduced as functional components of a complete service delivery model.

Some farmers' organisations may develop 'side businesses' linked to their facilities, such as catering and accommodation. While these can generate income, they may also pose a risk. As they differ from core activities, the energy involved in maintaining them may not be clear at the outset. Also, if the facilities are not used for convening farmer consultations, workshops, and training sessions, the benefits for members may remain marginal. A business plan or feasibility study may be helpful to clarify whether a 'side-business' strengthens the organisation's core purpose and services for members, or whether it diverts attention and management capacity.

Events and meetings

Farming organisations are made up of large numbers of people, all with different interests, experiences, and viewpoints. When members come together, a natural 'polyphony' of voices emerges, everyone wants to be heard, and many want decisions to reflect their priorities.

Events, fairs, and meetings work best when they balance three elements: providing people with a space to express themselves and connect, generating benefits and results, and respecting the time and cost constraints of members and the organisation. The annual general meeting, which often includes the general assembly, the annual agricultural fair, or harvest festivals are typical events where members come together.

An AGM may become a multi-day conference with a need for extensive planning and

resources. Setting the date well in advance enables members to plan ahead and allows the organisation to secure an appropriate venue and allocate funds in the yearly financial plan. The board usually decides on the key topics based on current priorities, while management identifies the speakers, moderators, and practical logistics. Topics should be relevant to members and can combine governance matters with learning and networking opportunities. Where appropriate, the AGM can be linked to additional activities, such as field days, training sessions, or exhibitions to increase value for participants.

Such gatherings also have value in terms of reputation. External partners may attend and observe the organisation's professionalism. This includes factors such as time management, the quality of facilitation, clear agendas, well-prepared background information, and respectful dialogue.

Smaller meetings share many of the same principles. Clear agendas, timely invitations, appropriate meeting spaces, and the right facilitation approach can have a significant impact. When online or hybrid meetings are used, technical preparation and clear participation rules help to prevent frustration and wasted time. After meetings, documenting key outcomes and sharing them promptly supports follow-up and accountability.

MANAGING DECISIONS AND ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

People in a farmers' organisation change. Elected representatives have set terms; staff may stay longer but eventually leave or retire. In order for an FO to deliver over time and achieve its long-term goals, it must build its institutional capacity over time. Decisions must be documented, owned, and transmitted, in order to prevent that each election cycle and newly hired staff is forced to repeat mistakes and rebuild capacity from scratch.

Effective decision-making processes

Effective decision-making depends on a few basic elements: clarity on what must be decided and who is authorised to decide; a shared understanding of the relevant facts and constraints; a realistic set of options, along with the expected results and implications for resources; and decision-makers who are capable and willing to act in the organisation's best interests.

Decisions are best made at the lowest appropriate level. High-level leaders and managers should not be burdened with minor operational choices that competent staff can make. Keeping decisions at lower levels signals trust and strengthens motivation. It also builds organisational capacity over time. While not every decision will be perfect, staff should understand when higher levels of involvement are required.

A structured approach is helpful when decisions are made in boards or committees. The issue should be presented clearly, ideally in writing. The options should be summarised, along with their key implications. Any misunderstandings should be addressed before the discussion moves forward. Discussion should allow opposing arguments to be heard, as this can reveal risks or improve options. Depending on the organisation's rules and the level of disagreement, the process should then move towards either consent or a vote. Consent is preferable when there is broad agreement and any remaining objections can be resolved through adjustments. Voting is often necessary when options remain contested. Quorum rules and voting procedures must be adhered to in order to maintain legitimacy.

Decisions should be recorded clearly and communicated so that implementation can be monitored and lessons can be learned.

Managing a learning organisation

Learning is a core management task, not an optional extra. Farmers' organisations face

constant change: markets shift, technologies evolve and, as organisations mature, member expectations rise. Elections and leadership turnover also create a recurring risk of losing institutional knowledge. What worked in the past may no longer be sufficient today. Without a learning culture, the organisation becomes brittle and reactive.

A learning organisation actively builds capacity at all levels, including among operational staff, management, leadership structures, and sub-organisations within the wider system. Organisational strength depends heavily on its people. Building capacity involves training and formal input, as well as the deliberate sharing of experience, decision-making power, and institutional memory.

Learning is supported by culture. If mistakes are treated as learning opportunities, once harm is contained and negligence addressed, people are more willing to innovate and take responsibility. Punishing honest mistakes can create fear, reduce initiative, and increase the leadership's workload. Learning also depends on knowledge management, such as harvesting and documenting experiences and sharing what worked and what did not. This ensures that improvements do not disappear when individuals leave.

Different levels require different capacities. Operational staff require practical skills to deliver services and perform administrative tasks. Management requires the ability to oversee operations and translate strategy into action. Boards and committees require leadership skills to set direction, oversee performance, and protect member interests. While these are not rigid categories, they help to clarify the focus of capacity-building.

Leadership development is a specific aspect of organisational learning. Leaders develop through acquiring knowledge, skills, insight, communication abilities, and strategic thinking,

eventually gaining wisdom. While some elements can be taught, others require experience and reflection. Since the starting point is often the selection process, this should consider not only skills, but also underlying values and attitudes, which are harder to change later.

Practical mechanisms can help to institutionalise learning, such as standard induction training for newly elected board members, mentoring and shadowing arrangements, structured handovers after elections, 'buddy' systems for new staff, and dedicated time for reviewing performance and extracting lessons. Promotions should be handled carefully. When people are promoted beyond their level of competence,

failure becomes more likely. A difficult but sometimes necessary management decision is to realign roles according to capability, including demotion where performance does not match responsibility. This should be done in a fair and respectful way.

Finally, organisational learning is supported by tools. IT systems and modern equipment can improve efficiency if people are trained to use them properly. Technology without capacity often adds complexity rather than reducing it. In well-managed organisations, learning and systems reinforce each other: better tools support better work, and better skills enable tools to deliver value.

The continuous need for organisational development

For the internal actors of an organisation, it is often a challenge to manage the necessary change processes, even to become aware of the needs. External consultants are often contracted to provide a fresh perspective and to advise on necessary steps. Depending on the specific phase and situation, organisational development (OD) can take place according to the needs and wishes of the leadership and the members.

Andreas Hermes Akademie (AHA) has accompanied various FOs in Germany and other countries, as do the other members of the AgriCord Alliance. Since they all are rooted in the farming sector, their understanding of the situation and mentality is genuine and secures adequate support. The specifics of such OD projects are sensitive and cannot be disclosed. However, OD typically encompasses such elements as:

- Participatory development of joint visions, missions, and strategies, and their translation into realisable business and action plans

- Adjustment of structures and processes to make the organisation fit for the future
- Capacity-building for the actors in the organisation, from leadership and top management to middle management and staff
- Development of networks, learning structures and innovation in the organisation to enhance continuous development for the future

In its work, the AHA focuses very much on the human aspects of organisational development. It is the people who make the change, and their attitude and spirit define the energy that change processes depend on. An OD process may take between 6 months and a few years, with intermittent workshops and training sessions with OD consultants, while the implementation remains in the hands of the FO.

Source:
AHA

3.4 FINANCING FARMERS' ORGANISATIONS

Funding is a major issue for farming organisations. There never seems to be enough income to cover everything the organisation and its members need. No two organisations manage their finances in the same way, and there are as many funding models as there are organisational structures. In most cases, farmers' organisations rely on more than one source of income, and these income streams tend to be diverse.

This chapter outlines the key components of financial sustainability. First, it considers why stable funding is important for independence and delivery. Then, it reviews the main internal income streams, such as membership contributions, services, and commercial activities, and levy-based mechanisms. Following this, external funding is discussed and the specific opportunities and risks that come with it. Finally, it summarises the practical foundations of financial management and control and concludes with the importance of building reserves and investing wisely to strengthen resilience over time.

WHY FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY MATTERS

Financial sustainability is essential for a functioning farmers' organisation. Stable finances provide an organisation with independence and room to act. Without this, priorities are easily driven by crisis and external funding can become a necessity rather than a choice.

Financial instability can lead to internal conflict, with leaders and members fighting

over shortages instead of focusing on the organisation's purpose and services. By contrast, a financially stable organisation is better placed to plan, invest in its people and systems, and maintain credibility with members and partners alike.

Financial sustainability is about more than just 'breaking even'. It means being able to withstand difficult periods when income falls or unexpected costs arise. This is where financial resilience comes in: reserves and capital create the time and space needed to make considered decisions, rather than forcing rushed ones.

Any farmers' organisation may experience downturns, failed investments, or economic shocks. Therefore, capital built up from internal sources is more than just a technical concept; it 'buys time' for the organisation to correct its course and protect its services for members when conditions worsen.

Financial sustainability also strengthens independence when dealing with external funders. It reduces the pressure to accept funding that does not align with the priorities of members. Stable finances also make the organisation more attractive to partners because they signal competence, predictability, and trustworthiness. At the same time, financial strength should not become an excuse for weak accountability: rules and controls still matter, because even strong organisations can be damaged quickly by poor financial discipline.

INTERNAL INCOME STREAMS

Membership-based income

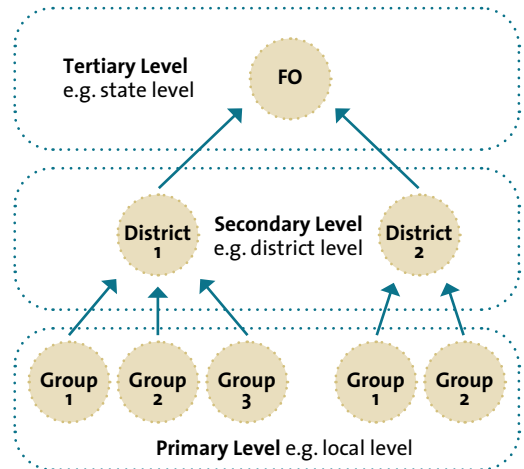
Membership fees are the most common and often the most significant source of income for farmers' organisations. They are important both financially and institutionally: paying for membership strengthens a sense of ownership and belonging. Members who contribute financially are more likely to feel entitled to services, demand accountability and participate in decision-making. Conversely, organisations that rely mainly on funding not linked to members' contributions are at risk of prioritising things that do not meet members' needs.

The way membership income is structured depends on the organisation's legal form and business model. Many associations and federations charge annual **membership fees**. Cooperatives and unions often build ownership through **member shares** rather than annual fees, and some companies follow similar share-based arrangements. In practice, many organisations combine membership contributions with service income and other revenue streams, but member payments remain the clearest link between representation and mandate.

Fees are mostly structured and relate either to farm size or number of employees. Membership fees of large-scale commercial farmers will be substantially different from small-scale subsistence, part-time and emerging farmers. Associate membership can be an additional source of income, especially where commercial entities are involved.

In many systems, farmers pay a membership fee to a local organisation, which passes on an agreed portion to higher levels, such as district, provincial/state, national, regional, continental, and global. It is rare for an individual farmer to pay separately at each level. This system helps to maintain continuity of representation

throughout the organisation and ensures that higher-level advocacy is connected to a grassroots constituency.



Membership fees can only be considered sustainable when there is a credible balance between the value received and the fees paid. Farmers often ask: 'what do I get for my money?' The answer lies in the organisation's **value proposition**: a concise explanation of the benefits of membership, such as representation, lobbying and advocacy, access to services, capacity development, networking opportunities, and the protection of farmers' interests and values.

Affordability remains a central concern, particularly for smaller or newer organisations, and for members with limited cash flow. Many organisations address this by offering reduced rates for young or small-scale members, for example, or by linking fees to farm size, commodity type, or turnover where feasible and fair.

Raising fee levels is sometimes possible, but usually difficult as fee changes often require member approval and can trigger resistance if the associated benefits are not clear. The most reliable way to increase membership fee income is therefore to grow the membership

base and strengthen retention. Having more members spreads fixed costs and increases both organisational scale and political influence. This is why membership management (recruitment, retention, and engagement) becomes a strategic priority for financial sustainability and not just an administrative task.

Discipline, representation, and the 'passenger problem'

Membership income gives rise to a recurring governance dilemma: what to do about non-paying members. Organisations that are too strict may lose members and weaken their representation. Those that are too lenient, on the other hand, may find themselves carrying too many 'passengers' who expect services and political clout without contributing to the cost of running the organisation. Strong leadership must strike a balance between financial discipline and political legitimacy.

Two practical measures are commonly used:

- Link voting rights to paid-up membership, particularly in relation to general assemblies and elections.
- Improve collection systems and communication so that paying is straightforward and members understand why timely payment matters.

INCOME FROM COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES

Many farmers' organisations strengthen their financial base by generating income through services, trading activities, and commercial enterprises. In principle, income generated from internal and market-based activities is preferable, as it supports independence and reduces vulnerability to changes in donor priorities. However, every income stream incurs costs and risks, so new activities must be selected and managed carefully.

Income from services and product business

As described in Part 2, a farmers' organisation can offer a wide range of services and trade-related activities. While some generate only modest returns, others can become major income streams. The basic rule is simple: any service that consistently results in a loss will weaken financial stability. Therefore, it makes sense to focus on services with a viable business model and realistic prospects of covering costs.

New income-generating activities should also align with the organisation's strategic direction. In most cases, it is sensible to build on existing expertise and resources rather than starting entirely new lines of business that require unfamiliar skills, systems, or staff.

While most services are designed for members, some organisations also use existing resources to serve non-members, provided this does not undermine member benefits. Examples include: (i) using processing equipment to offer value addition to non-member producers; (ii) providing fee-based training or advisory support to non-members; and (iii) offering logistics or facility-related services where capacity exists.

When offering services to non-members, many organisations implement differentiated pricing to ensure members clearly recognise the benefits of their membership. This can be communicated transparently and also supports recruitment.

Commercial entities and farmer-owned businesses

Many farmers' organisations have commercialised some of their assets and run them as businesses, using the profits to supplement their income. These businesses are typically independent entities, managed at arm's length from the farmers' organisation. Common approaches include:

- Establishing a business wing or FO-owned company that handles trading, processing, logistics, or service delivery.
- Earning commissions from livestock auctions, events, conferences, or symposia.
- Using land, buildings, showgrounds, or exhibition centres as income-generating assets (including renting out surplus office space).
- Developing commercial interests in insurance and financial services, or earning commissions from advertising and professional services.

In some cases, such entities evolve from an existing focus on a particular commodity. For example, an organisation engaged in grain may move into milling, packaging, or other forms

of value addition. If managed well, this can stabilise market access for members, reduce exposure to volatile prices and generate profits that strengthen the farmers' organisation's position as the owner.

However, these activities pose competitive and financial risks. Farmers'-organisation-owned businesses may compete with established market players, including buyers of members' raw produce. Therefore, markets need careful analysis before entry. Another key principle is risk containment: the commercial entity should be structured so that a downturn does not endanger the core organisation or require it to absorb significant losses using members' funds. In such cases, the existing arrangement should enable the organisation to terminate or restructure the business without endangering its core purpose.

Business wing – Tanzania Horticulture Association (TAHA)

TAHA is organised in two parts: a non-profit development division that focuses on the development of small-holder farmers and policy advocacy, and a commercial division for business operations. The business wing provides stability and financial resources to run the activities on the development division.

The membership of TAHA consists of large-scale producers (so-called 'comprehensive members'), but also 'allied members' from service providers to financial institutions, and 'associate members', which are small-scale producers, groups, and processors.

Under the brand TAHA Fresh, for example, the commercial division provides services for members to access markets. This includes logistics, cargo handling, and consolidation for air and sea freight, and is especially important during times of disrupted trade routes, e.g. as

it was periodically during the COVID crisis. TAHA aggregates and coordinates the export and market development activities of its members. TAHA invests in infrastructure, processing, and facilities to improve market access, also for smallholders. Capacity-building activities in this division focus on entrepreneurial skills, but also compliance with standards and regulations.

Source:
TAHA, AHA

The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development in India

NABARD, the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, was founded by the Indian government in 1971 to enhance the development of farmers and rural areas. With more than 30 offices in the country and over 4,000 partners, it implements specific programmes with favourable conditions and support for farmers, and even for farmers' organisations. It links supranational funding, such as from the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank, to national and regional financial institutions that work with the farmers. This also includes the support of micro-finance activities.

A specific Farm Sector Development Department has set up four major programmes for agricultural and rural development:

- Watershed Development Programme
- Tribal Development Fund

- Producers Organisation Development Fund
- Farm Sector Promotional Fund

Additional programmes focus on climate change, financial inclusion, institutional development, micro-finance innovation, off-farm diversification, and research & development. The website of NABARD also offers various essential information, such as basic business plans for bankable projects, case studies and publications, information on standard unit costs for various cost factors (per region), further information on government-sponsored programmes, and an overview on interest rates.

Source:

🔗 <https://www.nabard.org/EngDefault.aspx>

Agriculture financing with a cooperative bank – Norinchukin Bank in Japan

The cooperative approach is also common for agricultural financing. In 1923, the Norinchukin Bank in Japan was established by agricultural cooperatives to focus on the financial development of the sector. Using the deposits from their members, the bank can leverage and hand out funds for investments and operational capital. Members benefit in three ways: they receive funding at attractive interest rates, get interest payments for their deposits, and at the end of the year gain dividends on their shares.

Norinchukin Bank is directly owned by cooperatives in the agriculture, fishery, and forest sector, representing over 11 million farmers. With this bank of their own, they have

access to the global financial market. With its almost 6,000 branches across the country, it is close to its clients. Its vision is to 'be the "first-call bank" for the food and AFF industries'. To achieve this, it has set up an advisory service for farmers, checking their financial stability and providing respective financial solutions for their development.

Source:

🔗 <https://www.nochubank.or.jp/en/>

Mobilising commercial finance

Access to finance is often key for generating commercial income, particularly when organisations invest in storage, processing, logistics, equipment, or working capital. Farmers' organisations typically collaborate with cooperative banks, savings banks, commercial banks and, in certain instances, development banks.

Maintaining a well-managed bank account can enhance credibility and mitigate cash handling risks. Regular transactions through the account also create a financial history that builds confidence with the bank, improves transparency, and supports access to credit lines or overdraft facilities for short-term working capital. For larger investments, lenders will generally require a well-prepared business plan describing the activity, implementation approach, financial expectations, and key risks. Collateral may also be required, and the investment assets themselves can sometimes serve as security.

Levies and other production-based mechanisms

A distinctive funding mechanism used mainly by commodity organisations is the collection of levies, which are a key source of revenue for these organisations. These are usually linked to production volumes or transactions, and are typically collected at predictable points in the value chain, such as sale, processing, slaughter, or export. Although the rate is often small — sometimes less than one per cent of transaction value — it can accumulate to substantial sums when applied consistently across a whole sector. These funds enable commodity organisations to invest in activities that benefit the wider industry, including research, training, quality, and standards work, and marketing activities to boost demand.

There are two broad forms of levy:

1. **Statutory levies** are mandatory and legally established. They are commonly deducted automatically at a defined transaction point (such as an abattoir, mill, packhouse, or buyer) and transferred to the relevant commodity organisation. Their main advantage is predictability: they provide a stable income, enabling long-term planning and investment.
2. **Voluntary levies**, on the other hand, are based on agreement within the sector rather than law. Producers opt in to contribute a small amount per unit sold, which is often collected through a processor or first buyer. Where there is strong sector buy-in and reliable collection, voluntary levies can generate meaningful and sustained funding.

Because levy income is linked to turnover rather than individual membership, levy-funded commodity organisations enjoy a high degree of financial independence. At the same time, this model can weaken the 'membership discipline' that normally strengthens accountability: if income arrives whether or not farmers participate, organisations may need additional effort and mechanisms to ensure that priorities remain aligned with producers and that decision-making remains transparent and responsive. This is why levy-funded structures often need especially strong governance and communication to maintain producer confidence and legitimacy.

Appreciating the role of commodity organisations

Farmers often gain new appreciation for commodity organisations when unexpected challenges arise. For example, in the run-up to the Covid-19 pandemic, during a trade dispute between the US and China, the Chinese government imposed targeted trade restrictions. Among other things, China stopped importing certain pork products from the US, such as intestines, heads, and feet – products primarily consumed in China. Although these items represent a small portion of the pork carcass, they were critical to the profitability of US pork farmers, as revenue from this ‘fifth quarter’ often covered the low profit margins for the entire animal. Without this export market, US

pork farmers faced a financial crisis. In response, US pork farmers turned to their commodity organisation to advocate on their behalf, urging it to lobby for government support. This resulted in a form of subsidy from the US government to soften the financial blow.

Such incidents highlight how commodity organisations can provide vital advocacy and support in times of crisis, securing policies and resources to help farmers stay afloat. It is often during these crises that farmers come to fully appreciate commodity organisations and the critical role they play beyond the day-to-day operations.

EXTERNAL FUNDING: OPPORTUNITIES, RISKS, AND SAFEGUARDS

External funding can help a farmers’ organisation to grow more quickly than it could through member income alone, particularly where membership fees must remain affordable or where services cannot yet be fully cost-recovering. In practice, many organisations combine member-based income with project funding, contracted work, sponsorships, and one-off grants. The key issue is not whether external funds should be used, but how they can be used to protect the organisation’s mandate, credibility, and long-term viability.

State funding and government-linked income

Some farmers’ organisations receive funding from government budgets, contracts, or public programmes. This may take the form of direct subsidies, grants, service contracts, or payments for providing public services.

State support can reduce the need for membership fees and make it easier to employ staff or expand services. However, it can create a risk to the organisation’s legitimacy: one that depends heavily on state income may struggle to act as an independent voice when government policy conflicts with farmers’ interests. The key issue is straightforward: how freely can the organisation ‘speak truth to power’ if its operational lifeline depends on the same institution that it is expected to influence?

Where government-related income is used, it is safest when this is transparent, rule-based rather than discretionary, and limited in proportion to the total income. Clear separation between funding and policy positions also matters, so that representation and advocacy remain member-led.

Donor funding and development partners

Donor funding is common, particularly in environments where resources are limited. It can finance pilot projects, organisational development, capacity-building, equipment, or

services that would otherwise be out of reach. It can also support long-term programmes in which partners have a sustained presence, such as churches and certain non-governmental organisations.

The opportunity is clear: donor funding can accelerate progress. However, the risk is equally clear: donor agendas may not align with the authentic needs, values, and priorities of farmers. 'Don't bite the hand that feeds you' applies to donor-funded organisations as much as to state-funded ones. Donor dependence also creates vulnerability: funding can be withdrawn or conditions can be tightened over time, leaving an organisation exposed.

A practical safeguard is to keep the organisation's strategy at the centre. The strongest position is for the farmers' organisation to identify needs and solutions first and then approach donors with a well-defined idea that aligns with its strategic plan. When donors arrive with predetermined programmes, negotiation is key: clarifying the donor's underlying interests, shaping the partnership so that it strengthens the organisation's own priorities and declining projects that would divert the organisation from its mandate.

Donor projects also carry transaction costs in the form of dedicated reporting requirements, procurement rules, and administrative burdens. These should be recognised from the outset and, where possible, negotiated as part of the project budget, including realistic contributions towards overheads and statutory costs.

External funding is not always limited to grants. Donors can also be clients of a farmers' organisation, purchasing services. Donors, development partners, and non-governmental organisations often require assistance to connect with farmers and rural communities. Farmers' organisations can offer professional services in this area, provided they fit the

organisation's strategy and do not compromise its independence. Examples include:

- Mobilising suitable farmers for training sessions, surveys, information-gathering exercises, or project activities in exchange for a handling fee.
- Implementing the full activity on behalf of a partner using organisational resources in exchange for fees.
- Developing a new service with co-funding from a donor, with the longer-term aim of institutionalising the service and building internal capacity.

While this approach can strengthen financial sustainability and visibility, it requires management attention and expertise. Where such competence is still developing, capacity-building can become part of the cooperation itself.

Sponsorships and private sector support

Sponsorship is often easier to secure than grants because agribusinesses are very interested in farmer networks and visibility. Sponsors may include banks, insurers, suppliers of agricultural inputs, mechanisation firms, processors, logistics providers, and retailers, operating both upstream and downstream in value chains.

Sponsorship can be useful for funding events, training, communication products, or practical projects. Typical income channels include paid advertising space in print or online newsletters, banners or stands at events, and technical seminars, workshops and field days, where sponsors either support costs or pay a fee in exchange for visibility.

Two rules are particularly important:

1. Do not allow sponsors to finance policy-making or advocacy positions. If political activities are sponsor-funded, independence will be called into question, which could damage legitimacy.
2. Do not trade member contact data for funding. Member data is the 'crown jewels' of the organisation. Sharing it enables sponsors to contact farmers directly, which undermines the organisation's role and may breach data protection regulations.

Good sponsorship practice is explicit about what the sponsor receives (e.g. visibility, brand awareness, and the opportunity to present products) and what is off-limits (e.g. policy influence, member databases, and governance decisions).

Safeguarding autonomy and ownership across all external funding

Across state funding, donor funding and sponsorships, the same test applies: can the organisation still say 'no'? If refusing a condition threatens survival, then autonomy is already compromised.

Three safeguards help to ensure that external funding remains aligned with the interests of members:

1. Keep the mandate central: a farmers' organisation must belong to its farmer members; this is non-negotiable.
2. Anchor funding in strategy: projects and sponsorships should reinforce the organisation's agreed priorities, not replace them. Deviating from strategy in order to take money is rarely worth the long-term cost.

3. Plan for the project's duration and exit: external funding will end. Each partnership benefits from clarity on whether an activity is a one-off or can be repeated, what capacity remains afterwards, and how results can be sustained when support stops.

Used with discipline, external funding can build capacity, services, and resilience without undermining legitimacy. However, if used carelessly, it can undermine the organisation's very purpose of representing farmers' interests with clarity and credibility.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL

Sound and transparent financial management is a core responsibility of any management team in a farming organisation. While an organisation can survive for a time with limited income, it cannot remain credible or sustainable without proper accounting, reliable cash control, and transparent oversight. This is even more important in member-based organisations: once members or partners start to doubt how funds are handled, trust erodes quickly and is difficult to rebuild.

In practice, financial management serves two interlinked purposes:

1. To protect the organisation by ensuring compliance, preventing loss and fraud, and meeting obligations on time.
2. To steer the organisation by producing clear figures and analysis to support budgeting, operational decisions, and strategic planning.

Main components of financial management are introduced in the following sections.

The daily financial cycle: bookkeeping, liquidity, and control

Most financial problems originate from daily routines. Three functions need to work together:

1. **Bookkeeping** is the activity of recording transactions accurately and consistently. It forms the basis for everything else.
2. **Liquidity** (cash flow) ensures that there is always enough cash or bank balance to pay bills when they fall due.
3. **Controlling** uses these records to compare plans with reality, spot deviations early, and support decision-making.

Smaller organisations may perform basic bookkeeping tasks using paper or spreadsheets, but errors and delays can become costly as soon as the volume of work increases. Accounting software reduces manual work, improves consistency, and makes it easier to produce summaries and perform checks. For larger organisations, more integrated systems may link invoicing, inventory, staff administration, and finance.

Good practice includes clear cost categories (accounts), consistent documentation, regular reconciliation of cash and bank balances, and routine internal checks. Where risks are higher, especially with regard to cash handling, it is good practice to implement the 'dual-control principle': transactions and supporting documents are always checked by two people before they are registered.

Keeping records that auditors can follow

Good bookkeeping relies on thorough documentation. Financial records are only credible if transactions can be explained and justified. Common minimum requirements for transaction documents include:

- Date of transaction
- Payer and recipient
- Description (including quantities and unit values where relevant)
- Total value and currency
- Taxes, where applicable
- Supporting documents that justify the purpose of the expenditure (especially for procurement)

Where internal FO rules, donor rules, or national regulations require competitive quotations above a certain threshold, these should be filed consistently. The goal is not bureaucracy for its own sake, but rather the ability to clearly account to members, boards, auditors, and partners.

Managing cash, inventory, and assets

Certain areas carry a higher risk and require stronger controls, such as:

- **Cash management:** cash should be kept to a minimum, stored securely, and reconciled frequently. Unannounced checks can deter misuse.
- **Inventory control:** inputs, outputs, and semi-processed goods should be tracked through incoming and outgoing registers. Periodic physical counts should match the records held in the accounts; any unexplained differences must be investigated and recorded.
- **Assets and depreciation:** buildings and machinery are not handled like daily expenses. When assets are 'capitalised' in accounting, depreciation spreads the cost over the asset's useful life, in line with national tax rules. This affects both the profit and loss statement and the balance sheet.

Liquidity planning

Many farming organisations experience seasonal fluctuations: inputs are required prior to harvest, but income arrives later. This can therefore pose a significant management risk, even when the organisation is profitable.

A basic cash flow plan (monthly and more frequently during peak seasons) can help to anticipate gaps and plan early responses. While stable banking relationships can support short-term credit lines, such facilities only work when financial discipline and documentation are robust.

From bookkeeping to decision support: the role of controlling

Controlling is not 'policing'. At its best, it is an internal advisory function that helps leadership and management teams to improve performance and reduce risk. Drawing on bookkeeping data and other information, such as storage levels, sales volumes, membership trends, and market prices, it turns this into insight.

Typical areas of analysis include:

- Financial performance and trends (including basic ratios)
- Member activity (active vs. dormant members and reasons)
- Product and service margins (what increases and what drains resources).
- Procurement and production efficiency
- Client patterns and marketing results
- Internal process efficiency and staff utilisation

The practical point is that any deviations should be visible early on, while there is still time to act.

Formal annual accounts: profit and loss and balance sheet

At the end of the year, the organisation closes its books and produces two core statements:

1. the profit and loss statement summarises income and costs across categories to show whether the year produced a profit or a loss.
2. the balance sheet shows assets and liabilities, including cash and bank balances, inventory value, fixed assets, payables, loans, and the organisation's capital position (paid-in capital, reserves, and retained earnings).

For financial partners, these documents are often the first test of credibility. For members, they demonstrate transparency and accountability. The board is responsible for reviewing them with management, understanding risks and opportunities, and presenting audited results to the general assembly for approval and formal discharge.

Audits: internal discipline and external credibility

A yearly audit is standard practice and often a legal requirement. Typically, auditors will test samples of transactions, verify supporting documents, assess compliance with rules, and review the strength of the system itself. Audit outcomes can vary:

- Unqualified opinion: the accounts are reliable and compliant.
- Qualified opinion: issues exist but are within acceptable limits.
- No opinion/refusal: serious problems; the board must be informed and act immediately.

Audit reports matter beyond compliance. Banks, donors, and partners often require recent audits and monitor whether findings are acted upon. In some contexts, higher-level

cooperatives can provide accredited audit services to member organisations, improving relevance and reducing costs, provided independence and quality are protected.

Mandatory annual audit: audit service – DGRV in Germany

The Deutsche Genossenschafts- und Raiffeisenverband (DGRV) is the apex organisation for cooperatives in Germany, encompassing unions and cooperatives from all sectors, including agriculture. All cooperatives in Germany must become a member of a specific audit association, e.g. in the DGRV or its member-organisations.

With their expertise, they are responsible for conducting the mandatory statutory audits of their member cooperatives. This includes the actual audits of cooperatives, specific compliance checks, and the provision of advisory on accounting standards. The DGRV also trains the auditors to understand the specifics regarding the financial management of cooperatives, and it serves as a representative body to comment on new financial reporting standards that could impact the cooperative sector.

The benefit of this arrangement is highly compliant and professional financial management in the cooperative sector in Germany, securing the high trust of members in their organisations. At the same time, it also is financially attractive, as the service is less expensive than from external auditors (who would first need to learn cooperative accounting), and it provides, through the fees, a stable income for the audit associations.

Source:

🔗 <https://www.dgrv.de/>

Keeping costs under control

Income stability is only half of the equation. To be financially sustainable, an organisation must also manage its costs deliberately.

Costs can be categorised into three groups:

1. Fixed structural costs (often difficult to reduce quickly), including premises, utilities, staff costs (including taxes and social security), office running costs, statutory activities (e.g. board meetings and assemblies), membership dues to higher levels, taxes, interest and instalments, and depreciation.
2. Costs of non-income activities (necessary, but not revenue-generating), such as advocacy, extension services, field days, free information services, member engagement, meetings, and consultations.
3. Costs of income-generating activities: cost of goods sold (inputs and outputs), processing operations, mechanisation services, advisory and training delivery, and compliance and tax costs linked to commercial activity.

Good cost control does not mean cutting what matters. It means ensuring that spending supports member benefits, is economical, and remains within realistic capacity. Practical approaches include combining activities to reduce travel, developing internal expertise instead of repeatedly paying for external consultants, selecting suitable venues and formats (including online options where effective), using counteroffers for major purchases through the procurement process, and planning maintenance and replacements instead of allowing assets to deteriorate.

A key point to note is that staff and assets that are not used productively become a silent cost leak. Managing utilisation is part of financial management, not separate from it.

Oversight roles: finance is too important to 'leave to others'

In the broader governance chapter, financial oversight is considered one of the most significant organisational risks. This message is worth repeating in management terms: the finance function requires competent staff, clear delegation, and active oversight by elected leaders. While many good leaders are not trained accountants, they remain responsible for ensuring they receive the necessary information to govern effectively.

Regular engagement with internal and external auditors (including informal briefings in plain language) helps boards to identify risks at an early stage, rather than after damage has been done.

BUILDING RESERVES AND INVESTING WISELY

Financial stability is about more than balancing income and costs in a single year. Organisations also need reserves to withstand lean periods, respond to shocks and avoid becoming dependent on donors or short-term borrowing when things go wrong. Where surpluses exist, building reserves is a way of managing risk and establishing a foundation for long-term independence.

At the same time, reserves are not just held; they can also be put to productive use. If there are sufficient internal (retained profits) or external (banks, donors) sources, smart investments can strengthen the organisation's sustainability and, over time, expand its ability to serve members. The basis for any investment remains the same: a clear idea, a workable concept, and a business plan. A well-considered investment process usually covers three elements:

1. A concept over time, not just the purchase, but the full development from set-up to operations, income, and costs across several periods.
2. A business plan that puts figures to the concept, including the initial investment, financing costs (interest and instalments), expected income and all operating costs modelled over several years.
3. Scenario thinking: testing what happens if assumptions do not hold.

The key practical question remains: does the investment generate sufficient margins to allow it to be maintained and, where relevant, be repaid?

Ambitious plans can be attractive, but weak investments often start with 'dreaming too big' rather than modelling realistic demand, costs, and capacity.

Even when the idea is sound, reality can introduce delays and setbacks. Therefore, a sensible plan tests **scenarios** such as: delays in starting the business or service; markets being less attractive than expected; or costs being higher than expected (e.g. repairs, staffing, logistics).

A credible decision is usually one where the investment still makes sense under less favourable scenarios and where there is at least a 'Plan B' in case early assumptions fail. When there are several investment ideas, comparing the scenarios side by side often clarifies which option is more resilient.

Sponsored investments still require discipline

Although donor-funded investments can be helpful, they still require scrutiny. Even if the organisation does not pay the capital cost, they may still carry the operational risk. Before accepting a sponsored investment, it is worth checking whether:

- the investment fits the FO's strategy and its members' needs.
- the technology is suitable for local conditions

- technicians and spare parts are available for repairs and maintenance
- the FO can operate and manage the investment with internal resources

If the investment does not meet these criteria, it is better to renegotiate than to accept an asset that could become a burden. In extreme cases, it is more responsible to decline the offer.

Finally, even when an investment is sponsored, the organisation should aim to generate a positive return and retain some of it for future replacements. Assets wear out, and there may not be a sponsor available when a replacement is needed. Wise investment is therefore key to building a stronger capital base, which

improves access to finance and increases resilience over time.

In short: financing is about more than just covering costs. It's also about safeguarding an organisation's independence, credibility, and ability to fulfil its purpose. The strongest funding models keep the link between members and the organisation clear, combine income streams realistically, and ensure that ambitions are matched to management capacity. Good financial discipline, transparent controls, and the gradual accumulation of reserves enable a farmers' organisation to transition from year-to-year survival to confident planning, wise investment, and accountability to those it exists to serve.

3.5 UNDERSTANDING ORGANISATIONAL DYNAMICS

Having analysed a great number of aspects regarding the functioning of farmers' organisations, we would like to close this handbook by revisiting the FO as a whole. Even where key governance factors such as structure, rules, leadership, management, and financial systems are well in place, an organisations performance may still vary. Some FO may be active and effective, while others struggle or stagnate. Making sense of such differences leads to a reflection of organisational dynamics, considering how the various elements of an FO interact and shape its overall performance. The

lens of this final chapter lies on the energy and dynamism that drive the lifecycle of a FO.

The chapter is built along a three-step approach. First, it considers the internal energy of an FO as a practical means of observing how the organisation functions in daily operations. It then introduces three simple models to explain these dynamics: the Onion Model, the Life Cycle Model and the Web of Knots Model. Finally, it considers the practical implications of these models for strengthening, renewing and sustaining farmers' organisations.

INTERNAL ENERGY OF FARMERS' ORGANISATIONS

Beyond structure, type, legal format, or level of operation, every farmers' organisation is also shaped by a less visible but equally important dimension: its internal energy. This energy refers to the quality of engagement, motivation, and collaboration that drives its daily operations as well as long-term progress. Unlike other categories in this handbook, internal energy does not describe a static category or external label, but rather a dynamic spectrum, a continuum along which an organisation can move forward or backward, depending on its leadership, environment, and member engagement. Recognising the level of internal energy can be both a mirror and a motivator. It helps identify where an organisation currently stands and points to what may be needed for revitalisation or growth. The following five stages illustrate this spectrum.

EO Zero energy

At this level, the organisation exists on paper only. While it may be officially registered or listed in a database, it lacks any real activity, leadership, or member engagement. There are no meetings, no services, and no sense of ownership among farmers. Often, these organisations were created through top-down initiatives, such as development projects or government programmes, but failed to generate commitment at the grassroots level. Without internal drive or active participation, they remain dormant and ineffective, unable to contribute meaningfully to the farming community or to respond to members' needs.

Ew Wasted energy

Wasted energy describes organisations that give the impression of being active – holding meetings, maintaining a board, or even organising events – but consistently fail to

produce tangible outcomes. The problem is not inactivity but the misdirection of effort. This may result from poor leadership, unclear goals, or weak internal structures. Decisions are made but rarely implemented. Members begin to lose confidence as their time and energy do not translate into results. Over time, this cycle of effort without impact leads to frustration, demotivation, and eventual disengagement. The organisation appears busy, but the energy it consumes yields no real progress.

Er Reactive energy

Organisations with reactive energy come to life in response to external threats or injustices, such as unfair pricing, new legislation, or exclusion from market opportunities. They mobilise quickly, often drawing in many members, and can achieve visibility and influence through protest, petitions, or rapid advocacy campaigns. However, this energy is centred on opposition rather than proposition. While it can generate momentum in the short term, it is often emotionally driven and difficult to sustain. Without a constructive vision or clear strategy for long-term development, reactive organisations risk becoming divisive or losing their appeal once the immediate crisis fades.

Ep Proactive energy

Proactive energy marks a fundamental shift in the life of a farmers' organisation. Rather than waiting for problems to arise, the organisation sets its own agenda, guided by a clear mission and rooted in the needs and priorities of its members. It works to improve market access, strengthen farming practices, build resilience to climate change, or influence policy in a constructive manner. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, decisions are followed by action, and success is measured by outcomes that benefit the membership. At this level, members feel a sense of ownership and pride, and the organisation is seen as a reliable partner by external stakeholders. Collaboration replaces

frustration, and the culture becomes one of trust, innovation, and service.

Es Synergy

Synergy represents the highest and most transformative level of internal energy. Here, the farmers' organisation not only functions effectively on its own terms, but actively collaborates with others (whether peer organisations, research institutions, government agencies, or private partners) to amplify its impact. Through these partnerships, resources, knowledge, and ideas are shared, leading to innovation and systemic change. The organisation becomes a strategic actor in the wider agricultural landscape, contributing to sector-wide improvements in livelihoods, sustainability, and policy. Internally, it fosters inclusion, transparency, and adaptability. Synergy is not just about doing more, it is about achieving more together than would be possible alone.

Energy levels of organisations

E0

Zero energy:
FO only on paper

Ew

Wasted energy:
FO on paper and holding meetings, but no outcome and impact

Er

Reactive energy:
FO's harnessed anger is the drive for mobilisation; know what they are against rather than for

Ep

Proactive energy:
FO works towards a common purpose and actively promotes the interests of its constituency

Es

Synergy:
Cooperation between organisations with proactive energy, adding value to the sum of the parts

Internal energy can vary within the organisation itself. An energetic leadership may struggle to engage a passive membership, while a motivated member base may be held back by weak structures or unclear direction. For this reason, observing internal energy is a useful starting point, but it does not explain why an organisation functions the way it does. To understand this more deeply, it is necessary to look beyond what is visible in daily operations and examine the underlying drivers, the organisation's core character, its stage of development, and the structure of its relationships. The following section introduces three models that help to explain these dynamics and provide a more structured way of analysing and strengthening an FO.

CHARACTER, CYCLE, AND CONNECTIONS – THREE MODELS FOR FO ANALYSIS

Three simple models can help explain how a farmers' organisations functions, why it succeeds or struggles, and how it changes over time. The Onion Model looks at an organisation's core character, distinguishing between what is visible on the surface and what lies beneath. Where internal conflict occurs in an organisation it is worth peeling back the layers to determine, if the people that make up the organisation agree on the different aspects.

The Life Cycle Model places the organisation at a particular stage of development and highlights the strengths and risks associated with that stage. The Web of Knots Model illustrates the organisation's linkages, showing the relationships, and coordination points through which it connects to other actors and levels. These models build on one another. Core character shapes what the organisation sees as legitimate, how it makes decisions, and what members expect from their leaders. The life cycle explains why the same organisation may need different structures and leadership practices at different stages of development.

Finally, the system linkages model shows that an organisation's effectiveness depends not only on internal choices, but also on how it is connected to others.

Farmers' organisation's core character

The **Onion Model** helps to understand the core character of an organisation and the factors that give it direction and energy. In the context of farmers' organisations, four layers can be distinguished:

The outermost layer is **behaviour**. This is the most visible and dynamic aspect of an FO, shaped by leadership decisions, external pressures, and broader societal trends. Political developments or shifts in public perception can also influence how an FO acts and presents itself.

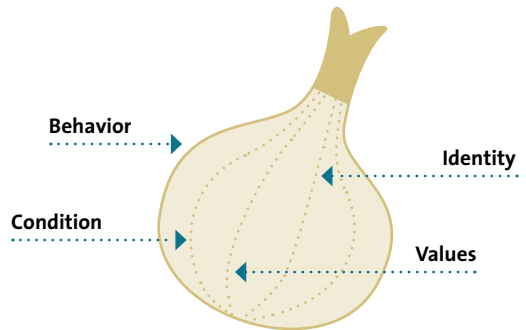
Beneath this lies **conditioning**, which reflects the collective experiences and formative influences that have shaped the organisation over time. It includes shared memories, key events, and internal narratives that influence how members interpret current situations. It also helps explain certain sensitivities or strategic preferences. For example, if an FO once pursued an ambitious project that failed badly, it may become more cautious towards similar initiatives in future.

The third layer, **organisational identity**, concerns how the FO defines itself and its role. It addresses questions such as: who are we as an organisation? Who do we represent? What is our role within the agricultural sector? For FOs, this may include balancing the interests of larger commercial actors and predominantly family-run farms, or deciding who belongs to the organisation and who does not. This layer is about self-definition and positioning.

At the centre of the onion are **values**, which form the foundation that holds the FO together. These are often implicit and not visible, yet they are the most stable and enduring element. Values shape what the organisation ultimately stands

for, such as solidarity among farmers, a shared understanding of agriculture, or a commitment to certain livelihood principles. While identity may evolve, these deeper values tend to remain more constant. In times of crisis or change, FOs often return to this inner core to reaffirm their principles and sense of purpose.

Onion Model of an organisation's identity



Life cycle of a farmers' organisation

The Onion Model helps to understand an FO's core character by distinguishing between visible actions and deeper underlying drivers such as identity, and values. These aspects are rather stable and do not explain how organisations evolve over time. To capture the development of an organisation, the Onion Model can be combined with an organisational **Life Cycle Model**. The life cycle model presented here is based on the well-known framework by Dr. Ichak Adizes, created for corporate organisations, adapted to reflect the realities of FOs. Unlike private sector companies, membership-based FOs often fulfil political and social roles alongside economic ones. Their development is shaped not only by management, but also by engagement, legitimacy, and leadership.

The life cycle begins with a **need**, often triggered by crisis or dissatisfaction, where immediate mobilisation and visible action dominate. This leads to a **movement** phase, characterised by high energy and a strong desire for change but

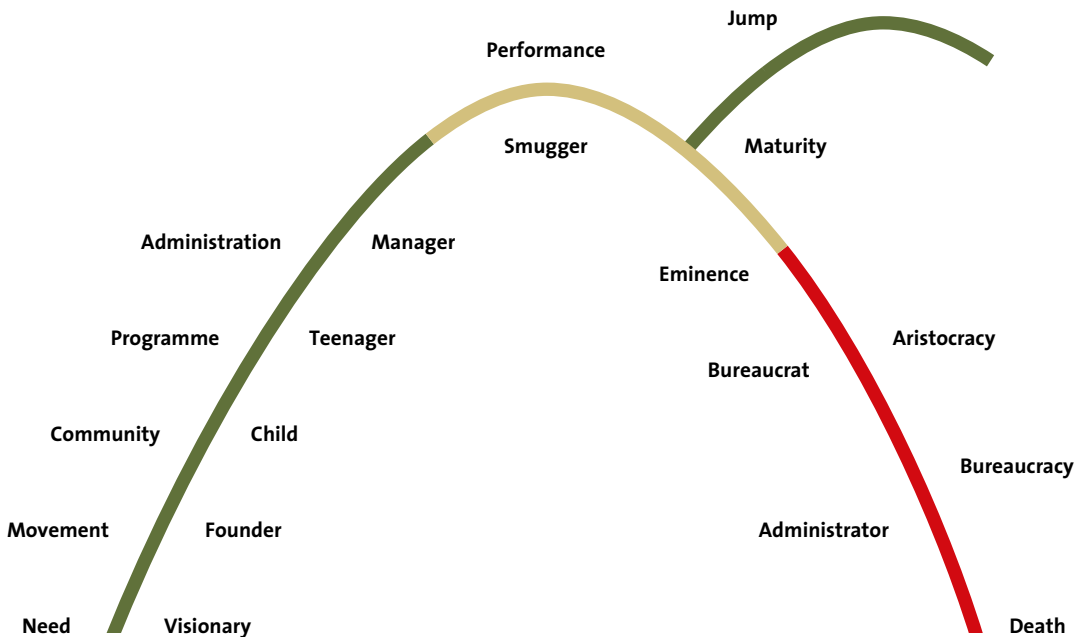
limited structure and unclear roles. Over time, the movement develops into a **community**, where trust builds and members recognise the value of working together. At this stage, the FO begins to define its identity, values, and shared principles. Building on this, the organisation enters the **programme** phase, translating intentions into plans, strategies, and objectives. The next stage is **administration**, where structures become more formalised. Roles and responsibilities are clarified, processes established, and professional staff are hired. These first five stages form the growth phase (or 'green zone'), in which the FO evolves into a structured organisation.

At its peak, the FO reaches **performance**, combining its founding spirit with effective structures and a capable team. Over time, however, success can lead to increasing caution. In the maturity stage, the focus shifts towards stability and continuity, often at the expense of adaptability. If this continues, the organisation may enter **aristocracy**, where maintaining

structures and status becomes more important than responding to member needs. This can develop into **bureaucracy**, where rules and procedures dominate, and a disconnect emerges between formal structures (the outer layer) and the organisation's inner vitality. If no renewal takes place, the FO may lose relevance, functionality, or engagement, and ultimately reach **death**. These last four stages represent the decline phase (or 'red zone') of the life cycle.

Importantly, this trajectory is not fixed. FOs can initiate a 'jump' into a new life cycle at any stage, often through leadership change, restructuring, or the development of a new mission and strategy. Such renewal typically involves reconnecting with core values and redefining direction. And not all FOs aim to progress through all stages. Some deliberately remain in the movement phase to preserve flexibility, independence, and a low administrative burden, which can be a strategic choice rather than a sign of underdevelopment.

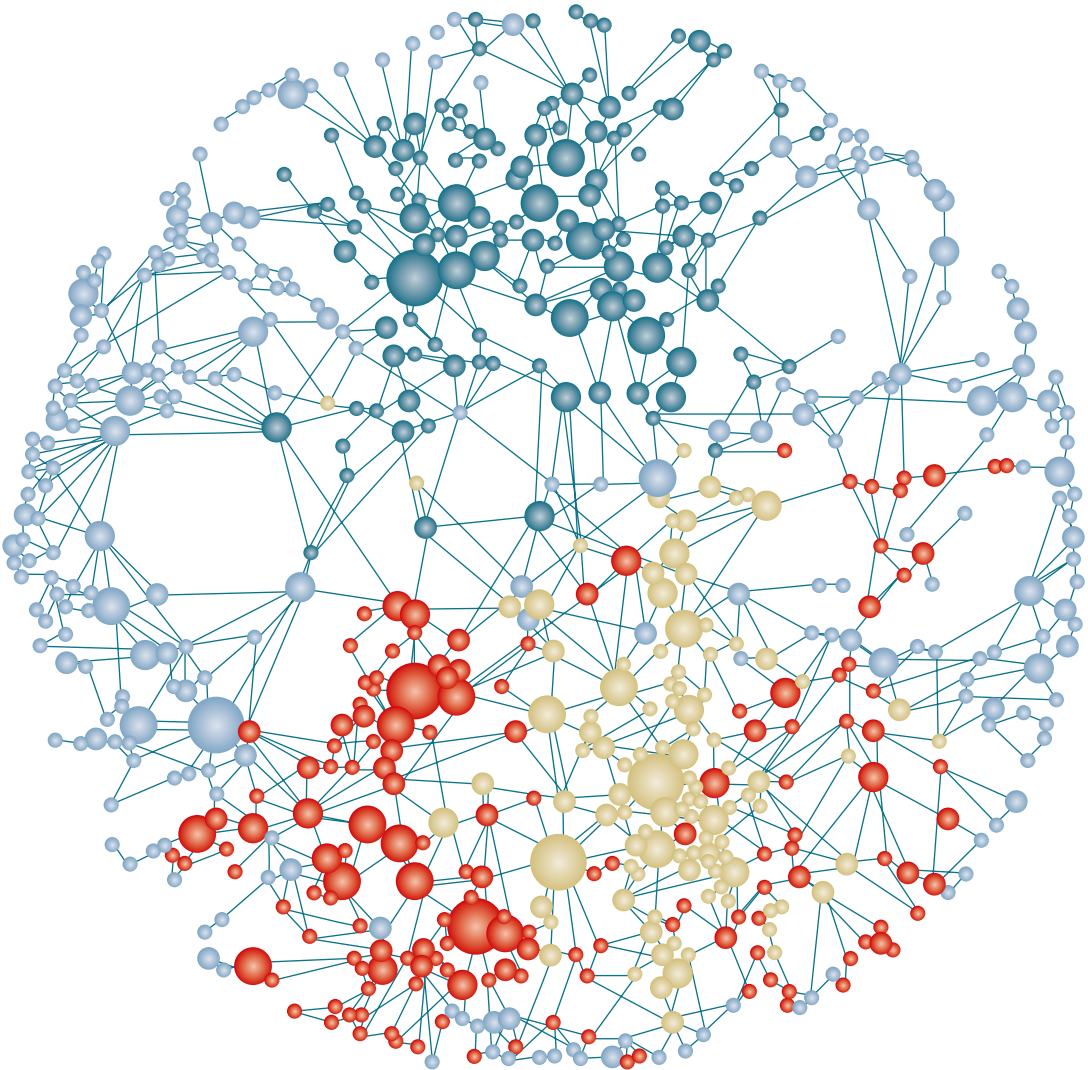
Lifecycle of organisations



Connections to the outside world

The **Web of Knots** shows how FOs function as interconnected systems. It illustrates how relationships, structures, and dependencies develop over time and shape the organisation's ability to act and adapt. As an FO evolves, more 'knots' are formed. These represent stable relationships, routines, and institutional arrangements, while the 'strings' between them symbolise connections between members, leaders, partners, and external stakeholders. As the web becomes denser,

it provides greater stability and resilience. For example, an FO with strong buyer relationships, internal committees, and trust among members will not collapse easily if one link breaks. If a key buyer withdraws, other connections, such as alternative markets and buyers, may help absorb the shock. At the same time, the web can become rigid. The more knots and links, the harder it becomes to change direction. Established roles, long-standing agreements, and power structures may hinder adaptation, even when needed.



As Figure 3 suggests, cutting a single string, for example by ending one partnership or replacing one leader, usually has limited effect because the wider web remains intact. More meaningful change often requires loosening or reconfiguring several knots. This loosening can happen abruptly, through external intervention, conflict-driven leadership change, or sudden restructuring. Such forceful change may produce quick results, but also carries risks: trust may erode, relationships may be damaged, and the organisation may be left with ‘unravelling ends’ that are difficult to reconnect. A more sustainable approach is often the gradual loosening and retying of knots. This may involve redefining roles, introducing new leadership, developing a shared mission, or creating new forms of collaboration. For example, an FO seeking to become more market-oriented may gradually shift responsibilities from volunteer leaders to professional staff while keeping members involved. Such changes often resemble a ‘jump’ into a new life cycle phase, allowing the organisation to renew itself without losing its core.

The Web of Knots thus highlights a central tension in FO development: the same structures that create stability can also limit flexibility. Understanding where knots are too tight, and where connections can be adjusted, is therefore essential for managing change effectively.

The three models offer complementary perspectives on how farmers’ organisations function and develop.

- The Onion Model provides a structural view, looking beneath visible behaviour to deeper layers such as shared experience, and values. In this way, it helps explain why an organisation acts as it does.
- The Life Cycle Model adds a developmental perspective, showing how FOs may evolve over time from initial mobilisation through growth and consolidation to possible decline. This helps identify when opportunities or challenges are likely to arise.
- The Web of Knots focuses on interconnectedness. It shows how relationships and dependencies can create both stability as well as resistance to change, helping explain whether and why change may be difficult in practice.

Membership-based FOs differ fundamentally from other civil society organisations, such as NGOs. This creates specific challenges reflected in the models presented here. From the perspective of the Onion Model, FOs are typically grounded in values such as continuity, mutual support, and member well-being, whereas NGOs often derive their identity from promoting change and mobilisation. This can create tension when FOs are expected to act with similar dynamism. In terms of the Life Cycle Model, FOs tend to seek stability earlier and move more cautiously through phases of change. While this strengthens reliability and trust, it can also limit adaptability. Balancing external expectations with an internal focus on stability may become a key organisational challenge.



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Shaping the Food Systems of Tomorrow The Role of Farmer Organizations



CONCLUDING REMARKS



Farmers' organisations stand at the intersection of many defining questions of the present age: how food is produced, how rural livelihoods are sustained, how natural resources are managed, and how those who work the land are represented in public life. Their significance lies not only in what they do, but in what they enable. They empower individual farmers to act collectively, transform shared concerns into organised responses and build institutions that can provide continuity, representation, and direction over time.

This role of farmers' organisations is becoming more important, not less. Agriculture is being reshaped by climate change, demographic transition, environmental pressure, volatile markets, technological change, and geopolitical uncertainty. These forces have a profound impact on rural life and alter the conditions under which farming is carried out. In such a world, farmers' organisations are not peripheral actors. They form part of the social, economic, and political infrastructure required to ensure that farmers remain visible, capable and influential within the systems that affect them.

At the same time, farmers' organisations cannot be understood through a single model. They differ widely in origin, scale, purpose, legal form, governance, and capacity. Some emerge from local self-help and mutual support, others from established sector structures or wider policy processes. Some focus on markets and services, others on representation, technical support, or social solidarity. It is this diversity that reflects the realities in which farmers organise themselves. In addition, it also highlights something deeper: while no two organisations are identical, many are built on recognisable principles such as member ownership, legitimacy, accountability, cooperation, and representation.

The purpose of this handbook is to bring greater structure to the diversity without reducing it to rigid categories. Farmers'

organisations need to be understood from different but connected angles: by their purpose, by what they do, by how they are governed and managed, and by how they evolve over time. While such distinctions do not remove complexity, they can make it more manageable. They help to identify patterns, ask better questions and support more thoughtful decision-making. The aim is not to prescribe a single way of organising, but rather to provide guidance in an area where clarity is often required and oversimplification is rarely helpful.

However, what ultimately gives strength to a farmers' organisation cannot be reduced to structure alone. Their strength lies equally in the quality of its internal life: the trust of its members, the legitimacy of its leaders, the clarity of its purpose, the soundness of its governance and its ability to adapt without losing its core values. The organisations most likely to sustain and thrive are those that remain rooted in the needs and interests of their members while also responding to changing conditions. Stability matters, but so does renewal. Identity matters, but so does learning. Representation matters, but so does the capacity to act.

If these pages help sharpen that understanding, they will have served their purpose. It is hoped that this handbook will encourage some readers to organise where organisation is still weak, support others in strengthening what already exists, and provide to many a clearer language for reflecting on their own institutions. Farmers' organisations do not become strong by chance. They are built through patience, commitment, cooperation and a repeated effort to transform shared needs into a common vision. Wherever farmers organise themselves with shared purpose and determination, they build not only stronger institutions, but also the collective power to face change with greater agency and to actively shape what lies ahead.

Accountability:

The obligation of leaders, board members, managers, and staff to explain their decisions and actions and to be answerable to the members and the organisation. In a farmers' organisation, accountability ensures that power is exercised in the interest of the membership.

Advisory services:

Practical support and guidance provided to farmers or to the organisation, often on production, business management, markets, quality, safety and other matters. Advisory services may be delivered by the farmers' organisation itself or by external partners.

Advocacy:

Action taken to influence policies, laws, decisions, or public debate in favour of the interests of farmers. Advocacy usually includes developing positions, engaging decision-makers, and communicating clearly with members and external stakeholders.

Annual General Meeting (AGM):

The regular meeting of member farmer, usually held once a year, at which key decisions are taken. These often include approval of reports and accounts, elections, and discussion of the organisation's direction. Typically, it includes the General Assembly (GA).

Association, Farmers' Association:

A member-based organisation formed to represent and serve the shared interests of its members. In this handbook, associations are usually non-profit organisations focused on representation, services, knowledge-sharing, or member support.

Audit:

An independent review of financial records, accounts, and procedures in order to check accuracy, compliance, and proper use of funds. Audits are an important tool for transparency, oversight, and trust.

Bank, commercial bank, savings bank, cooperative bank, development bank:

Financial institutions that provide services such as accounts, payments, savings, and loans. Different types of banks serve different purposes, for example commercial banking, member-based finance, or development-oriented lending.

Benefit, economic:

A financial or business-related advantage that members gain through the organisation, such as better prices, lower input costs, improved market access, or value addition.

Benefit, political:

An advantage gained through representation, lobbying, or advocacy, such as fairer policies, better infrastructure, or stronger recognition of farmers' interests.

Benefit, social:

A benefit related to well-being, solidarity, inclusion, or community support. Social benefits may include mutual support, improved living conditions, or greater participation of women and youth.

Benefit, technical:

A benefit related to knowledge, skills, innovation, or better farming practice. Technical benefits often come through training, extension, advisory work, or improved coordination in the value chain.

Board:

The elected body responsible for strategic direction, oversight, and governance between general assemblies. The board acts on behalf of the members and is accountable to them.

Bookkeeping:

The systematic recording of financial transactions, such as income, expenditure, assets, and liabilities. Good bookkeeping is the basis for financial reporting, accountability, and control and an important component of financial stability of any organisation.

Business model:

The overall way in which an organisation creates value, covers its costs, and remains financially sustainable. For a farmers' organisation, this may combine member functions with income-generating services or commercial activities.

Business plan:

A practical and financial plan for a defined activity, service, investment, or a defined period of time. It usually sets out objectives, expected income and costs, financing needs, and implementation steps.

Business wings, Companies owned by FOs:

Separate (and often independent) commercial entities established by a farmer organisation in order to run business activities such as trading, processing, or service delivery. They may help generate income while the parent organisation continues to focus on membership and representation.

By-laws, rules of procedure:

Detailed internal rules that explain how an organisation operates in practice. They usually build on the constitution or statutes and cover issues such as meetings, conduct, elections, and responsibilities.

Capacity building:

The process of strengthening the skills, knowledge, systems, and structures needed for individuals or organisations to perform effectively. In this handbook, it often refers to strengthening both farmers and their organisations.

Capital, capitalisation:

The financial resources available to an organisation or business, whether from member contributions, retained earnings, loans, grants, or other sources. Capitalisation refers to building up this financial base.

Chambers:

Public or semi-public bodies that represent and support certain sectors, professions, or regions. Agriculture Chambers may provide technical advice, public functions, or representation in the agriculture sector, depending on the country context.

Clout:

Informal influence, weight, or authority in negotiations, public debate, or policy processes. A farmer organisation with strong clout is more likely to be heard and taken seriously.

Committee:

A smaller group established within an organisation to deal with a specific area of work, such as finance, audit, nominations, or certain technical matters. Committees support decision-making and oversight.

Commodity association, commodity organisation:

An organisation centred on a particular product or commodity, such as dairy products, coffee or rice. Such organisations often bring together stakeholders along the value chain to address technical, market, policy or coordination issues relating to that particular commodity.

Common Interest Group (CIG):

A group formed around a shared problem, opportunity, or interest. It may be informal or formal and often serves as a starting point for collective action.

Conflict of interest:

A situation in which a person's private interests, business interests, or loyalties may interfere with their duty to act in the best interest of the organisation. Such conflicts should be disclosed and managed transparently.

Constitution:

The main governing document of an organisation. It sets out its purpose, values, membership, structures, decision-making rules and key procedures. It establishes the organisation's legal and organisational foundation.

Cooperative, primary and secondary:

A cooperative is a member-owned and member-governed enterprise created to meet shared economic needs. A primary cooperative has individual members, while a secondary cooperative is made up of cooperatives or groups rather than individual farmers.

Council:

A representative body or forum used for consultation, coordination, advice, or oversight. The exact role of a council depends on the organisation and the legal or institutional context. In some cases, a council may function as a representative decision-making body at a particular level, for example a district council that resembles a parliament at district level. Or it may serve a more specialised purpose, such as a scientific or advisory council that provides expert input on technical matters, standards, research, or strategy.

Development bank:

A bank or financial institution that provides finance for long-term development goals, often with a focus on agriculture, infrastructure, or social impact. Development banks may work directly with organisations or through partner institutions.

Dividends:

A share of surplus or profit distributed to members or shareholders. In member-based economic organisations, dividends may be one way of returning value to members.

Donor:

An external organisation, institution, or funder that provides financial support, often for projects, programmes, or organisational development. Donor funding can be useful, but it should not undermine member ownership or independence.

Economies of scale:

Cost or efficiency advantages that arise when activities are carried out jointly or at larger scale. For farmer organisations, this may include joint purchasing, processing, storage, transport, or marketing.

Extension service:

Practical support provided to farmers to improve production, management, and decision-making. Extension may be public, private, or delivered through farmers' organisations themselves.

Farmers' organisation, FO:

A member-based organisation created, governed, and owned by farmers to serve their shared interests. This handbook focuses mainly on such organisations, including associations, cooperatives, unions, federations, and producer companies.

Federation and confederation:

Umbrella structures bring together several member organisations at a higher level. In a federation, member organisations delegate some of their decision-making power to a central body, enabling stronger coordination and more unified action. Federations are usually more centrally organised, while a confederation has a looser, more network-like structure with member organisations retaining greater autonomy and the central structure playing mainly a coordinating or representative role.

Financial sustainability:

The ability of an organisation to cover its costs and continue operating over time without constant crisis or dependency. In this handbook, it refers to maintaining a sound financial base for both member functions and service delivery.

Formal, formalisation:

Formal means recognised under law and operating as a registered legal entity. Formalisation is the process through which an informal group becomes formally constituted, adopts rules, and gains legal recognition.

General Assembly (GA):

The highest decision-making body of a member-based organisation. It is the place where members or delegates exercise ownership through elections, major decisions, and approval of reports.

**General-purpose organisation/
general-affairs farmers' organisation:**

A farmers' organisation that serves a broad farming constituency and addresses a wide range of issues rather than focusing on only one commodity or target group. Such organisations often play a major role in representation and advocacy.

Good governance:

The effective and accountable running of an organisation according to agreed rules, clear roles, transparency, member orientation, and fair decision-making. Good governance helps protect trust and legitimacy.

Grassroots:

The local member base of an organisation, especially ordinary farmers and community-level structures. A grassroots mandate means that leadership is rooted in and answerable to the people it represents.

Hybrid model:

An organisational arrangement that combines more than one legal or functional form, for example a non-profit membership body with a for-profit business entity. Hybrid models are often used to separate representation from commercial activity.

Internal energy:

The level of engagement, motivation, initiative, and effectiveness visible in the daily functioning of an organisation. In this handbook, internal energy ranges from inactivity to synergy and is used as an entry point for observing organisational performance.

Legal entity:

An organisation that is recognised by law as having its own rights and responsibilities. It can enter contracts, own assets, open bank accounts, hire staff, and be held accountable.

**Levels, local, district, sub-national,
national, regional, continental, global:**

The different geographic or political scales at which farmers organisations may operate. These levels affect representation, governance, advocacy, and service delivery.

Levy, voluntary or mandatory:

A contribution collected from members or value chain actors, often linked to production or sales, to finance an organisation or a shared function. Levies may be agreed voluntarily or required by law.

Life Cycle Model:

A model used in the handbook to describe how organisations develop over time, from early mobilisation through growth and performance to possible maturity, decline, and renewal. It helps explain why different stages require different structures and responses.

Lobbying:

Direct efforts to influence decision-makers, institutions, or policy processes in favour of a specific interest or position. In this handbook, lobbying is closely linked to advocacy but often refers more specifically to engagement with those in power.

Mandate:

The authority given to a leader, representative, or organisation to act on behalf of others. In a farmer organisation, a mandate should come from the members and reflect their interests and priorities. It provides the basis for legitimate decision-making, representation, and public action.

Membership:

The relationship through which an individual farmer, group, or organisation belongs to a farmer organisation and gains rights, responsibilities, and access to benefits. Membership is the foundation of legitimacy in member-based organisations.

Mission:

A short statement explaining why an organisation exists, who it serves and what it seeks to achieve. A mission statement provides practical direction and should remain aligned with an organisation's values and purpose.

Mutuals:

Member-based arrangements in which people pool resources to provide support or protection to one another, often around risk, savings, insurance, or social security. They are based on solidarity, shared responsibility, and mutual benefit, and can help members cope with hardship or uncertainty that would be difficult to manage individually.

Networks:

Looser forms of cooperation that connect organisations or individuals around shared interests, learning, or action. Networks often support exchange, coordination, and visibility without creating a strong central authority.

Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO):

A non-profit organisation that is independent of government and usually works towards social, development, humanitarian, environmental, or advocacy goals. Unlike member-based farmers' organisations, NGOs are not necessarily governed and controlled by the farmers they work with. They may be guided more by their founding mission, management, board, or by external funding than by direct member decisions.

Office bearers:

Elected persons who hold specific positions of responsibility within an organisation, such as chairperson, secretary, or treasurer. Their functions should be clearly defined in the organisation's rules.

Onion Model:

A model used in this handbook to understand an organisation's core character. It distinguishes between behaviour on the outside and deeper layers such as conditioning, organisational identity, and values.

Organic farming:

An approach to farming that avoids or limits the use of synthetic chemicals and instead relies on ecological principles, soil health and biodiversity. The exact definition may vary depending on the standards and certification systems in place.

Organisational identity:

How an organisation defines itself, whom it represents, and what role it sees for itself.

Oversight:

The process of checking, supervising and reviewing the use of authority and resources. It helps to ensure that decisions are implemented properly and that any misuse or problems are addressed.

Peer-to-peer learning:

Learning that takes place directly between farmers or practitioners through exchange of experience, demonstration, discussion, and joint reflection. It is often practical, trust-based, and well suited to farmers organisations.

Platforms, informal or formal:

Arrangements through which different actors come together around a shared issue, interest, or sector. A platform may be temporary and informal, for example for dialogue or coordination, or more permanent and institutionalised, with defined structures and roles.

Policy, policy paper:

Policy refers to a course of action or set of rules adopted by a government, organisation, or institution. A policy paper sets out a position, analysis, or proposal on a particular issue and may guide advocacy or internal decision-making.

Producer Business Group (PBG):

A group of farmers who come together for joint economic activity, such as marketing, input procurement, or production support. Such groups may remain informal or develop into more formal organisations.

Producer company, farmer producer company (FPC):

A legally recognised member-based business structure, that combines features of a company with farmer ownership and democratic principles. It is designed to support joint economic activity by producers.

Quorum:

The minimum number of members or delegates that must be present for a meeting or decision to be valid. Quorum rules protect the legitimacy of formal decisions.

Representation:

Acting on behalf of members in a legitimate and accountable manner. In a farming organisation, this means taking members' interests into account when making decisions and engaging in public debate.

Reserves:

Financial resources set aside for future needs, emergencies, investment, or stability. Building reserves helps an organisation cope with uncertainty and plan for the long term.

Resources, internal and external:

The means available to an organisation to function and develop. Internal resources come from the organisation itself, such as fees, staff time, or assets, while external resources come from outside, such as grants, partnerships, or loans.

SACCO: Savings and Credit Cooperative

Organisation: A member-based financial organisation in which members regularly pool their savings into a common fund and can then access loans or related financial services from that fund. In this way, members both contribute to and benefit from the shared pool, often on a rotating or needs basis. SACCOs can improve access to finance where formal banking services are limited or difficult to obtain.

Second track diplomacy:

Informal dialogue, lobbying and partnering outside of official government channels, often with non-state actors such as farming organisations, civil society groups, academics and business representatives. This approach is frequently employed when direct lobbying of the government is challenging, politically sensitive, or has reached its limits. In such cases, second-track diplomacy can help to open communication channels, build trust, influence thinking indirectly and prepare the ground for more formal negotiations or policy engagement.

Secretariat:

The professional administrative and operational structure of an organisation often consisting of management and staff. The secretariat supports the implementation, coordination and communication of decisions made by the board and general assembly, as well as day-to-day operations.

Self-help group:

A group formed by people facing a shared challenge and recognising that collective action can help them address it. Self-help groups are often a starting point for more structured organisation.

Service delivery:

The provision of practical benefits, services, or support to members, such as input supply, training, advisory work, marketing support, or access to finance. Service delivery is one of the core functions of many farmers' organisations.

Small-scale farmer:

A farmer operating on a relatively small area of land or with limited resources compared to larger commercial farms. The exact definition varies by country and context and does not automatically mean subsistence farming.

Specialised farmers' organisation:

A farmers' organisation focused on a specific commodity, target group, service, or shared challenge, such as women farmers, youth farmers, or dairy producers. Specialisation allows more tailored support and stronger focus.

Stakeholders:

Individuals, groups, or institutions that have an interest in the work, decisions, or outcomes of an organisation. In the case of farmer organisations, stakeholders may include members, government, businesses, donors, financial institutions, and civil society actors.

Statutes:

The formal rules of an organisation, often similar in function to a constitution depending on the legal system. They typically define the organisation's purpose, structures, membership, governance, and decision-making procedures.

Strategy:

The chosen path by which an organisation seeks to achieve its mission and move towards its vision. A strategy sets priorities, makes choices, and guides action over a defined period.

Study group:

An informal group that comes together to explore, test, and discuss a specific topic, product, or technical issue. Study groups are often used for innovation, shared learning, and problem-solving. In many cases, they also form the foundation for more formal and larger forms of organisation, when a shared interest grows into sustained cooperation or collective action.

Value addition:

Activities that increase the value of a product beyond primary production, for example processing, grading, packaging, branding, or certification. Value addition can improve income, market access, and competitiveness.

Value chain:

The full sequence of activities and actors involved in taking a product from its initial production stage through to storage, processing, distribution, retail and final consumption. When looking downstream, the value chain follows the product from production towards the consumer. When looking upstream, it traces needs, demand or services back from the market or consumer towards production. Adopting a value chain perspective helps organisations to understand where value is created, lost or negotiated, and how different actors are linked along the chain.

Vision:

A short statement describing the desired future that an organisation is working towards. The vision should be ambitious enough to inspire, but also realistic enough to remain feasible and practical. Furthermore, it should be clear enough to guide collective effort and help members recognise the future the organisation wants to build.

Web of Knots:

A model used in this handbook to show how an organisation is held together by relationships, routines, dependencies, and institutional arrangements. It helps explain both resilience and resistance to change.

Work plan:

A practical plan that translates strategy into concrete activities, responsibilities, timelines, and resources. It helps the organisation move from intention to implementation.

A	AA	Agri Agency	C	CIG	Common Interest Group
	ACPCU	Ankole Coffee Producers' Cooperative Union		CLG	Company limited by guarantee
	AFA	Asian Farmers' Association for Sustainable Rural Development		CNCR	Conseil National de Concertation et de Coopération des Ruraux/ Senegal National Council for Concertation and Rural Cooperation
	AFASA	African Farmers Association of South Africa		COP	Conference of Parties
	AFDI	Agriculteurs Français et Développement International		COVID	Coronavirus Disease
	AGM	Annual General Meeting		CRM	Customer-Relation-Management
	AgriBEE	Agricultural broad-based economic empowerment		CUMA	Coopérative d'utilisation de matériel Agricole
	AHA	Andreas Hermes Akademie			
	AI	Artificial Intelligence			
	ANOPER	Association Nationale des Organisations Professionnelles d'Éleveurs de Ruminants/ Association Nationale des Organisations Professionnelles d'Éleveurs de Ruminants		D	DBV
	ASUF	Agri-Sector Unity Forum	DGRV	Deutscher Genossenschafts- und Raiffeisenverband	
B	BATNA	Best alternative to a negotiated agreement	E	EAC	East African Community
	BDAI	Biodynamic Association of India		EAFF	East African Farmers' Federation
	BDL	Bund der Deutschen Landjugend/German Rural Youth Association		ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
	BMLEH	German Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Regional Identity		ESNAU	Eswatini National Agricultural Union
	BMZ	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development		EU	European Union
C	CACVRA	Cooperativa Agraria Cafetalera Valle Río Apurímac Ltda, Peru	F	FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
	CBO	Community-based Organisation		FATIMA MPC FATIMA	Multi-Purpose Primary Cooperative
	CEJA	Conseil Européen des Jeunes Agriculteur/European Council of Young Farmers		FNSEA	Fédération nationale des syndicats d'exploitants agricoles/National Federation of Agricultural Holders' Unions
	CEO	Chief Executive Officer		FO	Farmers' organisation
	CFS	Committee for Food Security		FPC	Farmers' Producer Company (India)
	CGIAR	Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research			
				G	GA
			GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit	

I	ICA	International Cooperative Alliance	R	R&D	Research and Development
	IDF	International Dairy Federation		RFO	Regional Farmers' Organisation
	IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development		ROPPA	Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et des Producteurs Agricoles
	IFRIZ-M	Interprofession de la Filière de Riz au Mail		ROPSA-B	Réseau des Organisations Paysannes pour une Synergie d'Action au Burkina
	INOFO	Intercontinental Network of Organic Farmers' Organisations		<hr/>	
IT	Information Technology	<hr/>			
K	KENAFF	Kenyan National Farmers' Federation	S	SAAI	Southern African Agri Initiative
	KLPA	Kenya Livestock Producer Association		SAAPA	South African Agro-Processors Association
	KSh	Kenyan Shilling		SAAU	South African Agricultural Union
<hr/>			SACAU	Southern African Confederation of Agricultural Unions	
L	L&A	Lobby and Advocacy	SACCO	Saving and Credit Cooperative	
	LDCs	Least-Developed-Countries	SADC	Southern African Development Community	
	LTO	Land- en Tuinbouw Organisatie/ Dutch national farmers' organization	SRA	Sociedad Rural Argentina	
<hr/>			SUWFI	Specific Union for Productive Farmer Women in Jordan	
M	MarCCO	Matulatlula Agrarian Reform Community Cooperative	<hr/>		
	<hr/>			T	TAHA
N	NAFU	National African Farmers' Union	TAU	Transvaal Agricultural Union	
	NASFAM	National Union of Small-Scale Farmers of Malawi	<hr/>		
	NCFC	National Council of Farmer Cooperatives	U	UMNAGRI	L'Union Maghrébine et Nord-Africaine des Agriculteurs/ Maghrebien and North African Farmers Union
	NFU	National Farmers Union	UN	United Nations	
	NGO	Non-governmental organisation	UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change	
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O	OD	Organisational Development	V	VSLA	Village Savings and Loan Association
	OHADA	Organisation pour l'harmonisation en Afrique du droit des affaires/Organization for the Harmonization of Business Law in Africa		<hr/>	
<hr/>			W	WFO	World Farmers' Organisation
P	PAFO	Panafrican Farmers' Organisation	WFP	UN World Food Programme	
	PLC	Public limited companies	WLW	Westfälisch-Lippischer Landwirtschaftsverband/ Westphalian Farmers' Association	
	PROPAC	Plateforme Régionale des Organisations Paysannes d'Afrique Centrale	<hr/>		

