

Scaling up note



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Mauritania - Agricultural Rehabilitation Programme II

The context

In recent years, Mauritania has enjoyed political stability, with the June 2014 presidential elections taking place peacefully. In addition, the country registered a robust growth rate of 6.7 per cent in 2013 and continues to be characterized by macroeconomic stability. The country, however, remains exposed to vulnerabilities related to lack of diversification, international price volatility and reliance on foreign inflows. While it has succeeded in increasing per capita income in recent years, income distribution has remained relatively unchanged for the last two decades, and the challenges of unemployment remain daunting. Sound management of natural resources is essential to foster inclusive and long-term growth.

Despite robust economic growth, Mauritania's poverty rate remains high, particularly in rural areas. The main constraints to poverty reduction are the low productivity of the rural economy, a lack of human capital-intensive sectors, governance issues, the quality of public services and vulnerability to exogenous shocks. Poverty rates have, however, declined over the last decade or so, and Mauritania's human development index moved up from 0.424 to 0.487 between 2004 and 2014, compared with an average of 0.502 for sub-Saharan Africa.

Key elements of IFAD's country programme

IFAD plays a leading role in agriculture and rural development issues in Mauritania. IFAD-supported interventions in Mauritania have allowed IFAD to develop particular expertise and insights in a number of sectors such as community-driven development (CDD), building rural microfinance services, agricultural production and food security. The purpose of the country programme is to build inclusive and sustainable institutional systems supported by pro-poor investments, policies and relevant innovation and learning engagements. The programme has the following three strategic objectives: (i) strengthen the institutions of the rural poor using CDD approaches; (ii) promote sustainable rural financial services; and (iii) achieve sustainable agricultural development and food security.

There are currently two projects: the Poverty Reduction Project in Aftout South and Karakoro – Phase II (PASK II) and the Value Chains Development Programme for Poverty Reduction (ProLPRAF).

Scaling up in community-based institutions in Mauritania

Between the late 1960s and mid-1980s, Mauritania suffered from successive droughts that forced people living in the oasis regions to migrate in search of a better life elsewhere. As a result, the oases became abandoned and local economies suffered significantly.

IFAD was the first major development partner to invest in the oasis regions of Mauritania, starting with the Agricultural Rehabilitation Programme (Oasis I) from 1986 to 1993. However, it was only during subsequent projects, namely the Oasis Development Project (Oasis II, 1995- 2003) and the Oasis Sustainable Development Programme (PDDO, 2005-2014) that IFAD introduced a successful innovation: the Participatory Oasis Management Associations (in French, *Association de gestion participative des oasis*, or AGPO). These community-based organizations have played a central role in the development of each oasis and continue to do so. All IFAD-funded activities during Oasis II and PDDO were planned and implemented through AGPOs. AGPOs are of various sizes, covering one or several oases and bringing together 50 to 400 families. By September 2014, 96 AGPOs had been established, with more than 135,000 members.

As a result of IFAD's long-term support, AGPOs and their unions have become a credible – and often the only – development partner and interlocutor at the oasis level in Mauritania. They are an excellent example of community-based institutions supported by IFAD that have been able to scale up through influencing policies, leveraging additional resources and fostering learning. AGPOs have increasingly been able to: (i) play a role in setting the development agenda at the oasis level; (ii) mobilize resources; (iii) implement development activities; and (iv) establish partnerships to access technical expertise and knowledge and build social and political capital.

Much capacity-building was needed in order for AGPOs to mature. Attention was given to the following areas: (i) managing the association in a participatory manner; (ii) ensuring that clear mandates and transparent rules and procedures were in place; (iii) project management; (iv) financial management and community-based procurement; (v) building the capacity of new members of the AGPO executive office; and (vi) establishing partnerships to ensure the delivery of quality services.

AGPOs whose capacities have been strengthened are now able to scale up activities that have been supported by IFAD in their communities, and will continue to be able to do so in the future. Once AGPOs are considered mature according to a number of socio-economic criteria as identified in Box 1, their experience can be scaled up.

There is the opportunity for mutual exchange between mature AGPOs and the municipality. Some AGPO executive officers are members of the municipal council. This is a crucial condition for deeper engagement and for securing funding from other actors at the local level. For example, when the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) decided to implement development activities and consulted with the Wali of Tagant, it was directed to the AGPO as the unique development partner at the oasis level. The AGPOs' capacity to engage with other stakeholders is the fruit of the projects' extensive policy dialogue, which was followed by the passing of specific legal frameworks. For example, to successfully consolidate and scale up AGPOs, it was necessary to pass laws that regulate AGPOs (Law No. 1998.016) and the *Mutuelles d'investissement et de crédit oasien* (MICOs) (Law No. 2007.005) (see Box 3).

IFAD-supported programmes were able to attract additional financing from the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development to continue financing investment projects in the oases. Furthermore, the AGPO unions are involved in the design and implementation of the IFAD-supported, pro-poor ProLPRAF. The AGPO unions of Adrar, Assaba and Hodh have obtained grant funding from the United States African Development Foundation to invest in strengthening vegetable and date value chains. These unions signed an agreement in 2014 with Ecodev, a Mauritanian NGO, and established an informal association. This association is headed on a yearly rotational basis by the head of each union. It is expected that this partnership will further strengthen the AGPO unions and allow them to assist their member AGPOs in linking with agricultural commodity value chains. Through the value chain projects, there is an ongoing effort to attract private-sector investment in the oasis regions.

Strategy for scaling up

Building robust AGPOs requires time. On average, it has taken IFAD-supported projects four to five years to make sure AGPOs reach a certain degree of organizational and technical maturity. Once they have reached that stage, they can aggregate into a union.

Box 1. Essential criteria for scaling up

Certain criteria should be used to assess if an AGPO can be scaled up, namely:

- The oasis should extend over a geographic area that is not too large in order to facilitate information-sharing and to hold meetings.
- At least 60 families should be living on a permanent basis in the oasis.
- There should be at least 1,000 palm trees in the oasis.
- The oasis should have an underground water source that can be used for irrigation purposes.
- There should be public infrastructure, such as a school, health clinic, etc.
- There should be a certain degree of social cohesion in the oasis.
- The AGPO should consist of at least 160 members.

Although the process of scaling up community-based organizations is usually seen as being a linear one, as illustrated in Figure 1, in reality it may be non-linear, as was the case in Mauritania where, due to political and social unrest, the performance of certain AGPOs deteriorated to the extent that they became ineligible for further funding and for membership in the union.

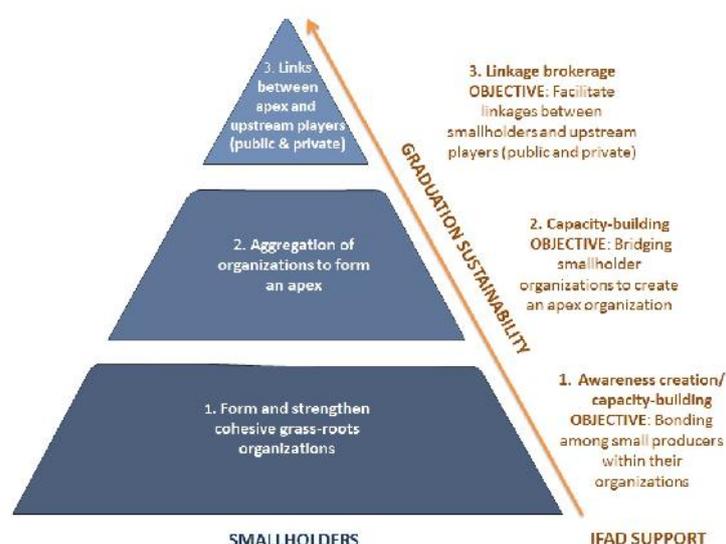


Figure 1: The scaling-up process for grass-roots organizations

Furthermore, scaling up needs to take place on two levels: horizontal and vertical. In Mauritania, horizontal scaling up took place by expanding: (i) the number of AGPO members; (ii) the number of activities implemented directly by the AGPO (both investments and income-generating activities – see Box 2); and (iii) the number of AGPOs formed in each region. While Oasis II established 65 AGPOs, under PDDO the number increased to 96 AGPOs.

Box 2. Scaling up of activities by the AGPO in Lehweitat

The AGPO in Lehweitat has successfully scaled up its income-generating activities (IGAs). Although PDDO initially provided financial support for a number of activities, the AGPO used profits from their IGAs to sustain and expand the number and type of activities they were involved in. Currently, the AGPO is involved in a wide range of businesses, such as a butchery, a bakery, a chicken farm and provision of electricity. These activities ensure a steady income for the AGPO that allows for further investment.

Vertical scaling up took place by aggregating the AGPOs into unions. The AGPOs formed four unions (in the regions of Adrar, Assaba, Tagant and Hodh). The fact that these unions were established on the initiative of the AGPOs gives them a very solid basis.

Wilaya (region)	Date union established	Number of AGPO members in union
Adrar	2001	26*
Assaba	2001	24
Hodh (East and West)	2007	19
Tagant	2004	28

* One AGPO in Adrar is a member of the union but is not supported by an IFAD-funded project.

The unions provide different services to their members, including the following: (i) capacity-building and training; (ii) exchange of experiences among various AGPOs; (iii) facilitating access to agricultural inputs; (iv) facilitating dialogue between farmers and other value chain actors, in particular wholesalers and traders in cities; (v) aggregating the input demands of the farmers; (vi) overseeing market access (e.g. the union in Adrar has a truck to pick up and transport produce to the markets, as well as a storage facility); (vii) managing conflicts (e.g. the union in Tagant has successfully mediated conflicts in some AGPOs in its region); and (viii) establishing new AGPOs.

In Mauritania, IFAD has followed three complementary pathways for scaling up: (i) policy dialogue, (ii) projects and (iii) knowledge management.

Policy dialogue

Legal recognition was a crucial element in the scaling up of the AGPOs. It enabled them to open bank accounts, be the recipients of funds from different partners and be credible interlocutors with the local government, and ensured their sustainability.

Box 3. Legal and institutional separation of AGPOs and MICOs

Initially, AGPOs were implementing microfinance activities through their MICOs, which were an integral part of the AGPO. However, the roles and responsibilities associated with implementing investment and financial activities needed to be separate. As a result, a law was passed to regulate the microfinance sector, which required that AGPOs and MICOs be separate institutions, each with their own management team. This also allowed for separate funding for collective activities by AGPOs (e.g. building or rehabilitating collective wells, setting up IGAs for cooperatives) and for loans benefitting individuals (e.g. a loan for purchasing fuel, or a solar energy panel for an individual household).

Policy dialogue also focused on delineating the geographical limits of each AGPO, which helps to guide investment decisions in the future.¹ Lastly, IFAD sought to formally integrate AGPOs in the decentralization process in order to ensure their sustainability.

Projects

AGPOs are involved in the implementation of ongoing IFAD-financed projects, such as ProLPRAF. To ensure sustainability, much emphasis has been put on strengthening partnerships between AGPOs and the government, donors, or private and civil society actors. In addition, AGPOs have been able to mobilize financial resources through several innovative IGAs.

Knowledge management

Knowledge-sharing took place in two ways: from oasis to oasis and from project to project.

Oasis-to-oasis learning. At the oasis level, several good practices exist that relate to investment activities, financial management, conflict resolution, management of AGPOs, and partnerships with external entities (donors, NGOs and municipalities). AGPOs had the opportunity to share their experiences during regional meetings organized by the project or by the AGPO unions. Exchanges also took place during regular trips of project staff and union staff to various AGPOs. The success of AGPOs in the oases generated a demand for assistance from neighbouring oases to set up their own AGPOs. However, in the case of some weak AGPOs, financing was withheld, sending a strong signal to show that reform was needed (see Box 4).

Box 4. Use of the “carrot and the stick” as an incentive to reform

PDDO effectively used the carrot and the stick to encourage weak AGPOs and an AGPO union to make necessary changes.

In Tagant, the performance of the Eshima AGPO had worsened significantly due to internal conflicts. PDDO stopped financing the organization for several years. This forced the AGPO to reflect upon its internal situation, and with the mediation of the union of the Tagant AGPOs, the Eshima AGPO members decided to put their differences aside and focus on the development of their oasis.

Similarly, PDDO signed contracts with two AGPO unions and eventually with the AGPO union in Tagant for strengthening the capacities of their member AGPOs. Initially, PDDO had been prevented from signing a contract with the union in Tagant due to internal conflicts within the union. This led to a change in the union's executive committee, after which capacity-building activities could then be organized.

¹ Currently, the AGPOs do not know where the geographical limits of each oasis are. This inhibits the AGPOs from investing in physical infrastructure, as it is unclear whether the physical infrastructure would be located within the geographical limits of the oasis. Policy dialogue, which might eventually lead to a legal framework, is needed to clarify this issue at the oasis level.

Project-to-project learning. Knowledge is not confined to one project but spans several successive projects (see Box 5). An evaluation of Oasis I carried out in 1992 concluded that many of its achievements were not sustainable due to the weakness of grass-roots organizations and the low participation of the targeted populations. As a result, subsequent IFAD-supported projects focused on ensuring the effective participation of beneficiaries in setting priorities and in planning, implementing and monitoring project activities. Furthermore, experiences from Oasis II showed that financial resources for implementing planned activities needed to be foreseen, which led to the setting up of an investment fund in PDDO. Lastly, lessons learned from PDDO led to legislation that separated AGPOs and MICOs. The lessons learned and the knowledge acquired were incorporated in successive IFAD-supported projects, building on the experiences of Oasis I, Oasis II and PDDO.

Box 5: Lessons learned from OASIS II and PDDO

Oasis II and PDDO have been instrumental in the establishment of AGPOs. Below are some key lessons that can be applied by future projects.

Participatory process. Oasis II and PDDO followed a highly participatory process to establish AGPOs and assisted them in developing their action plans and priorities. The process promoted democratic procedures, which included holding general assemblies twice a year, holding elections to appoint AGPO executive office staff every two years, establishing procurement committees, and promoting transparency and information-sharing. The result was that AGPOs became sustainable rural institutions capable of self-management even after the project ended.

Interlinkages between different project activities. AGPOs benefitted from different and interlinked activities that reinforced each other. The capacity development activities were complemented by capacity-building in finance for investment implementation and in IGAs. MICOs provided the opportunity to engage in village banking activities ranging from opening and managing savings accounts to microfinance.

Flexibility in the design was key to the AGPOs' success. The projects set the framework; however, AGPOs were given extensive leeway to decide on many issues. For example, each AGPO set its membership fees and the rules for IGAs. This led to greater ownership, as well as to innovation at the AGPO level. Another example is the decrease in the AGPO's counterpart funding from 30 to 15 per cent in order to better reflect the poverty levels in the oases.

The role of the project team is not to be underestimated in the successful scaling up of AGPOs. The team's physical proximity, dedication and knowledge were crucial in building the AGPOs' capacities and in addressing challenges as soon as they arose. The capacity-building team was composed of three project staff at the regional level: one responsible for AGPOs, one working with MICOs and one responsible for promoting gender issues and literacy. The team played the role of "catalyst" through a mix of methods such as coaching, mentoring, counselling, on-the-job training and process advising.

Drivers and spaces for scaling up

To establish and scale up AGPOs, favourable conditions need to exist (or be created) and obstacles need to be removed. The primary drivers and spaces for scaling up AGPOs in Mauritania are the following:

Institutional space

Institutional space covers both the enabling national policies and the AGPO as an institution – its capacities and its governance.

Developing supportive national policies and frameworks. As mentioned earlier, a major driver of scaling up AGPOs has been the supportive policies and legal frameworks that were put in place. Continuous policy dialogue is necessary to determine if there is a need to develop additional legal frameworks (e.g. adapting the law governing the AGPO unions in order to take into account the confederation of unions being established).

Continuous strengthening of the capacities of AGPOs. Three types of capacity-building are required. One type deals with the process of working together as an organization (participation, planning, information-sharing, democratic processes). The second type deals with organizational skills (establishing specialized subcommittees, procurement, monitoring, bookkeeping, etc.). The third type involves building technical skills in order to improve agricultural production, design IGAs and oversee microfinance activities. To ensure continuous capacity-building, PDDO ensured that each AGPO had a subcommittee responsible for capacity-building.

Promoting transparency and good governance. Transparency is key to preventing potential conflict and to ensuring that all funding is used in an appropriate manner. All AGPOs provide public information regarding their number of adherents (disaggregated by gender), number and type of activities, funding received per activity, etc.

Furthermore, the membership of AGPOs should be open, general assemblies and executive office elections need to be held regularly, and procurement processes need to be applied in a transparent manner.

Financial/fiscal space

Ensuring sufficient financial resources is crucial for AGPOs. Funds can be mobilized from government or donors, or can be leveraged from private and civil society actors. Some AGPOs have been successful in mobilizing resources from a variety of partners, from NGOs (e.g. World Vision) to bilateral donors (e.g. JICA) to United Nations agencies (e.g. UNESCO).

However, the resources that make scaling up possible mostly come from AGPOs themselves and as a result of their integration into the municipal development plans. Due to the flexibility given to AGPOs for implementing their development plans, they have been able to mobilize financial resources through several innovative IGAs implemented by cooperatives, with the profits split between the cooperatives' members and the AGPO. These IGAs contribute to the AGPOs' sustainability and provide them with additional funds for scaling up and implementing the additional activities envisaged in their development plans. Furthermore, some AGPOs have been able to mobilize resources from local governments (see Box 6).

Box 6. Innovative partnerships with local governments

In Lehwitat (Tagant), the AGPO and the municipality entered into an innovative partnership to solve the problem of livestock wandering into fields and destroying crops. The AGPO, with IFAD support, fenced in an area where the stray animals would be brought. The owner would have to come and pay a fee – set by the municipality – to get his/her animal back. This fee is collected by the municipality, which transfers it to the AGPO for funding investment activities in the oasis.

Also in Tagant, the previous mayor of Nbeika municipality had refused to allow AGPOs to participate as organized structures in a fair for cereal production. However, he did allow producers to participate as individuals. In the following municipal elections, he was voted out of office by the seven AGPOs in the municipality and replaced by another mayor. This has resulted in a new partnership whereby the new mayor not only allows AGPOs to participate collectively as an organization but also has put in place a system for purchasing the AGPOs' cereal production, which is later sold at a good price to the Commissariat à la Sécurité Alimentaire, guaranteeing AGPOs a fixed income.

Political space

Continuous political will for developing the oasis regions is needed both at the national and local levels. Through the establishment of the unions, the AGPOs have increased their influence in policymaking processes and in market operations at the local, regional and national levels.

Political power is ensured by virtue of the increasing number of AGPOs and their collective bargaining power. Special attention must be given to avoiding political conflicts within the AGPO. The AGPO unions are increasingly able to step in and assist their member AGPOs to manage and resolve conflicts, such as was the case in Tagant where the union helped the Eshima AGPO.

Cultural space

Fighting illiteracy. A major obstacle to scaling up is the high illiteracy rate in the oasis region. As part of the capacity-building and empowerment activities offered by the projects, literacy classes were offered to both women and men. This contributed to the AGPO members' ability to hold the AGPO executive office accountable and to oversee the activities being implemented.

Promoting the inclusion of women. Due to male migration to urban areas, women make up the majority of the population in the oases. Promotion of women's cooperatives has played a key role in increasing the membership of the AGPOs and in introducing IGAs managed by women.

Partnerships

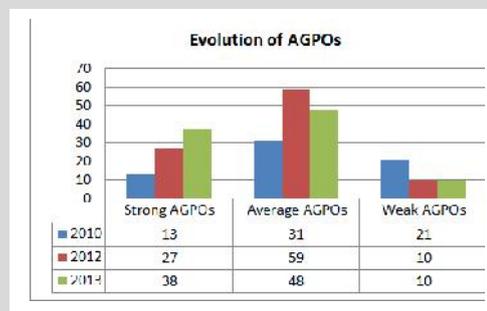
Building and strengthening partnerships is an important driver of the scaling-up process. The AGPOs have established technical partnerships with the Department of Statistics for collecting data regarding livestock, agricultural production, population, infrastructure and area cultivated in each oasis. In addition, most AGPOs have managed to establish a relationship with the municipality. They tend to share their development plans with the municipality, and some AGPO members are also part of the municipal council. Linkages with the municipality serve two important goals: (i) to include the AGPO's action plan in the municipal development plan; and (ii) to obtain financial and technical support from the municipality.

Monitoring and evaluation

Under PDDO, ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the performance of AGPOs has created healthy competition among them (see Box 7). It allows for the identification of areas where capacity needs to be strengthened and also for determining if an AGPO is eligible to become a member of the union. These assessments have been carried out jointly by PDDO and the unions.

Box 7: Annual AGPO evaluation – an example of healthy competition

PDDO signed an agreement with the unions to carry out a yearly assessment of the AGPOs, looking at the following criteria: (i) organizational strength, (ii) financial management, (iii) dynamism and (iv) natural resource management. AGPOs were ranked according to their maturity (A = a strong AGPO, B = an average AGPO and C = a weak AGPO). This has created a healthy competition among the AGPOs.



A monitoring system should be set up to ensure that spaces (institutional, political, financial, etc.) have been created to allow scaling up of the model. Monitoring the outcomes of the AGPOs' activities is important in order to support them in case of challenges that may arise (e.g. change in leadership, internal conflicts, etc.) and to capture and share good practices. Monitoring and evaluation databases should be set up at the regional level as well as national level. Indicators should monitor both horizontal and vertical scaling up.

Horizontal scaling up

- number of members in AGPOs and the trend (whether membership is increasing or decreasing)
- number/diversity of activities implemented by each AGPO
- number of AGPOs in each region
- partnerships established with municipalities (and other partners) and funding received.

Vertical scaling up

- number of AGPOs in each union and the trend (whether membership is increasing or decreasing)
- number of AGPOs benefiting from services offered by unions
- type of services offered by unions.

Key lessons for scaling up in the country

- Scaling up the establishment and capacity-building of AGPOs is a non-linear process and requires a long time frame (approximately 15 years). Close monitoring is essential to address in a timely manner specific challenges that an AGPO might face.
- Strengthening AGPOs, consolidating AGPOs and managing their internal conflicts require a specific set of skills. Both project and union staff can play the role of catalysers through coaching, mentoring, counselling, on-the-job training and advising.
- Scaling up requires a combination of mutually reinforcing interventions, such as institutional capacity-building, funding for implementation of investments and IGAs, access to microfinance, conflict resolution and capacity to establish partnerships.
- Legal recognition of AGPOs, which grants them the right to organize, implement and manage resources, is an essential element in promoting ownership and implementing medium- and long-term development strategies.

- Once AGPOs achieve a certain level of maturity and reach a critical mass, they tend to spontaneously organize themselves into a union.
- The aim is for the AGPO unions to develop their own capacity to monitor, support, train and provide services to their member AGPOs, and to have the capacity to obtain direct financing either from the government, donors, partners or directly from their members.
- The institutional driver of change has been critical to scaling up. The institutional pathway to scaling up does not necessarily lead to short-term results but enables the pace to accelerate once the institutional infrastructure is in place. The project started slowly but grew exponentially. The institutional pathway also enabled scaling-up results by increasing the scope of AGPO activities. Indeed, scaling up in the project has taken place along all four scaling-up dimensions – quantitative, functional, political (removal of regulatory barriers to AGPOs, promoting more transparent governance) and organizational.
- The sustainability of the project arrangements needs to be carefully thought through, and this has multiple aspects. One anecdote on financial sustainability shows AGPOs providing resources themselves, integrating their activities into municipal development plans and mobilizing resources from local governments. The link between AGPOs and the formal system of subnational government is particularly important, as is the use of AGPOs by the country's other partners. Sustainability is also strengthened by increasing the political power of AGPOs.

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International Fund for Agricultural Development
Via Paolo di Dono, 44 - 00142 Rome, Italy
Tel: +39 06 54591 - Fax: +39 06 5043463
E-mail: ifad@ifad.org

www.ifad.org
www.ruralpovertyportal.org

ifad-un.blogspot.com

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www.youtube.com/user/ifadTV

Originator

Philippe Remy

Country Programme Manager
West and Central Africa Division
E-mail: p.remy@ifad.org

Contact

Maria-Elena Mangiafico

Knowledge Management and Grants Officer
Policy and Technical Advisory Division
E-mail: m.mangiafico@ifad.org

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