



Investing in rural people

# Empowering through collective action

by  
Pierre-Marie Bosc

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**Author:**

Pierre-Marie Bosc

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## About the author

**Pierre-Marie Bosc** is a senior researcher at the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development [Centre de Coopération Internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement] (CIRAD) in Montpellier, France. After coordinating several multi-author reviews on the contribution of agronomic research to innovation and development processes in sub-Saharan Africa, he undertook research aimed at achieving a better understanding of the nature and roles of rural producers' organizations in development. He participated in the revision of the World Bank Rural Development Strategy (2002) and was part of a team contributing to the *World Development Report 2008* on these issues. His thesis, published in 2005, explores the conditions that allow a farmers' organization to improve the management of natural resources under customary rules. With others, he conceived (1997) and directed (2002-2005) a research programme in CIRAD called Family Agriculture and Globalization. He initiated, as scientific coordinator, the World Agricultures Watch international initiative (the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], IFAD and France), which monitors structural transformations in agriculture in order to feed relevant information into policy debates. In 2013, he coordinated the preparation of a report of the High-level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition to the Committee on World Food Security and the FAO regarding the constraints on investments in smallholder agriculture. For 2014, the International Year of Family Farming, he coordinated and contributed to several contributed books on family farming from a worldwide perspective. Since 2017 he has coordinated the World Agricultures Watch Initiative at FAO seconded by the French Government.

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# Abstract

In development studies, collective action often appears as a condition for achieving long-term ownership of development-oriented actions. Here, collective action is considered as a condition for the expansion of individual strategies. We also view collective action as a product of individuals getting together to achieve some common goal and thus accepting the constraints linked to collective action.

This paper explores the conditions for collective action to generate inclusion when agriculture transforms. Changes related to agricultural transformation have often led to urban migration for those rural and agricultural populations that could not cope with “modernization.” In the coming decades, agricultural transformation in rural areas may lead to more varied responses such as new farming patterns including more labour and thus require a broader diversity of collective action.

We consider households as the basic level where decisions are taken regarding domestic and economic activities: any improvement in one of these spheres will benefit the other. Improvements in households will also depend on other levels of investment: in local communities, in various interlinked sectors and by developing vertical linkages with other levels of organization, up to national policy level.

Based on a range of theoretical and empirical references, we propose a framework that goes beyond sector-oriented perspectives, linking several interconnected domains where collective action can make a contribution towards inclusion. In each of these domains, collective action could usefully focus on three main areas that potentially influence those domains: public goods provision, expanding opportunities (livelihood diversification and community infrastructure), and challenging current norms and behaviours.

We then explore how to operationalize this collective action framework to generate inclusion at local level across sector-oriented interventions, including by developing linkages with higher levels of organization, up to social movements. What is at stake is the ability of research and policymaking to support initiatives that cut across sectoral frontiers, favour interactions that open local people up to new ideas and beliefs, and look to bridge gaps in social status and between local and global thinking.

# 1 Setting the stage

## The challenge of inclusion can be met through collective action

If we consider organization as a general form of collective action, we may say that organization has been closely intertwined with agriculture since its origins, required to deal with heavy and repetitive work (e.g. slashing forest or fallow vegetation), peak labour times (weeding, planting or harvesting, depending on the crops) and landscape management (improving plants' growing conditions). These types of collective action mainly developed within localities, relying on kin and proximity relationships.

During the twentieth century, agriculture was deeply transformed and collective action also changed profoundly; new forms of collective action took place, and organizations and institutions were created to face new conditions, specifically through market integration. These transformations modified farming conditions mostly in developed countries. Globally, rural areas had to adapt to changes in their societies, but the adaptation required was particularly pronounced in the agricultural sector. Organizations became more complex, following the agricultural development pathway created by market integration.

The agricultural organizations of major Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries became world champions. Some developed, diversifying their assets and areas of investment, and are now able to compete with corporations. Outside agriculture, the cooperative movement grew rapidly in a wide range of sectors (health, insurance, saving and banking, housing, etc.), some of them having millions of members.

We will not expand on these achievements, since they are already well known and widely documented.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, we underline the following key points:

- The strongly imbalanced social and economic development of organizations, cooperatives and associations across the world: unlike in top-ranking OECD countries, where organizations created through collective action mechanisms have become powerful players, in most of the developing world they are barely emerging.
- The low level of organization has well-known causes, most of which are to be found in the weakness of the institutional framework and the failure – in too many situations – to rapidly set up the necessary rule of law.

1. The following is to illustrate the availability of data, although improvements are needed to obtain information that is more accurate (see the International Labour Organization website: [www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/areas-of-work/WCMS\\_550541/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/areas-of-work/WCMS_550541/lang--en/index.htm)). For quantitative data on the social and solidarity economy in France, for instance, see [www.cncres.org/upload/gedit/12/file/observatoire/L'ESS%20en%20France-Chiffres%20cl%C3%A9s%202013-CNCRES.pdf](http://www.cncres.org/upload/gedit/12/file/observatoire/L'ESS%20en%20France-Chiffres%20cl%C3%A9s%202013-CNCRES.pdf). For global key figures on the cooperative movement in France, see [www.entreprises.coop/english-version/key-figures.html](http://www.entreprises.coop/english-version/key-figures.html). For agricultural cooperatives achievements in France, see Coop de France (2014). At the global level, a recent assessment for the United Nations secretariat is available: [www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/2014/coopsegm/grace.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/2014/coopsegm/grace.pdf). For credit unions worldwide, the World Council of Credit Unions provides annual statistical briefs: [www.woccu.org/publications/statreport](http://www.woccu.org/publications/statreport).

- Despite decades of rhetoric on the “need to get people organized,” top-down support initiatives, and administrative and political interference, have undermined the development of strong organizations (Bosc et al., 2002).

In most countries, exclusion in rural areas is concentrated in several common forms. Exclusion deprives a large proportion of the world’s population of basic conditions for well-being and of access to public goods and services, as well as to economic opportunities. Widespread poverty, including poverty caused by intrahousehold, intragenerational and gender discrimination, prevails in terms of access to assets, opportunities to make one’s voice heard, and decision-making on social and economic matters.

In the context of globalization, characterized by greater instability and competition, rural actors – poor family farmers, grass-roots organizations, economic agents in value chains and local governments – are confronted with the need to increase their competitiveness, productivity and ability to take advantage of economies of scale. Organization can enable them to do this. Finally, for small family farmers, organizing is a means to gain a voice to influence policymaking regarding their professional needs, and to link and cooperate with other organizations in a wider context to improve living conditions or to participate in social movements.

By and large, being rural means “getting together” to improve one’s living conditions, but being small and rural increases the need for collective action. Any individual action in response to the challenges is likely to have little impact. Experiences in developing as well as in developed countries bring arguments to the debate on how strengthening collective action can increase inclusion through recognition by public services and authorities (Kerstetter, Green and Phillips, 2014).

By taking a wider perspective, beyond agriculture, it is possible to see the enormous potential that such organizations have in relation to future inclusive rural transformation.

### **Collective action as a means to reduce inequalities and increase inclusion**

Regarding inclusion, we consider that individuals operate within social and economic structures that simultaneously offer a wide range of opportunities to certain categories of people and exert pressures on or limit the range of opportunities for others. Economic, social and political power is not equally distributed within societies, and some categories of people cannot improve their lives and living conditions under these circumstances. These limitations are compounded in rural sectors, which results in the exclusion of a large proportion of the population from economic, social and political activities.

Collective action (as well as competition) has always existed in human societies as a means to ensure the minimum level of cooperation needed to achieve a common objective during a limited period. This definition is pragmatic, since it does not imply that collective action is a natural process or that collective action is the only way to achieve its goals; it also acknowledges that collective action coexists with conflicts and competition and can be limited in duration. Collective action is not an objective in itself in which individuals would invest their time, labour and energy at the expense of their own individual projects. Collective action is a means of supporting individual strategies.



**Figure 1** Inclusion: three main interrelated domains



For poor or marginalized groups, getting successfully involved in collective action increases confidence and self-esteem while improving living conditions. Organizing relies on the rationale of increasing bargaining power within the economic sphere. However, although material conditions matter, the impact of collective action is intrinsically linked with uplifting individual and social capacities to act differently and challenge the distribution of power that constrains the capabilities of poor and marginalized groups. By organizing, individuals benefit from capacity-building that increases individual and collective agency. Capacity-building goes beyond mere “skills training,” since it aims to empower people, opening up new options that were not even thought possible before.

Collective action and empowerment potentially have an impact on other levels of organization, within the family, at intrahousehold level, between social categories within communities, and between local groups and external stakeholders. At each of these levels, the structure of power can be challenged through collective action. As it aims to change the “rules of the game,” collective action is a long-term process that requires investment at several levels, up to the national level through social movements, as can be seen from IFAD’s experience with pastoral communities in Ethiopia (Box 1).

Nevertheless, monitoring and evaluation of support projects show that short-term livelihood improvements can be achieved after a few months of involvement and investment in collective action. Material achievements are important to instil confidence. Collective action is not simply getting together for participation’s sake; it has to be supported by investments in both capacity-building and access to material assets.

### Box 1 Empowering pastoral communities in Ethiopia

The Pastoral Community Development Project, supported by IFAD, the Government of Ethiopia, the World Bank and the International Development Association, was conceived as a long-term intervention, designed for fifteen years with three phases of five years each, reaching a total of 4.7 million people. A key aspect of the project was to decentralize *woreda* (district) processes and empower pastoral communities, local administrations and regional governments to better manage local development in their respective pastoral areas.

In Ethiopia, the pastoral population of 12-15 million people live in pastoral and agropastoral *woredas* that are located in remote arid and semi-arid areas. Key development challenges in these areas include limited access to public and social services, limited participation in local decision-making, poor infrastructure, vulnerability to drought shocks, environmental degradation, restrictions on movement and conflicts related to natural resource management.

The project adopted a bottom-up community-driven development (CDD) approach to promote community participation and demand-driven development processes. Through this approach, the project created genuine participation of pastoral communities, grass-roots institutions and local governments. Communities engaged in a dialogue to ensure that the available resources were applied to *their* development priorities. Education, health, water supply and improving animal health care services were identified as investment priorities by the communities.

The multi-phase project design allowed for a number of important lessons to be applied in preparing the different phases, particularly in institutionalizing the CDD approach through capacity-building of both communities and local level implementing bodies, and by enhancing the inclusiveness and accountability of planning processes. This long-term approach not only provided for geographical expansion and increased outreach but also allowed for a deepening and consolidation of reform processes and institutional measures, with better integration of pastoral communities into the national policy agenda.

The CDD approach fostered local partnerships among the public sector, private enterprises and civil society, and emphasized the importance of decentralization and community empowerment. Policy dialogue on the development of pastoral areas is now an established practice in Ethiopia, and the Pastoral Standing Committee in the Ethiopian Parliament has become a strong proponent of pastoral institutions.

### On collective action emergence and failures

Collective action often emerges as a response to a deep change in the environment. In Africa, the Malian syndicate of cotton producers (the National Union of Cotton and Food Producers -SYCOV) stood up in the early 1990s, when cotton prices plummeted, to negotiate with the government, and the Network of West African Farmer Organizations and Agricultural Producers (ROPPA) was created as a collective structure to negotiate common agricultural policy issues when the West African Economic and Monetary Union was established.

This notwithstanding, too often initiatives promote organizations because agencies provide subsidies and grants. Promoting such artificial dynamics shows a deep misunderstanding of the nature and rationale of collective action. Capacity-building is needed to empower the group and avoid clientelism and political interference, which is a common challenge for all state-sponsored programmes. Being autonomous and empowered is a condition for a group to survive and to best serve its members' interests. As reported by Fernandez (2006) with regard to India, the only motivation for creating self-help groups as part of state-promoted projects was to be awarded a grant, and the grants, in turn, were subject to political manipulation at

**Box 2** Myrada\*'s understanding of self-help affinity groups

"Following reflection and analysis, MYRADA realized that a strong feeling of affinity linked the members of each of these small groups. It was based on certain social features (such as a degree of homogeneity among members, of voluntarism and self-reliance and willingness to support one another in need), on certain structural features such as a common origin (...) or the same livelihood base (...), or on gender bonds (...). In a few cases, it was based on similar activities. (...) Interestingly, no groups were formed on the basis of political party affiliation. The affinity groups were unpolished diamonds hidden under stones. MYRADA just happened to kick these stones aside by accident: it stopped to look, to learn, to identify people's strengths or the potential of the diamond and then to build on that potential."  
Fernandez (2006)

\*Formerly MYRADA (Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency).

election timestimes (Box 2). Going beyond the Indian case, if organizations are needed, they should be built on existing ties, without imposing an external model; letting groups establish their own rules and enforcement mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and accountability is a far better strategy.

Many observers disregard collective action because of its complexity and inconsistent record, which includes disappointing outcomes.

Like all human undertakings, collective action is subject to conflicts and failures. However, it is impossible to determine if failures are more frequently found in organizations created through collective action than in other types of organizations. The failures of enterprises, corporations and banks are not seen as calling into question the rationale behind their structures. During the financial crisis in 2007, the combination of external and internal factors (shareholders' behaviours, deregulation of the financial sector, mismanagement, unrealistic risk-taking, etc.) explained the massive failures experienced by the banking system. Throughout this crisis, however, the banking system itself wasn't called into question; rather, the way in which it had been working under a process of deregulation that it had collectively promoted was criticized.

Preventing such failures, for cooperatives, producers' organizations or any collective endeavour, is not impossible. Many organizations based on collective action, operating under a specific set of rules and within a strong institutional framework, are living proof that the model works. To prevent failures, the main issues to focus on are: internal accountability mechanisms; clear collective rules and enforcement mechanisms; autonomy in the development of external partnerships; and a legal regulatory framework for external accountability. From the experience of self-help groups in India, Fernandez (2006) highlights that "fines are an indication of a good group that imposes penalties on dysfunctional behaviours. This is accepted by the member concerned, as s/he realizes that her/his behaviour has undermined the group's strength and cohesion."

Social movements, like any organization, are also subject to conflicts, and thus they can be fragmented and fail to deliver substantial outcomes in policymaking. However, one should ask: why do people continue to invest time and resources in collective action if it is truly so unsuccessful? Social movements can be undermined by mismanagement, just as political parties can, but this does not condemn democracy. Rather, these threats should prompt social movements to call for better governance.

## 2 Conceptual framework

### Defining collective action and empowerment

We understand collective action as framed by Commons (1934), who defined an institution “as collective action in control, liberation and expansion of individual action.” This principle applies “from unorganized custom to the many organized concerns such as the family, the corporation, the trade association, the trade union, the reserve system, the state.” We also adopt his dynamic perspective: “working rules are continually changing in the history of an institution (...) they have this similarity that they indicate what individuals can, must, or may, do or not do, enforced by collective sanctions” (Commons, 1934). We will focus on collective action aimed at improving the livelihoods and living conditions of the rural poor and marginalized populations, without considering collective action as a normative pathway for development. History teaches us that, at critical moments and in different contexts, individual capacities have developed thanks to collective undertakings. The forms taken by collective action will be determined by the institutional conditions and the related interests and available means to organize at different levels, following North (1990), who considers institutions as the “rules of the game” and organizations as “players.”

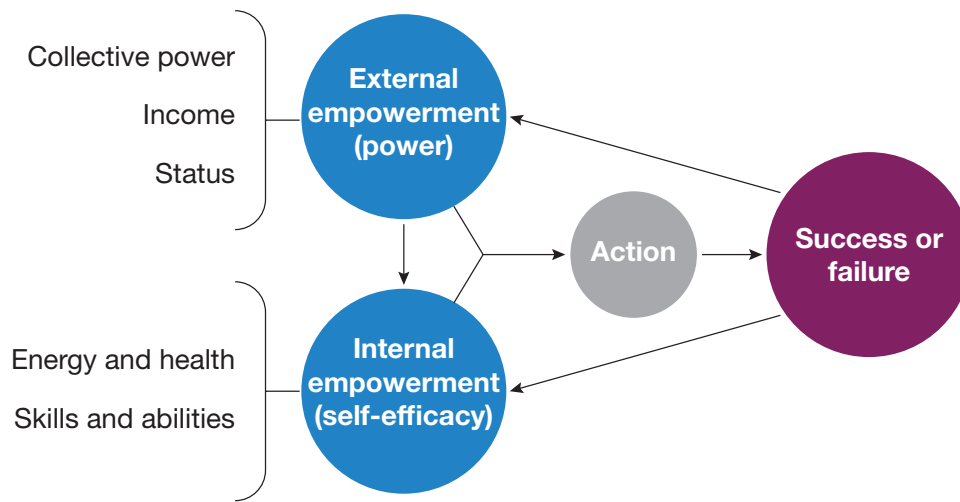
Improving one’s working and living conditions depends on a combination of features, which are often beyond one’s individual reach. First is **the limited level of assets** including physical, human and social capital. The second is **the capabilities of an individual to improve their level of assets** or increase their access to services. Organizations and institutions are strategic tools for improving access to assets and to services, as rightly stated in the sustainable rural livelihoods framework (Chambers and Conway, 1991).

Then, linked to the capabilities of the individual, there is **the psychological dimension** when marginalized economic, social or political segments lack the minimum self-confidence required to change their conditions. Here, we refer to the concept of “subjective well-being defined as people’s positive evaluations of their lives, including pleasant emotions, fulfilment, and life satisfaction. Psychological empowerment represents one facet of subjective well-being – people’s belief that they have the resources, energy, and competence to accomplish important goals” (Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2005).

The distinction made between external and internal empowerment is key to understanding collective action as a means of lowering the barriers preventing poor and marginalized people from uplifting their livelihoods. Interventions need to empower both sides: the collective and the individual (see Fig 2).

Empowerment is a complex process that has three main dimensions in close interaction: social, economic and political. Empowerment is at the same time a process in itself and an outcome of a process of change. Collective action is a tool for individuals and their

**Figure 2** Type of empowerment necessary for deliberate action



Source: Diener and Biswas-Diener (2005)

organizations to gain power within each of the three domains, as pointed out by Ostrom (2000): "Increasing the authority of individuals to devise their own rules may well result in processes that allow social norms to evolve and thereby increase the probability of individuals to better solving collective action problems." Only close interactions between the different dimensions can ensure the sustainability of the empowerment process, based on inclusion, defined in accordance with a human rights framework (Suárez, 2012).

### Collective action in several interrelated agency domains

We now move on to consider collective action and empowerment at local level, together with their linkages to higher levels of organization. There will be a specific focus on the role of collective action for effective policy design and implementation to boost inclusion in a broad sense.

We propose classifying the domains where collective action and empowerment can make a contribution towards more inclusion (Table 1). These domains are interconnected: collective action can influence public goods provision, which can increase collective as well as individual agency, challenging current norms and behaviours. The expected impacts cover several broad interrelated sectors: (i) the economic sectors (i.e. access to and control over natural resources [NR], economic activities) – considering agriculture among other sectors – where inclusion means access to employment, assets and income; (ii) the social sector (social services, information and capacity development), where collective action means social inclusion when access to public goods or services is improved (health, education, water access, information and capacity development, etc.) for the less favoured; and (iii) the policy sector (representation, voice and rights), which broadly includes rights and citizenship issues, and public policy design and implementation.

Specific attention has to be paid to women's agency (Box 3). In the Gender Action Learning System, a strengthening of women's autonomy is sought within the existing framework of family relationships that organize and shape women's agency in various domains within households and activity systems, including family farming (IFAD, 2014a).

Collective action and empowerment effects can be analysed at several interrelated levels of organization, from the individual and family levels, to community and local organization levels, and up to national and international levels (Hennink et al., 2012). This social and institutional "embeddedness" provides individual capabilities that can be expanded through specific investments and interactions. In this regard, the external environment plays a critical role in facilitating or hindering individual and collective empowerment. Any change in the institutional environment, including at the broader level of social movements, may encourage beneficial effects on the capabilities of both collective and individual empowerment processes.

However, change can occur and develop into sustainable inclusion only if material improvements in livelihoods (including living conditions) occur locally and are supported by long-term policy commitments that are, in part, a product of social movements' undertakings.

### **Box 3** Household methodologies increase gender equality and social inclusion

In recent years, IFAD has embraced new and innovative approaches to engage all family and household members in gender equality. To this end, IFAD has found household methodologies to be an innovative approach for working with families to understand intrahousehold dynamics. These methodologies have been developed and adapted by IFAD and its partners to shift the focus from assets, resources and infrastructure, to people, their relationships and visions for the future. Household methodologies are participatory methodologies that enable family members to work together to improve relations and decision-making, and to achieve more equitable workloads. Their purpose is to strengthen the overall well-being of the household and empower all its members to realize their development potential and create stronger, more resilient, productive and sustainable smallholder farming and rural livelihood systems.

IFAD has piloted the integration of these methodologies in a number of its operations in Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Uganda with about 50,000 participants. Results have been encouraging and include greater resilience in the face of shocks, increased happiness, more girls and boys in school, and increased productivity, incomes and food security, leading IFAD to consider ways of replicating and scaling up household methodologies in several countries across sub-Saharan Africa and in Asia. The methodologies may be implemented through groups (Gender Action Learning System, or GALS) or at the individual level with the support of a household mentor (household mentoring). Experiences show that when the methodologies are linked to other project activities, such as financial services, value chain development and infrastructure, these tools contribute to improved participation and inclusion; positive changes at the individual, household and community levels; and economic productivity.

**Table 1** Collective action and agency domains (based on Bosc et al. [2001], and Evans and Nambiar [2013])

Varied agency domains → Collective action	Access to and control over NR	Economic activities	Social services provision	Access to information and capacity development	Representation, voice and rights
<b>Public goods provisioning</b>	<p>Redistributive land policy</p> <p>Land tenure security</p> <p>Enforcement of common property resources regimes</p>	<p>Infrastructure provision: roads, communication networks, market infrastructure, etc.</p> <p>Support for investments in agriculture and diversified economic activities</p> <p>Market infrastructure improvement</p>	<p>Community infrastructure (schools, health centres, cultural centres, etc.)</p> <p>Development of social protection: health care, pensions, cash transfers, children's grants for education</p>	<p>Training and information centres (general)</p> <p>Information on markets, prices, etc.</p>	<p>Representation and defence of rights and interests of rural population</p> <p>Policy debate and formulation</p> <p>Market regulations</p> <p>Evolution of legal framework for rural population</p>
<b>Expanding opportunities</b>	<p>Diversification of production systems with higher value and higher nutrition crops and animal raising</p> <p>Land improvement (terraces, irrigation, forestation, soil amendments)</p>	<p>Collective marketing and input provisioning (cooperative or producers' groups) and technical support</p> <p>Upgrading quality of agricultural products and adding value to specific local assets (cultural, historical, NR, specific quality products, etc.)</p> <p>Access to financial and physical assets for agriculture, access to innovation</p> <p>Diversification of economic activities</p>	<p>Support for women's collective action (self-help groups, cooperatives, etc.)</p> <p>Develop collective services for childcare</p>	<p>Professional training access</p> <p>NTC centres</p> <p>Farmers' field schools</p> <p>Cultural development, including both local culture promotion and opening up to other cultures</p>	<p>Representation and voice on territorial development policies</p> <p>Development of linkages and exchanges with other organizations</p> <p>Representation of women's interests in diversifying economic opportunities</p>
<b>Challenging current norms and behaviours</b>	<p>Reduce gender inequality regarding rights to NR</p> <p>Safeguard and enforce the rights of indigenous people to NR</p>	<p>Reduce barriers preventing women from undertaking activities</p> <p>Food and nutrition diversification for home consumption</p>	<p>Improve women's access to information on birth control and on health issues, etc.</p> <p>Raise awareness about domestic violence</p>	<p>Promote women's and youth leadership, as well as leadership in indigenous and most vulnerable segments of society</p> <p>Create linkages with international organizations to promote equity and progressive thinking about individual and collective rights</p> <p>Develop openness to other cultures</p>	<p>Citizenship and human rights</p> <p>Legal status for organizations</p> <p>Recognition of the rights of the weakest and most vulnerable</p> <p>Equity in inheritance laws, in ownership of resources</p> <p>Open up options for women for divorce and decisions on marriage, etc.</p>

### 3 How do collective action and the empowerment of rural people contribute to making rural transformation more inclusive?

Inspired by Woolcock (1998), we consider two levels to frame the issue: (i) the local level, where collective action serves the needs of the population through the basic principle “Getting ahead collectively” (Hirschmann, 1984); (ii) the macro level, where public policies are framed, with varying degrees of interaction with civil society organizations. Several case studies illustrate how collective action and empowerment can generate inclusion through the combination of these two levels of collective undertakings when they operate in synergy.

We begin by providing evidence on how collective action at local level can bring answers to the economic and social challenges faced by excluded groups. The economic dimension will be presented first, followed by the social dimension and then spillover effects.

#### Collective action to improve the economic situation through local groups

New generations of cooperatives emerge even in contexts where past regimes kept them under administrative and political control. Evidence shows that cooperative sectors have been reshaped and perform well under new market regulations, as in Kenya in the case of the milk sector (Atieno and Kanyingo, 2008). In Kenya, the proportions of production managed by cooperatives is impressive: 70 per cent for coffee, 76 per cent for milk and milk products, 90 per cent for pyrethrum and 95 per cent for cotton (FAO, 2012). In other countries, the proportions of agricultural outputs controlled by cooperatives vary, but globally cooperatives benefit smallholders. Although this issue remains controversial, the balance is largely in favour of small family farmers benefiting from it: in India, the number of milk cooperatives has reached 75,000, comprising more than 10 million producers, many of whom are landless (National Dairy Development Board of India, [www.nddb.org](http://www.nddb.org)).

The Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India is a membership organization, established initially as a labour union and then a cooperative. Members are poor women mainly working in the informal sector. Having started small in Gujarat in 1972, they now claim nearly one million members. They started by mobilizing strong cultural resources – the Gandhian principles of peaceful demonstration – promoting intellectual skills through the commitment of a woman lawyer, and ran the organization as a means to concretely and rapidly answer to the women workers’ needs (Blaxall, 2007).

Desai and Joshi (2013) conducted an evaluation of women’s participation in SEWA groups with a follow-up after 18 months. The impact on agricultural income was higher (+35 per cent) for the most disadvantaged women, who also achieved higher non-farm incomes. Landless women showed a 64 per cent increase in farm income. Overall, the results suggest that SEWA had an effective impact on participant incomes, with a greater effect for the most vulnerable women (poorer women, those with less schooling and landless women).



#### Box 4 Cooperatives and social capital

“Despite differences in the scale of farms and their political and economic histories, there are fundamental similarities in the opportunities and challenges facing vertically coordinated cooperatives in developed and developing countries. (...) The first is that the primary motivating factor driving formal collective action in both economies is to generate net income to enhance the socioeconomic welfare of their member-patrons. While not minimizing net income as a motivating factor for membership in a cooperative, however, there are two other factors that determine cooperative performance. These are selective incentives and embedded social capital. Cooperatives in both the developed and developing world strategically utilize selective incentives to attract and maintain member patronage. The third factor employed to attract and maintain member patronage is embedded social capital at the grass roots level. Social capital is a necessary condition for transparency and trust. In addition to fostering democratic practices in organizational governance, social capital embedded in cooperative membership has additional benefits for the long-term development of civil society in developing countries by reinforcing positive relationships between formal and informal institutional arrangements.”

O'Brien, Banwart and Cook (2013)

SEWA membership develops awareness of credit through better access to information (+40 per cent), increasing the likelihood of obtaining a loan (by 13 per cent) and having a bank account (by 10 per cent). Overall, SEWA members achieved 67 per cent larger harvests, with this figure driven primarily by the poorest participants (more than 70 per cent of all women being wage labourers), which can be explained by their better utilization of their own plots. The authors of the evaluation study call for caution, since escaping poverty traps requires long-term commitment (Desai and Joshi, 2013). In evaluating another SEWA group, they confirmed “that SEWA’s intervention benefited women who were landless at the start of the program more than landholding women” (Desai and Joshi 2014).

In Burkina Faso and Senegal, Bernard et al. (2008) developed a quantitative assessment of the impact of village-based organizations (VOs) aimed at improving either community well-being through community organizations (COs) or market linkages through market-oriented organizations (MOs). These organizations were established under a World Bank-funded project at the end of the 1990s to strengthen the capacity and agency of rural producers’ organizations under national umbrella organizations (Diaz et al., 2004). Most participants recognized that they had derived benefits from their participation in the VO (86 per cent in Senegal and around 70 per cent in Burkina Faso) even if these benefits were limited. Members registered having greater access to “soft” components such as training than to “hard” ones such as equipment or credit access. These organizations included poor households identified in the villages surveyed. Such an evaluation challenges the issue of elite capture: “Leaders do not derive differential benefits from MOs compared to other members. In COs, we see that leaders derive less benefit than other members in Senegal” Bernard et al. (2008). The social control in these villages, as well as the desire of leaders not to jeopardize their leadership position, may explain these findings.

The case of a dairy cooperative development in India is a powerful illustration of the achievements of long-term support to village cooperative movements serving the interests of small family farmers, who typically have no more than one or two cows. Poor farmers

benefited considerably from technical improvements (artificial insemination, health care, improved animal nutrition, and sanitary measures at cooperative level were paid for by premiums for higher quality products) that transformed their livelihoods through increased incomes and improved family nutrition status. Globally, through small family farmers, total production rose from 21.2 million metric tons in 1968-1969 to 132 million metric tons in 2012-2013.<sup>2</sup> The per capita availability rose from 112 g to 290 g during the same period. In 2003, 89 per cent of milk farmers were farming less than 2 ha, 80 per cent were farming less than 1 ha and nearly 32 per cent were landless. As Kurien (2007) puts it: "The focus was on production by the masses and not mass production. The secret of the union (of cooperative movement) was in combining the wisdom of farmers with the skills and knowledge of professional managers. The partnership was based on a relationship of mutual trust, faith, and respect." Overall, the results can be summarized as follows: (i) strengthened farmer control and autonomy in the milk sector, at the stages of production, collection, processing and marketing; (ii) a positive economic rate of return for livelihoods and the cooperative scheme; (iii) enabling poor, small-scale women producers and poor landless or smallholder farmers to benefit by being able to market their milk through the village cooperative; (iv) increased smallholder access to intermediate and sophisticated technologies.

**Access to technologies** is the key challenge for improving small family farms' productivity and income. Owing to limited farm sizes, the strategic orientation should be higher value crops for domestic markets, adding value through local decentralized processing and reducing the drudgery of agricultural labour (HLPE, 2013). Small family farms present a high potential to increase food security and meet the challenges raised by transforming urban and rural markets in a sustainable way (FAO, 2014). However, the decrease in agricultural investments since the 1980s (FAO, 2012; Chang, 2009) has strongly affected research and extension services. Collective action by small family farmers' organizations supported by NGOs has played (Farrington et al., 1993) and still has to play a strong role in bringing to the field innovative proposals (Novo, Jansen and Slingerland, 2014). Effective small family farmers' organizations have demonstrated their success in tapping into agricultural services, research and extension, when the right institutional conditions are met (Bosc, Hussein and Zoundi, 2001). Several streams of research converge now that put even more emphasis on collective action processes through farmer-led research supported by civil society organizations (Temple et al., 2015). In Cameroon, implementing decentralized, innovative multi-stakeholder platforms for plantain led to the development of a technology requiring limited monetary investment: yields increased by 20 per cent and labour productivity by 15 per cent (higher density and longer plant life), which is visible in national records (Temple et al., 2015). However, the gender gap (Deere and Doss, 2006) should remain a constant concern for researchers and practitioners, including farmer-led initiatives (Waters-Bayer et al., 2015).

As already mentioned, access to technology and markets is often constrained for women and solutions include social dimensions fostering a more balanced distribution of the workload at household level. Linkages between social and economic dimensions are relatively straightforward owing to the family nature of smallholder agriculture (Bélières et al., 2015; Sourisseau et al., 2015).

Moreover, at the global level, the voice of small family farmers is increasingly replacing the need for NGOs to speak "on behalf of the rural poor" in international debates (McKeon, 2009), including for the purposes of research on technology issues faced by small family farmers (EuropAfrique, 2013).

2. [www.nddb.org/english/statistics](http://www.nddb.org/english/statistics)

### Box 5 Barriers that limit women's engagement in markets

The comparative study is based on empirical studies in three African countries of women's collective action: Ethiopia, Mali, and Tanzania for honey, shea and vegetable production, respectively. A total of 57 women's groups were surveyed.

Collective action and participation in groups is not a panacea for greater inclusion in market and monetary economies. Typical constraints addressed by women's collective action in the case under study include low volume and quality of production, inadequate business skills, insufficient information on markets and the reliability of contractual arrangements. Other limitations are access to land for independent production and transporting goods to market.

To foster inclusion through improved market participation, other hurdles that are less frequently addressed by women's groups focused on agricultural issues have to be removed, such as social barriers placed by men on women's engagement in markets or even in collective action, and women's lack of time due to family responsibilities.

"Women from households with greater wealth may have both more incentives and more opportunities to join groups." The willingness of men to share domestic tasks also favours women's engagement in collective action.

From Baden (2013)

The advantages and disadvantages of contract farming for smallholders are a matter of controversy (HLPE, 2013). Contract farming can be positive for smallholders primarily for two reasons: it reduces market risk and it complements their disadvantaged condition (e.g. lack or rationing of credit outside the contract arrangement, or lack of access to market and relevant and up-to-date technology and information). Agro-industries may be interested in getting into contractual arrangements with smallholders because the intensity and quality of the labour involved may be higher than in larger holdings (Reardon et al., 2009).

Among the 30 regions surveyed by the RuralStruc project, contract farming remained strictly limited, with an average of 7.4 per cent of households under formal contract, even though several "winning" regions had been selected for this purpose (Losch, Fréguin-Gresh and White, 2012). Within these "winning regions" the proportion of households engaged in contracts could reach 15 to 25 per cent, but, for the majority, it remained far below 10 per cent. Often, small family farmers' weak position and voice can directly affect the transaction arrangement including pricing, rights of land use and quality standard operation, resulting in exclusion for the less well-off. Contract farming is not a priori beneficial for small farmers but needs certain types of support and policies to be successful (Burnod et al., 2012). Moreover, such contractual arrangements are just a single part of a wider system that includes other dimensions such as public goods provision (infrastructure, research, extension and capacity-building for smallholders' groups) and the establishment of a clear regulatory framework to favour inclusion.

Regarding access to growing and changing domestic markets, there is a strong opportunity for collective action (Vorley, Fearne and Ray, 2007; Reardon et al., 2009; Bienabe et al., 2011; HLPE, 2013). The processing know-how linked to the specific characteristics of the species grown and the qualities of locally processed foods (Boucher and Muchnik, 1998; Requier-Desjardins, Boucher and Cerdan, 2003; Muchnik, 2009) are collective assets that can be converted into comparative advantages to boost local production on urban domestic markets, offering

viable options for regional development. Collective tools, such as geographical indications of origin have a high potential for increasing inclusion of small family farms and improving farm income through higher prices if collective rules are enforced (Zhao, Finlay and Kneafsey, 2014; Bienabe and Marie-Vivien, 2015). Emerging participatory tools such as participatory guarantee schemes for organic products reduce the cost of certification, promote inclusion of smaller farms and develop empowerment (IFOAM, 2011). These collective tools require approaches at multiple levels to design inclusive systems (Belletti, Marescotti and Touzard, 2015) while bearing in mind the risks of exclusion (Mancini, 2013).

Multi-purpose organizations are often the preferred pathway for small family farmers, since, as at household level, productive needs and social needs are interconnected (Bosc et al., 2001). In all cases, support in the long run is a key factor to build a strong collective voice for small family farmers as well as for the establishment of a conducive institutional framework (Diaz et al., 2004; World Bank, 2012). This should include provisions for increased access to redistributed land – where possible – to increase small farmers’ natural assets, and clear consideration of social discriminatory statuses that support exclusion (classes, castes, gender, minority ethnic groups and activity-oriented groups, such as pastoralists). The Indian parliament introduced a bill to legally recognize extensive rights for women farmers in all domains related to agricultural activities. Women represent more than 50 per cent of all Indian farmers and about 60 per cent of the workforce in the farming sector. They are active in seed management and in strengthening the collective capacities of organizations including enterprise-type organizations (primary collection, grading, packaging, processing, marketing). The articulation between technical, economic and policy-oriented collective action is a key issue, as illustrated in the IFAD example from Guinea in Box 6.

The challenge for social movements is to combine governance achievements with increasing access to material assets that can lead to better incomes, improved food security and/or access to social services and public goods (Bebbington, Abramovay and Chiriboga, 2008).

#### **Box 6** Investing in organizations for inclusive rural transformations in Guinea

IFAD's support to smallholder organizations focuses on helping individuals work together effectively and then supporting them as they link up their groups, eventually forming larger, more powerful and more effective associations and federations. In Guinea, IFAD works with farmers who have structured themselves into grass-roots organizations that federated into unions, federations and a confederation known as the National Confederation of Farmers' Organizations of Guinea (CNOP-G). The CNOP-G comprises 15 federations with 191 federal unions and 6 non-federal unions, bringing together over 500,000 individual farmers involved in various commodities, including a subset of women farmers known as the "*Collège des Femmes*".

The CNOP-G is a key partner for both the government and the donor community engaged in agriculture. It is also the entry point for the IFAD-funded National Programme to Support Agricultural Value Chain Actors to reach smallholder farmers involved in targeted value chains.

The programme is demand-driven and provides farmers with the resources they need to address constraints in increasing productivity, improving competitiveness and enhancing access to equipment and infrastructure at both the farm and post-harvest levels.

The programme has also introduced an innovative mechanism to strengthen the capacity and accountability of each organization based on its *maturity level*, which is defined according to detailed objective criteria. The CNOP-G has developed a participatory methodology to evaluate the level of maturity of its federations and unions and, on the basis of this evaluation, a support plan is developed for each organization.

## Collective action for better access to social services at local level

“Social capital is not a substitute for effective public policy, but rather a prerequisite for it and, in part, a consequence of it” (Putnam, 1993).

The cases of a women rag-pickers’ association established in 1993 in Poona, India, and of migrant Burmese women near the border in Thailand illustrate how social recognition is a powerful vehicle for collective action (Kabeer, Sudarshan and Milward, 2013). They also highlight the challenges these organizations face in changing the social perception of so-called “marginalized groups”, which are confined to working in undervalued – but vital – sectors of the economy. Collective action has had a significant impact on municipal authorities’ recognition of women workers’ contribution to critical environmental issues. For the rag-pickers’ organization in Poona, “it was important to shift public and self-perceptions that waste pickers were simply people who rummaged in the waste. They drew on a variety of discourses – economic, professional, environmental – to argue that their members were performing a valuable service in the waste economy, collecting and trading recyclable commodities, and that theirs was a far more efficient and sustainable method than other alternatives. Over time, the organisation’s activities have shifted the idea of waste pickers to that of a service provider within a professional business model located within the new economics of waste” (Kabeer, Milward and Sudarshan, 2013).

Migrant Burmese women came together on the basis of their migrant identity and not their “classical” workers’ identity (garment workers or fish-processing workers) to engage in collective action to improve their daily lives, which entailed “multiple forms of oppression: as women, as migrants, as informal workers, and as members of persecuted ethnic minorities in their country of origin” (Kabeer, Milward and Sudarshan, 2013).

Changing minds might be as important as material achievements through groups’ undertakings that deal with “the practicalities of everyday life (...) that convince their members to take on longer-term goals.” Similar conclusions are drawn by Desai and Joshi (2014): “SEWA’s main effect appears to be to facilitate the organization of communities, provide them with information, motivate greater intra-group cooperation, and lower the costs of participating in collective decision-making. It may be that these ‘indirect’ behavioural effects on program participants outweigh the direct effects on income, consumption, and employment, at least in the short run.”

In Kenya, as in many other rural settings, using lake water for domestic purposes is a critical public health issue. Access to clean water and sanitation facilities is a matter of public policy with consequences for productivity. Bisung et al. (2014) conclude that existing social capital based on proximity and kin ties (*Harambee*) is necessary but not sufficient for engaging in collective action in relation to these domestic facilities. Communities face inequalities in the distribution of local power that can hinder the development of such services. Collective action appears to be a factor in mobilization, especially for women, who usually bear the burden of water provision (from lakes) and handle household health care. Connections with formal and informal support networks play a critical role in empowering existing social capital towards more inclusion (Bisung et al., 2014).

Collective action through local organizations has to deal with local or national authorities, with NGOs or with private companies. As in agriculture, NGOs play an important role in contributing to the empowerment of local communities to reduce political interference (Sanyal, 2006; Fernandez, 2006). Empowerment remains high on the agenda for organizations to progress towards co-production of services (Isham, Kelly and Ramaswamy, 2002). Based on two cases in India and Sri Lanka, Isham and Kähkönen (2002) highlight that: "Democratic institutions – rules that enable exit and voice – increase user satisfaction with service design by involving community members in the design process and by letting community members, not outsiders, make the final decision about the service type." They recommend that interventions in communities with low social capital should allocate resources to increase it through supporting group formation and collective capacity-building. Some would argue that interventions should be based on existing social capital as a "lower cost" approach to delivering community based social services. On the contrary, a broader and more inclusive perspective suggests, rather, the need to invest in crafting and enhancing the development of social capital when it is obviously lacking as a means to achieving public health objectives (Szreter and Woolcock, 2004). Improving public health cannot be achieved "through material inputs alone, or simply through 'technological fixes', whether imposed or 'magnanimously granted' by those with superior resources" (Szreter and Woolcock, 2004). Improving access to health services for those excluded individuals requires the involvement of community-based organizations to overcome the barriers generating exclusion (Belle-Isle, Benoit and Pauly, 2014).

Local cultural identity, norms and customs are strategic assets for collective action mobilization. These "intangible" resources can be mobilized in two ways: (i) challenging them and creating "space" for new options or (ii) building on them to strengthen the collective process.

The rag pickers' organization in Poona diverted a family ritual in which social familial ties were mobilized and drawn upon to craft a specific embellishment all around the municipal building, to symbolize the contribution of the women rag pickers to the environmental maintenance of the municipality, and to publicize the low remuneration they were receiving from the municipality (Kabeer, Milward and Sudarshan, 2013). In Viet Nam the women's mass organization Vietnam Women's Union promotes women's emancipation through participation in the labour market or administrative responsibilities but fails to challenge the conservative domestic role of women in charge of the "happy family",<sup>3</sup> where the responsibility for the household, the care of the family, and even for "happiness" rests on women's shoulders (Waibel and Glück, 2013).

More common are the linkages between indigenous communities and their natural resource endowments as powerful roots for collective mobilization and action. The group's cultural and historical identity is associated with the territory, the ecosystems and the livelihoods of the family. These communities face many challenges including: (i) legal recognition by the state and full citizenship, (ii) enforcement of land rights – including the associated resources that could be of interest for other stakeholders (most of the time external to the communities), and (iii) access to public goods and services. The Amerindian communities in Latin America, and also minorities in African and Asian countries, face severely constrained living conditions and are exposed to sometimes violent processes of exclusion from their territories (Peralta et al., 2015).

3. "Happy family" is used in official documents and statements that describe how the authorities view the domestic role of women in the society.



## Spillover effects at local level

The spillover effects (or unintended consequences) of utilitarian collective action must receive full attention. Spillover effects can be material, but they are also social, increasing individual self-esteem and simultaneously strengthening a feeling of unity. These effects are as important as the initial material objectives.

In India, the broad experience of funding women's activities through microcredit local solidarity groups shows the importance of non-economic outcomes. Assessment of microfinance impacts in West Bengal (Sanyal, 2009) suggests that, aside from improving access to financial assets, interactions among women and between women and NGO staff improved, and the social capital of these groups was strengthened and transformed: "Continuing economic relations inculcate trust, intimacy, and mutual concern among women belonging to the same group. Prior to the introduction of these groups, women often lacked these feelings for one another, even though they resided in close physical proximity" (Sanyal, 2009). Proximity ties function as a starting point for group dynamics, but repeated contact modifies the content of the relationships among women and with the external staff they engage with: "group members are exposed to progressive ideas about women's rights, the value of women's work, and the importance of civic engagement. These ideas provide the women with discursive alternatives to conventional modes of thinking." Women acquire the capacity to integrate new representations of gender relations and challenge current norms and practices regarding underage marriage, male domestic violence, alcoholism and men's sexually permissive behaviours (Sanyal, 2009).

Little attention has been paid to the role played by cooperatives in providing collective and public goods both to their members and non-members within communities (rural roads, rural health services, schools, etc.). This was the case in Mali through villages' associations collecting cotton and being rewarded for this by the national company, CMDT; the funds were used to improve community well-being (Bingen, 1998; Bélières et al., 2008). In Colombia, the Colombian Coffee Growers Federation and the Government of Colombia agreed on a funding mechanism for a shared public investment based on a levy on coffee exports for communities in coffee-producing regions, even in remote areas. The Federation used part of the levy to build roads (12,882 km of roads were built and 50,672 km improved), clinics, water supply systems and schools (16,923), and to recruit teachers (Bentley and Baker, 2000). Less classical are the spillover effects reported in the case of Indian milk cooperatives, which provide examples of broader effects: improved knowledge on hygiene, on reproduction and on technical skills related to the milk sector increased women's knowledge and agency in relation to human reproduction: "it is not fate that determines their future, but they can take control of their own destinies" (Kurien, 2007).

## Vertical linkages are critical for impact and upscaling

Being local and open to diversity and external influences is not enough: coordination with higher layers of organization enables collective action to increase inclusion. Connections between national and international networks (NGOs, United Nations organizations, bilateral aid agencies), small farmers' organizations and civil society organizations shape new social movements (McKeon, 2014).

Achievements also depend on the quality of leadership and the ability to mobilize means at national and international levels. The founder of SEWA (Ela Bahtt) enjoys worldwide recognition (Guérin, Fouillet and Pallier, 2007; Blaxall, 2007) and the Indian “milk revolution” was supported by V. J. Kurien with long-term policy commitment from the federal government in all domains. Mamadou Cissokho started supporting a local development association in rural Senegal (Inter Entente Bamba Thialène), contributed to the creation of a national federation of non-governmental grass-roots organizations (Fédération des ONG du Sénégal-FONGS) and founded the Senegalese national umbrella federation (Comité National de Concertation des Ruraux CNCR). In 2000, Cissokho was influential in the creation of ROPPA and later established the continental structure for Africa (Plateforme panafricaine des paysans et des producteurs d'Afrique-PAFFO). These experiences (Cissokho, 2009) as well as those of many other African leaders explain the growing influence of rural producers' organizations that were previously excluded from the public debate. This process of inclusion may be one of the most potentially influential changes in shaping the future of African agriculture (McKeon, 2014). The commitment of these leaders has seldom been studied or highlighted, but some organizations pay attention to leadership promotion and training (IFAD, 2010). CNCR in Senegal has run a leadership training cycle since 2000, with similar initiatives being organized in Madagascar, Nepal, and the Philippines, in order to prepare new generations of men and women leaders (IFAD, 2014b). Building social capital and organizations able to cope with contemporary challenges requires well-trained leaders who can link several worlds and different rationales to channel resources to where they are needed (Mercoiret et al., 1997).

The major contribution of social movements to public debates on development issues is to move the discussion from technocratic or institutional approaches to the political agenda, clearly confronting inequalities in power relations and seeking to reduce them through collective action (Bebbington, Abramovay and Chiriboga, 2008): “[social movements] politicize discussions of rural development. Their existence, their arguments, their mobilizations, and occasional direct actions all demand that rural development to be seen as political and not technical.” The issue of inclusive territorial policies is a political matter that requires political will and commitment. The strength of social movements can influence the political agenda.

In Brazil, social movements have played a major role in shaping policies supporting family farming since the mid-1990s (Rocha, Burlandy and Maluf, 2012; Bonnal, 2013). Under the military regime during the 1980s, trade unions, the Workers' Party, the Landless movement and others started to self-organize and promoted an alternative vision for Brazilian agriculture, which was then ruled by the lobbying of absentees large owners or agro-business. Policies supporting family farmers in Brazil did not challenge the supremacy of large-scale export-oriented agro-business in terms of public spending. Rather, they played a part in the recognition of the contributions of the family farming model and allocated means to support its transformation, relying on and strengthening the municipality level of syndicates and grass-roots organizations. The specific sectoral content of these programmes was designed to reach a target group defined politically and written into national law: “family farmers.” Family farmers are therefore legally defined, and the definition includes variations between regions according to their resource endowments and historical background. The policy content is



rather “classical”, but it proved to be inclusive, since it allowed improved access to productive assets such as credit (through the National Programme for Family-Run Agricultural Businesses in 1994) and insurance to cope with the consequences of climatic hazards in 2004 and excluded from the policies initiatives that would favour large scale and agro-business farms. In this case “inclusion” targeted specific categories of people, such as women, Amerindian communities and beneficiaries of agrarian reform. Less classical aspects were brought about through wider social concerns, for example in the case of the public food procurement programme, sourcing food from family farms (2003) for schools, hospitals and prisons. These sector policies were supplemented by social protection measures such as pensions for the ageing (over 55 years for women and over 60 years for men) rural population in 1995; conditional cash transfers for low-income families, offered to women if children comply with school attendance; health care and other social services (*bolsa familia*); and territorial policies (2004 for the National Programme for Sustainable Development in Rural Areas [PRONAT]). PRONAT is aimed at inclusion, with the objective of achieving full citizenship through the concentration of public investments in the most disadvantaged territories to increase inclusion (Cazella, Bonnal and Maluf, 2009; Bonnal and Kato, 2011). This has been possible through a political agenda pushed forward by strong social movements connected with networks of local organizations and syndicates.

In Africa, the emergence of farmers’ and rural development associations was supported by visionary NGOs. However, the 1990s saw the consolidation of national umbrella organizations representing small family farmers. This occurred first in Senegal, where the CNCR negotiated support through a World Bank project, Agricultural Services and Producer Organizations Program, under state supervision. This experience provided lessons for upscaling (Mercoiret, 2004) beyond the Senegalese case: (i) the support was widely discussed, giving an effective voice to the representatives of the farmers; (ii) it was based on the existence of an apex federation – CNCR – that clearly saw the long-term interest, regardless of the World Bank’s image within the social movement; (iii) the project’s implementation allowed all the levels of the organization to be strengthened during the 10-year duration of the project, which made sense in terms of capacity development; (iv) it was a global learning process, in which everyone accepted the need to learn.

Political support is of great importance in fostering the development of local and national organizations in order to favour inclusion, but, if this support becomes exclusive of other economic ties, it may lead to unsustainable practices or high dependency on public stakeholders, thus limiting further development. Abramovay, Magalhães and Schröder (2008) compare two rural organizations involved in credit having comparable backgrounds and support from social movements and political affiliations. Direct support from social movements undermines sustainability through neglect for competitive economic ties. What appears to be important for the long-term sustainability of organizations is both support from social movements translated into enabling policies and the implementation of economic and institutional coordination without political interference. Organizations also need to engage (both internally and externally) in implementing procedures that ensure public disclosure of sources of funding and the external assessment of their results (Abramovay, Magalhães and Schröder, 2008).

Nevertheless, state-driven policies are not to be disregarded for ideological reasons. To achieve inclusion on a large scale, when national political decisions are needed, governments have the responsibility to create and implement initiatives for improving rural actors' agency, including access to assets (e.g. land for farming in the case of land reform) or access to income through rural diversification policies.

Redistributive land policies have proven to be highly efficient when implemented on a large scale in China and Viet Nam. China's land reform started in 1978 with the Household Responsibility System, which put an end to collective land allocation and contracted land to households for 15 then 30 years (Huang, Zhang and Rozelle, 2008). Viet Nam's land reform started in 1988 with the Household Responsible Contract System, followed by the 1993 Land Law, which recognized the farm household as the main unit of agricultural production, as well as recognizing farm's decision-making rights (Tuan, 1997). In China and Viet Nam, research provided evidence of large-scale social and economic inclusion resulting from agricultural growth, benefiting other sectors through rising incomes and demand.

These reforms in agriculture were associated with the development of industrial employment in rural areas, which meant an increased set of opportunities to improve rural livelihoods. In China the successful policy of the industrialization of rural areas and small cities to enable them to compete favourably with the urban state-owned sector was followed by the modernization of rural and small-city industries, while large cities tended to shift to services (Chan, Henderson and Tsui, 2008).

Effective state administration of territorial economic diversification policies yielded positive results regarding inclusion in China (Islam and Hehui, 1994) and in Viet Nam. In such cases, social movements have a limited voice, except through the administration and party, which may often be underestimated from an outsider's perspective. Diversification and a set of coordinated public policies have stimulated a high level of self-employment creation (Zhang, et al., 2002). Investments in education have yielded increased employment opportunities outside and within agriculture (Zhang et al., 2002). Viet Nam presents diversified employment opportunities through a "cluster" approach, leading to the modernization of thousands of craft villages (Fanchette, 2014).

### Measuring empowerment: a research and implementation challenge?

This is not the place for a reflection on the essence of power and the many clarifications that such an enterprise would require (Uphoff, 2005). However, it is worth mentioning that it is possible to analytically disaggregate some of the main features of "power" while simultaneously remembering Uphoff's warning: "The key element in Weber's definition is the equation of power with a probability. This means that power is never a certainty, nor is it a thing" (Uphoff, 2005).<sup>4</sup>

Uphoff proposed an analytical framework (2005) for both individual and local-level groups, based on the identification of power resources: economic, social, political, informational, physical and moral. The main point here is the emphasis on the collective dimension and the introduction of the processes under which collective action and individual strategies can take place that favour the voices of the most vulnerable under contextual conditions (norms, values, institutions).

4. Max Weber defined power as the probability that someone in a social relationship will be able to achieve his or her will, that is, whatever is desired, despite resistance and regardless of the bases upon which this probability rests." (Uphoff, 2005)

A second concept worth considering here is a standardized index designed to measure women's empowerment through a set of five criteria that relate to involvement in collective action (Alkire et al., 2013): (i) sole or joint decision-making in agriculture; (ii) ownership, access to and decision-making power over productive resources; (iii) income – sole or joint control over income and expenditures; (iv) leadership – membership in economic or social groups and comfort in speaking in public; and (v) time – allocation of time to productive and domestic tasks and satisfaction with available time for leisure activities.

This index, the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), has been implemented in a set of countries to establish a baseline survey and test the relationships between the index and several outcomes, with a specific focus on food security through "sustainable reduction of poverty and hunger" (Malapit and Quinsumbing, 2014). Although this is an initial attempt to achieve an objective measurement of women's disempowerment (sample size, regional coverage and methodological issues for an index designed for cross-country comparisons would need further research), this baseline survey highlights the following three criteria as the most limiting factors weighing on women's empowerment capacities: (i) limited access to credit, (ii) workload and (iii) lack of participation in collective action. These findings seem consistent with the review of findings presented here. The WEAI is also mobilized in research that looks at the outcome of women's empowerment in relation to health issues (Cunningham et al., 2015), concluding that, even acknowledging some limitations, the results are robust enough to establish a positive link between women's empowerment and positive health outcomes for their children.

To progress towards a more standardized measurement of empowerment, there is a need to deepen, expand and consolidate the integrated framework to look beyond the community level and to bring into the picture the national level (Narayan, 2005).

## 4 Lessons learned, messages and policy recommendations

### Lessons learned

- Collective action and public policies have to be closely linked to increase inclusion. Strong local grass-roots and social movements can contribute to the content of public policies. However, when social organizations are weak, public policies can be used as a tool to strengthen collective action and social movements. The condition for this “two ways exchanges” is basically democratic governance.
- Collective action needs to build on existing social capital. Local social structures matter and are assets – confidence and proximity ties – to build on. However, this social capital is not enough to overcome local barriers – norms and customs – to improve livelihoods. For collective action to spread, it needs to connect with external agents who channel new ideas, innovation and material incentives, in order to support and promote initiatives.
- Organizing poor or vulnerable populations on a long-term basis requires quick improvements to their daily lives: improved access to productive assets and to services. To ensure sustainability, these improvements should neither be granted (by the state or an NGO) nor defined from outside: initiative, responsibility and command are to be placed within the organization's governance.
- Collective action has a role to play in alleviating the domestic burdens borne by women. In so doing, collective initiatives open the way for a better balance of tasks and responsibilities within households, which, in turn, generates resistance. Such efforts cannot be achieved without strong, long-term external support.
- The poorest tend to benefit more from their engagement in collective action, owing to their very low economic level. They are not systematically excluded from organizations, even if their commitment may appear limited because of their lack of resources (time). Nevertheless, social and economic inclusion can work through organizing poor populations, even if the actual economic benefits may increase significantly only with time.
- There is a trade-off in relation to group membership. Homogeneity favours cohesiveness, but a certain degree of heterogeneity can bring greater strength, especially in the economic dimension. As a consequence, collective action at local level should not limit group membership by ex ante normative thinking. Each member's individual conditions should be accounted for first of all when discussing their commitment to the group.

- The debate on collective action outcomes remains controversial. Mismanagement and failures occur, as in all human undertakings. Nevertheless, evidence demonstrates that many organizations generate social and economic inclusion for small family farmers and marginalized people. The whole cooperative movement, indigenous organizations, self-help organizations and social movements are large-scale examples.
- There is no blueprint for success – although classical models are available, where the context is appropriate. Pragmatic design is found to be the most efficient way to proceed in order to cope with diverse contexts.
- Operational linkages between local and national levels are strategically important to progress towards more inclusive policies. What seems to determine the capacity for public policies to generate inclusion is the quality and density of institutional relations between state structures and civil society organizations.
- It is crucial to support both social movements and local organizations, so that they can develop synergies. Information flows need to be two-way, in order to promote solutions mobilizing adequate levels of governance and implementation.
- Training for leadership should be high on the agendas of both organizations and the donor community. The complexity of the challenges faced by agriculture and service provision in rural areas requires commitment but also highly innovative skills to handle it. This type of human and social investment is crucial for the future of organizations. Academies for farmers' leaders and rural leaders should be supported by international and national funds.
- Collective action and strengthening organizations is a learning process that provides outcomes similar to public goods provision: training new generations to overcome difficulties, compensating for the lack of or the limited availability of basic education, and contributing to reshaping social capital. These expected benefits, as well as the collective action process, advocate for long-term support.

## Messages and policy recommendations

The main goal of investing in collective action and empowerment is to change the distribution of power and the institutional framework that supports it in order to generate inclusion. A wise balance of investments between the different levels of collective action and between capacity-building and access to assets can foster such a change in institutions.

1. Grass-roots organizations can play an increasingly important role in the transformation of small family agriculture, provided they are recognized as legitimate stakeholders able to weigh in on the definition and implementation of agricultural and rural development strategies, policies and methods.
  - a. Supporting rural organizations that generate inclusion requires national and territorial perspectives to take into account the quality of the resource endowment, the specificities of the institutional framework and the features of the social organization to build upon it. Adaptation to local contexts should prevent the imposition of an external model of organization.

- b. Strengthening collective action requires consideration of different levels of organization (from groups to communities and up to social movements) and the inclusion of several domains (social, economic and political), avoiding duplication of tasks through subsidiarity.
  - c. External support to organizations should favour “inclusive” organizations and promote democratic principles.
  - d. Identity can be an asset, but organizations or social movements based on a particular identity should be supported only if their membership and rules favour inclusion, regardless of the origins of their members.
2. Empowerment of local and national organizations requires long-term investment in individual and collective capacity-building. Generating inclusion requires the combination of collective human capital development with a response to immediate individual and collective economic and social needs. Empowering inclusive organizations will help to shape future rural transformations.
- a. With the time horizon for empowerment being long-term, adequate milestones are needed to mark clear steps that correspond to external assessment practices and the development of both internal and external accountability, as a learning process.
  - b. Investments in organizations should be open to various domains of action (social, economic, cultural, etc.), corresponding to self-defined needs, independently of their formal or informal structure but showing collective achievements.
  - c. Participation in organizations as well as individual skills development should be associated with material achievements, most needed by the poorest.
3. Future rural transformations can generate inclusion only if they rely on: (i) empowered grass-roots organizations linked to social movements that challenge those in power and current thinking on development; (ii) integrated multisector policies at the territorial level; and (iii) socially targeted interventions to reach the most vulnerable.
- a. Institutional mechanisms should be implemented at government level to channel and coordinate investments to better support the most disadvantaged territories and social groups in terms of public goods provision.
  - b. Regarding different types of sectors, collective action can make a difference concerning inclusion in access to services (health, education, training, etc.), in diversification of employment opportunities, and in farm and non-farm activities.
  - c. In many situations, inclusion has to be connected with citizenship and rights issues, in order to accelerate the effective recognition of the rights of those who most need to see an end to their exclusion and discrimination against them.
4. To increase inclusion at local level, support for grass-roots organizations needs to adapt to the context, recognizing that any particular model is less important than the actual functioning and concrete achievements of the organization, based on clear internal and external accountability mechanisms.
- a. Orient investments in collective action to favour linking organizations to those outside their usual partners, to explore new synergies, avoid routines and increase autonomy.
  - b. Promote the implementation of procedures to help organizations to develop democratic behaviours based on external assessments, public disclosure, and internal and external accountability.

5. To achieve inclusion on a large scale, rural producers' organizations and local organizations need to build alliances with other sectors of society, to consolidate the democratic process and to influence policy agendas, including to create a secure and enabling environment (public goods provision, land tenure security, improved market functioning and diversified livelihood opportunities outside agriculture) and promote positive urban-rural linkages.
  - a. At each level, there is a critical need to link collective action and related organizations to the corresponding government counterparts (from municipalities to regional governments up to the national level) in order to influence political agendas.
  - b. Collective action through adequate linkages with social movements must contribute to fostering a substantial change in policies, favouring inclusion of the most vulnerable.
  - c. Investments in local organizations should favour linkages with related organizations at national and international levels, directly or through nationally based organizations.

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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

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