

Youth: the future of agricultural cooperatives



There are some 500 million smallholder farms worldwide. These small farms produce about 80 percent of the food consumed in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (IFAD, 2011). Young people account for a large percentage of the rural population, and are often unemployed or underemployed, despite the need for labour force in agriculture. Rural youth do not perceive agriculture as a remunerative or prestigious profession, and until they find meaningful economic opportunities and attractive environments in rural areas, they will continue to migrate to cities. This trend not only contributes to the emerging phenomenon of over-urbanization and growing unemployment in urban areas, but is also expected to affect global food production. Investing in young people living in rural areas is therefore key to enhancing agricultural productivity and food security and boosting rural economies.

Agricultural cooperatives¹ (ACs) have proved to be an effective mechanism for engaging young people in agriculture while increasing youth employment opportunities through on-farm and off-/non-farm activities. As highlighted by the 2011 International Day of Cooperatives with its theme of “Youth, future of cooperative enterprise”, equitable and efficient ACs can play an important role in helping young farmers overcome specific challenges to engage in agriculture. By providing a range of services to members, the following examples illustrate how ACs can facilitate access to and management of natural resources such as land and water; input and output markets; financial services; and information, communication and knowledge. Belonging to a cooperative can also help develop the self-confidence, entrepreneurial spirit, collective action and

1 A cooperative is an autonomous association of people united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise. Cooperatives adhere to seven main principles: voluntary and open membership; democratic control by members; members' economic participation; autonomy and independence; provision of education, training and information; cooperation with other cooperatives; and concern for community (ICA, 2007). For the purpose of this brief, any type of organization that follows these principles is a cooperative.

social capital of its members. Cooperatives can enhance young farmers' participation in policy dialogue so that youth-sensitive policies are more likely to be developed. Youth are an important asset for ACs, not only because they ensure the generational renewal of the membership and will be the ACs' future leaders, but also because they have a greater capacity for innovation and entrepreneurship, are more inclined to work with new technologies, and generally have higher levels of education than older farmers.

Youth's participation in cooperatives: challenges and successes

Youth face specific constraints in *joining a cooperative*. Some cooperative by-laws stipulate membership conditions, such as landownership and the payment of membership fees, to which youth often cannot adhere. Youth, particularly young women, typically do not own (enough) land and cannot pay membership fees. To address this issue, some Latin American organizations have introduced the concept of household membership, ensuring that family members other than the head of household who owns the land can be involved in the organization (MIJARC/IFAD/FAO,2012). Cooperatives can also play an important role in facilitating land access for youth. For example, cooperatives in Burkina Faso have negotiated with village chiefs to convince them to give land to young women in their communities. When youth form their own cooperatives, they often struggle with cumbersome and complex procedures to register these cooperatives.

Youth-only and mixed organizations (those with both young and older members) face different constraints in *representing* youth. Youth-only organizations are generally informal and lack human and financial resources. On the other hand, although youth often form a large percentage of the membership of mixed organizations, they are frequently not well represented in and excluded from decision-making processes. Young people's limited participation within organizations also undermines their ability to participate



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AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES: EMPOWERING YOUTH

CASE STUDIES

Junior Farmer Field and Life School graduates

Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools (JFFLS),² launched by FAO in 2004, follow a gender-sensitive approach that combines support to vocational training with employment promotion and access to markets through the facilitation of youth's inclusion in farmers' organizations, federations and unions. Impact assessments have shown that the approach has supported

the development of entrepreneurial and agricultural skills among youth and built their self-esteem, helping them to become confident young adults. In the Hebron district of the West Bank, JFFLS graduates joined the youth wing of the Al-Shiva Hive Cooperative Society. They received training in beekeeping, bee-hiving and honey processing twice a week in the afternoons after school hours. They are now full members of the cooperative society and are obtaining their share of the profits (FAO, 2010).

in policy processes outside the organization. Culture and traditions characterized by hierarchical relationships in which young people are expected to obey older community members also complicate youth's participation in cooperatives. Again, young women face additional challenges in having their voices heard. However, there is growing recognition of the importance of ensuring adequate representation of young people in cooperatives and their active participation in decision-making. As a result, many cooperatives have been expanding their membership bases to include young people, establishing youth structures within the organization, and promoting youth leadership.

Agricultural cooperatives empowering youth, how?

A series of recommendations for increasing agricultural cooperatives' empowerment of youth were drawn up by rural youth and young producers' representatives at joint regional workshops held by FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the International Movement of Catholic Agricultural and Rural Youth (MIJARC) in Senegal, Sri Lanka and Peru in 2011. These recommendations were refined during the fourth global meeting of the Farmers' Forum hosted by IFAD in 2012, and are addressed to cooperatives, governments and donors.

1. Cooperatives should become *youth-sensitive*, particularly in their representation and governance. *Youth sections* should be created within mixed cooperatives, and gender inequalities should be addressed to ensure the active participation of young women. The creation of *youth-only cooperatives* should also be facilitated.
2. Cooperatives should provide *mentoring, guidance and advisory* services to their young members, so that they can become leaders and farmer entrepreneurs, and can overcome constraints (e.g., through access to training, land and credit).



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Market access in Togo

REJEPPAT, the young farmers' section of *Coordination Togolaise des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs Agricoles* decided to invest in "aggressive market research" for its members' agricultural produce. Members visited markets in various West African countries, negotiating a contract at the large Katak market in Niamey to sell their bananas and pineapples, and signing another contract to sell their green beans in Burkina Faso. REJEPPAT

contacted the Togolese Chamber of Agriculture, which put the young farmers in touch with the International Trade Centre (ITC). ITC accompanied REJEPPAT members on a market prospecting visit to Morocco to identify other suitable markets for selling their pineapples. REJEPPAT is also negotiating a contract to sell soy produce to the PKL agrifood business in Côte d'Ivoire (MIJARC/IFAD/FAO, 2012).



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Young coffee growers in Peru

The National Association of Coffee Producers (JNC) of Peru represents 52 coffee producer organizations. Older members of JNC encouraged youth to participate in the organizations' decision-making processes, but the organizational structure did not allow for this. In 2005, it was acknowledged that it was time for a generational renewal of leadership within JNC. As a consequence, the National Coordinating Committee of Young Coffee Growers

(CONAJOC) was created as a section of JNC's national board. CONAJOC activities include training and workshops targeting young coffee producers, technical support, and launching of a Youth Innovation Fund. To facilitate membership, CONAJOC encourages parents to anticipate the inheritance of part of their coffee plantations so that their children can join the committee (MIJARC/IFAD/FAO, 2012).

3. Cooperatives should value *indigenous/traditional agricultural knowledge* and practices, while also promoting innovations to stimulate youth's interest in agriculture.
4. Cooperatives, donors and governments should formulate and implement *youth-focused agricultural development projects and programmes*.
5. Cooperatives, governments and the international community should play a proactive role in *raising the image/profile of agriculture*. Cooperatives can be a platform for sharing/demonstrating farmers' success stories, or linking young women and men to educational institutions and agricultural schools.
6. Donors and governments should provide specific *financial support* for the development of cooperatives that involve and/or engage with young people.

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Contact:

Nora Ourabah Haddad, Cooperatives and Producer Organizations Coordinator
nora.ourabahHaddad@fao.org

Charlotte Goemans, Gender and Rural Institutions Specialist
charlotte.goemans@fao.org

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Viale delle Terme di Caracalla – 00153 Rome, Italy
 Tel: + 39 06 57051 – www.fao.org

International Fund for Agricultural Development

Via Paolo di Dono, 44 – 00142 Rome, Italy
 Tel: +39 06 54591 – www.ifad.org

International Year of Cooperatives website
<http://social.un.org/coopsyear/>

