

CoOPequity | Promoting governance and gender equality in producer organizations in Niger

Agricultural producer organizations (POs) play a crucial role in the fight against poverty and food insecurity. But in many cases, specific groups, such as women and young people, are excluded from the services and benefits that POs offer. The active participation of producers – including of women and young people – is key to the good governance of POs and to strengthening their capacity to influence policy. It is in this context that the CoOPequity programme is working in Niger to support the implementation of policies and measures that encourage the development of equitable, efficient and economically viable POs.

In this Sahel country, structuring the agricultural sector and improving the livelihoods of women and men smallholders are major challenges.

POs can play a decisive role in reducing inequalities in the agriculture sector, as well as in tackling poverty and food insecurity, provided they have an enabling policy, legislative and economic environment and are founded on principles of equity and good governance.

Launched in 2012 by FAO, with backing from the European Union, the CoOPequity programme has been designed to support governments in implementing policies and measures that will encourage the development of equitable and effective POs.

A framework for sound PO development

CoOPequity provides technical assistance to policy-makers, as a way of encouraging them to put in place the enabling environment needed to create and develop efficient and inclusive POs. They also seek to promote a more equal balance of power between different actors, improve communication between them and strengthen mechanisms for dialogue.

Strengthening organizational capacities

The programme also offers technical assistance to POs, so that they can strengthen their organizational capacities. The focus is on strengthening governance, gender equality, economic performance, market access and the capacity of POs to influence the development of agricultural policies. These activities are planned and carried out according to the needs, priorities and strategies as identified by the POs themselves, through surveys, consultations and dialogue.

Strengthening women and men producers within their POs

The programme promotes initiatives that can help men and women farmers play a more active role in POs, using participatory infor-



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mation and communication sessions. It also works to set in place a network of good practices and experiences, most notably by organizing exchange visits between producers – both women and men – from different POs.

CoOPequity in action: an ambitious workshop

The first CoOPequity workshop, which took place in Niamey from 20 to 22 November 2012, was first and foremost one of identification, aimed at laying the foundations for future interventions in Niger and highlighting weaknesses and the priority needs of the organizations targeted, particularly in terms of performance, governance and equity. Subsequently, the idea was to support the development of a common plan of action to strengthen the performance, governance and equity of POs in Niger.

The multi-stakeholder workshop brought together all the actors involved in agricultural and rural development in Niger (POs, govern-

ment, High Commission of the 3N Initiative, NGOs, research), as well as representatives of key international partners: IFAD and the *Union des producteurs agricoles du Québec* (Union of Producers in Quebec, UPA).

POs in Niger – the current situation

Among the main causes of weakness in POs, workshop participants identified lack of organizational support and training, lack of or inadequate information and communication within POs and between various levels of each organization, as well as under-representation of women and young people in PO decision-making processes. Other problems highlighted included insufficient financial resources.

Working together to achieve common goals

The participants agreed on a series of priority objectives to be achieved over the next three years, with the aim of improving the performance, equity and governance of POs in Niger.

What is a rural organization?

Rural organizations such as POs and cooperatives are autonomous organizations, based on principles of free membership and participation, managed by their members and governed by an elected representative.¹

Rural organizations provide a range of economic and/or social services to their members, which enable them to improve their access to natural resources, agricultural inputs and markets. They also facilitate access to information and knowledge sharing, as well as promoting better participation in decision-making by men and women farmers and their active engagement in partnerships with public authorities, the private sector, research and other actors. Collective action taken by POs enables women and men producers to overcome a range of obstacles and improve their livelihoods, thereby reducing poverty and hunger.

As regards **enabling environments**, there was broad agreement on the urgent need to set up equitable consultation mechanisms and ensure the effective participation of POs in the decision-making processes.

For the **POs**, a more autonomous, democratic, equitable and transparent management is to be developed, as well as an improvement in the accessibility and quality of services provided to members, especially in the area of information and communication.

As for the **women and men producers**, there were calls for significant advances in capacity building, as well as for an easier access to PO services and a better knowledge and understanding of their rights and duties as members.

All the participants welcomed the success of the first CoOPequity workshop in Niger, which paved the way for dialogue between the Government and POs, under the supervision of FAO and the partnership agreement with UPA.

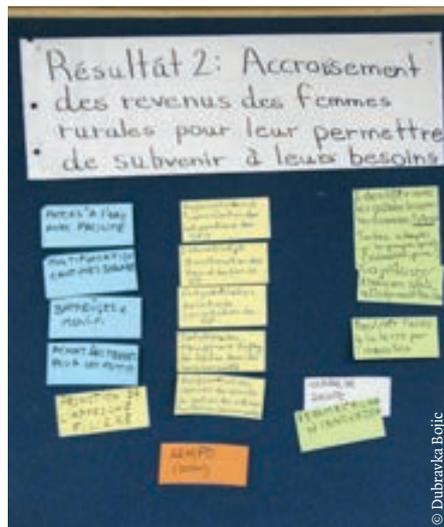
✳ **For more information, contact:**
Carol Djeddah, Coordinator of the CoOPequity programme
Carol.Djeddah@fao.org

The toolbox

The CoOPequity approach was developed on the basis of a body of literature and good practices on strengthening institutions and developing organizational capacities.²

More specifically, the launch workshop took as its starting point Learning Module 4 from the FAO Corporate Strategy on Capacity Development. This module presents a systematic approach to change for institutions and organizations.³ It brings together a series of recently developed methodologies and tools that can help to facilitate an analysis of organizational capacities, as well as assist in implementing an evaluation of the process of organizational change.

Adapted to both specific conditions in Niger and to the demands of the CoOPequity programme, the methodologies used included, for example, a framework for systematically analysing organizational performance, a tool for analysing the enabling environment, or a “vision” tool which made it possible to develop a common plan of action.



An innovative partnership

The CoOPequity programme supports the implementation of innovative partnerships, such as the one between FAO and the organization “Union des producteurs agricoles du Québec – Développement International (UPA-DI)”, based on the principle of solidarity between farmers North and South.

As part of the International Year of Cooperatives, and in keeping with the theme of World Food Day 2012, “Agricultural cooperatives: key to feeding the world”, a memorandum of understanding was signed between FAO and UPA with the aim of developing a targeted intervention strategy for farmers’ organizations and agricultural cooperatives in developing countries.

CoOPequity is based on an innovative North-South approach for cooperation between farmers, with the broader goal of strengthening their capacities to work together for sustainable and fair development and better livelihoods.



- 1 Annual Report on FAO activities in support of producers’ organizations and agricultural cooperatives, FAO, 2012; Agricultural cooperatives: paving the way for food security and rural development, FAO, 2012.
- 2 Good practices on building rural institutions to increase food security, FAO/IFAD, 2012; Successful farmer collective action to integrate food production into value chains, Herbel, D. and Ourabah Haddad, N., Food Chain Journal, November 2012.
- 3 Learning Module 4 (LM4).