

CoOPequity | An inclusive approach based on participation, good governance and gender

Funded by the European Union, FAO's CoOPequity programme supports the implementation of policies and measures that encourage the development of equitable and efficient producer organizations (PO), in partnership with the UPA, Union des Producteurs Agricoles (Farmers Union) of Quebec. We met up with Carol Djeddah and Dubravka Bojic, responsible for implementing the programme.



What is “CoOPequity”?

CD: It takes its name from “Cooperative”, “PO” for producer organization (OP in French) and “equity”. The approach is based on gender equality and good governance.

DB: It is both a programme and a global innovative approach, created on the basis of the experience of the actors. Before, there were good practices, but for specific areas. Here, we are involved in an integrated global approach which takes account of policies, organizations and individuals.

Which countries does the CoOPequity programme cover?

CD: In Niger, we have based ourselves on the work of Dimitra, and used the results of a study regarding the place of women in POs, which showed that although women are present as members, they play virtually no role in decision-making, and even less in terms of leadership.

We have also started to implement the CoOPequity approach in Kenya, in Ghana as part of a regional initiative, as well as in Ethiopia.

What is the history behind CoOPequity?

CD: The origins of the approach are to be found in the International Year of Cooperatives in 2012. There was a great deal of debate on cooperatives, their role in a global context, how they work, who participates, etc. From this starting point, and the fact that FAO had produced a joint publication with IFAD on good practices in rural institutions¹, it was decided that it was time to put into practice what had been developed.

The authors of the publication collected some sixty examples of good practices from organizations working well in various continents, POs, cooperatives and associations at various levels: at grassroots but also at regional level, such as, for example, the Network of Farmers' and Agricultural Producers' Organisations of West Africa (ROPPA).

DB: Together, these actors chose a certain number of practices considered to be the best ones to ensure the proper functioning of organizations. The conclusion was, that if organizations are to be able to develop and provide the services needed by men and women small-scale producers, in order to reduce poverty and improve their well-being, the following will need to happen: (1) there will have to be links between the men and women farmers, so

that the organizations are based on the common interests of everyone involved; (2) the organizations will need to interact with each other, exchange experiences and join together under the umbrella of federations or unions. That will enable them to speak with one voice, be stronger and represent the interests of their members; (3) the organizations will have to interact with other actors (the government, private sector, etc.) throughout the value chain. That is the basis of the CoOPequity approach.

CD: The observation was made that there were efforts at the level of the producer organizations, but that not enough was being done to link initiatives at all levels (individual, organizational and policy); this is known as working on an enabling environment. (...)

It should be said that we are working with Dimitra to explore how to make linkages at community level. The Dimitra listeners' clubs could be exactly what we need to raise awareness about POs among members, and inform them that, by joining a PO, community members, especially women and young people, can benefit from social and financial support.

DB: I would add that the approach looks at the situation as a whole. Although work done at a particular level is certainly useful, it is more



effective when the various actions are linked. An organization cannot develop properly without an enabling environment; an organization cannot provide services for its members if it does not communicate and is unaware of the needs and interests of those it represents. And the members will not be able to express their needs unless they have access to relevant information. Information exchange based on equitable relationships between different actors is crucial, particularly if they are to be involved at all levels.

CD: This is another specific feature of CoOPequity: facilitating the implementation of platforms for information exchange and dialogue between all actors, on well-defined issues. This involves devising consultation mechanisms where problems can be solved. Inclusive platforms make it possible to gather all actors around the same table – all the PO members, women as well as men.

The “Union des Producteurs Agricoles du Québec” (UPA) is a key partner for CoOPequity; what form does the collaboration take?

CD: It varies. UPA is a project partner in all respects. It has helped to set up a legal framework in Quebec, so that the voice of POs can be heard by the government. It is a union of producer organizations, which also runs cooperation programmes in developing countries. It speaks the same language as the POs and the unions that we work with, and that has a very strong impact.

DB: Yes, UPA has a great deal of experience. It has been working in Africa for 20 years. It is based on the idea that it is essential to have a thorough knowledge of a country’s background and engage in discussions before deciding the best approach to take.

What concrete activities does CoOPequity carry out?

CD: We work at country level. For example, in Niger we started with a workshop attended by all stakeholders (umbrella groups, unions, producer organizations, ministry departments, representatives of the 3Ns initiative – the national strategy for food security that reports to the President, technical and financial partners, etc.), during which an analysis was made of their performance in terms of governance and equity, and a plan of action was jointly developed. More specifically, it was

agreed that FAO should facilitate the process of strengthening dialogue and consultation and of building organizational capacities, especially on questions of governance and equity, as well as in specific technical areas.

Effective dialogue between POs and government authorities is considered essential for the success of strategies on food and nutrition security in Niger. In the same way, better consultation between the various POs, as well as stronger capacities for mobilization and making proposals, are crucial if they are to be in a position to represent small-scale producers when talking to political decision-makers. FAO and UPA support this process.

DB: Following the last meeting on consultation between POs, organized by CoOPequity, the stakeholders decided to meet among themselves so as to define an advocacy strategy. (...) This process should ensure the sustainability of the approach. After the foundations have been laid, the various actors must be able to continue without our help.

Are there no bodies doing this work in Niger already?

CD: Yes, several structures exist, but they are not very effective and often don’t respect gender equality. It has to be said that CoOPequity has not invented anything new here, but is supporting existing initiatives so as to strengthen them. The same is true outside Niger, though each country is at a different stage. For example, there are countries where there are a great many structures. Challenges have also been encountered in places undergoing decentralization: often there are platforms in the capital, but the actors also want them at decentralized level. Each situation is different!

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¹ Good practices in building innovative rural institutions to increase food security, FAO & FIDA, 2012.

