

World Food Day 2012

Message of the Director-General of FAO, José Graziano da Silva



The theme of this year's World Food Day is *Agricultural cooperatives: key to feeding the world*. This theme was chosen to highlight the many, concrete ways in which agricultural cooperatives and producer organizations help to provide food security, generate employment, and lift people out of poverty. For FAO and its partners, agricultural cooperatives are natural allies in the fight against hunger and extreme poverty. Their importance has also been acknowledged through the United Nations' declaration of 2012 as the *International Year of Cooperatives*.

Over the three decades of decline in national investments in agriculture and official development assistance, millions of small producers have struggled to respond and to cope with variability and crises in climate, markets, and prices. Since the food crisis of 2007-8 many countries have renewed their commitment to eradicating hunger in the world and improving livelihoods. But in some cases, concrete political, programme and financial support are lagging behind verbal commitments.

The opportunity that the food price spikes of 2007-2008 might have provided as a pathway out of poverty for small producers was not realized.

Every day, small producers around the world continue to face constraints that keep them from reaping the benefits of their labour and contributing to food security not only for themselves but for all through active participation in markets. However, poor infrastructure and limited access to services and information, productive assets and markets, as well as poor representation in decision making processes, mean that this potential is not realized.

Evidence shows that those strong cooperatives and producer organizations are able to overcome these constraints and to mitigate the negative effects of food and other crises.

Strong producer organizations have helped to fill a void. They have been able to overcome market and policy constraints by providing their members' access to a range of assets and services. For instance, they can reduce costs to farmers by allowing them to purchase in groups and benefit from better retail prices of agricultural inputs. They also make it possible for members to voice their concerns and interests – and to play a role in decision and policy making processes.

There are numerous examples of strong and inclusive organizations that foster collective action among people who depend on farming, fishing, forestry, livestock and related employment for their livelihoods. These organizations operate at the community, national or international level, working to combine the economic and social goals of their members.

It has been said repeatedly that we have the means to eliminate hunger and malnutrition. What is needed is the establishment of an enabling environment that allows small producers to take full advantage of available opportunities. Strong cooperatives and producer organizations are an essential part of that enabling environment.

FAO supports member governments in helping cooperatives and producer organizations to thrive, by developing adequate policies, legal frameworks, economic incentives, and forums for dialogue on policy making. In addition, FAO generates evidence, knowledge and good practice that supports the emergence of more self reliant, inclusive, gender- equitable, and market oriented producer organizations and cooperatives.

FAO, together with UN and other partners, including the Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC) and the Rome based agencies, will continue to strengthen and support cooperatives, as key stakeholders, to open the door to new opportunities and to achieve our common goal of a more food secure and sustainable world.