

The side event "*Transforming food systems: investing in producer organizations (POs), innovative approaches to support smallholder farmers*" sponsored by GAFSP, IFAD, and ROPPA had the objective of highlighting the importance and benefit of investing in POs to enable their members to become their own agents of change, enabling them to make effective decisions about their activities and improve their livelihoods. The event was built from information and result of the GAFSP and IFAD work in projects designed and managed POs. The information shared clearly demonstrated that smallholder farmers can sustain their income and productivity growth when they come together to pool their efforts and that PO-led investments provide smallholder farmers with greater ownership, enabling them to make more effective decisions about their activities.

Marco Camagni, IFAD Global Senior Technical Lead Rural Institutions, and Fanny Grandval, IFAD Senior Regional Technical Specialist Rural Institutions emphasized that channeling funds directly to PO through mechanisms such as GAFSP is critical to put farmers in the driver's seat to implement their plans in line with their strategic priorities. They also stressed that it is essential that donors continue to support POs, including in the light of the importance of the private sector, recognizing that farmers are the primary private investors in agriculture, but not an ordinary kind of private sector, but one that has much more to offer in terms of social and environmental impact, and must be supported accordingly.

Corry Van Gaal, deputy director for Global Affairs Canada and chair of the GAFSP Steering Committee, and Luis Rodriguez, head of Sustainable agri-food systems and fisheries, DG International Partnerships, European Commission, emphasized that family farmers are in the best position to define their own needs and work with their organizations to implement projects that meet those needs. Grassroots approaches are key to driving the adoption of new practices that help farmers adapt to climate change and address power imbalances that limit the voices of marginalized groups, including women and indigenous peoples.

Representatives from PO involved in IFAD and GAFSP projects also shared their experiences. Soumana Kanta, from the National Coordination of Peasant Organizations (CNOP) in Mali, outlined the challenges farmers already face in accessing credit from banks and microfinance institutions and securing market access, talking about how POs can help farmers cope by supporting them in building their capacity and bargaining power. From Burundi, Annick Sezibera, executive secretary of the Confederation of Agricultural Producers' Associations for Development (CAPAD), noted that direct financing allows farmers to prioritize needs and find strategic solutions and makes PO activities more sustainable, as community-based systems remain long after projects end.

Iris Baguilat, from the Asian Farmers Association for Sustainable Rural Development (AFA), illustrated successful examples of how POs responded quickly to the crisis caused by COVID-19. GAFSP funding for POs provided tremendous support to farmers during the COVID-19 pandemic to find practical solutions that POs faced at that time.

Marcela Villarreal, Director of the Partnerships Division of FAO, said that POs are critical allies that have already demonstrated incredible resilience and need to be more supported by donors for sustainable crisis response in the future. She also emphasized that working directly with POs will not only empower local communities but also minimize the operational costs of reaching rural communities and providing services, including those that strengthen food security, for more sustainable change in the long term.

In conclusion, ROPPA pointed out that PO has already demonstrated a unique ability to remedy food system failures and weaknesses with local responses. The international community was also urged to step up and support farmers by channeling funding directly to POs. A global effort was called to transform and strengthen investments targeting small farmers and their organizations so they can respond quickly and find solutions to challenges in their own context.