



Forest and Farm Facility

The vital role of forest and farm producer organizations (FFPOs) in COVID-19 responses and plans to build back better

Quotes from partners

"These are really challenging times. The situation in our communities worries me very much. As you know, many of our territories have absolutely no access to healthcare. Added to that, many young indigenous persons who were living in the cities are now migrating back to the communities due to COVID-19, not knowing if they are taking it with them into their families and communities. It is a surreal situation." (Feedback from indigenous partners in Belize, Central America)

"We just felt that we needed to do something and since limited access to vegetables is already felt, we thought that this would allow us to use our network for the response." (Feedback from the Farm Forestry Smallholder Producers Association of Kenya, which is supporting food security for its members)

FFPOs provide support where few other agencies reach

Forest and farm producer organizations (FFPOs) represent many of the 1.5 billion family smallholders, rural communities and indigenous peoples. These include some of the poorest people, who live in forest landscapes worldwide. Many of their members all over the world are already feeling the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in disruptions to their lives and livelihoods. Yet FFPOs working in forest and farm landscapes are critical actors in building lasting resilience to climatic, economic and social changes. FFPOs offer services and information enhancing the capacity of their members to keep up with their businesses and livelihoods, shape better policies, restore and sustain landscapes at scale. They provide solidarity and social support systems between their many members, both women and men, extending information and innovations to their large networks. They draw on traditional knowledge and experience and lead collective responses for recovery and rehabilitation. In many cases, they provide the only organized response to local needs, especially for some of the most vulnerable, in times of crisis – be it economic, environmental, or in this case a health crisis. This briefing draws together FFPOs insights from our networks in nine countries to describe three things. It describes COVID-19 impacts on rural producers. It also illustrates how FFPOs are providing immediate emergency responses – particularly in the areas of information sharing and crisis service provision. Finally, it shows how FFPOs can offer grounded solutions for resilience in building back better, securing landscape-based production systems and introducing innovative solutions that will be necessary in the post-COVID-19 world.

1. Major impacts of COVID-19 on forest and farm producers

Short term demographic changes

As poor wage laborers are laid off in cities, urban to rural migration gathers pace. This puts more immediate stress on resources, food security and family livelihoods. It increases the rural risk of exposure to COVID-19. Often the main rural employers, FFPOs are helping to engage these returnees and meet their needs. The crisis provides an opportunity for them to re-imagine how youth and other returnees might use their urban knowledge to develop opportunities to stay on in productive roles.

Food insecurity due to supply chain interruptions

With wide spread enforcement of social distancing, reduced mobility is leading to disruption between traders and buyers. Reports come in of temporary closures of farmers' markets. Farmers are facing difficulties to transport and sell their products (locally, nationally and internationally). Food is spoiling, and perishable forest products wasted. Prices are increasing. This puts additional pressure on poor urban households. In Madagascar for example, food markets in the capital city are only open from 6 am to 12 am. Only basic commodities can be transported. In Kenya, food prices have shot up. The diversity, especially of fresh produce, has become limited. Urban to rural migration means more people needing food. Access to farm inputs and extension services have also been affected. These changes are affecting the food and nutritional security and future livelihoods of poor rural and urban families.

Higher pressure on biodiversity and the environment

Access to charcoal markets is also restricted. People in both urban and peri-urban areas are being pushed into harvesting wood themselves. This adds pressure on the few forest reserves that remain close to urban areas. More land may also be cleared for subsistence food production as traditional distribution processes struggle. Communities, in some slum areas in Kenya, have started using plastics and other non-conventional sources of fuel, leading to air pollution and posing health hazards.

Increased poverty and reduced well-being

Lost income and shortages of food are most severely felt by those already at risk. This is true particularly for women, the landless, and daily wage workers. But it is also true for producers with very small holdings and those not linked to FFPOs or strong social and economic networks. On top of these challenges, many producers are already highly vulnerable to climate and market related risks. Many small or economically unstable FFPOs have little resilience to cope with the current scale of disruption.

Increased burden on women and gender-based violence

Women are particularly affected by the COVID-19 crisis. They make up most of the care workers (paid and unpaid). This leads to greater risk of infection. They are also usually the ones in the household going to markets to buy food and other items of daily need. This increases their exposure even further. Women face aggravated work burdens in cooking and care for children and the elderly too. More children and other family members are staying at home than usual (due to school closure, home office regulations or loss of work and general restriction of movements). Additionally, men staying at home or returning have increased sexual and gender-based violence. Movement restrictions make it more difficult for affected women to report these incidents or seek help.

Special challenges for indigenous communities

Many indigenous peoples' groups are confronted with particularly acute challenges. They live in remote areas, often with basic healthcare provision and communication. Lockdowns further isolates indigenous communities by limiting their access to food and medicine. This makes them vulnerable and defenseless if the coronavirus spreads to their territories. Monitoring and support are rarely tracking their situation in official reports due to the difficulty in communication. Relevant information on prevention and containment is often not available in local languages.

2. FFPOs play vital roles in immediate emergency responses to COVID-19

Improving coordination between partners

FFPOs and their enterprises play a vital role in local economies as employers, suppliers and as buyers of broad baskets of products. They provide trusted links for people, goods and services between rural and urban areas. Often ignored for their non-governmental status, their democratic membership base and reach can be a critical asset in COVID-19 coordination efforts. For example,

some FFPOs have stepped in to help national social protection programmes for food supply, with distribution of food supplies (for example in NEPAL by the Federation of Community Forest Users of Nepal - FECOFUN). FECOFUN has also provided funds to the COVID 19 Relief Fund established by the Nepal Government.

Enhancing flows of information

FFPOs play an essential role in communication and information that reaches the local level. Tiered FFPOs, with their established chapters at local, regional and national levels, have a vital role to play in disseminating critical information and providing channels for social support. Local FFPOs are the first point of reference and support for individuals and families and can often help in translating or transmitting information in local languages on the prevention and containment of the pandemic, especially targeting rural communities and indigenous peoples (for example in Ecuador for Amazonian communities by Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon, CONFENIAE). FFPOs are already serving as primary communication channels about COVID -19 health, hygiene practices in many instances. In the area of digital media and virtual communication, the COVID-19 crisis presents an opportunity to support FFPOs to deliver information and services with new tools for e-commerce, finance and technical extension.

Establishing links with social protection programmes

FFPOs already provide a range of social protection services in terms of health, education and childcare. These serve both their members and often the broader community. As social protection programmes of the government are highly stretched due to the COVID-19 pandemic, FFPOs can improve access to these programmes and provide help to vulnerable groups on the ground. Some FFPOs have been providing premises for quarantine and self-isolation (for example in Nepal by FECOFUN). FFPOs have also been offering support for unpaid care by women and addressing the specific constraints for workers in the informal sector (many of them women). They are helping people returning to rural communities.

Enhancing gender equality and maintaining social integrity

FFPOs are a key player in local democratic processes. They often have particular constitutions that target gender equality and the inclusion of vulnerable groups (e.g. youth and ethnic minorities). In addition, many reach out to people living with disabilities and other vulnerable groups including the homeless and the aged. It is groups such as these that are particularly vulnerable in the COVID 19 crisis. FFPOs can help to maintain the public spirit of social inclusion in response and resilience planning and programmes.

3. Engaging FFPOs to help build back better to secure more resilient production systems

Broadening the ownership of resources and business

FFPOs and their enterprises are owned by their members. They provide much needed local employment and income in areas where little else exists. They typically supply local markets with a wide basket of products – based on biodiverse landscape mosaics. They balance economic needs with other social and environmental agendas as their membership dictates. COVID-19 has disrupted mainstream trade and distribution networks, leaving people more dependent on local solutions and local provision. Future climate change is likely to replicate exactly these types of disruption making local resilience and secure control over land and resources ever more important. FFPOs offer prospects for a fairer and more resilient future. As COVID-19 shows their importance to local crisis resilience, efforts are needed to strengthen their membership, improve their cooperation and federation between regions, and ensure their engagement in future production.

Finding organizational innovations that foster long-term resilience

FFPOs thrive through organizational innovations that improve prosperity for local people. The COVID-19 pandemic is showing how they can find and demonstrate alternative solutions to the

closure of transport links for food and inputs, and for preparing food stocks with local farmers' organizations. In many cases, FFPOs are leading thinking that is out of the box – about building solutions for recovery which are already different and reflect more sustainable, equitable and caring systems. Many of these build on initiatives that they have already taken to develop:

- Landscape scale value chains based on baskets of products that enhance climate, ecosystem and social resilience.
- Shorter value and supply chains that reduce carbon emissions, and optimize diversity and more local processing and value addition.
- Renewable and sustainable energy solutions and networks that give territorial control to groups that can then restore and protect energy resources for the future.
- Support networks that prioritize well-being and strong relationships between people, their communities and their landscapes.
- Re-valued rural-urban and human-nature linkages and nexuses.

Representing the most vulnerable groups in decision-making

FFPOs represent family smallholders, communities and indigenous peoples on their own terms. In some enlightened cases, for example in Ecuador, FFPOs have been invited to be members of the newly established Emergency Committee. This is ensuring that the new policies, and funds being allocated through stimulus packages channel resources and incentives to FFPOs and micro, small and medium scale enterprises and not exclusively to the big business sector. As a result resources will reach member-owned groups and local people reinforcing the local economy. FFPOs are suppliers in the food value chain and consumers in the local markets. All ongoing efforts to channel existing funds and programmes to FFPOs can be accelerated, and they can be assisted to identify and help the most vulnerable.

4. How can we all support FFPOs in the current and post COVID-19 realities?

Support FFPOs to help national governments design response strategies

As most COVID-19 measures are taken by national governments, it is crucial that national level FFPOs are involved in policy and decision making with national governments. FFPOs can also play a crucial role in the implementation of policies and incentive programmes at local levels or help in dissemination of information and communication material. Government agencies, multi-lateral and bilateral development assistance, global programmes, international financial organizations, civil society groups and investors can all play a role in furthering this process.

Support FFPOs to demonstrate, expand and replicate practical solutions

It is vital that FFPOs have access to on-going support. Large regional and global federations of FFPOs, including indigenous peoples institutions, women's federations and other member organizations provide vital capacity development support to national and member FFPOs and should be supported. The Forest and Farm Facility (FFF), a partnership between FAO, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and AgriCord hosted by FAO at global and national level is a functional mechanism which has channeled direct support to more than 1000 FFPOs. Additional partner networks of AgriCord and its agri-agency members at regional, national and local levels share a mandate to support FFPOs.

Support gender equality and women's empowerment in FFPOs and beyond

Women groups and female members of FFPOs are crucial for targeted community responses. Women need to be fully integrated in all decision-making related to COVID-19 and beyond, coupled with facilitating more women in leadership positions. Single mothers and widows that are already the most vulnerable among women will be affected harder by the COVID-19 crisis which requires a tailored social protection support strategy. Continuous effort to enhance gender equality and empowerment of women at all levels is crucial to reduce the risk of aggravated gender-based violence and to lower the work burden of women due to their traditional roles including care work.

Support FFPO programmes for youth engagement

Young people will be seriously affected from a global recession. Youth unemployment rates will increase. Most FFPOs already have active youth programmes and the international community can help them develop specific programmes for youth employment in rural areas in the wake of COVID-19. Young people are joining the global response against the COVID-19 pandemic in many ways, for example the indigenous youth caucus. Young people are running awareness campaigns, handwashing campaigns, volunteering to support the elderly and vulnerable populations and are innovators in many ways.

Document best practices that support COVID-19 responses

FFF partners FAO, IUCN, IIED and AgriCord are helping FFPOs in documenting and sharing best practices and facilitating the implementation of locally adapted measures. In addition to the examples cited above, these include measures for:

- ***Immediate emergency responses:***
 - Engaging youth in COVID-19 communication campaigns and response strategies to help affected groups.
 - Directly involving women in all planning and implementation of COVID-19 responses and specific support to women and girls that includes assisting women in leadership.
 - E-commerce and delivery mechanisms that allow FFPOs to trade and develop new market opportunity for FFPOs that cope with social distancing.
 - Health protection methods that still allow aggregating, logistics, distribution of basket of products from FFPOs.
 - Special focus on rural poor and other vulnerable groups, in productive activities for landless families and ensuring access to seeds for both production and self-consumption.
- ***Building back better for the long term:***
 - Generate rural employment opportunities whilst stimulating livelihood diversification for more resilience.
 - Sensitization and information campaigns on the value of collective action and the important role of FFPOs for resilience and recovery for/from shocks and crises, such as this pandemic.
 - Designing local strategies and management plans for the revival and strengthening of rural production and livelihoods, enhancing resilience and social protection systems.
 - Assessing and improving public policies regarding the strengthening of FFPOs and their inclusion in relevant coordination mechanisms.
 - Scaling up initiatives and work on enhancing gender equality and women's economic empowerment in FFPOs and beyond.

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Contact: Jeffrey.Campbell@fao.org

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