

Notes from the Publisher

Farmers Organizations: Growing up to authority

“Apart from staying viable and being cohesive, negotiating effectively is the best way farmers’ organizations can serve their members.”

At the Global Forum on Agricultural Research conference in Dakar, Senegal in May 2003, the farmer representatives in that conference:

- Stressed the importance of farmer participation in priority-setting and decision making processes, particularly at the grassroots level;
- Insisted that extra efforts are needed to ensure legitimacy of representation and accountability to the constituents; representatives must be chosen by the farmer organizations themselves and not appointed by other stakeholders, governments or research bodies;
- Said that extension needs to be more effective, and the results of agricultural research need to be more accessible and user-friendly to the average farmer;
- Wanted better access to research results and to build on local knowledge,
- Requested assistance in building their leadership skills to ensure effective representation, advocacy and policy formation, and improving their communication and information-dissemination capacities.

These conditions, if fulfilled, would make farmers truly and effectively participate in the development process. But that is a big “if”. If farmers were to be taken seriously as stakeholders in the development process they must organize and, beyond building their capacity, attain a status of authoritative. A limited survey done by NACA in mid-2003 of different types of aquaculture farmer or producers organizations in five Asian countries - while it was not aimed to find support to this statement – turned up some examples by which farmers organizations could attain an authoritative stature.

The surveyed associations are legally established, have the requisite

statutory constitutions and the structure and systems including financial, to operate properly. They are generally professionally managed although no clear indication is given on whether they are seriously engaged in organizational and professional development other than expanding membership or training members. The associations have memberships that comprise representatives of the industry sub-sectors and, in one case, the input (feed and chemicals) suppliers. This multi-sector membership endows some power in being able to claim a wide representation of the sector, and a fair amount of authoritative if the association’s opinions and advice offered to government or to its own ranks, are informed by science-based sources and objective debates of issues. Legitimacy is also seen as the association representing the various scales of producers, but in particular (in the Asian context) the numerous small farmers.

Not surprisingly, none claimed to have adequate funding. The associations raise funds through various means that include organizing conferences and trade fairs, leveraging support from industry sponsors and government, sale of or commission from sale of members’ products. Running conferences, seminars and trade exhibitions are a common and accepted way to raise revenue by societies. It also gains them credibility by being seen as providing opportunities for industry, government, scientific community and NGOs to discuss issues dispassionately. Leveraging support from government through collaborative activities, or for grants, is largely an acceptable means although it raises a critical issue. It may give the association greater credibility if it maintained a great degree of independence. That said, most Asian



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farmer associations are probably more dependent on government than their counterparts in developed regions. This works both ways on sustainability: On the one hand, government support can come in handy in keeping associations viable and enabling them to operate, as with grants, support to conferences, support to promotional activities, restructuring of taxes, etc. On the other hand, dependence on government risks fostering subservience or stifling initiatives to seek other ways of sustaining the association. Some degree of dependence on government, in the context of a developing country, is unavoidable. It has benefits, but it could suppress initiative, at best. At worst, it could lead to passivity and thus vulnerability to particularized demands. An association in such a state cannot be expected to contribute well to development processes; it would be its own worst enemy for its vulnerability to being used as a tool to stronger interests.

Apart from alliances or partnership among themselves and with government, the survey did not indicate whether the associations have formed alliances with other associations or societies in other countries in or outside the region. However, some individual members of the shrimp associations are also members of the Global Aquaculture Alliance as well as the ASEAN Fisheries Federation. The Philippines seaweed industry association cooperates with international seaweed associations like MARINALG and the International Seaweed Association, and is active in the ASEAN Carageenan Industry Club. It engages experts from

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stocks. Clearly, better management of hatcheries and nurseries will be essential to reduce risks. In response to such problems, the health management components of upcoming NACA courses are being strengthened to emphasise better health management in hatcheries and nurseries. A special workshop "Management of environmental and health risks in marine fish farming" is being planned by NACA in late 2004 to develop some practical guidance on managing of such risks in hatcheries, nurseries and grow-out farms.

Regional Training Course on Grouper Hatchery Production 2004, Bali, Indonesia

The Asia-Pacific Marine Finfish Aquaculture Network and its cooperating partners are planning for the 3rd training course in 2004, the tentative schedule will be from March 24-April 13. As the training course is only taking limited number of participants therefore it is important for those who are interested to contact Mr. Sih-Yang Sim (grouper@enaca.org) to register their interest and secure a place in the training course. The training course reports for 2002 and 2003 are available from the NACA website <http://www.enaca.org>.

Update on 2003 Training Course Participants

Dr. Trevor Anderson from GFB Fisheries Ltd, Australia successfully produced some 20,000 *Cromileptes altivelis* fingerlings in November 2003, with success also extended to *E. coioides* in his hatchery. Mr. Sufian B. Mustafa from the Marine Finfish Production and Research Centre, Malaysia reported some success in spawning (*Epinephelus* species) after implementing pellet LHRH hormone implantation for broodstock. However, he reports larviculture problems, constrained by lack of S and SS-rotifer. Dr. K. Kailasam from the Central Institute of Brackishwater Aquaculture, India has seen improvement in grouper (*Epinephelus coioides*) breeding with successful female fish spawned and fertilized by stripping method. But larvae did not survive beyond day 7.

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national R and D institutions and invites experts from other countries to provide technical advice on a range of issues including taxonomy and processing. Sri Lanka's Ornamental Fish Producers Association works with national technical and economic agencies and also engages professionals and scientists, and fosters relationships with similar associations in other countries. The Vietnamese fishery society – a vast well-organized and powerful multi-stakeholder entity - includes in its agenda building links and collaborating with national, regional and international organizations and other NGOs to share experiences and information. Its biennial fishery exhibition and technical conference brings in the participation of policy makers, scientists, technicians, farmers, input supply companies and technical advisers.

Included in the survey are the village farmers associations in Eastern India (where STREAM and other international agencies have been operating). The village associations have realized that maintaining relationships with the NGOs and state and federal government agencies, and continuing their participation in community development activities can sustain the build up of their capacities. A recent move is to provide support for networking the various village associations to facilitate exchange of information among them. Networking builds up numbers. More importantly it broadens the scope of the associations' influence through their alliance fostered by networking.

Holding on to members and staying financially stable are, for obvious reasons, the foremost organizational concerns of farmers associations in developing countries. Other than being able to serve members' needs, being able to sell their produce at a profit is still their best bet to staying viable, relevant and cohesive. The national associations based on a single export commodity (almost all producers associations are organized around a single commodity) are dependent on the market and, on top of coping with risks posed by vagaries of nature and

markets, must comply with an increasing number and stringency of "market requirements." They have shown that they are willing to comply with requirements - including those that ask them to be environmentally responsible, to assure that food safety and quality are of a certain standard – as well as to work with government and other sectors on legislation, policies, and standards, and to promote and apply codes of practices and conduct among their members.

Pragmatically, they know that environmentally sensitive and socially responsible farming makes good business sense. However, to the small farmers, or even large but unorganized farmers, some elements of the "market requirements" can be a threat to their staying in business. This is a strong reason to organize to attain economy of scale, and more importantly, to attain a degree of authority to be able to negotiate from a position of strength. Being able to negotiate effectively - for favorable prices and terms for their product and for input supplies and equipment, for better allocation of or access to land, water and credit resources to the industry, for favorable tax structures and other incentives, for access to technology, for improvement of the marketing infrastructure and system, for fairer trade regimes, etc – is probably the best way farmers' organizations can serve their members.

While maintaining viability is a primordial concern, the association should have the ability to work with government and other sectors of society to shape policies and research and development agenda, precisely define its needs and work with others to meet those needs, bring professional and scientific advice into the discussions and decision processes (as the Federation of European Aquaculturists or FEAP does with great effectiveness), and engage in mutually beneficial alliances.

It is clear that to develop the potentials of farmers organizations for sustainable development, it would be best to provide them the environment and motivations to attain a status of authoritativeness.