



## Role of Farmer Organizations in the Strategy for Improving the Quality of Life for Livestock Producers in Northern Mali

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*This study investigates the potential for farmer organizations to be of assistance to livestock producers by looking at the broader issue of farmer organizations in northern Mali as a way of gauging the potential for such groups to be of assistance in the livestock sector. The study was conducted in the regions of Mopti, Tombouctou and Gao, which are very productive livestock raising areas. A participatory approach was adopted, targeting two villages within the administrative area of each region, through interviews with focus groups, individual interviews with members of organizations, and interviews with key informants. The study yielded several results of interest concerning: policy and development actors and their relation to farmer organizations; functional relations between organizations and agricultural policies; relations of power within farmer organizations; the different forms of organizations; and strengths and weaknesses of different forms of organizations. Findings show that formal and informal farmer associations are numerous in northern Mali and intervene in various fields. However, in some sites, farmer organizations exist in name only, and are used exclusively by leaders to receive support for themselves; a finding with drastic implications for agricultural development projects relying on these groups as there is a no guarantee that the benefits of such projects will actually reach targeted beneficiaries. Formal organizations attract more farmers in view of the many benefits they provide to members through the support of the State or of technical and financial partners. In spite of this, overall it appears that farmer organizations have very little influence on agricultural policies at any level, and that there is very little role currently played by groups allowing collective action in the livestock sector. When these organizations are capable of cohesion, however, we were able to see how they achieve economies of scale in marketing activities and influence decisions in a way favorable to the interests of members, indicating that farmer organizations as currently structured in northern Mali are largely a case of unrealized potential.*

### Background

Farmer organizations are among the most important and legitimate actors responsible for promoting agricultural development in developing countries. These organizations are formed voluntarily by professional groups formally or informally (association of producers, cooperatives, union of cooperatives, and associations) operating in different areas. They represent a strategy of collective action to influence government decisions or other institutions on behalf of communities composed of members who are generally poor and relatively powerless as individuals. They can also offer cost savings in terms of input markets or higher returns in output markets through collective action. As such, there is a promise of benefits to working with farmer associations in the livestock sector.

This study attempts to analyze the influence of farmer organizations on political and administrative authorities in terms of influencing policy, and also their role in fostering access to basic services (farm inputs, market information, and higher return markets). For this purpose, roles and responsibilities of agencies in the formulation and implementation of development policies more favorable to the most disadvantaged players were reviewed.

### Methods

The study adopted a participatory approach through interviews with focus groups, individual interviews with members of organizations, and interviews with key informants. It consisted of an inventory of organizations and support structures in the area, describing the collective activities of organizations and the governance thereof.

The study focused on the regions of Mopti, Tombouctou and Gao. In each region, *cercles*, a subdivision of a region, and corresponding technical support services were identified. Two villages were selected in each *cercle* to conduct interviews and surveys. The interviews were held with groups (some all male, some all female, and some mixed) whose principal activity is agricultural. In addition to group interviews, three farmers were interviewed individually (a leader of the organization, and two members of the organization – one male and one female if mixed composition). Finally, a key informant was interviewed in each *cercle* to identify the situation of organizations of the area as a whole from his or her perspective. The information collected was analyzed to understand how different organizations perform based on structures of support, goals, strengths, weaknesses, and gender.

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# Findings

There are several types of farmer organizations, which differ in their functions and types. In northern Mali, the organizations identified are broadly represented in Table 1.

In Mali, the agricultural policies that have succeeded since independence have been targeted to certain products (cotton, rice, peanuts, and to a lesser extent livestock), certain areas (over 800 millimeters of rain per year), and particular professional groups (retailers and consumers). Analysis of these policies shows the increasing role played by farmer organizations since the advent of democracy in the country. These include unions of rice producers in the Office du Niger, the union of cotton producers, and with regard to the topic of this study, the National Federation of the Livestock-Meat Sector in Mali (FEBVIM), though this is more targeted at the merchants and butchers than the livestock producers. The importance of these organizations are related to the relative importance of commodities for the country in terms of production, the level of prices for the commodity in the domestic market, the level of prices in export markets, or some combination of these elements.

Groups of farmers in northern Mali are often marginalized in decisions because of their remoteness from the main areas of production and consumption, and the difficulties this generates in terms of their access to information and input to decision-making. In addition, the study revealed that organizations commonly encountered in this

Table 1. Types of farmer organizations identified in northern Mali.

Status	Level	Type
Formal	National	Fédération
	Régional	None identified
	Local	Coopératives Associations
Informal	Local	Associations

area are generally not effective at advocacy with partners and government for consideration of their grievances. Organizations in this area are almost all in the least structured level of collective action (association), rarely are they at a cooperative or higher level of organization.

Currently, efforts are being made by the technical and financial partners, donors, political parties, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and often religious organizations for the promotion of farmer organizations. The activities that correspond to these efforts are focused on a set of activities such as the establishment of input shops, leadership training, and access to credit. In contrast to the relatively common set of activities, our work indicated that the different promoters of farmer organizations often follow different strategies using different approaches in addressing these activities. This leads to a multiplicity of organizations in a given site using different approaches to the same activity; the ensuing confusion at least partially



Figure 1. The first female market monitor recruited and trained for the MLPI Livestock Market Information System (LMIS), accesses market and price information from the LMIS via her cell phone. MLPI is working to empower women through increased participation in livestock marketing activities and collective action groups, though traditional farmer organization structures often exclude women and discourage their participation. Photo by Jay Angerer.

*Box 1. Reasons identified for the resistance to change of power relations in study communities.*

The physical dispersion of the rural population makes it difficult to identify common grievances and possible solutions.
Existing social relations of dependency, or conflict between members or sub-groups in these communities work against cooperation.
Constraints of information flow in rural areas increase the difficulty of identifying common problems or potential solutions.

explains the modest performance of each individual organization.

In agricultural policy design and implementation, the ideal of farmer organizations is that policies are defined democratically after extensive consultations among stakeholders, to analyze constraints and identify options for solutions that are suitable for the local context that will be supported by funding partners. The size of the country, the limited public finances, and the decentralization process do not allow the state to meet the needs of all organizations, thus creating the space for other kinds of assistance to be sought out. In this context, farmer organizations can be active in ensuring access to agricultural inputs, training, and information to members of organizations. The reality we encountered in our survey work is that large professional organizations (unions, federations of cooperatives, or associations), which are represented in Bamako, are more likely to be capable of exerting an influence on decision-making by government and program design by donors. Despite the undeniable contribution of these organizations in improving rural incomes, it is clear that most of them have been created to serve the interest of the group leaders rather than focusing on meeting the needs of all members. Thus, some organizations are limited by membership, areas and scope of their activities, and do not really represent the overall interest of rural producers in a given area. To remedy this situation, farmer organizations should be open and accessible to the poor, democratic, effective, and relevant in the choice of targets.

We encountered a variety of organizational types in the villages. There are formal and informal groups, groups of men, women, or mixed groups. As noted above we found that in general, local groups were led by a small number of beneficiaries who derive the greatest benefit from the group. Within these organizations we found consistent evidence that the stronger members derive benefits that are not obtained by the weaker members. Indeed, although they are almost always the majority, we found

members who were not in the core leadership generally unable to identify their constraints, to express their needs, or to make choices or propose solutions to better their outcomes. This largely explains the failure of some agricultural development projects initiated by donors that rely on farmer organizations. Power relations that exist in communities resist change for various reasons, and are identified in Box 1.

We also found that in many cases, farmer organizations are influenced by the technical services, NGOs, and technical and financial partners in the identification and implementation of development projects. Note that this is in contrast to the idea that members express their collective interest through the group and are assisted in asserting their will with outside assistance. Our work in the field indicates this pattern recurs due to a lack of organizational resources in the local communities, the low level of training of members, and frequent divergence of interests within the group, so that subgroups take advantage of outside resources and support to press for their interests within the group. In some sites, we found that farmer organizations exist in that area in name only, and are used exclusively by leaders to receive support for themselves.

The organizations include within them many members who could potentially take collective action and impact the sale or purchase of bulk goods and services. When organizations are capable of cohesion, we were able to see how they achieve economies of scale in marketing activities and influence decisions in a way favorable to the interests of members. This indicates that farmer organizations as currently structured in northern Mali, are largely a case of unrealized potential. We will be working in the area to see how the benefits of collective action can be more accessible to livestock producers in northern Mali.

The activities undertaken by farmer organizations in the livestock sector identified in the field mostly centered on the supply of livestock feed, as marketing decisions are taken exclusively by individuals. However, there is potential for group action in the livestock sector, perhaps building on the work of groups obtaining feed for animals. Any associations targeted for support in the livestock sector must build on the positive lessons, and learn from the negative outcomes encountered by other types of producer organizations in the area.

## **Practical Implications**

Producer organizations, in particular farmer organizations, are numerous in northern Mali. However, the level of training of their leaders is generally very low. In addition, we found numerous examples where leaders were elected not because of their effectiveness but because of the positions they occupy in society. There is evidence



that weaker members of communities who are not in core leadership positions are generally unable to actively engage in decision-making, due to a lack of capacity along with the traditional structure of the farmer organization. As the majority of these organizations are composed of and run by males, there is also very little room for female participation. This organizational structure has drastic implications for agricultural development projects relying on these groups; there is a no guarantee that the benefits of such projects will actually reach targeted beneficiaries. While the formal organizations attract more farmers and were seen to provide greater benefits to the members through access to outside

funds and expertise, farmers' organizations in northern Mali, in their present state, have very little influence on agricultural policies at any level, and there is very limited use of farmer organizations in the livestock sector.

In conclusion, there is considerable room for improvement of these organizations through capacity building and collective action, especially among livestock producers. We hope to build on these findings and advise local farmer organizations on how best to obtain the benefits of collective action in the livestock sector, while avoiding problems encountered by farmer organizations in other sectors.

## Further Reading

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Building on the successes of the GL-CRSP Livestock Early Warning System/Livestock Information Network and Knowledge System (LEWS/LINKS), Improving Pastoral Risk Management on East African Rangelands (PARIMA), and Forage Monitoring Technology to Improve Pastoral Risk Management by Herders in the Gobi Region of Mongolia (GOBI Forage) projects, the Mali Livestock and Pastoralist Initiative (MLPI) was initiated in January 2008, to develop a livestock market information system, and to examine strategies for reducing risk and improving livestock marketing options for the enhancement of pastoral livelihoods in Mali. The project is a collaboration between the Global Livestock CRSP and the USAID Mission to Mali with Texas A&M University, and Syracuse University as the US implementing partners. The project is led by Dr. Jay Angerer, Texas A&M University. Email: [jangerer@cnrit.tamu.edu](mailto:jangerer@cnrit.tamu.edu). The MLPI Co-Principal Investigator is John McPeak. Email: [jomcpeak@maxwell.syr.edu](mailto:jomcpeak@maxwell.syr.edu).



The Global Livestock CRSP is comprised of multidisciplinary, collaborative projects focused on human nutrition, economic growth, environment and policy related to animal agriculture and linked by a global theme of risk in a changing environment. The program is active in East and West Africa, and Central Asia.

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