

MULTIPLE ROLES OF FARMERS' AND PRODUCERS' ORGANIZATIONS IN RESPONDING TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS



Farmers' and producers' organizations both weakened and strengthened by the crisis

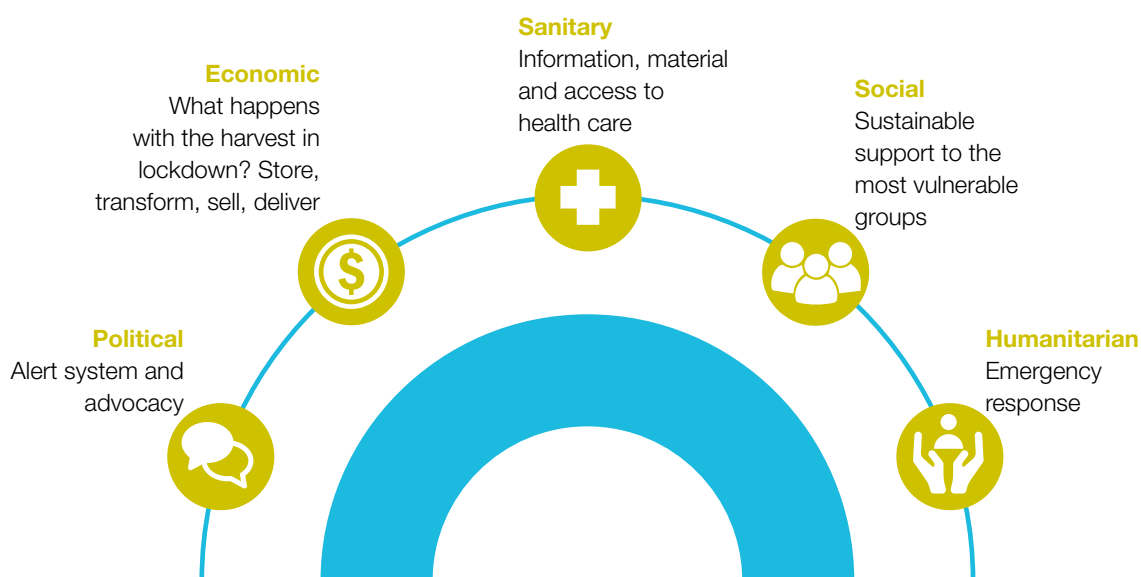
Farmers' and producers' organizations (FOs) have been both **weakened and strengthened by the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic**. Weakened because nothing is more contrary to the associative dynamic than **physical distancing**; by reducing the circulation of people and exchanges, the global pandemic has severely tested associations in their deepest vocation, which is to forge ties. **Strengthened because they were able to show that they were an indispensable tool in the hands of rural populations and a valuable partner of the authorities and technical and financial partners in dealing with crises.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit rural populations very unevenly in different parts of the world. In some countries, the disease has taken a heavy toll on family farms. However, it was often the measures adopted by governments to limit the spread of the virus that affected producers the most. These measures, which were similar everywhere, were applied to varying degrees: **border closures, travel restrictions and the limiting of meetings**. In most cases, governments sought to preserve the agricultural sector as much as possible, recognizing its **vital role** in the country. Nonetheless, there have been multiple disruptions upstream and especially downstream in the agricultural sectors. Restrictions on movement have resulted in a slowdown, or even a temporary halt, in the collection of agricultural products. Market, restaurant and school closures and the halt in tourism meant that farmers often found it difficult to sell their produce. For the most vulnerable groups, whose survival depends on their agricultural and non-agricultural activities, the consequences for income and food supply may have been dramatic.

Multiple roles of farmers' and producers' organizations

Faced with this triple **health, economic and social crises**, FOs have been the target of numerous requests by their members, the authorities and technical and financial partners. **They have thus been called on to play a variety of roles, some of which were unprecedented.** Thanks to their proximity to farmers and producers, they have often been the only entities able to reach and support rural populations at a time when circulation has been severely restricted. FOs first played a massive **role in health, something completely new to them**, by disseminating information about the disease and barrier measures. In the areas most affected by the virus, they even made rooms available for care of the sick, distributed medical equipment and organized psychological support sessions, among other activities. They have also been called on to play a major **social role**, providing assistance (reimbursable or non-reimbursable) to the poorest people and using formal and informal solidarity mechanisms when possible. Finally, FOs have played a **humanitarian role**, which may have been similar to that of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in emergencies, such as providing cash contributions, as in Asia. In some contexts where COVID-19 has amplified other security and climate crises, **FOs have been at the forefront**, demonstrating exceptional mobilization of humanitarian assistance. In these troubled contexts, governments and NGOs have often turned to FOs for information about the food and agriculture situation in remote areas, targeting strategies and response measures. Almost everywhere in the world, FOs have traditionally played a more **political role**: using monitoring tools and information-gathering systems that are sometimes very sophisticated, they have conducted surveys and studies on the

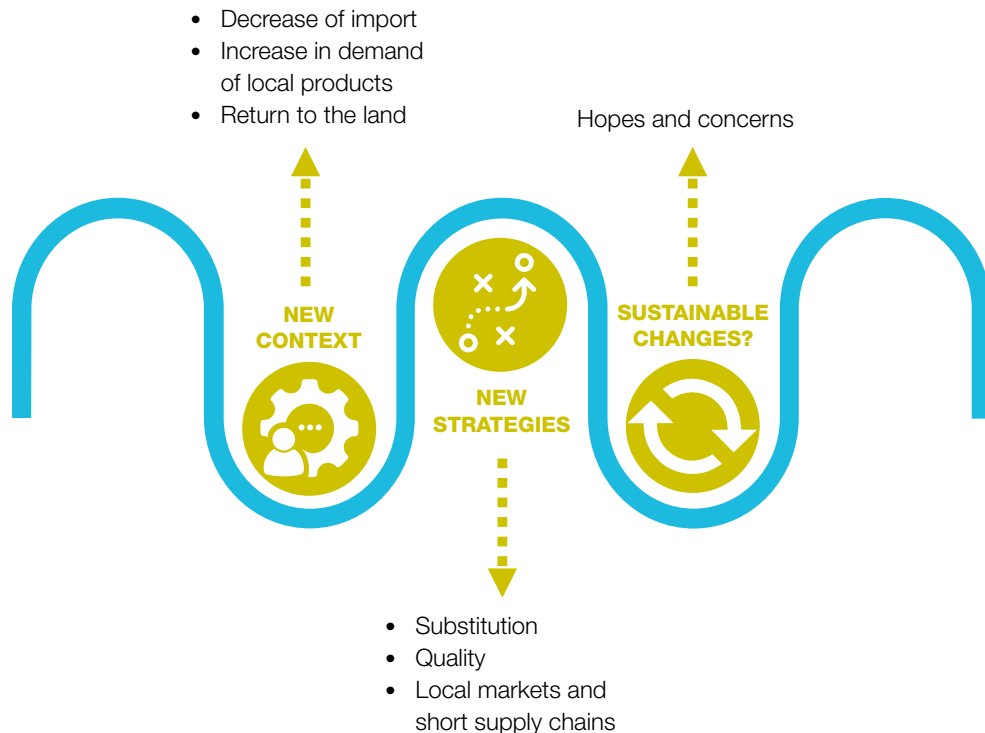
Multiplicity of roles of the FOs during the COVID-19 crisis



food and health situation and drafted communiqués to alert the authorities and propose measures in response to the crisis. Finally, FOs have naturally played a major **economic role** by proposing **innovative solutions** to their members to deal with the difficulties involved in selling products and the blockage downstream of the sectors. They have thus re-doubled their efforts in the areas of storage and processing, sought new outlets with processors, traders, importers or public institutions, and sometimes entered into contracts to expand their clientele and build loyalty. It should be noted that union-type FOs have been led to develop economic activities, and, conversely, cooperatives strongly geared to economic services have been led to adopt social measures (reimbursable or non-reimbursable). In short, the crisis has shown that in exceptional circumstances, and in order to respond to numerous needs, it is essential for FOs to be able to assume very different roles and demonstrate versatility.

Contrary to the trend in the past few years, which has consisted of encouraging **FO specialization** in economic functions, **the experience of the pandemic calls, on the one hand, for maintaining and reinforcing a cadre of generalist FOs as a complement to the specialized ones, and on the other, for rehabilitating the social role of FOs in some way.**

FOs at the heart of a reconfiguration of food systems



Farmers' and producers' organizations at the heart of a reconfiguration of food systems



The crisis has also disrupted conventional food systems. In addition to the upstream and downstream disruptions in country food supply chains, border closures have raised the spectre of a disruption in food supplies from abroad, while paradoxically opening up new opportunities for local production. From North Africa to Haiti to the Pacific region, **new markets for local products** to replace imports have emerged (local cheese, eggs, breadfruit, etc.). States have become aware of the urgency of **increasing their food sovereignty, encouraging local production and strengthening the links between cities and the countryside.** Many FOs, especially those on the outskirts of cities, have taken advantage of this renewed interest in **“consuming locally”** and have sought inventive and often digital answers to the problem of marketing products. In this context, FOs have tried out many collection and direct sales initiatives, including online sales, collective sales points and home delivery. FOs farther away from the places of consumption have embraced and strengthened more traditional solutions to deal with the blockage downstream of the commodity chains, such as the storage and processing of products or contracting.

At the start of this crisis, FOs were in a state of shock and experienced a slowdown or even a complete halt in their activities. Government measures began by blocking all planned activities, especially services such as training, the sharing of experiences and advice to producers. Very quickly, however, while the social and economic context has suffered a form of paralysis, FOs have had to **invent new ways of working.** They switched en masse to videoconferencing tools, digital apps and social networks so that they could do their work remotely, even though these methods were not necessarily tailored to rural areas. In fact, rural populations in poor countries are still very unfamiliar with new technologies and have very little equipment, while illiteracy remains common. **Five uses of new technologies were identified:** i) communication (internal and external); ii) monitoring and data collection; iii) monitoring and evaluation; iv) advice and training (e-learning); and v) marketing (e-business).



Lessons learned and recommendations

Thanks to these initiatives, FOs have gained a great deal of visibility and legitimacy in the eyes of both their members and their partners. Nonetheless, a big question remains: **Will these changes be sustainable? Will food systems gradually evolve toward more resilient models in which FOs will have a greater role?** A 2020 survey in Asia concluded that, according to participants, the most significant crisis they faced was not COVID-19 but climate change. Indeed, whatever the short-term political and economic developments, the COVID-19 crisis should perhaps be viewed as a laboratory. In light of the upcoming crises, FOs are likely to play an even greater role tomorrow and must therefore be prepared.

With a view to increasing resilience to current and future crises, this study highlights some issues for FOs to consider and invites them to consider the following points in particular:

- 1. How to strengthen their capacities in terms of crisis prevention and management** by reinforcing monitoring and warning systems, training and the sharing of experiences in crisis management and resilience strategies, and the creation of a culture of versatility in FOs.
- 2. How to better fulfil their social mission** by developing an approach linking emergencies with development, improving targeting strategies and supporting social protection and formal and informal community solidarity mechanisms.
- 3. How to further integrate the resilience-building initiatives of members into their action plans**, which could include agroecological advisory activities or interventions in the diversification, storage, processing and conservation of perishable products.
- 4. How to further the promotion of local consumption** by seeking alternatives to imports, improving the quality of the local product supply and increasing the number of short circuits (direct sales, online sales and home delivery).
- 5. How to make better use of new technologies** to revive associative life and the usual FO services, especially advisory services and training, by seeking a new balance between in person exchanges and distance work enabled by the recent digital transition.

Based on the questions above, interviews and other exchanges and discussions with farmers' organizations, **the following recommendations were made for farmers' organizations, financial and technical partners and governments.**

FOs	Technical and financial partners	Authorities
FO capacity-building in crisis prevention and management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build capacity in health and climate risk prevention and management • Capitalize on and share the experiences of FOs that have developed strategies and guidelines for good practices in the face of the crisis • Strengthen leaders' capacity in demand analysis and contracting to stabilize outlets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support monitoring and warning systems within FOs • Support the organizational strengthening of FOs in parallel with project-oriented funding • Strengthen FO capacity in risk analysis and mitigation measures
Strengthening the social mission of FOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify, capitalize on and share FO initiatives that have strengthened the link between emergency measures and long-term development dynamics • Build capacity in humanitarian assistance: aid distribution, targeting approaches, social protection and social transfers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forge partnerships with health authorities in the areas of health, nutrition and hygiene • Recognize FOs as strategic partners
Strengthening members' resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen the capacity of FO members in food storage, processing and preservation to reduce losses • Forge partnerships with crisis response actors • Promote crop diversification and food self-sufficiency through advisory approaches to producers • Build members' capacity in organic inputs, agroecology and climate change farming practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue and strengthen support for contracting between FOs and downstream actors • Encourage and support more generalist territorial FOs • Strengthen the implementation of agroecology-friendly programmes and policies • Strengthen FO contributions to national and regional storage policies • Improve access to organic agricultural inputs • Create a national livelihood and resilience fund
Promotion of local consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen advocacy for local consumption and food sovereignty (protection of local resources) • Strengthen advocacy for FO access to institutional markets • List and capitalize on FO experiences in the search for old and local varieties, diversification, supplies of alternatives to imported products, the quality of local products, greater appreciation of nutritious local food, short circuits and online sales • Build members' capacity with respect to standards and quality, as well as the marketing and packaging of local products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote and develop local food projects as a complement to industry projects • Include the promotion of local consumption in the guidelines • Encourage the development of short circuits through marketing support programmes for FOs • Strengthen investments in processing, storage and packaging equipment • Develop programmes to strengthen national food sovereignty in collaboration with FOs • Encourage the decentralization and relocation of food systems • Promote greater FO involvement in national and regional storage policies • Give priority to local products in institutional purchases • Support local processing industries and skills transfer • Strengthen research into plant material and invest in local seed production
Encouragement of rational digitalization of agricultural services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resume in-person advice in FOs • Capitalize on e-learning experiences • Seek a new balance between telework and in-person work by adopting rules for videoconferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equip FOs with digital tools on a large scale, building capacity in the use of information and communication technologies • Forge partnerships with innovative companies and implement pilot projects • Negotiate with banks to create innovative financial products for family farmers • Improve network coverage in rural areas; reduce the digital divide




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