Background

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In the face of scarce land and overpopulation, Bangladesh must contend with many challenges to overcome poverty and food insecurity. A majority of the population, approximately 16 million families (about 80 million people), depend on agriculture (a sector that is plagued by challenges) for their livelihood.

The poor performance of the agriculture sector in Bangladesh is the result of a variety of physical, socio-economic and institutional constraints. One of the most conspicuous of these is the recurrent cycle of natural disasters and environmental concerns in the country – predominantly floods, drought, salinity, and erosion. One-fourth of total cultivable land (8.42 million hectares [ha]) is affected by drought, while 0.3 million ha are water logged. Approximately 5.6 million ha are flood prone, and 0.82 million ha of costal and offshore tidal plains are affected by salinity. Additionally, annual losses by pests, diseases and weeds amount to 20-50 percent of total yield, while losses during storage are at 14 percent.

In order to develop comprehensive interventions to address the many challenges of agriculture, food security and nutrition, the Government of Bangladesh designed its Country Investment Plan (CIP), which represents the Government's priorities for investment in those areas.

During late 2010 and early 2011, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) was involved in a consultation process designed to strengthen the CIP. Many stakeholders were consulted, including civil society groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). However, there was a lack of awareness and understanding of mechanisms with proven efficiency to engage directly with farmers and their representatives, which would have involved them in **investment planning and the project cycle**.

In June 2010, the Government of Bangladesh received a USD 50 million grant from the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP) for the Integrated Agricultural Productivity Project (IAPP), which is in line with the priorities outlined in the CIP. USD 3.69 million of this amount was allocated for a Technical Assistance (TA) Component, implemented by FAO, to develop capacities of a variety of actors, including non-state actors such as farmers' organizations (FOs), in **investment programming in agriculture, food security and nutrition**.

The TA Component has three sub-components: (i) developing capacities in project cycle management; (ii) developing capacities in specific technical areas relevant to the CIP and the IAPP – seed sector quality assurance, water management, and nutrition; and (iii) developing capacities to ensure inclusive investment programming. This last sub-component takes a 'twin track' approach to strengthen inclusiveness – it builds both the capacity of state actors in stakeholder mobilization and consultation, and the capacities of non-state actors, particularly FOs, to **organize, advocate and partake in the investment programming process**. It is under this third sub-component that this mapping exercise fits.

The TA Component aims to address capacity needs at the individual, organizational and enabling environment levels, in order to provide a holistic approach to capacity development. This is in line with the FAO capacity development framework and international good practices.

What are some examples of how this translates concretely in this work with FOs? At the individual level, the project is working to develop skills of FO leaders and members to be able to participate in investment programming. At the organizational level, the project is facilitating exchanges between FOs that will strengthen their institutions. At the enabling environment level, the project has conducted a review of policies relevant to FOs and has proposed some improvements (contained within this report).

1.1 Farmers' organizations: Definition

For the purpose of this exercise, **an FO is defined** as a formal or informal (registered or unregistered) membership-based collective action institution serving its members, who are rural dwellers that get part or all of their livelihood from agriculture (crops, livestock, fisheries and/or other rural activities). Services provided by the FO aim to improve the livelihoods of its members, and include access to advice, information, markets, inputs and advocacy.

Farmers' Organizations vs. Farmers' Groups

In Bangladesh, there is a spectrum of institutions formed by farmers. It ranges from farmers' groups promoted by external actors for the main purpose of project delivery (whether stated explicitly or understood implicitly owing to the lack of provisions for sustainability following project completion) to FOs and farmers' federations formed autonomously by community members, with the purpose of establishing a platform to address the needs of the farming community on a permanent basis. In between these two extremes, there are associations, societies, cooperatives, unions, and even firms. The common thread is that all are established to serve the interests of farmers.

The mapping team has intentionally chosen to include all institutions on this spectrum, as they are all part of the landscape of FOs (used in the broader sense) in Bangladesh. The purpose of this broad inclusion is to analyse the strengths and shortcomings of different types of organizations in order to paint a complete picture of the situation and, therefore, allow for meaningful insight into the challenges Bangladeshi farmers encounter in organizing.

1.2 Farmers' organizations: Benefits of being organized

Some of the **benefits of being organized** in an FO include the ability to share information and ideas, pool resources, lower production costs, gain access to markets, serve as an efficient access point for communication with other development actors, as well as advocate through strength in numbers.

With regards to market access, by consolidating their efforts, farmers and their organizations are able to pool resources and build assets and competency. With a larger market share and with more information, small producers can modify transaction conditions, such as price and timing and can exert influence over other actors, thereby gaining market and negotiating power. With real market power, FOs gain credibility and are in a better position to discuss with policy makers. Considering that agriculture in Bangladesh needs to move higher in the value chain in order to increase farmer income, the formation of FOs is very beneficial to farmers, as it allows them to engage more effectively at these levels.

1.3 Farmers' organizations: Key factors for success

The many factors that contribute to a strong FO vary depending on the context. However, through the exercise, the team found the following **factors**, which are often overlooked, to be **particularly important for successful, sustainable organizations**:

- **Autonomy:** Though some FOs may be formed by external facilitators, autonomy is key for long-term sustainability. Leadership, vision and initiative must come from within the organization. Decisions must be made genuinely by the members and not through direct or indirect imposition by facilitators. This does not mean that there is no role for facilitators, but that all who are engaged as such must genuinely be working towards the complete autonomy of the organization within a defined time frame. In order for this to be feasible, the formation of FOs cannot be an externally-imposed process, but must, instead, highlight the benefits of being organized, facilitate peer-to-peer learning from already established FOs, and build on existing networks within villages. This process takes time and those planning to support the formation of FOs must allow for it.
- **Inclusive leadership:** Strong leaders that mobilize and engage their members are also key to ensuring the sustainability of FOs. Leaders must be genuinely endorsed by members and must make continuous efforts to engage and communicate with their organization. Grievance and accountability mechanisms should also be in place to address any concerns about poor leadership.
- **A strong membership base:** An FO is as strong as its members. If the members are strong, its leaders are likely to be strong as well. The reverse is not necessarily true. In Bangladesh there is a large risk of leaders taking all the benefits of the FO for themselves and not sharing with members (elite capture). As such, developing a strong, empowered membership base is critical for ensuring the sustainability of the organization. Members must be engaged in the affairs of the organization and must be able to hold their leaders accountable.
- **Needs-based service provision:** Services provided by the FO must be based on the true needs of its members, and not on the pre-conceived notions of external actors. If service provision does reflect actual needs, this can be key to ensuring the financial viability of the FO. This can take shape through the development of an enterprise (a seed mill, for example) that can generate revenue for the organization. It could also be through the provision of information or advocacy services, which don't, per se, generate revenue, but do ensure an engaged membership base that is more likely to see the benefits of partaking in the organization (ensuring a steadier stream of membership dues, which contribute to financial sustainability).
- **A clear, 'owned' purpose:** A key step in the FO development process must be for farmers to make their purpose for organizing explicit. This purpose must be clear to all concerned farmers, and not just to the facilitators who, in many cases, impose their own ideas. This is a large factor contributing to the mechanical nature of FO development, and why organizations are at risk of failing upon closure of the project under which they were developed.