

Message of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations
On the 21st UN International Day of Cooperatives
4 July 2015

“Choose cooperatives, choose equality”

Equality for all must be at the centre of efforts to achieve global food security and nutrition, eradicate poverty, and promote sustainable agricultural development. Today however, many women, youth and marginalized groups lack the resources and opportunities they need to be fully productive. Collective action, through agricultural cooperatives and producer organizations, is key to helping small producers, including women and young people, to overcome the barriers they face.

Women make crucial contributions in agriculture – farming, forestry, fisheries and livestock – and rural enterprises in all developing country regions. Women as farmers, workers and entrepreneurs consistently face a gender gap in agriculture. They have less access than men to opportunities and assets, inputs and services – land, livestock, labour, education, extension and financial services, and technology. They also do not participate equally in decision-making processes. Closing this gender gap would mean important gains for the agriculture sector and the broader society. If women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could significantly increase yields on their farms, which could in turn reduce the number of hungry people in the world.

Rural youth are the future of food security. Young people under the age of 24 years represent 61% of the African continent’s total population, and account for about 37% of the total labour force. Young people have motivation for innovating and they bring new technologies and more recent education and skills to farming.

Rural youth suffer from disproportionately high levels of unemployment, underemployment and poverty. In 2012, close to 75 million young people worldwide were out of work, resulting in a global youth unemployment rate almost three times the corresponding rate for adults¹. Few employment opportunities in rural areas and the drudgery associated with low-productivity agriculture often push young people to leave agriculture. They encounter many challenges ranging from insufficient and unequal access to knowledge, information and education, land, financial services, green jobs and markets. Often their voices are not heard in policy processes that affect them.

Effective and inclusive cooperatives and producer organizations can empower their members economically and socially. They can create sustainable employment opportunities for all. Inclusive agricultural cooperatives can represent the interests and concerns of all their members in policy and decision-making processes at national, regional and global levels.

These organizations can leverage the capacities of young people for innovation and entrepreneurship, helping them to engage in farming and other rural enterprises as attractive and dynamic professions. In Mali, where more than 60 per cent of the population lives in rural areas and is below the age of 25, generating increased decent employment opportunities and improving the quality of jobs for rural youth is essential to enhancing resilience and poverty reduction. FAO is supporting the government’s efforts to unleash the capacities of young women and men to effectively participate in the modernization of the agricultural sector, including through producer organizations, by facilitating access to land, markets and financial services for youth.

Agricultural cooperatives and producer organizations are also an important means to encourage women’s leadership and participation in agriculture and the rural sector. The FAO Dimitra project promotes the leadership and voice of the most marginalized, women and youth in particular, to improve their livelihoods, including through their own organizations. Dimitra builds the capacities of rural populations through information dissemination and the exchange of experiences, such as in the Dimitra Community Listeners’ Clubs in sub-Saharan Africa. It supports rural people, especially women and youth, to get better organized and facilitate participatory communication, and fosters social change.

¹ ILO, 2013

Through the CoOPequity approach in Niger, FAO supports the development of effective and equitable rural producer organizations and cooperatives by enhancing their internal capacities for governance, participation and gender equality.

In developing their own responses to achieving food security, government officials, policy-makers development practitioners and cooperatives and producer associations alike may benefit from a partnership approach inspired by an increasing trove of good practices and experiences pointing to possible solutions. For youth, these include the need to provide access to the right information to help overcome young farmers' lack of experience. Integrated training approaches and providing young people with access to agricultural assets including land, markets, ICTs, tailored financial products, can help them to respond to the needs of a modern agricultural sector and drive the innovation and growth needed to reduce rural poverty. It is imperative to develop youth's skills and capacities for collective action to enhance their voice in policy-making processes.

Likewise, closing the gender gap in agriculture requires coordinated policy reform in priority areas. These include eliminating discrimination against women in access agricultural resources, education, extension and financial services, and labour markets. There is a need to strengthen rural institutions and enhance policy and programming to make them gender-aware. Women also need to have a greater voice in decision-making at all levels. Collective action for women including through cooperatives (women only and mixed) can be an effective means of building social capital and a stepping stone to closing the gender gap in participation in other civil society organizations and government bodies. Empowering women, youth and marginalized groups through inclusive and effective cooperatives and producer organizations can ensure that they play a pivotal role in creating a food-secure world for present and future generations.

In a context marked by the beginning of the Sustainable Development agenda with agriculture being put at the center of many of the goals, cooperatives have a major role to play in contributing to a more equitable world.