

Session 8 : Strengthening institutional capacity for supporting FANR policy development
– focus on farmer organizations

This session was a follow-up exercise of yesterday's session. It was based essentially on two presentations:

- a SWOT analysis of umbrella farmer organizations (FO) of the sub-region
- the development of a data base of umbrella farmer organizations

The former presentation presented an interesting synthesis table of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats with regards to farmer organizations (farmer unions, commodity associations), as a result of discussions held on the previous day. It also presented draft recommendations that the study is likely to put forward.

Discussions that followed this presentation dealt essentially with one of these recommendations, regarding the promotion of a single lead farmer organization at country level. While the justification for this would be to avoid division and get farmers to speak with one stronger voice, there was controversy: should we be forcing farmers into one organization? Furthermore, experience has shown in some cases that there can be barriers to entry by small-scale farmers into such umbrella organizations.

So the main recommendations which reached some form of consensus was to: (1) promote institutional systems of confederation type (or similar formalized platform that organizes dialogue among farmer unions) and (2) SACAU could have a facilitating role in that respect.

The second presentation on the data base was the result of a survey commissioned by both SACAU and FANRPAN. The plan is essentially to have an inventory of sub-region's farmer unions and commodity associations which have a national scope. This data base would be published and accessible on the internet.

Some discussions dealt with possible gaps in the inventory (organizations that might have been missed). However, information is still being collected and this is a living exercise that will be updated over time.

More importantly, caution was recommended re: financial information of individual organizations communicated on the internet. Some organizations might feel uncomfortable about their budget being accessible by anyone. The group got confirmation that all surveyed organizations had been informed of the purpose of the survey. It was however recommended

- (1) to restrict the information to the most useful and less sensitive, e.g. % of self financing, main financial partners, total budget.
- (2) Before the information is published, top pass it on to all surveyed organizations so that they check it.

The issue of how to maintain the data base should be explored soon.

The discussions shifted to the issue of “service providers”, basically major NGOs, which provide ground support to the development of FO at local level. Indeed, those FOs don't seem to be incited to join farmer unions. However, it was recognized that FOs can't be forced to join or not farmer unions. The example of the Agri-business forum in Zambia was given as an illustration of platform where dialogue with such “service providers” can be organized.

Lastly, the issue of the role of FO in providing services to their members – and related possible capacity building needs – was raised. It meant services such as related to facilitating market linkages, as well as technical support and training. However, discussions were not quite conclusive, apart from suggesting that capacity building could indeed be provided to FOs with regards to Best Practices in those areas.