

Farmer Producer Organizations in Plantation Sector: Issues and Challenges

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Introduction

A Producer Organisation (PO) is defined as a legal entity formed by primary producers. The major share of producer organizations across the globe involve members drawn from viz. farmers, milk producers, fishermen, artisans, etc. Producer organisations are voluntary membership organisations of agricultural producers. They can be organised and structured as associations, societies, cooperatives, farmers groups, unions, federations, or even firms. They exist to promote the interests of farmers and to work for their economic and social benefit. Most producer organisations provide services that directly or indirectly support agricultural production (Rondot and Collion 2001, Bijman and Wollni 2008). A PO can be a producer company, a cooperative society or any other legal form which provides for sharing of benefits among the members. Farmer Producer companies form a sub-sect of producer companies, where the members are farmers. The legal sanctity of these organizations and their institutional acceptability vary widely across the nations. However, the evidences for beneficial nature of these farmer producer organizations are now widely accepted among policy makers and farmer members alike.

The name Farmer Producer Company is an accepted nomenclature in India denoting a producer organization usually involved in agricultural production, processing and marketing. The terms used to designate closely related institutions and

farmer collectives vary across the countries. Farmer Based Organizations (FBO), Community Based Organizations (CBO), Farmer Collectives (FC), Farmer Producer Companies (FPC) and Farmer Cooperatives (FC) are some of the names which are commonly used. Whatever be the nomenclature, essentially, the FPO carries out similar functions in most of the countries. The farmer producer organizations, as a new form of farmer collective combining the elements of cooperation and commercial companies, is being promoted aggressively as a means to address the challenges faced by small holder producers. The functional presence of producer organizations is considered to be critical for smallholders, to achieve competitiveness and ultimately improve their welfare (World Bank, 2008). In fact primary producer organisations or collectives are being viewed as the only institutions which can protect small farmers from ill-effects of globalization or make them participate successfully in modern competitive markets (Trebbin and Hassler, 2012).

Evolution of Farmer Producer Organizations: Rationale

Aggregation and collectivisation is a tried and tested strategy which has benefitted many farming communities involved in cultivation of plantation crops across the world. It helps in bringing economies of scale, bringing down the input costs, better bargaining power and magnifies the voices of farmers as collective voice. It has also played a significant role in reducing the risk in agriculture and

strengthening the livelihoods of small and marginal farmers. By organizing themselves into farmer groups and FPOs, farmers have better capacity for and access to technical knowhow on crop planning and management, inputs (including seed production), credit, post-harvest management, value addition, marketing infrastructure and better market linkages.

The most common form of collectivisation that farmers have adopted across geographies involves some form of cooperative institutions and Self Help mechanisms and Joint Liability Groups. The Producer Companies or more specifically Farmer Producer Companies/Farmer Producer Organizations are of much recent vintage which evolved out of some shortcomings in the earlier institutional arrangements for collectivization. These farmer collectives were designed to address the constraints faced by small farmers and which arose from both the nature of agricultural production and the size of their holding. Some of the constraints which are of specific significance to small farmers involved in cultivation of plantation crops include

- Structural challenges which acts as a barrier between farmers and the market hindering their growth and market viability.
- Poor market infrastructure, non-availability of credit from formal sources, market information asymmetries, inefficiencies of factor markets and output market etc.
- Lower bargaining power and holding capacity arising from insignificant individual production volume and disaggregate nature of agricultural production.
- Higher input costs arising from purchase of inputs in retail market, low volume transactions, inability to forecast requirements and lack of technical expertise in input management and decision making.

Though the farmer collectives like cooperatives had many lofty ideals, over time these ideals got diluted and a sense of lethargy crept in. The cooperatives and other forms of traditional farmer collectives alike failed due to problems like political interference and poor management. The efforts to provide stability and support to these traditional institutions often resulted in excessive bureaucratic control in day to day functioning and resulted in a lack of clear focus and vision about their institutional *raison d'être*. The constant quest for creating an institutional structure that can withstand these challenges and constraints while maintaining the ethos of cooperation for farmers" collectivisation saw many experiments in collectivizing the farmers

and the Farmer Producer Companies or the Farmer Producer Organizations are one of the most promising of these innovative farmer collectives.

Though farmer cooperatives, which have a long history of existence, could be viewed as a crude form of farmer producer organization, its scope and functioning has significant drawbacks. Some of the major drawbacks of small farmer cooperatives/ farmer collectives arise from capital constraints, corruption, free rider problems, political interference and lack of autonomy which adversely affected the performance of cooperatives in the country (Singh and Singh, 2013). As a considered policy intervention for strengthening and revitalizing farmer collective organizations, it now considered that a change in organizational and operational environment of farmer collectives/cooperatives more congruent with professionally run companies will be highly transformative in effect. The enhanced freedom, unshackling of collective power and stakeholder involvement in professionally run business operations was expected to make farmer collectives profitable business entities in a competitive market.

The concept behind Farmer Producer Organizations is that farmers, who are the producers of agricultural products, can form groups and register themselves under the Indian Companies Act. The aim is to enhance farmers" competitiveness and increase their advantage in emerging market opportunities.

Types of Farmer Producer Organizations

Broadly Farmer Producer Organizations can be categorised into four broad categories (Thompson et al. 2009): viz, Market-oriented, Input-oriented, Extension-oriented and Policy and advocacy oriented.

These categories are useful for mapping the terrain, but most producer organisation are a mixture of some or all of these functions. The identity of a producer organisation will vary according to its origins and context, be shaped by economic change and policy trends, and may well shift during the lifetime of the organisation.

Evolution of FPOs in India

Framing of a legislation that would enable incorporation of cooperatives as companies was one of the key policy initiatives under consideration during the early part of this millenium. The conversion of existing cooperatives into companies while ensuring the retention of the unique elements of cooperative business with a regulatory framework

similar to that of companies was envisaged through changes in the companies act (Gol, 2013). On the recommendations of an expert panel led by Y.K. Alagh, Government of India amended the extant Indian Companies Act, 1956, in 2002-03 to provide for “producer companies”. The amendments ensured the establishment provisions for creation of producer companies or more specifically Farmer Producer Companies in agriculture sector as a hybrid between cooperative societies and private limited companies. The policy initiative through the amendment of Companies Act, 1956 effected through “The Companies (Amendment) Act, 2002” saw the emergence of the new generation Farmer producer organizations, more identified with companies in functioning and scope than with the cooperatives.

In any agrarian economy dominated by the prevalence of small holder production system there exists a strong economic rationale and sound logic for a demand for such farmer producer organizations. The first farmer producer organization registered in India under the provisions of the new amendment was the Vanilla India Producer Co. in Kerala state which was set up in 2004. Over a short span of time, FPOs have emerged as an alternative institutional arrangement, across several crop sectors including plantation crops, to promote small holder aggregation and address production, processing and marketing constraints faced by them.

Objectives of FPOs in plantation sector

A Farmer Producer Company can be formed by any 10 or more primary producers or by two or more producer institutions, or by a contribution of both. They can undertake activities related to production, harvesting, procurement, grading, pooling, marketing, processing, etc., of agricultural produce. Several well documented success stories of Farmer producer companies in the country, over the short span of its existence in plantation crop sector, have proven that the entire gamut of activities related to production, processing, value addition, marketing and trade are well within the ambit of its capability. Though an FPO in plantation sector essentially is similar to other FPOs in field crops and horticultural crops, there are some differences in terms of the priorities and focus of the FPOs working in different sectors. Here we take a brief look at the major priorities and functional role of FPOs in plantation crop sector.

- The major focus of FPOs in plantation crop sector

should be to organize farmers into a collective to improve their bargaining strength in the market. This is especially important in plantation crops because of the nature of price cycles in the output market and the nature of price instabilities.

- The plantation sector FPOs require frequent tactical decision making and the FPOs generally tend to get it done through experienced professional managers. They take decisions based on market price movements, supply scenario etc.
- They adopt all the good principles of cooperatives and the efficient business practices of companies and also seek to address the inadequacies of the cooperative structure.
- The Farmer Producer companies have strong democratic governance, each producer or member having equal voting rights irrespective of the number of shares held.
- The FPOs in plantation sector usually specialize in few products unlike FPOs in agriculture sector. The fewer the products, the greater is the need for forward integration in plantation crop sector. Therefore we have witnessed a trend favouring forward integration by adopting complex post harvest processing and creation of capacity in value added product development using the commodity in focus.

Models of Farmer Producer Organizations

The primary agricultural production sector in India has experimented with several models of farmer collectives. The crops with significant contribution to plantation output are also the ones where, more number of farmer producer organizations is in operation. Here we examine the farmer producer organizations in, coconut and rubber, the two crops which together contribute 59.7 per cent of the gross value of output from agriculture in Kerala state, the leading producer of these commodities in India.

FPOs in coconut sector

The coconut crop economy is one of the key components of the agricultural sector of the state of Kerala. The scope and potential of the new generation farmer producer organizations in agricultural sector was clearly demonstrated through the FPOs formed in the sector. It was the active institutional support and intervention of Coconut Development Board (CDB), a statutory body under the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare that catalyzed the formation of FPOs among the largely unorganized

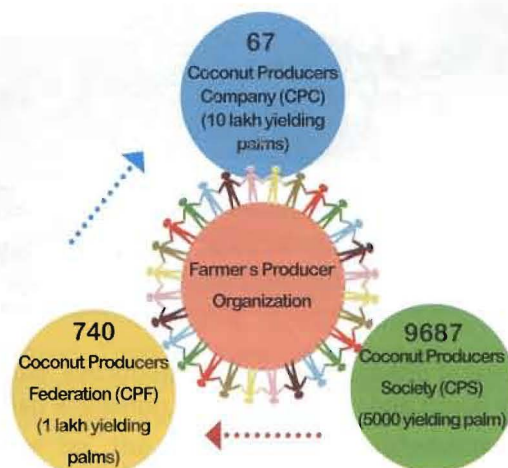
coconut farmers of the state. A three tier structure consisting of Coconut Producers Society (CPS), Coconut Producers Federation (CPF) and Coconut Producers Company (CPC) is operational in the state.

Progress of Coconut Producers' Society, Federation and Company formation*

S No	States	No. of CPS registered	No. of CPF registered	No. of CPC registered
1	Kerala	7220	464	29
2	Tamil Nadu	659	69	17
3	Karnataka	400	125	13
4	Andhra Pradesh	1115	82	8
5	West Bengal	214	0	0
6	Odisha	37	0	0
7	Assam	27	0	0
8	Gujarat	14	0	0
9	Maharashtra	1	0	0
	TOTAL	9687	740	67

* (as on 18-Dec-2018) (Source: Coconut Development Board <http://coconutboard.nic.in/ProducerSocieties.aspx>)

The Coconut Producer Societies are small scale FPOs formed by association of 40-100 coconut growers in a contiguous area with a consolidated minimum of 4000- 5000 palms. The farmer member contributes equity in the organization and undertakes activities aimed at productivity improvement, cost reduction, collective marketing, processing and product diversification (CDB, 2007). The CPS, as knowledge based farmer centered collective, forms the basic unit of the FPO framework in the sector. The next hierarchical tier, the Coconut Producers Federations is formed by combining about 8-10 CPS. The FPOs formed are provided legal status through registration under Charitable Societies Act and are also registered with CDB. An aggregation of 8-10 CPFs would form a Coconut Producer Company. A CPC would have around ten lakh coconut palms under its management. . These companies, fully owned by the farmers, are registered under section 581B of Indian Companies Act of 1956. The coconut FPOs in the state has more than 7 lakh farmer members with equity rights with an average membership of 97 farmers in each CPS and an average area of 42.6 hectares under its operational control. The broad producer base and extent of area indicate the acceptability of these FPOs and its perceived utility.



Support to FPOs through CDB Schemes

Coconut Development Board undertakes various promotional activities for the development of the coconut sector in the country. All the schemes are implemented through FPO's. The major programmes that are being implemented by the Board are, Setting up of Coconut Kiosks/points, Establishment of Coconut Nursery, Technology Mission on Coconut, Replanting and Rejuvenation of Coconut Gardens, Laying out of Demonstration Plots etc.

● **Setting up of sales outlets/ kiosks**

Financial assistance is extended for setting up of sales outlets/ kiosks for value added coconut products . The board will provide reimbursement of 50% of cost incurred on infrastructure and purchase of Assets, maximum of Rs. 1.5 Lakhs.

● **Establishment of Small Coconut Nursery**

Establishment of Small Coconut Nursery scheme is implemented on project basis to encourage FPO's in seedlings production by providing financial assistance for establishing coconut nurseries. Financial assistance is limited to 25 % of the project cost or Rs.2.00 lakhs .

● **Technology Mission on Coconut**

Under Technology Mission of Coconut, Financial assistance is provided for Setting up of modern copra dryer, Neera processing units, desiccated coconut powder, VCO, Coconut oil, coconut water etc.

● **Replanting and Rejuvenation of Coconut Gardens**

The main objective of the scheme is to enhance the productivity and production of coconut by



removal of disease advanced, unproductive, old and senile palms and rejuvenating the remaining palms.

● **Laying out of Demonstration Plots**

The objective of the LODP scheme is to increase the production and productivity of coconut from unit holding by proper and timely adoption of package of practices in a farmer participatory mode. This programme will facilitate the adoption of appropriate coconut based farming systems and promote farm level processing for value addition on a community basis.

FPOs in rubber economy

The collectivization of farmer producers started as early as 1986 in rubber crop in the form of voluntary associations of small growers registered under the Charitable Societies Act known as rubber producer societies (RPS) promoted by the Rubber Board. More than 75 per cent of the 2304 RPS are located in Kerala and they have gained wide acceptance among the small holder rubber growers in the state. They operate in small compact areas having a radius of 2 to 3 km with 50-200 small holder producer members. Though promoted by Rubber board, the RPS have operational freedom in undertaking transfer of technology, processing, marketing of produce and procurement of inputs. The RPS can be viewed as farmer producer organization as the key operational patterns were similar. The product aggregation and enhanced capacity of primary producer societies necessitated creation of federal producer organizations for scaling up activities and operating capital intensive commercial ventures. A total of 7 federated processing companies and 11 trading companies have also been established. (Rubber Board, 2016). Most of these are jointly owned Rubber Producers' Societies with significant equity participation by the Rubber Board.

Support to FPOs through CDB Schemes*			
Sl No.	Scheme	Total No. of FPO 's	Total financial assistances Rs. (Lakhs)
1	Coconut Nursery	87	25.31
2	Coconut kiosks	153	188.48
3	Copra Dryers	32	157.16
4	Neera processing unit	10	350.73
5	Coconut oil	05	129.76
6	Coconut water	01	7.63
7	VCO	01	24.54
8	Desiccated coconut powder	01	25.00
9	Replanting and rejuvenation scheme (R&R)	6028	11283.57
10	Laying out of demonstration plot(LODP)	2254	15346.51
		TOTAL	27538.69

*As on 31st March 2018

Support to FPOs

Governments can facilitate the development and strengthening of FPOs by creating a suitable legal and regulatory framework, developing policies that provide a framework for active and meaningful engagement and cooperation with FPOs, creating laws and policies that seek to establish a balance between several stakeholders with divergent interest, providing an enabling environment to access public incentive programmes and other resources, providing opportunities for FPOs to participate in policy development, supporting and facilitating capacity-building of FPOs, promoting equitable distribution

of access to government services and raising public awareness about the role and relevance of the FPOs in its domain. As a policy initiative to support farming community, FPOs bring a clutch of benefits for governments of the developing countries. It is in the interest of a benevolent government to develop a collaborative rather than an adversarial partnership with the FPO sector. A deliberate stance to support a policy environment conducive to establishment and growth of FPOs in plantation crop sector can bring rich dividends for governments.

- Encouraging the establishment and successful development of FPOs should be a priority for governments wishing to promote sustainable development of plantation crop sector since the stakeholder involvement through FPOs in nurturing the plantation economy will ensure incorporation of sustainability principles in all activities.

- The establishment of FPOs strengthens market forces and enhances better and fair access to markets for all stakeholders. The enhanced market efficiency, while enhancing government revenues, is helpful for optimizing resource allocation across crops and commodities

- The establishment of FPOs can reduce the need for government expenditure and involvement in provision of support services, especially extension services and other technical guidance services. This can free up government resources for other priority sectors in the country while making services available to plantation crop producers at a lower cost and with more effectiveness than is often possible by government.

Governments should encourage the development of FPOs as they can improve the process of policymaking by proposing supportive policies and providing coherent assessments of policy impacts from the perspectives of actual stakeholders.

Issues and challenges facing FPOs in plantation sector

There is a broad consensus that concerted efforts need to be made to promote and nurture producer companies and further legislation need to be made to make these companies more attractive for investors. The rapid growth and development of FPO sector notwithstanding, this relatively new institutional mechanism has thrown up several issues. The restriction on trading of shares of FPOs which limits the exit options for investors, the exclusion on non-producers and the low level of institutional support

from commercial financial institutions are some of the persistent issues over the years. This shows that there is scope for improving the existing way of functioning and the need for policy makers to guard against complacency with respect to their approach to FPOs in policy matters.

Key issues and challenges include the following:

- The low level of awareness about the functional and operational structure of FPOs among financial institutions makes them reluctant to provide term loans and working capital loans to producer companies. Therefore creation of awareness among financial institutions needs to be accorded priority. Though agricultural income is exempted from income tax, the same benefit is not available to Farmer Producer Companies. Equal tax treatment on par with agriculture need to be extended to FPOs in plantation sector also.

- Many FPOs failed in their objectives due to lack of administrative capacity resulting in poor management of books which leads to issues with accountability and transparency. These factors also stand in the way of their accessing finance from banks. Only a few FPOs in plantation sector have explored the options for getting premium pricing through certification strategies and providing traceability of its produce. This results both from a lack of capacity and lack of awareness. This situation needs to be addressed.

- The role of professional extension services is underutilized during the initial stages of formation of FPOs. These services can be used in locating farming community, awareness creation, community mobilisation, organising community meetings through local leaders, social capital formation, facilitating formation of core group, capacity building of farmers etc.

- Many FPOs are dependent on grant-in-aids and subsidies provided through various government and non-governmental sources. This undermines an assessment of their actual commercial viability and makes them fragile as an institution. The FPOs need to be trained to become self sufficient and weaned off external support within a short span of time.

- Most of the FPOs in operation focus on increasing the output volumes alone with a hazy focus on profitability. The FPOs should focus on productivity enhancement per unit of land and reorient their present focus on production to a focus on market oriented production. The focus on productivity and profitability can be embedded in

crop planning, rotation and shifting patterns of crops and development of value chains to reduce the transaction cost.

- The establishment of FPOs resulted in product diversification and scaling up of processing facilities. For example, the emergence of FPO's in coconut sector has resulted in ensuring availability of more than 30 product types in the consumer market strengthening the product value chain and benefitting consumers through wider product range.

- Many self help groups, especially the women self help groups have successfully adopted the FPO model for venturing into commercial activity, thus bringing together an organizational mix of cooperation, self help and commercial attributes. For example, a conglomerate of women SHGs representing more than 7000 families below poverty line has launched a FPO with an annual turnover of more than Rs 30 million. The establishment of several such FPO's indicate the availability of entrepreneurial skills and capacity for risk bearing amongst collectives of primary producers.

- The FPOs were formed along natural clusters of farming groups with focus on specific crop which created better understanding and close interdependence among members.

- The availability of an institutional facilitator (Coconut Development Board and Rubber Board) for initiating formation of FPO's and handholding the nascent collectives through the developmental stages helped in establishment of FPOs in these crops.

- The farmer producer organizations have promoted participation of small holder producers in the process of value creation and thereby ensuring a share of value addition to the small holders.

- The diversity in forms and activities of farmer producer organizations in these crops promoted healthy competition and sufficient market opportunities for harnessing benefits from value addition.

- Federated structure of the FPOs in coconut and rubber has helped in increasing the grass root level participation while broadening the participation and increasing the capacity for equity capital accumulation.

- The farmer producers are members of multiple societies and have shown the discipline required for successful collectivization and good business acumen to leverage their strengths and benefit from public institutional support.

Constraints and the way forward

Collectivization of producers, especially small and marginal farmers into farmer producer organisations has emerged as one of the most effective means of addressing the challenges faced by agriculture sector. But the growth and establishment of FPO's, both in terms of number and extent of activities, has not been uniform across the crops in Kerala. The spices farming sector, which contribute more than 10 per cent to the value of output, has not seen the emergence of FPOs commensurate with its potential for value addition. The possible missing link which led to this situation might be the absence of institutional handholding services which were available in case of crops like coconut and rubber. Broadening the base of farmer collectivization is urgently required by giving more emphasis for sectors like spices, vegetables and fruits. This could be done by identifying public institutions as developmental partners in each target sector. The cooperative sector of the state offers a huge latent potential for mobilizing farmer producers on the lines of FPOs through facilitation of smooth transition from cooperative legal framework to FPO mode. The state which has a high intensity of farmer collectives in cooperative sector should give special focus on this aspect of FPO development.

Policy incentives to support FPO's must target facilitating improved access to investments, technology inputs and markets. The external commercial environment can be made friendlier through targeted policy measures favouring FPO's. The relaxing of licensing rules on trading, procurement, marketing operations etc. can enlarge the scope of operations and facilitate diversification of operations.

The network of FPOs in two major crops of the state, coconut and rubber shows the importance of handholding institutional services in development of FPOs. By focusing on crops with high potential for value addition like spices, leveraging network of self help groups and addressing constraints like access to training services, credit and technology can further strengthen the FPO sector in the vstate.

With a strong network of cooperative institutions and diverse agricultural production sector, there is considerable scope for development of the FPO mode of farmer collectivization in Kerala. The organizational, financial and commercial sustainability of FPOs in the state can be further

enhanced by leveraging the strengths and addressing the constraints through pragmatic policies.

The experiences of evolution and impact of FPOs in small holder's crops like coconut and rubber in Kerala state in India discussed above clearly indicate the importance of facilitating FPOs in the sustainable development of plantation sector. Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS, 2015.) has made recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of FPOs which are very relevant for the FPOs in plantation sector as well. GFRAS suggests that FPOs

should increase their capacities in good governance, organisational management, and Federal -level coordination. Besides they need to develop mechanisms for delivering financially sustainable rural advisory services, promote a better understanding among farmers of the role of producer organisations in demand-driven rural advisory services, intensify their partnerships with other actors in the agricultural innovation system, increase their capacity to provide rural advisory services, especially concerning demand-orientation, brokerage, flexibility, and communication. ■

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