

# The Role of Farmers and Farmers' Organizations

**Rashid Pertev**

Mediterranean Committee of the  
International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), Paris (France)

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**Abstract.** The effective functioning of an agricultural research and extension system requires not a linear, but a triangular arrangement between research institutions, extension and training agencies and farmers' organizations. The presence of strong and representative farmer's organizations and their formal recognition as partners in research and extension is therefore an essential basis for agricultural and rural development in the Mediterranean Region, with particular reference to its eastern and southern sub-regions. Time for such a partnership is also opportune, especially with the establishment and consolidation of the IFAP Mediterranean Committee, where farmer's organizations are ready to take the lead and cooperate on many of the vital issues for the region.

**Key words.** Rural development – Extension – Farmers' organizations – Mediterranean – Agricultural policy – Non-governmental organizations – Development agencies – Sustainable agriculture – Environment.

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the fundamental concepts relating to farmers and farmers' organizations, to give an outline of farmer structures, especially with respect to the purpose and objectives of the IFAP Mediterranean Committee, and to summarize farmer perspectives and policy relating to agricultural research and extension.

## I – Fundamental Concepts

### 1. Importance of Farmers' Voice

If there is one principal lesson farmers can draw from history, it is the following: that, when farmers are not strong, many sections and sectors of the society are ready not only to tell the farmers what they should do, but even worse, to speak on their behalf.

This historical recurrence is often all in good faith. Most ministries, political parties, associations, promotional non-governmental organizations as well as development agencies and most experts have indeed committed this sin, often in an unaware fashion. Indeed, many a political party has set up campaign sub-committees to get farmers' votes. Many a non-governmental organization, whether from the north or the south, but with no mandate from farmers, have stood up in international meetings to voice, in often fascinating detail, the farmers' plight.

Questions remain on whether farmers' voice is such a sought-after commodity after all, and whether the society would like farmers to speak. Indeed the lack of farmers' voice is often unnoticed, precisely because of the enthusiasm with which other people are ready to speak on behalf of farmers. Similarly, during periods when farmers do speak, farmers' voice is more readily seen as something of a "problem".

Irrespective of its desirability, the lack of an effective farmers' voice is indeed an impediment to agricultural and rural development. Whether it be the development of agriculture or of rural society or the protection of environment, farmers play a vital role. A two-way dialogue therefore needs to be established between farmers, and other actors which determine the political, economic, legal as well as technological framework within which farmers operate.

In short, an effective farmers' voice is not only the basis of mutual respect and democracy, but it is also the true basis for agricultural and rural development.

## 2. Importance of Farmers' Organizations

Farmers' voice cannot be obtained without farmers' organizations. In the world, for instance, there are hundreds of millions of farmers. To engage in any sensible dialogue with the rest of society, farmers need their representative organizations, the farmers' organizations, structured from grassroots to the international level, as their legitimate voice. This is why farmers' movement gives a lot of importance to farmers' organizations, organizations by farmers and for farmers, as an important pillar of today's society.

## 3. Farmers' Organizations and the Non-Governmental Sector

For many decades, farmers' organizations have made persistent calls to underline the importance of non-governmental organizations and the importance of their participation in the process of development. Now that this principle is widely accepted and applied, it is felt important to go one step further and see who-is-who within the non-governmental sector.

In this context, farmers' organizations strongly maintain that the time is ripe for making the difference between farmers' organizations, which are run by farmers for farmers, from other non-governmental organizations which have no mandate to represent farmers.

Making such a distinction between farmers' organizations (or more broadly « rural peoples' organizations ») and the rest of the non-governmental sector, does not undermine the validity of either. However, by stressing on the importance of identity, and underlining what each can or cannot by its nature do, opens the doors for a healthy and fruitful complementary and co-operation between the different organizations.

## II – Farmer Structures

### 1. International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP)

The International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), is the only world organization of farmers, grouping together 82 national level farmers' organizations from 57 countries, representing over 500 million family farmers. The structure of the organization has been appended.

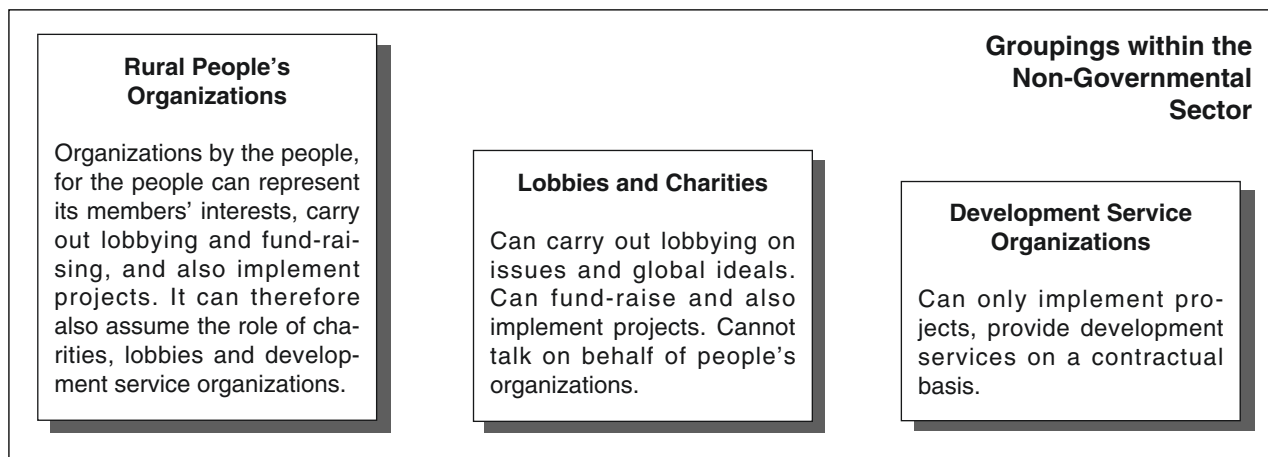
### 2. IFAP Mediterranean Committee

In January 1992, within the framework of IFAP, the Mediterranean farmers' organizations have set up an IFAP Committee of Mediterranean Farmers to provide them with an opportunity to meet and cooperate as partners in order to promote the development of agriculture and the economic and social condition of farmers in the Mediterranean region. While taking into account existing forms of association and integration among certain Mediterranean countries, Mediterranean farmers' organizations have expressed their desire for much greater agricultural co-operation in the Mediterranean with a view to stimulating economic and social development in the region.

The Committee is made up of farmers' organizations in the countries of the Mediterranean Basin which are members of IFAP. Charter of the Committee has been appended.

The objectives of the Committee include establishing and strengthening ties between farmers and various research and development bodies in the region. The Committee also aims at the provision of information and encouragement of actions in the field of technical or economic co-operation among farmers' organizations, including in the area of training and extension.

During its Cairo Session last April, the Committee confirmed its objectives with regard to the solution of Mediterranean agricultural problems as a whole, particularly through productive diversification, qualitative improvements, more judicious use of water resources and closer collaboration with research activities.



The Committee also underlined its objective of changing the existing relations in the fields of agriculture and research. Particularly, agriculture should not merely be the target of scientific, economic and technological choices adopted within the confines of research institutions but should ensure that research can comply more adequately with its productive and qualitative requirements so as to protect farmers' incomes more effectively.

The IFAP Mediterranean Committee shares much affinity and co-operation with the IFAP African Regional Committee, established as early as 1984 by the African farmers' organizations. The area of co-operation also inevitably includes North African countries, farmers' organisations of which are members of both Committees.

It is also important to note that IFAP African Regional Committee launched an important initiative of strengthening links between farmers and researchers in November 1991, when the Committee had its First African Farmers – Researchers Consultative Conference at Ibadan, Nigeria. This initiative was followed by the Nairobi Regional Working Session between African NARS and African farmers' organizations in December 1992, and led to the recent IRRI-IFAP Consultation in Los Baños, Philippines, in October 1993.

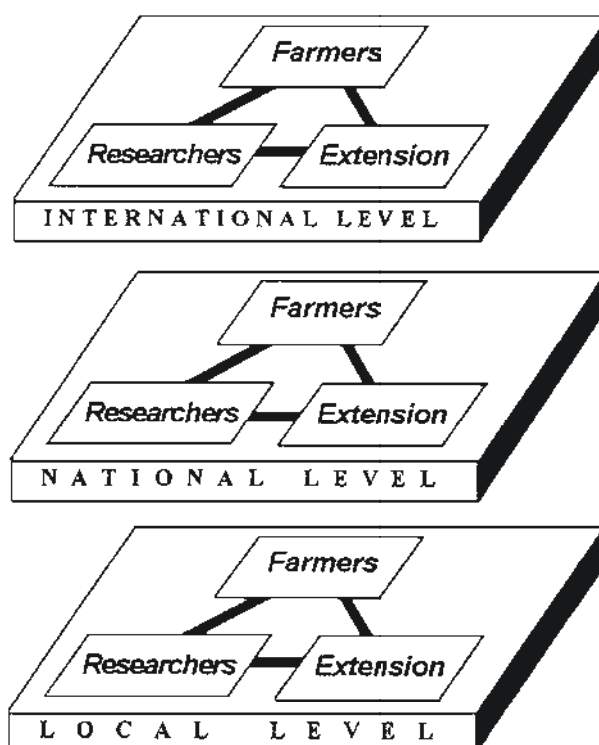
### III – Policy Issues

#### 1. Research, Extension and Farmers

At present, the necessity for strong working links between farmers and researchers is widely accepted and forms the general consensus. IFAP further maintains the following:

- ❑ the importance of establishing a triangular (and not a linear) relationship between farmers, extensionists and researchers;
- ❑ that this triangular relationship be repeated at all levels, from the local level to the international level.

The necessity for a triangular relationship between farmers, researchers and extensionists and its repetition at all levels, implies that the links can be established only through the active involvement of farmers' organizations.



This is in line with the IFAP Ibadan Statement, which emphasizes that "...client orientation in agricultural research can only be achieved by the effective representation of farmers through farmers' organization structures at all levels. Farmers must be involved in the planning, application and follow-up during the research process, in order to ensure appropriateness and relevance of results".

This policy is repeated in IFAP's Nairobi Conclusions, which called for the adoption of a "systems perspective" for the strengthening of linkages between farmers and researchers—that, all key actors (policy makers, scientists, extensionists and farmers) in the technology generation, transfer and adoption should have a "systems perspective" (i.e. shared goals or mission, accountability, synergy and leadership).

While this policy framework enhances the partnership between farmers, researchers, and extensionists, it should be noted that extension no longer has the role of "intermediary" between farmers and researchers.

In the context of Mediterranean countries, much scope exists for further enhancing such healthy partnership, especially because of the presence of strong farmers' organizations in the region. In the north of the Mediterranean, for instance, farmers' organizations and agricultural research and extension institutions are—historically and at present—closely interlinked through a multiplicity of formal and informal contacts and working relationships. Such links, which also exist to some extent also in the developing countries of the Mediterranean, have been beneficial, both for farmers and researchers. In particular:

- Researchers have benefited from farmer feedback and guidance in their work, at all levels, ensuring that the results of their work were useful and easily accessible to farmers.
- Researchers have also benefited from the financial and 'political' support of farmers, at all levels, ensuring the sustainability of the quality of research and research institutions.
- Farmers have benefited from regular and useful technical support given by researchers.

## 2. New Context for Extension

At present, there is a new context for extension. Within this framework, IFAP held a Development Workshop on "Agricultural Extension and Resource Management" in Cairo, Egypt, 20th-21st September 1993, within the framework of IFAP African Regional Committee, in order to find out the new policy position of farmers' organizations in the area of agricultural extension, in the light of the recent structural changes in the agricultural scene.

In summary, farmers' organizations are ready to play a more active role in extension, and are favourable to contributing financially. This, however, must be as part of a gradual process, with a long term perspective. In the meantime, farmers' organizations need to be stronger before they can contribute financially. Farmers' professional status also needs to be enhanced, and a more favourable policy environment needs to be established to encourage innovations by farmers, researchers and extensionists. Enhanced infrastructure and investment in the countryside is essential for ensuring farmers' access to information, skills and education.

Successful projects are currently being carried out by farmers' organizations in the region in the field of extension. A notable example is the extension programme by Union of Chambers of Agriculture of Turkey, where farmer groups contribute towards the cost of employing their own highly skilled extension worker.

## IV – Conclusions

Enhancement of partnership between farmers, researchers and extensionists are all the more important and meaningful today, especially within the new context of environmental concerns in general, and within the objective of attaining sustainable agriculture in the region in particular. Time for such a partnership is also opportune, especially with the establishment and consolidation of the IFAP Mediterranean Committee, where farmers' organizations are ready to take the lead and cooperate on many of the vital issues for the region.

**For a more complete policy discussion, please refer to:**

- IFAP Mediterranean Committee Second Session, Cairo, Egypt, April 1993. Proceedings.
- Agricultural Extension and Resource Management, IFAP Development Seminar, Cairo, Egypt, September 1993. Conclusions and Working Papers.
- Working Session between African Farm Leaders and NARS Managers, Nairobi, Kenya, December 1992. Conclusions and Working Papers.
- Statement issued by the IFAP African Regional Committee and Working Papers. African Farmers & Researchers Consultative Seminar: IFAP-IITA Consultation, Ibadan, Nigeria, November 1991.
- Sustainable Farming Systems and the Role of Farmers' Organizations (1990). IFAP publication (Chapter 4 : Farmers' Organizations and Agricultural Research).



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