

COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR AN EQUITABLE FOOD PRODUCTION SYSTEM

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Abstract

Collective political action in agriculture is crucial in order to achieve a more equitable food system allowing food producers to live from their production. This paper will examine two cases of interventions organizing food producers in Niger and Romania to represent their interests in the political decision-making process. The Grow Campaign in Niger was initiated by Oxfam. One of the key aspects of the campaign is bringing together different groups that have an important contribution to food production worldwide, but are socioeconomically marginalized and excluded from the political decision-making process, in order to give them a common voice and political weight to influence policies that directly affect them. In Romania, the Pro Agro Federation is working to make food producers' voice heard at the national and European level, in order to achieve better conditions for farmers and rural development.

Key words: collective action, Grow Campaign, political weight, Pro Agro.

INTRODUCTION

Individuals choose to adhere to groups when they consider that the group is able to represent their interests and achieve their goals through collective action.

Thus, associations of individuals occur when a common goal needs to be achieved. To use the example this paper will examine, farmers can get organized into an association that will try to achieve legislation favorable to its members.

Yet, according to the collective action theory, it is not sufficient for individuals to have a common interest in order to form a group (Olson, 1978). Although classical group theories argue that forming an association to protect and promote their common interest is a natural tendency, or even an instinct people possess, Olson maintains that the founding and organization of a group does not only depend on the existence of a common interest.

According to him, organizational costs are increasing as the number of individuals in the group increase due to the fact that, the larger a group, the smaller the fraction of the advantage obtained through collective action will be received by each member of the group. As a consequence, individuals in smaller groups will more readily resort to collective action than individuals in larger groups, as the former will

perceive the advantages of collective action as being higher than the latter.

A large group, according to Olson's theory, will not reach its goal without coercion or another type of exterior intervention that will incentivize the members of the group to work together in their common interest.

Smallholder farmers and agricultural producers are undoubtedly one of the largest 'latent' (unorganized) groups in the world, as about 73% of the workforce in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and 59% in all developing countries are employed in agriculture (Elijah, 2006). They face high organizational costs, which, coupled with their relatively low incomes, result, most of the time, in their inability to organize themselves into well-functioning groups that could represent their interests in the political decision-making process. This is worsened by the attitude governments have towards smallholders, which are considered by authorities, according to Harisson (2001), as individuals lacking innovation initiative, and thus historical agency, and upon whom development and change have to be imposed by force.

Teodor Shanin (1971) classifies peasant political activism into three categories: independent class action (equivalent to what is called 'collective' or 'group' action in the

paper), guided political action (political action triggered by exterior intervention) and amorphous political action.

He argues that the first type of action, constituting in the formation of a nationwide organization, with its own identity (as expressed through an ideology and certain symbols) and political leaders emerging from within, is the least frequent in the case of smallholders.

The second category, guided political action is very important in the case of smallholders, as only an exterior intervention can break “the conservative cyclical stability of both the farm and the village and the political implications of this” (Shanin, 1971).

The third category, spontaneous and amorphous political action is the dominant type or peasant reaction. As Harisson also states, smallholders have historically protected themselves against political change unfavorable to them with the “weapon of the weak”, subterfuge and sabotage of the programs imposed upon them, rather than publicly advocating for a change in policies (Harisson, 2001).

Shanin foresaw, however, that trends might were subject to change, due to the spread of mass communication which made easier the construction of smallholder cultural and political cohesion, while the increasing importance of international trade lowered their political bargaining power as they lost the ‘monopoly’ of food production.

And it was trade, indeed, what created a sense of urgency (the ‘crisis’ necessary for the formation of collective identity) and incentivized the creation of the largest worldwide peasant organization.

La Via Campesina is an international network of peasant/farm organizations, created in 1992 and now regrouping approximately 150 organizations from 56 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and North and South America (viacampesina.org).

It was born in 1992, after the Uruguay round of trade negotiations, out of opposition to neoliberal interests promoted by the World Bank and the IMF and facilitated by the World Trade Organization, and one of its main goals is to organize smallholders to advocate for food sovereignty and peasant’s rights at the global

level, through protests at WTO gatherings, public meetings, conferences, workshops, and non-violent protests that can be followed by negotiation with authorities (Desmarais 2007).

The organization has managed to bring together smallholders across continents, despite their cultural, political and ideological differences, by “resurrecting peasant identity” (Desmarais, 2007) - making explicit the smallholder’s ‘latent’ group identity.

The collective action of agricultural producers, regardless of the level of development and geographical position of the area where these producers are located or to the practical reason that brought them to group together, is increasingly necessary in today’s globalized world in order to assure the equitability of the food production system, and that agriculturalists gain enough in order to live off of their own production.

This paper analyzes two cases, in Niger and Romania, of interventions attempting to enhance the collective organization of smallholders and agricultural producers’ groups in order to improve the political and legislative framework on issues that directly affect them.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To characterize the importance of cooperation among agricultural producers, several indicators have been taken into account, such as collective action, association, cooperation, organization of farmers, political weight, agricultural sector development and efficiency.

For the Niger case-study, information was collected in Niamey between August and December 2013, through direct observation of Grow Campaign meetings and events and individual qualitative interviews with members. For the Romania case study the survey method was used, which is a quantitative method of gathering information, using questionnaires as survey tools. The questionnaire we used in the market research regarding the analysis of the agricultural cooperatives in Romania was composed of 38 questions. Data collected from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, COPA (Committee of Professional Agricultural Organizations of the European Union) and members of the National Federation PRO AGRO, were processed and

interpreted, and extrapolated given trends existing in Europe.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

I. Niger Case-study

Oxfam is a confederation of 17 affiliated non-governmental organizations working in 90 countries worldwide to fight poverty and injustice. In addition to engaging humanitarian responses in times of crisis, Oxfam also attempts to empower the poor to influence political decisions that affect their livelihoods. In order to do so, Oxfam builds partnerships with local organizations in its countries of intervention, to project the voices of the vulnerable that these organizations represent and make them heard by policy makers.

Grow is one example of an advocacy campaign initiated by Oxfam in 2011, aiming to promote a more equitable and sustainable food production system, that would allow for a just access to food in a world of increasingly scarce resources. The campaign is active in more than 50 of the Oxfam intervention countries, and is managed at the global level by the Oxfam International office, while at local levels it is being implemented by one Oxfam affiliate on each national scene. The four thematic areas of the Grow campaign are land rights, small-scale agriculture investment, climate change and food prices. Each national campaign chooses among these themes the most relevant to focus on given country specificities.

The Grow campaign in Niger

In Niger, the Grow campaign (translated to 'Cultivons' in French, the official language of the country) was launched in March 2013. In line with the four thematic areas of the global campaign, the Niger branch decided on four national objectives. The first one is to encourage, in a participatory and inclusive manner, Nigerien authorities to develop a national pastoral and agriculture policy, with a special focus on family farms. The second one is to advocate for the allocation by the state of at least 20% of the national budget to agriculture and livestock. The third objective is to encourage effective investment in strengthening the resilience of populations vulnerable to food crises. And the last objective is to increase the level of processing and

consumption of locally-produced agro-pastoral products.

In order to define the country specific objectives and work at achieving them, Oxfam partnered with fourteen local organizations, including producers' groups (like the Federation of Horticultural Cooperatives, the Federation of Rice Producers' Cooperatives, pastoral associations, etc.), peasant movements, women and youth associations, etc. Not only did each partner participate in defining the Grow campaign's objectives by including their own objectives and aspirations, but they were also able to include in the campaign's operational plans activities that were part of their own operational plans. Thus, on the one hand, the organizations received funding support from Oxfam, and, on the other hand, Oxfam ensured that the campaign was appropriated and implemented by the local civil society.



Figure 1. Potato harvest during the official

launching ceremony

Some of the main activities the campaign included thus far were: organizing conferences, debates and meetings to commemorate events relevant to the campaign (such as World Food day, International Women's day, etc.), participating in the Agricultural entrepreneurship's week (an agricultural business fair organized by Oxfam, where high state authorities and the public are invited to visit agricultural producer's stalls), promotion of the campaign through a song and posters in the local media (television, radio and newspapers), the official launching ceremony (where high-level political figures were invited as guest speakers), presenting the campaign to national and international partners through meetings organized with various ministries and international institutions, conducting several studies on the situation of the agricultural sector in Niger and the points on which the

campaign could intervene to encourage improvements, and a field trip organized with high-level officials to visit two sites managed by Grow-member organizations to raise their awareness on issues encountered by producers on the ground, and innovative solutions proposed by the civil society to these issues.

Although only one year old, the Grow campaign can already count two important achievements. The first one is that it was able to bring together fourteen local organizations representing marginalized groups involved in agriculture and enabled them to identify and acknowledge their common interest, as well as to start together towards achieving their common goal by projecting a unified voice to be heard by policy makers.



Figure 2. Smallholders during field trip visit

While a few years before, according to one campaign member, it was unconceivable that representatives of cultivators and animal breeders, for example, would be reunited around a discussion table, the Grow campaign's achievement to have them agree on common objectives cannot be considered negligible.

The second achievement, which is linked to the political goal of the campaign, is that policy makers are increasingly aware and interested in the campaign. While at first organizers encountered difficulties in bringing high-level politicians to attend Grow events, the last few have seen the participation of many high officials (among which the Prime-Minister). Some Nigerien politicians have made the connection between the Grow campaign and the State's anti-hunger 3N Initiative ('les Nigériens nourrissent les Nigériens' – 'Nigériens feed the Nigériens'), which brings the prospect that the Government will take into account the requests brought forth by the campaign in the implementation of their national initiative. It remains to be seen if, and to what degree the Nigerien authorities will

actually adopt Grow objectives into their political program.

Analysis of the Grow campaign in Niger

The Grow campaign in Niger is a complex and innovative type of intervention in terms of smallholder political empowerment, combining together elements of exterior and interior intervention. It is, on the one hand, an exterior intervention of the type which, according to Olson, is required in order to incentivize smallholder farmers and agricultural workers to surpass the state of 'latent' group and get organized to advocate for their communal interests.

Yet, as recent developments have shown, exterior intervention is no longer absolutely necessary in order to form peasant organizations, as smallholders themselves have started groping together to advocate for their rights with their own voice. Thus, the fourteen local organizations representing producers and vulnerable groups, which are now Grow members, existed before the initiation of the campaign. Oxfam's intervention was, however, important in making each pre-formed group transcend its sector-specific identity and integrating a group with a broader, more inclusive identity, that of agriculturalists. This movement grouping the fourteen already existing organizations is large enough to give real political weight to its claims (which wasn't true of each organization taken separately).

The Grow Campaign, on the other hand, can be considered as designed and implemented entirely by local members (so it is an interior intervention): it was the members of local organizations who decided on and tried to achieve or put into practice its goals and actions. Oxfam was only there to facilitate the discussion and support financially some of the projects.

According to Olson's explanation, the individual interests of the members of a group should not be in direct competition with those of the other members of the group, in order for this not to block collective action. Yet, if we consider the fourteen Grow organizations as our units of analysis, it is not the existence of contradictory interests, but, more importantly, the perceptions that they do not share common interests but are competitors that prevented the

local associations from having a common conversation.

The Grow campaign was thus an occasion for them to identify the interests they have in common, and to realize that these are more important than the points on which they are direct competitors. The organizations were able to perceive that their common goal, once achieved, will offer satisfaction to all of them, and none will be excluded from enjoying the advantages obtained (another necessary condition, according to Olson, for groups to get organized). Once this was achieved, the organizations built a common project, whose success is impossible to evaluate at present, but which has great potential for the future.

II. Romania case-study

Global agriculture is subject to significant pressure to meet the demands of a growing population as well as increasing costs, particularly energy costs, with farmers having to pay more for diesel fuel, electricity, fertilizers, pesticides, etc.

In Romania, more than in other countries, competition for agricultural exploitation is tough, under globalization and competition with European countries with a thriving economy. The family farm and other associative forms cannot afford to purchase upstream and downstream services they need, the first alternative would be giving up to buy themselves these too expensive services, and to focus exclusively on primary agricultural production, hence the necessity and importance of linking farmers in cooperatives and associations to solve the problems that they themselves cannot solve.

Romanian farmers' mentality began to change, realizing the importance of associations. In the present and near future the benefits offered by professional and inter-professional organizations and cooperatives should be promoted by promoting values, professionals, fairness highlighted by best practices (Bercu, 2012).

Agricultural cooperatives in Romania can revitalize the cooperative sector for it to become a means of improving the living conditions of people in rural areas, to ensure sufficient revenue to producers, to strengthen the economic role of professional producers'

entities, and to develop the agricultural sector and implicit the national economy.

The fundamental purpose of the cooperative is building a countervailing power to the monopoly position of large companies, thus improving the cooperative members' terms of trade. Cooperatives are expected to operate in a competitive environment and must adapt effective management and operating practices. The effective operation requires minimizing costs and persistence in cooperation with non-cooperative businesses offering similar services.

Currently Romania is at the beginning of a new path in reconsidering the idea, resumption and promotion of cooperatives. Cooperatives remained the main if not the only means of organizing agricultural activities, especially among small farms.

According to a study by F. Bercu (2012), cooperatives in our country are still in their infancy compared to European ones, which operated on the same principles for decades. Analyzing business sectors in which agricultural cooperatives have been recorded, we find that the majority are those with production (34%) and marketing activities (42%) and much less cooperatives with processing activities (7%) and services (4%). The total number of members of agricultural cooperatives analyzed amounted to 23.412 national and cooperatives average 85 members. Cooperative members were self-classified as follows: small farmers (49.84%), medium farmers (36.93%) and large farmers (13.1%).

Analyzing the most serious problems and constraints in agricultural cooperatives in Romania it resulted that 9.62% of cooperatives think constraints are due to the limited number of members, 4% to limited patronage or scope, 6,1% to weak organizational structure and management, 11.9% to lack of entrepreneurial and managerial skills, 41.9% to the lack of financing, 20.3% to technology, 25.9% to market; 23.8 % to lack of information, 17.2% to external market environment, while 17.4% mentioned other problems.

Besides agricultural cooperatives, in Romania there are 50 professional and inter-professional organizations recognized by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development on the sectors of agriculture, aquaculture, fishing,

forestry and hunting, food, beverages and tobacco. (MARD) The strongest one of them is the National PRO AGRO Federation (National Federation of Agricultural, Food and Related Services Producers in Romania), an umbrella organization which seeks to meet the challenges facing its members by promoting and supporting a sustainable rural economy where agriculture is essential for the future, an important pillar of the Romanian economy.

PRO AGRO is composed of 14 professional and inter-professional organizations representative of the agriculture and food industry. Two years after its establishment, the National Federation PRO AGRO has consolidated its position in the agricultural sector, becoming the most representative organization for farmers. The federation meets the representativeness criteria in the sectors of agriculture, aquaculture, fishing, forestry and hunting, food, beverages and tobacco.

PRO AGRO objectives

An important objective of the federation is the creation of the PRO AGRO Mutual Fund. It will be the first mutual agricultural fund in Romania and will be accredited by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Thus, in 2014 farmers will be able to enroll in the Agricultural Mutual Fund PRO AGRO, which will compensate members for economic losses caused by animal diseases, plant, an environmental incidents or any other insurable risk.

Other objectives for 2014 are:

1. Active representation of agricultural producers' (and related services) interests nationally and in the working groups and advisory groups of the European Commission for Agriculture and Rural Development;
2. Active participation in developing the PNDR (National Rural Development Program) 2014-2020 measures for agriculture and food;
3. Complete steps to improve the legislative framework for inter-professional organizations on the Product branch;
4. Supporting steps to maintain TVA on bread to 9% and reduced TVA of meat, vegetables, fruit and sugar;
5. Reviewing the legal framework in agriculture and food industry.

Intervention channels

PRO AGRO represent the interests and needs of its members, coordinating and supporting professional organizations on agricultural, economic, legal, fiscal, educational and social issues with the European Commission, European Parliament and Council of Ministers.

At the national level

PRO AGRO is a dialogue partner of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, participating in meetings of the Commission for Social Dialogue, bringing their contribution to an important series of legislative projects in the sphere of activity of its members, such as : the Mutual Fund Law, the law financially supporting representative federations, the law to reduce TVA on bakery products, the certificates of deposit law, welfare standards for pigs and poultry, the National Rural Development Program 2014-2020, etc (PRO AGRO).

Generally, when MARD refers to: repealing, amending, or supplementing a bill or when sector specific proposals to repeal, amend, supplement a law and new legislative initiatives are made, a working group composed of representatives of the authorities (ministries or agencies connected with that approach) and representatives who operate associative forms involved (among which PRO AGRO) is formed.

Following discussions in the working group the legislative act, amendment / supplement are made, its passport of signatures to be taken from MARD and other ministries (Finance, Justice, Waters and Forests, etc.) or advising institutions is made. Advising institutions make recommendations to change if deemed necessary and submit the necessary adjustments to be made before signing. After signing, the document is taken, depending on the form, is submitted for discussion and approval to the Parliament.

At the European level

PRO Agro is a member of Copa Cogeca, thus enabling Romanian farmers to express their views having a direct impact on their earnings at European level. COPA (Committee of Professional Agricultural Organizations in the European Union) and COGECA (General Confederation of Agricultural Cooperatives in the European Union) represents the interests of

farmers and the supply and marketing sector of the food industry at 70 %.

The principle underlying the Copa - Cogeca activity is reaching a common position on policy areas relevant to farmers and agricultural cooperatives. The ability to influence decisions at EU level is based on the principle of the common position. There must be a willingness to reach a compromise when the situation demands it, which is essential for the success of lobbying. Copa - Cogeca lobbies not only at the European Commission (through participation in consultative groups organized by it), but also at the European Council and the European Parliament, in close collaboration with our member organizations.

Their voice is heard at European level because they represent 13 million farmers and 38,000 agricultural cooperatives in all Member States, and the organization has a multi-sector and cross-sector nature and is operating at both vertical (specific commodity) and at horizontal level. Through PRO AGRO, Romania is among the big states receiving 12 votes (maximum number of votes allocated to a country) at Copa-Cogeca in the internal process of decision-making and, therefore, plays an important role in influencing decisions. But this is possible only through active participation when there is an interest in promoting a certain orientation.

European agricultural legislation is constantly changing and it is essential that Romanian farmers participate in discussions when decisions are adopted so that their voice is heard. It is not just about politics, but about the reality on the ground and on improving the lives of farmers.

CONCLUSIONS

The fact that food producers worldwide constitute a very important group in terms of number of members has been, historically, a disadvantage for their organization and social

cohesiveness, thus translating into a weak political impact. However, the two case studies presented in the paper, demonstrated that, once the initial organizational obstacles are overcome, the numerical preponderance of agriculturalists is what provides weight to their political stances and claims. It is thus crucial for food producers to form well-organized groups in order to successfully advocate for the transformation of the food production system into a more equitable one through collective action in the political and legislative spheres.

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