



Costa Rica

CMC-Costa Rica: women take-up a role in the national advocacy platform

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In Costa Rica, the focal National Farmer Organisation (NFO) for the ESFIM programme is the Peasant Women's Coordinating Committee (*Coordinadora Mujeres Campesinas* - CMC). This organisation was established in 1995 as a sub-committee of the National Peasant Platform (*Mesa Nacional Campesina* – MNC), which became an autonomous association in 1999. This organisation aims at supporting economic and social initiatives for women in rural areas. The CMC is actually an affiliation of 42 active women's organisations throughout the country, representing approximately 700 women involved in productive projects.

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Costa Rica is characterised by good democratic functioning of its government institutions. Although the power of the State and public institutions are still important, they have been gradually reduced in the last 20 years. The CMC as well as other small and medium producers' organisations have been engaged in a rather complex and difficult political struggle to defend their interests since the 90s, when Costa Rica shifted towards more liberal policies. The resulting orientation of the country regarding agriculture has been towards the promotion of agricultural export. Small-scale agriculture has received only minor support from agricultural institutions. Moreover, Costa Rica underwent an economic transition in the 1990s, with the development of a service sector and the reduction of the agricultural sector's share of the GDP to less than 10 per cent. Hence, Costa Rican agriculture is characterised by the coexistence on the one hand of highly intensive, generally large farms oriented towards the export market and small and medium family farms on the other. Small-scale farmers have trouble obtaining resources for investment and reaching markets with their products in good condition.

Representation of small and medium farmers has been fractured since the 90s, with the creation of several organisations having different leaders, orientations and strategies. The quality and intensity of dialogue between these farmer organisations and the Ministry of Agriculture has fluctuated greatly during the last decade, depending on the government's focus. Even though new strategies for dialogue have been developed, the position of small and medium farmers on the whole has been very marginally taken into account during the past decade.

Development challenge

The challenge for small and medium farmers to access markets has been identified through various activities. First, a national congress with more than 50 representatives of farmer organisations throughout the country was held in 2005 to consider small-scale farmer issues. Then, in 2007-2008, a National Farmer Organisations' Platform (NFO-P) was consolidated within the framework of the Costa Rican component of the “Regional project to support rural business organisations in Central America”, implemented by CIRAD under supervision of the Regional Unit of Technical Assistance (RUTA). This platform, denominated “Plataforma de Organizaciones Rurales y Empresariales (PoryE), helped to identify development challenges. A research agenda to investigate the issue of small farmers' access to markets was detailed during the first ESFIM phase, in 2009, and especially during the workshop that took place March 24-25, 2009. During this workshop, in which representatives of national and regional organisations participated, the issues and obstacles hindering small farmers' access to market were defined, and three areas for action were identified (CMC, 2009): 1) organisational support, 2) bolstering negotiation capacity, and 3) policy lobbying.

Based on the results of this workshop and taking into account the current policy process, a dialogue was conducted within the NFO-P in 2010. This NFO-P is an open platform of farmer organisations for the entire country. During the ESFIM project, members of the NFO-P included representatives of na-

tional organisations such as CMC, ANAMAR (*Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Agro-industrial Rurales*), MNC (*Mesa Nacional Campesina*), JNFA (*Junta Nacional de Feria*), UPA National (*Unión de Pequeños y Medianos productores agrícolas*), CORFOGA (*Corporación para el fomento ganadero*), and grassroots organizations such as AFAR (*Asociación de Familias Agricultoras Ramonenses*) and ACOAGRO (*Asociación Cotobruseña de Agricultura*). In October 2010, two initial study themes were identified in consensus between the NFO-P participants: 1) an assessment of information on market in Costa Rica; and 2) an assessment of small farmers' limits and constraints to access international markets. These two first research activities were launched in early 2010.

During ESFIM phase II (2011-2012), the research goals were updated in the period from August to October, 2011 to take into account the evolution of local needs and policy developments. Specifically, four elements were included. First, it became apparent from grassroots interactions in different regions that it was necessary to study the new food safety regulations and its implementation in rural areas. Second, following the demand of local organisations in the south of the country, the reactivation of regional markets was considered. Third, the importance of farmers' fairs (*Ferias del agricultor*) as a way for small farmers to access markets and the debate around the JNFA management programme led to research on farmer fairs. Finally, with an emerging opportunity to develop a lobbying process on food sovereignty jointly with national assembly parliamentarian, a study of food sovereignty regulations appeared as an important new research subject.

The process of choosing the research themes was discussed in the NFO-P meeting. The choices were transparent and there was broad consensus among the participants. The main criteria were the concerns of grass root organisations and the opportunity for reviewing policy processes.

A coordinator was assigned to the project to help prioritise activities in ESFIM phase II, which were more oriented towards broadcasting information than conducting real research. In addition, CMC leaders and AGRINATURA representatives (WUR, CIRAD) adjusted plans and terms of reference of the activities in order to strengthen their research nature. One of the main difficulties in defining the thematic and research agendas was to reduce the number of possible research activities, as there were many topics and potential obstacles for policy process.

Collaborative research process

The structure of the NFO-P was used to monitor the entire process of ESFIM phase II. Regular meetings of the NFO-P (at least once per month during the 2010-2012 period) ensured dissemination of information about current policy situation and issues, progress on the various research topics, preparation of the workshops and future plans. The composition and participation of the NFO-P was relatively stable during the whole process. While certain groups were involved in only some aspects of the project, depending on their agendas and the specific theme, permanence of the process was ensured by the consistent and dedicated involvement of six members of national and local organisations.

A total of six research proposals were identified during ESFIM phase II (Table 7).

During the first phase (2009-2010), two research proposals reflected obstacles identified in the workshop that had taken place during ESFIM phase I:

- Availability and accessibility of market information in Costa Rica for small farmers.
- Assess barriers keeping small farmers from accessing international markets.

For the second step in 2010-2012, four new assignments were defined which were more in line with evolution of the policy agenda and identification of local needs:

- Assess the operation of the SENASA law in Costa Rica: this was defined as a priority, as it affected a large sector of small farmers (raising cattle throughout the country). There was evidence that farmers had an unclear understanding of this new law, making it difficult to implement it and enforce compliance.
- Study the condition of regional markets and how to improve them, with particular reference to the development of the southern region, following the request of the representatives of farmer organisations from the south.
- Evaluate the impact of regulations on the Farmers' Fairs (FF), as FF are an important means for farmers to access markets (as shown by the results of first study on market information). The discussion centred on the five-year policy planning of the national board of the farmers' fairs, as well as the demand of local participants such as the Heredia regional committee.
- Food sovereignty was considered as a possible flag theme for the various small and medium farmers organisations. Moreover, there was the possibility of an alliance with a national parliamentarian to address this subject.

TABLE 7 ASSIGNMENT AND METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH FOR ESFIM PHASE II

	TITLE OF THE STUDY	PERSONS AND ORGANIZATIONS RESPONSIBLE	METHODOLOGY
1	Accessibility of market information in Costa Rica	Shirlene Chaves Carballo (CMC)	Desk review + qualitative interviews
2	Assessing barriers keeping small farmers from accessing international markets	Shirlene Chaves Carballo and Vilma Herrera Chavarria (CMC)	Desk review + qualitative interviews
3	Assessing operation of SENASA law in Costa Rica	Adriana Flores Gonzales (junior consultant)	Desk review + qualitative interviews + 3 regional workshops
4	Studying regional markets and how to improve them, in particular the southern region,	CEDAR (consulting firm of senior consultants)	Desk review + 1 regional workshop
5	Evaluating the impact of regulations on Farmers' Fairs	Shirlene Chaves Carballo (CMC)	Desk review + direct interviews (200 farmers, consumers, and traders)
6	Studying food sovereignty legislation	Colleagues of NFO platform	Desk review, NFO meetings and fora discussions

The research studies were mainly assigned to (internal) CMC technicians but also to consulting firm or individuals (Table 7). At the beginning of the process, the first two research assignments were given to CMC technicians, in order to strengthen the structure and capacity of CMC on these two broad topics. Thereafter, the assignments were extended to include consultants. Because of work load and policy context, no researcher was specifically assigned to revising the sovereignty law. Until now, discussions on this topic have been carried out within the NFO-P.

When it became evident that the CMC technician was overworked, resulting in delays in the first two assignments, it was decided to expand staffing to include a non-CMC technician. Moreover, the specificity of a theme such as the SENASA law justified the use of an external consultant. Finally, CEDAR, a firm of

senior consultants, was engaged at the request of a local organisation and this was justified by the fact that these consultants already had accumulated knowledge on this topic.

It is worth noting that: 1) the NFO-P was reluctant to appoint an academic (a professor or student from one of Costa Rica's four universities), as farmers' representative within the NFO-P consider that academics are not able to produce sound and intelligible products for them; 2) the assignment of too much research work to one person at the CMC led to overwork and delays; and 3) hiring external consultants (especially senior ones) led to tension and difficulties among the farmers representatives of the NFO-P.

The national farmer organisation (in this case CMC) had a central role in the research process, as the CMC employees were directly and fully in charge of three of the six projects. For the other one (in particular the one on SENASA law), they were greatly involved in preparations for the regional workshop.

The role of the AGRINATURA was important in the design and definition of the research studies (especially with respect to refining the research question and the research breadth). Their role in the methodological design and implementation, on the other hand, was limited to regular interactions with the CMC employee and consultants during the NFO-P meetings and progress reporting.

With respect to methodology, the studies were mainly based on desk reviews and some qualitative interviews. For all the studies, and especially for the analysis of the SENASA law, there was a participatory process to collect and discuss information.

The quality of the studies and their outputs were generally satisfactory but uneven (Table 8). The studies on market information (#1) and barriers for export (#2) were both of good quality, resulting in a broad synthesis of very scattered information on the two topics. In both cases, they indicated the learning potential for farmers, which have been rather underestimated to date.

TABLE 8 QUALITY AND OUTPUT OF THE RESEARCH STUDIES OF ESFIM PHASE II

	TITLE OF THE STUDY	QUALITY	OUTPUT
1	Accessibility of market information in Costa Rica	large review process good final report	a good synthesis of very scattered information poor results in terms of learning process of farmers and policy process
2	Assessing barriers keeping small farmers from accessing international markets	good revision process good final report	no results in terms of learning process of farmers and policy process
3	Assessing operation of SENASA law in Costa Rica	good revision of the material and didactical product large process of consultation, and very good participation of farmers in regions good final report	very good generation of information for learning process of farmers creation of a room for consultation between farmers and civil servants lack of valorisation for policy process
4	Studying regional markets and how to improve them, in particular the southern region,	poor technical analysis (too general) good participation in workshop (due to involvement of NFOs representative) poor final typo-report	poor learning process (very large amount of information) good output regarding policy process with the reactivation of a local platform to address market issues
5	Evaluating the impact of regulations on Farmers' Fairs	intensive data collecting in process	creation of innovative and easy-to-replicate method for other farmers' fair assessment good output potential for improving management of farmers' fairs
6	Studying food sovereignty legislation	in process	strong potential for incidence of policy process

“The main approach to advocacy was the realization of forums in the national assembly to promote the theme of food sovereignty.”

The study on SENASA law (#3) provided a good, original insight into the perception of farmers on the law and the difficulties they encountered. The process of data collection was linked to a process of information diffusion. The analyses of the results were good. The process of information and consultation initiated with the ESFIM project has been finally followed-up by an inter-professional body on animal husbandry (CORFOGA), which is planning to organise information workshops at the request of producers.

The study on regional markets (#4) was very poor, as the consultants have limited their analysis to a very general motivational speech presented during a workshop held in the region. The added value of this study for the learning or policy process has been very limited. However, the main output of this research was the reactivation of a local platform to promote the creation of a marketplace, which was mainly the result of the previous work of one of the members of the NFO-P, a grassroots organisation in the southern region.

The two other studies (#5 and 6) were finalised in August-September 2012. The analysis of farmers' fairs has generated new information and an easy-to-replicate methodology using the situation of one fair, San Isidro, as a potential teaching tool for organisations involved in Fair management. A final meeting was organised to present these results to a large group of participants from local fair management organisations and representatives of national fair management group. The studies on sovereignty laws were more a deliberation than research and we cannot make judgments on their quality. In general, the study helped some of the members of the national platform to get a better understanding of the scope of laws concerning the issue of food sovereignty. It also encouraged active participation in lobbying activities at a national level to put the food sovereignty issue on the political agenda.

Advocacy outcomes

During the research process, there was no evidence of the formulation of evidence-based, formal recommendations for a change of policies and institutions. However, the various studies allowed for the identification of certain possible changes in policy or institutional environment that could be made, but these have not yet been worked out. The national platform existed before the implementation of the present collaborative research project was consolidated with ESFIM, especially regarding analysis and lobbying capacities.

During the ESFIM phase II, various methods of advocacy were used by the NFO-P. The main approach to advocacy was the realisation of fora in the national assembly to promote the theme of food sovereignty (two fora were held, in October 2011 and May 2012). The other method was encouraging participation in events organised by platform members.

The limited use of media, policy briefs and formal notes during the process were noteworthy. These techniques could have been further developed in the last phase of the project, but this was not feasible due to time constraints. At the final ESFIM meeting of the farmer organisation platform in August 2008, a plan for valorising the results of the various studies was defined. This plan will be implemented according to the available human and financial resources of the CMC and NFO-P members after the ESFIM project. During this process of advocacy, various board members of CMC were involved depend-

ing on their availability, in coordination with the technical unit of CMC. Because the ESFIM project was managed within the NFO-P, the advocacy process was also supported by representative national farmer organisations, in particular ANAMAR and MNC, in both the local and international arena. Grassroots organisations were also involved, though participation of the NFO-P.

The main constraint to lobbying activities, especially during the second step of ESFIM II, was the limited interest of this subject in the national assembly, where debate was concentrated on the reform of tax laws (*plan fiscal*). Furthermore, at that time the leading coalition in the national assembly was also unstable. The programme was able to adapt to this constraining factor by rescheduling activities in the first semester of 2012. However, this has led to postponement of the study on food sovereignty legislation.

Another constraint worth mentioning was the limited time available on the part of the Technical Unit (TU) of CMC. The TU of CMC consisted of two persons working part-time, who were in charge of all CMC activities, as well as the monitoring of ESFIM activities and the direct implementation of the research studies. The resulting work overload led to some delays in research activities, limited interaction with the local AGRINATURA researcher, and limited use of research results in the advocacy process. The lack of interest in CMC activities on the part of the administration were another constraining factor. For example, the participation of civil servants in the workshops was minimal, in spite of convocation efforts made by CMC.

Two main driving factors could be identified in the process. First, the willingness of a parliamentarian group to develop the theme of food sovereignty in the national assembly was an important driving force, as it gave an opportunity to the NFO-P for advocacy lobbying. Two main advocacy events were organised- the two food sovereignty fora in the national assembly. Furthermore, the support and mobilisation of representatives of other organisations within the NFO-P has been an important driving factor for the ESFIM project and CMC's advocacy process. It was regrettable, however, that certain representatives who may have had more skills and strength in lobbying participated poorly.

Because changes in policy are multi-factorial, it is difficult to define a specific outcome in terms of institutional policy change during the duration of this phase of the project. Nevertheless, ESFIM II has helped influence the NFO-P in certain ways.

Firstly, ESFIM phase II has stimulated dialogue between farmer organisations and has highlighted in particular the importance of the theme of food sovereignty within these organisations. Indeed, the importance of this subject grew dramatically during the last month of the ESFIM project. The mobilisation of a large number of producers for a demonstration and the alliance with a national parliamentarian directly influenced policy and resulted in a change in the law. Moreover, this mobilisation led to the creation of a new organisation, the farmer Platform for Agro-Food (*Mesa Agro-alimentaria*). Key players in this new group are some organisations of the NFO-P supported by ESFIM. Whereas alliances with powerful organisations were rather lacking during the ESFIM programme, this new and specialised platform could provide a good opportunity for follow-up activities.

Secondly, ESFIM phase II brought about the collaboration of key local actors in reactivating the work on local and regional markets. Indeed, following the workshop organised in the south by ESFIM, a committee of implementation of the regional market (*Comisión ejecutadora del mercado regional*) was created, with the vice-minister of agriculture as president. Some financial resources were granted by the development fund of the south (Judesur) to conduct feasibility studies of a new regional market. The committee has been working rapidly and regular meetings are scheduled to lead and monitor the process, which also included other organisations such as the agro food market integration programme (PIMA).



Other outcomes have been obtained with this project. For example, ESFIM enabled the CMC to reactivate their work on policy advocacy, which had been dropped in 2006 following an organisational crisis. It also helped CMC and their affiliated members to promote commercial activities through fairs organised around the forum and the workshop. ESFIM strengthened the existing NFO-P, giving it more substance, and helping to reactivate dialogue between representative organisations of small farmers that were increasingly segmented during the last 20 years. Finally, it helped to establish the importance of the National Fair Board (*Junta nacional de ferias*) as an important tool for small farmers to access markets.

The main limitations on the influence of the project were time constraints, policy advocacy being a long-term activity. A further limitation was conceptual: policy decisions depend not only on research and technical evidence, but also on many social factors, such as interactions of policy planners and representatives of farmers groups; these factors were not really addressed in the project design. It would be interesting to develop a method to analyse the policy process by studying stakeholders, interest groups, arenas, and forums in each country according to topic. This kind of scientific analysis of policy decisions could help farmers' representatives to understand the policy process of their country. During the project, the development of direct links with and participation and interest from policy makers and leading representatives of government and institutions (MAG, CNP, and PIMA) has been very limited, though in the last phase and the follow-up phase of the programme, some links have been established, in particular with the MAG authority and PIMA concerning regional markets in the south, with the parliamentarian in the food sovereignty campaign, and with civil servants of MAG and donors (FAO) within the initiative around the International Year of Family Farming 2014.

Partnership

The relationship between the AGRINATURA team and the CMC was very good. A horizontal relationship of mutual trust and respect was built up through regular meetings since 2007 and various events that were organized over time.

There has been interaction between AGRINATURA and the national research partners on three levels: the studies carried out by CMC personnel, the studies carried out by a consultant associated with CMC, and those carried out by the consulting firm CEDAR. With regards to the CMC personnel, the relationship was one of confidence. Nevertheless, insufficient time on the part of the CMC employees limited interactions with the AGRINATURA researcher on methodology and follow-up. The consultant associated with CMC worked on veterinary law, which was out of the scope of AGRINATURA specific expertise, but the relationship was nonetheless supportive. Liaison with the consulting firm CEDAR was more complicated. The group of senior consultants was appointed to study regional markets in the south, a topic that was proposed by a local farmer organisation. The difficulty in obtaining accurate results from this group created tension within the NFO-P and with AGRINATURA team.

The objectives of the leaders of national farmer organisations and the NFO-P were more oriented towards information diffusion to grassroots organisations than implementation of research for advocacy. At the level of CMC, there were difficulties in managing the tensions between the research and advocacy objective on the one hand, and concrete demand for more pragmatic support arising from grassroots members on the other.

To date, there has been no clear evidence that the various partners learned to make innovative inquiries or generate new insights. However, some collective actions were achieved, such as the organisation of two fora in the national assembly with a large participation of grassroots organisations, and the involvement of the CMC in an international project on food sovereignty. Through their representation, there was cross participation in other programmes such as the Cedeco project on sustainable agriculture, the national committee on the International Year of Family Agriculture 2014 (linked with the rural world forum), and ultimately with other associates such as FAO and IFAD. Finally, ESFIM contributed to the positioning of CMC on the food sovereignty theme and the creation of new alliances. These included a political alliance with national parliamentarians, and a financial one with the Swedish Cooperative Center (*Centro Cooperativo Sueco*) supporting the food sovereignty campaign. Moreover, the CMC is contributing to a European funded project on capacity building in food and nutritional sovereignty at the Central American level.

Lessons learnt

- The political context is an important factor for the output of the ESFIM project, as the lobbying process during the project (especially regarding food sovereignty) depended on the opportunity of alliance with parliamentarian groups. Moreover, the use of research products for advocacy process was limited by time constraints. The research reports were delivered late (between May and August 2012), thereby limiting their usefulness in the advocacy process. Adapting research material to the policy advocacy process is time consuming and needs careful planning. Moreover, the advocacy process can be managed without the development of specific technical material. For example, the important results in term of advocacy output in the southern region were not obtained with high-quality research inputs, but rather with the activation of the important participants using the social capital of one farmers' representative.

- Several issues would need to be addressed in order to strengthen NFO-led research into advocacy processes. First, the interest that the national farmer organisation has in conducting research and advocacy should be more carefully assessed. In the case of the CMC, although there was an interest in market issues, there was no experience in advocacy on this subject. Therefore it would have been useful to develop a training course on public policy analysis and advocacy. Secondly, a project should analyse the workings of the various parties concerned with policy decision making, and this should be linked to capacity building. And finally, the time available on the part of the national farmer organisation to participate in the programme should be more clearly defined.
- There was no evidence of precise institutional change at the national farmer organisations, AGRI-NATURA nor at the national research level as a result of this project. This may have had to do with the fact that there were many different parties involved in the programme. Policy process and policy incidence are long-term processes that are affected by many variables and conditions. Technical studies are only one component of the process, and are usually not the key factors involved in new policy changes. To better grasp the relative importance of technical and other factors in policy process, it could be interesting to analyse a specific change in policy process with a monitoring and evaluation approach of advocacy support such as ESFIM programme.
- The future of research-based evidence for policy processes in Costa Rica will depend on the main objectives of the future programme. If the main objective is to obtain better research and advocacy results, the challenge will be to develop a stronger platform of national farmer organisations involving cooperatives that have greater advocacy power and more technical resources to define solutions. During the final phase of the project and its follow-up, this problem has been partially solved with the creation of the national Agro-Food Platform (*Mesa Agro-Alimentaria*). Nevertheless, as this is very recent, we are not certain about the sustainability of this platform. If the objective is the strengthening of capacity, the main challenge will be to strengthen the existing platform in terms of advocacy and research. This may be difficult, as research is not the main priority of these organisations. Moreover, a change in how academic researchers are viewed should be effected; there is much reluctance on the part of national farmer organisations to contract consultants and national academic researchers.
- There are several other lessons to be learned that could also be used in other countries. One is to create trust in the NFO platform. The human factor should also be considered. Organisation platform success not only depends on the organisations' interests but also relationships between their representatives. Hence, members of the platform have to develop from the beginning a level of trust and confidence that enables them to overcome conflicts and differences of opinions in an atmosphere of mutual respect. This is one of the keys to sustainable functioning. Another key is the proper selection of the members of the platform (regarding genuine motivation, goals, capacity and experience) and the theme to be developed.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to all members of the National Farmer Organisations Platform for their support and suggestions during the process of implementation of the ESFIM programme, as well as suggestions and inputs for this final report. Special acknowledgements go to Shirlene Chavez Carballo and Vilma Herrera of CMC, Gerardina Perez of ANAMAR, Enrique Fallas of MNC and ACOAGRO, Iris Fernandez of ANAMAR and MNC, and Claudio Arraya of AFAR.