



India

FFA-India: collaborative research needs more structure than just personal charisma

FELICITY PROCTOR AND BART DOORNEWEERT

The Federation of Farmers' Associations, Andhra Pradesh (FFA-AP), was identified as the preferred organisation with whom to build a partnership between the ESFIM programme and India. This decision was taken based largely on the advice of the regional Asia representative of the now defunct International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP). The FFA-AP is a unified and independent grassroots organisation aiming to support rural development. The organisation's premise is to make agriculture a profitable occupation, imparting farmers with dignity and social equality. The FFA-AP was founded

in 2000 and represents 1630 farmer associations operating at the local level in 19 of the 22 districts of Andhra Pradesh. The membership is estimated by FFA itself as 75,900 farmers.

FFA-AP is affiliated with the Consortium of Indian Farmers Association (CIFA) which is a national umbrella organisation of farmer federations and commodity associations as well as independent farmer organisations. The CIFA and FFA seek to lobby government by sharing knowledge on agriculture and farmer issues in part, but not exclusively, through the Parliament Members Farmers Forum. FFA-AP at the time of the ESFIM programme was also working in partnership with Agriterro on a programme entitled *Linking farmers to business and enhancing livelihoods and establishing a women's wing* (2011-2012). The key contact persons within FFA-AP were P Chengal Reddy, Hon. Chairman of the FFA-AP and N. Vijay Kumar, Project Director. The AGRINATURA institutions involved in this collaborative programme with India were the Natural Resources Institute and the LEI Wageningen University and Research Centre.

Development challenge

Overall both the state and national level farmer organisations in India are weak. They lack broad-based ownership in particular by the small-scale farmer and are often financially insecure. For the majority of small-scale farmers, representation is inadequate. Membership-owned structures able to both lobby and support economic organisation are severely limited in number and geographic coverage, with the exception of the cooperative movement, most notably in the dairy sector and commodity based associations where the membership includes large-scale producers and agribusiness. Farmer organisations are in many instances politicised and institutional arrangements at the grassroots level, which should hear the voice of the small-scale farmer, are structurally bereft. *“Farmer organisations do not have sufficient resources because of the small farmers’ inability to contribute to membership”* (FFA May 16, 2012).

In order to inform the farming agenda, the government put in place in 2004 a National Commission on Farmers, chaired by M. S. Swaminathan. This advocated for pro-farmer policy changes and created a sufficient basis for farmers to engage with the State. Furthermore, with media focus turning to the plight of the farmers and debate emerging on a range of humanitarian issues related to the sector such as an ever increasing number of farmers’ suicides, the public was also broadly supportive of this engagement. The major causes of the distress that has led farmers to commit suicide in recent years include the unfinished agenda on land reform, the availability and quality of water, technology fatigue, access to and adequacy of institutional credit, and a lack of opportunities for an assured and remunerative market. Whether the momentum of the Commission, which completed its work in 2007, has been able to be sustained was not reviewed through the ESFIM programme. The UPA Government of India Report to the People 2007 in their strategy for inclusive growth included “to increase credit availability to farmers and offer them remunerative prices for their crops” as one of the key planned actions.

Collaborative research process

The work programme for ESFIM was elaborated during the ESFIM programme launch conference held in India in 2009. An India country overview was undertaken by a joint team comprising an AGRINATURA researcher and an FFA-contracted consultant based in India. The methods used were a literature review and targeted key informant interviews. The report provided an overview of the policy background of small-scale farming in India, an assessment of key issues relating to market chain development in the context of small-scale farmer market participation, and an overview of the status of farmer-based

organisations in India. It also highlighted some key areas as potential starting points for action for the ESFIM-India programme. These are listed in Box 4.

Box 4 Key issues for the empowerment of small-scale farmers in India

- Share models of what works in India and why? Specifically on good and innovative methods of empowering farmers in markets
- Evaluate existing models of self-help groups that have effective business processes for collective marketing
- Build platforms for dialogue at state and sub-state levels for (commodity) market chain planning and improvement of small-scale farmers market access
- Align national research to meet policy needs of farmers and develop techniques that can be adapted by the small-scale farmers (or are at least scale neutral)
- Improve systems of data collection and dissemination regarding crop production e.g. acreage under cultivation, relevant treatments (pesticides - organic or otherwise, fertiliser, manure, etc.) at different stages of production, and on market price information
- Synthesise and support the better use of data on agriculture and farming practices
- Develop new business models linking farmers to modern market intermediaries to improve market access for the poor
- Invest in a market-orientated agricultural extension to facilitate production market linkages
- Conduct research into the impact of specific market related policies and interventions on different categories of farmers
- Mobilise farmers and their organisations at regional and national levels for better advocacy
- Collectivise the farmers marketing operations in order to reduce the transaction costs
- Pilot innovation to link producer organisations with consumers and thus minimise the number of intermediaries
- Develop and share innovation to reduce the cost of insurance of commodity warehousing, institutionalise warehouse receipt systems particularly in the rural areas

Source: Srinivas and Proctor, 2009

The two-day conference entitled *Empowering Smallholder Farmers in the Market* was organised by the FFA on the February 3-4, 2009 and held in Hyderabad. Over 44 persons participated in the conference, including representatives of state and commodity-based farmer associations and organisations (26), civil society organisations (4), academia (4), public sector (3), private sector (4) and others (3). Presentations were given by at least ten of the participating farmer organisations as well as the private sector. The conference offered language interpretation, which enabled inclusive participation.

Day two of the conference was dedicated to a participatory process, which sought to identify key challenges faced by the small-scale farmer. All ideas generated by the participants were collated. These were mapped by the AGRINATURA moderator and FFA consultant and, using an equitable voting system, were prioritised as issues for action by FFA and to be supported by ESFIM (see photo next page).



*Mapping and prioritisation of key issues and opportunities for small-scale farmers in markets in India (February, 2009).
Note: Coloured cards present issues and opportunities. Green dots indicate votes given as priorities for action.*

Based on the priorities selected, three themes were further debated in breakout groups in order to generate entry points for research and action. The three themes were: post-harvest technologies; government's role in trade and commodities; and marketing of farm produce.

Given the size and scale of the challenge of small-scale farmer empowerment in markets in India, the fact that some six states were represented at this conference is to be commended. However no information was available on how the representatives of the farmer organisations present at the conference obtained their members' views on farmer market links, specifically those at a grassroots level.

A joint FFA and AGRINATURA task team reviewed the outputs of the conference and developed further the priorities suitable for the future ESFIM programme. It should be noted that some of the ideas and proposals made were outside the scope of ESFIM's research on advocacy, yet were felt to be of key importance to the farmer organisations. The needs and demands therefore far exceeded the scope of ESFIM and its funding.

The conference in 2009 provided a valuable opportunity for participating farmer organisations and others to network and make new contacts, and to develop and share ideas and innovations – this was in itself a valuable output of the ESFIM process. The series of presentations made by farmer organisations at the conference 2009 enabled views and concerns relating to the small-scale farmer to be shared. These were not limited to “empowering farmers in the market” as FFA felt that it was important that all priority issues and concerns be heard. This took time, but was acceptable, given that there are few other such opportunities for sharing the wider range of issues. There are no formal or regular mechanisms in India that enable groups of farmer organisations (within and between states) to raise and debate systematically these issues, nor is there public sector or donor financing available to work with farmer organisations to address specific challenges in a systematic and transparent manner.

The participatory process used to draw out key issues and opportunities and to derive a work plan adopted within the conference and led by the AGRINATURA team was both useful and ultimately welcomed by all. There was some hesitancy at the beginning of the process on the part of the Indian partners in the use of such participatory tools - this was a successful breakthrough in terms of method and practice. The challenges facing farmer organisations in India go beyond “empowering farmers in the market”; it

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was necessary at the conference to balance ESFIM programme priorities with a wider debate, given the limited opportunities for such dialogue in India.

Activities continued in mid-2010 and an initial contractual agreement was reached between FFA and LEI in October 2010. To take this forward in line with the areas of work defined, a *Working methods paper - ESFIM India* was drafted. This was used to provide the background to deliberations at a series of planning meetings held in India in November 2010.

The November 2010 process included an open meeting with seven farmer organisations, representatives of commodity associations, research consultants and public sector representatives. Thereafter, closed meetings took place between the FFA, national researchers and the AGRINATURA team.

The open meeting provided the opportunity to discuss the planned ESFIM programme. The focus of the work - *to understand and foster small-scale farmer inclusion in supply chains including models of economic-based farmer organisations* - was revalidated. The outputs from the open meeting were: agreement on the key elements of the ESFIM methodology, and the identification of case studies on collective action of farmers in markets. Specifically, the farmer organisations’ representatives at the working meeting emphasised: the importance of understanding state level differences in relevant laws and policies on farmer group formation including cooperatives; the need to have a clear understanding of language/terminology used on aspects of farmer to market linkages and market chain development; the value of understanding market models and sharing them; and the importance of the work being evidence-based.

During the open meeting it was evident that people were keen to provide examples of innovative business models. Therefore the idea was put forward to secure and collate other such ideas through the setting up a “new business models marketplace”. A proposal was made to prepare a simple guideline/template to aid in the compilation of experiences and innovations of the parties contributing examples of business models. This information would be reviewed, made available on the FFA website and possibly become a separate ESFIM publication.

The first step agreed upon was a literature review of published material on the legal and institutional frameworks in India that support economic activity of farmer organisations in three focal states - Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Furthermore, a detailed study was to be made of six cases selected from within these three states, including related policy issues. It was also agreed that the programme would focus on extensive case studies and refrain from the preparation of multiple Policy Notes partly as a response to a reduction in the FFA-proposed budget, and partly to undertake a maximum number of possible case studies.

In closed meetings, the FFA and the AGRINATURA team identified how the research should be conducted, determined the work plan timetable and budget, and selected local consultants, including a review of curricula vitae submitted by FFA, as well as their terms of reference. It was agreed that the AGRINATURA team would help train the local research team and help with the first case study, as a training and pilot session.

Specifically the work plans included:

- A desk review of secondary information sources to elaborate the background of each case study. This research was to delve into relevant state and national reports relating to the (dis)incentives to organising the supply chain, legislation pertaining to the organisation of supply chains (e.g. contract laws, cooperative law), and relevant government policy programmes and subsidy schemes. This research stage was also to include material relating directly to the specific case study, such as the business plan, annual reports, evaluation reports, annual accounts, etc. in order to inform the assessment of the given case.
- Drawing up unique case-study material. This would come in the form of review of any written reports on the cases in question. The case-study material would include: a Participatory Value Chain Assessment with the multiple stakeholders to the case value chain; in-depth interviews with informants; consultative meetings with groups of farmers; and reports on all these activities.
- Case-study collation and lessons learnt. This was to be followed by an advocacy and outreach plan.

The working meetings were attended by some of the key persons whom FFA planned to place in an Oversight Committee for this work. The planned advocacy approach was to focus on the policy notes generated and feed the results into: the Confederation of India Farmers Associations' (CIFA) Annual Conference, provisionally scheduled for November 2011; the dialogue between FFA and the Planning Commission; the FFA website and hard copy distribution; and the CIFA pre-budget discussions on agriculture with the Finance Minister scheduled to be held in February 2012.

Partnership

The outline work plan was subsequently completed and a start-up budget for the implementation phase was presented by FFA (February 2011). FFA also identified a steering committee to guide the work. However, the AGRINATURA team requested of FFA a full financial account of earlier activities as well as a response to queries on the work plan and budget for the planned activities, and, despite repeated requests to FFA from the ESFIM – AGRINATURA team to finalise these, a proposal from the AGRINATURA team to allow FFA to reassess the planned work with a view to restructuring if called for by FFA including limiting the work to a desk based study and review, no information was provided by FFA. The AGRINATURA team was left with the dilemma of whether or not to proceed with the research component of ESFIM 11, realising that the necessary planning may not have been done. The risks in terms of using development funds were seen as too great. The partnership between LEI-WUR on behalf of the AGRINATURA team and FFA was terminated in September 2011.

So why did FFA not follow through? It is difficult to know the exact reason however they include:

- FFA had very limited in-house staff to manage a research agenda, including the sub-contracting of researchers and thus decided not to proceed
- The challenge of managing including sub-contracting a fairly complex research agenda and research team may have been too high an expectation of FFA. FFA chose to sub-contract individuals rather than an institution. This option created opportunities as well as imposed limitations, as individuals (some six to ten persons were required) would require more management by FFA. In defence of this decision it was felt by FFA that a contract between FFA and a research institution would be very bureaucratic and increase overall costs, while at the same time devolving the overall manage-

ment. Whilst FFA has associated themselves with one of the CGIAR centres based in India, they have no experience of institutional contracts with national or other research institutions.

- FFA reprioritised the planned ESFIM partnership agenda. *“The activities of FFA and CFA over the years are not able to adhere strictly to programme or time schedule. This is mainly because farmers of different commodities and at different levels will confront problems which demands our attention to the newly surfaced problems”* (FFA May 16, 2012)
- The overall budget was modest, and meant limited financial gain to FFA in terms of overheads or commissions to support policy research, including external partnership and advocacy. Because of the presumably very tight internal FFA funding, the opportunity of partnering with AGRINATURA on ESFIM was no longer found to be attractive.

Face-to-face meetings held in 2009 and 2010 were essential to build relationships and strengthen mutual understanding. The open meetings with farmers were central to the setting of a farmer organisation-led agenda and there was clear agreement between FFA and AGRINATURA on priorities and, indeed, on the process. There was mutual agreement on the research approach, the work plan and the timetable. During the meeting held in 2010, the independent moderator and prospective FFA-identified research team leader played a helpful and enabling role. Tensions did emerge (during the November 2010 meetings) on how local consultants would be contracted and managed. Specifically, the question was whether the entire work programme should be contracted out, given the staffing limitations of FFA or whether FFA would hire a consultant to manage the sub-contractors. There were also discussions on the level of detail required for submission of the budget. FFA saw these details as “micro-management” on the part of AGRINATURA, whereas AGRINATURA saw them as key elements of an open contractual arrangement that needed to be understood by and transparent to both parties. It was generally felt by FFA that they did not need to share details on management issues with the AGRINATURA team and that the level of the budget breakdown was unnecessarily stringent.

Lessons learnt

- The India partner FFA-CIFA has operated an advocacy and lobby agenda since its inception and well in advance of the ESFIM partnership – although this might better be described as a pressure group. Whilst the extent to which their on-going advocacy and lobby agenda is evidence-based might be contested, their voices are heard.
- FFA-CIFA recognised the value of evidence-based advocacy; however, the challenge was to get this realised within both the prevailing institutional structure of the FFA-CIFA and in partnership with national research institutions. There were no on-going and structured links between the FFA-CIFA and national institutions, although some ad hoc links had been forged with a CGIAR institution based in India.
- FFA-CIFA had very limited internal staff and financial resources. This potentially hampered FFA's capacity to partner with other institutions and programmes. In addition, staff changes took place in FFA between ESFIM 1 and ESFIM 11 whereby the lead policy officer took on a secondment with an ACIDI-VOCA programme in 2010, thereby reducing significantly the level of senior FFA staff available to ensure the implementation of ESFIM programme both in terms of management of the research and the follow-through on advocacy.
- FFA demonstrated its commitment to the ESFIM work through the mobilisation of participants to the 2009 conference and to the subsequent working meetings, the hiring of at least two local consult-

ants (ESFIM 1 and 11) and the submission of a progress report and work plan. Despite this, the full ESFIM 11 contract was not secured for the work and the AGRINATURA team were forced to close the arrangement with FFA.

- There can be no doubt that the need for the work to be done as identified in 2009 at the Conference still remains a priority for farmer organisations and their members in India. New ways should be found to build sustainable and longer term working relationships between key national and state level farmer organisations and national research institutions to address farmer organisation-led research agendas. Seeking to finance research via the farmer organisation may not have been appropriate in the case of India. Overall, the planned research was probably too ambitious for the FFA to manage, even though the outputs were clearly demanded and evidently needed.
- Optimise on available information. Given the limited overall budget, more could have been done in India to learn from existing research and grey evidence, including donor-funded programmes. This material itself would have been useful for the preparation of relevant policy notes for advocacy.
- There is a need to find mechanisms to keep administrative and financial management systems as straightforward as possible. The administrative demands, including financial accounting, may have been the key underlying reason for the discontinuation of the ECART-FFA partnership.

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