

# Peasant organisations in Ghana: major players of sustainable development

From “Nnoboaa”, a traditional form of cooperation in Ghana to the current Peasant Organisations (PO), the paper facilitates the understanding of the history, role and importance of peasant farming in Ghana as well as the challenges it is confronted with. It is illustrated by a focus on Rice POs in the Kesena-Nakana District.

Establishing farmer organisations - especially those of smallholders - and strengthening their capacity, has been a major focus of the Government of Ghana (GoG) since gaining political independence in 1957. Agriculture has historically been the dominant sector of Ghana's economy, but its contribution to GDP has been oscillating in recent years (18.7% in 2017, 18.3% in 2016). The sector is still suffering from low productivity due to a number of internal factors including land tenure arrangements, market access, capital and technology as well as external factors such as investor speculations, climate change impacts and falling international market prices of Ghana's export products (MoFA, 2015).

## “Nnoboaa”: a traditional form of cooperation and a model

Collective activities conducted as a form of reciprocal labour exchange and mutual aid by farmers in Ghana are based on customary arrangements linked to social, ethnic and familial relations. This form of arrangement is called “nnoboaa” among the Akan speaking communities in Southern Ghana. “Nnoboaa” is not only voluntary and informal; it is also temporary with the group dissolving on completion of the task. In the late 1920s, the British colonial administration introduced formal farmer organizations in the form of cooperatives to improve the quality and marketing of cocoa and to provide loan facilities to farmers. They were viewed as key instruments for agricultural and rural development. So the Department of Cooperatives (DoC) was established in 1944 to oversee cooperative development in the country. Early success stimulated a rapid expansion of cooperatives first in the cocoa sector. The model expanded to other crops to become prominent immediately after independence in 1957. Cooperatives were then responsible for the marketing of about 40% of the total cocoa produced in the country. In the 1990s, smallholder rice farmers also began organising themselves in

associations to share communal labour and to participate in social events. These actions have helped to promote strong bonds among smallholder rice farmers and made rice production more efficient and productive.

However, after the 1966 military coup, the new government feared the cooperative movement was becoming an economic and political force in rural areas and therefore ordered it to be disbanded. The DoC was dissolved. The global pressure for structural reforms and market liberalisation during the late 1980's put an end to state controlled cooperatives. Since then, subsequent governments adopted a liberal approach and allowed other types of rural and farmers' self-help organisations, commonly referred to as Farmer-Based Organisations (FBOs) or Peasant Organisations (POs) to be formed for promoting income-generating activities. These days, cooperatives and FBOs are the two main forms of smallholder farmer associations in Ghana. In the 1970s, GoG adopted the traditional practice of mutual assistance in farming, the “nnoboaa” system, as a model for rural development and this accelerated the formation of POs in the country.

## Farmer Based Organisations: vehicles for providing collective services

POs in Ghana are made up of farmers with similar problems and similar needs. They share local resources such as land, labour, water and access to markets for the benefits of their members. Their activities can be in the form of agitating for decreases in fertilizer prices, marketing crops, negotiating for better access to credit and improving transportation for produce. They try to empower themselves and as Van der Ploeg (2008) observed, they try to empower themselves by actively constructing barriers to ensure the autonomy of their members and mitigate dependency, poverty and marginalization in this globalised world.

Many international development organisations also support FBOs because they are vehicles for providing an array of collective services to their members on a non-profit or cost basis. FBOs constitute one of the key actors in agricultural value chain support services in Ghana. In this way, they are considered to be an important means for achieving agri-business development objectives and rural development in the country; they are solicited by private sector enterprises to enhance value chain development of their farming activities. Similarly, NGOs are encouraging FBOs to improve rural service delivery, economic growth, and poverty reduction among farmers. They also prefer to deal with peasants through FBOs. The number of FBOs in Ghana is estimated to be around 10,000, including those registered and unregistered, and those registered as cooperative societies. The number continues to increase rapidly.

## Peasant associations connected to national and regional networks

POs are controlled by farmers sometimes helped by specialized employees. They are usually associated with specific value chains and are emerging as networks of local NGOs. The Ghanaian national umbrella PO is known as the 'Peasant Farmers Association of Ghana' (PFAG). It was formed in 2005 by a group of small-scale farmers but has evolved to become the apex farmer-based non-governmental organization. It aims at advocating for change of policies that perpetuate the poverty of rural farmers and other issues that affect their livelihoods. It currently has a membership of 1,527 registered member and 39,156 individual registered small-scale farmers in over 70 Districts in all the regions of the country. Its vision is a Life of Dignity for the Peasant Farmer. It advocates for pro-poor trade and agricultural policies at national and international levels, serves as a platform for farmers to build and strengthen their capacity in policy advocacy, and provides technical business and entrepreneurial training for the peasant farmers. PFAG is a member of the West African sub-regional federation known as “Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (ROPPA)”.

## POs in defense of sustainable development

POs in Ghana have undeniable strengths to contribute to the sustainable development

of the country. The significance of peasant farmers in Ghana is reflected by the fact that about 80% of the country's total agricultural production is attributed to them. Most farm holdings are less than 2 hectares in size. POs in Ghana have a long history and have played and continue to play extensive and leading roles in the struggle for political independence in the country. They often mobilise their members to fight against detrimental government economic policies and development programmes.

## Peasant organisations' response to land grabbing

The performance of POs in Ghana, and in West Africa in general, is hampered by a multiplicity of national challenges: access to land, land grabbing and limited irrigation. Land grabbing by foreign private companies has become a significant concern of peasant farmers in Ghana and across Africa. Peasant movements declared in a global Conference organised by La Via Campesina in Spain in 2017 that: "Almost everywhere in Africa the elite and corporations are undertaking efforts to capture and control people's basic means of production,

such as land, mineral resources, seeds and water. These resources are increasingly being privatized due to the myriad of investment agreements and policies driven by new institutional approaches, imposed on the continent by western powers and Bretton Woods institutions" (Monjane, B., 2017).

In Ghana, land grabbing by foreign investors continues to escalate, especially in Brong Ahafo Region and the Upper West Region. This phenomenon is causing local communities many problems such as the displacement of inhabitants, non-payment of compensation, lack of access to water resources, land degradation and infringement of poor farmers' access to land, especially female smallholder farmers. Female farmers are hardest hit due to traditional norms and customs which limit their access to and ownership of land; they mainly rely on family to access land. Caritas, the charitable organization of the Catholic wing of the Ghana Catholic Bishop's Conference, recently called on the government of Ghana to immediately take measures to stop the spate of land grabbing in the country. Unfavourable international market prices are

also limiting smallholder farmers' ability to expand their production frontiers, thereby reducing their incomes and livelihoods. Cocoa, rice and cashew farmers in Ghana are suffering from continuous declining international market prices.

Rice POs in the Kasena Nankana District have to a large extent succeeded in negotiating with land owners and community chiefs to get access to lands which are then allocated to their members according to agreed criteria and conditions. For instance, Donkor and Owusu (2014) and Dinye (2013) indicated that about 18.4 percent of the 2,334 hectares of irrigable land managed by the Irrigation Company of the Upper Region (ICOUR) is leased to farmers while the remaining 81.6 percent of the land is put under the management of Village Committees which are made up of selected beneficiary farmers.

## Transform POs into viable sustainable development players

To ensure the transformation of POs into viable sustainable development players, GoG, private sector development agents, business enterprises, civil society organisations and the general public should contribute more meaningfully to ensure sustainable rural development policies via institutionalised mechanisms which effectively involve POs; appropriate legislation and regulatory frameworks; capacity building assistance and financial services; knowledge; information and technologies. ■

### Rice Peasant Organisations in the Kessena-Nakana District

With a population of about 118,441, the Kessena-Nakana District (KND) is highly dependent on rice which constitutes the highest share (54.8%) of cereal production in the district. KND also accounts for 4.5% of the regional rice production in the country which is an important food and cash crop in Ghana.

Farmers in rice production have been organising themselves to participate in meetings, communal labour and social events since ancient times. Recognising that rice production is a difficult venture, farmers have organised themselves for the purpose of "rotational weeding". Farmers develop strong bonds that help to break complex tasks into easier and manageable pieces. At the same time, NGOs in KND have therefore taken steps to assist informal POs in the district to formalize themselves.

Rice PO members benefit from more than just rotational weeding. In KND, rice POs strongly collaborate with Irrigation Company of the Upper Region (ICOUR) which liaises with various financial institutions in the district to provide soft loans to farmers. Rice POs are recognised by the district Farmer-Based-Organisations (FBOs) board which recommends POs to investors. Thus they have better access to smart farming methods such as tractors, hired labour, etc. POs also help their members to acquire lands. For instance, about 18.4 percent

of the 2,334 hectares of irrigable land is managed and equitably leased to farmers by the ICOUR, the remaining 81.6% of the land is put under the care of the Village Committee made up of selected beneficiary farmers. Farmers, male and female, belonging to POs have no difficulties acquiring land for cultivation; they own about 72.2 percent of farmlands. Apart from helping farming activities, POs serve as a source of motivation for farmers to diversify into other livelihood strategies including petty trading, carpentry, teaching, sanitation, grass cutter rearing and mushroom cultivation. They finally serve as a safety net for members through group support and individual solidarity.

Difficulties exist. Achieving rice POs' objectives has been marred by contestations as different people with different opinions make-up these groups. During POs members' meetings, farmers barely accept each other's opinions with respect to allocation of resources; land, finance, farm inputs like fertilizers and use of farm machinery. Membership is open to all farmers, including local ethnic groups, migrants, females, males, and young and older farmers. Within the rice POs, members sometimes form factions depending on individual interest, ethnic affiliation or community, which often led to grudges, confrontations and rebellion against the leadership.

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