

Rural civil society and the role of social mobilisation in poverty reduction and sustainable rural development

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'The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018' has shown how in a number of areas progress has been insufficient to meet the Agenda's goals and targets by 2030. This is especially true for the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups (United Nations 2018). After years of decline, global hunger is on the rise, driven by conflicts and climate change (FAO et al. 2018). Poverty still has a rural face, with 79 per cent of the world's poorest people living in rural areas (World Bank 2018) and depending on agriculture for their well-being (FAO 2017a).

This scenario calls for an urgent transition towards a new paradigm of food systems and rural development, where the focus is on rural people to tackle the root causes of poverty and leave no one behind (FAO 2017b). Future actions must be transformative, not on production alone, but moving towards a more complex set of interconnected objectives, thus simultaneously addressing socio-economic and environmental sustainability to supply healthy, diverse and nutritious food, while reducing poverty and avoiding the depletion of natural resources.

In this context, rural food producers, family farmers, pastoralists, forest dwellers, fisherfolk and other small-scale food producers are key agents of change. They are in many ways the foundation of food security (Pimbert 2009), since they produce over 80 per cent of the world's food—84 per cent of which is produced by those with less than 2 hectares per capita (FAO 2014). These producers face many challenges, such as limited access to productive assets, including land and other productive resources, as well as to finance and credit, education and training opportunities. In addition, social isolation and lack of access to information/knowledge and to solidarity support networks also exacerbate their condition (FAO 2017c). In this regard, social mobilisation (in the form of self-help groups, social movements, producer organisations or cooperatives) is essential for them to address some of the causes of poverty. As productive agents, they also help ensure food security and nutrition for all, providing social and economic inclusion, and conserving biodiversity and the ecosystem services on which agriculture depends (FAO 2018b).

Food producers and their organisations are important catalysers of public policies; due to their multidimensional nature (Van der Ploeg 2013) they have diverse roles to play in society. By emphasising people-centred, context-specific solutions, different components of poverty and sustainability can be addressed through and with rural civil societies, such as strengthening solidarity networks in rural communities, combining and exchanging traditional knowledge and innovative practices, while protecting landscape and biodiversity.

1 How social mobilisation can be a key driver for transformational change towards the reduction of rural poverty

Social mobilisation can be broadly defined as "the process by which individuals or sections of society mobilise in order to effect social change"². It can take different forms, ranging from very informal groups to various types of more structured producers' organisations such as cooperatives. They all have in common the fact of being the result of a collective process of people coming together to meet a common goal. Most frequently, they are set up for advocacy purposes, to provide services, or both. Alliance-building and cooperation, most often in the case of social movements, can be also driven by a specific political agenda; for example, the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty brings together more than 500 rural organisations with the aim of advancing the food sovereignty agenda at global, regional and national levels (McKeon and Onorati 2017).

Social mobilisation, often emerging as a reaction against converging socio-political, ecological and economic processes in the world (Borras 2016), can be key in removing constraints that producers face and in promoting local economic development. Evidence also shows that people in rural areas can improve their well-being and increase their agency through social mobilisation and collective action. This includes their knowledge, critical awareness and analytical skills, thus increasing their collective political capabilities to think and act like citizens, interacting with different stakeholders, demanding policies and services needed by their own communities, and, ultimately, actively contributing to the reduction of rural poverty (Herbel et al. 2012; Kabeer and Sulaiman 2015; Vicari and De Muro 2012).

A wide debate is currently taking place regarding the extent to which social mobilisation can benefit the poorest populations. It refers in particular to the existence of entry barriers in most of producers' organisations (e.g. Penrose-Buckley 2007; Bernard and Spielman 2009; Francesconi and Heerinck 2010; Fischer and Qaim 2012). It also questions the degree of effective participation in social mobilisation by society's most marginalised people (e.g. Manzanera-Ruiz and Lizarraga 2016; Meier zu Selhausen 2016). Surely, different levels of formality—as well as different types of organisational design—can have different impacts on poverty reduction.

Concrete experiences suggest that when social mobilisation—and in particular producers' organisations—come from an endogenous process of collective action and are based on bonding, bridging and linking relations,³ they are more likely to be inclusive and effective. These principles are central to meeting member needs and aspirations and contributing to the reduction of rural poverty (Herbel et al. 2012). Their ability and capacity to engage in meaningful policy dialogue, presenting possible solutions to address the needs of their members, is key in this regard, as the following experience showcases.

2 The Articulation of the Semi-Arid (ASA) network: an inspiring example of how social mobilisation can contribute to the reduction of rural poverty

The ASA network⁴ was set up in the 1990s as a result of a process of civil society mobilisation in the semi-arid areas of the Brazilian northeast. It currently comprises 3,000 social organisations, including family farming organisations, cooperatives, farmer unions and non-governmental organisations, to promote and defend an alternative model of coexistence in the semi-arid region and related public policies.

For centuries, a prevailing view among Brazilians considered the semi-arid region a poor, unsustainable, unviable, unproductive region, with no particular source of knowledge or possibility for progress. The difficult climatic characteristics of this region were considered a major hindrance to development. ASA has been working to change this view, by developing and strengthening local solutions to support the social and economic transformation of the region, emphasising cultural value and traditional practices and seeing local communities as essential actors in their own development.

ASA's work consists in creating opportunities for rural people—8 million inhabitants as per the 2010 official census—to coexist with semi-arid conditions, in particular by providing universal access to water, for both consumption and production. To fight food and water scarcity, stocking fundamental items for the survival of humans, animals and vegetation was at the heart of the strategic support to the population living in these semi-arid areas and improving their quality of life. ASA programmes were divided into three main segments: stocking water, stocking food (including seeds) and stocking fodder to feed animals.

Water stocking initiatives improved other innovative experiments in the production of food, the rational use of natural resources (soil, native vegetation) and the valorisation of rural culture, reducing the migration of rural populations, avoiding desertification and promoting sustainable development throughout the region. This has

been done mainly by recovering and developing local social technologies that enable integrated and participatory water management and by influencing public policies.

In terms of concrete results, ASA members promoted the construction of 615,597 cisterns, which collect up to 16,000 litres of water from rooftops—considered sufficient for drinking and cooking for a family of five during the average eight-month low-water period (Osava 2018). Ponds built on large rocks or tanks holding up to 52,000 litres of rainwater, using a system where water runs down a sloping concrete terrace, are among other water technologies used for production and animal consumption (ibid.). Community action and the exchange of experiences among farmers, and recovering and structuring more than 700 community seed banks, preserving the genetic assets adapted to the reality of the semi-arid region, are also key components of ASA's work.

ASA also actively engages in policy dialogue, such as in the National and State Councils for Food Security and Nutrition and in the National Articulation of Agroecology (ANA),⁵ and it concretely acts to influence policymaking. The main result of ASA's work in the policy area was the adoption of the National Programme to Support Rainwater Harvesting and other Social Technologies for Accessing Water (otherwise known as the Cisterns Programme—Programa Cisternas) in 2003 by the federal government, which helped ensure access to water during the dry season for more than 1.25 million families in the semi-arid region.

This work had positive impacts on poverty reduction through increased food security, but it also helped decrease occurrences of diarrhoeal episodes in the rural population and increase children's school attendance, as a direct consequence of reducing the time needed for women and youth to collect water (Santos Neves et al. 2010).

3 Active dialogue between policymakers and food producers' organisations: the key to successfully reducing rural poverty

The ASA initiative, along with other experiences built on social dynamics (as in Cuba,⁶ India⁷ and Zimbabwe,⁸ for example) stresses the importance of an enabling, inclusive and responsive policy environment. Public policies promoting sustainable rural development require both inclusive processes for their development and a holistic approach in terms of their content.

While there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to guide policymaking, experiences show that close and continuous interaction among ministries, governmental bodies and organised movements of food producers is one of the main ingredients that can guarantee the success of public interventions aimed at reducing rural poverty (Del Grossi and de Azevedo Marques 2015). Constant communication and coordination between relevant actors and the effective participation of those who are most affected by specific policies allow for better identification of concrete policy targets. As dialogue leads to a deeper understanding of rural communities' assets, concerns and needs, policies will focus better on specific actors, building on locally available resources, thus responding to context-specific needs. As a result, policies, programmes and strategies anchored to an inclusive

development process will gain greater legitimacy and be more sustainable to changes in the enabling environment. At the same time, the engagement of rural organisations in policy formulation will boost their sense of ownership, making them key to effective policy implementation.

Similar to wide participation and active dialogue, interconnected and focused policy design is a crucial factor for the success of effective poverty reduction. The coordination of traditionally independent policy areas, such as regulating issues of education, infrastructure, financial services, investment, food production and distribution, embedded in a broader national strategy, optimise and increase the effectiveness of public interventions, influencing different dimensions, thus contributing to multiple goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

4 Conclusion

This article highlights the key role that rural civil society, food producers and their organisations play in furthering the transition towards more sustainable food systems and rural development that contribute to the reduction of rural poverty. To meet the ambitious goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, there is an urgent need for national strategies and international initiatives to support the collective actions of rural organisations. Emerging agrarian/rural movements, while forging their internal structures and developing services for their own benefits, simultaneously require new arrangements in

relevant legislative/political frameworks to successfully address social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainable rural development, with rural organisations acting as key agents.

Integrating solutions developed and tested by rural civil society organisations and working in partnership to scale them up can be an effective way to put people centre stage. Rural civil society organisations and their services to poor people are strengthened, and their membership could be expanded, while the international community and national governments increase their outreach and potential impact—including thousands of agents of change who are experts in context-specific solutions to contribute to overcoming poverty.

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1. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).
 2. See: <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com>>. Accessed 9 November 2018.
 3. i) Bonding or intra-group relationships within a group are relations of mutual trust which enable members to gain self-confidence, develop a sense of ownership, identify solutions and act collectively; ii) bridging or intergroup relations between groups create unions, federations or apex organisations to increase their negotiating power; and iii) linking creates extra-group relations between groups, market players and policymakers (Herbel et al. 2012).
 4. See: <<http://www.asabrazil.org.br>>.
 5. Internal ASA–FAO report, unpublished.
 6. Asociación Nacional de Agricultores Pequeños (ANAP): <www.ecured.cu/ANAP>.
 7. Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF): <<http://www.fao.org/3/a-bl990e.pdf>>.
 8. Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers Forum (ZIMSOFF): <www.fao.org/family-farming/network/network-detail/en/c/170898/>.

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