Producer Organisation RAS
Roles, strength, limitations and actions
E-collaboration as validation of results from the 4th GFRAS Annual Meeting

Introduction
Producer organisations play a crucial role in rural advisory services (RAS). This was recognised by participants at the 4th GFRAS Annual Meeting, who elaborated some conclusions and recommendations. The Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS) will reflect and enhance these conclusions and recommendation as preparation for follow-up activities in 2014.

71 GFRAS affiliates from producer organisations around the world, GFRAS regional focal points, and few international stakeholders were invited to participate in an e-collaboration with the objectives to:

- Reflect and enhance recommendations of the 4th GFRAS Annual Meeting in regards to the role of producer organisations in RAS
- Elaborate a position for the Farmers’ Forum side event on the role of producer organisations in RAS
- Prepare key affiliates for awareness raising activities on the role of producer organisations on regional level

The e-collaboration was planned in two rounds. In the first round, taking place on 6-17 December 2013, participants discussed and enhance conclusions and recommendations from the 4th GFRAS Annual Meeting in regards to:

- Key roles of producer organisations
- Comparative advantages of producer organisation RAS
- Limitations and challenges of producer organisation RAS
- Recommendations to producer organisations to overcome their limitations and challenges and use their potentials
- Recommendations to other actors in the agricultural innovation system to support producer organisations in overcoming their limitations and challenges and using their potentials

On 13-22 January 2014, the group will discuss unclear statements, divergent ideas, and interesting aspects from the first round.

This report summarises key points from the first round of the e-collaboration. Participants’ statements were also included in the document “Role of Producer Organisations in RAS”, which summarises conclusions and recommendations from the 4th GFRAS Annual Meeting.

Key statements from the first round of the e-collaboration
Participants related their statement to concrete situations and explained them based on their contexts.
Role of producer organisations RAS

Participants confirmed the roles of producer organisations identified at the 4th GFRAS Annual Meeting.

In regards to supplying RAS, the e-collaboration showed that producer organisations should:

- both serve women and men and consider gender aspects
- base their services on identified needs and demands
- stress business-related services and knowledge management
- Contribute to producers’ access to information, increased ability to innovate, and making profit

In regards to organising the demand side of RAS, participants added:

- Gender aspects
- Creating an enabling environment to recognise and identify true needs and demands, which requires participatory needs assessments and consultations

Participants considered producer organisations’ participation in advocacy and policy formulation as important activity to raise awareness on gaps in farmers’ human resource development, particularly in regards to participation and access of women and youth to RAS. It includes:

- mobilising members
- seeking partnership
- influencing decision making of AIS actors and political processes
- promoting an enabling environment for economic activities

Creating linkages and partnerships with actors in the agricultural innovation system is especially important in relation to other RAS providers and research. Producers organisations need to mobilise their members to create linkages, engage in feedback processes and articulate demands.

Participants highlighted the importance to complement RAS activities with economic activities such as input provision, warehousing, and value adding marketing in order to create direct benefits for producers and generate capital for financial independence and institutional sustainability of producer organisations.

Comparative advantages of producer organisations RAS

Participants confirmed that producer organisations’ advantages have their origin in the social and geographic proximity, which leads, in addition to the aspects mentioned at the 4th GFRAS Annual Meeting, to:

- Considerable social capital amongst producers
- Capacity to encourage farmers’ testing by providing the appropriate space
- Scope for linking producers to other AIS actors for adaptation, training, sharing, and diffusion of good practices and joint research
- High level of legitimacy, experience and activity in advocacy on rural issues
- Contribution to local capacity strengthening
- Increase in producers’ relevance in AIS
- Contribution to increased adoption of innovations, reduced costs and increased coverage and sustainability of RAS

In addition, participants identified the following comparative advantages of producer organisations’ RAS:

- Flexibility in activities
- Efforts to be self-sustaining and for gradual development
- Cost-effective as involved in technical topics that do not require high level of qualification and training
- Homogeneity of clients’ group leading to shared objectives and needs of clients

**Limitations and challenges of producer organisations RAS**

Participants identified a range of limitations and challenges for producer organisation RAS:

a) Weak management and governance capacities:
   - Insufficient grassroots orientation in governance; weak consideration of democratic principles in decision making and representation;
   - Inadequate organisational capacity due to limited educational background and high level of volunteer work leading to unutilised potential in regards to action and use of market opportunities
   - Weak administrative capacities, lack of databases to identify producers’ specific needs

b) Insufficient financial sustainability and business skills
   - Limited financial capacity and donor-driven financing of services leading to reduced sustainability and gap between real producers’ needs and provided services
   - Weak ability to see and use opportunities for income generating activities and marketing
   - Project-orientation with limited duration leading to reduced sustainability and weak ownership

c) Limited outreach and quality of advice
   - Advice limited to members
   - Insufficient identification of producers’ training needs and elaboration of need-based training modules
   - Narrow perspective, neglecting the range of producers’ activities
   - Limited capacity to adapt and renew the content of advice to the evolution of farmers demands and changing contexts
   - Insufficient use of social capital for fostering links between members and leaders and amongst members that would benefit farmer-to-farmer extension; challenges in experience exchange between farmers due to poor internet services in rural areas, expensive travelling, and different dialects
   - Weak attention to activities with direct benefits to members such as provision of services, low cost goods, and inputs
   - Limited capacity to autonomously develop sound RAS project that attract partners’ financial contributions
   - Lack of simply understandable technology and information in different languages and dialects

d) Social and environmental limitations
   - Limited capacity or interest to integrate small-scale farmers
   - Exclusion of women or limited gender sensitivity

e) Insufficient knowledge and human resource management
   - Weak record keeping, monitoring, and evaluation of RAS activities, due to challenges in collecting accurate and timely data from farmers
   - Lack of institutionalisation, harmonisation, and documentation of approaches in guidelines
- Insufficient elaboration of modules and training materials for lead farmers
- Difficulties in selecting and motivating lead farmers through financial and non-financial incentives
- Insufficient continuing professional development, equipment and orientation for effective RAS with direct benefits; weak technical and logistical support to lead farmers

f) Insufficient public relations
- Low awareness of value of collaboration and poor public relations leading to reduced participation in sustainable and fruitful collaborations with other AIS actors and RAS providers, particularly public extension services
- Weak ability for promoting producer organisations within the AIS, expressing demands of their members, and maintaining public relations
- Insufficient collaboration with other AIS actors, especially other RAS providers and research, due to limited funds, personnel and capacities

Recommendations to producer organisations
Consequently, producer organisations were recommended to increase their organisational profile, invest in capacity strengthening and financial sustainability, enhance the provision of RAS, strengthen monitoring and evaluation, engage in awareness raising and advocacy, foster collaboration and partnership and encourage rural youth in family farming. Participants added the following aspects to the recommendations elaborated at the 4th GFRAS Annual Meeting:

a) Increase the organisational profile
   - Define aims, roles and responsibilities
   - Strengthen governing structures
   - Elaborate strategic documents such as business plans

b) Capacity strengthening
   - Elaborate strategies to be updated on new challenges, including climate change

c) Financial sustainability
   - Develop mechanisms for financial sustainability of RAS: seek co-funding; raise service fees; provide embedded services linking advisory services to robust business models, income generation and resource mobilisation programmes that increase members’ incomes and generate capital for financial independence and institutional sustainability of producer organisations

d) Enhance RAS provision
   - Elaborate baseline information to orient services to demands and needs
   - Repackage technology and information into modules that are attractive and understandable for farmers
   - Develop ways of communication and participatory learning amongst producers; invest in farmer-to-farmer extension as inexpensive approach that utilises producer organisations’ social capital for training farmers and facilitating experience exchange amongst producers
   - Provide business oriented services that increase producers’ perception and use of existing opportunities for income generating activities
   - Invest in the provision of services with direct benefit for producers’ welfare, such as support in producing fertilisers and pesticides, and assistance in marketing products to higher levels in the value chain
- Combine provision of advice with advocacy, marketing and the provision of inexpensive goods and inputs

e) Monitoring and evaluation
   - Devise appropriate systems for feedback collection from the ground

f) Awareness raising and advocacy for producer organisations’ involvement in AIS and pluralistic RAS
   - Express demands for RAS clearly and based on recognised needs
   - Invest in public relations activities and promotion of producer organisation RAS, starting with showcasing small success stories, in order to attract retailers, processors, other AIS actors, as well as technological innovations

g) Foster collaboration and partnerships
   - Raise the awareness and take advantage of available resources and capacities
   - Enhance linkages and partnerships with other actors in the RAS system and AIS, especially buying companies and research, to collaborate in service provision and access capacity, expertise and co-funding
   - Organise and register into value chain commodity platforms that are linked to specific markets and engage in marketing and demand-oriented capacity strengthening.

Other issues

Besides the discussed questions, participants raised the following issues:
- Partnerships and collaboration are key, but its implementation is challenging
- Producer organisations are diverse. There is a huge variation in terms of objectives, needs, circumstances, activities, scope and resources. As consequence, few generalisations will hold. It would be useful to break producer organisations into categories in order to make more useful statements.