



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations



1st SAARC Agri Cooperative Business Forum

Organizing and Strengthening Family Farmers Cooperatives to Attain SDG 1 and 2 in South Asia

28 - 30 August 2018 II Park Village, Kathmandu, Nepal

Outcome Document¹

The SAARC region covers only around three percent of world's landmass, however, it represents around 24% of world population, and thus is considered the area with highest population in the world. Around 67% of its population live in rural areas, and are dependent on agriculture, fisheries and forestry for a living.

While South Asia is making satisfactory progress on several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the region still needs to substantially scale up implementation across the SDGs, particularly in eradicating poverty (Goal 1), reducing hunger (Goal 2), and addressing gender inequality (Goal 5), among others. Still, 66% of the world's poor live in rural South Asia. To realize these SDGs, increased efforts and greater participation and partnerships among different actors, including governments, the private sector, the international community and the civil society, particularly small scale family farmers, are important.

Agricultural cooperatives can play a key role in achieving these goals. Agri-cooperatives are an integral part of the social structure of South Asia and their contribution towards promoting sustainable incomes, livelihoods and rural development is widely recognized. By increasing the productivity and income of smallholder producers through joint actions such as bulk buying of inputs, collective marketing, negotiation of credit and contracts, lobbying with policy-makers and capacity building, agri-cooperatives help reduce poverty and hunger. By strengthening the existing agricultural cooperative systems in SAARC countries, progress towards the SDGs could be greatly enhanced.

Agricultural cooperatives can be a basis for a just and equitable society, as cooperatives promote accountability, sustainability, democracy, fair sharing of risks and benefits, participation, volunteerism and stakeholdership. Therefore, cooperative is not only a program but it is also a movement for social transformation.

The SAARC Agriculture Vision 2020 recognized the importance of cooperative farming. In the SAARC Agriculture Vision, it is stipulated that *"Small-sized farms in South Asia face serious constraints in adopting modern technology and in marketing their produce. To some extent, the size disadvantage can be obviated through contract and cooperative farming"*. At the Eighteenth SAARC Summit, SAARC leaders recognized the potential of Cooperatives in *"achieving inclusive, broad-based and sustainable economic growth and development,"* and called for *"sharing of experiences, expertise and best practices in this sector"*. An intergovernmental process is also underway for finalizing the SAARC Plan of Action for cooperation in matters relating to Cooperatives.

The event "First SAARC Agricultural Cooperatives Business Forum" is a step towards that direction. The representatives from the Ministries of Agriculture and Departments of Cooperatives of the Member States of SAARC, and representatives of farmers' organizations from SAARC region, gathered together for the first SAARC Agriculture Cooperatives Business Forum, held on 28-30 August 2018 in Kathmandu, Nepal. In this Forum, participants shared and learned from each other's experiences in organizing and strengthening family farmers' agricultural cooperatives towards promoting sustainable incomes, livelihoods and rural development. During the first two days of the forum, presentations were made on

the situation of agriculture cooperatives in each SAARC Member State, as well as on six cases of successful cooperatives in Nepal, India, Philippines and ASEAN. Participants also visited two agriculture cooperatives located at Dakshinkali and Bhotechour districts. They also attended group workshops to share the lessons learned from experiences.

After having elaborated discussions, the Forum made the following recommendations:

- 1. Build and strengthen the capacities of concerned government agencies and leaders of family farmers organizations in establishing and strengthening family farmers' cooperatives and their enterprises,** through yearly national and regional Agri Cooperative Business Forum for sharing experiences and policy dialogues; learning exchanges and study visits within country, South Asia and global levels; documentation and dissemination of successful cooperatives through print, video and mass/social media; exchanges with other Asian sub regions such as with ASEAN; and establishment of a sub-regional data portal on cooperatives. At the cooperative level, capacity building sessions should be directed at promoting good and accountable leadership as well as sound and transparent management and financial systems. Agri Cooperatives should be able to directly access markets and meet the market demands; and are able to provide timely, relevant, high quality services to their members.
- 2. Encourage and support the strengthening of cooperatives through enabling government policies** at national level such as tax exemptions; flexible and easy credit; public procurement of crop and food produced by cooperatives, crop insurance to cooperatives; provision of land and other support services such as infrastructure (equipment, facilities, tools) for the use of agricultural cooperatives; and raising public awareness on the role of cooperatives in achieving the SDGs. At the SAARC level, initiatives may be taken for declaring a day as a SAARC family farmers' cooperative day; facilitation of visas for representatives of agri cooperatives attending SAARC events; formulation of a roadmap to promote agricultural cooperatives; harmonization of principles, guidelines, framework on agricultural cooperatives, and recognize the role of family farmers' cooperatives in the proposed SAARC Plan of Action for Cooperation on the Matters Relating to Cooperatives and involve them in its implementation.
- 3. Promote coop-to-coop partnerships and businesses at country and regional levels** with other international and intergovernmental institutions such as the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), The ASEAN, and the local governments; and through also the development of regional value chains; with the possibility of establishing a multistakeholder Regional Network of Agriculture Cooperatives for sharing and exchange and link to international markets. At the local level, support the work of organizing farmers' groups into cooperatives and federating these primary cooperatives into national cooperative councils/ alliances or commodity federations.
- 4. Constitute and support a multi stakeholder Working Group on Agriculture Cooperatives within the SAC,** comprising representatives of governments' cooperative agencies, farmers' organizations/cooperatives, business sector and development partners, for supporting implementation of the recommendations of this Forum and for taking further initiatives towards strengthening of family farmers' cooperatives in South Asia.

¹ The 1st SAARC Agri Coop Business Forum was participated by xxx government officers from the ministries and departments of agriculture and cooperatives of the eight SAARC member countries as well as xxx leaders of farmers organizations who are implementing a capacity building program for farmers organizations called MTCP2, a program funded by the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).