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IMPROVING FOOD SECURITY IN GEORGIA

Oxfam's Multi-Stakeholder Network Approach

This case study describes how the Georgian Alliance for Agriculture and Rural Development (GAARD) became a multi-stakeholder network. It explores how the network has contributed to Oxfam's ability to leverage wider change and has helped establish relationships with key actors. It discusses the network's initial achievements, and considers what its strategy for sustainability should be, if it is deemed to exist for the long term.

1 INTRODUCTION

Georgia is one of the very few countries in post-Soviet Eurasia where democratic developments have led to a more accountable government. While shortcomings and challenges remain, there is space for civil society, social/political movements and individuals to engage with the state and collectively influence government policy, including on rural development. Like its neighbours, Georgia struggles with rising inequalities, including in terms of gender and governance issues. But unlike many of its neighbours, Georgia is open to development and to engaging with national and international mechanisms that hold the government accountable on social policy. Working on national-level advocacy to achieve change at scale is therefore particularly pertinent.

Poverty in Georgia is concentrated in rural areas, and smallholder farmers are particularly likely to be poor. Agriculture accounts for about 52 percent of the labour force.¹ The smallholder farming sector faces multiple challenges, including low productivity and poor access to the inputs, knowledge and capacities that farmers need to build profitable farming businesses. Smallholder farmers find it difficult to influence or respond to conditions in the market economy that affect their competitiveness and their livelihoods.

In response to the challenges facing smallholder agriculture in Georgia, Oxfam and its partners Action Against Hunger (ACF), the Rural Communities Development Agency (RCDA) and the Biological [organic] Farming Association Elkana jointly designed and are implementing an integrated programme of cooperative development and capacity building. This programme is called 'Towards a new direction – Supporting Agricultural Cooperation in Georgia'. It is part of the wider European Commission (EC) funded 'European Neighbourhood Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development' (ENPARD),² which aims to increase the productivity and competitiveness of smallholder farmers.

The project works with smallholders to establish and strengthen business-oriented farmer groups, believing that collective action can support more productive and profitable smallholder agriculture. In addition to supporting farmer groups directly (as a demonstration project), the project is also working towards a more conducive environment for sustainable smallholder agriculture, by promoting changes to the national policy and regulatory framework, and pro-poor agricultural investments by government, private sector and international development agencies.

2 ABOUT OXFAM'S PROGRAMME

Establishment of the Georgian Alliance for Agriculture and Rural Development (GAARD)

ENPARD is a large programme that, in addition to the smallholders' cooperation component represented by Oxfam, CARE, Mercy Corps and People in Need, also provides budget support and technical assistance to the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) and academic institutions. The donor, the EC, envisioned close coordination and collaboration between stakeholders, who from the very beginning were strongly encouraged to consider their respective projects as an integral part of a country-wide, multi-stakeholder effort, supported by its own ENPARD platform for the project consortium partners.³ This gave Oxfam an opportunity to strengthen its advocacy work through a collaborative effort with international and local NGOs, initially to promote the development of Georgia's new law on cooperatives.

Once this law had been successfully adopted, the informal network that had formed around it decided to become a more formal alliance – the Georgian Alliance for Agriculture and Rural Development (GAARD). At the time, the government of Georgia had just changed and was particularly open to discussions with multiple stakeholders on its agricultural strategy. GAARD would promote future collaborative advocacy efforts to create more supportive policies for smallholder farmers.⁴ This was a key component of Oxfam's Economic Justice (EJ) strategy in Georgia⁵ which aims to shape and monitor policies and practices which put women and smallholders firmly at their centre; to ensure that the voices of women and smallholders are heard; to unlock the potential of women and smallholders; and to reduce poverty and ensure food security.

GAARD was formally established in March 2013 at the launch of the Caucasus flagship project 'Improving Regional Food Security through National Strategies and Smallholder Production' (FSS). This included a specific objective of working in coalition with partner organizations representing civil society to draw attention to food security issues and lobby decision makers for policy change. The alliance is supported by the EU-financed ENPARD and Food Security projects. The signing ceremony of the GAARD's Memorandum of Understanding was attended by more than 60 participants, including the Deputy Minister of Agriculture of Georgia and representatives from the EU, Parliament, NGOs, donor agencies, government, and project beneficiaries. The event was widely covered by national media.

Whereas the focus had initially been on supporting agricultural cooperation (ENPARD), the goal through FSS was to develop inclusive, gender-sensitive food security and nutrition strategies and legislation to support local food production and address critical barriers faced by women and smallholder farmers. During 2014, GAARD focused on supporting agricultural cooperatives

through various initiatives and on a review of the draft Strategy for Agricultural Development in Georgia 2014–2020, sending comments and concerns from Georgian farmers to the MoA. Further discussion on the action plan for the agricultural strategy resulted in the formation of six thematic working groups within GAARD: 1) food security; 2) environment and biodiversity; 3) smallholder farmers and agricultural cooperatives; 4) land ownership and land use; 5) extension services; and 6) access to finance and other services.

Membership

GAARD has grown to include 22 organizations. In principle, all members are involved with agricultural and rural development, but this ranges from organizations with a very direct involvement (e.g. Oxfam, CARE, Elkana) to those with a much less significant connection (e.g. Georgian Economists' Association, Georgian Institute of Public Affairs). Only two organizations have direct links with the grassroots: Elkana,⁶ which represents the voices and interests of 2,320 farmers and organizes an annual Farmers' Congress⁷ with them; and the Georgian Farmers' Association,⁸ representing around 2,000 farmers. However, these farmers' organizations do not directly represent the majority of smallholders, especially those most affected by poverty and marginalization. Apart from smallholder farmers, GAARD aims to make special efforts to support marginalized groups, in addition to helping them to participate in alliance building processes, but it is not currently clear what strategy will be undertaken in this regard.

3 WHAT DID WE ACHIEVE?

Following the development and adoption of Georgia's new law on cooperatives, which led to the formalization of the GAARD alliance, Oxfam worked with the newly established state agency for the development of agricultural cooperatives to develop an information guide on cooperatives, and tools for organizational development and capacity assessment.

Subsequently, GAARD (helped by Oxfam's expertise) provided gender-related feedback on the draft agricultural strategy (2014–2020) developed by the MoA. GAARD's recommendations related to gender mainstreaming, food security and nutrition (and the need to collect baseline data), as well as environmental protection. They also focused on the need for civic participation in strategy formulation, implementation and monitoring. Most of this feedback was incorporated and resulted in a much more gender- and smallholder-sensitive draft.

Unfortunately, a change in leadership in the MoA resulted in a new draft strategy that discarded much of the original feedback, especially on gender. GAARD was granted an opportunity to provide new feedback. Overall, GAARD has agreed that general strategic directions are acceptable; however, its feedback focused on demanding more specifics around extension services, an action plan on collaboration with municipalities, and specific support measures for agriculture in high mountains. GAARD received an official response from the

government stating that these specifics would be incorporated in the strategy's action plan, which was under development, and that it was planning to adopt a law on the high mountainous areas.

Another recent success is that GAARD advocacy led to the creation of a Food Security Working Group in the MoA through a ministerial decree. The group is composed of 20 members, including members of the GAARD, and is tasked with making recommendations on the draft law on food security.

How does the multi-stakeholder network operate?

Guiding principles: With its pluralist membership and representation of genders, regions, constituencies and sectors, decision making is based on consensus in order to strengthen cooperation and reach common positions when possible. One of GAARD's guiding principles is to reflect the special needs of women working in agriculture, and to make recommendations based on gender equality, aiming to ensure that gender issues are addressed by food security and nutrition policies. However, GAARD's members do not include any women's rights organizations. GAARD has therefore appointed a Gender Adviser.

Organizational structure: GAARD's structure aims to encourage a participatory approach. It has an Advisory Board (a panel of experts appointed by the members) and a Board of Observers (an inclusive space for external actors that directly or indirectly influence agricultural policy) to ensure that its advocacy work reflects a wide range of opinions.

Activities: These are facilitated through face-to-face meetings, consultations, reports, policy briefs and working groups. Frequency of meetings is based on need and urgency; however, GAARD usually meets once per quarter.

Funding: For the time being, Oxfam still provides funding for GAARD's activities, and no plan is yet in place for GAARD to become financially independent (see 'Conclusion and Next Steps', below).

Communication: GAARD uses various formats such as communiqués, resolutions, declarations, recommendations and policy briefs to achieve more organized, effective and focused initiatives and to establish the alliance as an important player in the sector.

4 WHAT HAS OXFAM LEARNED?

As an inclusive network, GAARD aims to facilitate exchange of information, analysis and experience between CSOs, though according to some of its members this has not materialized so far. The policy focus of GAARD is very broad, which allows for flexibility in addressing pertinent issues, but can lead to a lack of focus; the increasing focus of few projects on food security isn't

necessarily reflected by the much wider range of agricultural and rural development issues covered by the network. GAARD's purpose is to play an influencing role rather than a governance role, and to demonstrate change-making processes through task forces that influence structures outside GAARD, such as the Farmers' Congress.

The alliance has demonstrated success through advocacy and lobbying for the new legislation on agricultural cooperatives and its input to the country's agricultural strategy. Factors underlying these successes include the strength and legitimacy that come with a unified and broad-based alliance of stakeholders. A few (but only a few) of these stakeholders represent farmers themselves (though not the majority of vulnerable women and smallholder farmers). At the same time, the role of the EU-funded ENPARD and FSS projects cannot be underestimated. As well as supporting the formation of the alliance, these multi-million-euro projects provided a lot of additional support to the MoA and NGO consortia to achieve the reforms mentioned above. As long as GAARD's interests coincide with those of donors, and its work is funded by these same donors, such successes, significant as they are, are to be expected.

There are, therefore, some clear limitations to this multi-stakeholder initiative. Most importantly, GAARD's agenda risks reflecting the donor's agenda more strongly than that of its own members (particularly the aspirations and rights of women and smallholder farmers), given the financial and other incentives. If GAARD wants to continue to work for the interests of rural women, smallholders and other vulnerable people, it needs to establish a stronger link with them, support their organizations and give them a stronger voice in the change-making agenda. Representing farmers requires sufficient accountability to ensure that farmers' voices are heard by their representative GAARD member organizations. In addition, while it might not be possible to become financially self-sufficient in the near future, GAARD's legitimacy and sustainability would increase if it could attract financing from other donors, including NGOs (such as BRIDGE – the organization which will replace Oxfam following its planned exit from Georgia in 2018) and government agencies, in addition to a financial contribution from its own members.

It is up to GAARD members themselves to decide which direction to take, and it is important to recognize the strengths GAARD already possesses as the foundation of an effective multi-stakeholder network. In addition to its experience in joint advocacy and learning, and its legitimacy through its broad and diverse membership, it also has access to extensive technical support and expertise from its Advisory Board and Board of Observers, which include interested stakeholders who cannot join the alliance, e.g. Parliament's Agrarian Committee. Moreover, the network has led to unprecedented collaboration among CSOs, instead of competition for donor funds. The recent decision to rotate GAARD chairmanship among the members, and the leadership role that members are playing in the working groups, are proof of their commitment. This will only be strengthened by Oxfam's support in hiring a part-time Alliance Coordinator, as long as Oxfam (and the future BRIDGE) is careful to support rather than drive the alliance.

There are also some threats to the effectiveness of GAARD's role in improving the enabling environment. As noted above, the initial successes were in part due to a receptive government and MoA. This has changed, and the agriculture

strategy has not incorporated all of the recommendations from GAARD, including some that are vital to the interests of women and other vulnerable smallholder farmers. However, the strategy pledges that the 'activities implemented by MoA will take into consideration gender specifics when planning certain initiatives' and that these specifics will be laid out in the action plan. The jury is still out as to whether the new agricultural strategy is going to help smallholder farmers; this depends on the MoA sharing its action plan with GAARD so it can play a role in monitoring the strategy's implementation and involving farmers to demand their rights and make recommendations.

Lastly, selecting six or seven thematic areas, as described earlier, might have motivated the diverse GAARD members to stay involved, but the lack of a specific common goal has risked creating confusion and loss of momentum, dilution of resources and lack of coherence. Moreover, GAARD lacks a uniform way to measure progress towards its goals. While it may not be the most appropriate model for GAARD, the *Collective Impact*⁹ approach provides some excellent recommendations on how a multi-sector alliance can identify a specific social problem and align efforts around common measures of success.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

GAARD consolidated its members' missions and action plans, resulting in a list of more than 50 topics – though not necessarily a single one that all members feel needs to be addressed. Some of the more pertinent issues are policies to increase farmers' competitiveness, establishing a registry system for farms or famers, formulation of a rural development strategy and, most urgently, a proper land registration mechanism (which falls under the authority of the Ministry of Economy, not the MoA). In reality, it is very difficult for network members to focus on issues for which they don't have additional donor resources.

During a recent workshop to discuss GAARD members' commitment and plans for sustainability, it was decided that the alliance would work as an informal (i.e. not a bureaucratic) platform for national influencing, guided by individual members' priorities and strengths and coordinated through the alliance. Members also decided to not portray GAARD as a watchdog, but instead to focus on monitoring and reflecting. They expressed a need for better coordination and greater efforts towards joint positioning, especially in promoting inclusiveness and advocating for women and smallholder farmers.

Alliance members agreed to continue focusing on the following priority areas, each of them to be addressed by the corresponding working groups: food security; environment and biodiversity; smallholder farmers and agricultural cooperatives; land ownership and land use; extension services; and access to finance and other services. Each working group will be led by a member organization.

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NOTES

- ¹ Levan Dadiani, 2015. *Building Farmer Cooperatives in Georgia: Supporting smallholder farming in the post-socialist context*. Oxfam case study
- ² Natia Samsonishvili and Levan Dadiani, 2014. *Towards a New Direction – Supporting Agricultural Cooperatives in Georgia*. Baseline Study Report, Oxfam Georgia
- ³ Oxfam GB, 2015. *ENPARD Annual Report for Period of 01/02/2014-31/01/2015*. Oxfam Georgia Internal Document
- ⁴ Nino Edilashvili, 2014. *Learning Paper for MECIS EJ Learning Event: Leveraging and Network-building*. Oxfam Georgia
- ⁵ *Georgia Country Strategy June 2012-May 2017*
- ⁶ 278 farmers (54 women) and 531 Farmers' Union Representatives with their own constituencies of cooperatives and farmers.
- ⁷ The Farmers' Congress is an annual gathering of farmers' representatives, who represent several thousand farmers and voice their opinions in an organized manner, which is targeted to policymakers. The concept has been developed and administered by Oxfam together with partner organization Elkana.
- ⁸ 767 farmers (195 women) and 72 associated organizations.
- ⁹ <http://www.fsg.org/approach-areas/collective-impact>

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