

# Strengthening Collective Action in Communities to Build Sustainable and Profitable Agricultural Systems: Examples from the CRSPs

By Scott Bode and Kimberly Swallow

Achieving food security for growing populations while both reducing poverty and protecting the natural resource base is one of the great challenges of the 21st century. Even more daunting are the risks posed by climate change to reaching this goal. Some **Collaborative Research Support Programs (CRSPs)** are working to build sustainable and profitable agricultural and natural resource systems through collective action.

Collective action plays a critical role in integrated pest management (IPM). When one producer does not reduce their pest numbers, that farmers' fields effectively become a host site for those pests, thus frustrating and at times negating the pest control efforts of their neighbors. Non-environmentally safe practices, such as excessive pesticide or fertilizer use, also respect no borders. Recognizing that negative practices impact all community stakeholders, the IPM CRSP utilizes collective action by working through farmers' agricultural clubs to increase and improve technology development, adaptation, and adoption.

In Gaidghat, Bangladesh, the IPM CRSP achieved significant results by utilizing farmers' clubs in collaboration with government and private sector partners. Clubs serve as a mechanism for training (over 600 farmers trained in the area), on-farm trials to test new techniques, demonstrations, information dissemination, and problem-solving forums. In addition, the clubs have collective power to strengthen their marketing of products. Through the IPM CRSP project, eggplant farmers in Gaidghat have increased yields by as much as 250 percent, boosted their incomes



by 300 percent, and eliminated the use of pesticides.

*Grafting has developed into a cottage industry for the Bangladeshi women in the region.*



*Nicaraguan women gleaners have formed an organized, effective group confident in making decisions for estuary management.*

Community-based NRM has been developed and piloted by a variety of development players. The CRSPs have been successful in engaging communities in

stewardship of natural resources. The AquaFish CRSP in particular has utilized gender-focused collective action to empower marginalized women in the Nicaraguan cockle trade. The AquaFish CRSP provided capacity building and technical assistance to form collective action groups in the Aserradores estuaries region and to develop a co-management regime that addressed both socio-economic and conservation goals, which significantly improved estuary management, and as a result the fish and shellfish resources. The collective power of the group helped move the government's estuary management policy in the area towards a community-based approach. The model has been transferred to other communities by the Nicaraguan government.

The SANREM CRSP provides numerous examples of the successful use of collective action for NRM. In Mali the CRSP links civil society with local government through Natural Resource Management Advisory Committees (NRMAC). Local leaders are trained and, in turn, train the communities to facilitate collective decision-making. In Zambia, the Wildlife Conservation Society, in cooperation with the SANREM CRSP and private sector partners,



developed the Community Markets for Conservation Program (COMACO). Through collective producer groups, COMACO takes a business approach to achieve conservation objectives. To date, over 200 farmer cooperatives operate in over 70 percent of the Luanwaga Valley. This collective action allows for better access to trade and high quality markets, provides peer support, and ensures compliance with conservation practices. COMACO has organized over 30,000 farmers of which 12,000 are women. With technical support from the SANREM CRSP, yields in maize, rice and cassava have increased, levels of soil carbon have improved, and over 500 poachers have agreed to stop hunting.

Rangeland management is being challenged today by a host of threats including climate change and population growth. Pastoral communities are particularly vulnerable. From 1997–2009, the Pastoral Risk Management (PARIMA) project of the Global Livestock CRSP focused on managing risk through diversification, asset building, and savings-led microfinance and credit. PARIMA used collective action groups as the primary vehicle for delivery of its “action-research” in the Borana Plateau of Ethiopia. The groups that were formed strengthened community leadership, created new social safety nets, and provided forums for training and capacity building. As in the other CRSP case studies, the power of the groups’ collective efforts facilitated access to markets

and policy change. For example, PARIMA collective action groups had a big impact on local management and protection of pastoral resources by negotiating with the Ethiopian government to lift the ban on controlled burning of rangelands. With 2,300 founding members (76% women) and 13,800 direct beneficiaries, PARIMA’s 59 collective action groups accumulated cash savings of approximately US\$93,000 from an initial base

of zero. Over 5,360 micro-loans were extended with a cumulative loan value of over US\$647,600. At the conclusion of the project in 2009, the groups were transformed into 37 legally recognized cooperatives that remain in operation today.

The CRSPs have had significant impacts on food security and livelihoods, increasing resilience of vulnerable populations, and maintaining or improving environmental conditions. Collective action has been a central factor in achieving results.

**Common elements** can be observed in the CRSP approach to natural resource management:

- Purposeful **strengthening** of collective action groups and **capacity building**.
- Multiple stakeholder **engagement**.
- **Outreach** to partners which is critical for post-project sustainability and scaling.
- **Evidence/science-based** project design and innovation.
- Emphasis on **business models:** adding value, product development, and marketing.

The CRSPs, authorized in another time of crisis in the global food system during the 1970s, continue to play a critical role in applying the best of U.S. science to agricultural and NRM practices around the world. The intersection of collective action and natural resource management will be increasingly important in the years ahead as the world’s population is challenged to develop new ways to work together to meet our growing needs while adapting to and mitigating climate change.

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