

FIVE REASONS WHY ORGANIZED FARMERS BUILD SUCCESSFUL ENTERPRISES¹ - lessons for the “Federation of Farmers’ Unions” in Zimbabwe

Farmers’ Organizations succeed when

- 1. They are large**
- 2. They meet some minimum operating conditions**
- 3. They provide specialized services to their members**
- 4. They share and learn from common challenges**
- 5. They successfully tackle unique local issues**

In September 2017, Farming Unions in Zimbabwe attained an important milestone on the journey towards an all-inclusive Federation of Farmers’ Unions (FoFU – hereafter referred to as The Federation) was launched and is expected to become a driving force for making sure that farmers succeed in their core business to not only make Zimbabweans food secure at the household and national levels; but also contribute to the nation’s economic security by integrating agriculture in the myriad of value chains that develop an integrated and sustainable economy.

The sharing of regional and international experiences with The Federation was very much informed by the African proverb that says “one who does not travel thinks his mother is the best cook”; and the farmers of Zimbabwe got a glimpse of the work “mothers” elsewhere have tried to tackle feats similar to what The Federation has so bravely set out to do.

The Federation has a historical task, aptly captured by a quote by Rashid Pertev in a paper presented at the International Federation of Agricultural Producers:-

“If there is one principal lesson farmers can draw from history, it is the following: that when farmers are not strong, many sections and sectors of society are ready not only to tell the farmers what they should do, but even worse, to speak on their behalf... Farmers’ voice cannot be obtained without farmers’ organizations... their representative organizations, structured from grassroots to the international level as their legitimate voice. In short, an effective farmers’ voice is not only the basis of mutual respect and democracy, but it is also the true basis for agricultural and rural development”.

That sums it up. It basically summarizes the historical responsibility The Federation has to all the farmers of Zimbabwe, their families, and others who make up the nation.

The rest is elaboration, in this case using a few observations from select Farmers’ organizations from around the world.

For a network of such global magnitude, it is difficult to select from all the pertinent issues farmers and their organizations face and deal with, but five themes on successful farmers’ organizations have been identified as characteristics that are relevant to the Zimbabwe Federation of Farmers’ Unions at this early stage, and could be used in the coming early formative years.

¹ Based on an address during the launch of “ Federation of Farmers’ Unions” on 21 September 2017 at Robbie Mupawose Centre, Harare Agricultural Show Grounds

1. They are large

- The International Federation of Agricultural Producers brings together 82 national level farmers' organizations from 57 countries, and represents over 500 million family farmers (with a population of nearly 2.5 billion individuals).
- The Philippines Federation of Free Farmers was established in 1953 and has over 200,000 members from 50 provinces representing fishermen, agricultural labourers, agricultural tenants, owner-cultivators, and settlers.
- The Eastern Africa Farmers Federation was formed in 2001 and represents over 20 million farmers (a population of over 100 million) in Eastern and Central Africa.
- The Zambia National Farmers' Union has countrywide coverage representing the agriculture industry (including small and large scale farmers as well as agribusinesses).
- The National Farmers' Federation of Australia was formed in 1979 and brings together presidents of 31 state-level farmers' organizations into a policy-making Council.

In Zimbabwe, The Federation plans to bring together around 1 million farmers spread out in over 70 Rural Districts and Urban Centres; with the majority of these farmers being smallholder operators with limited capital, poor access to markets and knowledge, but with a big passion for farming. The Federation also has in its midst a small and highly experienced group of farmers who need an opportunity to get back to the business of farming. These are both challenges and opportunities for The Federation to tackle and exploit, respectively.

2. They meet some minimum operating conditions

- As member organizations, they allow people to subscribe and to pay a membership fee (a subscription).
- They are mostly non-political, not-for-profit, and democratic.
- They have a particular purpose and connect people with common interests – in this case farming.
- They often have commercially-run membership subsidiaries separate from the core organisations. The Philippines Federation of Free Farmers owns self-managed cooperative projects and runs consumer stores on their own.
- They typically rely on their membership network to provide services to their members.

In Zimbabwe, the Federation will meet these minimum conditions, but it has to work hard to develop some of the required new competences so that The Federation can serve **all** its members and not just the few. Opportunities exist to run commercial entities that not only serve all members, but to also tap into their market potential – as buyers of inputs, equipment, and insurance, as well as being savers. These are all areas where The Federation would serve its members while building a formidable commercial network to ensure long-term sustainability of its operations.

3. They provide specialized services to members

- The Philippines Federation of Free Farmers helps its members with subsidized training and financial audit services; and also administers a life insurance program for individual members.

In Zimbabwe, there are many agencies that could partner with The Federation to initially provide subsidized services as a path to helping farmers become customers of the future. Whether these are corporates, NGOs, Development Partners or Philanthropists partners, there is much interest and potential. This is not to mention Government departments that although short of money have enormous expertise and knowledge that if appropriately tapped could help members of the Federation get on the road to successful farming.

4. They share and learn from common challenges

- Good farmers' organizations nurture and advocate for farmers on such issues as markets, productivity, capacity building, information, global and regional trade, among others.
- They foster linkages with other private sector players (over inputs and outputs markets).

In Zimbabwe, opportunities exist to lobby various players to support members of the Federation, but it might require an adjustment in strategies and a reminder that when any one of The Federation's organizations lobbies, it does so for all and not for partisan interests based on past alliances and interests. The interests of all federation members would need to be above individual union interests even if it means sharing resources and influence that an individual union has had access to in the past. This will be hard, but a necessary condition for building a single federation from the many parts that have come together to make it. This coming together of four Unions to form a federation is very much part of the "philosophy of unity in action" captured by an African proverb: "one finger cannot kill a louse".

5. They successfully tackle unique local issues

The Eastern Africa Farmers Federation was championed by national farmers' organizations from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and DR Congo to enhance regional cohesiveness and socio-economic status of farmers

In Zimbabwe, the Federation will continue to be faced by issues from the past as well as current concerns occupying the minds of farmers. Without much elaboration, just a few critical issues that The Federation might find itself tackling, and where many countries around the world are also still looking for answers; but somehow are determined to find ways to make progress. Critical questions include:

- The issue of **who** owns land that in Zimbabwe goes back to nearly two hundred years and disentangling it will continue to be difficult but not impossible – be it over reparations, compensation, national identity, and international linkages, among others.
- The issue of **how** land is owned has historically generated conflicts everywhere as instruments of ownership, governance and accountability, transparency, and others are tackled at different times and through different means around the world.
- The issues around **why** anyone owns land are at the heart of economics, social, cultural, and political discourses. The creation of efficient ways to make land productive, to distribute it to those who need it as well as to those who can use it, are particularly important in these discourses. Investments, taxes, land holding sizes, and other issues come to the fore in many societies across Africa and they all demand solutions.

In Zimbabwe, a federation that can become an effective voice for all its members can play a critical role in helping various stakeholders find workable solutions to what appears as

intractable problems of (1) **who** owns land, (2) **how** they own it, and (3) **why** they own it; so that the Zimbabwe of 2030 could have put to bed issues that have dogged land issues for nearly two hundred years – during which time the country saw major movements of populations from the South in the early 1880s, from Europe in the late 1880s and early 1900s, and internally from marginal to more productive land after 2000: with each movement compounding issues from the previous era. By bringing all farmers' unions together and agreeing on a common strategy, the Federation can be an important player in resolving some of these issues to the benefit of the whole economy and society at large.

It is difficult to do justice to the breadth of experiences from around the world and regionally, but these few ones point to specific elements and experiences that The Federation could learn from. Examples abound on country-level experiences where farmers have worked together to achieve both big and small things, and The Federation will in future have its own successes to share with others.

Below are a few examples from where farmers and their organizations have worked with various players like Governments, the private sector, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, and others to record notable successes in agriculture while playing a critical part in economic and social development.

- In Western Europe, North America, and Japan, farmers have worked with Governments and other stakeholders to ensure that targeted agricultural subsidies provide an industrial foundation that has made these countries dominate world food markets.
- In China, farmers worked with government and others to turn failed collective farms into successful privately-owned farming enterprises.
- In parts of Brazil, farmers have worked with State Governments and other stakeholders to support a land reform program that is making Brazil a global player in food markets.
- In Australia, the National Farmers' Federation tackles critical policy issues in productivity, access to markets, digital connectivity, natural resource management, biodiversity, health and welfare, education and training, and workplace relations; a process that has made a great success of agriculture in a particularly hostile physical environment.

Coming closer to home;

- In Malawi, NASFAM has over the years successfully supported a large number of small to medium scale farmers in securing inputs on time and at reasonable costs.
- In Zambia, farmers have overcome the death of critical parastatals and restored effective grain production and distribution through commercial channels.
- In Botswana, farmers have survived being weaned off heavy government subsidies associated with food self-sufficiency and successfully concentrated on areas of comparative advantage like livestock.
- In Namibia, farmers have successfully deployed modern technology to give the country the badge of being the only country in Africa whose beef gained access to the lucrative US market.
- In Kenya, farmers have managed to own and successfully manage the tea industry using a membership-owned parastatal-like body (the KTDA).
- In Uganda, Ethiopia, and Tanzania, farmers have successfully taken advantage of Government liberalization of the coffee industry to ensure that farmers get "a fair

price” from the international community (having learnt from several coffee-producing countries in Latin America).

- In Kenya and Ethiopia, farmers have successfully responded to the international market for flowers and fresh produce in the Northern hemisphere by meeting stringent supply and quality standards.
- In South Africa, farmers have successfully responded to rising purchasing power inside the country and across the African continent by increasing production at competitive prices.
- In Ghana, farmers have successfully organized to produce organic cacao for the production of fair trade chocolates that compete with the best in the world.
- In several countries across Africa, farmers have successfully tapped into agricultural expertise developed in Zimbabwe over the last one hundred years and adapted it for local production in the last decade.

There are enough experiences from around the region, Africa, and the world at large for The Federation to learn from, then copy, adapt, improve, innovate and then share with others faced with similarly difficult issues around land, agriculture, and development.

Mungai N. Lenneiye, Founder Trustee, *Udugu Institute: For a Better Innovated Africa*. Udugu Institute promotes innovation in Institutions, Systems, and Technology (IST). This note is an example of how Institutional Innovation can be approached in a particularly complex sector.