

FARMING FUTURES

Reimagining Producer Organisations in India

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The Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the existing fault lines of our inequitable economic systems. Eighty-four per cent of Indian households suffered a decline in their income even as the number of billionaires and their wealth increased leading to calls for introducing global wealth taxes to address this crisis (Chancel et al., 2021; Oxfam, 2022). Could alternative economic systems that embed the distribution aspects of wealth creation during production mitigate this problem? As member-owned, people-centred, and value-based enterprises, cooperatives are potentially better vehicles for promoting equality and inclusive economic development (Iyer, 2020). Members of cooperatives have shown greater resilience during crises like the pandemic and have withstood shocks and carried on their businesses despite widespread disruption (Hiriyur and Chhetri, 2021; Billiet et al., 2021). Despite an overwhelming focus on investor-owned firms as *the* economic organisations in management research, cooperatives have begun to feature in recent discussions on management paradigms beyond profit maximisation (Adler, 2016). Cooperatives are part of community wealth-building strategies that could broadly include consumer cooperatives, worker cooperatives, or producer cooperatives (Dubb, 2016). Cooperative enterprises, according to Verghese Kurien, the founder of the dairy cooperative movement in India, “constitute a model for a people-centred and sustainable form of societal organization based on equity, justice, and solidarity” (p. 103, Chakraborty et al., 2004).

1. Smallholder agriculture and producer organisations

Cooperatives that were an integral part of rural development policy witnessed a decline in the 1980s. Producer organisations (PO) are replacing the older category of farmer organisation and cooperatives with a greater emphasis and policy orientation on market orientation, the enterprise nature, and as rural businesses (Bijman, 2016). POs, in rural areas, have been seen to play

an important role in alleviating poverty and supporting development that led to organisations like the World Bank increasing their capacity development support for agricultural POs. POs are seen as key actors for integrating small farmers into economic production chains, important for democracy and human development, as essential actors in bringing about innovation and as vehicles to overcome social dilemmas (Gouët et al., 2009).

Smallholder farmers account for between 30 and 70% of global food production. Small farms in India are defined as holdings with size less than 2 hectares, while operational holdings greater than 10 hectares are classified as ‘large’. However, 70% of farms in India are ‘ultra-small’ – less than 0.05 ha. Further, between 1990–1991 and 2015–16, the share of small and marginal farmers rose from 78 to 86% (Giller et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2020).

Activities that were traditionally farm-centric like production of seeds, animals, feed, and fertiliser are all increasingly being integrated within consolidated agribusiness value chains. For instance, three global market leaders in seeds that control over 50% market share are also major pesticide producers. These agribusiness conglomerates can dictate prices, conditions of production and exchange, and the direction of government policies (Econexus, 2013). Individual peasants or subsistence farmers are connected in complex ways with global agribusinesses through local retail markets (Aga, 2018). Food sovereignty movements seeking greater autonomy of peasant agriculture have emerged across the globe since the 1990s, often using the lens of ‘food regime’ to better understand the complex intersections at play in the food and agriculture system (McMichael, 2021).

Small producers suffer from high production and market risks emerging from lack of capital and capacities; high operational costs; poor or costly access to services like technology, training, and credit; and weak bargaining power. Also, they largely remain invisible in the policy prescriptions. Right from the mid-19th century, cooperatives have played a vital role in helping small producers overcome these challenges, and collective action has been seen to flourish while providing a social, economic, and political alternative to profit-maximising capitalism (Ratner, 2009). Different forms of formal and informal collectives under the broad canvas of social and solidarity economy (SSE) have emerged that seek to reassert social control or ‘social power’ over the economy by giving primacy to social and environmental objectives above profits. They rethink economic practice in terms of democratic self-management and active citizenship with the potential to provide decent work (Utting, 2016).

POs are seen as the only institutions which can protect small farmers from the ill effects of globalisation or make them participate successfully in modern competitive markets by provisioning various services, which enhance member engagement and lead to producer agency and empowerment (Penrose-Buckley, 2007; Trebbin and Hassler, 2012). Unlike private agribusiness(es) that create value only for investors, POs are needed to

capture value for farmer members (Gersch, 2018). POs are seen as institutional innovations that can reduce transaction costs, provide technical help in production and creating social capital, offset scale disadvantages faced by small farms in supplying to the modern value chains, help in farm diversification and better price realisations in output markets, strengthen bargaining power, and raise the voice of smallholders in the policy process (Ton et al., 2007; Kanitkar, 2016; Singh, 2021a, Pingali et al., 2019).

The 2008 World Development Report, the World Bank's first report on agriculture after 1982, emphasised the need to improve the competitiveness of smallholder agriculture and popularised the narrative of "making markets work for poor people" (World Bank, 2007; Cooney and Shanks, 2010). POs were seen as the favoured vehicles for improving farm income ever since. However, the policy prescriptions for POs in developing countries sit uncomfortably with the literature on agricultural cooperatives predominantly from the North American and European contexts where new-generation cooperatives (NGCs) have been explored for greater engagement with markets and value chains through mechanisms like joint ventures and alliances (Cook and Iliopoulos, 1999). Smallholder farm sizes in the developing world though are vastly different from the hundreds to thousands of hectares in the Western world to fractional or less than few hectares in the developing world. Member equity is substantially lower, and thereby their access to and control of value chains too is limited.¹ Understanding contextual differences is critical for effective design of POs.

1.1 Agrarian distress and POs in India

No national occupational group in the world contains more people, or more poor people, than India's agricultural sector. Moving beyond the post-independence pangs of production deficit, India today is a leader in agricultural commodities in the world in vegetables, buffalo meat, rice, wheat, and sugarcane.² While crop yields have increased over time, farm incomes have stagnated or declined. Agriculture's contribution to GDP in India has fallen to around 14%, yet 50% of the workforce continues to partially rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. Rising input costs and stagnating output prices coupled with low yields make for low returns. Rural households in several Indian states experience negative growth in real net incomes. Productivity growth in field crops appears to have stagnated owing to a combination of poor soils, water constraints, and unbalanced fertiliser use. The current crisis in Indian agriculture is often attributed to a historical policy that privileged self-sufficiency over sustainability (Kumar et al., 2020).

Any discussion on farming and agriculture in India is incomplete without reference to the long-standing agricultural crisis and distress of farmers. The number of farmer suicides in India during 1995–2012 was more than 300,000 (Nagaraj et al., 2014).³ In recent years this distress has manifested

in terms of farmer protests forcing state and central governments to reconsider their policies, most significantly the contentious farm bills of the Government of India (GoI) in 2020 that led to the largest and longest sustained non-violent movement in Indian history (Singh, 2021; Narayanan, 2021; Nandakumar, 2022).

Farming is a high-risk business, and financial returns fluctuate wildly between years. An average Indian farmer is estimated to be earning Rs. 3,140 per month in 2016–17 from cultivation activities that constitute only 36% of the total monthly household income of about Rs. 8,931 (including income from non-farm sources, salaries, wages, and the like). Estimates suggest that a rain-fed farmer taking a crop loan of Rs. 300,000 in a year could easily become a defaulter with a crop loss in two seasons and would need Rs. 31,500 to restart his/her account (Saini et al., 2021). Despite highly subsidised rates at which loans can be availed, a significant number of small and marginal farmers depend on non-institutional sources of credit at higher interest rates.

The Indian government renamed the department of agriculture to include farmer welfare and constituted a committee to double farm incomes. Farmer producer organisations (FPOs) were seen as a critical instrument that would transform agriculture from subsistence to an enterprise. There are over 280 references to FPOs in its 14-volume report, and FPOs are seen as one of the more effective institutions to reach out to small and marginal farmers and build their capacities to collectively leverage their production and marketing strength for enhancing farmer income. FPOs in India thus face multiple expectations from stakeholders to provide solutions to smallholder agriculture. These include being a ‘voice’ for farmers against corporate interests and takeover, enabling markets to work for the poor, and a vehicle to increase farm income. They are expected to be institutions that could present a middle path between otherwise polarising narratives that tend to see this as a corporate takeover by the opponents of the farm bill or ‘the 1991 reform movement’ by proponents of the farm laws (Prasad, 2021). In the next section we trace the evolution of FPOs in India to help situate the set of cases in the book from rain-fed regions of India.

2. POs in India: from cooperatives to producer companies

In the decades following India’s independence, there were several farmer leaders who spearheaded POs registered as cooperatives. Stalwarts such as Tribhuvandas Patel in Gujarat (for dairy farmers), Vitthalrao Vikhe Patil in Maharashtra (sugarcane farmers), and Viswanath Reddy in Mulkanoor in Telangana/Andhra Pradesh (paddy farmers) seeded cooperatives, nurtured them in initial years, and ensured that the emerging cooperative grew in both business and membership. Cooperatives also had significant support

from the academia with the setting up of many cooperative management training centres and specialised institutions such as the Vaikunth Mehta National Institute for Cooperative Management (VAMNICOM) in 1967 and the Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA) in 1979 to create professional manpower for the growing dairy sector following the Anand pattern of cooperatives through Operation Flood. New knowledge combining practice and theory followed with scholars like Baviskar and Attwood (1995) positing that fertile grounds for cooperatives emerged in places where the regional political economy was considered favourable.

Researchers at IRMA led a series of workshops and books on rediscovering cooperation, and alternative explanations were sought to explain the performance of cooperatives. The seminal work by Tushaar Shah (1995a, 1996) presented an alternate explanation for driving cooperative performance with an aim to seek a minimal blueprint that brought greater attention to the design, governance, and management of cooperatives as self-governing organisations. Shah's six principles of the Anand pattern have been invoked to drive better cooperative performance going beyond dairy into other sectors. There was however a significant change in the external environment since the 1990s with the liberalisation of the Indian economy and the opening up of commodity markets to global players. Unlike the dairy and sugar industries, that had built significant capacity and competence to cope with these changes, cooperatives in other agricultural commodities had significantly lower market shares and were insufficiently organised to expand or respond effectively to the sweeping changes of the agricultural sector.

While state support for cooperatives was high in post-independence India, it declined over the years with few new cooperatives being established since 1980s. High dependence and excessive interference by the state produced "a vast but spineless cooperative movement" (Shah, 1995b) that was central to government policy on rural credit but becoming entrenched power centres for doling out patronage, financial help, and political support (Vaidyanathan, 2013). Leading thinkers of the cooperative movement such as Mohan Dharia, L. C. Jain, Verghese Kurien, and the Cooperative Development Foundation (CDF) as part of the Cooperative Initiative Panel (CIP) pushed for a liberal law that would enable greater member control and autonomy of cooperatives and a reduced role of the registrar of cooperatives in cooperative functioning in the 1990s. This led to the formation of the Mutually Aided Thrift Cooperative Societies (MATCS) and self-reliant cooperatives in a few states, especially in Andhra Pradesh, where this change in the law also coincided with the growth of the self-help group (SHG) movement. While the larger thrust of these new cooperatives was in the microfinance sector (Nair and Gandhe, 2011), there were also some in later years that became strong agricultural cooperatives, such as the Dharani Mutually Aided Cooperative Society (Sathish Kumar and Prasad, 2020).

2.1 *Producer companies as NGCs in India*

Traditional cooperatives were increasingly seen as unsuccessful in linking small farmers to the global market. The ground for a new set of cooperatives with greater autonomy and democratic control by members continued through the concerted efforts of the CIP. A need was felt for a central enabling legislation that would respond to new challenges posed by the liberalisation of the Indian economy. A committee for the formation and conversion of cooperative business into companies under the chairmanship of Dr Y K Alagh was constituted by the GoI in 2000. The committee highlighted the need for new institutions that would enable rural producers as equal partners in the new economy, who could market their produce in a modern and professional manner. The committee reviewed cooperatives and companies with the cooperative ideal from Denmark, Switzerland, Zimbabwe, and the United States and recommended that the government enact a legislation to enable registration and operation of producer companies in India. An amendment of the Companies Act, 1956, provided for registration of ‘Producer Companies’ by primary producers. This has been hailed as an Indian version of a NGC (Singh, 2008), a new form of collective action (Trebbin and Hassler, 2012) and an institutional innovation (Singh, 2021a) while also criticised for being ‘old wine in a new bottle’ (Shah, 2016).

Table 1.1 highlights the key differences between a producer company, a cooperative, and a private company. As is evident, the producer company format enables greater ‘ease of doing’ business for POs but can also come with

Table 1.1 Comparison of Indian cooperatives, producer, and other companies

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Cooperative</i>	<i>Producer Company</i>	<i>Other Companies</i>
Registration	Co-op Societies Act	Companies Act	Companies Act
Membership	Open to any individual or cooperative	Only to producer members and their agencies	Any person who wishes to invest
Area of Operation	Restricted	Throughout India	Throughout India
Professionals on Board	Invitees only	Can co-opt experts as directors	Provision for independent directors
Shares	Not tradable	Tradable within membership	Freely tradable
Voting Rights	One member one vote; registrar (govt. rep) has veto powers	One member one vote; non-producer cannot vote	Proportional to shareholding
Government Role	Significant, excessive	Minimal	Minimal

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Cooperative</i>	<i>Producer Company</i>	<i>Other Companies</i>
Compliance	Annual reports to regulator	As per Companies Act (2013), high and challenging	As per the Companies Act
External Equity and Other Entity Relations	No provision; transaction/ contract based	No provision; can form JVs and alliances	Allowed JVs and alliances
Profit Sharing	Limited dividend on capital	Based on patronage and with priority on building reserves	As decided by board with no restrictions
Income Tax	Trading surplus exempt under Section 80P	Section 80P(A) exempts income from eligible businesses up to Rs. 100 crores till 2024–25	25% corporate tax rate

Source: Compiled by authors from Singh and Singh (2014) and Phansalkar and Paranjape (2021)

greater compliance requirements – a challenge for an ostensibly first-generation, and even illiterate, farmer board of directors (BoD) in remote corners of India.

While the phrase ‘producer organisation’ is common internationally, in the Indian context the more common phrase is ‘farmer producer organisation’ (FPO). This is a much broader category that includes several legal forms of collectives of farmers that could be formally registered as a traditional cooperative society under various state governments, the new-generation self-reliant cooperatives operational in a few states, a section 8 company, a public trust, or a society. However, the most preferred organisational form has been the producer company under 2003 Act that was later modified in 2013, following opposition from an industrial chamber and counterarguments by proponents of company legislative reform in favour of farmers.⁴ Figure 1.1 shows the registration of FPCs since inception. Technically, the number of FPOs is larger than this. However, there are challenges with putting together data across multiple implementing agencies and formats that need to be collated at each state level for cooperatives.

The evolution of Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs), which began with a trickle with fewer than 50 FPCs registered per year until 2010, has now become the most favoured form of PO in India. It is estimated that there are 22,388 FPCs registered until March 2022.⁷ One can broadly discern four phases of FPO evolution in India. The first phase, roughly from 2003 to 2010, was the gradual acceptance of this new form with the biggest thrust coming from Madhya Pradesh that pioneered the registration of 18 FPCs through the World Bank–funded District Poverty Initiative Program (DPIP) with a generous support of Rs. 2.5 million each for working capital and administrative costs over five years. Further, Civil Society Organisations

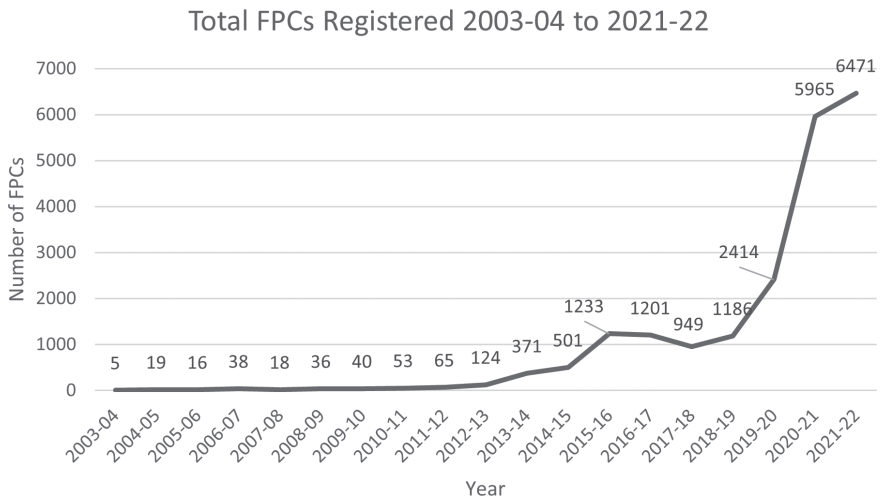


Figure 1.1 Trajectory of FPC registration

Source: Collated from Ministry of Corporate Affairs database^{5,6}

(CSO) were actively involved in the mobilisation of farmers and executing the programme (Chauhan, 2016). Many leading CSOs such as Professional Assistance for Development Action (PRADAN), Bharatiya Agro Industries Foundation (BAIF), and Rangсутra began experimenting with this new form in *tassar* (Masuta), agriculture (Vasundhara Agri-Horti Producer Co. Ltd (VAPCOL)), and handicrafts, respectively.

The second phase governing the trajectory and growth of FPOs has been largely due to the policy thrust at the national level, first from the Small Farmers Agribusiness Consortium (SFAC), an entity under the Ministry of Agriculture, through a pilot programme from 2011 to 2013. This led to mobilisation of 0.25 million farmers into 250 FPOs (about 1,000 members) drawing from the MP DPIIP model. Resource Institutions (RIs), largely CSOs, were empanelled with a two-year period to invest in capacity building and handholding of FPOs.

Policy guidelines for the spread of FPOs were formulated in 2013⁸ that enabled a larger spread in the third phase (2014–17) through the active engagement of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) through its Producers' Organization Development and Upliftment Corpus (PRODUCE) Fund of Rs. 20 million for the creation of 2,000 FPOs (both cooperatives and companies). NABARD is currently the biggest player in the FPO ecosystem with an estimated 55% of all FPOs registered in the country (Suryakumar, 2022).

The fourth phase (2017–20) witnessed a greater uptake of this model by many state governments through World Bank and other support that led to

an acceleration of FPC formation in states like Maharashtra, which today constitutes over 30% of the FPOs in the country. During this period there has also been a concerted policy thrust reflective of the shift in understanding of farming or agriculture as a ‘value-led enterprise’ as articulated in the Doubling Farmers’ Income (DFI) report. The last and ongoing phase can be seen from 2020 with the central government’s thrust for creation of 10,000 FPOs by 2024–25 (Prasad, 2019; NAFPO, 2022). The massive expansion of FPOs across India has also revealed structural shifts in the FPO movement with little investment in state capacity, a greater role of consultants and a diminishing role of CSOs, especially at the grassroots, that were at the forefront in embedding the FPO movement in India (Prasad, 2021; Singh, 2022). This phenomenal growth of FPOs in India has not been matched with sufficient academic engagement, and we explore what this means for new knowledge on POs.

3. Co-creating new knowledge on POs in India

Mainstream academia has been slow to respond to the rapid spread of FPOs and explicating what it means for Indian agriculture. Studies, as is increasingly common in academia, depend solely on online database searches and tend to ignore significant insights from critical reflections and knowledge grounded in practice or practitioner experiences and run the danger of ignoring the significant contextual differences between POs in India and the rest of the world. Significant knowledge continues to emerge from chapters in annual livelihood reports⁹ and the more recent state of sector reports by the National Association of Farmer Producer Organisations (NAFPO) (Phansalkar and Paranjape, 2021; NAFPO, 2022). Critical challenges highlighted in these reports include the perpetual capital and capability constraints faced by FPOs (Mahajan, 2015), the need to recognise diversity and complexity and build ecosystems that could enable the ‘ease of doing’ business for FPOs (Prasad, 2019). The reports also describe the undercapitalisation, lack of business acumen, and unsuitable operating models (Govil and Neti, 2021) widespread among FPOs. An annotated bibliography covering the period between 2003 and 2019 looking at the literature on FPOs in India found a preponderance of cases on Western India and limited work on the inclusive participation of marginalised sections and women in POs (Prasad, 2019). We suggest that a co-creation approach to knowledge, which seeks to create spaces for dialogue between academics interested in PO research and development practitioners, is more likely to produce newer insights, and this volume attempts to address this research gap.

It is pertinent here to briefly review the relevant literature that provided us with critical insights while embarking on our journey towards discovering collaboratively newer and contemporary frames to understand the dynamics of FPOs in India and elsewhere. Tushaar Shah’s framework (1995a, 1996, 2016) highlighted the importance of designing member-owned institutions

as interacting sub-systems of members, their governance, and operating systems. As POs seek domain centrality and if good POs are member-central, they would be empowered to both guide and assess performance of the professionals involved in day-to-day operations. This opportunity for dairy cooperatives' business to be significant in the economic domain has been possible for historic reasons but has rightly been questioned for its applicability in non-dairy agricultural POs in contemporary times, where the market already has significant established players that the FPO must compete with (Ganesh, 2017). Importantly though, Shah's work anticipated more recent shifts in the theory of cooperatives that go beyond the rigid conceptualisation of cooperatives as an independent firm to the complex and multi-dimensional nature of agricultural cooperatives, or in short from 'economic analysis' to 'economic design' (Cook and Grashuis, 2018).

Cooperatives' performance has largely been assessed based on neo-classical theories that essentialise the aim of the cooperative to maximise member return (and patronage refund) while minimising costs of production. Cooperatives, however, optimise among multiple goals rather than only maximising profits. They also face constraints beyond production, related to institutional structures, property rights and the need to consider transaction and adjustment costs (Royer, 1999, 2014). While the New Institutional Economics literature incorporates some of these failings and has been used to better understand the governance challenges of cooperatives (Cook and Iliopoulos, 1999; Chaddad and Cook, 2004) their extension to Indian contexts of agricultural cooperatives owned by a large number of smallholder farmers necessitates a rethink beyond the cooperative, and a closer look at the ecosystem and the promoting or incubating institution in particular. Recent work looking at the governance-strategy link in organisational management (Busco et al., 2007) suggests a greater focus on diffusion of governance principles throughout the organisation with the BoD needing to be more involved in strategic planning and monitoring implementation in day-to-day operations.

Newer understandings of cooperatives need to look beyond agricultural economics' literature and point to the need to accommodate the 'world of farmers' and the 'world of managers' as the prime task of the BoD and management (Bijman et al., 2013). Cornforth (2004), in his review of various theories of governance, argues for a multi-paradigm paradoxical view of cooperative governance. Furusten and Alexius (2019) suggest that achieving multi-vocality can be regarded as a strategic goal of the board members and the management of cooperatives. A framework that may help in looking at multiple processes at the same time, increasingly popular in understanding the firm, but less applied to POs, is the stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984). Freeman showed that the firm was operating in an environment where there were more entities that were interested (or had stake) in the business. This idea of the 'firm' embedded in a system of actors/stakeholders' view has been pursued by some scholars in strategic management (Ghosh, 2010). The conception is however not entirely

new within cooperative literature. Mary Follett (see Fox, 1968) has articulated this quite early, but it has not been pursued by cooperative scholars proactively since. Mapping and understanding the cooperative or a PO as part of a multi-stakeholder ecosystem has, we suggest, greater explanatory power.

Within the Indian context there have been a few landscape studies from the Azim Premji University that have sought to characterise the fast-evolving FPO ecosystem by demystifying the numbers and exploring the capital structure and levels of inclusion of these new institutions (Govil et al., 2020; Neti and Govil, 2022). Nayak (2016) points to organisation design issues behind the below-par performance of FPOs in terms of financial returns to individual producers and argues for an ‘optimal’ design as a single-window service at the level of Gram Panchayat or a group of villages. There is however little empirical evidence for such an ideal architecture of sustainable FPOs.

Singh and Singh (2014) offered the first detailed business performance of FPCs across four states and highlighted growth challenges due to their weak financial performance and poor ecosystem support. A larger and more recent study by Singh (2021b) extends this discussion on performance by exploring the impact of producer companies in five states, with Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan common across the two studies. The study found performance linked to location (ecosystem and policy support varied widely across states) as well as the quality and capability of the promoting agencies in linking farmers to modern markets. An action research study on market linkages in 49 clusters in 52 districts was done by Arya Collateral for the Tata Trusts (2020). Only 40% of the 1,833 FPOs surveyed were active, an indication of the challenges in selection of FPOs for long-term studies.

A tested way for smallholder cooperatives to ensure greater presence in domains like milk and fertilisers has been to have a market-facing federated cooperative as Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation (GCMMF) and Indian Farmer Fertiliser Cooperative (IFFCO). Federating collectives, it is argued, can solve the problems of economies of scale, fair-priced market access, integration and upward mobility of the producer in the value chain, and reduction of the production and market uncertainty/risk faced by farmers. Pooling resources, defining property rights, creating and nurturing ownership among primary producers are often achieved by POs. However, the goals of tackling risk, moving up the value chain, and gaining market through diversified product portfolio and advocacy at higher levels are often beyond the scope of individual POs and better achieved by second-order collectivisation to create apex cooperatives or federations of cooperatives.

A rather neglected area of research on PO in India has been the potential and examination of functioning of FPO federations. Between 2014 and 2020, 20 such federations were registered. These organisations are still evolving and only eight of them are active (Singh, 2021). Three of the cases in this volume explore the functioning of the three most active FPO/FPC federations in India fulfilling the need for grounded insights on market

linkages for FPOs coupled with issues relating to the ecosystem and the ‘ease of doing’ business for FPOs.

The overview of literature above presents a case for a new inclusive frame to understand and make sense of the diversity and complexity of FPOs in India. These could help explore and, if possible, answer questions on appropriate frameworks, design, incubation, growth and management challenges, performance assessment and policies. The broad question driving the study is, are FPOs the organisations of the future that offer a potential strong vibrant alternative to the challenges faced by smallholder farmers in the market-based solutions? Specific dimensions of this question can be articulated as follows:

- Would newer perspectives drawing from stakeholder theory, social enterprise, responsible and inclusive businesses offer better explanatory power than the conventional typical transaction cost economics and agency theories?
- Would the frameworks developed based on the study of dairy cooperatives and the Anand pattern developed in the 1990s in pre-liberalised India still hold for non-dairy FPOs?
- What would be the new insights from fresh entrepreneurship literature that prioritises experimentation, failing forward and lean start-up ideas, and how could they be applied to the incubation of FPOs?
- How is the governance of these New Age social start-ups different from established organisations? Would the famed circle of responsibilities for Cooperative Boards (Baarda, 2003) and the arm’s-length separation of governance from operations work well for FPO BoD, who are often first-generation entrepreneurs with limited business exposure and skills?
- How effective have the market linkages of FPOs been with growing interests of commodity exchanges and corporates showing interest to tie up with FPOs? What has been the experience of FPO federations in enabling market linkages and providing a voice for FPOs, and small farmers, in an ecosystem that is dominated by big players?
- Is there an empirical basis for many of the policy prescriptions on the optimal size of an FPO (1,000 members in the 2013 policy guidelines and 300 in the 10,000 FPO policy) and how are they linked to profitability? Given the multiplicity of objectives of FPOs that often have features of social enterprises with dual purposes (Kaushik, 2022), how effective are existing frameworks of assessing their performance?
- How realistic is the time frame of three years’ project support for FPOs that has driven the massive growth of registrations in the last few years in India? Can FPOs provide a middle ground for an alternate route to agricultural reform in light of the contentious farm bills?

Through detailed studies of 15 FPO cases, this volume seeks to go beyond existing landscape studies and explores the multiple dimensions of FPO

growth, management, and performance in diverse settings. Many questions, ideas, and concerns from several field-level interactions and workshops and national conferences (held at IRMA and other parts of India since 2015) provided the motivation for the study and helped shape the research questions.

4. FPOs as inclusive institutions of farmers

Greater market integration has implications for the inclusive nature of POs (Bijman and Wijers, 2019). In the Indian context, FPOs have been seen as inclusive institutions that exist primarily to strengthen the bargaining power of smallholder farmers through collective action, and these farm aggregation models can help smallholders by improving their access to credit, technology, and extension services (Sharma, 2013; Abraham et al., 2022). An estimate from the online database of Tata Cornell Initiative on FPOs of 13 states reveals that smallholders have been part of nearly 50% of all FPOs. This number, while not representative of the larger percentage of small farmers in India, is significantly higher than their representation in other institutions like the traditional cooperatives or their institutions for credit access – the Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS).¹⁰

In the volume and the cases chosen for detailed analysis, inclusion has been an important criterion both as a framework and for selection of cases. By inclusion we explore the following dimensions. First, recognising the role of CSOs as important for inclusive institutions and creating the base for greater ownership of these first-generation entrepreneurs. Current policies tend to overplay the business acumen of external consultants over building capacities of CSOs to lead the FPO revolution (Prasad, 2021; Singh, 2022). Second, to ensure that not only is smallholder focus maintained in the choice of FPOs to study, but there is also an attempt to proactively explore the potential of FPOs both to go beyond becoming mere last-mile suppliers of agrochemical inputs and as institutions that would promote the greater use and adoption of sustainable farming. Finally, we explicitly attempt to explore gender roles in the running of these institutions.

4.1 *Engendering FPOs*

Women contribute an important but often unrecognised role in agriculture and allied activities. The lack of visibility is reflected in the fact that despite forming 55% of the agricultural workforce,¹¹ the percentage of female operational holdings in the country is only 14% as per the 10th agricultural census (2015–16). The urgent need for a gender-sensitive focus also stems from the increased trend in distress-induced urban migration, primarily by men, in search of employment. This has led to what is known as ‘feminisation’ of agriculture due to increased participation of women in several activities in the agricultural value chain (Vepa, 2005). The increased labour is rarely

accompanied by equivalent remuneration. Instead, even as their role in agricultural activities increases, they have a limited role in agricultural decision-making, low representation in market-facing roles, and little control over price realisation of farm commodities (Agarwal, 2014).

FPOs have the potential to build on the framework and mobilisation offered by existing SHG networks to empower women from an entrepreneurial standpoint. Newer market opportunities and autonomy offered by FPOs can help transcend the sociocultural factors preventing women from actively participating in the agri-value chain. Since most schemes and benefits available to farmers are directly tied to landholdings, policies end up having a blind spot for gender-specific reforms. As a result, discriminatory social structures get reinforced due to lack of opportunities for women to access information, resources, extension services, credit, technology, land, and local institutions. Alluding to the male dominance seen in the cooperative movement, the NAFPO study (2022) suggests that the same pattern may continue into the FPO movement unless inclusive measures are implemented to ensure equitable participation and access.

The recent push by the GoI, to form farmer collectives and enable them to leverage economies of scale, needs to take cognisance of the gender constraints and opportunities to effect any sustainable change in farmer incomes (Bathla and Hussain, 2022). Pointing out the lack of representation in the FPO policy guidelines, Vasavada (2021) argues that there is no mention of the minimum number of women FPOs to be formed, nor any criteria for the minimum number of women shareholders in a mixed FPO. Without adequate capacity building and ecosystem support, the requirement of an FPO's BoD having at least one female number becomes a tokenistic gesture rather than bringing any ground-level transformations. Without empowering women to play a crucial role in managing FPOs, gender disparity is bound to widen as they would lose access to entrepreneurial levels of market engagement and remain restricted to field labour. As caretakers and people most closely related to the land, active participation of women can also help steer sustainable production practices, as they witness the ill-effects of chemical-laden practices first-hand. It is thus not a coincidence that many initiatives connecting social equity and environmental issues often have women at the forefront (Shiva, 2018). Envisioning FPOs as inclusive and sustainable initiatives thus needs active engagement and a supportive ecosystem to enable participation of women. We also suggest that there is a case for exploring, in the Indian context, the scope of FPOs as sustainable transition intermediaries (Groot-Kormelinck et al., 2022).

The availability of an opportunity through a new institution (such as forming an FPO) does not guarantee equitable participation because women face additional constraints and patriarchal norms, preventing them from exercising agency or control in the organisation. Understanding ground-level initiatives focused on supporting and enabling women-led FPOs can

offer insights for designing policy recommendations and acknowledging the added dimensions of socio-economic complexities governing women's participation in male-dominated markets. In this book, seven chapters focus on various aspects of women FPOs, across different geographies, commodities, and promoting institutions. In many of these cases, the significance of pre-existing networks of women SHGs in mobilising the community is evident. In our concluding part of this introductory chapter, we describe the research process followed in light of the above concerns and frameworks highlighted.

5. Research approach and the process of co-creating knowledge

The cases featured in this collection are an outcome of extended and sustained forms of participative inquiry between academics, practitioners, and grassroots promoters of FPOs to collectively make sense of the dynamic and ever-changing socio-political and economic landscape. Characterisation of the management challenges in FPOs has a lot to gain from understanding the evolving processes and practices in these organisations. Given the complexity of the ecosystem governing these organisations, we chose approaches that allow for collaborations, methodological pluralism, adaptive iteration, and critical reflexivity (Chambers, 2015). The collaborative initiatives can be traced back to several stakeholder dialogues in the form of national workshops hosted by the IRMA since 2015 to co-create knowledge on these complex organisations.¹² These dialogues underlined the need for greater cross-learning between field and academia to foster 'nuance and interrogation' around the policy discourse emphasising collaborative research between development professionals, policymakers, and research organisations to jointly strengthen capacities, generate development outcomes, and identify future areas of research (Lomas, 2000; Lundy et al., 2005). This explicit partnership allows for contextual embedding of research problems (as opposed to abstract, theoretical questions) while providing the opportunity to learn across geographical and institutional boundaries. Characterising and understanding ground-level issues encountered by FPOs required an acknowledgement of the sheer diversity and contexts governing individual organisations. With inclusion being an important theme, scoping of cases was predominantly focused on rain-fed areas, and those with significant woman or tribal leadership, given their conventional invisibility in policy dialogues.

Prior networks built over workshops were tapped to seek collaborators who would be interested in conducting an in-depth study of selected FPOs. Nurturing a democratic space for collective inquiry translated into a slower process of relationship development and consultation. Some of the contributors were part of *Farming Futures*, a similar collaborative volume of 15 cases on agri-based social enterprises (Kanitkar and Prasad, 2019). At a workshop in March 2020, potential authors explored ways to improve on

the first volume of *Farming Futures* and to work along a common case protocol to ensure greater alignment among individual cases. Three cases, with joint authors, were first developed as both a pilot and template for developing a case study protocol. Potential authors were then invited for online orientation workshops and brainstorming sessions to discuss the goals, values, priorities, and perspectives of each contributor in October 2020. The selection criteria of the cases included the need to have the FPOs in operation for at least three years and the aim was to cover as many regions as possible (with no more than one case per promoting institution) while reflecting a diversity of FPOs and their federations. Table 1.2 presents an overview of the cases chosen including their year of registration, promoting organisation and commodities that the FPO deals with.

Based on the initial consultation process, broad focal themes to study respective FPOs were decided.¹³ Academics were paired with development practitioners and consultants to initiate a process of joint inquiry, and the abstracts were peer-reviewed and discussed in a subsequent workshop that included the case protocol. The iterative and reflective process aimed at bringing alignment and analytical consistency across the cases. The process was appreciated by the authors, as it offered them a safe reflective space. Excerpts of some feedback illustrate the point:

In all the field interactions, the practitioners had the details, what they needed was a dialogue partner, someone who will sit with them, listen to their stories, get feedback and often respond to questions they were struggling with. . . . We went NOT to extract data from them but in return also offered our reflection.

Teaming up with a development practitioner was very productive as it helped to get the internal processes followed and rationale-meaning logic of certain interventions – why SHGs in lieu of farmer interest groups . . . it also helped understand the ecosystem better . . . institutional knowledge and grassroots rapport building are challenges faced by outside researchers and having a practitioner as a co-author smoothened the journey.

Three cases that could not meet the criteria developed as part of the framework were dropped. Two of the FPOs were less than three years old, and the promoting institution of the third was reluctant to share data or be named. Field visits were a key part of the writing process as they allowed the authors a sense of FPO operations that usually remain unarticulated. Three promising FPO cases could not be pursued due to the difficulty faced in undertaking field visits by case authors. The idea that better theories can be put forward by academics and managers who are pragmatic and aware of the context being theorised (Wicks and Freeman, 1998; Freeman and McVea, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005) was pursued. Interim reflections by authors were encouraged to

Table 1.2 Snapshot of the 15 FPOs as on 28 April 2021

<i>FPO Name</i>	<i>Chap No</i>	<i>Promoting Institution</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Date of Registration</i>	<i>No. of Shareholders</i>	<i>Commodities (in order of importance)</i>
Krushidhan	2	Development Support Centre	Gujarat	2013	4409	Potato, groundnut, wheat, paddy, maize, spices, cotton
Jeevika	3	Jeevika	Bihar	2009	1206	Maize, mango, wheat and mentha oil
Bhargar	4	Access Development Services	West Bengal	2012	1751	Fruits and vegetables
Ram Rahim	5	Samaj Pragati Sahyog	Madhya Pradesh	2012	5062*	Red gram, Bengal gram, wheat, maize, <i>jowar</i> , soybean
Mahanadi	6	Vrutti	Chhattisgarh	2014	613	Gustard apple, non-timber forest produce
Umang Mahila	7	Grassroots	Uttarakhand	2009	1142	Spices, walnuts, pickles, preserves and hand-knits
KBS Coop	8	PRADAN	Jharkhand	2003	2680	Horticultural commodities
Hasnabad	9	ALC India	Telangana	2012	1004	Red gram, groundnut
Pandhana	10	AKRSP	Madhya Pradesh	2016	552	Goats, back-yard poultry chicken
Pashu Palak	11	MYRADA	Karnataka	2016	1000	Banana, paddy, millets
Kazhani	12	BASIX	Uttar Pradesh	2014	1005	Mangoes, wheat, paddy
Navyug	13	Sahaja Samrudha	Karnataka	2013	500	Organic seeds – (paddy, horticultural crops, millets)
Desi Seeds	14	42 FPCs meet	Maharashtra	2014	600+ FPCs	Pulses, soybean, onions
Maha FPC#	15	Rajya Aajeevika Forum	Madhya Pradesh/ Chhattisgarh	2014	134 FPCs (11 Coops)	Certified seeds, soybean, wheat, pulses, paddy,
Bharat#						
Gujpro consortium#	16	Sajjata Sangh	Gujarat	2014	30 FPCs	Groundnut, wheat, mango, cumin, coconut

* comprising 364 SHGs shareholders

FPO federations

capture everyday transactions, the local socio-political climate, market proximity, BoD dynamics, state of available infrastructure, and so on, and authors were encouraged to present their initial field impressions in the form of blogs. A compendium of blogs that included many of the ideas from the cases was released as part of the Kurien Centenary celebrations at IRMA (Prasad and Dutta, 2022). Some guiding questions that emerged over time through the iterative process of writing, field visits, and interviews were as follows:

- Incubation – How long should the incubation period of an FPO be? Who bears its costs? When is the right time to withdraw? How have promoting institutions handled post-project closures?
- Entrepreneurial quality – What are the makings of a vibrant FPC? Are FPOs today closer to social enterprises or start-ups than traditional cooperatives? How have the FPOs been balancing their financial and social objectives? Has the FPO movement led to a rise in rural entrepreneurship and enterprise?
- Capacity building and ecosystem support – How strong is the ownership by members of the enterprise? Are FPOs better led by professional well-paid staff, or should there be a thrust to develop business capacities of farmer members? Is an *atmanirbhar* (self-reliant) FPO a myth, and how can their governance be strengthened to reach this goal?
- Business model – How do FPOs evolve their business models given their capital and capability constraints?
- Performance assessment – What are the metrics that would help understand the impacts – economic, social, and environmental, and how are they viewed at the farmer and FPO levels?
- How do FPOs make decisions, and are the governance and management or operating systems able to undertake decisions with lesser involvement of the promoting institutions in the long run?

The ‘Farming Futures’ project attempted to leverage the different knowledge, skills, and values of the contributors through multiple rounds of peer review such that specific aspects of gender inclusivity, sustainability, and organisational dynamics within an FPO could be explicitly discussed. The exercise was perceived as being helpful towards opening newer vistas for looking at their own cases and being part of a collective inquiry.

The themes discussed in the synthesis chapter of this volume were derived based on a combination of inductive and deductive analysis of the individual chapters. A rigorous analysis of the business performance of the FPOs and emerging trends was done via the collection of balance sheets for all the FPOs until the year 2020–21. Categories were developed and discussed to articulate connections between aspects such as gender and sustainability, or FPO infrastructure and overall profitability. The overall timeline of critical events in the research process is outlined in Figure 1.2.

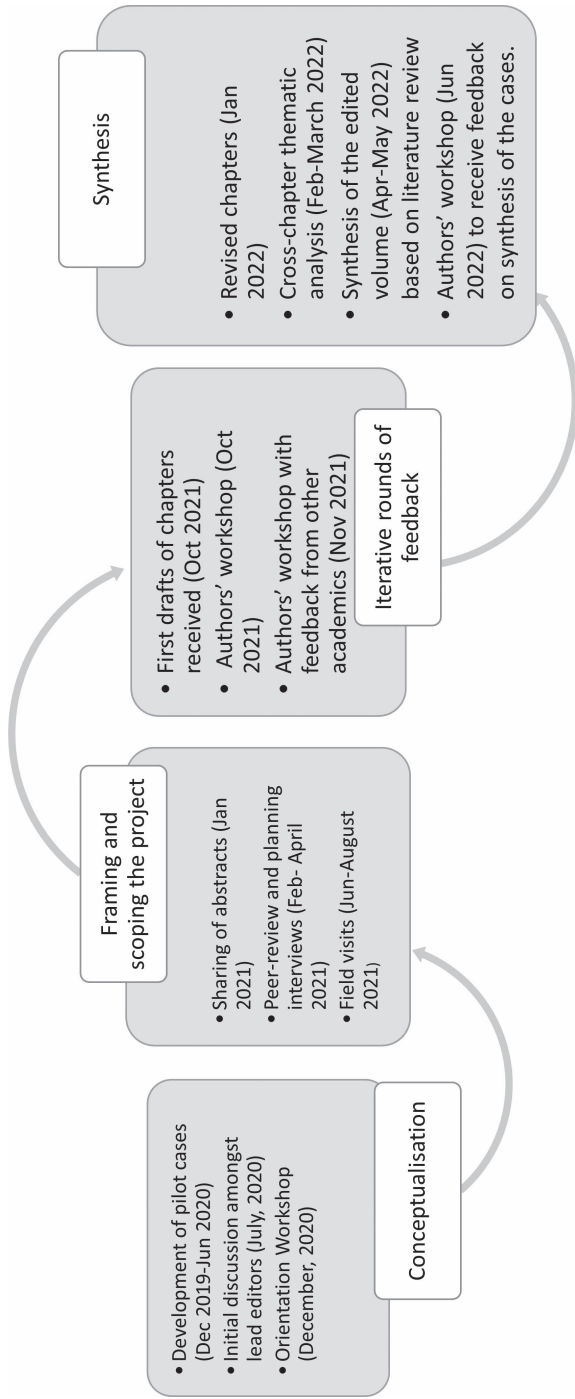


Figure 1.2 Illustrating the collaborative research and writing process

This volume is a culmination of collective inquiry and democratic forms of participation that enabled everyone involved to assume ownership of the project in different ways. Authors brought with them a flavour of epistemic heterogeneity owing to their own particular experiences and interests. Authors shared common values of enabling farmers to have decent livelihoods and better agency, even as they questioned each other about the emphasis, or lack of it, on aspects like gender, sustainability, and so on. The book is an invitation to imagine multiple possibilities that continue to exist between formal policies and everyday relationships that FPOs are a part of and is organised into six themes, exploring different areas concerning the management of FPOs. Chapter 1 lays down the context of the extant literature and research in the area. Chapters 2–5 explore the issue of market access through collective enterprises, using the illustrative cases of Krushidhan, Jeevika, Bhangar, and Ram Rahim, each having established a unique process for market access through contract farming, specific tie-ups with government or private bodies, and public procurement. The processes of building inclusive institutions are analysed in Chapters 6–9. We posit that prioritising participation of women can't be simply seen as an 'add-on' to other tasks of an FPO, and engendering FPOs involves designing institutions differently. Chapters 10–13 explore younger FPOs to explore their innovative practices and journeys for collective autonomy with a changed ecosystem that some of the older (pioneer) FPOs were unable to access. The cases demonstrate ways in which FPOs engaged with the wider ecosystem to develop unique, context-based solutions to solve specific issues within the organisation or commodities being sold. The management challenges and opportunities of FPO federations, hitherto unexplored, are taken up in Chapters 14–16 through a state-level analysis of MAHAFPC, Madhya Bharat, and Gujpro. A synthesis of all the cases along the parameters of incubation, inclusivity, business models, impact, financial and social performance is presented in Chapter 17, along with concluding thoughts for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. The volume ultimately aspires to enthuse a new generation of researchers and practitioners to study the emergence of such novel forms of organisation, given their potential to offer a strong alternative towards farmers' prosperity and equitable, sustainable food systems as a whole.

Notes

- 1 Further, the share of population who depends on farming as primary livelihood option is significantly lower – a mere 1.4% – in the United States as compared to over 50% in India. The agrarian employment figures from United States have been referred from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/ag-and-food-sectors-and-the-economy/>. The estimate of population employed in farming in India has been cited from Kumar et al. 2020.

- 2 See https://www.rbi.org.in/Scripts/BS_ViewBulletin.aspx?Id=20750 as accessed on 12 August 2022.
- 3 Official data indicates a decline in farm suicides since 2016, but some suggest this has more to do with changed methodology than any ground-level changes. <https://psainath.org/the-slaughter-of-suicide-data/>
- 4 See Alagh's 'In the Right Company' (22 December 2015) for more details <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/in-the-right-company/>
- 5 The data is dynamic, as a result of which the specific web links change with time. The main site accessed was <https://www.mca.gov.in/MinistryV2/aboutmasterdata.html>
- 6 All figures in the book have been created by the authors of the corresponding chapters.
- 7 The MCA database for year 2021–22 has figures missing for the months of November 2021 and January and March 2022. <https://www.mca.gov.in/content/mca/global/en/data-and-reports/company-llp-info/incorporated-closed-month.html> accessed on 13 July 2022.
- 8 See https://www.mofpi.gov.in/sites/default/files/fpo_policy_process_guidelines_1_april_2013.pdf
- 9 The annual State of India's Livelihoods (SOIL) report brought out by Access Development Services has had chapters on FPOs in 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2021. <https://livelihoods-india.org/publications/all-page-soil-report.html>
- 10 Collated by authors from <https://tci.cornell.edu/?blog=assessing-indias-fpo-ecosystem#tables>. There is variation across states with West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, and Telangana having less than 40% small farmers (accessed on 12 August 2022). The newly formed Ministry of Cooperatives has pegged its reforms on digitization of PACS that have known to be unrepresentative of small and marginal farmers.
- 11 According to World Bank data, retrieved from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) database. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.FE.ZS?locations=IN>
- 12 For more details, see <https://www.smallfarmincomes.in/fpojourny> as well as the deliberations of the various national FPO conferences in the website.
- 13 Facilitating open-ended discussions during the Covid-19 pandemic was a challenge, and innovative ways to seek responses were sought through Google forms, breakout sessions, and WhatsApp® groups.

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