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Message from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations

11th UN International Day of Cooperatives

Confronting climate change through cooperative enterprise

The climate is changing. It is increasing climate risks and altering the patterns and impacts of these risks, affecting particularly agriculture, one of the sectors most sensitive to climate. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions and developing strategies to adapt to and counterbalance future impacts of climate change sustainably are among the most pressing needs of the world today.

Farmers' organizations and agricultural, fisher and forest user cooperatives are effective partners in managing community level responses to natural disasters and climate change. Cooperative enterprises can promote local prevention and adaptation practices that reduce the impacts of natural hazards and climate change. For example, alternative production practices, non-farm rural livelihood options and enterprise diversification can increase the resilience of rural communities when confronted with climatic hazards. Cooperatives and farmer's organizations can also assist in linking rural communities with higher scale public and private institutions. They can, for instance, communicate with rural people to ensure timely early warning about disasters or to promote mitigation strategies. However, there is no "one size fits all" solution, particularly at the local level. Decentralized ways of working that consider local bio-physical, socio-economic and socio-cultural factors are needed, along with coherent national policies to manage risks and adaptation. The proximity of cooperatives and producer organizations to rural people and their capacities to achieve economies of scale by grouping multiple, small producers mean that they have a key role to play in ensuring rapid, effective and sustained responses to climate change.

The case of Asia and the Pacific. Asia and the Pacific is one of the world's most natural disaster-prone regions. Floods, drought, fire, landslides, cyclones and tsunamis regularly threaten rural lives and livelihoods. Gradual changes in mean temperatures and rainfall are already affecting agriculture, forests, marine resources, biological diversity and water availability in the region.

FAO helps to foster collaboration on climate change adaptation and mitigation, by supporting the development, networking and capacity building of small farmer cooperative enterprises and cooperation among government cooperative development agencies and national movements of agricultural cooperatives in 12 countries in the Asia and Pacific region. FAO's project experience clearly confirms that rural farmers' organizations, cooperatives, local governments and NGOs play an active and crucial role in reducing the vulnerability of the rural poor to natural disasters and climate change. In Bangladesh, over 60,000 agricultural cooperatives with 2.3 million farm family members have been registered and are helping to prepare their members to cope with natural disasters and climate change more effectively, by raising public awareness, building cyclone shelters, providing immediate relief and rehabilitation in case of need, and promoting alternative farm and non-farm income opportunities. In India, about 107,000 primary agricultural cooperatives are reaching out to farmers in more than half a million villages, encompassing over 70 percent of all rural households. In India's southern Tamil Nadu state, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, agricultural cooperatives were in the forefront of immediate relief and rehabilitation efforts after the December 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. In the Philippines, the Government Cooperative Development Authority (CDA) involves cooperatives in its environmental protection and conservation programme and is helping to develop the capacities of cooperatives to respond to natural disasters, including by involving them in planning and programming to prepare for disasters. In Thailand, a national programme is being developed to build the capacities of over 4,000 agricultural cooperatives to manage natural resources more effectively.

Agricultural cooperatives in different parts of the world can help to enable members to manage climate risks and adapt to climate change. By adhering to environmental standards and promoting local production and marketing as opposed to long distance transport, consumer and producer cooperatives can help to limit greenhouse gas emissions. The large size of their membership places cooperatives in a unique position to raise member awareness about the importance of reducing their carbon footprints and to lobby Governments to significantly reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.