

## Cooperatives in Zimbabwe Representing Small Holder Farmer Organisations/Associations

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## About Ismael gWEKWERERE

I am the Chairperson of Gokwe South Small Scale Cotton Farmers Association. I have worked as an Extension Officer and also as a Team Leader for Conservation Agriculture. I have won the best farmer for over 5 years. Started working with ZIMCODD in 2009 when I was elected the district chairperson.

## Introduction

- In Zimbabwe, cotton farming is normally practiced by rural subsistence small scale farmers in arid and semi-arid regions where other crops fail.
- As farmers, we depend on cotton as a cash crop for our livelihoods.
- Zimbabwe's cotton sector was liberalised in 1994 leading to more cotton buyers entering into contract farming by supporting rural farmers.
- Contract farming became unpopular among farmers when companies formed the Cotton Ginners Association.
- This is now acting like a cartel where few companies have a monopolistic tendency when engaging farmers.
- What one company says is followed by other companies
- Problems with CGA include unfair pricing of output and inputs.

- Inputs are expensive while output is being paid lower prices compared to cost of production.
- For example in 2011/2012 season, a bag of fertiliser was costing around \$35 per 50kg bag, 25 kg bag of seed was costing \$28 while chemicals were costing around \$9 per 500 millilitres.
- Total cost on a 1 hectare was about \$700 where farmers can produce 600 kgs.
- When the selling season was opened companies were offering 30 cents per kg meaning that farmers would earn around \$210 per hectare meaning farmers would lose.
- Sometimes inputs are given to farmers not in time, after the rainy season has begun; chemicals are given after disease outbreak.

## Emergence of Small Holder Farmer Organisations/Cooperatives

- Farmer cooperatives have been in existence in Zimbabwe even during the colonial period.
- These flourished in 1980 after getting independence when the government saw cooperatives as groups that represented community interests and the government believed working with groups of farmers as a better option rather than as individual farmers.
- These cooperatives later grew and became bigger farmer unions and in Zimbabwe there are 4 bigger farmer unions.
- The problem with bigger unions is that they no longer represent small holder farmer issues.
- Some of the are now politicians, they own shares in cotton companies and charge exorbitant subscription fees ranging between \$5-\$10 per annum of which for rural farmers this is too high.
- these unions are also funded by cotton companies.

- The late 1990s saw the beginning of small holder farmer cooperatives and organisations emerging representing various crops ranging from cotton, small grains, livestock etc.
- To date, strides have been made and cotton Farmers Association has been formed and is working on consolidating its structures.
- District associations feed into the national association.
- This form of organisation assisted farmers in the struggle for better prices which to some extent the farmers won.
- Despite these small holder farmers forming cooperatives and associations, they are having challenges.

### **Role of Small Holder Farmer Organisations Especially Cotton Associations**

- Conscious building among other farmers about their economic rights and are able to demand and secure fair trade practices (e.g. being paid viable producer prices for their commodities)
- Facilitating increased access to support services and markets for their commodities
- Inputs sourcing

- Representing other farmers when engaging companies and government
- Sourcing of funds from banks as loans
- Assisting formation of savings clubs within farmer associations
- Linking other farmers with ginning companies

### **Challenges Being Faced by Small Holder Farmer Cooperatives in Zimbabwe**

- Weak negotiating capacity with cotton merchants thus they are price takers of inputs and their produce
- Co-option of farmers leaders into politics, bigger farmer organisations and even being employed by cotton companies
- Lack of resources to be autonomous and self reliant

- Women and youths representation is still weak
- Fear among farmers to stand for their own rights
- Weak farmer organisations
- Lack of government support
- Access to extension services is limited
- Climate change is threat to farmers, droughts and floods affecting output

- Lack of storage facilities such as warehouses
- Lack of transport to ferry their produce to alternative buyers and even gineries
- Lack of recognition of small holder associations such as non-registration but to recognise bigger farmer unions

### **Recommendations**

- Assist the farmers in strengthening associations through which they can collectively influence policies that affect the pricing of their produce.
- Mobilise and sensitise farmers on social and Economic Rights
- *A recent visit by the Cotton Farmers to Mozambique revealed that the right to seed and other inputs to farmers is enshrined in the constitution. This further vindicated the debates ongoing in the country within the context of the constitution making process, there is an need for inclusion of the Social and Economic rights in the Bill of Rights of the new constitution.*

- Farmers should venture into value addition such as in Mozambique
- Revive local textile industries and create more demand of cotton locally rather than depending on international markets where farmers have no say but are just price takers
- Protect rights of small holder farmers in the constitution
- Government support and subsidies for inputs and even on pricing when prices fall such as in 2011/2012 season where a price of 30 cents per kg of cotton was being offered by companies while farmers were demanding US\$1.00 per kg. Government support is given to European and US farmers.

- Introduce farming technology to boost production
- Develop irrigation schemes for these cooperatives of associations by government
- Recognition and support of small holder farmer organisations by government and other stakeholders

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Thank You

Defending the Cotton Farmer