

ALINE: Farmer Voice Seminar 13th July 2010 Summary Report

Introduction

On the 13th July 2010, ALINE held a seminar for the ALINE Farmer Voice award winners. The main objective of the seminar was to share experience and lessons around the subject of “making space for farmer voice”. This included discussing donors’ views of farmer voice activities and how activities could potentially be expanded in the future.

ALINE’s Farmer Voice awards have celebrated nine leading initiatives from around the world that strengthen farmer voice. By ‘farmer voice’ we mean the practice of promoting and responding to smallholder farmers’ voices, particularly in agricultural development programmes. For more details please see: www.aline.org.uk/awards

Email and phone conversations established the foundation for discussions a few days before the seminar. Seven award winners joined the seminar and four were able to follow the discussion to its conclusion, due to technical difficulties encountered by the others. Four ALINE staff also joined the seminar. The award winners included INGOs and a social movement, variously based in Nepal, the Philippines and Switzerland.

The workshop had four major conclusions:

1. Donors are open to farmer voice activities in the interests of transparency, accountability and improvement.

Cases were described where donors were willing to fund, and sometimes introduce farmer voice related activities to support transparency, accountability and empowerment of marginalised farmers. In some cases however, senior managers needed convincing of the added value of farmer voice.

One participant described how he had to convince his headquarters of the use of farmers’ feedback for improving services and his project’s overall success. Winning an ALINE Farmer Voice Award had helped him do this. Another participant mentioned that donors are very much interested in farmers’ views and whether target groups had received support or not.

“Donors are very much interested in farmers’ views of whether target groups have received support or not.”
Bhagat Bista,
Helvetas, Nepal

A participant who works for a local radio station explained how his organisation included farmer voice activities in funding proposals to donors. A case was made for farmer voice on the basis of gathering evidence from on-farm action research activities using 'radio research gardens'. Donors had also carried out their own independent evaluation of this work and were convinced of the positive value of these activities.

In grassroots collective social movements which are not necessarily organised by NGOs, this relationship with donors was less apparent. One participant who coordinates a social movement explained that in this movement collective organisation is key and donors' roles are limited. In his view, donors should be more supportive of farmers and support farmers to lead and control their own activities.

2. Adaptation and facilitation are important in ensuring that the most marginalised people are heard.

Participants described challenges to making sure that the voices of the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups are heard. They agreed that it is crucial to know the context, analyse local power dynamics, identify who are the most marginalised and facilitate by helping to build their capacity. Adapting feedback systems to local context is also important. For example, radio can reach those who are geographically isolated or illiterate and graphical participation methods can further support farmers' inclusion.

Some of the most marginalised farmers are reluctant to join formal organisations or participate in NGO activities. For instance, a participant suggested that they

"Most challenging is to focus on the most marginalised, disadvantaged group of people and how their voices are heard."

Orlen Ocleasa, ACDI / VOCA, Philippines

might not have the right clothes for formal engagements or feel ashamed. He described these farmers as a 'silent voice'. It takes patience and skilled facilitation to encourage them to find effective ways of reaching them.

The importance of high quality facilitation was strongly emphasised. Participants expressed the view and agreed that it is important to work with farmers and help them to: (a) understand their context and rights, (b) better identify power dynamics and relations, and (c) identify what specifically is affecting them and what actions they can take, including how can they organise themselves.

One participant mentioned that facilitators should take care to balance 'silent voices' and 'shouting voices' – i.e. those farmers who through their education are more confident and vocal. In many cases the skill of the facilitator is often responsible for ensuring silent voices are heard.

3. Farmer voice can be used to improve project effectiveness, sustainability and help secure farmers' rights.

Farmer voice can be used to monitor and evaluate a project. One participant described how his organisation functions like a donor, funding local partners to deliver services to farmers. His organisation uses feedback directly from farmers to monitor the quality and quantity of services they receive, and to inform their relationships with implementing partners.

Another participant stressed that if services are to be sustainable then it is important they must absorb and incorporate farmer feedback and build on local organisation.

One participant who coordinates a rural social movement mentioned that in the context of grassroots movements the emphasis is not on service provision. Instead, the movement's objective is to influence politics and policy. In this case, farmers see the problems they face as primarily political. He concluded that, if farmers' voices are not heard, the chances of making lasting political impact are minimal.

"Without changing policy practices, you cannot change the life of poor people. Without hearing their voices, you cannot change their lives."
Jagat Basnet, CSRC, Nepal

Participants discussed that service delivery, to the extent that it contributes to strengthening poor farmers' representation with powerful institutions, can also be political. The impact of building farmers' capacity to provide feedback on services may be felt beyond direct service improvement. In the process of capacity building, farmers can get used to giving feedback and participating in activities that affect their lives. Seminar participants were of the opinion that farmers exposed to these ways of working would be more likely to give feedback to other service delivery organisations and try to influence other policies that affect them.

4. Farmer voice can give farmers more decision-making power, open up communications and integrate all stakeholders in the process.

A participant described how his organisation is training farmers to take a lead in farmer voice and collect feedback themselves. Elected 'farmer voice facilitators' will be in a better position to create 'safer' spaces for all farmers to offer their opinions.

Transparent and clear communications are very important to improving farmer voice. Farmers should take part in all discussions concerning a project, even in the discussions that take place before the onset of the project. They should have decision making power and be able to assess whether or not a project is necessary in the first place, and how it will be sustainable. Organisations should see themselves as external facilitators and as supporting farmers' own

development efforts. The tools used to facilitate feedback and farmer voice should be simple, user-friendly and owned by farmers and the communities.

“The decision making power should always be on the shoulders of farmers themselves. We should think that we are an external support, supporting their own efforts.”
Bhagat Bista,
Helvetas, Nepal

Ideally dialogue should also be strengthened with government officials and important political figures in the community. Involving donors in planning and implementing farmer voice may help donors realise the potential that farmer voice offers. To support this, donors would be well placed to find ways to add farmer voice as a component to their projects.

In some cases however, integrating donors and government may be challenging. In the case of grassroots movements, it is important that farmers are able to control content and that the role of donors as well as government is limited. As one participant put it, farmers have to be supported towards independence, not dependence.

Next Steps

The seminar deepened and reinforced ALINe’s work on Farmer Voice. During 2010 we will continue to contribute to this emerging agenda for change. We will publish case studies of good practice from across ALINe’s Farmer Voice Award Winners and work with partners in the field to pilot feedback systems and collaboratively work towards developing potential solutions.

Further details are available at www.aline.org.uk. We welcome potential collaborations with others working in this field. Please contact the ALINe Coordinator: Efe Atugba at E.Atugba@ids.ac.uk