

Farmers' participation in Policy Advocacy: Reviewing two cases from Bolivia

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Abstract

This paper reviews two cases of enabling greater farmer participation in policy advocacy at local and national level in Bolivia. The first case refers to the Committee of Sacaca for Strengthening Ecological Farming (COFAES), a farmer's organization in Sacaca, North Potosi. The second involves the National Soil Platform, a national-level multi-actor network that champions soil conservation. Both initiatives seek to influence policy at different levels in favour of soil conservation and sustainable agriculture. These examples are instructive on how farmers may become increasingly involved in policy formulation processes. COFAES started sharing its experience on ecological agriculture with local traditional leaders, and subsequently it elaborated a collective perspective on development. The National Soil Platform became organized around reviewing governmental policies, and eventually it took on the task of articulating a law on soil management and conservation.

The role of farmers' participation is different in each case, although both seek the leadership of traditional peasant and indigenous organizations. We argue that thematic platforms built on the collective interests of farmers can encourage farmer involvement in advocacy and policy formulation. The paper presents favourable conditions as well as interactive tools that may facilitate the process.

Introduction

Eighty percent of Bolivian's rural economy is based on agriculture. 400.000 from 600.000 farms belong to resource poor farmers. Clearly, agriculture remains a central source of livelihood for the better part of the Bolivian population. However, their production means, particularly their natural resources – within this, their soils - are impoverished. Studies have found that 41% of soils within Bolivian territory are degraded¹ (Ministerio de Desarrollo Sostenible y Medio Ambiente, 1995 in Superintendencia Agraria, 1995; IIDE & USAID, 1986 in Zimmerer, 1993; PRONALDES, 1997 in Plataforma Nacional de Suelos, 2007a). At the same time, 24% of these soils show strong to severe degradation (Superintendencia Agraria, 2001 in Plataforma Nacional de Suelos, 2007a), especially in the central highlands, valleys, and *chaco* regions. It puts rural people's livelihood at risk, hitting small-scale farmers the hardest.

The National Soil Platform for Sustainable Agriculture emerged in 1993 to contribute to solving the soils degradation problem in Bolivia. Presently the Platform is composed of 40 members, mostly representatives of non-governmental organizations and small-scale farmers working with them on soil conservation and sustainable agriculture², following ideals of "agro-ecology". It is composed by a network of five regional platforms (*Altiplano, Cochabamba, Valles, Sur* and *Tarija*) which cover most

¹ Soils degradation is the progressive loss of the soil's physical, chemical and biological characteristics which weaken its productive capacity.

² For the National Soil Platform, Sustainable Agriculture is like a house where its **foundation** (soils, water, vegetation and animals) is managed ensuring their productive character for future generations. Farmers' creativity and their families are part of this house foundation. **The pillars** are sustainable practices such as soil conservation, organic fertilization, crop diversification and rotation, reforestation and animal husbandry. **The roof** is what they want to achieve: healthy, sufficient and nutritive food production, surplus for market, self-sufficiency, and the satisfaction of farmers, their family and community.

of the *Altiplano*, *Valleys* and *Chaco* regions located in the departments of La Paz, Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, Chuquisaca and Tarija (Plataforma Nacional de Suelos, 2007b).

Upon internal reflection of its role in the promotion of Sustainable Agriculture, the Platform realized that participation in Policy Advocacy at local, regional and national level is very important if one wants to have more impact. That is why they started the challenge of influencing on policy making. They understand 'policy advocacy' as a process by which they, as part of the civil society, can participate and have influence on decision makers, especially policy makers (Iturralde, 2007).

In continuation we share the early experience of the National Soil Platform with involving farmers in advocacy and policy intervention at local and national level. *At local level*, we present the experience of COFAES. *At national level*, we describe the experience of the National Soil Platform's with a law proposal.

COFAES: local level policy intervention

COFAES is a small-scale farmer organization which promotes soil conservation and sustainable agriculture in the Municipality of Sacaca located in the remote mountainous region of north Potosi. COFAES is composed of 297 farmers from 16 of the 187 local communities.

Sacaca is located in the Central Highlands, with altitudes varying from 3100 to 4600 metres above sea level. It has a semi-arid climate, with infrequent rainfalls during the year (on average 440 mm per year). Poor soils combined with highly variable highland climate make for lowly productive and risky agriculture. As a result, temporal (12.53%) and definitive (2.6%) emigration is common (Gobierno Municipal de Sacaca, 2002).

In 2003, COFAES emerged from local soil committees as a collective network. The members of COFAES describe the organization as an "originario", which distinguishing the group as a "local" and "native" organization rather than an external NGO. It has its own governing body and internal rules and presently the group is in the final phase of legal recognition. COFAES is not a parallel organization to the traditional ones³. Rather, it is a complementary organisation, specialized in agro-ecological production, and particular soil management and conservation. This organization is part of the National Soil Platform. K'anchay and AGRECOL-Andes (national NGOs) support its membership within the Platform.



COFAES showing its experience. Photo: k'anchay, 2007

In internal meetings and workshops, COFAES discussed the need to share its experiences with other people in the Sacaca Municipality. By doing so, COFAES could better participate in policy advocacy with proposals that promote the development of agriculture towards the purposes of agroecology. With the NGO K'anchay, COFAES organized the first "Local Congress on Ecology" and three workshops involving peasant's leaders and municipal authorities. The below we further describe these events.

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The First Local Ecological Congress took place in february 2007, and had different purposes, one of them to identify some guidelines which will be part of their proposal to the municipality (K'anchay, 2007a).

One hundred and seventy-eight delegates participated in the Congress, of which the majority were farmers, six were peasant leaders (from the 16 communities working with COFAES) and six municipal authorities. Participants organized commissions on Economics, Development, Organisation and Social aspects. Each commission produced conclusions that informed the future design and

³ In Sacaca, every community has it own "traditional way of organization" which they call "*sindicato*". Many *sindicatos* together form a "*sub-central*", and all the *sub-central* organizations form, together, the *central* peasant organization of Sacaca. This municipality has 187 communities and 17 *sub-centrals*.

functioning of the COFAES organization. At the same time, participants decided upon priority issues for policy proposals, especially those related to the promotion of ecological production in the municipality. The “Development” commission took also on the task of providing inputs for the National Soil Platform proposed law. Some of those inputs were: 1) the proposal objectives should include soil protection, conservation and recuperation as well as soil fertility and the use of organic manures, 2) the need to take into account the existing experience of farmers and institutions working on soil conservation, and 3) the request for greater governmental investment in this issue (K’anchay, 2007a).

The peasant leaders and municipal authorities congratulated COFAES’ farmers for their work, which according to the spokesperson, “Is becoming an example for all farmers in Sacaca.” They also expressed their wish to spread COFAES’ ecological production experience, so that all the farmers in the municipality could benefit from it (K’anchay, 2007a). For COFAES, the Congress helped them to promote, consolidate, and clarify its proposal on Sustainable Agriculture.



The Ecological Congress. Photo: k’anchay, 2007

The three workshops organized by COFAES took place in the period of December 2005-September 2007. In the first and the second workshop, COFAES members shared their experiences on soil management and ecological agriculture with their peasant leaders. The members want their leaders to understand and support soil conservation, water management, organic manure production, crops diversification and rotation, and vegetable production.

The third workshop went beyond sharing experiences. COFAES and the leaders of the peasant organisations jointly prepared a document related to their “view on development” (K’anchay, 2007b). The proposal describes what they understand and want for Sacaca Development, especially for the rural communities. Before preparing the proposal, they analysed their socio-economical and productive situation. This resulted in the development of a proposal that include issues related to organisation, health, education, production and culture. In what concerns the productive sector, they emphasized again the sustainable agriculture promotion (based on COFAES experience) (K’anchay, 2007b). They want their proposal be included in the 2008 – 2010 Development Plan of Sacaca Municipality. At present COFAES’ views its task as helping to assure that the farmers’s perspective will be included within the Municipal Development Plan.

National Soil Platform: national-level policy intervention

At national level, the National Soil Platform took upon itself the task of preparing a proposal which can contribute to current Bolivian policies related to soils. Before doing so, they reviewed the governmental policies related to soil resource.

The National Soil Platform organised a seminary to dialogue with representatives from the Agriculture and Development Planning Ministries in October 2006. The aim was reviewing and reflecting on current policy and plans related to soils and agriculture. Participants recognized efforts in this respect but also concluded that these were not sufficient to catch the attention and active involvement of government for solving this problem (Plataforma Nacional de Suelos, 2006). In the meanwhile soil erosion rate in Bolivia was at 114-173 t/ha per year (Zimmerer, 1993) putting farming at risk. This situation encouraged the National Soil Platform to work on a proposal for a soil law, the need for which was also recognized by the Ministry of Agriculture through its Soil Unit.

After the seminar, the National Soil Platform directed its efforts on developing a soils law proposal. First, a commission of people from Platform’ directorate prepared the foundations of their proposal. Second, the Regional Platforms contributed to this paper, adding their experiences and knowledge of local reality. In the same way, in the XII National Exchange of the Platform, its members of this organization gave more contributions and reached a consensus on the proposal’s core message. The proposal is seen as just a tool trough which they seek to recover and conserve the soil as well as to maintain, improve and keep soil production capability in Bolivia. Two third of the participants of that event were small-scale farmers and their leaders (K’anchay, 2007c).

Subsequently, the Soil Platform considered the importance of sharing this proposal and gathering contributions from other stakeholders, particularly from peasant and indigenous organisations. To that end, they organised a regional and a national workshops. *The regional workshop* took place in La Paz. The main regional indigenous and peasant organizations showed their interest and support to that proposal (Plataforma Nacional de Suelos, 2007c).

The national workshop organized in August 2007, counted on the participation of four important national indigenous and peasant organizations for the east and west of Bolivia. Representatives from the Soil Unit of Rural Development and Agriculture Ministry have also attended. The Soil Unit had elaborated also a law proposal on their own and was invited to share it at the event. The main agreement of this workshop was the nomination of a multi-institutional committee to bridge the two proposals from the National Soil Platform and the Soil Unit (Plataforma Nacional de Suelos, 2007d). This agreement was the starting point of a partnership of the National Soil Platform with indigenous and peasant organizations as well as with the government in relation to soil law proposal. The committee merged the two proposals into one in October 2007. At the moment (November 2007), this proposal has been sent back to the main Bolivian indigenous and peasant organisations for feedback. After finishing the proposal, the National Soil Platform and their allies plan to present the proposal to the Parliament and make the policy advocacy campaign to make it part of Bolivian national policies.



XII National Exchange of the Platform, Sacaca, North Potosi

During proposal building process, the participation of farmers, peasant, indigenous people and their leaders was very important for the Soil Platform. In their internal regional workshops, a third part of participants were farmers (members of the Platform). In all the events (within the Platform and with other stakeholders), 177 from 357 (almost 50%) participants were small farmers, peasant and indigenous people and/or their representatives. Some inputs from farmers to the soil law proposal are: Valuation and promotion of ancestral knowledge and local innovations, including soil management in primary, secondary schools and universities curricula, sanctions for soils degradation should be determined by rural communities themselves, recognition of the multicultural and multi-ethnic character of Bolivia, support to innovative farmers who apply soil conservation practices, among others (Plataforma Nacional de Suelos, 2007e). All these contributions were integrated into the proposal paper.

Reflecting on the policy advocacy processes and farmers participation

In the cases reviewed, the farmers and technicians try to consolidate and disseminate their work on soil conservation and sustainable agriculture through exchanging experiences. They are also interested in influencing policy making at local, departmental and national levels. These cases showed the way they started this policy advocacy processes with relevant farmer involvement.

Some conditions that allowed them to carry out this process were: Their organization and experience. COFAES integrates 16 local soil conservation committees, organizes meetings and workshops, and has more than 6 years experience working on soil conservation and agro-ecological farming. The National Soil Platform also has many years of experience on sustainable agriculture and exchange of experience among its members. It has five regional platforms, and a national directorate which supported the organization of workshops at regional and national level in order to elaborate the soil law proposal.

The cases differed on the way of actually doing policy advocacy. COFAES's first efforts were showing its concrete work on sustainable agriculture - emphasizing soil and water management - to inspire and guide the elaboration of policy proposals. They wanted to convince their own indigenous leaders (of the *central campesina*), and later, making them take the leading role in policy advocacy process. Amongst the tools used by COFAES are the workshops and their Local Ecological Congress. The

National Soil Platform strategy on policy advocacy is to directly influence policy making at national level through its soil law proposal. However they didn't want to do it alone. The Platform seek allies, especially indigenous, peasant and farmers national organizations. Similar to COFAES, they try to influence to peasant leaders to take the lead in these advocacy actions.

In this process, both COFAES and the National Soil Platform started elaborating their proposals. COFAES together with the *central campesina* closely reviewed the socio-political situation of the area and developed its "view of development" proposal for the Development Plan of Sacaca Municipality (PDM) 2008-2010. Its proposal therefore has a general and integral character, and they hope to, little by little, elaborate a more specific proposal related to agriculture and soil management. In the case of the National Soil Platform, it started by reviewing and evaluating the current policies and plans related to soil. On the basis of this assessment, it called attention to the lack of a legal instrument which can give more responsibility and obligations to the State. They elaborated the proposal among the Soil Platform members and later with other stakeholders. They still continue sharing the proposal to get inputs from others. In comparison with COFAES, this proposal focuses on a concrete resource - the soil - without losing an integral vision; it takes soil as the basis for sustainable agriculture development.

Farmers's participation on these initial experiences was also of a different character. Sacaca farmers from 16 communities, with the K'anchay and AGRECOL Andes support, decided for establishing COFAES because they understood that if organized, their experiences and proposals would be more influential. They also understood the importance not to ignore the legitimacy and political power of their traditional organizations (community organizations, *sub-centrales* and *central campesina*). The peasant organization has authority and power in decision making at community, inter-community and municipal level. This realization brought COFAES farmers to influence first their traditional leaders, thinking that their leaders themselves can make policy advocacy. This process shows COFAES farmers as initiators and catalysts of advocacy actions at local level with the support of local NGOs.

In the case of the National Soil Platform, the participation of small scale farmers in the process of soil law proposal elaboration was important for this organization. The Soil Platform organized workshops to allow farmers and national peasant and indigenous people organizations to give inputs on this proposal. However, despite of the relevant number of farmer participation in this experience, they were not the initiators of the process as in the case of COFAES. The technicians of the Platform, through their National Directorate of the Soil Platform did. That is why the Soil Platform is interested on influencing to the main farmers' organizations, made them their allies, and if possible, these organizations can take a leading role on this advocacy process.

Conclusions

Bolivian farmers face diverse natural resource management challenges. One of them is soil degradation, which endangers their agricultural production and livelihoods. As a result of present policy formulation processes, governmental policies related to agriculture hardly include the most relevant issues for farmers. The only way for policy to capture the perspective of farmers is for rural people to become more directly involved in advocacy and policy formulation processes.

The cases reviewed showed the importance of a thematically-focused farmer organization in influencing policy. Because it is thematically focused, it is better able to develop concrete experiences which can in turn become examples and better influence decision-makers.

Currently, the indigenous, peasant and farmers' organizations have increasing political power⁴. Nevertheless, the representatives of rural people often become 'urbanised' and politicized and as a result they lose sight of their people's priorities, such as for policies that provide immediate practical benefits. This is an added-value of the thematically focused groups. At the same time, these theme-based groups can not ignore the role of their traditional leaders. Traditional leaders should be part of farmer-led policy advocacy processes. For example, in the cases reviewed, COFAES members aimed

⁴ In Bolivia, the current President, Evo Morales, governs in alliance with peasant, farmers and indigenous people organizations. Their policies seek to favour these sectors.

to influence their local traditional leaders. The National Soil Platform focused on national peasant and indigenous leaders. In this process, exchanging experiences and involvement in workshops and congresses became policy advocacy tools for farmers, when they could remind representatives of their reality and inform them of their priorities.

Community-based organizations such as COFAES, provide more favourable environments for farmers and traditional leaders to play lead roles in the policy processes. NGO-lead organizations and networks such as National Soil Platform can provide protected spaces for farmers involvement in debates, build proposals and subsequently accompany advocacy process at higher political levels. This is the effort of the National Soil Platform in their process of elaborating its law proposal. Farmer participation and leading role is necessary especially if policy proposal that affects farmers' livelihood is promoted.

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