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VICTORIAN
FARMERS
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FARMERS' UNIONS

THE CHALLENGES OF REPRESENTATION



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This reports explores the challenges to farmers' unions of representing their membership in the context of dwindling farmer numbers, reducing revenue from membership and diminishing political influence.

Objectives

My purpose was to examine the following main issues:

- Farmers' unions' financing;
- Benefits and services;
- Organisation and structures;
- Internal and external communications.

Then, having analysed the experience of the farmers' unions I met for this project, I made the following recommendations.

Recommendations

- Farmers' unions must have a clear **corporate image** and need to proclaim their identity by way of a **mission statement**
- **Membership fees** should be their main source of financing, as they give independence and mandate.
 - Fees should be **inflation proofed**
 - They should be expressed in **absolute amounts** to avoid fluctuations and exposure to blackmail from produce purchaser collecting a percentage of output value on behalf of the union
 - They should tap into **direct support** payments
 - They should be collected through **direct debit**
- **Additional services** which are **relevant**, and **good value** for money should be developed to add value to membership and/or recruit new members
- **Different types of memberships**, such as associate memberships for rural businesses, rural dweller packages, etc. should be introduced to improve revenue.
- **Family membership packages** would help involve more family members, particularly spouses, in the union
- **Commercial and taxpayers' contributions** should be kept at arm's length
- Farmers unions should remain rigorously **independent from party politics**
- They should have **fully democratic structures** from grassroots to top
- **Training** should be provided to help elected officers fulfil their democratic mandate
- **Communications with membership** should be as direct as possible

- **Elected officers and Committees should be on an emailing and/or SMS text messaging list** to allow immediate contact
- Farmers' unions should resolve internal dissension through **consultation, consensus building** and **internal clearing** of decisions
- Farmers' unions have a critical role in representing farmers to the **general public**
 - They must not tolerate **bad or irresponsible farming**
 - They must **explain farming and rural issues** to the public
 - They must defend and explain the concept of **government supports** while those remain critical to the livelihoods of their members
 - They must only use **militant action** when it serves a real purpose to highlight an intractable problem and channel positively members' frustrations
 - They must not allow such action to **degenerate**
- They must proactively promote **Codes of Good Farming Practice** and **Quality Control Schemes** in partnership with processors and retailers
- They must seek the recognition of **a fair price for primary food producers** in legislation and international agricultural policies and trading agreements

Conclusion

The main challenge for farmers' unions in the future will be to establish as a matter of right the concept of fair prices for primary food producers, in return for environmentally responsible, high quality food production.

This is why, with the changes in the social and economic environment precipitated by lower numbers of farmers and international agreements for freer trade, farmers will in future years have an even greater need for professional, well structured and well resourced unions.

INTRODUCTION

Working for a farmers' union, the Irish Farmers' Association, for the last nine years, I have become acutely aware of the challenges faced by the organisations representing the interests of farmers.

Throughout the world, the number of farmers, the primary producers of food, is dwindling rapidly. Fewer farmers mean less political clout for the bodies representing them.

Furthermore, societies are increasingly urbanised and consumers more removed from primary food production.

In 1950, the average US consumer spent 20.5% of disposable income on food consumed in or out of the home. By 2001, this had been halved to 10%. The same holds true in Europe.

Yet, although consumers spend less on food, their demands as to the quality of this food have never been greater.

The meaning of quality has widened beyond concepts of hygiene and wholesomeness, to include ethical values relating to environmental impact and animal welfare.

Add to that the fact that, with powerful multinational retailers squeezing producer and processor margins, consumers also expect food to be cheap.

To top it all, what most consumers know about milk, meat, vegetables and other food products, is that they can rely upon finding them every week on the supermarket shelf...

The urban rural shift and its implications

Fewer rural dwellers/people working in agriculture

With increased urbanisation and industrialisation worldwide, rural populations have diminished in importance relative to urban populations.

Table 1 outlines the development in rural versus total populations in the regions of the world my study focussed on, namely the 15 member states of the EU, the US, New Zealand and Australia. In the last 50 years, total population has increased very substantially in every one of the countries concerned.

The share of rural dwellers in those regions has decreased in relative terms, and in the EU also in absolute terms.

Table 1 - Evolution of Rural v. Total Populations

Country/ies	Year	Rural Population (in million)	Total Population (in million)	Rural Population As % of Total	
				1950	2000
US	1950	56.50	157.80	35.80%	
	2000	64.50	283.20		22.78%
EU 15	1950	105.50	296.30	35.61%	
	2000	77.10	376.70		20.47%
New Zealand	1950	0.52	1.90	27.37%	
	2000	0.53	3.80		13.95%
Australia	1950	2.04	8.20	24.88%	
	2000	2.90	19.10		15.18%

Source: FAO Statistics

The decline in numbers of workers involved in agriculture as a percentage of total labour force or total active population has been even more spectacular. Worldwide, the number of people employed in agriculture has gone up in absolute terms by 1 billion in the last 50 years reflecting the increase in total populations. However, the share of agriculture in total labour force has reduced very substantially. It is still currently around 70%, which indicates the importance of agriculture in the economy of developing countries, as well as the fact these are the countries in which the bulk of the world's population resides.

Table 2 – Agricultural Population and Labour Force in the World

	1950	1970	1990	2000 (estimate)	2010 (forecast)
Agricultural Population in the World (millions)	1.6	2.0	2.5	2.6	2.7
Share of Agriculture Labour Force in Total Labour Force (%)	89.56	84.21	75.97	70.62	65.21

Source: FAO Statistics

Gap in understanding - How is food produced?

Up to the last few decades in western countries, most people who didn't themselves live in the countryside had relatives or friends who did, many of whom were involved in farming. Many would have visited or spent holidays on their rural relatives' or friends' farms. They might even have helped with farm chores and seasonal work on those occasions, and so would be familiar with farming and food production realities.

This is no longer the case to any significant extent. Nowadays, the remoteness between urban and rural dwellers is greater than ever.

While urban consumers dream of organic, animal welfare friendly farming methods, the fact is that they do not know how food is produced.

The meaning of “organic”

The organic label is selling – at a premium - a perceived superior wholesomeness, environmental and animal welfare friendliness which growing numbers of consumers buy into.

Yet, as shown in a number of studies, most consumers have a limited understanding of the concept.

This poor understanding, together with the positive perception of “free range”, “farm produced”, and other ill defined, or even unregulated labels, is frankly exploited by retailers and marketers.

Rural neighbours

The gap in understanding of rural issues is also glaring in the sometimes uncomfortable relationship between active farmers and urban workers moving out of cities in search of more affordable housing and/or more pleasant living environment.

The newly arrived rural dwellers have difficulties dealing with the smells, the noises, and the seasonal activities in the countryside which they consider nuisances.

The occasional lodgement of objections to planning permissions for important on-farm investments is yet another side effect of this relatively recent population shift.

Food scares

Over the last decade, concerns over food scares, fears over genetically modified crops, issues of animal welfare and farming practices in general have led consumers and the media to become suspicious of farming and the potentially disastrous impact it might have on their families' health.

BSE was a major wake up call: it showed up the consequences of certain feed industry practices developed to cut costs and increase productivity.

When scientists pointed to the feeding of contaminated animal protein to ruminants as the most likely cause of BSE, many felt that unnatural feeding of animal protein to ordinarily vegetarian animals was coming home to roost.

When, in 1996, the possibility of transmission of the disease as New Variant CJD to humans was brought to light, consumer confidence in farmers and food production was shattered in many European countries. Almost seven

years after the major 1996 crisis, beef consumption in Europe has yet to recover to its pre-BSE level.

GMO's

Another issue which proved damaging for agriculture and farmers was the debate about genetically modified (GM) organisms.

The farmers of the first world and the companies developing and marketing the GM technology were the only ones seen to benefit from this new technology.

Improved yields, built-in resistance to pests or diseases, or even increased dependency of farmers on supplies exclusively available from one or other company, appeared to be the only outcomes. Advantages for humankind as a whole, or in developing countries, were rather less evident.

These were seen as the practices of a greedy, profit oriented agriculture, out to corner market share and in the process deny developing countries their share of world riches.

Farm subsidies

Fifty years after the creation of the Common Agricultural Policy, Europe's willingness to continue financing agricultural supports is in question as the Mid Term Review of Agenda 2000 is underway.

The immediate aftermath of World War II, when food security was a crucial issue, is now long forgotten. What remains in the public mind are the excesses of butter and beef mountains, wine lakes, destruction of food, paying farmers to lay their land fallow, and the apparently insane complexities of the systems.

Many of the drastic reforms of recent times are misunderstood. The "cheque in the post", or direct compensatory payments, are seen as payments to farmers for doing nothing.

The political and budgetary pressures for the enlargement of the EU to poorer CEEC countries, and the restrictions on subsidies agreed to by the EU under WTO are influencing EU governments and their willingness to continue financing the CAP.

Yet, as EU farmers operate in one of the highest cost environments in the world, with ever-increasing quality, hygiene and environmental regulations imposed upon them, continued CAP supports are vital to their survival.

Public goodwill

There is no doubt but all the issues described above have increased the distance and suspicion between farmers and other sectors of society.

Farmers are often perceived as “whiny”, and even their legitimate demands are frequently misunderstood.

The goodwill of the general public, taxpayers and consumers - different words to describe essentially the same audience - is vital for farmers, as the political will to spend taxpayer money on agriculture will depend on it. Whether or not market supports exist, this goodwill is essential if the general thrust of legislation dealing with environmental, planning, taxation, or other issues, is to take account of rural and agricultural aspects in a reasonably sympathetic, or at least pragmatic manner.

Hence, now more than ever before, sensitivity to public opinion must be a primary consideration for farmers’ unions.

The demise of some European Ministries for Agriculture

Over the last few years, a number of European governments have chosen to rename their Ministries for Agriculture – some even dropping the term “agriculture” from the new title altogether - and redefine their functions.

Agriculture must now be put firmly in the context of food safety, bio security and the proper management of fragile natural resources

The Ministry for Agriculture, Food and Forestry in the UK (MAFF) has become Department of the Environment, Forestry and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), under the Labour government, after the second BSE crisis of November 2000.

In Germany, under the Green/Socialist government coalition, what used to be known as the Ministry for Agriculture was renamed the Ministry for Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture.

Similar changes have been made in some Scandinavian countries.

Even in Ireland, where the Department of Agriculture and Food remains very focussed on farming issues, repeated calls have been issued by politicians to introduce a separate Department for Food – in response to concerns about food safety.

Rightly or wrongly, many farmers perceive these changes in policy priority as yet another sign of distrust and a threat to their survival.

Implications for farmers’ unions

These demographic and societal developments have made it increasingly difficult for farmers, whose numbers are ever-decreasing, and whose commodity-dependent incomes have not historically kept pace with those in the other sectors of the economy, to finance professional representation to fight their corner.

At the same time, their marginalisation and reduced political clout makes the job of their representing organisations ever harder.

Hence those organisations have had to devise ways of maintaining, never mind increasing, their revenue, and to put across their message in a different, more relevant and compelling manner.

They also have the difficult task of explaining to their members the necessity for a new approach in the face of a general public which cares less but demands more from primary producers.

This is a tall order.

OBJECTIVES

In the context outlined in the introduction, how can farmers' unions continue fulfilling their mission of defence of farmers' interests?

In this research project, my aim was to answer this question by examining what strategies farmers' unions have implemented to cope with those difficulties in a number of Western countries, in most of which agriculture is still seen as a relatively important economic activity and a political priority.

My purpose therefore was to examine critically the following:

- The financing methods developed by the main farmers' unions in the countries I visited;
- The benefits and services they offer;
- How they handle commercial and/or taxpayer income streams;
- How they are organised and structured;
- How they deal with internal issues within their structure, dissention in their midst, and how/why new groups/organisations can arise from such rifts;
- How they communicate with external audiences, including the general public, particularly on difficult issues such as the environment, food safety, animal welfare, and taxpayer funded financial/market support.

Finally, I sought to draw conclusions from my research, and make recommendations, based on my analysis of the experience of the organisations I met.

THE ORGANISATIONS STUDIED FOR THIS REPORT

Although this report concentrates on farmers' unions, I also met with co-operatives, and bodies such as the Countryside Alliance in the UK, which represents rural dwellers rather than just farmers, or produce promotion organisations like the New Zealand Dairy Board, and the US Dairy Exports Council. I also met with civil servants, politicians, journalists, and a variety of people and organisations in each country to fill in the background. Most importantly, wherever possible, I met with farmers.

In the US and the UK, Foot and Mouth disease fears and precautions in the Spring and Summer of 2001 meant that I was not able to meet with as many farmers as I would have liked. I had to communicate with those that I did contact through the "non-infective" methods of phone and email.

The following are the main organisations I met for this research project:

At EU level: COPA/COGECA (Brussels)

At World level: IFAP (Paris)

Australia: National Farmers' Federation, United Dairy Farmers of Victoria, Victorian Farmers Federation, New South Wales Dairy Farmers Association, Dairy Farmers Co-op, MPs of NSW Parliament.

New Zealand: Federated Farmers of New Zealand, New Zealand Dairy Board, New Zealand Co-operatives Association, the New Zealand Young Farmers' Club, farmer members of the NZDG's Shareholder Council.

USA: American Farm Bureau Federation, National Farmers' Union, Farm Bureau of California, Dairy Farmers' of America, US Dairy Export Council, National Milk Producers Federation, National Cattlemen's Association.

UK: NFU, UFU, Farmers For Action, Countryside Alliance, the Country Land and Business Association (CLA).

France: FNSEA (France's main farmers' federation), FNPL (milk producers), FNO (sheep breeders), FNB (beef cattle breeders), FDSEA (regional federation) of the Hautes Pyrénées, Confédération Paysanne.

A SAMPLE OF THE LIVE ISSUES

In every country I visited, farmers were challenged by dramatic changes or crises.

Australia

When I arrived in Sydney, the milk market was in the process of being deregulated. Liquid milk “quotas” which existed within state boundaries, and protected the state’s market for the state’s liquid milk producers who held such quotas, were abolished.

Because these had become tradable and hugely valuable over the years, deregulation wiped out much of the value from dairy farmers’ assets in New South Wales, Queensland, and Western Australia, and led to a net reduction in milk production in those states which persists to this day.

This proved a major challenge for farmers’ unions in Australia. On the one hand, the NSW Dairy Farmers Association were very badly affected by defection of members either going out of business or disillusioned by what they saw as the failure of the organisation to defend their interests.

The drop-off was so severe that, when I visited them in February 2001, the NSW DFA was in the process of finalising its subsuming into the general NSW Farmers’ Association, as it would otherwise have not been in a position to continue financing its activities.

On the other hand, United Dairy Farmers’ of Victoria saw themselves as instrumental in bringing about the deregulation, and largely the winners from it.

As they saw it, it was going to profit dairy farmers in Victoria by allowing them to break into the NSW liquid milk market, thereby raising their essentially world market dependent milk price and increasing potential output.

UDV said they were the main players in securing compensatory “restructuring” payments for affected farmers, which were to be paid, not from state coffers, but through a consumer price levy.

New Zealand

I came to New Zealand just a few months before the shareholders’ vote on the proposal to merge Kiwi and the New Zealand Dairy Group to form what is now known as Fonterra Co-op.

I was fortunate to attend a few farmers’ meetings, including one shareholders’ meeting I was asked to address about the so called “Irish model”, i.e. the hybrid co-operative/publicly quoted company structure adopted by some Irish milk processors.

It was clear that farmers' views were divided on the issue of the Mega Merger. They were concerned about the future of their milk price in the absence of competition for supply, about farmer representation within the new merged group, and about the relative valuation of either entity in the merger negotiations.

Federated Farmers' of New Zealand adopted a totally supportive stance towards the proposed merger which it considered generally good for the NZ dairy industry, and therefore good for dairy farmers. It saw all other issues as belonging within the co-op structure, and therefore not for them to get directly involved in.

I found this instance of relative removal from day to day issues surprising, although perhaps not so surprising in a country where farmers are a self-reliant sort, exposed day to day to the harsh realities of the market, which they accept as the inevitable norm, with few expectations of assistance from Government, even in hard times.

This sort of disengagement – as we might perceive it here - would not have been acceptable to farmers in Ireland or France.

USA

The timing of my visit to Washington DC allowed me to attend the first hearing through the Senate Committee on Agriculture of the New Farm Bill (now Farm Act), as the main vested interests, including the Presidents of the NFU and the Farm Bureau made their presentations.

The new Farm Act now appears as a clear u-turn in terms of farming support policy in the US. It was evident to me that, despite its often stern stance on farm subsidies in WTO, the US supports very strongly, and now even more so, their agriculture industries.

The new Farm Act is adding US\$65 billion expenditure for farmer supports to the existing US\$100 billion budget for the next 10 years, and while the US NFU and the Farm Bureau both have certain reservations as to technical aspects of the Farm Act, they nonetheless recognise and welcome the greater degree of support available to many farming sectors.

UK

Foot and Mouth Disease made the UK a quasi-no-go area when I travelled there. Visits to the countryside would have been irresponsible.

Hence my ambitions there had to be limited, and I only met with the main farmers' unions and other organisations at their London headquarters, while contact with farmer members and non-members had to take place by telephone or email.

But the Foot and Mouth disease was only the latest straw on the long-broken back of British agriculture.

Farmers' incomes, and indeed the farmers themselves, were very severely depressed.

I found farmers' unions in the UK to be generally under strong criticism, as their members see them as insufficiently militant in standing up to an increasingly disinterested Government.

The emergence of Farmers For Action, a militant but somewhat disorganised group, and their success in persuading the retail trade to pass retail milk price increases back to farmers, has been a major challenge to the established Farmers Unions.

France

In France, scandals in the public financing of non-profit organisations led to an investigation by the French Court of Auditors. This had serious implications for all farmers' unions, which benefit from substantial public funds collected from farmers by the ANDA (Association Nationale pour le Développement Agricole). I will develop fully on this matter later in this report.

This challenge to a substantial part of its resources has forced the FNSEA and most of its member federations into seriously re-thinking how to secure financing, and how to better deal with membership.

The FNSEA is examining ways of expanding its services to other rural dwellers and businesses, and to other interests within the broad agri-business and representative areas.

They are also exploring ways of securing state finance on the same basis as workers' unions.

FINANCING

Born of solidarity, much the same as other types of unions, farmers' unions distribute the burden of their financing over their membership.

This is a bigger challenge than might appear: for an individual member to pay a fee requires a vision that the joint lobbying effort, which may seem removed from one's farm gate, is worth investing in for the greater good.

In addition to financing from membership, many farmers' unions also seek finance from what other sources they can tap into.

Membership fees and dues

Membership fees or dues, whether paid directly by farmers, or through a federated structure by regional and/or sectoral farmers' groups, form the main source of income of most of the farmers' unions I have come across.

Typically, there is a minimum fee, with an additional amount proportional to the relative size of farming enterprises.

This is however not true of farmer member fees charged by the US NFU, for example, which apply a single flat fee per member regardless of farm size. Although the level of the fee varies from state to state, it remains relatively modest, going in 2001 from \$12 per farm per year in Arkansas to \$60 in Texas.

Affordability is an essential consideration. Hence, the New South Wales Dairy Farmers' Association had to radically review their fee structure further to the deregulation of the Australian liquid milk market. The deregulation, which did away with state-based, previously valuable, liquid milk production quotas, reduced substantially the income as well as the asset value of NSW DFA members. As a result, fees up to Aus\$ 700 per annum had to be halved to \$350, while the NSW DFA had to downsize and be subsumed into the NSW Farmers' Association.

The Federated Farmers' of New Zealand had to rethink their revenue collection system after the compulsory unionisation provisions of the 70s were abolished, which used to guarantee them a levy on every animal. It also had to restructure its organisation, from a provincial structure to a national one, allowing it to reduce staff numbers and expenditure, while improving the quality of service supplied to members.

A relatively hefty subscription fee of NZ\$ 300 + 12.5% GST tax applies, to a membership which has dwindled from 35,000 in the days of compulsory unionisation to a current 16,000. A 7% increase in subscription fees was successfully implemented in the last couple of years.

In the IFA, this type of fee structure only represents about 50% of funding by farmers, with the other half coming from a voluntary levy on the value of

members' produce sales, used to finance activity in the EU (the European Development Fund). This levy is collected by the processing industry on behalf of the Association.

This method of collection is dangerously dependent on the goodwill of the processing industry, and as it is expressed as a percentage of produce value, in the context of weakening commodity prices, the relative contribution to the IFA budget through this means of collection is dwindling.

This system also fails to tap into the increasing portion of farmers' incomes which comes from direct Common Agriculture Policy payments. The Mid Term Review and the proposal to introduce decoupling of direct payments, will make it even more crucial for European farmers' unions to address this issue.

Some farmers' unions, including the IFA and the British FU's, have to collect their members' subscription every year, with only few members contributing through a system of direct debit. As a result, substantial resources have to be used to secure annual income.

Federations such as the US Farm Bureau, or the FNSEA in France, are dependent for their revenue on receipts from their local and/or sectoral affiliated Federations. Unless the collection system is efficient, the financing of the main federation can be precarious.

The American Farm Bureau's members are insurance policy holders, not necessarily farmers. State Farm Bureaux pay an average of \$3.50 per insurance policy to the American Farm Bureau, giving it an overall budget of approximately \$18 m. Each state Bureau has an independent budget also levied from every policy holder-member.

Some of the member Federations of the French FNSEA – whether sectoral or regional - fail to generate sufficient income from membership to finance their own activity, never mind contributing to the financing of the “Mother” Federation.

In its strategic review, the FNSEA suggested that some of those Federations in financial difficulties might share certain facilities and staff.

Some sectoral federations in France, such as the milk producers' FNPL, only receive a percentage of the funds they set out to raise from their membership. Often as little as 60 or 70% of their target is actually collected, mostly because they do not have a structured collection system.

At local level, the FDSEA of the Hautes Pyrénées finances its €230,000 to €310,000 budget through the levy of membership fees of €35 for farms under 20 hectares, and €50 for larger farms. Retired farmers contribute €15 regardless of farm size.

Pig and poultry producers pay an additional €8 or so, while cereal growers pay a percentage of output value. Farmers also pay levies to their local specialised organisation, which also in turn pays levies to the FDSEA.

The National Farmers' Federation of Australia have found it nigh on impossible to increase levies, and have only done so once in the last six years. Hence their preferred strategy is to rationalise and reduce operating costs.

Fees for extra services

Farmers' unions have pools of skills in a number of major areas, such as rural/land law, arbitration, expertise in weather related catastrophes, insurance, and in complex agricultural policy schemes. They have also well established working contacts in Government Departments, local authorities, and other official bodies.

These are valuable skills and contacts, which can be developed and marketed by the unions as worthwhile extra services.

Some farmers' unions offer these services at an additional fee with a view to offering better, more targeted services to existing members, or indeed to differentiate the organisation and help attract additional members.

The California Farm Bureau, for example, offers the Farm Employers Labour Service, or FELS. Set up in 1970, FELS aims to "assist subscribers in avoiding costly labour management mistakes".

Different types of membership

Non-farmer members

Farmers' unions' expertise can be valuable to other sectors of agribusiness, particularly the self-employed, or other groups in society. Bringing in non-farmer members can be another way of generating additional income while minimising the cost to the organisation of supplying services.

Farmers' unions can target consultants, lawyers, accountants and other such ancillary service providers in agribusiness for what IFA calls "Associate Membership". They can also target rural dwellers, as IFA has been doing recently.

The fees obtained from those associated members can better reflect the true commercial value of the service and expertise provided by the Union.

Only very recently has the FNSEA examined the option of opening its services to non-farmer members, such as small rural businesses. They have even considered opening up to larger organisations such as agricultural co-operatives, insurances companies, agri-food companies and banks.

They believe this could also help them address their problematic "corporatist" image.

They are however concerned that what they could gain in increased financial resources, they could lose in their identity. This is obviously a very important consideration for all farmers' unions taking that option.

Australia's NFF have made a strategic decision not to broaden their membership to non-farmers, because they see themselves as an active farmers' organisation and nothing else. Indeed, retired farmers do not have a vote in NFF.

Should these associated members be given voting rights?

In the IFA, associated members basically buy services and information. They do not get any voting rights or representation within the structure of the IFA.

The FNSEA suggest that non-farmer members might be dealt with by way of separate representative committees within the organisation, their voting rights confined to their own particular sub-structure.

Family memberships

Family memberships are also an important possible source of additional revenue which can strengthen the organisation by tapping into the human resources that are farm families.

A family membership could give access to the services of the union to the family members over 18 involved on the farm. It is also an incentive for them to become involved in the structure of the organisation which would be made easier because their existence and involvement on the farm is effectively acknowledged.

Family membership can bring farmwomen and other family members into the pool of talent the organisation may draw upon.

To quote an Irish farmwoman "They (IFA) are happy enough to take the membership fee cheque from an account in joint name – so why doesn't our membership come in joint name?"

IFA has only recently introduced family memberships, which may be taken out by the spouses and children (over 18) of fully paid up IFA members who are farming full or part-time but have not yet become farmers in their own right. They receive their own membership card, and have full voting rights, as well as full access to benefits and services.

Income from commercial activity

Some unions generate a substantial portion of their income from sources other than membership fees, such as the provision of insurance services or association with an insurance company, or other commercially supplied services.

Heavy reliance on such commercial funding can damage an organisation's credibility, and distract it from its primary mission.

The US Farm Bureau's membership is made up of insurance policy holders, some of whom are farmers. Bureau activities are financed by a levy on each policy, of which €3.50 is paid to the American Farm Bureau each year to finance central activities giving the Federal organisation an annual budget of \$18 million.

The Bureau claims five million members – yet the US only has two million farmers in total. While their reliance on insurance gives them a stable income collection system and the weight of numbers, they cannot possibly claim to represent the interests of such a disparate membership.

Their competitor organisation, the US NFU, also have a heavy reliance on an insurance-related income stream although it is based on “renting out” the NFU's name, and is kept relatively at arms' length.

The UK NFU's are involved in selling insurance, and their local office managers are self-employed. Not only do they have to service membership locally, they also have to meet certain targets relative to the sale of insurance policies. Where will their top priority lie?

This was an issue clearly identified by the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) in their recent strategic review “The Way Ahead”. Consequently, the UFU have decided to redefine the role of their technical officers to ensure that the part of the Group Secretaries' role which involves marketing insurance and financial services products to farmers and non-farmers does not swamp their ability to service membership at local level and seek out new members.

It is of course valid for farmers' organisations to use the revenue from commercial enterprises to fulfil their primary function of representing farmers.

What matters is whether it develops into an end in itself, or whether it is treated as a revenue generating activity at the service of the organisation's main mission.

In the case of the UK NFU, farmers I have spoken to identify this dual activity of local representatives as a negative, which they see as hampering an effective representation and active role in defending farmers' interests at local and national level.

Commercial sponsorships

Farmers' unions frequently organise events, shows, conferences or seminars, or issue publications for which they seek private commercial sponsorship.

This can work very well, providing resources to organise high profile events to showcase expertise, or help raise awareness on specific issues.

Most farmers' unions would select carefully the organisation they approach for this type of deal.

For example, IFAP regularly involves airlines in sponsoring its conferences and seminars, to offset the cost of participation by mostly developing country members.

Another important consideration is the editorial contribution, if any, of the sponsoring company to the event or publication.

There may be a price to pay for a generous sponsorship deal, and the unions I have met always engage in a careful cost/benefit analysis.

IFA often calls upon Ireland's main banks to sponsor publications and events. For those sponsors, the association with the name of IFA and the exposure and credibility this will give them in the farming press and with farmers is enough, and they do not normally seek any editorial role in those publications and events, unless the topic is directly within their competence.

Co-funded initiatives

Farmers' unions can initiate certain promotional activities with co-funding from other commercial organisations.

This can be very valuable, for example to raise awareness on certain issues, or to improve the image of farmers and farming.

Further to a series of consumer workshops held in 1999, the UK NFU initiated the Little Red Tractor, a highly visible and recognisable logo which identifies quality food produced to the British Farm Standard. It covers the dairy, livestock, sheep, poultry, pig, tillage and fruit/vegetable sectors. The Little Red Tractor logo can now be found on 550 product lines in shops and supermarkets all over the UK. Its presence on a product guarantees that it has been produced under independently inspected farm quality assurance schemes.

Managed by the independent company Assured Food Standards, the scheme benefited from MAFF subsidisation in its first two years of existence. It is now entirely financed by contributions from the various sectoral assurance schemes.

In only a few years it has acquired a very high public profile, and while it has predictably been criticised by organisations such as Compassion in World Farming, it does appear to have improved consumer confidence and the image of British farmers as producers of quality food.

In Ireland, the Irish Farmers' Association a few years ago initiated a project to educate the public on rural issues, and address in an independent and positive manner some of the perceived image problems of Irish farming and agriculture.

Agri-Aware was created, with co-financing from organisations including the Irish Dairy Board and Bord Bia - the Irish Food Board.

Agri-Aware has played an important role in bringing the realities of rural life to school children, and to the general public, getting involved in educational and fun projects generally aimed at improving the image of Irish agriculture. "Agriculture is our Culture" is its motto.

Feíle Biá, is another such initiative, promoting the use of Irish quality assured produce by the catering trade, hotels and restaurants, is part-financed by the Bord Biá, the Irish Food Board.

Government/taxpayers' funds

Some farmers' unions are in receipt of state funds/taxpayers' money.

In France, a special type of taxation is levied specifically from farmers to form the funds of ANDA, the Association Nationale pour le Développement Agricole.

This €120 million fund is redistributed through a variety of agricultural organisations such as the Chambers of Agriculture and farmers' unions, for objectives relating to development and training in agriculture.

In 2000, the French Court of Auditors found fault with the lack of transparency in the financing of certain non-profit organisations. Farmers' unions, among others, were investigated as a result.

The Court found that ANDA contributions were being used beyond the purposes for which they were intended, to finance some of the day-to-day activity of the unions.

The Court also found it was unacceptable for farmers' unions to be involved in decision-making regarding the disbursement of ANDA money, when they were themselves beneficiaries.

This was a major challenge to French farmers' unions, since the FNSEA budget relied for nearly 25% on ANDA funds. Worse again, the Confédération Paysanne relied on it for three quarters of its funding.

While the latter feels confident that its steadily rising number of members will secure its future income, the FNSEA has been forced into rethinking much of its financing strategy.

ANDA funds will remain available for the type of activities they were initially intended to finance. Hence alternative sources of funding will have to be found.

FNSEA has been considering ways in which to ensure that individual farmer members of local and/or specialised groups pay their way, leading to each

federation being in a position to raise 100% of dues. This in turn would improve the ability of the FNSEA to secure its own finances.

Another relevant example of use of government funds is the way in which IFA has been able to recruit a number of staff for particular projects, making use of part funding from the Irish National Development Plan (NDP).

Hence, an Equality Officer, National Road Development Executive, Forestry Promoter and Fish Farming Executive were recruited, the cost of whose employment is part-offset by state funds under the NDP.

This has allowed the organisation to provide a broader range of services to existing members, as well as recruit more members.

In contrast to the French situation though, the scope and conditions involved here are very clearly and narrowly defined.

THE SERVICES PROVIDED

Lobbying and representation

Farmers' unions were primarily set up to lobby national governments, parliaments, politicians, international bodies and in some instances the food processors purchasing farmers' produce.

They also represent farmers on the public scene and communicate with the general public on their behalf.

Their main mission is to ensure that the environment – whether regulatory, political, or commercial - in which farmers operate, as well as public opinion, are as favourable as possible.

Their effectiveness in this matter depends mostly on the numbers they represent, how democratic the organisation is, and the professionalism with which it is organised and operated.

Other services: to add value to membership

In the context of often volatile, and generally reducing produce prices, and therefore incomes, farmers are under pressure to cut costs.

The farmers' union membership fee has to be seen as value for money, or it will be axed as superfluous expenditure.

Value for money in an individual farmer's case is generally seen in terms of what the farm organisation is doing for him/her specifically. Hence, the general lobbying function – which the farmer could argue would take place regardless of whether he/she contributed or not – cannot be assumed to be sufficient reason to pay a membership fee. There has to be some further incentive to pay up – namely access to services which are directly and immediately relevant to the individual farmer's day-to-day concerns.

This is one of the main reasons why most farmers' unions offer extra benefits and services.

In many cases, at least for smaller farmers, the price of the membership fee can be made up for almost immediately, by the various discounts and deals available.

Additional services also play an important role in differentiating the organisation and attracting potential members.

Technical advice

None of the farmers' unions I have met go as far as providing technical advice in production-related areas, although the UK NFU does offer advice on animal health, pesticides, and a number of other areas.

In most countries, separate organisations and/or private consultants deal with this type of issues.

Legal advice and action

Most unions employ legal advisors in-house or buy in legal expertise to deal with members' legal problems. This is often linked to additional payment by members wishing to avail of these services.

As part of the service to membership as a whole, legal cases may be pursued through the courts which are in the general interest of members.

The National Farmers' Federation in Australia has successfully challenged in court attempts by non-farming rural dwellers to prevent farming investment by their neighbours, establishing important precedents which have made the life of farmers near cities a great deal easier.

In 1992, the IFA took a case on behalf of its dairy members to challenge the failure by the European Communities to compensate farmers adequately for the transformation of a temporary 4.5% milk quota cut into a permanent one.

While the case was ultimately unsuccessful, it helped establish a number of important principles regarding the rights attaching to the ownership of milk quota.

Industrial / labour issues

In those countries where average farm sizes are larger, and the hired labour input higher, farmer's unions often act as an employers' body on behalf of their members.

They supply information on agricultural employers' and employees' rights and obligations, and lobby on industrial relations issues.

This is one of the main functions of the National Farmers' Federation in Australia, which operates at national level, and to which all state and sectoral farmers' unions are federated.

The Farm Employers Labour Service (FELS) from the California Farm Bureau, has already been mentioned in the previous chapter.

Asset management advice

The FDSEA of the Hautes Pyrénées supplies comprehensive asset management advice to its members. It is a reflection on the complexity of the French property leasing system and land law that the FDSEA have developed competences in this area.

FDSEA also advises retired farmers, or farmers considering diversifying their activity, on ways to maximise the value of their farming assets.

Special financial deals

Most Farmers' unions use the weight of their numbers to negotiate favourable financial deals which only their largest, most commercial members would have a hope of achieving as individuals.

Hence, the IFA each year negotiates a loan package for the purchase of milk quota by Irish dairy farmers with one of the main banks. Competition being what it is, this package is generally emulated and matched by most other financial institutions on the market place within days of launching.

Discount purchasing of goods and services

On the same principle, the farmers' union bargaining power can be brought to bear to secure lower input prices, and discounts on services.

The California Farm Bureau offers such services through e-commerce, and have set up a web-site allowing farmers to purchase feed, fertiliser, seed, machinery, and other necessary supplies and inputs online, at prices which they could not achieve as individuals.

The California Farm Bureau has also made a deal with General Motors allowing its member to purchase Dodge pick-up trucks at a \$1000 discount.

The US NFU provides a National Motor Club service to farmer members, which is particularly useful for farmers' private vehicles, but also extends to urgent repairs for tractors and machinery.

IFA set up a scheme called Buywayz, through which farmers who do not already belong to a purchasing group can benefit from all the advantages of group purchasing.

Also, IFA has made an agreement with one telecommunication service provider, O2, which allows its members to save up to 40% on their mobile telephone bills, while an agreement with Esat BT secures substantial savings on landline phone bills for members.

The examples are numerous, but the principle is the same; making use of the strength of group purchasing to get better deals on goods and services for members.

Insurance discounts (health, public liability, motor, farm, home, etc.)

Farmers, because of the nature of their activity, are big consumers of insurance products. Many farmers' unions also have some involvement in the insurance business, and avail of this closeness to make special rates available to members.

When it comes to health insurance, they can negotiate group rates generally only available to employees through an employers' scheme, and which farmers, as self-employed business people, could not normally avail of.

Hence, the IFA operates a discounted scheme with the Voluntary Health Insurance Company (VHI) in Ireland, which is available to all its members.

Social services

In France, the regional structure of the main farmers' union, the FDSEAs, provide a "listening ear" to the problems of its memberships that go beyond agricultural business issues.

Countrywide, FDSEAs employ social workers to help members deal with the less obvious human problems of life on the farm.

In 2001, the UK NFU provided an Internet lifeline in the middle of the Foot and Mouth Disease crisis to isolated sheep farmers. The membership of the Internet community/newsgroup nfunet.org.uk doubled to 11,000 farmers between February and September 2001. Farmers marooned while their herds were restricted or slaughtered, relied on the web for news and support, through the means of the online community generated by NFU.

Formally or otherwise, most farmers' unions do provide some degree of social service, but in times when farmers' incomes are under pressure, and farm families have to contend with the traumas of herd depopulation, or of one of the highest suicide rates in society, there is scope to formalise and increase such services.

POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE V. ALIGNMENT

Generally speaking, farmers, as self-employed people attached to a more traditional way of life are a conservative force. Land, ownership of land, family values, and traditions all tend to be associated more with the rural way of life.

Although this is obviously a generalisation, most farmers would tend to relate more to conservative politics than to more liberal parties. This is generally reflected in the type of policies pursued by their unions.

However, lobbying involves working with whatever political masters democracy throws up. Hence to be effective, most unions have chosen the independent route, at least officially.

Most have rules preventing active political party involvement by elected union officers while they hold office.

Federated Farmers of New Zealand have been careful, over the years to maintain an apolitical approach. To quote Roger Barton of FFNZ, “we never attack the party, we attack the policy”.

However, despite such precautions, not all farmers’ unions succeeded in remaining truly non-aligned. While this may have its own benefits when their favourite party is in government, it can make life very difficult when it is in opposition, and can affect an organisation’s credibility.

The Deutscher Bauernverband in Germany, who were very closely aligned with Helmut Kohl’s CDU party, have had difficulties dealing with the current socialist/green coalition government.

The American Farm Bureau and NFU, too, have seen their respective stars rise and fall as Republicans and Democrats succeeded each other in the White House. “Leland Swenson, the President of NFU, would have been Secretary for Agriculture in a Gore administration”, an NFU insider told me.

Indeed, the IFA itself, although non-aligned, and equipped with rules preventing activists from being involved in party politics, is often seen as a nursery bed for Fine Gael, the second most important party in Ireland, with centre-right leanings.

Until, that is, the choice made by outgoing President Tom Parlon in 2002, to stand (successfully) in the General Election for the business friendly Progressive Democrats!

STRUCTURES

Federations v. Associations

While farmers' union's structures have many things in common, they do tend to split between Federations, whose membership is made up of farmers' groups, or Associations, whose membership consists of individual farmers.

Federations can be made up of regional and/or sectoral groupings, and aim at representing as best as possible the various interests of farmers in different regions or in different sectors of activity.

Hence, the French FNSEA is structured both regionally and sectorally. Its members are made up of FDSEA's, departement-based regional substructures, and sectoral federations which themselves have a regional structure. These include the beef breeders' federation FNB, the sheep farmers' Federation FNO and the milk producers' Federation FNPL.

The regional structure also builds on the regional identity and specialisation. For example, livestock, sheep and maize are the priority sectors for the FDSEA of the Hautes Pyrenées.

Regional Federations have more or less independence relative to the national structure.

In the FNSEA a recent strategic review identified this as a problem, as locally or sectorally undertaken militant action is always laid at the doorstep of FNSEA, which then has to defend and explain policies and actions it didn't initiate.

In the US, the State Farm Bureaux have very distinct identities, with a great deal of local decision-making power in terms of recruitment of members, supply of services, and policy.

Crucially, they retain a substantial percentage of funds levied from members for their local operation, passing back only about \$3.50 per membership to the American Farm Bureau.

Associations or other shallow structures whose members are actual individual farmers appear to be a feature of smaller countries or individual sectors, where a more complex structure would be costly to maintain, or simply unnecessary.

Examples of associations include the Irish Farmers' Association, the UK Farmers Unions, and the state-based farmers' unions I met with in Australia, such as the United Dairy Farmers of Victoria, or the NSW Dairy Farmers' Association.

Those organisations are, by definition, closer to their grassroots. This can be a great strength, where it is accompanied with solid democratic structures.

A focussed, single-sector association such as the UDFV has both a strong democratic mandate and a clear set of priorities concerning exclusively dairy farming in Victoria. This was an important factor in helping it achieve the deal that would best suit its members in the recent deregulation of the Australian liquid milk market.

While a sector-specific organisation is clearly focussed on its priorities, a generalist Association catering for farmers in every sector of farming can have major weaknesses. It is at far greater risk of potentially alienating parts of its membership if they feel their specific interests are being overwhelmed by others.

The IFA deals with such potential problems by having Commodity Committees to draw up sector-specific policies, and using its Council as the ultimate clearing house for any potential conflicts of interests. This does not resolve every problem, but it helps avoid many.

Despite those potential difficulties, a structure that is closer to grassroots gives better guarantees of democracy, as well as greater cohesiveness of action and message. They are also more manageable, less unwieldy, and therefore potentially more effective in fulfilling their mission.

Democratic base

Whatever the type of structure, it does tend to be the case that the grassroots organisations are directly democratic, with ordinary farmer members elected to local committees.

Higher levels are not always quite so democratic, and in many organisations, the President and the top team of the organisation are elected by the union's governing body, not its farmer members.

The Irish Farmers' Association, whose President, Deputy President and four regional Vice Presidents are elected every four years, uses a collegial system which is close to a universal ballot, but actually rests on its branch structure.

Members' votes are counted within the branch to determine the branch's vote. Branch votes are then counted to elect the top team of IFA.

This is a more democratic system than that prevailing anywhere else in the EU 15, even if some would argue in favour of a real universal ballot of all members.

Regardless of whether a farmers' union is a Federation or an Association, it needs solid structures to ensure proper internal democracy and communication at all levels.

In the case of the UK NFU, many ordinary farmer members I have contacted believe the top elected officers of the organisation are too removed from farmers' day-to-day concerns.

They disapprove of the lack of democracy at that level as the top officers are elected by the NFU Council.

Many of the comments made to me are revealing of serious frustrations among sections of membership who question the efficacy of their representatives at a time when British agriculture is in severe crisis and has been all but abandoned by Government.

COMMUNICATING WITH MEMBERSHIP

To lead and represent farmers, ascertain members' views, develop policy and inform membership, a seamless flow of information and communication must exist from grassroots to top, and back down again.

Methods of communication

The **structures and elected officers** of the organisation are the most direct and best vehicles of communication from and to members.

Briefing material is prepared by professional staff after consultation, and then delivered at meetings by elected officers and/or staff.

To reach a wider audience, different types of written media are also used whether to promote a debate on an issue, or to publicise policy and achievements.

Indeed, most of the farmers' unions I have met have **in-house magazines**, which members can subscribe to.

Hence, the American Farm Bureau's publishes FB News, FNSEA's l'Information Agricole and le Journal du Fermier et Métayer, Australia's National Farmers' Federation's publishes Reform and the National Cattlemen's Association's Beef Business Bulletin and National Cattlemen.

Focussed **newsletters** or written briefing notes can also be published and circulated.

Mailing lists of influencers among the membership can be targeted. If the information is very specific to a clearly identifiable group, either producing a commodity, or sharing a particular concern, then a mail shot of all the members of those groups it is the ideal method.

This requires very **detailed membership records**, however, with databases allowing clear identification of sector of activity and special interests.

Mailing each and every member, however, is not something farmers' union can generally afford to do very frequently, and therefore only happens for very important issues.

Members can now be contacted instantly and very cheaply by **email**. The Federated Farmers of New Zealand have 2,600 of their 16,000 members on email, who receive a weekly Friday Flash.

In the last few years, most farmers' unions have developed an **Internet** presence. Many of their websites provide detailed information, publicise the union's achievements and also offer concrete services.

Websites provide two-way **interactive** communication, and can be used to allow members respond rapidly on particular topics as well as to address individual queries.

However, with a relatively older age profile, only a minority of farmers have access to computers and the Internet. The 'net cannot yet entirely replace other more expensive or less direct forms of communication.

Mobile phones have been a boon to farmers, who need to be contactable on the move.

Information can be conveyed to them through SMS text messaging facilities available from most mobile phone service providers.

The IFA regularly advises its members of important deadlines and issues through text messaging.

New generation mobile telephony should create further opportunities for improved communication.

Membership can also be reached through the less direct vehicle of the **press and broadcast media**.

Where editorial control is not in the hands of the farmers' union, there can be no certainty of just how the message is delivered, and how distorted it becomes.

Using the **farming press** and specialised agricultural media ensures a reasonable targeting on the audience of farmers and of other readers interested in agriculture and agribusiness.

However, certain farming issues are of interest to broader audiences, and so make it to the **general press**, whether national, regional or both.

Where this is the case, the farmers' unions must bear in mind that they are talking to a broader audience not necessarily familiar with farming issues and possibly indifferent or hostile. This is an opportunity to spread the farmers' union's message beyond membership to the general public.

On issues such as the environment or food safety, when promoting the positive aspects of farming and its contribution to the economy and society, farmers' unions must convey their message to more than the converted.

For this very purpose, the US NFU have acquired their own television and radio studios, in which they can produce their own professional broadcasts and programmes.

Policy development

The flow of information required for policy development must operate freely up and down from grassroots to top structures. This ensures that issues and

concerns originating from the grassroots, or flagged from the top, are identified and dealt with as soon as they arise.

Discussion papers or draft policy documents are then drawn up, using the professional resources of the organisation, and capitalising on the views and ideas gleaned from membership through motions and resolutions.

Then, the discussion papers must be given proper airing through the structure of the organisation, or even beyond, if the issue requires global support among farmers.

Hence, in 2002, IFA carried out a comprehensive survey of all 27,000 Irish dairy farmers on future dairy policy, circulating a questionnaire with the assistance of all the country's milk purchasers, to which an excellent 23% response was received. The survey revealed an overwhelming support for production management through milk quotas as a quid-pro-quo guarantee of adequate milk prices. It clearly showed that Irish farmers do not believe themselves to be ready for quota abolition, despite what some narrow interest groups had been arguing.

The discussion paper can then be finalised into a policy paper, and included as part of the organisation's general policies, with maximum support from members, and ideally from all farmers which the specific policy issue concerns.

Obtaining such support requires exceptional leadership skills in the people elected to the top levels of the organisation.

Developing policies also requires good professional resources, access to researchers, legal advice and relevant expertise.

Dissension and conflicts of interests

In any type of human organisation, dissension is bound to feature at some stage. Indeed, it is important to give vent to diversity of views and interests.

Therefore policy development, particularly on sensitive issues, should always be preceded by a thorough debate within the organisation.

Few issues will ever be solved through a single uncontroversial plan of action. Some group of members will disagree. This is part and parcel of the normal day-to-day debate which should go on in any properly democratic organisation.

However, if such disagreements are improperly handled, they can lead to major dissatisfaction among members. Left to fester they may even result in loss of members or generate splinter groups.

Five years ago in Ireland, the Irish Cattle and Sheep owners' Association (ICSA), was formed by dry stock farmers mostly involved in winter fattening.

They felt that the mainstream organisations were dominated by the concerns of dairy and suckler farmers, which they perceived to be totally incompatible with their own.

Initially at least, they decided that only in an organisation where these farmers were not represented at all could their priority issues be addressed in any way.

The Confédération Paysanne was set up in France in competition to the mainstream FNSEA in the 70's.

The FNSEA was seen as a group representing conservative and generally larger farmers by many in a new generation of more environmentally and socially conscious farmers. They thought the FNSEA was concerned with commercial considerations to the exclusion of social issues, particularly as they related to small farmers in disadvantaged and increasingly deserted rural areas.

The Confédération Paysanne was a product of the social unrest of 1968, and proposed an alternative to the traditional values of the sclerotic FNSEA.

In Australia, the deregulation of the state-based liquid milk market gave rise to the birth of the Australian Milk Producers' Association, who were established to row back the deregulation. The mainstream Australian farmers' unions had taken the pragmatic view that, faced with a quota system deemed unconstitutional by Australia's Supreme Court, it was better to try and get the best possible compensation package for the dairy farmers affected than to fight an impossible fight and get nothing in the end.

AMPA tried to give voice to the frustrations and disgruntlement of hard done by liquid milk producers in certain states. They worked hard against the conservative parties in the general election of 2001, eventually seeking what other farmers' unions saw as unrealistic levels of compensation, to include the value of the abolished quotas and the loss of income. However, their fight was in vain, as the deregulation is now a fait accompli, and the compensation package, paid for by way of a consumer levy, has not been improved.

The approach taken by the US NFU is to encourage multiple membership (over 90% of their 300,000 family farm members are also members of other farmers' organisations), and to communicate with other organisations, particularly on difficult issues.

The US NFU lobbies with other commodity groups on subjects of common interests. In 1999, the NFU adopted the "Principles of Agreement", which attracted 29 other commodity specific farmers' organisations.

It is worth remembering that splinter groups and competing organisations have to be financed from the one pool of farmers' incomes.

Do such divided approaches really make the best use of the limited resources farmers can afford to invest in their professional representation?

Does a multiplicity of voices allow for the more precise reflection of diversities of interests, or does it simply give an excuse to governments and politicians to play one group off against the other?

Those questions are at the very core of farmers' unions' strategies.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD

The audiences

Farmers' unions have three main external audiences: governments and institutions, the purchasers of their produce, and the general public.

Communicating with **governments and institutions** is what lobbying is all about, and is the main missions of farmers' unions.

In most countries where farmers' unions are professionally established, this relationship is well structured, even if historically it had to be earned the hard way.

Hence, the IFA (NFA at the time) had to establish its right to negotiate with and be recognised by the government of the day after spectacular marches and demonstrations in the late 60's. Refusal to pay rates – a form of land taxes - resulted in the jailing of a number of farmers.

In all the countries I visited for this research project, the main farmers' unions were the established voice of the farmers they represented, and as such were respected and consulted by governments and institutions.

Indeed in some countries, farmers' unions are established as one of the social partners.

Consultation is done through membership of official advisory groups and committees, or ad-hoc on specific issues.

Farmers' unions can also initiate and propose policy papers, rather than just react and respond to government decisions or proposals for legislation.

When it comes to communicating with the **purchasers of their members' produce**, not all the farmers' unions I met with had the same approach.

Much depended on the degree of institutionalised supports farmers receive.

For example, I visited New Zealand during the final negotiations for the merger of New Zealand Dairy Group and Kiwi to form what is now known as Fonterra Co-op.

Federated Farmers of New Zealand saw the proposed merger as a good thing for the New Zealand dairy industry and therefore a good thing for dairy farmers. However, the official attitude of the organisation was that as this was a merger between two co-operatives, farmer members would have the final say in what would happen. There was therefore no need for FFNZ to become actively involved on behalf of its members.

In contrast, in recent years, IFA was very directly involved in the merger of Waterford and Avonmore to form Glanbia in the late 90's. In particular, IFA

was expected to obtain milk price guarantees to make sure that the savings from the merger would benefit farmers.

More recently again, the purchase of Golden Vale by the Kerry Group, and the subsequent resale of some of the Golden Vale assets to Lakeland Dairies, led to a number of meetings being specifically held by IFA to seek both price and representation guarantees on behalf of Golden Vale suppliers.

In France, the regional dairy federations, the FDPLs, are directly involved in price setting negotiations in the milk sector, through the statutorily established “interprofession”, which gathers together farmers and the local private and co-operative milk processing industry.

On the other hand, in the UK, it is interesting to note that it took Farmers’ For Action’s militancy to persuade supermarkets to increase prices for the specific purpose of passing those back to farmers. The long established British farmers’ unions had neither been able to, nor tried to deliver such concessions on behalf of producer members during the years of income crisis they suffered.

The general public is nowadays probably the most difficult audience of all for farmers’ unions to deal with, and yet one of the most important.

For a very long time, farmers’ unions had by and large ignored the general public in their communication strategy. The public was assumed to be onside, or at worst indifferent.

However, the public’s attitude has changed. The general public, the consumers of the produce produced by farmers, and the taxpayers and electorate on whose goodwill much of a country’s agricultural policies depend, are one and the same audience.

I was quite surprised when reading Guy Smith’s paper on the Rebranding and Marketing of British Agriculture (see bibliography), that he didn’t seem to see a role in this exercise for the main British farmers unions.

I fundamentally disagree with him. I believe it is very important for farmers’ unions to take due account of the general public’s sensitivities and in particular to avoid actions and statements which could alienate their goodwill or confirm their negative prejudices. It is also a vital aspect of farmers’ unions’ mission to give a positive representation of farmers and their role in society.

Clearly, the UK NFU also disagrees with Mr Smith, as they rightly include those issues in their in their 1997 “Growing on Success: Tomorrow’s NFU” and their 2000 “Next Steps” strategic reviews.

And that is where the difficulty of addressing a dual audience, i.e. the farmers’ union’s own members on the one hand, and the general public on the other hand, really comes into its own.

While members might find that a 'soft' message shows lack of commitment, the general public might perceive the militant tone required to appeal to membership as unreasonable griping.

Methods of communication

Communicating with such differentiated audiences requires a complex communication strategy.

When lobbying governments and institutions, all farmers' unions use direct and focussed approaches: presentation of policy papers and submissions, participation in issue-specific discussion and policy formulation or advisory forums, etc.

There can also be a need to make the general public aware of the problems, even enlist their support by highlighting common areas of interests so as to increase the pressure on governments and institutions to accede to certain demands.

This requires a more public approach, which has also the added benefit to keep membership informed of the union's action.

Press and media

By using mass media, farmers' unions aim to increase awareness of farming issues among a wider audience.

It could be, for example, about highlighting the costs of measures imposed on farmers under general measures aiming at protecting the environment (Nitrate Vulnerable Zones in Ireland, for example).

On the face of it, the general public would be all in favour of curtailing farming activities to protect the environment.

However, they may not realise that farmers may have to invest significant amounts of money for no return.

This is only one example, to illustrate how the general public might be targeted in an information campaign by a farmers' union, in order to gain their support, or at least their understanding.

Doing this can at least minimise public resistance to, in this case, a more balanced approach to environmental legislation.

Protests and "stunts"

When an issue is particularly difficult to progress or when a serious crisis arises, farmers' unions sometimes need to make a **show of strength**.

This is about airing the problem, but also reminding governments that farmers still wield influence, and so strengthening the hand of their negotiators.

Protests, in union tradition, are not only a way of bringing difficult issues to the attention of the general public while increasing pressure on politicians, they are also a good way of channelling members' frustrations in a constructive way.

In October 1998, IFA organised a protest which led 40,000 farmers onto the streets of Dublin to highlight low incomes and poverty in farming in general, as well as a short term fodder crisis.

Within a few months, parallel lobbying activity by the organisation delivered a new social welfare scheme for very low-income farmers, Farm Assist.

In January 2003, the IFA staged a week long "tractorcade" from the four corners of the country, culminating in a 300-tractor orderly protest in Dublin, as part of its Farm Family Survival Campaign.

This was an exercise in moral boosting after a year of extreme income difficulties in all sectors, as well as a week long opportunity for a public and very informative debate on farm incomes and rural Ireland.

"Stunts" are protests with a more militant edge. Instead of simply protesting in an orderly march or a peaceful picket, frustrated farmers can sometimes engage in obstructive action, sometimes on the edge of illegality, with a view to obtaining satisfaction.

In January 2000, Irish beef farmers were incensed by what they perceived as the beef industry's collusion in keeping cattle prices low. Farmers protesting outside the gates of every meat plant in the country closed down the industry for two weeks, and after some legal complications resulting in a mass resignation of the IFA's Council, finally obtained an increase in cattle prices fully justified by market returns.

Such stunts in France have varied from regular dumping of agricultural produce on the doorstep of local authorities to the wrecking by José Bové and his associates at the French Confédération Paysanne of a MacDonald's restaurant construction site in Millau (S. West France) in 1999. The controversial action was in protest against globalisation and the imported American "mal-bouffe" (literally, "bad grub", i.e. fast food) concept.

José Bové in particular defended these actions as part of a strategy to hook up the media through a sensational act to open up the debate on the real issues of globalisation, the impact of WTO on farmers, developing countries and the environment. He described those methods as "farmers' unions' martial art".

But doesn't the sensationalism of the actions and the colourful character of José Bové ultimately obscure the issues he and the Confédération Paysanne

are seeking to highlight? Bové is frequently invited to address chat shows on French television and beyond, mostly on the basis of his personal notoriety. It seems his brand of spectacular “martial arts” has backfired on his cause.

Does this type of militancy work? There is evidence in France, that the exuberant protesting methods regularly used by farmers there do make an impact on politicians still very influenced by their rural constituencies.

However, some of those actions simply go too far. Recent examples of burning of live lambs imported into France from the UK in roll-on-roll-off trucks can only be described as scandalous abuse of animal welfare and hooliganism of the worse kind.

Yet, they happened because of a very real collapse in French sheep farmers’ incomes resulting from the impact on French lamb prices of cheap UK imports.

Even in crisis situations, these tactics are totally unacceptable: they are intolerable abuses of property and animal welfare, and do farmers far more harm than good in the public opinion.

There is undoubtedly a time and a place for well-timed, well-run militant action. It is the job of the union to make sure it does not degenerate.

To be genuinely helpful to the farmers’ cause, it is also important that these protests would project a very clear message as to their purpose.

Hence, it took nearly three days of the 5-day “Tractorcade” organised by IFA in January 2003 for the organisation to answer the question burning on every journalist’s lips: “what exactly are the farmers protesting for, what do they want?”.

La Grande Moisson, organised by the French young farmers’ association CNJA in 1990, did leave one wondering what that was all about, even if the harvest of 10 hectares of wheat grown on pallets on Paris’ Champs Elysées was spectacular and memorable.

Did it merely try to say that French farmers could do nice demonstrations too?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Identity and Purpose

Like any other organisation, a farmers' union needs a **corporate image** with which members can identify and non-members and the general public can clearly recognise.

A distinctive logo, house style, and consistency in presentation to the media and general public will help achieve this corporate image.

The farmers' union also needs to be absolutely clear as to what it stands for, and what its objectives and aims are.

This must be thought out thoroughly, and then summed up and expressed in a **mission statement**.

For most farmers' unions, these objectives will include the defence and promotion of fair and reasonable farm incomes achieved in the framework of a responsible agriculture mindful of the environment, providing society with safe food, respect for animal welfare, and contributing to the vibrancy of the rural economy.

Financing

Membership fees and dues are the fairest way to distribute the financing burden among members, and it also gives the organisation a better focus on its primary mission, a vital independence, and a strong mandate.

Fees should be set as **absolute amounts** rather than in percentage of the value of output by farmer members, as this makes it easier to **inflation-proof** the farmers' union income, and to tap into the portion of farmers' incomes made up by **direct support payments**.

Such fees can be collected without reference to processors of agricultural produce, and therefore also protect the union from **potential blackmail**.

Direct debit should be the preferred collection method, to secure regular collection of revenue with minimal expenditure.

All new members should be subject to direct debit procedure, and as many existing members as possible should be persuaded to pay by direct debit, by way of a fee reduction and/or some other suitable incentive.

To secure and even increase its income earning potential, the union could seek to **recruit new members**, either from the existing farming community, or extend some of its benefits and services to say, rural dwellers, or small rural-based businesses.

This would have to be done carefully though, to avoid diluting the primary role of the union, which is to represent the interests of farmers.

The union could also provide **additional services** and benefits for an additional fee to its existing membership (see next recommendation on services).

Commercial and taxpayer/national exchequer contributions should be kept at **arms' length**. They should not become a mainstream revenue source for the organisation.

In the case of sizeable and regular income stream such as those from insurance services provided by the union itself, it is wisest to **set up a separate structure** which protects the main organisation.

Other types of commercial financial contributions should be kept to specific projects or **sponsorship deals** for specific events or publications.

The union should **select** the commercial organisation carefully and should retain **editorial control** over the sponsored event or publication.

National exchequer contributions come with a different type of strings attached – but must be handled with equal care.

It is clearly preferable for a farmers' union not to be at all dependent on national exchequer funds.

Services

Services available to members must, as a general rule, be directly **relevant** and offer **good value** for the farmer's money.

Services available free with membership can pay for the membership fee several times over! If the fee costs a few tens of Euro, a couple of insurance discounts, and a telecom discount, can be worth more to the farmer than the fee itself.

A good portfolio of services is a valuable **marketing tool** for a union.

Developing **additional services** to **add value to membership**, will help increase income generation. Obviously, those extra services must make a positive contribution to the organisation from extra income and improved goodwill.

Family memberships packages should be targeted to all adult family members working full time on the farm, to promote the participation of family members, in particular farmers' spouses, to the organisation.

To optimise their participation, **voting rights** must attach to all adults in the family who are registered as members under those special packages.

Social concerns, such as rural poverty, the trauma of herd depopulation, depression and suicide who feature highly among farming populations, must be part of the farmers' union's portfolio of issues.

When all around concentrate on animal welfare, it is important for farmers' unions to supply a little "human welfare" to their members!

Help lines offering practical assistance should be made available to members, either directly provided by the union, or at least by way of a **link up** with the relevant support agencies.

Political Independence

To fulfil their mission, farmers' unions must maintain **total political independence**.

They must equip themselves with **rules** which oblige elected officials wanting to become actively involved in political parties to resign their position within the farming organisation.

Beyond maintaining neutrality, they need to **cultivate contacts** with all political parties so as to be able to lobby them all, as the need arises.

Structure

Farmers' unions should have a **fully democratic** structure from top to bottom, to give it its mandate, and establish its credibility in terms of representation.

A fully democratic structure also allows the membership to feel genuine ownership of the organisation, and to identify with its head officers.

Training

The democratic structure of the union must be completed by **proper training** for elected officers at all levels of the organisation.

The democratic process will bring natural leaders to the top, even if they are not skilled and polished public performers. It behoves the organisation to provide its elected officers with the skills required to allow them fulfil the democratic mandate given to them by membership.

Internal Communications

Methods

Direct methods of communication with members should be developed as a matter of priority.

Full use should be made of **new technology**, with the development of **interactive websites** with members only zones.

These also hold the potential to prohibit access to information to members who haven't paid their fee, by identifying them as they log in.

Unions should work towards having all their elected officers and members of committees on **emailing lists** to allow prompt and precise communication at low cost.

To speed up the process, farmers' unions could seek grant aids for **IT investment on farms**. Not only would it facilitate communications, it would also allow farmers better manage their business, with the increasing traceability and auditing requirements which they now have to operate with.

Mobile phone technology also allows for new methods of communications, in particular **SMS text** messaging. This can be a very useful way of communicating limited information valuable to a member's business.

Dealing with dissension

Unions should always provide a forum for difficult or challenging debates, even if they originate from a minority of membership, rather than let them fester on the sidelines.

On major issues, the organisation should engage in **thorough consultation of membership** to identify minority as well as majority views.

These consultation processes, carried out by way of **public meetings** and/or extensive **surveys**, must be more than cosmetic, otherwise they will antagonise members who will see them as lip service.

These are expensive exercises, which the organisation should not enter into without a commitment to see them through and take account of what they tell them.

Such exercises allow for **consensus building** and the provision of **leadership** by the farmers' union.

However, the ultimate decision-making should always be reserved for the **elected structure** of the organisation, whose democratic legitimacy must never be undermined.

Farmers generally fare better when it comes to influencing government policy if their unions act as their own internal clearinghouses. They can produce **balanced proposals**, or **differentiated schemes** for different groups of farmers.

The IFA motto "**Strength in Unity**" is wise. Governments and institutions will make the most of any internal rift to impose policies, and play one group against the other where diverging interests are allowed to go unreconciled within the union.

External communications

Dealing with the public.

Farmers' public image is critical to the furthering of their interests.

Farmers' unions must distance themselves from **bad or irresponsible** farming practices.

Unions should have well publicised rules providing that if farmers are found guilty of cruelty to animals, of use of illegal growth promoting substances, or deliberate pollution, their **membership will be terminated**, and they will be expelled permanently from the organisation.

There is no room for compromise if farmers' unions are to be accepted as professional, ethical bodies, and if farmers are to be established in public opinion as committed and expert professionals.

Farmers' unions should also spell out publicly the incompatibilities of **bad farming and commercial realities**. Farmers' unions must show farmers as responsible custodians of the countryside, their animals and the environment.

Farmers' unions must explain **farming and rural issues** in plain language to the general public, through co-operation with the media.

Farmers' unions could give presentations in **schools**, or even obtain that farming issues be covered in both primary and secondary school curriculums.

Farmers unions must explain in an accessible manner the economic as well as social justification for **government supports** to agriculture. The public's perception of those will ultimately be decisive as to the willingness by governments to continue financing necessary income support schemes.

Militant action

Farmers unions must ensure that **militant action**, where it is necessary, is non-destructive and non-violent.

Such action must not be overplayed though, as even if it offers members the opportunity to vent genuine frustrations, it runs the risk of presenting to the general public an image of whining farmers crying wolf one time too many, losing vital public support.

Most of the time, putting the message across will demand that the farmers unions put in **good professional PR**, with sensible convincing arguments, and solid background research and information work, rather than spectacular militant action.

Purchasers of produce

For farmers to assert their professionalism, regain the high ground and anticipate critics convincingly, they – through their unions - must take the initiative to develop **Codes of Good Farming Practice**.

They must initiate, draw up and co-ordinate their implementation with other stakeholders in the agri-business industry and the retail trade, rather than leaving it to supermarkets and/or legislators to **impose** potentially impractical standards.

Naturally, the unions must also actively promote the adoption of the codes by their members.

Farmers' unions must also be proactive with **Quality Control Schemes**.

These must be developed as positive **interactive partnerships** between farmers, the processing industry and the retail trade.

The provision of a high quality, consistent product where and when industry requires it must in return attract the payment of a **fair price** taking due account of the additional cost of producing the said product to the requirements of the Quality Control Scheme.

Government and Institutions

The greatest challenges for farmers' unions in the future will be to establish in national and international law the principle that **farmers are entitled to a fair income**, and to gain recognition from Governments and international institutions of their **right to negotiate** a fair price for their produce on behalf of their members.

Farm-gate prices cannot be allowed drop below acceptable levels if farmers are to continue to reliably supply society with the high quality, traceable food and environmental maintenance services which are expected of them.

This is particularly vital in the face of increasingly rationalised processors, pressures for international free trade under WTO and a multinational, concentrated and aggressive retail sector.

Farmers' unions must convince Government negotiators that they must enshrine the concepts of fair prices and fair incomes into international trade agreements **for all the world farmers**, not just those in developing countries.

CONCLUSION

Fair pricing

In an agricultural world dominated by WTO agreements and complex subsidy systems, the farmers of the world have never faced greater challenges.

European farmers in particular have in recent decades worked within a highly regulated and restrictive, but up until now reasonably supportive system which is now coming under serious pressure by the very governments and taxpayers who developed and financed it.

Producers of food are often looked upon with suspicion because of food scares and environmental concerns.

Their importance in the chain is being overlooked in the headlong rush for the cheap, safe, environmentally sound and animal-welfare friendly food to which every consumer aspires.

Farmers are price takers: they are the last link in the chain and get whatever is left after every other player has taken his share.

This needs to be changed to a situation where the producer of high quality produce is remunerated fairly as a matter of course.

This, I believe, is the single greatest challenge to farmers' unions in the coming decades.

There is probably a whole new Nuffield research project in that. Future Scholars, take note!

The farmers' unions farmers deserve

As we go forward, some would argue that the numbers of farmers are dwindling, and that farmers' unions are a retrograde, often socially motivated force which commercial farmers will not need in a world of freer trade.

My research, as well as my experience with the IFA, has convinced me of the exact opposite.

Farmers will need stronger unions than ever, unions that are even more skilful than ever before in international negotiations, whether of WTO agreements, or of internal Agricultural Policy reforms.

Farmers' unions have, many years ago in most cases, established their place in the economy, and in many cases managed to be recognised as social partners on the same basis as employers and trade unions.

They now need to establish the legitimate right to negotiate and bargain for fair price and production conditions on behalf of members with purchasers of their produce, just as trade unions have done many decades ago for the price of their members' labour and their working conditions.

Farmers will have to commit sufficient resources to secure their unions for the long haul.

They will have to become more actively involved within the structure of their unions, to make sure that they do a professional job.

They will have to see to it that their unions obtain the concrete and legal recognition of farmers' pivotal role as custodians of the environment, and as providers of food, the most basic essential for life in human societies worldwide.

Farmers will get the farmers unions they are prepared to commit time and money to: they will get the farmers' unions they deserve!

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