

Key points

Collective organisations play a crucial role in helping to make communities more resilient to shocks.

More than eight million collective organisations have been established since 2000 — a dramatic increase on previous decades. This indicates a growing recognition of the value they play in helping to deliver resilience.

The strength of collective organisations, which is based on their shared and trusted pursuit of public goods, deserves greater recognition, finance and technical support.

Any support should recognise these movements as key agents of change, not as passive recipients of development aid.

Why collective organisations matter for resilience

In the face of worsening and interlinked global threats such as biodiversity loss, climate change, poverty and hunger, collective organisations bolster long-term social, environmental and economic sustainability. By mobilising large numbers of members, they resist unfair grabs for power, land and resources, and instead collaboratively pursue outcomes that benefit societies, such as biodiverse farming systems, shared business models, localised democracies, fair public policies and laws, and inclusive education and training. This not only builds resilience for the organisations' members, but also helps secure a more equitable, sustainable and peaceful planet. Supporting collective organisations is therefore a highly effective and efficient way of delivering public goods at scale.

The world is facing escalating crises of biodiversity loss, climate change, economic turmoil, social inequality, poverty and hunger. Women, young people and ethnic and social minorities, including rural smallholder farmers, small-scale fishers and fish workers, Indigenous Peoples and those living in urban informal settlements, are often at the forefront of, and suffer most from, these interconnected challenges.

The dominant contributors to these crises are destructive, extractive economic models, unjust power dynamics, and protectionist policies and laws. These prevalent ideologies are leading humanity to overshoot environmental boundaries while neglecting the most vulnerable. Different ideologies must be supported to challenge this status quo, otherwise people and planet will continue to suffer.

IIED's research suggests six key categories of what we as humans value: beauty in nature and culture; material health and wellbeing; affirmative social relationships; present and future security; creative fulfilment of potential; and a sense of identity and purpose.¹

These values can be pursued for short-term, individualistic enrichment — following ideologies that legitimise the appropriation of value in the interests of the few — or they can be pursued for long-term, collective benefit — prioritising the interests of the many. Collective organisations follow the latter path, offering a compelling model for how these values can be pursued in the public interest and provide long-term social, environmental and economic sustainability in the process.

While democratic governments also pursue public goods, they often have limited reach into remote rural areas or deprived urban settlements. This is why investment in local to global collective organisations is so important.

What are collective organisations?

Collective organisations are groups of individuals or institutions that come together to jointly identify and work towards a shared goal or interest. This could be smallholder farmers supporting each other through a community savings and credit association, fishers

collaborating to get their catch to market or forest users jointly managing natural resources in a sustainable way.

Together, these groups can achieve much more than their members can alone. They can pool

knowledge and contacts, share costs and use their strength in numbers to negotiate better deals.

Because collective organisations comprise of members of the communities in which they are based, this gives them much more of a stake in

the future of those areas than is often the case with outside interests. This means they focus on things that are in the public interest, such as:

- Sustaining biodiverse farming and fisheries management systems that contribute to a healthier environment and more secure and affordable sources of food for their members
- Mapping informal urban settlements and identifying gaps in service provision, and advocating with governments for improved housing, essential services and climate resilience, to ensure the presence of low-income populations in cities is recognised and provided for
- Creating shared business models that generate and share revenues across their membership to secure stable livelihoods locally
- Using their strength in numbers to champion fair and effective public policies within spaces that offer representative, localised democracies — where people's voices can be heard and valued so that people can live together more harmoniously, and
- Supporting and providing inclusive education and training opportunities for local people to learn new skills and build a career where they live.

All this helps develop and strengthen social bonds and gives people greater confidence to invest in public goods, knowing that others will do the same.

How do collective organisations work?

Collective organisations often exist in interlinked tiers, which work together to collectively pursue these public goods (see Figure 1).

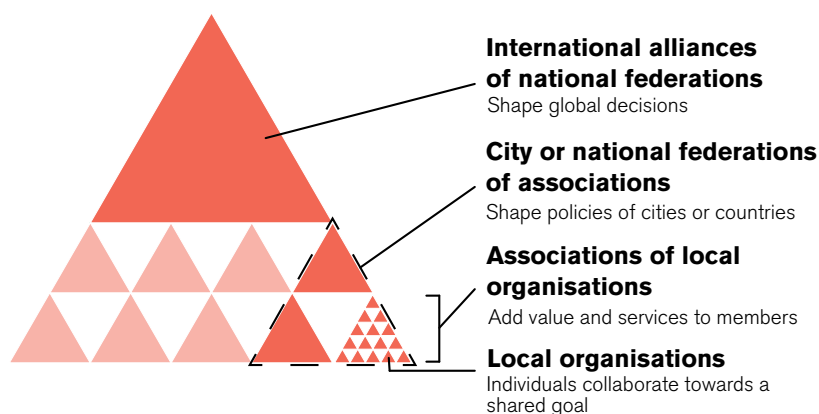
Among rural producer cooperatives, at the bottom is a diverse array of small groups collectively working to deliver products in a sustainable way and create shared saving and loans facilities. Above them are associations of those cooperatives, which add value by pooling products and financial resources from several groups to invest in processing and packaging infrastructure, and providing technical support services to their members. Then there are 'apex' bodies, which are national or sub-national federations that represent and support networks of associations by helping to shape policies that affect their members. These in turn may be part of international alliances, which help to shape global decisions.

These layers of interlinked organisation are also visible among collective organisations of the urban poor. Grassroots groups are mobilised to set up small savings groups that build capacity, cohesion and trust. Community-level federations feed into city- and national-level federations that are, in turn, affiliated to regional and international networks. These federations share a set of principles and methodologies for advocating for inclusive, pro-poor policies and practices at the neighbourhood, city and global levels. Knowledge, good practices and solutions to issues, such as climate risks, are shared through regular and strategic peer exchanges across the network, enhancing action and resilience.

It is estimated that over eight million collective organisations were established between 2000 and 2020 for a range of shared ambitions, including building watersheds, planting forests, improving irrigation, tackling pest infestations, protecting wildlife, sustainably managing fisheries, upgrading informal settlements, and setting up savings and credit cooperatives to provide microfinance.² This represents a dramatic increase in their numbers, indicating a growing recognition of the value collective organisations can play in helping to deliver resilience.

Together, groups can achieve much more than their members can alone, by using their strength in numbers

Figure 1. The interlinked tiers of collective organisations



Why are collective organisations important?

Collective organisations strengthen local resilience in both urban and rural settings.

In urban areas, where around half of the world's population lives,³ collective organisations are critical to the efficient and sustainable functioning of societies. They provide important services in informal and low-income communities, such as microloans for housing and infrastructure upgrades and small business development. They undertake data collection through mapping and enumerations, and work with local governments to promote climate-resilient informal settlement upgrading and affordable housing. They also serve to organise informal workers, such as street food providers and waste pickers/recyclers, and support improved livelihood opportunities within communities, especially in low-income areas.⁴

In rural areas, collective organisations are central to the sustainable management of forests and agriculture. Family farmers and their organisations produce 80% of the world's food⁵ and also play an important role in protecting forest landscapes, supporting biodiversity and promoting food security (see Box 1).

On coasts and in other areas near water bodies — rural and urban — small-scale fisheries collectives play an active role in sustainably managing fisheries and advancing community wellbeing, including through food and nutrition security, labour rights and healthcare.⁶

Although 1 in 12 people globally — nearly half of them women — depend on small-scale fisheries for their livelihoods,⁷ many of them still have limited or insecure access to aquatic resources and are forced to compete with large-scale fisheries.⁸ Small-scale fisheries collectives help to secure the rights of coastal communities, fishers and fish workers, and enable participation in governance and management of fishing areas, including through co-management arrangements that have contributed positively towards the Sustainable Development Goals, such as by restoring fish stocks.⁹

Collective organisations also provide a significant source of income and investment for communities — estimated at as much as US\$1.29 trillion annually in rural communities alone in 2017.¹⁰

For example, smallholder farmers could potentially be collectively investing US\$368 billion annually on necessary climate adaption measures in their communities — approximately 180 times all the climate and development financing reaching them.¹¹ This includes the use

Box 1. About the Forest and Farm Facility



A restored forest landscape used for providing fodder for dairy farmers in Nepal.

Credit: Duncan Macqueen/IIED

Since 2012, IIED has co-managed the Forest and Farm Facility (FFF) with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the global alliance of agri-agencies, AgriCord.¹² FFF provides direct finance to more than 1,000 forest and farm producer organisations (FFPOs) operating at the local to national level in 14 countries¹³ as well as those at the regional and global level.¹⁴ Providing direct finance to these organisations allows them to strengthen and enact their own visions for change.

Since 2018, FFF has seen these FFPOs deliver: 336 policy changes, which have created a more enabling environment for smallholder forest and farm producers; 505 value additions to sustainable forest and farm businesses; and 688,693 hectares of land under more sustainable forest management, forest protection or restoration.¹⁵

One such FFPO is the Central Dairy Cooperative Association Limited Nepal (CDCAN), a national dairy federation. CDCAN develops organic, smallholder, tree-based fodder systems with local dairy cooperative members. For example, one of their members, the Setidevi dairy cooperative, has restored forest landscapes by enriching individual smallholder fodder with five species of Napier grass and ten species of tree fodder. This was financed out of their own credit union, which holds capital of more than US\$1 million.¹⁶ Setidevi has also joined forces with a local community forest user group, planting 30 hectares of tree fodder plants and grasses to help those without adequate land. The result has been a 20% increase in milk yields and a resilient fodder production system.¹⁷

For more information about FFF and further examples of the contributions of the programme, visit www.iied.org/forest-farm-facility-phase-ii

of climate-smart agricultural practices, often involving mixed crops, trees and animals in agroforestry systems, which help to advance agrobiodiversity.

Much of the self-generated funding for climate adaptation by collective organisations comes from the over 67,000 savings and credit unions worldwide, which manage around US\$3.8 trillion

of loans and investments.¹⁸ These loans and investments help collective organisations develop their businesses through efforts such as improved technology and infrastructure for processing their products, or 'shared labelling' on these products, which help promote and advocate for more regenerative food and livelihoods systems among consumers.¹⁹

What do collective organisations need to grow?

Too little recognition, finance and technical support currently reaches collective organisations. This limits collective responses to the growing threats posed by biodiversity loss, climate change, economic turmoil, social inequality, poverty and hunger.

Working in concert, collective organisations support greater resilience and prosperity for both people and planet. They embrace diverse approaches but are unified in their focus on creating and supporting common goods for their members, which in turn positively shapes global society.

Supporting collective organisations at the local, provincial, national, regional and global levels is therefore a necessary and highly effective and efficient way of delivering public goods at scale. This support could include:

- **Funders** providing enabling investment, blended finance and capacity building to help grow and develop collective organisations
- **Governments** creating regulatory environments that better support collective organisations to establish self-financing mechanisms, such as savings and credit cooperatives and credit unions, and
- **Institutions** involving communities in data collection, knowledge sharing and evidence gathering to better inform decision making and policy changes.

Mobilising new alliances of collective organisations, and boosting collaboration among



A meeting of a shea butter producers cooperative in Burkina Faso. Credit: Duncan Macqueen/IIED

them, would help bolster these efforts. Valuing and making space for such peer exchanges across networks is an invaluable and often underutilised resource for innovation among collective organisations, sharing best practices and amplifying the voices of more vulnerable communities.

Such support would help to increase the already vital role collective organisations play in enabling communities around the world to adequately respond and become more resilient to the growing challenges they are facing.

IIED has been partnering with collective organisations for several decades, valuing and advocating for community-led approaches. To discuss our work further and the importance of supporting collective organisations, get in touch.

Duncan Macqueen, David Ackers, Isabela Núñez del Prado Nieto, Teresa Sarroca, Annabelle Bladon, Jeneen Hadj-Hammou, Lucy Earle and Marcelle Mardon

Duncan Macqueen, director of forests, IIED; David Ackers, editorial manager, IIED; Isabela Núñez del Prado Nieto, former researcher — forest finance, IIED; Teresa Sarroca, senior project manager, IIED; Annabelle Bladon, senior researcher — aquatic food systems, IIED; Jeneen Hadj-Hammou, researcher — shaping sustainable markets, IIED; Lucy Earle, director of research and strategic impact, IIED; Marcelle Mardon, researcher — urban poverty and informality, IIED. The authors would like to thank Anna Walyncki, Janine Duffy, Kata Wagner and Stephen Mwangi for their helpful comments.



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development's (IIED) mission is to build a fairer, more sustainable world, using evidence, action and influence in partnership with others.

Contact

Duncan Macqueen
duncan.macqueen@iied.org

44 Southampton Buildings
London, WC2A 1AP
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
www.iied.org

IIED welcomes feedback
via: www.linkedin.com/company/iied

ISBN: 978-1-83759-181-7

This output was funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). However, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of this donor.

FIND OUT MORE

Our work on supporting collective organisations for resilience is being undertaken through various projects. Find out more about our work at

www.iied.org

Notes

¹ Macqueen, D et al. (2020) Innovations towards prosperity emerging in locally controlled forest business models and prospects for scaling up, *World Development*, 125. doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.08.004. / ² Pretty, J et al. (2020) Assessment of the growth in social groups for sustainable agriculture and land management, *Global Sustainability*, 3(E23). doi:10.1017/sus.2020.19. / ³ World Bank Group, Urban development, www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment/overview / ⁴ Satterthwaite, D et al. (2020) Building resilience to climate change in informal settlements, *One Earth*, 2(2), pp.143–156. doi:10.1016/j.oneear.2020.02.002. / ⁵ Lowder, SK et al. (2021) Which farms feed the world and has farmland become more concentrated?, *World Development*, 142, 105455. doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105455. / ⁶ FAO, Duke University and WorldFish (2023) Illuminating hidden harvests: the contributions of small-scale fisheries to sustainable development. Rome. doi:10.4060/cc4576en. / ⁷ Basurto, X et al. (2025) Illuminating the multidimensional contributions of small-scale fisheries, *Nature*, 637, pp.875–884. doi:10.1038/s41586-024-08448-z. / ⁸ Basurto, X et al. (2024) A global assessment of preferential access areas for small-scale fisheries, *npj Ocean Sustain*, 3, 56. doi:10.1038/s44183-024-00096-0. / ⁹ Smallhorn-West, P et al. (2022) Linking small-scale fisheries co-management to U.N. Sustainable Development Goals, *Conservation Biology*, 36, e13977. doi:10.1111/cobi.13977. / ¹⁰ Verdone, M (2018) The world's largest private sector? Recognising the cumulative economic value of small-scale forest and farm producers. International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Gland. doi:10.2305/IUCN.CH.2018.13.en. / ¹¹ Hou Jones, X and Sorsby, N (2023) The unsung giants of climate and nature investment: insights from an international survey of local climate and nature action by smallholder forest and farm producers. IIED, London. www.iied.org/21976iied / ¹² FFF is co-managed by FAO, IUCN, IIED and Agricon. Find out more at www.iied.org/forest-farm-facility-phase-ii / ¹³ Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Gambia, Ghana, Guatemala, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Nepal, Tanzania, Togo, Viet Nam and Zambia. / ¹⁴ Forest and Farm Facility (2025) Forest and Farm Facility Annual Report 2024. www.iied.org/22620g / ¹⁵ See note 14. / ¹⁶ Acharya, D et al. (2025) Upscaling agroforestry for dairy production in Nepal: the role of the Setidevi Cooperative. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22649g / ¹⁷ See note 16. / ¹⁸ World Council (2025) 2024 statistical report. Madison and Washington DC. / ¹⁹ Wagner, K (2023) How innovative shared labels are promoting diversity, biocultural heritage and sustainable production, IIED, 20 March. www.iied.org/how-innovative-shared-labels-are-promoting-diversity-biocultural-heritage-sustainable-production

