Research Note
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NAVIGATING AGRICULTURAL CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS FOR FARMER PRODUCER COMPANIES IN BARPETA DISTRICT, ASSAM

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Agriculture is the backbone of India, providing livelihoods for nearly 45 percent of the population. Small and marginal farmers play a critical role in reducing poverty and sustaining rural communities (Chopade *et al.,* 2019). FPCs aim to transform traditional farmers into producer-sellers by improving their access to technology, market information, and business services (Katiki *et al.,* 2021; Chauhan *et al.,* 2021).

These organizations, supported by institutions like NABARD, SFAC, NAFED, and NCDC, help farmers secure inputs at better prices, connect to markets, and boost their incomes (Chowdary *et al*., 2022; Phapale *et al., 2021).* The idea of producer companies was introduced in 2002 by economist Y.K. Alagh's leadership and further developed through policy initiatives such as the 2013 "Policy and Process Guidelines for Farmer Producer Organisations" by the Department of Agriculture and Cooperation (Alagh, 2007; Department of Agriculture and Cooperation, 2013).However, while FPOs hold great promise, they face significant challenges, including financial, technical, infrastructural, and market-related issues. These barriers often prevent them from reaching their full potential as one-stop solutions for small and marginal farmers (Paty *et al*., 2018). This study aims to uncover these challenges and identify strategies to help farmers unlock the full benefits of working collectively.

The current study conducted during the year 2023,employed an ex-post facto research design. In total, nine FPCs operate in the Barpeta District. Out of nine FPCs, one, "HowlyAgro-Fish Farmers Producer Company Limited," was purposively selected. The basis for choosing "HowlyAgro-Fish Farmers Producer Company Limited" was its relative member strength and competence to other FPCs operating in the region (Government of Assam). Primary data were acquired from sample respondents utilising a well-structured interview schedule. The list of members of the chosen FPC was received from the office of "HowlyAgro-Fish Farmers Producer Company Limited". To accomplish the study's objective, 100 farmers were selected randomly. The gathered data was evaluated using Mean Scores and Rank.

An effort has been made to examine the constraints encountered by respondents in carrying out FPC activities and reaping the advantages. The constraints were classified as personal, economic, infrastructure, operational, and marketing. The structural questions were rated on a three-point scale ranging from strongly agree/most adequate,

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agree/adequate and disagree / least appropriate, with values of 2, 1, and 0. Participants were asked to offer choices for several aspects of the FPC, which were tabulated.

According to the data in Table 1, the respondents rated Lack of time as the most important constraint, with a mean score of 4.12. Increased workload was identified as another limitation on II rank, with a mean score of 3.34. This might be because the respondents were active in the production and processing of agricultural products while also having to devote time to other activities such as meetings, training, money collecting,company planning, and so on. The dual burden of a few female farmers to undertake both domestic tasks and farm operations contributes to these limits. The respondents rated constraints such as a Lack of initiative (mean score 2.98) and a Lack of family support (mean score 2.45) III and IV, respectively. Non-cooperation was the least common constraint ranked V, with a mean score of 2.21, since they were extremely cooperative within their groups and made collaborative efforts throughout the survey.

To address personal constraints, such as Lack of time and Increased workload, several opportunities can be explored. Implementing workforce training programs can significantly enhance time management and productivity skills among FPC members. Such programs can be tailored to address specific challenges faced by farmers, helping them balance their farming and FPC responsibilities more effectively. Additionally, involving family members in FPC activities can foster a supportive environment, alleviating some of the pressures on individual farmers. By encouraging family participation, FPCs can create a more collaborative atmosphere that supports members in their roles. Incentive programs can also be introduced to motivate farmers to take more initiative and cooperate actively within the FPC. These incentives could include recognition for outstanding contributions or small financial rewards, thus, encouraging a more engaged and proactive membership.

Regarding the category of economic constraints, Table 1 shows that the majority of farmers encountered a shortage of sufficient financing at Ist rank, with a mean score of 4.34, posing challenges in implementing an enhanced package of practices. Other constraints classified II and III by FPO members were a lack of credit facilities and a lack of assistance from bank authorities, with mean scores of 4.12 and 3.89, respectively. As a result, they favoured non-institutional sources of financing over institutional ones. Respondents stated that receiving a loan is a time-consuming procedure that includes filling out forms, photocopying, document verifications, and organising relevant papers such as pictures, ID proofs, and meeting minutes, among other things. The member farmers also mentioned the constraint of high cost of labour, with a mean score of 3.15 and a rank of V. During peak seasons, respondents need to hire workers to carry out the cultivation and processing tasks. Furthermore, they must visit the bank several times, which takes a significant amount of time and results in a loss of wage-earning days for them.

Economic constraints, such as lack of sufficient finance and credit facilities, can be mitigated through various strategies. Forming microfinance groups within FPCs can provide farmers with more accessible credit options tailored to their needs. These groups can offer small loans with flexible terms, making it easier for farmers to invest in necessary inputs and practices. Additionally, leveraging public-private partnerships (PPP) can secure better financing terms and subsidies for FPC members. By collaborating with both government and private sectors, FPCs can access funds and resources that may otherwise be unavailable. Implementing cost-sharing models is another effective approach, where the financial burden of inputs and labour is distributed among members. This model can help reduce individual costs and make investments in agriculture more feasible.

According to Table 1, the key constraints were the Lack of processing plants, rated first by member farmers with a mean score of 3.98, lack of storage facilities, ranked second with a mean score of 3.54, and Lack of irrigation facilities, ranked third with a mean score of 3.45. They noted that a Lack of suitable storage facilities at the organisational level leads to insect and other organism attacks, which reduces the crop's market value. On the other hand, the farmers encountered another constraint: a lack of a good training hall, which had a mean score of 2.98 and ranked IV. In this instance, the Krishi Vigyan Kendra in Barpeta supplied space for training, meetings, and so on.

To overcome infrastructural constraints such as Lack of processing and storage facilities, FPCs can explore several opportunities. Applying for infrastructure development grants from government bodies or non-governmental organizations can provide the necessary funding to improve rural infrastructure. These grants can be used to build or upgrade processing plants and storage facilities, enhancing the overall efficiency of FPC operations. Developing community-based irrigation systems is another valuable opportunity. These systems can be managed collectively by FPC members, optimizing water usage and reducing individual costs. Additionally, mobile training centres can be introduced to provide skills and knowledge to farmers in remote areas. These centres can travel to different locations, offering training on best practices and new technologies, thus bridging the gap in infrastructure and education.

Table 1. shows the operational constraints experienced by the respondents. The data in the table show that respondents regarded Lack of technical expertise as the biggest barrier, with a mean score of 4.42. Interactions with members found that members were having difficulty adopting improved agricultural practices, licencing, and certifying organic goods due to a lack of technical expertise. ICT tools may assist farmers increase their productivity and gain greater access to market information, funding, and other facilities and services. According to the data, farmers placed lack of understanding of ICT tools as the second constraint, with a mean score of 4.29, preventing them from reaping the benefits of ICT tools. Lack of education and digital illiteracy were identified as the causes of a lack of knowledge of ICT technologies.

Lack of information regarding grading and packing was another operational limitation ranked III by farmers with a mean score of 3.83 due to a lack of training on improved packaging procedures, product processing, and storage practices. Other challenges stated by farmers with ranks IV, V, and VI were limited access to recommended methods, a high frequency of diseases, pests, and crop failure, and a lack of technical assistance. The farmers asserted that crop production using conventional methods is inexpensive, however,using HYVs, insecticides, herbicides, and fertilisers in the recommended package of practice costs more money, which they were unable to pay owing to their low financial situation. Unavailability of labour was a less severe limitation experienced by farmers, with a mean score of 3.01 and a ranking of VII.

Table 1. Constraints faced by members of HowlyAgro-Fish Farmers Producer Company Limited

n=100

Sl.No	Constraints	Mean Percent Score (MPS)	Rank
Personal Constraints			
i	Lack of time	4.12	I
ii	Increase workload	3.34	II
iii	Lack of initiative	2.98	III
iv	Lack of family support	2.45	IV
v	Non-cooperation	2.21	V
	Overall Score	*3.02*	
Economic Constraints			
i	Lack of sufficient finance	4.34	I
ii	Lack of credit facilities	4.12	II
iii	Lack of assistance from bank officials	3.89	III
iv	High cost of recommended inputs	3.56	IV
v	High cost of labour	3.15	V
	Overall Score	*3.81*	
Infrastructural Constraints			
i	Lack of processing facility	3.98	I
ii	Lack of storage facility	3.56	II
iii	Lack of irrigation facility	3.45	III
iv	Lack of training hall	2.98	IV
	Overall Score	*3.49*	
Operational Constraints			
i	Lack of technical knowledge	4.42	I
ii	Lack of knowledge of ICT tools	4.29	II
iii	Lack of awareness of grading and packaging	3.83	III
iv	Less access to recommended practices	3.54	IV
v	High incidence of pest, disease and crop failure	3.28	V
vi	Lack of technical guidance	3.16	VI
vii	Unavailability of labour	3.01	VII
	Overall Score	*3.65*	
Market Constraints			
i	Lower price for produce	4.51	I
ii	Lack of latest market information	4.37	II
iii	High cost of transportation	4.28	III
iv	Distant market	3.96	IV
v	Perishable nature of products	3.79	V
vi	Exploitation by middle men	3.56	VI
vii	Delayed payment	3.34	VII
	Overall Score	*3.97*	

**Source: Researcher's primary data*

Addressing operational constraints requires targeted interventions to improve technical knowledge and access to resources. Organizing technical workshops and seminars can provide farmers with the latest agricultural techniques and information on ICT tools. These workshops can be designed to address specific needs and challenges faced by FPC members, enhancing their operational efficiency. Establishing digital literacy programs is also crucial for improving members' proficiency with ICT tools. By providing training on digital technologies, FPCs can help members utilize these tools to their advantage, enhancing productivity and access to information. Collaborative problem-solving sessions can further support members by creating opportunities for them to share knowledge and solutions to common operational challenges. These sessions can foster a culture of cooperation and innovation within the FPC.

Marketing constraints are variables that limit the organization's capacity to fulfil its marketing objectives. Distant markets, a lack of up-to-date market knowledge, lower produce prices, high transportation costs and delayed payment were some of the marketing challenges faced by FPO members. Regarding these marketing constraints, data reported in Table 1 reveal that low produce prices were ranked I by farmers, with a mean score of 4.51. The farmers stated that they had no access to the most recent market information and ranked II with a mean score of 4.37. To get remunerative pricing, they must sell their goods at the main market, which is located far from their villages and incurs large transportation costs, for which they were ranked III and IV, with mean scores of 4.28 and 3.96, respectively. Other marketing challenges stated by respondents were the perishable nature of the items, exploitation by middlemen, and delayed payments.

Marketing constraints, such as limited access to profitable markets and high transportation costs, can be addressed through several strategic opportunities. Developing market linkage programs can connect FPCs with larger agricultural businesses or cooperatives, improving market access and stabilizing prices. These partnerships can provide farmers with better selling opportunities and reduce the impact of price fluctuations. Forming transportation cooperatives is another effective solution to reduce the cost and increase the efficiency of moving goods to market. By sharing transportation resources, FPC members can lower their expenses and improve logistics. Implementing real-time market intelligence technology can also empower farmers to make informed decisions about when and where to sell their products. Access to up-to-date market information can help farmers achieve better prices and avoid the pitfalls of market uncertainty.

The FPC members confronted five categories of constraints: personal, economic, infrastructure, operational, and marketing. The total mean score and rank were determined to be 3.02 (V), 3.81 (II), 3.49 (IV), 3.65 (III), and 3.97 (I) according to the constraints. Marketing and economic constraints were identified as the most significant challenges for FPC members. In order to address marketing inefficiencies, it is necessary to establish easily accessible digital platforms, possibly community-led or mobile-based, for real-time market intelligence. Also, it is necessary to establish direct connections with local and regional buyers and explore community e-commerce initiatives. At the same time, reducing economic vulnerabilities necessitates creating strong internal revolving funds within FPCs that are adapted to the financial realities of rural farmers and facilitating institutional credit access through regional "credit camps." Members will be empowered by promoting shared processing and storage facilities, improving operational capabilities through realistic, hands-on technical workshops, and offering basic digital literacy programs. Personal burdens will be lessened by creating a supportive atmosphere through efficient meeting scheduling and family involvement, which will help FPCs like HowlyAgro-Fish Farmers Producer Company Limited succeed in the long run.

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