



# Issue Brief 3



International  
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## Rural women producers and cooperatives in conflict settings in Arab States

This issue brief aims to shed light on the reality and potential of cooperatives in empowering rural women in conflict settings in Arab States, based on the experience of Lebanon, Iraq, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip (WBGs).<sup>1</sup> Violent conflicts, including intrastate and interstate wars and occupation of States and stateless territory, have had a deeply negative development impact across Arab States. The diverse nature of conflicts in the region dictates that adequate development interventions need to take into account the complex nature and specificity of each context.

### Conflicts, decent work deficits, and gender inequality

Conflict settings are characterized by deficits in all forms of security and are aggravated in rural areas where state outreach is often more limited. A common outcome of conflicts in the region is the geographic redistribution of populations through displacement, often to rural areas or refugee camps, and emigration, whether regular or irregular. The forced movement of persons and their separation along political, sectarian, or other identity lines limits their access to natural resources, as the natural environment itself is transformed during conflict.

The presence of high risk discourages productive investments and invites speculative private capital, fuelling instability and further exacerbating risk. The resulting shrinkage in employment opportunities, worsening of working conditions, and deterioration of social infrastructure can further intensify conflict situations and make them



longer. In such a situation, conflict settings affect women in ways both similar to and different than men, including in the way they compensate for the lack of formal social protection.

**In times of conflict, family structures as well as gender roles and responsibilities within them may go through dramatic changes along with political and economic shifts.**

A growing trend of women-headed households is observed, especially in rural areas: for example, 14.4 per cent of households were women headed in Lebanon after the civil war (Nauphal, 1997) and 10.2 per cent in occupied Iraq (COSIT et al., 2008). Men are typically more mobile and assume more risk, whether to secure an income in dangerous areas, or to engage in conflict-related activities. Meanwhile, many women start playing multiple roles as breadwinners, activists, fighters, political prisoners and martyrs in the face of displacement, loss and destruction (Centre for Mediterranean & Middle Eastern Studies, 2008). The power

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dynamics within families and communities change accordingly.



Women's more restricted physical mobility, a result of their household responsibilities and prevailing social norms, is compounded during conflicts, which further constrains their ability to fulfil their multiple roles. The challenges that women face include early marriage, lack of access to basic social services, and barriers to education resulting in rising illiteracy.

**With the scarcity of available jobs, and social norms giving the priority to men's employment, employed women are often concentrated in agriculture and low value-added services.**

In Iraq, Lebanon, and WBGs, women and men work mainly in the service sector, and a higher share of employed men work in industry compared with women. In all three settings, women represent less than a quarter of employment.

While the necessity for women to be employed increases in conflict settings, their opportunities to find jobs and access decent terms and conditions of work further deteriorate, as private investments are unable to generate decent jobs and public sector employment is curtailed. Moreover, private entrepreneurial activity is unable to compensate for the lack of wage employment opportunities, and the challenges to it intensify. In particular, the obstacles to women's access to and control over resources typically worsen.

Several factors have contributed to the historically low levels of women's land ownership in Lebanon, Iraq and the WBGs, ranging from patriarchal inheritance practices to the legislation that governs the distribution of land. In 1998, no more than 7

per cent of landholders in Lebanon were women (MoA and FAO, 2000), while in 1999 in the WBGs 5 per cent of women owned land, compared with 24 per cent of men. Women's restricted access to property, including land, limits their access to income-generating opportunities.

### Box 1

#### Cooperative values and principles

According to the ILO Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 (No. 193), the promotion and strengthening of the identity of cooperatives should be encouraged on the basis of:

(a) cooperative values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity; as well as ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others; and

(b) cooperative principles, as developed by the international cooperative movement, namely: voluntary and open membership; democratic member control; member economic participation; autonomy and independence; education, training and information; cooperation among cooperatives; and concern for community.

Source: ILO, 2002.

#### Main challenges and obstacles facing cooperatives

While most enterprises suffer in times of conflict, the cooperative form of enterprises has demonstrated its resilience to crises, as cooperatives "aggregate the market power of people who on their own could achieve little or nothing, and in so doing they provide ways out of poverty and powerlessness" (Birchall and Ketilson, 2009).

In particular, people in rural areas can establish cooperatives to share risks, pool resources, accumulate savings, and provide credit. Cooperatives have a special relevance for women who form a larger share of the agricultural labour force as contributing family workers.



**Cooperatives may have essential roles in attenuating the devastating effects of conflicts and contributing to peace-building in the aftermath.**

Despite the potential of cooperatives to respond to the social and economic goals of their members and of society, the development of cooperatives in Arab States has faced many obstacles.

### *The twists and turns in the history of cooperatives*

Cooperatives have a long history in Arab States, particularly in the three conflict settings mentioned above, which reaches back to the beginning of the twentieth century. In ways paralleling other developing countries (Tchami, 2007), the evolution of cooperatives has closely followed the social and political changes in Arab States. During the French and British mandates, cooperatives were used by the colonial authorities to secure their political domination over the lands formerly under the rule of Ottoman Empire. The post-independence phase was characterized by the rise of a centralized national authority where

cooperatives were under State control and used as means to manage rural affairs and implement land reforms.

**In recent years, cooperatives in the region have been repositioned to promote entrepreneurship and market economy in the context of globalization and donor involvement.**

Although they share a number of commonalities, the pathways followed by cooperatives, including rural women cooperatives, remain distinct across the Palestinian, Lebanese, and Iraqi experiences.

In the Palestinian context, the cooperative movement goes back to the 1920s. It has played a major role in political mobilization, particularly among women around the first Intifada. Economic cooperatives were set up by the women's committees as a part of the popular front of mass mobilizing against Israeli Occupation (Hanafi and Tabar, 2006). Such initiatives have been marginalized in the post-Oslo period, along with the NGOization of women's movements.

In Lebanon, the evolution of cooperatives has been closely associated with the transformations in state capacity. Supported by the government in the 1960s and 70s, they suffered a major decline during the civil war. Their re-emergence in the post-war period was largely driven by political parties and donor initiatives; ensuing bad practices have strongly damaged their reputation (Adwan, 2004).

In Iraq, cooperatives had an experience similar to other Arab States with strong State traditions (Owen, 2004). In the Ba'ath period, cooperatives were under direct control of the ruling party, serving social and political organizational functions. However, following the 2003 occupation of Iraq, cooperatives have largely been re-envisioned as private economic entities based on market principles that are largely supported by donor initiatives.

### *Cooperatives remain marginal*

Cooperatives remain marginal in the three settings, as they provide jobs for no more than 1 per cent of the employed population and women's participation within them is limited. Women who participate are mainly involved in women-only

cooperatives that are small in size. Yet much of the literature on rural women producers and their cooperatives in the three countries has a tendency to paint an overly optimistic picture, often to validate the support of external funders' to the cooperatives. The actual limited role of cooperatives in the three settings reflects the need to take stock of lessons learned to enable cooperatives to fulfil their potential.

Cooperatives can allow for sharing risks, pooling resources, learning together, generating income, and balancing work and family responsibilities. Cooperatives can contribute significantly to

(ILO, 2002). In fact, many private enterprises register as cooperatives to take advantage of the legal benefits and donor funds available to cooperatives, although they lack the basic features of cooperatives. Non-profit organizations also often register as cooperatives; although they may be support institutions, they are not cooperatives since they are neither membership-based nor democratically controlled.

**Many institutional entities identify themselves as cooperatives but lack the basic properties of a cooperative.**

**Table 1. Cooperatives, private enterprises, and non-profit organizations**

Attributes	Cooperatives	Private Enterprises	Non Profit Organizations
<b>Ownership</b>	Members	Entrepreneur owned	Often not owned by anyone
<b>Control</b>	Democratic	Entrepreneur, bank	Board, leaders, beneficiaries
<b>Purpose</b>	Member promotion	Returns maximization	Public interest service
<b>Funding</b>	Cooperative equity	Capital markets	Tax-exempt, public or private donations, funding
<b>Social Responsibility</b>	Community development through member-approved policies	Some community activities	Collective action for a common good

**Source:** Based on OCDC, 2007.

income generation, and their decision-making process can contribute to improving women's position and status. They can also be conducive for developing trust and social cohesion, and the transformation of social norms towards more gender equality and mutual support, although there may need to be enough trust in place first, an outcome of the political process.

### ***Not every "cooperative" is a cooperative***

The attractiveness of cooperation has meant that many institutional entities identify themselves as cooperatives although they lack their basic properties. A cooperative is defined as an "autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise"

### ***Donor dependency can threaten sustainability***

Development agencies and their NGO partners often do not build on contextualized local knowledge to engage with cooperatives. Instead they are more likely to base their work on their own home country experiences which may lead to establishing a relationship of dependency and subordination for the local cooperatives. The fact that cooperatives depend on short term donor funds in conflict settings can endanger their sustainability as local economic initiatives which are exposed to the ebb and flow of donor priorities. Moreover, the availability of international development funds in large quantities can transform cooperatives from being productive ventures to fundraising initiatives. Such dependency on donor funds may cause the cooperatives to avoid building long lasting alliances with local stakeholders. Consequently,

interventions need to focus on developing the capacity of cooperatives for self-reliance.

### *Cooperatives often lack gender responsiveness*

Mixed cooperatives of women and men tend to be synonymous with “men-led” cooperatives. Women who join such cooperatives are often wives of prominent leaders or cooperative officers, and are absent from leadership or decision-making positions. In addition, women members do not benefit from the cooperatives to the same extent as men. In smaller and women-only cooperatives, the benefits generated may be controlled by other family or community members. Accordingly for women, cooperative membership can mean an increase in workload without an increase in control over resources or decision-making power.

### **Enhancing and sustaining rural cooperatives**

Cooperatives have the potential of attenuating the devastating impacts of conflict settings, and laying the ground for sustainable recovery in post-conflict periods. The strengthening of cooperatives can effectively mitigate the effects of violent conflicts as well as reinforce their coping mechanisms. Many pitfalls, however, threaten the effectiveness of the promotion of cooperatives by development actors; ignoring such pitfalls may derail the purpose of the interventions or even lead to destructive effects, as target groups lose trust in the process, the parties involved, and the genuine value of cooperatives.

### *Skills development is central*

Women-only cooperatives often tend to focus on the comparative advantages of women in skills related to homemaking activities, which reinforces traditional gender norms. Expanding the skills of rural women as preparation for positions of responsibility and non-traditional occupations is crucial, for instance through developing their managerial, financial, marketing, and accounting skills. The diversification of skills can help women who wish to transcend their traditional roles and enable them to create mixed cooperatives that would be gender responsive.

Training strategies should be linked to the broader goal of promoting gender equality in the world of work; rural cooperatives can target gender equality issues more explicitly, such as unpaid work, shared

responsibilities and gender-based violence. The inclusion of men in such activities from the onset is likely to ensure their support and reduce resistance, as the strict focus on women can lead to undesirable outcomes.

## Box 2

### 2012 the International Year of Cooperatives

The General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed 2012 as the International Year of Cooperatives in adopting resolution 64/136 on 18 December 2009, emphasizing “the potential role of cooperative development in the improvement of the social and economic conditions of the indigenous peoples and rural communities”.

Among other measures it called for “promoting and implementing better legislation, research, sharing of good practices, training, technical assistance and capacity-building of cooperatives, especially in the fields of management, auditing and marketing skills” and “promoting sound national policy formulation through harmonizing statistical methodologies”.

**Source:** UN, 2009.

### *Training needs to be adapted to the local context*

Training materials are often developed by international organizations in countries other than those they are ultimately used in; consequently problems of effective communication typically arise. The first obstacle is the language barrier, both for international experts working in the field and for the development of training materials. Closely related to the language barrier is the conceptual barrier; even when translation is able to render closely the original meaning, the content may remain unpalatable to the receivers on account of the ‘foreignness of concepts’. The ILO has taken several steps to tackle those obstacles through the adaptation of the WEDGE (Women Enterprise Development and Gender Equality) materials for rural women producers in conflict settings in Arab States. The process included the participation of local trainers in the peer review of materials and their testing with small groups of intermediaries. The trainers were trained to promote entrepreneurship and gender

equality in their institutions and share their knowledge on different levels.

### ***Cooperation is desirable across institutional forms***

Cooperation among cooperatives can help them develop their capacities, secure markets for their products, and achieve economies of scale, instead of competing with each other.

### **The strength of cooperatives can only be realized when primary cooperatives organize into unions, and cooperative unions come together into federations.**

Cooperation with other membership-based organizations like trade unions can also foster mutual advantages. For example, Palestinian trade unions are establishing an interface with cooperatives, as they are interested in unionizing the members of cooperatives. Meanwhile, cooperatives can tackle the problems of informality, still an unfamiliar territory for many trade unions, as they can contribute to achieving some semblance of job protection and social security, especially in rural areas. Coordination and cooperation are necessary to strengthen cooperatives in line with cooperative principles.

### ***More State involvement is needed***

Reducing urban biases in economic policies and shifting focus to supporting rural employment generation, through mechanisms such as cooperatives, can support women and men in these communities to enhance their livelihood options and to improve the quality of life for their families and communities. An enabling environment for cooperatives necessitates better contextualized cooperative laws, facilitating the establishment of cooperative federations, encouraging related research and data collection, and legal and economic literacy on cooperatives for local communities. Support for cooperatives, however, needs to be on the basis of equal treatment with other forms of organizations, to protect cooperative autonomy and independence (Henry, 2005). Measures to increase the gender responsiveness of the cooperative movement need further coordination by women's departments and rural women units in ministries. Such coordination may come in the framework of national decent work strategies for urban and rural areas.

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