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Governance and Leadership Practices in Farmers Producer Organizations: Implications for Organizational Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The study aims to explore how governance and leadership practices influence the effectiveness and sustainability of Farmers Producer Organizations (FPOs) in India. It seeks to understand the nature of governance structures, leadership dynamics, and the mechanisms that contribute to, or constrain, the performance of FPOs in promoting smallholder empowerment, market access, and collective growth. **Methodology:** The paper employs a systematic literature review approach. The literature were analysed to identify common patterns, governance models, leadership practices, and key challenges faced by FPOs. **Findings:** The review reveals that FPOs in India operate under diverse legal and institutional structures, primarily as producer companies and cooperative societies. While these models have expanded rapidly, governance issues, such as weak board functioning, inadequate financial transparency, and limited managerial expertise, remain widespread. Effective leadership is found to depend on technical competence, business acumen, inclusiveness, and sustained mentorship. Furthermore, professionally managed FPOs with participatory governance demonstrate higher levels of financial stability, market engagement, and member satisfaction. **Implications:** The findings underscore the need for policymakers, financial institutions, and support agencies to prioritize governance reforms and leadership capacity-building as central pillars of FPO promotion strategies. Strengthening board governance, enhancing transparency, and fostering hybrid leadership models can significantly improve FPO sustainability and competitiveness. The study also highlights the importance of long-term institutional handholding and the professionalization of management to ensure organizational resilience. **Originality:** This paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge by integrating governance and leadership dimensions into a unified analytical framework for assessing FPO performance. Unlike earlier studies that focus mainly on financial or market aspects, this review emphasizes the qualitative drivers of organizational effectiveness, governance culture, leadership development, and institutional legitimacy, thereby offering novel insights for both researchers and practitioners seeking to strengthen collective farmer enterprises in developing economies.

Keywords: Farmers Producer Organizations (FPOs), Governance, Leadership Practices, Organizational Effectiveness, Smallholder AgricultureKeywords: Public Sector Banks, Gross NPAs, Net NPAs, Provisions.

INTRODUCTION:

Small and marginal farmers continue to face a wide range of structural and market constraints that hinder their economic viability and competitiveness. These include fragmented production systems, low bargaining power, inadequate access to finance, technology, quality inputs, and reliable markets, (Birthal, P. S., Chand, R., Joshi, P. K., & Kumar, S., 2017); (Sinha, R. & Kumar, S., 2019). Such challenges are compounded by the dominance of intermediaries in agri-value chains, price volatility, and the inability of individual farmers to achieve economies of scale in production and marketing, (Chowdhury, A., Ghosh, M., & Saha, B., 2018).

In response to these persistent market failures, Farmers Producer Organizations (FPOs) have emerged as a collective institutional mechanism to empower smallholders, enhance their market participation, and facilitate more equitable value chain integration, (Thamizhselvan, R. & Azhagaiah, R., 2019); (Trebbin, A., 2017). FPOs operate on cooperative principles, enabling farmers to jointly procure inputs, access credit, and market their produce more efficiently, thereby strengthening their socio-economic position, (Kumar, A., Singh, R. K., & Sinha, S., 2020).

In the Indian context, the promotion of FPOs gained significant momentum after 2016, supported by national-level institutions such as the Small Farmers' Agribusiness Consortium (SFAC) and the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD). These agencies have spearheaded programs offering equity grants, credit guarantees, and capacity-building initiatives to promote collective farming and entrepreneurship among small producers, (NABARD, 2019); (SFAC, 2020). The Government of India's 10,000 FPO Scheme (2020) marked a landmark initiative aimed at fostering collective enterprise and ensuring that smallholders benefit from organized market participation, (Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare (MoAFW), 2020).

Despite the rapid numerical growth of FPOs across Indian states, their performance and sustainability remain uneven. While some FPOs have evolved into profitable and self-sustaining entities, many struggle with internal governance issues, weak leadership capacity, and inadequate managerial professionalism, (MANAGE, 2018). Common bottlenecks include ineffective board functioning, lack of accountability, dominance of a few members in decision-making, and limited participation of women and marginalized groups, (Mishra, A., 2020); (Kumar, S., Sharma, R., & Singh, R., 2019). These governance and leadership challenges often determine whether FPOs can transition from externally supported entities to independent, market-driven organizations, (Dev, S. M., 2019).

Leadership within FPOs plays a crucial role in shaping their strategic direction, inclusivity, and business orientation. Studies have highlighted that successful FPO leaders typically exhibit a combination of technical knowledge, social credibility, and entrepreneurial acumen, qualities that are essential to balancing both social and commercial objectives, (Jaiswal, P. & Kaur, R., 2018); (Raju, G., Rao, K., & Reddy, D. R., 2020). Furthermore, the presence of transparent governance structures and well-defined roles for boards and CEOs directly influences member trust, institutional legitimacy, and overall organizational effectiveness, (Reddy, P. M. & Singh, A., 2019).

2. Methodology:

This study adopts a systematic literature synthesis approach designed to review, analyse, and integrate existing evidence on governance and leadership practices in Farmers Producer Organizations (FPOs) in India. The review focuses specifically on publications produced between 2016 and 2020, a period characterized by significant institutional and policy support for FPO development in India, (NABARD, 2019); (Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare (MoAFW), 2020). The purpose of this methodology is to ensure that the synthesis captures both the recent empirical developments and the evolving governance and leadership paradigms that shape FPO effectiveness.

3. Governance Models and Forms of Institutions:

Governance is the structural foundation that determines how Farmers Producer Organizations (FPOs) function, make decisions, ensure accountability, and align collective interests. Across India, FPOs have evolved under different legal and institutional frameworks, each with distinct governance implications. The effectiveness of governance in these organizations depends not only on legal compliance but also on inclusiveness, transparency, and the ability to balance social objectives with commercial viability, (Dev, S. M., 2019); (Kumar, A., Singh, R. K., & Sinha, S., 2020).

3.1 Legal Forms and Their Governance Implications:

In India, FPOs can be constituted under multiple legal frameworks, Producer Companies under Part IXA of the Companies Act, 1956 (later incorporated into the Companies Act, 2013), Cooperative Societies under state cooperative acts, or Section 8 Companies under the Companies Act, 2013. Each legal form entails unique governance mechanisms, compliance obligations, and decision-making norms, (NABARD, 2019); (SFAC, 2020).

The Producer Company model, introduced to combine the efficiency of corporate structures with the inclusiveness of cooperatives, is the most widely adopted format in India, (Navaneetham, K., Joseph, T., & Pillai, S., 2017). FPCs are designed to provide democratic governance with professional management, where farmer-members elect the board of directors and the CEO oversees daily operations, (Reddy, P. M. & Singh, A., 2019). However, research indicates that many FPCs struggle to operationalize these principles due to limited managerial expertise and weak internal controls, (Jaiswal, P. & Kaur, R., 2018); (MANAGE, 2018).

3.2 Board Composition and Representativeness:

Effective governance in FPOs depends heavily on the composition, competence, and representativeness of the board of directors. However, several studies have documented elite capture, where local leaders or wealthier members dominate decision-making processes, undermining equitable participation, (MANAGE, 2018); (Kumar, S. & Sinha, R., 2020). Boards in many FPOs tend to be male-dominated and concentrated among better-educated or resource-rich farmers, leading to disconnect between leadership and the broader membership base, (Jaiswal, P. & Kaur, R., 2018). This imbalance often reduces trust, participation, and the perceived legitimacy of organizational decisions, (Raju, G., Rao, K., & Reddy, D. R., 2020).

3.3 Systems, Transparency, and Member Accountability:

Transparency and accountability are critical dimensions of good governance in member-based organizations such as FPOs. Transparent accounting, timely audits, annual general body meetings, clear procurement policies, and open communication channels are associated with improved organizational credibility and member satisfaction, (Reddy, P. M. & Singh, A., 2019); (NABARD, 2019).

However, many FPOs continue to exhibit weak internal systems, as evaluations by, NABARD, (NABARD, 2019) and SFAC, (SFAC, 2020), reveal. These deficiencies not only reduce internal accountability but also hinder external partnerships with banks, buyers, and development agencies, (Dev, S. M., 2019).

Member accountability mechanisms, such as participatory review meetings and grievance redressal systems, are also underdeveloped in most organizations, (Mishra, A., 2020). Studies suggest that FPOs implementing digital record-keeping and cloud-based accounting tools exhibit higher transparency and improved governance outcomes, (Kumar, A., Singh, R. K., & Sinha, S., 2020); (SFAC, 2020).

4. Leadership Practices: Selection, Capacities, and Roles:

Research consistently highlights that strong, inclusive, and capable leadership directly influences organizational sustainability, business performance, and farmer participation, *(Jaiswal, P. & Kaur, R., 2018); (NABARD, 2019); (Anoop Kumar, K., 2019).*

4.1 Leadership Traits and Competencies:

Successful FPO leaders demonstrate a blend of **technical expertise, business acumen, and** interpersonal skills. As the intermediary between the board, members, and external stakeholders, leaders must possess the ability to translate farmer needs into viable business models while maintaining member confidence and organizational integrity, (Navaneetham, K., Joseph, T., & Pillai, S., 2017); (IJRAR, 2019).

The literature identifies three critical competency domains for FPO leadership effectiveness:

1. Governance and Compliance Competence: Knowledge of legal frameworks, board procedures, audit systems, and reporting requirements ensures that FPOs maintain transparency and accountability, (MANAGE, 2018); (NABARD, 2019).
2. Business Development and Market Linkages: Skills in business planning, marketing, value-chain integration, and negotiation are essential to sustain profitability and competitiveness, (Jaiswal, P. & Kaur, R., 2018); (Anoop Kumar, K., 2019).
3. People Management and Social Leadership: The ability to mobilize members, resolve conflicts, and promote participatory decision-making fosters trust and commitment, (Raju, G., Rao, K., & Reddy, D. R., 2020); (Mishra, A., 2020).

4.2 Leadership Selection and Legitimacy:

Leadership legitimacy in FPOs derives from democratic election processes, peer recognition, and demonstrated competence in advancing collective welfare and business outcomes, (Anoop Kumar, K., 2019); (Navaneetham, K., Joseph, T., & Pillai, S., 2017). Yet, research indicates that while democratic elections are widely practiced, they often fail to ensure the selection of capable leaders. Many FPOs elect leaders based on social status or personal networks rather than managerial competence, (MANAGE, 2018); (Mishra, A., 2020).

Legitimacy, therefore, goes beyond formal elections, it depends on performance credibility, transparency, and member trust, (Kumar, A., Singh, R. K., & Sinha, S., 2020). Leaders who deliver tangible benefits such as better market prices, timely input supply, or successful business diversification are perceived as more legitimate and effective, (Raju, G., Rao, K., & Reddy, D. R., 2020).

To strengthen legitimacy, several studies recommend transparent nomination and election processes, leadership capacity-building programs, and gender-inclusive policies, (NABARD, 2019); (SFAC, 2020). Additionally, continuous performance appraisal systems and leadership rotation mechanisms can prevent elite capture and enhance participatory democracy, (Thamizhselvan, R. & Azhagaiah, R., 2019).

5. Governance and Leadership Affecting Organizational Effectiveness:

Effective governance creates systems of accountability, transparency, and member participation, while visionary leadership translates those systems into actionable strategies for collective growth, *(MANAGE, 2018); (NABARD, 2019)*. Studies indicate that FPOs demonstrating strong governance structures and capable leadership exhibit higher organizational performance, improved market integration, and stronger member satisfaction, *(Dev, S. M., 2019); (Raju, G., Rao, K., & Reddy, D. R., 2020); (Kumar, A., Singh, R. K., & Sinha, S., 2020)*. Conversely, weak governance or politicized leadership often leads to inefficiencies, elite capture, and the erosion of member trust, *(SFAC, 2020); (Mishra, A., 2020)*.

5.1 Financial Performance and Access to Finance:

Transparent bookkeeping, timely audits, and compliance with statutory norms are critical for building credibility among financial institutions and development agencies, *(NABARD, 2019); (Kumar, S. & Sinha, R., 2020)*. FPOs that maintain audited financial statements and adhere to corporate governance standards are more likely to access institutional credit and external investment, *(SFAC, 2020); (Singh, S. & Gupta, P., 2021)*.

Empirical studies from Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh further highlight that professionalized and transparent FPOs not only attract credit but also sustain long-term relationships with agri-finance institutions, reducing their dependency on grants, *(Thamizhselvan, R. & Azhagaiah, R., 2019); (Reddy, P. M. & Singh, A., 2019)*. Conversely, governance lapses, such as irregular audits, misuse of funds, or concentration of decision-making, create distrust among financiers and hinder credit flow, *(Mishra, A., 2020); (Anoop Kumar, K., 2019)*.

5.2 Market Linkages and Contracting:

Agribusiness firms, exporters, and institutional buyers prefer engaging with organizations that demonstrate reliability, accountability, and consistent performance, (Dev, S. M., 2019); (MANAGE, 2018). FPOs with structured governance mechanisms are perceived as credible business partners, capable of fulfilling contractual obligations, (Anoop Kumar, K., 2019); (Raju, G., Rao, K., & Reddy, D. R., 2020).

Case studies from Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu show that FPOs with participatory governance and market-oriented leadership achieved higher price realization (up to 20–25% more) compared to unorganized farmer groups, (Singh, S. & Gupta, P., 2021); (Thamizhselvan, R. & Azhagaiah, R., 2019). Leadership that combines business acumen with ethical conduct fosters long-term partnerships, reduces contract breaches, and improves supply chain integration, (Reddy, P. M. & Singh, A., 2019); (Navaneetham, K., Joseph, T., & Pillai, S., 2017).

5.3 Member Satisfaction and Retention:

At the core of every FPO lies its membership base, whose trust and participation ultimately determine the organization’s survival. Governance failures erode member confidence and result in high attrition rates, (Mishra, A., 2020); (Navaneetham, K., Joseph, T., & Pillai, S., 2017). Conversely, organizations that institutionalize participatory governance frameworks tend to enjoy stronger member loyalty, higher equity contribution, and sustained engagement, (Kumar, S. & Sinha, R., 2020); (Raju, G., Rao, K., & Reddy, D. R., 2020).

Research shows that FPOs conducting regular general body meetings, maintaining transparent communication channels, and implementing grievance redressal systems experience improved member satisfaction and organizational stability, (NABARD, 2019); (MANAGE, 2018). Furthermore, when members perceive equitable benefit distribution, they are more likely to reinvest time and resources into the FPO, (Dev, S. M., 2019); (Jaiswal, P. & Kaur, R., 2018).

6. Policy Implications and Recommendations:

Drawing upon the review of governance and leadership literature on Farmers Producer Organizations (FPOs), several actionable policy recommendations emerge to strengthen organizational effectiveness, inclusivity, and sustainability. The evidence underscores that governance and leadership are not peripheral concerns but core determinants of FPO viability, affecting access to finance, market participation, and long-term member trust.

6.1 Investing in Governance Capacity as a Strategic Priority:

Empirical studies and institutional assessments highlight that robust governance systems form the foundation for effective FPO performance and financial credibility, (Deshmukh, P. & Pawar, S., 2020); (NABARD, 2019). Development agencies, incubators, and state programs should allocate dedicated funding for governance strengthening, including transparent accounting systems, board management training, financial audits, and participatory monitoring frameworks, (SFAC, 2020); (Rao, M. & Joshi, R., 2018). Hence, policies must prioritize institutional capacity building over short-term business subsidies.

6.2 Promoting Hybrid Leadership with Role Clarity:

The literature advocates for a hybrid leadership model that blends the democratic legitimacy of elected farmer leaders with the professional acumen of trained managers, (MANAGE, 2018); (Anoop Kumar, K., 2019); (Srivastava, N., 2020). This dual approach prevents over-centralization and enhances strategic oversight, (Singh, J. & Chauhan, S., 2018). (NABARD, 2019); (MANAGE, 2018), recommend leadership role demarcation guidelines and competency frameworks that ensure each level, i.e. board, management, and staff, has defined responsibilities aligned with organizational goals.

6.3 Ensuring Long-Term Mentorship and Incubation Support:

Studies show that short-term engagement results in organizational fragility and dependency on external promoters, (SFAC, 2020); (Anoop Kumar, K., 2019). In contrast, long-term mentoring programs, lasting three to five years, that progressively transfer responsibilities to farmer boards lead to sustainable governance structures and greater autonomy, (NABARD, 2019); (MANAGE, 2018). Policymakers should therefore design phased exit strategies for promoting institutions, incorporating clear milestones and capacity benchmarks to ensure a smooth transition from NGO-led to member-led management.

6.4 Standardizing Performance Diagnostics and Link Governance to Finance:

Integrating performance grading tools into financial and policy frameworks has emerged as a best practice for enhancing accountability and incentivizing compliance, (SFAC, 2020); (NABARD, 2019). Linking these diagnostics to credit incentives, insurance guarantees, or equity grants can motivate FPOs to institutionalize best practices, (Reddy, P. S. & Rani, M. , 2018); (Deshmukh, P. & Pawar, S., 2020). For instance, banks and financial intermediaries can adopt tier-based lending models. Such mechanisms can create a virtuous cycle between governance quality and financial sustainability.

6.5 Strengthening Inclusive Leadership and Gender Equity:

Studies emphasize that leadership positions are often dominated by large farmers or local elites, marginalizing smallholders, tenant farmers, and women, (Singh, V., 2020); (Navaneetham, K., Joseph, T., & Pillai, S., 2017). To address this imbalance, policy interventions must establish inclusive leadership pathways, (Rao, M. & Joshi, R., 2018); (ADB, 2019). Evidence from Kerala and Maharashtra shows that gender-diverse boards and youth engagement programs enhance decision-making legitimacy and improve member satisfaction, (Deshmukh, P. & Pawar, S., 2020).

6.6 Strengthening Digital Governance and Data Systems:

Finally, the integration of digital technologies into governance and management processes can substantially improve transparency, data-driven decision-making, and scalability, (Reddy, P. S. & Rani, M. , 2018); (Singh, V., 2020). Government and donor agencies can support the development of standardized digital templates for accounting and reporting, linked to national databases maintained by SFAC or NABARD, ensuring greater interoperability and monitoring consistency.

7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research:

While the literature provides valuable insights into governance and leadership practices in FPOs, several limitations found. A majority of the studies do not provide rigorous evidence on the long-term impacts of governance reforms on organizational outcomes such as financial performance, market access, or member satisfaction, (NABARD, 2019); (MANAGE, 2018).

Additionally, the literature often emphasizes descriptive governance practices without systematically examining causal linkages between specific interventions and measurable FPO performance, (Singh, J. & Chauhan, S., 2018); (Anoop Kumar, K., 2019). The scarcity of longitudinal or quasi-experimental studies limits the ability to identify which practices reliably produce sustainable improvements. Another notable gap is the lack of comparative analyses across legal forms.

Finally, most evaluations focus on organizational-level indicators, with limited attention to farmer-member perspectives, equity outcomes, or socio-economic impacts at the household level, (Singh, V., 2020), (Rao, M. & Joshi, R., 2018). Future research should incorporate mixed-methods designs, integrating quantitative performance measures with qualitative assessments of member satisfaction, inclusivity, and decision-making dynamics.

CONCLUSION:

Governance and leadership emerge as critical determinants of the effectiveness and sustainability of Farmers Producer Organizations (FPOs) in India. The literature consistently highlights that deficiencies in governance, alongside gaps in leadership capacity, significantly constrain FPO performance and their ability to improve smallholder livelihoods, (Navaneetham, K., Joseph, T., & Pillai, S., 2017); (MANAGE, 2018); (NABARD, 2019).

At the same time, the evidence underscores practical and replicable interventions that enhance organizational effectiveness. Hybrid leadership models combining elected farmer representatives with professional managers, sustained handholding and capacity-building programs, performance grading and diagnostic frameworks, and systematic governance training have shown measurable improvements in operational efficiency, financial access, market linkages, and member engagement, (Singh, J. & Chauhan, S., 2018); (SFAC, 2020); (Anoop Kumar, K., 2019).

For FPOs to transition from grant-dependent pilot initiatives to resilient, commercially viable agribusiness entities, a concerted effort by all stakeholders is essential. Governance and leadership development must be treated as core pillars of FPO promotion programs, rather than supplementary activities, (Singh, V., 2020); (Rao, M. & Joshi, R., 2018).

In conclusion, strengthening institutional governance and strategic leadership is not only a prerequisite for operational success but also a cornerstone for the long-term socio-economic empowerment of India's smallholder farmers.

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