

Network Paper 62: TECHNOLOGY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN A BASE ECONOMIC ORGANISATION: 'EL CEIBO' LTD FEDERATION OF AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES

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This study from Bolivia was undertaken as part of a larger study jointly carried out by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the International Service for National Agricultural Research (ISNAR), entitled 'Research and Farmers' Organisations: Prospects for Partnership?' The ongoing study, for which Phase I fieldwork was also conducted in Mali and Zimbabwe, looks at the actual and potential roles that small farmer organisations can play in developing and transferring agricultural technology. The Bolivian case study differed from those in Mali and Zimbabwe in several aspects. While the other two studies focused on single, national level organisations, the Bolivia case deliberately chose a comparative approach. Rather than looking at a national farmers' union, it concentrated on regional level, federated organisations. Reflecting the nature of the organisations and the research team, the Bolivia study focused on the wider development strategies of these organisations, and their potential roles as catalysts in regional economic and social development (Bebbington et al., 1995).

The researchers recognised the distinction between political and economic organisations and the differences in the roles played by each. This paper analyses the case of an economic organisation, El Ceibo, which is a federation of thirty-six cocoa producing cooperatives in the Alto Beni region in the north of the La Paz department. It is one of the strongest and most successful economic organisations in Bolivia. It also stands as one of the most successful cases of small farmer organisation around technology generation and product transformation and marketing in the Andes. El Ceibo has been able to open new markets for its products, adapt product transformation techniques appropriate for these markets, and develop technology in support of its marketing strategy.

This paper discusses how this programme has emerged, and factors that have favoured Ceibo's success - these factors include long-term financial and technical support from external agencies, its isolated location, and a cash/export crop specialisation. The paper also discusses some of the household, regional and institutional impacts apparently deriving from the strategy. These impacts are significant - though not always as great as some commentators might suggest. In particular, it is not clear how far Ceibo's activities spill over into fostering a more broadly based regional development in the Alto Beni area.

The paper, and the larger study from which it is drawn, also indicate some of the ways in which the strategies and impacts of economically-based organisations such as El Ceibo differ from those of more traditional, representative and politically-oriented small farmer organisations. The broad pattern is that the quality and depth of the impacts of organisations such as Ceibo tend to be far greater than those in the more traditional organisations, but that conversely fewer people benefit from these positive impacts because of the higher barriers to membership entry in such organisations.