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Constraints, strategies and policy suggestions for effective promotion of farmer producer companies in Tamil Nadu

¹Sankri Karthikeyan and ²Anand Karthikeyan

¹Assistant Professor (Agricultural Extension), Department of Agricultural Extension and Communication, Vanavarayar Institute of Agriculture, Manakkadavu, Pollachi, Coimbatore District, Tamil Nadu, India

²Associate Professor and Head, Department of Agricultural Extension and Communication, Vanavarayar Institute of Agriculture, Manakkadavu, Pollachi, Coimbatore District, Tamil Nadu, India

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Corresponding Author: Sankri Karthikeyan

Abstract

The Small Farmers' Agribusiness Consortium (SFAC) has, since 2013, promoted the formation of Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) across India through empanelled Resource Institutions (RIs) that mobilise farmers, facilitate incorporation, and support the preparation of business plans. While this RI-led model has enabled substantial numbers of new FPCs, published, ground-level documentation of the process constraints RIs and farmers actually encounter, including cases where the process does not culminate in a functioning FPC, remains limited. This study documents the formation process facilitated by one Resource Institution across five districts of Tamil Nadu, including a case from Thiruvavur district in which the process did not progress beyond initial mobilisation, together with structured feedback on the SFAC Policy and Process Guidelines obtained from two Resource Institutions and a consolidated set of thirty strategies and policy suggestions distilled from twelve case-study Farmer Producer Companies. The Thiruvavur case identified nine specific, non-technical impediments to formation, spanning entrenched dependency on government transfers, landlord control over local group formation, self-interested office-bearer motives, discouragement by an influential local farmer, and prior exploitation by unrelated documentation schemes that had eroded trust in any new scheme requesting personal documents. Resource Institutions' feedback on the national guidelines converged on the need for tax parity with industrial economic zones, restructured and more realistic monitoring and evaluation expectations, higher remuneration for Local Resource Persons, and earlier, more flexible provision for a Chief Executive Officer and for commencing business activity. The consolidated strategies, which include a single-window district-level clearance mechanism, flexible membership norms for niche and native-variety produce, priority agri-input dealership licensing for FPCs, and an SFAC-run electronic trading platform, provide a ready checklist for policymakers, Resource Institutions and prospective FPC promoters seeking to reduce formation failure and strengthen the effectiveness of India's FPC promotion architecture. Findings were validated through data triangulation across four independent sources per case and were found to align closely with a recently proposed six-factor national framework of FPO performance determinants and with a large multi-state review reporting comparable awareness and financial constraints, indicating that the Thiruvavur impediments reflect a broader, generalisable failure pattern rather than a purely local anomaly.

Keywords: Farmer producer company, formation constraints, resource institution, SFAC guidelines, policy suggestions

Introduction

The Small Farmers' Agribusiness Consortium (SFAC) has, since the 2013 revision of its Policy and Process Guidelines for Farmer Producer Organisations¹, promoted a Resource Institution (RI)-led model of Farmer Producer Company (FPC) formation, under which an empanelled NGO, cooperative, agricultural university or similar agency is entrusted with mobilising farmers into Farmers' Interest Groups, guiding them through incorporation, and supporting the preparation of a viable business plan. This model has been central to the rapid numerical growth of India's FPC sector, from a handful of companies in 2003-04 to more than 24,000 by 2022-23². Yet a recent systematic review of the Indian FPO literature found that complicated documentation procedures, weak market linkage, working-capital constraints, inconsistent tax treatment relative to registered cooperatives, and leadership capture by non-farmer business

interests remain recurring, largely unresolved constraints across the sector³, and that empirical, process-level case documentation of how these constraints actually play out on the ground, including instances where FPC formation is attempted but does not succeed, remains comparatively scarce relative to aggregate status surveys.

This scarcity persists despite mounting quantitative confirmation of the same underlying problems. A 2025 review of farmer participation in FPOs found that 91.2 per cent of surveyed farmers remained unaware of the Farmer Producer Company concept altogether, that all of the FPOs surveyed reported inadequate operating funds, that 88 per cent faced skill and training gaps, 84 per cent lacked adequate storage and handling infrastructure, and 92 per cent struggled with market information access, and further flagged that the standard three-year window of government handholding support is frequently too short relative to the five years FPOs

typically need to become self-sustaining⁴. A separate multi-level analysis of what actually distinguishes better- from worse-performing FPOs in India identifies six interacting determinants of success — transparent internal communication, group cohesion and conflict-resolution capacity, complementarity between an FPO's formal rules and members' informal norms, diversified access to capital, leadership that is socially embedded in the local community rather than externally imposed, and inclusive engagement of farmers, CEOs, boards and external supporters alike — operating jointly across micro-, meso- and macro-levels rather than any single factor acting alone⁵. Read together, this recent evidence base indicates that FPO/FPC underperformance and outright formation failure are shaped as much by awareness, trust, leadership legitimacy and institutional fit as by the financial and infrastructural constraints that dominate current policy discussion — precisely the kind of ground-level, process-stage evidence that a single Resource Institution's documented experience across several districts, including one stalled case, can supply in a form that a national household or FPO survey cannot. This gap matters because an RI-led promotion architecture is only as effective as the RIs implementing it, and RIs' own experience of applying the national guidelines under real, heterogeneous district conditions is a source of specific, actionable feedback for policy revision that household or FPO-level surveys cannot substitute for. It also matters because a formation process that is halted partway, rather than completed, is systematically under-represented in the published literature: FPCs that never reach incorporation are, by definition, absent from every sampling frame built from registries of already-incorporated companies. Drawing on a multi-case exploratory study of FPC formation and functioning in Tamil Nadu, the present study addresses this gap by documenting, in detail, (i) the process followed by one SFAC-empanelled Resource Institution in facilitating FPC formation across five districts, including a case in which the process stalled, together with the specific, non-technical impediments identified in that case, (ii) structured feedback on the national Policy and Process Guidelines obtained directly from two Resource Institutions, and (iii) a consolidated set of policy and process suggestions distilled from twelve case-study FPCs, intended as a practical reference for Resource Institutions, promoting agencies and policymakers.

Material and Methods

The study followed an ex post facto, multi-case research design⁶. Of forty-nine Farmer Producer Companies incorporated in Tamil Nadu as of April 2014 (identified from the SFAC website) and eighteen that responded to preliminary correspondence, twelve were selected for detailed case study of formation and functioning through focus group discussions with Directors and Members, as part of a parent doctoral investigation⁷. In addition, discussions were held with the officials of one SFAC-empanelled Resource Institution, Erode Precision Farm Producer Company Ltd. (EPFPCL), regarding its facilitation, between 2014 and 2015, of FPC formation across five districts — Namakkal, Tiruppur, Erode (pulses), Salem and Thiruvallur — under the 2013 revised guidelines, and with officials of a second Resource Institution, Isha Outreach, regarding its own

experience of the guidelines. Data were collected between April and July 2015 through focus group discussions, personal interviews and structured discussion with RI officials, and secondary data from FPC and RI records and correspondence. The Thiruvallur case, in which the facilitation process had not, as of July 2015, progressed to incorporation, was documented in chronological detail as a distinct case ('a typical case of impediments') precisely because a stalled process offers observations that a sample confined to already-incorporated FPCs cannot provide. Data are presented descriptively, as chronological process narrative, thematically organised constraint statements, and a consolidated numbered list of strategies and suggestions, consistent with the exploratory, case-study character of the parent investigation.

Rigour and trustworthiness of the findings

Because this study is a qualitative, case-based investigation rather than an inferential-statistical one, its scientific validity was established through the trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability rather than through statistical significance testing⁸. Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation across four independent sources for every case — focus group discussions with Directors, personal interviews with individual Members, structured discussion with Resource Institution officials, and secondary FPC/RI records and correspondence — so that no single finding rests on one respondent category alone. The Thiruvallur case in particular was cross-verified against the accounts of two successive sets of Local Resource Persons and against District, NABARD and Krishi Vigyan Kendra officials who were separately involved in the later mobilisation attempts, providing a form of respondent and source triangulation for what is otherwise a single, information-rich case. Dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining a chronological, dated audit trail of every mobilisation attempt in Thiruvallur (Table 1) and by presenting Resource Institution feedback and the consolidated strategies (Table 2) as directly attributable, verifiable statements rather than as the authors' own inference. Transferability is necessarily bounded, as in any single-Resource-Institution case study, and is addressed in the Discussion by relating the present findings to independently reported, quantitatively larger studies of FPO constraints and performance determinants elsewhere in India.

Results

Resource-Institution-facilitated formation process across five districts

Under the RI-led model, the Resource Institution's officials organised village-level meetings, brainstorming sessions and business-plan discussions, formed farmers into Farmers' Interest Groups (FIGs) of about 20 members each with their own bank accounts, trained office-bearers in minute-book writing and accounts, and fed farmer data into SFAC's online Sugyan system. Of the five districts facilitated, three FPCs reached incorporation within the study period — Namakkal Farmers Producers Company Ltd. (incorporated 13 March 2015, 640 members), Tiruppur Farmers Producer Company Ltd. (30 March 2015, 560 members) and Erode Pulses Farmers Producers Company Ltd. (15 April 2015, 720

members) — and a fourth, Salem Farmers Producer Company Ltd., was at an advanced stage of incorporation. Each of these four cases combined a genuine resource base (green gram and desi poultry in Namakkal; maize in Tiruppur; hill-grown beans and potato in Erode; minor millets in Salem's hill tracts) with an RI-facilitated business-plan process that converted a long list of brainstormed livelihood ideas (11 to 14 per district) into two to five financially disciplined, immediately actionable ventures within the Rs. 10-15 lakh capital typically available to a newly incorporated FPC.

Impediments in the formation of an FPC in Thiruvavarur district

In the fifth district, Thiruvavarur, formation did not progress to incorporation. Despite well-attended initial village meetings

(40 to 50 farmers per meeting) presenting a credible business opportunity — direct, premium-quality marketing of paddy and black gram, including organic produce, to metro consumers under the FPC's own brand — not a single farmer returned a completed application form after the meetings, even though no money was required with the application. Repeated re-attempts over several months, including a change of Local Resource Persons, revised meeting formats and timings, an on-field demonstration of a seaweed-extract micronutrient treatment on black gram, campaign publicity, and the involvement of District and NABARD officials and familiar Krishi Vigyan Kendra scientists, all failed to produce more than a single 20-member Farmers' Interest Group by the end of the study period. In-depth enquiry identified nine specific, largely non-technical impediments underlying this outcome (Table 1).

Table 1: Impediments identified in the stalled formation of a Farmer Producer Company in Thiruvavarur district

No.	Impediment identified in Thiruvavarur district
1	Generations of routine mono-cropping (paddy-paddy-pulses) had entrenched a habit of receiving benefits from government rather than investing for a return, at odds with the FPC's invest-and-earn logic.
2	An unstated but effective control by local landlords over group formation among small farmers, even as landlords themselves were too occupied with other work to engage with the FPC process directly.
3	A perception among other farmers that prospective office-bearers wished to use the FPC platform to promote their own personal businesses, discouraging genuine collective participation.
4	The premium direct-marketing opportunity was seen as being taken up by a few self-motivated individual entrepreneurs rather than as a shared community venture, weakening broader buy-in.
5	Active, organised discouragement by an influential local farmer, who argued in public meetings that FPCs would eventually be absorbed by large corporates to the detriment of poor farmers.
6	A visible absence of youth engagement in agriculture in the area, narrowing the pool of potential FPC leadership and continuity.
7	Prior experience with unrelated agencies that collected a fee and a photocopy of farmers' ration cards under various pretexts and then disappeared, which bred generalised suspicion toward any new scheme requesting personal documents.
8	Farmers who had taken personal loans from local money lenders needed to repay these promptly after the paddy harvest, leaving no surplus funds available to pay for FPC shares at the relevant time.
9	A perception among some farmers that the FPC would eventually compete with local retail traders who were their own relatives, creating a personal disincentive to participate.

Resource Institution feedback on the SFAC Policy and Process Guidelines

Officials of both Resource Institutions consulted for this study — EPFPCL and Isha Outreach — affirmed that the 2013 guidelines' flexibility across differing agro-socio-economic contexts and the scale of budgetary support behind them were without precedent in Indian agricultural policy, but identified converging, specific gaps. Both RIs called for enhanced remuneration of Local Resource Persons (from the prevailing Rs. 3,000 to at least Rs. 5,000), for provision to appoint a Chief Executive Officer for the FPC from the outset rather than only after incorporation is complete, and for removing the rule confining business activity to after one-and-a-half years of incorporation, so that Members ready to begin trading earlier are not required to wait. EPFPCL additionally sought tax holidays for FPCs comparable to those given to industries in economic zones, two additional RI staff (one dedicated to process documentation), a restructured 50:50 annual budget-release schedule, more realistic Monitoring and Evaluation expectations given the pace at which rural, subsistence-oriented farmer groups can plausibly be transformed, one dedicated Accountant per FPC

rather than one shared across five, and a crop-specific restructuring of the Sugyan reporting template, which had been designed around one vegetable-marketing project and applied without modification to every subsequent commodity and RI.

Consolidated strategies and policy suggestions

Synthesising the formation-process observations, the Thiruvavarur impediments, and RI feedback with the future plans and expectations expressed by all twelve case-study FPCs yields a consolidated set of thirty strategies and suggestions (Table 2), spanning single-window district administration, differentiated fiscal treatment of FPCs, a menu of proven formation-facilitation interventions, flexible membership and equity norms for niche and native-variety produce, input-license and subsidy-routing priority for FPCs, infrastructure and machinery support, carbon-credit incentives for tree-based FPCs, RI staffing and remuneration reform, realistic monitoring timelines, inter-institutional research support, State-level FPC networking, recognition awards, and an SFAC-run electronic trading platform.

Table 2: Consolidated strategies and policy suggestions for effective promotion of Farmer Producer Companies

No.	Strategy / suggestion (condensed)
1	Establish a Single Window System at the District Collectorate for all licenses, loans and subsidies relevant to FPCs, replacing the current need to approach multiple departments separately.
2	Grant FPCs registration/renewal-fee concessions and a minimum five-year tax holiday, on par with industries in economic zones; waive incorporation filing fees.
3	Offer RIs and promoting agencies a documented 'cafeteria' of proven mobilisation interventions (key-influencer identification, use of existing SHGs/Farmers' Clubs, village meetings, brainstorming, baseline surveys, PRAs, SWOC workshops, exposure visits, success-story sharing, training, demonstrations, buyer-seller meets, business-plan preparation, leadership capacity-building, ICT-based communication).
4	Relax the rigid 500-1,000-member and small/marginal-farmer-only norms for niche, native-variety or high-value produce where a smaller, well-organised membership is more appropriate.
5	Extend seed-production subsidy and simplified seed-certification/sale procedures to FPCs on a priority basis.
6	Permit FPCs to commence business activity from the date of incorporation rather than only after one and a half years.
7	Grant FPCs priority, mandatory-basis agri-input dealership licenses from input companies, since private dealers often treat FPCs as competitors.
8	Route existing line-department subsidy and input-supply functions through FPCs to reduce departmental workload and improve timeliness for farmers.
9	Extend the existing inorganic-input subsidy mechanism, and dedicated production subsidy, to organic inputs produced/supplied through FPCs.
10	Give FPCs procurement priority under government schemes such as the Public Distribution System.
11	Recognise FPCs as eligible stakeholders, on par with registered societies, for schemes of bodies such as the Coconut Development Board, Spices Board and CAMCO.
12	Provide subsidised farm machinery (tractors, dryers, harvesters) to FPCs for member hire, with repair/maintenance managed by the FPC.
13	Offer carbon-credit incentives to FPCs whose members undertake large-scale tree planting.
14	Provide low-interest infrastructure loans (godowns, processing units, training halls) once an FPC is able to acquire land.
15	Allot FPC members priority shop space in government-run Uzhavar Sandhai (farmers' markets) for direct consumer sales.
16	Sanction two additional RI staff per project, including one dedicated to process documentation.
17	Restructure the annual budget-release pattern for RIs to an even 50:50 schedule.
18	Raise Local Resource Person remuneration from Rs. 3,000 to a minimum of Rs. 5,000.
19	Permit appointment of a Chief Executive Officer for the FPC from the time of incorporation itself.
20	Set realistic Monitoring and Evaluation timelines for impact indicators, recognising the pace of change achievable among rural, subsistence-oriented farmer groups.
21	Restructure the Sugyan reporting format, currently designed around one vegetable-marketing project, to suit the specific crop/commodity each FPC or RI handles.
22	Provide one dedicated Accountant per FPC rather than one shared across five FPCs.
23	Build FPC business acumen through market exposure visits rather than classroom training alone, since business skill is acquired through experience.
24	Improve coherence among RI staffing, budget flow, activities, outcome indicators and the Monitoring and Evaluation framework.
25	Direct ICAR/State Agricultural University KVKs and research centres to take up FPC-identified production and value-addition problems as research priorities.
26	Encourage experienced FPCs to lead the formation of State-Level Producer Companies, networking smaller FPCs for mutual buying and selling.
27	Institute SFAC recognition awards, with cash incentives, for high-performing FPCs, building on the precedent of TNAU's own Unique Achievement Award.
28	Encourage large corporates to partner with FPCs on developmental/welfare activities as a shared-value arrangement.
29	Promote FPC formation as an identified activity under ATMA's Innovative Extension Activities component, with Master Trainer sensitisation for administrators and extension staff at all levels.
30	Establish an SFAC-run virtual electronic trading platform, on the lines of the USA's Market Maker system, linking FPCs directly with traders and buyers.

Condensed from case-study Farmer Producer Companies' expressed future plans and expectations and from Resource Institution feedback on the SFAC Policy and Process Guidelines.

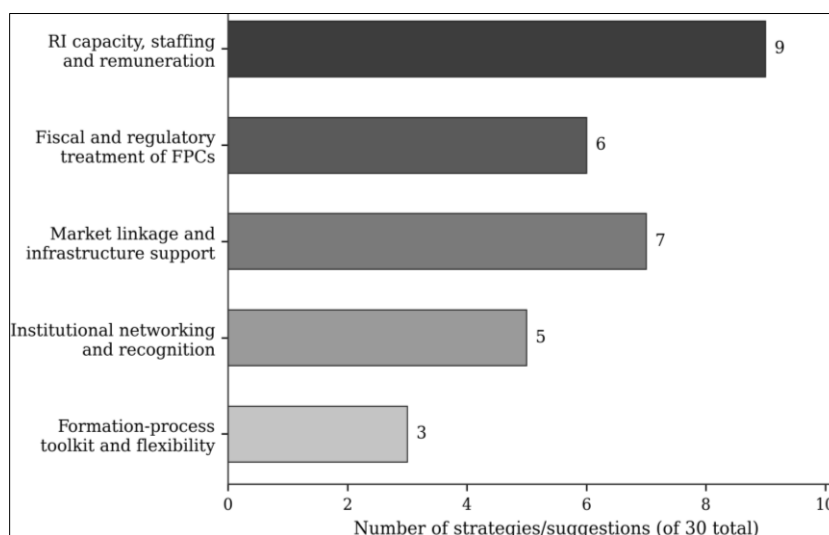


Fig 2: Consolidated strategies and policy suggestions, grouped by category

Grouping the thirty strategies by category (Figure 2) shows that the largest single cluster (nine of thirty) targets Resource Institution capacity, staffing and remuneration rather than farmer-level incentives directly — consistent with the RI feedback reported above, and with the interpretation that RI capability, not only farmer willingness, is a binding constraint on formation outcomes.

Discussion

Notably, in the two districts with the most physically dispersed or resource-poor farmer bases (the hill-cluster geography of Erode Pulses and the near-subsistence millet economy of Salem), the RI reported that farmer cooperation on documentation and incorporation formalities was, if anything, stronger than in more accessible areas, suggesting that physical dispersion and resource poverty are not, by themselves, decisive barriers to formation where the RI's mobilisation effort is sustained. Thiruvavarur, by contrast, illustrates what happens when formation stalls despite a credible business case, ample RI effort, and repeated changes of approach.

Read together, the nine impediments in Table 1 describe a district where generations of routine, subsidy-oriented paddy-pulse cultivation had entrenched an expectation of receiving benefits rather than investing in them; where informal local power structures (landlords, self-interested prospective office-bearers, and an actively discouraging influential farmer) worked, whether deliberately or not, against collective organisation; and where the population's trust in any scheme requesting personal documentation had been eroded by unrelated, exploitative prior schemes. This combination is qualitatively different from, and arguably more difficult to resolve through RI effort alone than, the resource or capital constraints more commonly discussed in the FPO literature, and is consistent with the broader observation that governance and trust-related barriers, not merely technical or financial ones, are a major unresolved constraint on FPO effectiveness in India³.

This distinction matters for policy because national-level evidence shows that FPO participation nationally remains minimal (about 0.77 per cent of farm households) and that most FPOs stay confined to input-supply and advisory

functions rather than moving into output marketing². If a large share of attempted formations resemble the Thiruvavarur pattern rather than the four successful cases documented here, the modest average income premium reported nationally for FPO members² may partly reflect not weak economic potential once an FPC is functioning, but a high attrition rate between initial mobilisation and a genuinely functioning, business-active FPC — an attrition rate that aggregate household surveys, built from registries of already-incorporated organisations, cannot observe directly. This reading is consistent with the very high awareness deficit (91.2 per cent of surveyed farmers unaware of the Farmer Producer Company concept) and universal financial-constraint reporting (100 per cent of surveyed FPOs) documented in a recent multi-state review of FPO participation barriers⁴, which suggests that the Thiruvavarur pattern of stalled awareness-to-commitment conversion, rather than being a local anomaly, may be widespread enough to be a first-order explanation for national FPO underperformance in its own right.

The four successfully incorporated cases and the single stalled case documented here also map cleanly onto the six-factor performance-determinant framework recently proposed for Indian FPOs — transparent communication, group cohesion and conflict resolution, institutional complementarity, capital diversification, embedded leadership, and inclusive stakeholder engagement⁵. Namakkal, Tiruppur, Erode Pulses and Salem each combined a locally credible resource base with RI-facilitated business planning that produced socially legitimate, farmer-anchored leadership around two to five concrete ventures — in effect, embedded leadership and institutional complementarity operating together. Thiruvavarur, by contrast, failed on nearly every one of the same six dimensions simultaneously: communication was undermined by prior exploitative schemes and negative propaganda from an influential farmer; group cohesion was blocked by landlord control and self-interested prospective office-bearers; institutional complementarity was absent because the FPC's invest-and-earn logic conflicted with an entrenched subsidy-receipt norm; capital diversification was foreclosed by money-lender debt obligations timed against the paddy harvest; leadership

legitimacy never took hold because farmers suspected office-bearers of personal motives; and stakeholder engagement stayed shallow despite the involvement of District, NABARD and Krishi Vigyan Kendra officials. That a single case aligns this precisely, and this comprehensively, with a

six-factor framework derived independently from much larger, quantitative, multi-level data strengthens confidence that the Thiruvavur impediments reflect a generalisable failure pattern rather than a purely local idiosyncrasy.

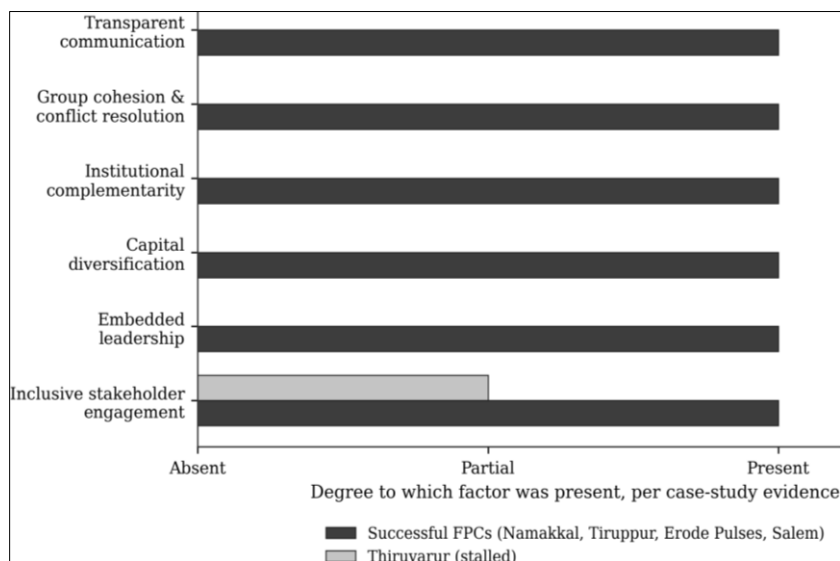


Fig 1: Presence of the six FPO performance-determinant factors in the successful cases versus the stalled Thiruvavur case

The Resource Institutions' converging feedback on Local Resource Person pay, early Chief Executive Officer appointment, realistic monitoring timelines, and flexible norms for early business commencement, together with the consolidated thirty-point strategy list distilled independently from twelve case-study FPCs, indicate that several of these gaps recur across very different districts and commodities rather than being isolated, one-off complaints. Items voiced by more than one FPC or RI in this study — flexible membership norms for niche produce, tax parity with economic zones, and the case for a district-level single-window mechanism — are the strongest candidates for near-term policy revision precisely because of this independent recurrence.

Conclusion

Documenting a Resource Institution's formation effort across five districts, including a case that did not progress to incorporation, shows that FPC formation success is not determined by resource endowment or geographic accessibility alone: districts with dispersed, resource-poor farmer bases reached incorporation within a few months, while a district with an ostensibly more favourable, contiguous paddy-growing population stalled entirely, for reasons rooted in entrenched subsidy-dependence, local power structures, self-interested leadership expectations, active discouragement by an influential farmer, and residual distrust from unrelated prior schemes. This distinction matters for policy because it is not resolved by the financial and infrastructural incentives that dominate current FPC policy discussion, but requires sustained, locally adapted social mobilisation effort that RIs are not currently resourced or trained to sustain indefinitely against sceptical or actively hostile local dynamics. The converging feedback obtained from two Resource Institutions on the national guidelines,

and the consolidated thirty-point list of strategies distilled from twelve case-study FPCs, together provide policymakers, SFAC and prospective Resource Institutions a practical, ground-tested checklist — spanning fiscal treatment, membership flexibility, RI staffing and remuneration, monitoring realism, and market-linkage infrastructure — for closing the gap between the number of FPCs formed and the number that go on to deliver the collective-marketing benefits documented in comparable, functioning FPCs. As a qualitative, case-based study of one Resource Institution and twelve FPCs, this evidence is necessarily illustrative rather than exhaustive; a structured, multi-RI comparative study of formation success and failure across a larger sample of districts would help establish how generalisable the Thiruvavur impediments are to other parts of India attempting FPC promotion in similarly subsidy-dependent, socially stratified agrarian settings.

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