

## **ESTABLISHING AND STRENGTHENING FARMERS' ORGANIZATIONS**

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Historically, extension has mainly involved technology transfer, with the village extension worker (VEW) transferring knowledge from research stations to farmers by using individual, group and mass media methods. More recently, extension has been asked to play a "Technology development role" by linking research with community group needs and helping to facilitate appropriate technology development. It is in the historical context that many government agencies developed national policies for rural development and designed a policy framework to help rural people become organized so that the delivery of services could be channeled through various types of farmer organizations or groups. Well-meaning policies also provided blue-print structures for farmer organizations (FO) in the form of co-operatives and commodity organizations in order to provide various input making and educational services to the farmers.

Targets for forming groups and farmer organizations were given to VEWs without training them properly in the theory and principles of community organizations. VEWs did not have many skills and not much experience in the process of establishing these organizations. Some countries such as Thailand had VEWs for establishing co-operatives in rural areas, while other countries like Malaysia and Indonesia developed "nucleus estates" for small rubber producers where smallholders bring their rubber to process it. India has introduced dairy cooperatives with some success. Many VEWs presented government policies in an oversimplified way to rural communities suggesting that unless they are organized into cooperatives or associations or groups, they will not get government subsidies or access to credit and technical services. As a result, several FOs were established overnight on paper. Mostly the elite of rural communities captured all the services and resources, while the poor and women were left out or received little benefit. Very few attempts were made to develop the management capacities of FO leaders, their members and VEWs. Community organization and facilitation skills were not part of staff training programmes.

The traditional approaches to organizing farmers and forming cooperatives need to be revised to meet the following development challenges of the twenty-first century.

- The increasing absolute and relative poverty in many countries.
- The degradation of natural resources such as soil, water, flora and fauna.

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- Low involvement of women in health, agriculture and other development programmes.
- Poor health and education facilities in rural areas.
- The increasing sociopolitical unrest among the communities.

## **New Roles for Extension**

Several extension roles can be conceptualized to help rural communities get organized, but we will focus on four important roles.

### **1. Empowerment Role**

The empowerment role can be a cornerstone of the new approach to extension. Extension personnel need to develop a new philosophy where their role is to help farmers and rural communities organize themselves and take charge (empowerment) of their growth and development. Telling adults what to do provokes reaction, but showing them triggers the imagination, involving them gives understanding, and empowering them leads to commitment and action (Chamala, 1990).

The term *empower* means to enable, to allow, or to permit and can be viewed as both self-initiated and initiated by others. For VEWs, empowering is an act of helping communities to build, develop, and increase their power through cooperation, sharing and working together. The power in empowerment comes from releasing the latent energy hidden in the community and building collective action for the common good, rather than merely redistributing power from the haves to the have-nots. FOs can help harness this synergetic power for the survival, growth, and development of its members. Empowered FOs can act as convergent points or platforms for solving local problems and mobilizing human and financial resources for sustainable development (Manalili, 1990).

### **2. Community-Organizing Role**

Village extension workers must learn the principles of community-organization and group management skills (Chamala & Mortiss, 1990) in order to help the community, especially the poor or weaker sections, to organize itself for development. Understanding the structures, by-laws, rules, and roles will help leaders to plan, implement, and monitor their programmes and to perform this new role effectively. Skills in conflict resolution, negotiation and persuasive communication would help VEWs to develop FO leaders and members.

### **3. Human Resource Development Role**

The human resources development approach empowers people and gives new meaning to all other roles. Development of technical capabilities must be combined with management capability. Training modules are now available

(Chamala & Mortiss, 1990; Mortiss & Chamala, 1991) to help develop individual and group management skills. The entire philosophy of human capacity building is to encourage rural communities to understand their personal and group styles of managing themselves and to improve their planning, implementation and monitoring skills.

#### **4. Problem-Solving and Education Role**

Problem solving is an important role, but the role is changing from prescribing technical solutions to empowering FOs to solve their own problems. This is achieved by helping them to identify the problems and seek the right solutions by combining their indigenous knowledge with improved knowledge and by using their resources properly. Similarly, there is a shift in the education role from lectures, seminars, and training to learning by doing and encouraging farmers and FOs to conduct experiments and undertake action-learning projects.

#### **Farmer Organizations**

Farmer organizations can be grouped into two types:

- i) Community-based and resource-oriented farmer organizations;
- ii) Commodity-based and market-oriented farmer organizations.

##### **i) Community-Based, Resource-oriented Farmer Organizations**

This could be a village-level cooperative or association dealing with inputs needed by the members, the resource owners, to enhance the productivity of their business based on land, water, or animals. These organizations are generally small, have well-defined geographical areas and are predominantly concerned about inputs. However, the client group is highly diversified in terms of crops and commodities.

There are many primary-level agricultural cooperatives in the developing world, but a majority of them have been financially vulnerable and ineffective. Strategies have been developed to strengthen these organizations. This group of organizations can generate income from the sale of inputs and outputs. The income can then be put back into the organization by spending it on extension, data generation, business planning, and administration. It is essential to have professional and honest management with constant monitoring and periodic rounds of evaluation (Gupta, 1989).

##### **ii) Commodity-Based, Market-Oriented Farmer Organizations**

These organizations specialize in a single commodity and opt for value-added products, which have expanded markets. They are designated as output dominated organizations. Not specific to any single community, they can have members from among the regional growers of that commodity who are interested in investing some share



capital to acquire the latest processing technology and professional manpower. These FOs are generally not small and have to operate in a competitive environment. Research, input supply, extension, credit, collection of produce, processing and marketing are all integrated to maximize the returns on the investments of the members who have invested in the collective enterprise. Several successful cases are found in India, such as Anand Milk and other dairy FOs.

The rate of success of these organizations is determined by their capacity to arrange for major investments and a continuous flow of raw materials. This requires convincing management of both enterprise-related and member-related aspects. The profits generated are used to provide supplementary and supportive services at reduced cost to encourage members to use them. To do this requires a high caliber of representative and enlightened leadership from among the grower members. It is a challenging and demanding task to conceive, design, build and nurture this type of FO.

VEWs can consult and work with other governmental agencies and nongovernmental organizations for establishing these types of organizations.

### **Issues influencing participation in FOs**

The following issues influence the extent of participation:

- The degree of the farmer's dependence on the outputs of the organized activity.
- The degree of certainty of the availability of the outputs.
- The extent to which the outputs will be available only as a result of collective action.
- The extent to which the rewards associated with the collective action will be distributed equitably.
- The extent of availability of rewards within a reasonable time frame.
- The extent to which the rewards are commensurate with the costs associated with continued participation (Shing & Bluhm, 1987).

### **The Role of Extension in Farmer Organizations**

The role of extension will vary with the role of the organization, the sectors in which the organization operates, the services offered, and the organizational form used. In community-based organizations, extension is used as a supplementary or supportive activity to realize the objectives of the BASE (basic activity sustaining the enterprise) function of the organization. In commodity-based organizations, extension is integrated with all the other aspects of the organization to maximize returns on the investment of the collective enterprises. Extension is taken seriously by both the organization and its members because both derive direct and measurable benefits from it.

The following issues need to be considered when developing the extension role, especially for farmer organizations which are set up to specialize in the extension function:

- Is there an identifiable need for extension in specific commodities in the area covered by the FO?.
- Would the FO be able to generate enough revenue from the extension activity alone (with farmers willing to pay for these services) to meet the FOs expenses and to provide satisfactory rewards to its members for their monetary and non monetary contributions? It will be important to anticipate the high potential for unresolved conflict over the issues of equity and charges for extension services.
- How sustainable will the extension activity be over time, and therefore how sustainable will the organization be? It is possible for advice to be converted to freely transmittable knowledge, which can be transferred to anyone without payment. The cost of the extension advice limits access to this knowledge. Therefore, the revenue earned from the extension activity could decline, especially with a client group, which has a low resource base and is primarily concerned with a subsistence economy.
- Can the advice given be actually put into practice and produce tangible benefits to the FO members? The FO would need to control or arrange for the supply of necessary inputs to ensure this. The organization will need to provide specific information in addition to the general information available from research centers. To do this and to survive, the organization will need a research linkage with government and university research institutions. It is beneficial if the FO can employ qualified and committed scientists who have active contacts in research organizations or who can act as consultants to groups of members. This would increase the cost of extension advice to members if the FO is expected to be financially self-supporting.

### **Steps in Establishing Farmer Organizations**

Some of the principles and steps for social action models, community organizations, and management are used in designing a simplified step-wise approach in establishing FOs (Chamala, 1990). In the following steps, the term VEW will be used to refer to the person or group of people selected to establish the FO.

#### **Step 1: Understanding the village community**

VEWs should enter the community with an open mind and understand the community structure. They must understand the community power structure, problems, and opportunities for development. Walking around and talking to key



people can help ease their entry into the community. VEWs should also develop an understanding of the entire community, including the poor and marginal farmers and women.

Some of the techniques that can help to understand the community are using key informant techniques, participating in the community meeting and tea stalls, and walking around. Understanding the ownership of community resources and people's attitude, knowledge, and skills in the development of agricultural production will help the VEW learn about the community. The VEW can also understand the situation in more depth by collecting both qualitative and quantitative information on the levels of income and productivity, cost of cultivation, post-harvest losses, output utilization, and the likelihood of making striking improvements in each of these factors.

## **Step 2. Identifying potential Leaders in the Community**

The usual tendency is for the VEWs to talk to formal leaders and commercial sections of the community. By using the sociometry method, they can identify potential leaders. However, it is also important to be sensitive to the leadership structures operating in that culture and to the knowledge and skill needed to be a successful leader of a farmer organization.

In some cultures, it is wise to search for and contact middle-aged leaders of the area who are neither too young or too old. Preferably, they should come from better-off families, have social status and respect, and be from farming household. These leaders also had to struggle and negotiate with bankers, bureaucrats, politicians, critics, and others including their own farmer members. (Seetharaman & Shingi, 1992).

## **Step 3: Talking to the Identified Leaders and Seeking Cooperation from Other Agencies**

VEWs can talk to these leaders on general agricultural development and get ideas and information on FOs in the village. They may also seek cooperation from government agencies and especially from NGOs (if there are any in the area) to help establish FOs and support them in achieving success.

Does the community have a farmer organization? If not, is there a need for such an organization? If the community has an FO, what is its structure and history of performance? How could the FO play a role in village or community development? VEWs can canvass for ideas from the community and add their own ideas on the need for and the role of FOs in the entire process of broad-based agricultural development. They can explain how FOs in other communities helped them in development.

#### **Step 4: Helping Local Leaders Call Community Meetings**

VEWs can help enthusiastic local leaders organize community meetings. Sometimes more than one meeting may be needed to discuss the need for and the role of FOs in agricultural development. FO leaders from neighbouring villages can be invited to speak at these meetings. Farmer-to-farmer information exchange helps them. Sometimes smaller meetings can be held for low-resource (small and marginal) farmers and minority groups. They may prefer having a separate FO to serve their specific needs. There is no harm in having more than one FO in a village.

It is important that producers from all sectors in the village participate in these meetings because the success of an enterprise-based FO depends on the volume of raw material produced from member producers. Every small or big producer contributes to this volume. The volume itself is more important than the socioeconomic status of the supplier. Prospective members need to be convinced that everyone benefits in proportion to his or her contributions, not just the big farmers, as is widely perceived.

#### **Step 5: Nominating Core Group Leaders to Develop or Establish the FO**

From the community meetings, core group leaders are elected to design the FO with further community consultation. If leaders are elected or nominated, VEWs should consider the issues raised in step 2 when assessing each candidate for election or nomination.

In situations where it is more appropriate to appoint a leader, the search for a suitable person is critical and requires time and patience. It is also critical that the selected leader be involved in the search for a potential agro-based enterprise to act as a BASE (Basic activity sustaining the enterprise) for economic development.

#### **Step 6: Developing an Organizational Structure for the FO**

The VEW can help the core group of leaders in developing an organizational structure for their farmer organization.

The structure should serve the organization's functions and goals. Understanding various types of FOs is useful. It is the farmers' organization, so they must design it carefully by describing roles, responsibilities, rewards, and punishment for the people who perform tasks in the FO. At this stage, the VEW should, as far as possible, play a passive role because the leaders are the ones who are building the FO. NGOs also may share their experiences and help leaders to develop an organizational structure.

Several less exacting chores also need to be taken care of at this stage. These include locating premises and negotiating for land, money, technology, personnel,



construction, and infrastructure services such as power lines and telephones (if available).

### **Step 7: Developing the FO's Management through Education and Action Learning**

An essential part of community empowerment is to help educate the leaders and members in management principles covering planning, implementing, and monitoring their projects and programmes. The following empowerment methods may be useful:

- **Educating.** Organize formal and informal learning activities.
- **Leading.** Help the leaders to lead and to learn from their actions by reflection as a team.
- **Mentoring and supporting.** Help the members initially by mentoring or supporting them in their planning and implementation stages.
- **Providing.** Obtain the services of other stake holders, FOs, and VEWs in providing various services to nurture the FO in the early stage of development.
- **Structuring.** Help the FO to structure its meetings and various participative planning activities and to learn from their experience through reflection.
- **Actualizing.** Help them to reflect on the process of managing their FO. Learning by doing can help them in self-actualization.

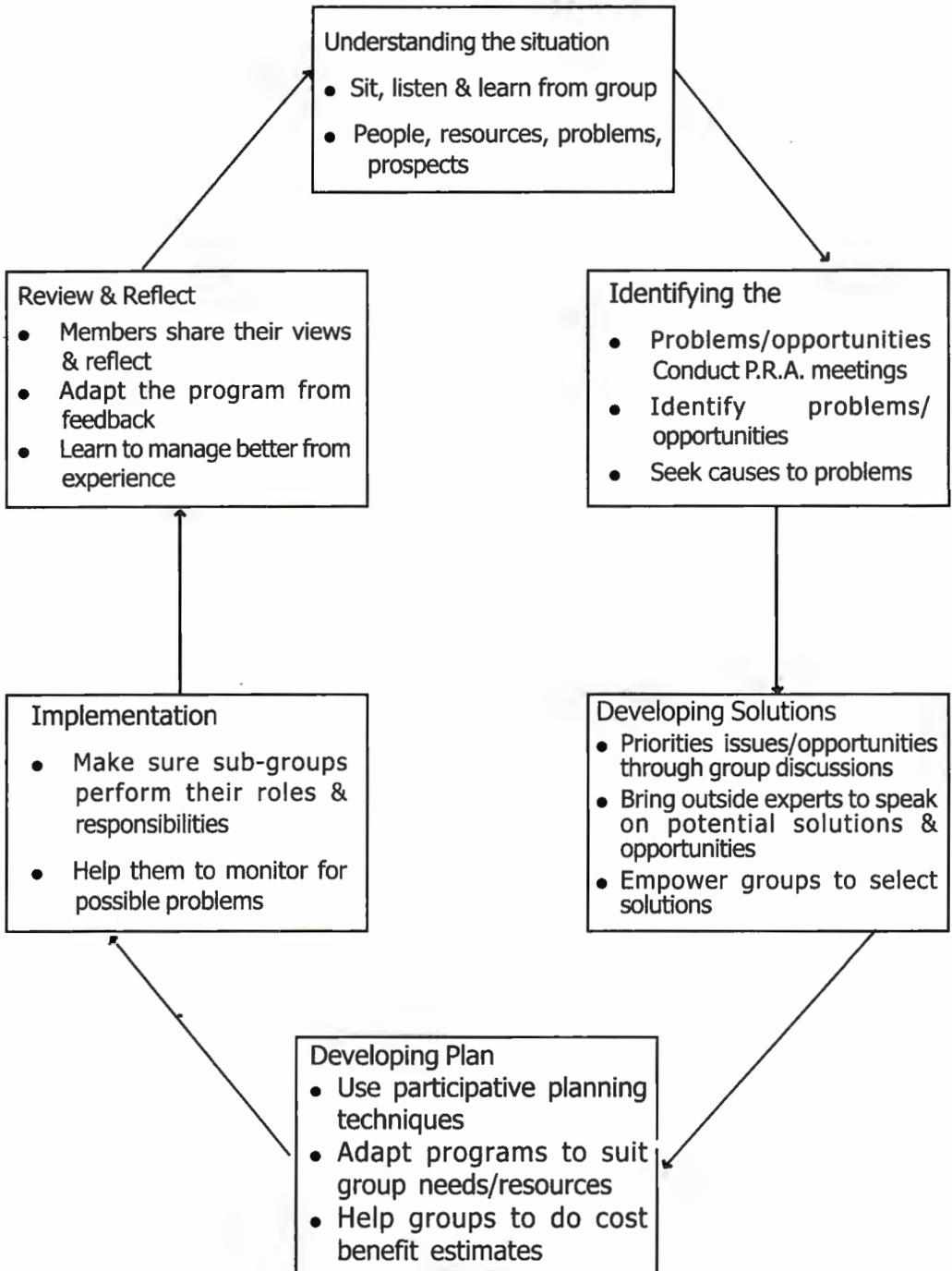
### **Step 8: Gearing up for Action**

In this step, FOs examine their action plans, and task groups are set up to mobilize human and financial resources. Understanding the participative action management (PAM) planning process is useful (Chamala 1995a). A detailed six-stage PAM planning cycle (Figure 1) can help FO leaders in designing an inclusive and participative planning process. This is the stage to start considering the timing, scale, and content of the extension and research input of the FO.

### **Step 9: Implementing Selected projects**

In this step, the village extension worker can help the FO leaders implement the projects they have chosen. The following process may be useful:

- Start implementing the selected projects.
- Secure resources and allocate tasks.
- Develop a calendar of activities to achieve the goal.



**Figure 1** Detailed six-stage PAM planning cycle  
**Source:** Chamala (1995a).



- Develop monitoring processes for reflecting on events and activities regularly, either formally or informally.
- Ask committee members to meet to discuss actions periodically and report to general members regularly to keep them informed and involved.

## **Step 10: Monitoring and Evaluating the FO's Progress**

Usually evaluation is done annually to meet formal requirements. But VEWs can encourage Fos to reflect on their activities more frequently so that they learn and improve their management skills. They need to watch for people who want to take over the FOs for their self-interest. It is important to take action against any negative influences. These monitoring or reflection processes help strengthen FOs and avoid self-defeating problems. Learning organizations are created through collective reflection and openness on financial and other managerial matters (Senge, 1990).

The success of the farmer organization can be evaluated by measuring the increase in the members' productivity, the increase in their net income, and the net reduction in the cost of cultivation due to bulk purchases of inputs by the organization. It is essential to conduct monitoring and periodic evaluation.

## **How to Strengthen Existing FOs**

Many farmer organizations that go through a high activity phase become inactive or defunct over a period of time. This is a normal process for many groups or FOs. VEWs can help the community to understand the reasons and causes for decline.

VEWs need to understand the factors that influence group or organization effectiveness or success. Many FOs have failed because of corruption, mismanagement, conflict, and lack of clear goals. It is important that VEWs understand these forces that influence their functioning. Several steps are suggested to revive or revitalize existing FOs.

### **Step 1: Understanding the Village Community and Gaining Their Trust**

The key factor here is for the VEW to gain the community's trust in order to help them develop.

### **Step 2: Talking to Leaders about Why FOs Are Less Active**

Getting the multiple perspectives of identified leaders in the community informally is the next step. Putting pieces of the jigsaw puzzle together to understand why FOs are inactive requires diplomatic skills. The historical perspective of the FOs and various local factors that influenced their inaction must be obtained.

### **Step 3: Seeking Ideas on Strengthening and Revitalizing Community FOs**

VEWs can talk to key leaders and seek their ideas on how to strengthen or revitalize the existing FOs or how to create new ones. It is the community's organization for their development, so the leaders' opinions and support should be obtained.

### **Step 4: Encouraging Local Leaders to Call Community Meetings**

The VEW can help the leaders in setting up a community meetings to strengthen FOs or to form a new one. The VEW can unobtrusively provide the format and make suggestions on how to conduct meetings and how to strengthen FOs.

### **Step 5: Establishing a Core Group of Leaders to Draft a Proposal**

A core group of leaders or a steering committee will further deliberate, using the suggestions made by the members to design and develop a strategy to strengthen or revive the farmer organization.

### **Step 6: Community Endorsement of the Strategy**

Leaders should be careful not to let the meetings and the community mood for "head hunting" or "apportioning the blame for the FOs inefficiency" take control.

It is necessary to guide the community in a positive direction to develop working strategies. Several methods are available, such as SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, prioritizing, and action-planning methods.

### **Policy Issues in Establishing and Strengthening Farmer Organizations**

Several macro-level policy issues influence the establishment of farmer organizations. The two most important issues are :

#### **1) Increase in Demand for Services**

Will strong farmer organizations create more demand for services, and if so, how can this issue be resolved? Some policy makers believe that strong farmer organizations could create more demand on research and extension. This is partly true, but if the overall policy framework emphasizes empowerment, self-help, or user-pay systems, then more local resources could be mobilized and help improve use of natural resources on a sustainable basis. Several low-resource farmer groups working with other stakeholders like banks, agribusiness, NGOs, private consultants, and religious and philanthropic agencies will bring more resources to the development process. Retired professional teachers,



nurses, and agricultural scientists could be encouraged to work as volunteers with FOs. In many developing countries, volunteers are a major force in providing services to the community.

## **2) Competition for Services**

Will organized low-resource farmers compete for extension services with the existing commercial farm sector, and if so, how can this issue be resolved? In principle, farmer organizations with full empowerment reduce the pressure on "routine extension" activities, which take up a lot of the VEWs time. For example, "Landcare" groups in Australia and some successful FOs in Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, India and Africa are helping other farmer groups or farmer organizations to be effective not for egalitarian or welfare reasons, but because they see that the commercial sector is dependent on low-resource farmers or upland farmers in solving their salting, erosion, water quality, and pest and weed management problems. Ecologically, the commercial sector is dependent on resource-poor or other minority tribes and groups for their survival. Just as in farmer-to-farmer extension methods. VEWs should help link the commercial sector with the low-resource farm sector so that win-win projects can be developed.

## **Conclusion**

The commercial sector needs peace and prosperity to avoid social unrest and other problems. VEWs can play a positive role in developing a common or shared vision for sustainable development. Several techniques like further research, problem census, and SWOT analysis will help develop a shared vision for the commercial sector as well as the low-resource farming sector or minority groups. Collective action is crucial for survival and sustainable development.

Community organization is essential for rural development. One should not take a blueprint approach, but rather a learning process approach within an action-learning framework (Korten, 1980).

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