



## **Working with Groups and Agricultural Coops**

By Sylvester Nzene

Executive Director

Partners for Productivity Foundation

Cameroon, Africa

As an extension program gets under way in a community and starts growing, it becomes more and more necessary for the volunteers to work with groups as time may not always be available for individual visits.

If working in communities with no organized groups, volunteers are faced with the task of initiating groups with which to work. It is not unusual for community members to be resistant to the idea of joining such a group. For many reasons (a tradition of working alone, local feuds or jealousies, suspicion of unwanted economic or political commitments, etc.) this may be one of the volunteer's most difficult tasks. Dealing with and overcoming this reluctance is an individual matter and every volunteer works things out uniquely. It takes time and communication to develop a relationship that both the community members and the volunteer are comfortable with. Other community members, including other agricultural extensionists, nurses, or school teachers, who have had experience working with similar community groups, may have very useful suggestions in these matters.

Although presenting new information to farmers is more efficient on a group than on an individual basis, this may not be so for actual field work. The volunteer must evaluate each community to decide if it is more appropriate to carry out demonstrations on individually or group tended lots. In group cultivated lots, the work and risks are shared, lessening the burden of any individual. However, sometimes farmers are less conscientious about caring for a crop if it is not theirs individually. In such cases, it may be most appropriate for the volunteers to present new information or techniques at a central location, such as a school, a small parcel of land made available to the volunteer for this purpose, or by rotating among the individual parcels of the group members. After the group presentation, the volunteer should, whenever possible, discuss or visit each individual's parcel to ensure that the technique will be put into practice correctly.

Organized groups of farmers can also be very important in the continued spread of the introduced techniques after the volunteer leaves. They increase communication among farmers, they serve as support groups for innovative farmers, they are more likely to attract the attention of other extension programs, and in some cases they manage credit funds which make it easier for farmers to implement certain technologies. Volunteers should familiarize themselves with the different types of groups so that they have a better understanding of how groups may facilitate, or possibly inhibit, the continuance of their promotional effort.

Agriculture committees are often informal assemblages of people drawn to meetings by a common interest in agricultural innovations. These committees are very flexible and allow for the admission of new members or formation of new committees upon demand. This can be a big advantage when working in a new area as the success of the program will probably attract more and more interested persons. This flexibility also leads to the danger of dissolving rapidly if

interest wanes, especially if dominated by only one or two enthusiastic members. The members of these committees can, however, be very important resources as since very often they are attending solely based on interest and a desire to learn, without any other reward. These committees can also be a good starting point for the organization of an agricultural cooperative if desired.

### **Cooperatives**

Cooperatives are more formal groups, generally organized around a set of by-laws or constitution, requiring members to fulfill certain responsibilities (pay dues, attend meetings or workdays) and granting them certain privileges (credit, buying and/or selling at favorable prices, right to farm a certain portion of land). Because of their formal nature, cooperatives are likely to be more permanent organizations than agricultural committees. Also as a result of this more formal nature, they are less flexible about admitting new members. Many times cooperatives receive preferential treatment from governmental agencies when soliciting training courses, credit, or other types of assistance.

There are several types of cooperatives, differing in the nature of the rights they grant and the responsibilities they require of the members. Production cooperatives involve the members working together in the production process, such as farming the same piece of land. Credit cooperatives manage a common fund which is used to loan members money, an alternative to more expensive and often unavailable bank loans, buying and selling coops pool all the farmers buying orders, buying in bulk for cheaper prices, and pooling the farmers' produce to sell at higher prices or lessen transportation costs.

A soil conservation volunteer for example may also be involved in working with other types of groups, such as schools, youth groups, housewives groups, etc. Regardless of the type of group volunteers works with, some basic concepts must be considered:

- First, groups should be goal oriented or purposeful, that is, they must provide some advantage to their members; some incentive to spend their time with the group.
- Second, the group must have a structure, organization, plan of activities, and a disciplinary code which permit the attainment of its goals.
- Third, care must be taken in planning, promoting, and realizing all group oriented activities to avoid disillusion among members and abandoning of the group. This may result from joining a group without understanding its stated goal or joining a group incapable of attaining its stated goal because of flaws in the design of its structure, organization, plan of activities, or disciplinary code.

When these concepts are kept in mind, then the group is much more likely to serve its members in a productive, self-sustaining fashion. Once confident of the usefulness and power of their own group, community members will be much more motivated to work within the group

### **Extension Techniques**

A soil conservation extension program almost always faces a challenge initially to generate awareness that soil erosion is a major problem that merits dealing with. Often farmers do not perceive deforestation or environmental degradation as problems, and may attribute poor production to other factors (lack of credit to buy fertilizers, quality of seed available, lack of modern farm machinery, etc). One of the first goals of any volunteer, therefore, should be to change some of the attitudes farmers may have and introduce some of the following ideas.

The importance in an increasingly crowded society of:

- permanently cultivating the same plots of land while maintaining others in an undisturbed state
- protecting water sources and wildlife
- the simplicity of adopting soil conservation techniques
- the advantages of labor intensive improvements as compared to capital intensive (buying fertilizers, improved seeds, farm machinery) improvements

Only upon generating genuine interest in soil conservation techniques can a volunteer expect farmers to be willing to try out and to care for, any new types of structures or planting systems introduced. Several methods are available to volunteers attempting to change farmers' attitudes and generate interest in new techniques. Some of the common ones are informal discussions, lectures, films or filmstrips, classroom demonstrations, demonstration lots, field trips, visits from farmers already using the techniques, financial incentives, and soil conservation courses. Informal discussions with farmers can be one of the volunteer's most effective techniques, especially in more isolated communities and where people may be unaccustomed to receiving courses, attending meetings, or receiving visits from volunteers. Informal discussions provide an opportunity to make friends, to have people understand what to expect of the extension program, and to discuss ideas in an informal setting. Friends made in this manner, often turn out to be the first interested collaborators in an area.

More formal presentations such as lectures, films and films strips, and classroom demonstrations made to a group of people, allow for the presentation of more information to more people and the use of visual aids to make some of the ideas clearer. They have the disadvantage; however, of requiring people to attend a meeting at a fixed time, something people may be unaccustomed to or very reluctant to do. These types of presentations are probably most effective when several individuals have already expressed an interest during informal discussions. In communities where people are not accustomed to receiving focal presentations, the format and content of the lecture, photos or demonstration materials should be designed carefully to ensure that the people attending understand how this will relate to their own farm work.

### **Demonstrations**

Demonstration lots are small plantings, carefully prepared and cared for, that demonstrate some or all of the techniques which are to be promoted in an area. "Seeing is believing," and that is the main advantage of this technique. People are given a concrete example, so that when a volunteer talks about digging ditches in the middle of a corn field, planting in contour curves, or using organic fertilizer, farmers will have a clearer concept of what these terms are describing. They also provide a local trial to evaluate the appropriateness of the techniques under local conditions.

Field trips to, or visits from farmers already using soil conservation techniques provide an opportunity to evaluate what is being done in other areas and to consider their appropriateness in the new area. These are especially valuable if there is a chance to discuss the new techniques directly with the farmers involved. This will permit a more thorough consideration of time and labor involved and the rewards to be expected.

Agricultural volunteers should encourage their collaborators to seek out and share their experiences with other farmers in the area. Volunteers might even consider making a "moral contract" with collaborators, requiring them to teach two additional farmers, who in turn each will promise to teach two more farmers, etc. In this way the number of farmers learning and using the techniques increases more and more rapidly with time. They should be aware that if the

demonstration area or farmer has received any special attention or aid to carry out the work, this may be interpreted as a prerequisite to the success of the technique.

Financial incentives (credit, seed, fertilizer, food for work, etc.) are available from many national and international agencies interested in rural development projects. These often are available only for groups of farmers. They can be used to attract participants to a project designed, for example, to bring people together for formal classroom sessions where new techniques are described, followed by carrying out the practices on their own land. In this process, the involved farmers receive benefits from increased production and a longer useful life of their fields.

In Appendix 3, an extension program is described in which fifty farmers were involved in such a project. If carried out throughout a region or country, these types of projects can benefit the economy because of greater self-sufficiency in production and can reduce migration to urban areas and avoid often destabilizing political pressures for rapid land reform measures. This method has the advantages of attracting a larger number of people to be trained during the extension program and the more immediate achievement of economic benefits to a larger number of people. A possible disadvantage of this strategy is that it may overlook the importance of future acceptance of soil conservation techniques by farmers not involved initially. If the same motivating benefits are not available to other farmers, they may not feel that the soil conservation work by itself is worthwhile. Depending on the receptivity and the subsequent extension methodology followed, this may not present a problem. In fact, the immediate high visibility of such a program may allow a great increase its effectiveness.

The high visibility of such a large project could also be important in providing a site for field trips to motivate or train other farmers and volunteers and a basis for publicizing the success of soil conservation techniques on a regional, national, or international level. Soil conservation courses allow volunteers to teach a variety of techniques to farmers. It should be remembered however, that many people are unaccustomed to learning in a classroom format, and that the courses should involve as much practical fieldwork as possible. Courses are probably most effective in training extension workers, once several farmers in an area have already tried some soil conservation techniques on their own fields and seem receptive to learning more.

Village Volunteers  
206.577-0515 • [info@villagevolunteers.org](mailto:info@villagevolunteers.org)  
[www.villagevolunteers.org](http://www.villagevolunteers.org)