Establishment and Maintenance of Farmers' Groups (FGs)

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(The FGs approach is being implemented in Vietnam in the Province of Vinh Long. Districts of Tam Binh and Tra On; Communes Tuong Loc, Loan My and Tan My; and in the Hamlets of Tuong Le, Tuong Nhon B. My Phu Nam, Can Suc, Thong Nguyen, Canthay, Soc Ruong, My Binh)

I. Why Should Agricultural Service Stations and Mass Organizations Focus on Farmers' Groups in Vietnam?

In the past few years, the Vietnamese government has given increasing attention to the formation of Farmers' Groups (FGs). The reasons for this increased interest in FGs are as follows:

- While the farmers' demands for government's support on agricultural modernization is increasing, the capacity to answer all these requests is very restricted due to lack of budget and human resources. FGs make it easier for the government to provide services to the farmers.

- Part of the government's tasks can be taken over by the FGs, like transfer of information, distribution of fertilizers, production and distribution of seeds, vaccination of animals, etc.

- When farmers work together in groups, important new skills are developed within the hamlets, like technical skills, skills in group management, problem solving, economic cooperative, bookkeeping, verbal expression and grassroots democracy, which all help the rural society to develop more quickly economically, socially, and politically.

Farmers' participation is considered as one of the essential conditions for sustainable development process. Therefore, the development of an extension approach that aims at increasing people's involvement in the decision-making structure is needed.
II. General Objectives of Farmers' Groups:

- Members make better use of existing individual skills and opportunities, and develop new skills; and
- Members obtain the benefits of scale working together.

Expected Results:

- Increase farmers' capacity to help one another in solving their problems, instead of relying only on external support.
- Farmer become more confident in applying new techniques since group members can help one another in putting the new knowledge in practice.
- Help farmers in formulating their needs for assistance, propose appropriate solutions, and request support from relevant institutions (administrations, technical services, mass organizations, other groups of farmers, etc).

III. Advantages and Disadvantages of FGs:

a. Advantages for the farmers

1. Information spreads more quickly when farmers are working together in a group
2. Members get more economic benefits when helping each other
3. By working in a group, some work get done more easily and work becomes lighter
4. Different skills of farmers are better used, benefiting others
5. A group has more power to bargain with input suppliers, banks and other credit suppliers, and with buyers of their products than individual farmers.
6. The members can get the services of village and district level organizations, which individuals can never get.

b. Advantages for the extension systems

1. Providing services to groups is more effective than to individuals, as more people can be served at the same time.
2. Information spreads more quickly in a group than among individuals.

3. Experiences gained by individuals may easily get lost, but those gained by a group will be preserved better.

4. Groups can take over certain extension activities from the extension stations, like setting up demonstration plots, do simple tests, and spread informations to farmers outside the group (orally, by document, or by example).

5. By working with permanent groups, extension agents (EAs) can get more insight in farmers' conditions, problems, and needs. This way, EAs can better prepare their extension activities.

6. By working with permanent groups, EAs can more easily follow up the results of their extension activities, as level of adoption of new ideas can easily be measured within groups.

c. Disadvantages for the farmers

1. The members have to organize their time according to the needs of the majority in the group.
2. The members have to spend time and energy for the organization of the group.
3. The members have to travel to the place of meeting.

d. Disadvantages for the Extension System

1. During the initial years, more time have to be spent in a number of hamlets where FGs have just been established (later, however, less time will be needed).
2. The work with FGs requires not only time for transfer of techniques but also for organization of the groups (this task may be given to the mass organizations).
3. EAs have to change their roles and attitude; new skills are demanded to accompany FG well.

IV. Steps in Group Establishment

a. Identify the need for group establishment

Development agents are the extension workers and members of women's union, farmers' association, etc., who are working in a commune. The people can recognize problems in agricultural production. Some problems cannot be solved individually but by group. Establishing "working groups", however, is not necessarily a natural process for farmers. They need the intervention of development agents.

- First of all, development agents invite the farmers who have the same interest or the same problem in a meeting.
- People do problems analysis together. The problem analysis is done by using the problem tree tool or Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) method, with 12-15 persons. It is a full day exercise, which addresses successively the different components of the local farming systems (e.g., rice production, husbandry, diversification of lowland spring crop, orchards development) because it is done before a priority sector of intervention is chosen.
They discuss for the solutions. Some solutions cannot be solved individually but together, so they need to work together in a group.

**b. Formulation of group objectives**

Objective formulation gives a purpose to the group. It is an exercise followed by all the group members to define clearly the goals of the group, in terms of concrete and realistic objectives that need to be met. They represent clear results that contribute to the general objective and call for a determined set of possible activities.

The results are presented to the whole target group and farmers select a limited number of clusters, according to their priorities. These main problems are then converted into general and specific objectives. Formulation of the groups’ objective is such an important exercise that it should be reproduced before each new planning session (or at least formally considered). Therefore, it is designed as a regular and format step, to let group members the opportunity to update or change their objectives based on new factors. Results are not different but the exercise is shorter (no problem tree) and kept focused on farmers' main interest in the production system.

**c. Group organization**

During this meeting, the group is assisted to draw its own rules and regulations, which determine some common basic principles to observe during group activities. Members determine how often and where the group meet, they eventually set a schedule for financial contribution, and specify some rules of good behavior.

They can also decide to adopt a system of punishment and penalties to ensure the groups' good functioning. During the same meeting, the group is also guided to elect a management board, whose main responsibility is to keep the group members mobilized, to ensure that the group achieves its objectives and progressively develops its capacity, scope, and range of action. The board also represents the group in external functions.

As a result, rules and regulations vary considerably between groups. Besides a group leader, the management board may include vice-leader(s) or, a secretary and/or a cashier. Situations vary according to the group’s size, geography, and range of activity.

**d. Activity planning**

Depending on their sector of intervention, groups make detailed operation plans before each cropping season (rice, vegetables) or every six months (husbandry, fruit trees). Planning is based on objectives already formulated. In the plan, responsibilities are assigned and a calendar is set up.

Activities planned are generally of two main types. Activities related to transfer of technology include: (1) technical training, (2) visits outside to see new models or seek for new technical documents, new materials, etc., (3) experimentation or demonstrations followed by field workshop, and (4) exchange of experiences through meetings and field visits.

In addition, farmers also undertake social activities (i.e., activities that require more organizational skills than technical knowledge). Such activities play an increasing role that contributes to strengthen the group’s cohesion. Coordinated organization among group members can help to implement vaccination campaigns, ensure input supply, market new productions, or provide credit.

The role of external facilitators evolves with the group development. During the first sessions, external facilitators play an important role in suggesting activities for the group. With time and
experience, group members become more autonomous in this process.

**e. Internal monitoring and evaluation**

During the period set by the group to implement its plan, the group records regularly the progress made. Each time it does so, it specifies the next step and decides of the appropriate amendments to make, when needed. At the end of the period, group members review and assess the results obtained, to decide on the follow-up to be given. The evaluation deals with the implementation of the group's initial plan but also with the improvement of the members' technical knowledge and with the groups' organizational development.

Group self-evaluation is done at the end of each cropping season every six months. For annual crops, evaluation of the first cropping season is done later in the year than the planning session of the second season.

The second evaluation is more detailed, for it also consider the functioning of the management board, the group's organizational development, etc. Forms are used to orient the group of the discussion process. During the first time, the exercise is facilitated by the district field worker and then by the group leader.

**V. The Development and Sustainability of the Group**

The other important factors that help develop the group, and make the group become more sustainable are as follows:

- The **enthusiasm and management capacities of the leaders** are the main factors for the success of a group.
- Members join the group and participate in group activities **voluntarily**, based on the group objectives and activities. Any forced or false expectations will definitely have a negative effect on the motivation and active participation of the members.
- The group should **start from the bottom, at the initiative of the farmers themselves**. This gives an advantage since members know each other before the start, and they already trust each other to a certain extent for they have worked already for some time informally.
- The group develops **diverse activities** for members as soon as the management board is able to manage a group with a single interest. Past experiences have shown that it is difficult to keep a big number of people for a long time together in a group by only organizing a single activity, although it can be started like that. But as soon as the objective has more or less been achieved, the members' motivation will wane unless new activities are set up. Some members are more attracted by one type of activity, others by another type, for example training and saving. **Economic activities** make the group strong. This can be done through the establishment of a **mutual savings fund** to provide members with cheap credit, or in the form of **an economic production or business activity** that benefits all members. Examples of these are buying together inputs like fertilizers, animal feed, pesticides, and to operate together sowing, threshing, or drying machines.
- **Group meetings have to be interesting for everybody**, and this can only be done when there are **several subjects** dealt with in the same meeting, such as **technical information, fund management information, economic information** about prices and markets, information, economic information about prices and markets, information about **government policies**, and also when **acute members' problems** are discussed and solutions are sought.
• **Participants live near each other.** Members must know each other well in order to build up trust and cooperation, and this goes much easier when they live near each other. Furthermore, it is easier to attend meetings when distances are short, especially for poor members. Finally, the exchange of information between members is easier when they not only see each other once a month during a meeting, but more regularly in their own fields and in café/s and on markets in their neighborhood.

If for some reason members live far from the center of the hamlet, sub-groups can be created in small zones where 5-7 members live closer together. By selecting sub-group leaders, more members get active and cohesion can increase. Competitions can be organized between sub-groups to stimulate active participation and adoption of new techniques.

• **The group is officially recognized by the village authorities.** The official letter of village authorities helps the group to get easier access to services like credit, late payments for inputs, vaccinations, demonstration plots in the hamlet, support for visits outside hamlet, etc.

• **Some other organization is in charge of the group** (group is looked after by some bigger organization, like Women Union, Farmers Association, District Extension or Plant Protection Station, Church, NGO). In Vietnam, groups who do not belong to any organization have low prestige, and have more difficulties in getting through the bureaucratic systems and realizing their objectives.

• **Support from outside is very important.** The success of a group depends on its capacity to link its members with the world outside the hamlet, and to bring new information about techniques, products, and markets to the hamlet. The group needs permissions for doing certain activities and technical support from agricultural services and research stations. Also, the services of banks and other suppliers of credit are needed, as well as better telecommunications, water supply and transport systems. The more the management board succeeds to link the group with the outside world and to get support, the more enthusiastic the members get.

*Among the advantages of FGs include quick dissemination of information while working together, more opportunity to develop and enhance communication skills, and getting work done easily and effectively.*