

**Farmer-Interactive Learning for Improved Management Through *FARMS* (Farm Asset Resource Management Study) Groups: An International Perspective**

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**Abstract**

*The purpose of the paper is to describe the characteristics of **FARMS** (Farm Asset Resource Management Study) Groups and the practical factors which enable them to start and be sustained with a view to encouraging their wider adoption as a means of sustainable extension. Its objectives are to:-*

- *Clarify the characteristics of **FARMS** Groups*
- *Present a descriptive outline of their operation and outputs in diverse contexts*
- *Discuss practical factors contributing to successful seeding and sustenance of such groups*
- *Advocate the benefits of **FARMS** Groups in addressing the current issues facing agriculture and their potential role in farm management and extension strategy*
- *Encourage promotion of **FARMS** Groups to enable farmers to face the challenge of improved farm-household resource management in the context of global environmental management imperatives, the global trading context and global entrepreneurship.*

*It is the central argument of this paper that farmer-interactive learning together promotes mutuality and the scope for trust to grow among farmers. Upon this mutuality and trust, subsequent spontaneous and sustainable collaboration can be built through the decision of farmers together. Improved resource management on farms is stimulated in the process. Trust and mutuality are necessary not only for the subsequent development of various types of Farmer-Controlled Business (FCB) but also for promotion of rural community relationships.*

**Key words:** Groups, Study, Management, Farmer-Interactive Extension.

### Introduction

The author first described Farmer-Dominant Study Groups (FDSGs) in the context of his practical farmer group work in the UK and previously in Nigeria (Wibberley, 1978; 1984a; 1984b). Subsequent continuous and ongoing fieldwork experience since then – especially in sub-Saharan Africa and in the UK - has refined and tested the model developed and described fully (Wibberley, 1992). Most farmers need to seek their livelihoods not simply from sales of traditional crop and livestock products but from the total assets of their farms by means of more effective and innovative resource management. Thus, the particular type of FDSG developed and promoted is now the Farm Asset Resource Management Study ('*FARMS*') Group. The author has catalysed the formation of such *FARMS* Groups in many African countries as well as in the UK, but also sought to do so during assignments in Asia, Europe and the Americas.

Farmer-Interactive Extension (FIE) is advocated to address the need for relevant, sustainable extension based on farmer participation. Shifts in thinking and practice required to adopt this are briefly explored. *FARMS* Groups can maximise an informal and participatory style of learning, anchored in practical relevance and conducive to ownership of the process and the outcomes by the participant learners. For sustainable farming and food business development, learning needs to be by sustainable means and to encompass the global contextual level through to the component field and micro level.

### Current Pressures Affecting Agriculture

Mosher (1966) observed that farmers do not generally meet together as much as it would be in their interests to do. Current pressures on farmers exacerbate this since labour costs have risen relative to farm product prices, and there is growing conflict between rival paradigms of development. The drive for high input, commoditised, sole-cropping farming systems is in question, not least in face of their oil requirements. The ecocratic ('homes rule') alternatives pursuing more integrated, biodiverse farming systems seeking to optimise local inter-relationships are gaining attention as concern about global warming impacts of human activity are mounting (Houghton, 2004; Lovelock, 2006) but not to the exclusion of smart technologies. Farmers' wisdom has traditionally led to more ecocratic, environmentally-friendly approaches (King, 1911; Pretty, 2002) and these need to be rekindled, as is being done through such organisations as *LEAF* in the UK ([www.leafuk.org](http://www.leafuk.org)) and internationally through *FARMS* Groups.

Many farmers worldwide are currently under threat and stress from the WTO (World Trade Organisation) central policy of 'non-discrimination against imports'. A proper *Highway Code for World Trading* is urgently needed (Wibberley, 2005) with an internationally agreed protocol providing a framework of law and order for operation of markets, as pursued in relation to global climate change and other environmental management protocols, and as for traffic.

### The Increasing Importance of Farmers Within Extension Approaches

Extension strategy has broadly developed from the 'wandering teacher' who gave way to 'farmer as client' orientation with some feedback asked of the farmer. Realisation of the complexity of social systems led Jones (1967) and Rogers & Shoemaker (1971) to promote diffusion theory whereby supposed key farmers were chosen as channels for information; this did not 'trickle down' to less favoured farmers as was supposed. Thus, weaker farmer categories - such as small landholders, women and lower castes, were targeted with their own specific information. However, it was soon realised that the target categories were sociologically complex as were the processes of information perception and transfer itself, all needing study in

their own right. Linkages between research, extension and farmers were recognised as often weak and so Röling (1988) expounded ‘integrated extension’ whereby the extension process itself was seen as being central. Meanwhile, from the late 1970s, the Training-and-Visit (T&V) System of extension management was supported by the World Bank majoring on Technology Transfer using ‘Contact farmers’ in a concerted attempt to reach others. This is now largely abandoned on cost as well as efficacy grounds. Merrill-Sands *et al* (1990) wished to place Technology at the centre as the key factor in the collaboration between farmers, extension and research. However, the author has consistently argued (Wibberley 1978 ff.) that interacting farmers should be central to extension with the role of extension to catalyse and then, as unobtrusively as possible, to lubricate that interaction including linkages to both research and commerce. Without a catalyst, processes may not start at all and lubricants in engines are only noticed when absent!

### **Farmer-Interactive Extension (FIE) Through *FARMS* Groups**

FIE includes any learning approach, which derives creative agricultural progress for farm business and rural development primarily from the interaction between farmers themselves. In order to become farmer-interactive, shifts of emphasis are needed in attitudes towards farmers by extensionists and in extension practice (Table 1). Farmers are not ‘organised into co-operatives’ but rather ‘predisposed to collaborate’ through FIE. Farmers’ reality counts (Chambers, 1997).

Table 1

#### *Shifts of Emphasis for Farmer-Interactive Learning*

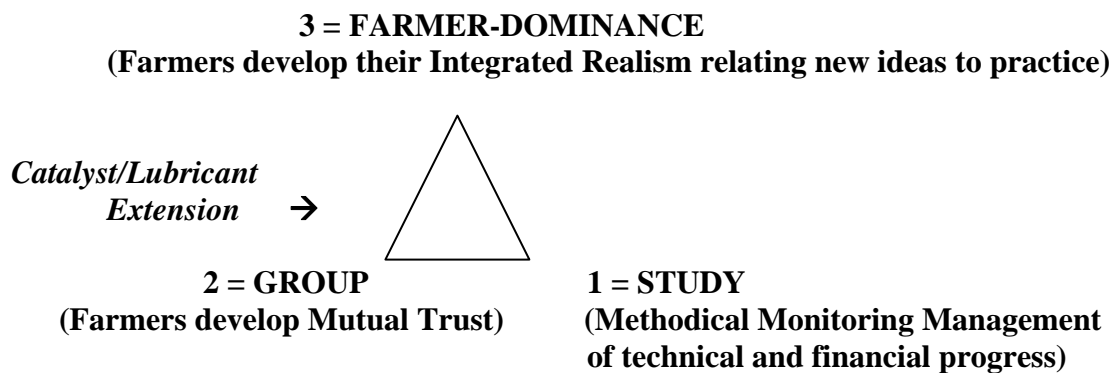
<i>FROM :-</i>	<i>TO :-</i>
* OPINION-LEADER FARMERS	SEEKING FARMERS’ OPINIONS
* GROUPS <i>FOR</i> FARMERS	GROUPWORK <i>BY</i> FARMERS
* EXTENSION AGENT’S GROUPS	<i>FARMS</i> GROUPS
* EXTERNAL INFORMATION 1st	FULLY USE LOCAL KNOWLEDGE 1st
* MEASURABLE FACTS ONLY	+ EXPERIENCE, WISDOM, INTUITION
* TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER	COMPREHENSIVE STUDY
* PROGRESS RECIPIENTS	PROGRESS-GENERATING FARMERS
* INFORMATION DELIVERY	INFORMATION DEMAND by Farmers
* TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION	WHOLE-FARM SUSTAINABILITY

Local initiatives among farmers require mutual trust and understanding, together with cross-fertilisation of ideas among practitioners who comprise farmers and those working closely with them, including extensionists who need to adopt a collaborative attitude. To achieve this, a Farmer-Dominant Study Group (FDSG) is a means which has been internationally advocated and adopted (Wibberley, 1992; Kyamuwendu, 1999); these studies show that farmers enjoy and prefer to learn from other farmers. A FDSG is characterised as follows:-

- Chaired by a farmer with most (but not all) members being farmers
- Meets on-farms with each member’s farm providing a proportion of the Group’s data
- Compares total farm assets (thus requires farms of reasonably similar size and situation)
- Starts with Study together with no other hidden agenda by advisers, commerce or others

- Practises Methodical Monitoring Management (MMM) whereby farmers observe and record progress of their crop or livestock enterprise, sharing both technical and financial data
- Develops group mutuality by regular contact for collective and interpersonal exchanges
- Farmers strengthen their awareness of and confidence in their valuable integrated realism.

Past groups (1970s/1980s) were often enterprise-specific e.g., livestock; cereals; then came a shift towards an integrated farming systems focus (1990s, especially gearing to reduced inputs and more environmentally friendly farming). Now, *FARMS* (Farm Asset Resource Management Study) Groups are needed internationally to review together the sustainable farm livelihood impacts of improved resource management. The term *FARMS* is chosen because farmers worldwide face the challenge of business survival and need to assess all their farms' assets as potential resources for improved management in order to gain sustainable livelihoods. These may be identified during SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis of a particular farm's land, location, buildings and any special features or interests/skills of the owner. Post-trauma (e.g. UK after FMD; Asia post-tsunami of December 2004) recovery self-help groups may be needed. Part-virtual/telephone networks can work (Rittmann, 2002). Farmers prefer to learn from other farmers (practitioners of any kind appear to prefer to learn from other practitioners). Therefore, study together in practically focused groups with farmer-chosen agendas provides suitable opportunities for this and for trust to grow, without which collaborative business cannot work. Such future collaboration may be in the interests of group members but they must decide if this is to be so after they have come to know and trust each other, which happens most naturally during learning together. The *FARMS* Group model (Fig.1) specifically encourages technical and financial monitoring, with mutual sharing of information.



*Figure 1.* Components of a *FARMS* Group.

Practical hints on establishment and operation of *FARMS* Groups based on field experience of group ecology over three decades suggests that a *FARMS* Group needs to:-

- a) be outsider 'catalysed' only; NEVER imposed NOR coerced into existence by the extensionist
- b) be farmer-owned and locally led, ideally with spouses/other family members welcome too
- c) be self-running (autonomous) - with someone to send out reminders of next meetings
- d) be small enough to be intimate, large enough to give a creative mix - around 12-25 members
- e) hold on-farm/field meetings with practical discussions
- f) include taking a simple meal together during the meeting
- g) promote the 'fun element' of meeting together

- h) promote 'belonging' but welcome newcomers (be community-inclusive)
- i) be encouraged to split (and start a new one) if it becomes overlarge – above 25 members
- j) foster an outward-looking group culture
- k) encourage problem-sharing
- l) stimulate solution-seeking
- m) become more resource, processing and marketing conscious and astute together
- n) develop its own identity/name, chosen by its members
- o) be given time to gel (if it is going to do so) – this tends to occur after around 20 meetings
- p) be accessible within a maximum travel time of some 20-30 minutes from each farm
- q) meet around 10-15 times per year, avoiding busiest months but keeping continuity.

### **Outcomes of Farmer-Interactive Extension**

Current experience among livestock farmers in New Zealand and its adoption within the UK confirms the value of monitored farms for farmer learning (Webby & Paine, 1997; Riddell, 2002; see also Murray, 2002 and Downes 2004). Owen (2004) studied the resurgence of farm based discussion groups (Tate, 1969). Participatory farm management approaches with farmers' groups have proved valuable in Zimbabwe and Ghana, especially the use of participatory budgeting (Dorward *et al*, 2007). Agri-rural research approaches are beginning to recognise and pursue interdisciplinarity in order to derive more realistic, contextualised results (Lowe & Phillipson, 2006; Scholefield, 2007). A *FARMS* group provides a microcosm of interdisciplinarity by harnessing the multi-professional skills and experience range of a group of farmers for practical progress in their local field context. Farmers who learn together may come to earn together. As a result, various forms of Farmer-Controlled Business (FCB) may be set up and other community-based beneficial activity of environmental and/or social value may result. In Africa, various business and conservation initiatives have been catalysed such as crop processing ventures, shared poultry projects, tree-planting and setting up Junior Conservation societies.

Outcomes of FIE may include joint sponsoring of trial work as in the UK case of Arable Research Centres (now called TAG, *The Arable Group* [www.thearablegroup.com](http://www.thearablegroup.com)) which provides independent agronomic advice to progressive arable farmers, using information derived from the largest network of agronomic trials in the country at its 23 Centres in the main arable districts. TAG grew out of the Cirencester Cereal Study Group of Farmers established in 1977 – Wibberley, 1978; 1985;1988; Barling, 1980; Jenkinson & Wibberley, 1986). The author's books, *Spring Wheat* (Wibberley, 1984), *Cereal Husbandry* (Wibberley, 1989) and on cereal nutrition (Wibberley, 2006) derived substantially from field work with farmers' study groups.

As farmer numbers have dropped below 2% of the UK working population, many work in isolation, and are consequently more susceptible to stress and business failure as FCN (*Farm Crisis Network*) experience in the UK shows. However, farmer collaboration can materially assist survival. *FARMS* group work is conducive for collaboration to develop and is the 'prophylactic' aspect of FCN's work making crises less likely, while Local Groups of Farming people also provide 'curative' assistance to those in admitted crises ([www.farmcrisisnetwork.org.uk](http://www.farmcrisisnetwork.org.uk)).

### **Recent Indications of the Value of *FARMS* Group Membership in the UK & Africa**

*FARMS* Groups are encouraged using a catalyst/lubricant extension approach by FCN (*Farm Crisis Network*) in the UK since 1998. Data were collected from one of the deliberately

randomised questions to Devon Livestock/Mixed Farmers from several different *FARMS* Groups, which contain farmers of varying ages, including those retired or part-time as well as the majority whose livelihoods are very dependent on their farm's viability. If grouped into categories under four key headings, a distinction is shown for 'cohesive' factors (friendship, enjoyment, meeting others in the same 'boat' and problem-sharing) which score an average of 85.5%, well clear of other categories. Such cohesion can ameliorate stress. By contrast, self-help 'confidence' factors (feeling my farming is worthwhile; confidence boost to own ways; encouragement to farm better; aid to decision-making; confirming my existing farming; courage to change farming) scored an average of 62.8 %. Below these, 'motivational' factors (exposure to the drive of others; half-day respite from farm work; sustainable livelihood hope; competition to succeed; stimulus to attend to detail; stimulus to diversify income) scored 59.8%. Finally, the 'performance' factors (business information & ideas source; technical information source; yield-boosting ideas; quality-boosting ideas; cost-saving information) averaged only 57.2% (Table 2).

Table 2

*Devon Farmers' Evaluation of FARMS Group Membership Benefits (N = 48)*

1. Friendship within the group [94% score]	C
2. Enjoyment [86%]	C
3. Meeting others in the same 'boat'; Problem-sharing [81% each]	C
5. Exposure to the 'drive' of others [71%]	M
6. Feeling my farming is worthwhile [70%]	M
7. Confidence boost to own ways [68%]	S
8. Encouragement to farm better [66%]	S
9. Business information and ideas source [65%]	P
10. Half day respite from farm work [64%]	C
11. Aid to decision-making; Sustainable livelihood hope [60% each]	S
13. Confirming my existing farming [59%]	S
14. Competition to 'succeed' [58%]	P
15. Technical information source; Yield-boosting ideas [57% each]	P
17. Stimulus to attend to detail; Quality-boosting ideas [56% each]	M
19. Courage to change farming [54%]	M
20. Cost-saving information [51%]	P
21. Stimulus to diversify income [50%] – already promoted in UK, hence low score? M	M
<i>Key to factor categories: C = Cohesive; M = Motivational; S = Self-help; P = Performance</i>	

*Note.* (Viney & Wibberley, 2004 data)

Despite the limitations of surveys, these findings confirm the sequence of earlier ones using closely similar questions with a study of a progressive UK Cereal Farmers' Study Group (n = 19) after 15 years together (Wibberley, 1992, 1997):- Cohesive factors = 78.8%; Self-help 'Confidence' factors = 71.2%; Motivational factors = 70.8%; Performance factors = 66.4%). These data show the clear importance of cohesive factors for group success but they also indicate that important value is placed on all other factors offered to respondents as potentially derived from *FARMS* Group membership. However, the 2004 sample of Devon farmers, answering after the ravages of Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD) in 2001 and in a context of relatively demoralising farm prices, showed a much greater differential valuation of the cohesive factors

derived from *FARMS* Group membership. Each *FARMS* Group needs to establish its own agenda. For instance, the Cotswold Organic Growers' Study Group members in the UK have changed their farming systems quite radically in recent years (mostly since 2000, with 54.8 % of the reason for their going organic 'to make farming pay' while 27.8 % of the reason was 'due to belief it is right'; other contributory reasons included 'response to global warming' and 'anticipated easier compliance with environmental regulations'). This group decided the following preferred distribution of time at meetings:- Studying whole farming systems 48%; Discussing 20%; Eating together 18%; Hearing from outsiders 14%. The group's technical focal priorities are:- Weed control 30%; Fertility-building 25%; Cultivations 20%; Marketing 25%.

Once trust has been established and a *FARMS* group has 'gelled', then it can become a potential vehicle for concerted advice-seeking, input-purchasing, resource-sharing and product-marketing, as well as for joint action in other ways for environmental and community benefit. For example, *FARMS* Group members start sharing equipment, such as fertiliser spreader calibrators, and carrying out joint projects. Already well-established in the Dutch horticulture sector (Proost, 1991), Bergevoet & van Woerkum (2006) showed that Study Groups for Dutch dairy farmers improved their entrepreneurial competencies and benefited all participants irrespective of farmer and farm characteristics or their level of competencies at the start of the programme.

In Africa, village ecological & farmer surveys were conducted in Nigeria during the mid-1970s as a prelude to work among farmers and a book resulted (Joy & Wibberley, 1979). In 1975/6, a survey of 145 farmers in Benue and Plateau States revealed that they collaborated considerably (a predisposing factor for catalysis of *FARMS* Groups in Africa):- 73% in harvesting, 69% in planting, 57% in buying, 55% in selling and only 9% not at all. Their top aspiration was to produce enough food to sell some, or at least have full family food security. The Africa Co-operative Action Trust (ACAT – [www.acatkzn.co.za](http://www.acatkzn.co.za)) began in South Africa in 1979. The author during the 1980s, confirmed within ACAT in Kwazulu, Ciskei, Transkei and Swaziland the crucial role of farmer motivation and group work. ACAT provides underpinning training, extension and a means of setting up Savings Clubs among farmers within which they also learn and share improved management practices; over 4000 of these have been set up across Southern Africa. They have led to a host of other development initiatives – including shared processing and selling of agricultural produce based on mutual trust developed through group work. ACAT has improved resource management by emphasising sustainable agriculture, the key role of enterprise and the community-building value of engendering mutual interdependence. In Malawi, the Kasitu *FARMS* Group – among those catalysed in 2005 - has 26 members and each one agreed to give out cassava stem cuttings freely to 15 neighbours in order to improve food security. In West Africa, work has involved several countries, including Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Niger (Batchelor, 1993; Wibberley, 1999a; 2004a; 2004b). In East Africa, *FARMS* Groups have been catalysed in Tanzania (Wibberley, 1999a), in Kenya – where several hundred groups are operating in Western Kenya - and in Uganda (notably via Kulika Trust, [www.kulika.org.ug](http://www.kulika.org.ug) through which several hundred groups have emerged; Kyamuwendu, 1999). Outlined below is a methodology developed for group evaluation in Uganda (Wibberley, 1998) most recently adapted to use within a Send-A-Cow Uganda evaluation of Farmers' Groups (Kinengyere Mango & Wibberley, 2006).

### Methodology Used for Farmer Groups Evaluation Exercises in Uganda

This evaluation exercise is done after individual farmer interviews, and before open discussion with groups – during which additional comments are invited and topics introduced. Feedback is given later to Farmers' Groups after data collation. 5 *matooke* (green bananas) each distributed to farmers seated by gender in outward-facing circle after short drama about 'weighing opinions' like weighing babies, and looking outwards for information. Questions follow (each is explained and each scored by placing down *matooke*, which are then recorded for males and females separately by tellers):- *Matooke* number → 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Since Group involvement:-

1. Can you afford to save money now? NEVER, RARE, SOME, OFTEN, MUCH
2. Which do you produce to sell some now? (add 1 *matooke* for each of: (i) potato (sweet or Irish); (ii) coffee or maize; (iii) vegetables (tomato/cabbage/onion/carrot etc); (iv) meat (goat, cow or pig); (v) cow's milk)
3. How many additional schooling costs can you now pay in full? :  
FEWER, NO DIFFERENCE, SOME, MOST, ALL
4. Are women richer? NO, A LITTLE, SOMEWHAT, MUCH, VERY MUCH
5. Which home improvements have you added? (add 1 *matooke* for each of:-  
Extra room/hut; new tin roof; roofwater tank; fuel-efficient stove; pit latrine)
6. How is nutrition in you household now? WORSE, NO CHANGE, +, ++, +++
7. How many new practices have you adopted as a direct result of Group learning?
8. How many new practices have you passed on from Group learning?
9. Is it easier to learn from other farmers? HARDER, SAME, EASIER +, ++, +++
10. Have women become stronger in influence? (add 1 *matooke* for each of:- joined committee; spoke in public; became leader; husband listened more; lobbied or wrote to political leaders)
11. How has Group involvement affected the status of women? NOT, +, ++, +++, +++++
12. How do you rate the value of your Farmer Group involvement? 1=low to 5=high; (Table 3).

Table 3

#### Results: Six Farmers' Groups in Uganda

QUESTION?	INDICATIONS from 6 Farmers' Groups in Uganda			
	Lo	Hi	Av	
1. SAVING	1.6	3.4	2.5	Savings capacity rarely to usually somewhat increased
2. PRODUCE	2.1	3.7	2.9	Wealth by 'produce range' quite high to moderate
3. SCHOOL	0.6	2.1	1.1	Average capacity to pay schooling costs increased a little
4. RICH	1.7	3.2	2.6	Women feel 'a little to somewhat richer'
5. HOMES	1.2	3.0	2.3	Homes have had 1 to 3 key improvements
6. NUTRITION	2.9	4.1	3.4	Nutrition is found 'somewhat to much better'
7. TECHNICAL	3.0	4.6	4.0	New techniques adoption significant; 3 – 4+ items added
8. SHARING	2.0	3.5	2.7	There was significant (51-85%) sharing of new practices
9. LEARNING	2.9	4.7	3.9	It's easier to very much easier to learn from other farmers
10. INFLUENCE	2.7	4.9	4.1	Women show a 54-98% increased 'influence'
11. WOMEN	3.2	4.4	3.7	Women's status is felt to be 'noticeably to v. much higher'
12. GP. VALUE?	4.2	4.8	4.5	Value of Group membership is highly rated (84-96%)

Note. (Kinengyere Mango & Wibberley, 2006)

### A Contextual Framework for *FARMS* Groups

Motivation to learn requires a favourable context of general agricultural viability (such as sensible national and international food security policies) to give hope that the learning might be worthwhile. Entrepreneurs will always seek out what they need to know – and pay for it if necessary. However, the most needy farmers will be more difficult to access and will have the greatest barriers to learning (Defra, 2004). *FARMS* Groups might be offered subsidised access to training ‘modules’ or short courses on specific skills, as sought by them (e.g. on new crop varieties, nutrient management, budgeting, computer use). In the UK, linkages may be developed to professional bodies such as The Institute of Agricultural Management. Ongoing opportunities are needed to update on relevant competencies, and to recognise the professionalism of farmers (Wibberley, 2007a). Whatever the level of farmer literacy, competency or farming scale, modes of adult learning required are as in a *FARMS* Group - participatory, building on the experience of farmers and not usurping their responsibility to manage creatively (as adduced by Jarvis, 1987).

In an agricultural research, extension and development context, Biggs (1989) usefully categorises the various modes of farmer participation - though not mutually exclusive - as follows:- CONTRACT - The farmer hires land and services out for research on for example, multi-site screening of new crop varieties; *the farmer is passive*; CONSULTATIVE - The farmer tells of the agricultural problems but the scientist devises solutions in a ‘doctor-patient’ relationship, where *the farmer is the patient* - such as typically occurred in the Farming Systems Research (FSR) approaches of the late 1970s/1980s; COLLABORATIVE - Farmers and researchers operate in partnership with regular liaison so that *the farmer is the partner* though frequently the ‘poorer relation’; COLLEGIATE - The scientists/researchers strengthen the farmers’ own informal research and development efforts making farmers co-equal colleagues with all other relevant contributors - i.e. *the farmer is a real participant*.

FIE may go beyond these categories such that in a Farmer-Dominant Study Group (*FARMS* Group), researchers and extensionists become ‘guests’ of the interacting farmers present at their collective behest and subject in their specialist inputs to the practical scrutiny and possible censure of their offerings by working farmers. This can engender greater reality in research programmes. In policy terms too, farmers are those who can deliver the essentials for future sustainability, and *FARMS* Groups can facilitate them doing so. Internationally, agrarian advocacy (Gwaivangmin & Wibberley, 2004) is needed to argue the case for integrating four key requirements of agricultural progress at the policy-making level. These are:-

- sustainable livelihoods (in farming and other rurally compatible businesses) through
- natural resource conservation and management (countryside habitat care by farmers) for
- food security (from optimised local production, processing and consumption) and
- land heritage (maintaining people’s connection to place and celebration of it).

Farmers everywhere face huge changes. In the enlarging EU, the role of agriculture within ‘rural vitality’ is under scrutiny with policies for production agriculture support being substituted by those for environmental benefits. There is debate about the role of farming within rural vitality (Wibberley & Turner, 2006) though it remains central to rural employment and is facilitated by farmer collaboration, which can be nurtured via *FARMS* Groups (Turner & Wibberley, 2007).

### Emergent Educational Themes, Conclusions & Recommendations

Theoretical and philosophical educational themes of this paper are that:

- Learning together produces mutuality wherein trust can develop;

- Practitioners prefer to learn directly from other practitioners;
- Trust is a prerequisite for sustainable mutually-compatible entrepreneurship, collaboration and co-operation;
- Too many well-intentioned initiatives – of governments, NGOs, commercial and charitable bodies - seek prematurely to ‘organise’ farmers into co-operatives or other forms of association based on an analysis of their needs;
- Farmers must ‘own’ their collaborative ventures and they must decide upon the basis of mutual trust to so operate for the common good;
- Catalysing farmers meeting for purely mutual learning in a context of farmer-interactive extension (*FARMS* Groups) need not exclude government, NGO, commercial or charitable involvement but this must be in a context of farmer-dominance running the group – setting its agenda and determining its development.

Mutual learning needs to be a lifelong process. Indeed, the preferred terminology for ‘Continuing Professional Development’ (CPD) is now ‘Lifelong Learning’ (LLL). The educational importance of *FARMS* Groups is that they provide a proven context for LLL since they offer a potentially self-sustaining, enjoyable context for mutual learning, consequent trust development and then other, farmer-decided collaborative activity. The implications of the work reported are that neither ‘top-down’ nor ‘bottom-up’ approaches to extension reflect contextual reality but rather a ‘farmers together’ approach such as induced in *FARMS* Groups offers a practical context for agricultural progress in a way which can underpin sustainable rural development. The author has found in both temperate and tropical contexts that *FARMS* Groups can work with groups of relatively similar farmers, whether resource-rich groups or resource-poor groups. It is only farmers together who can integrate with realism the delivery of sustainable livelihoods, natural resource conservation and management, food security and land heritage. *FARMS* Groups have begun to offer a useful contribution towards this in the experience of farmers in contrasting environments, and are recommended by the author for promotion by other reflective practitioners engaged in extension and management education. *FARMS* groups need to be adopted, modified and field tested elsewhere by extension practitioners. They merit further attention and catalysis as a means not only for laying the foundations for sustainable entrepreneurship and farmer collaboration, but also for affordable extension service delivery.

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