Carousel Abstracts

Sustainable Development Through Farmer Groups

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International development organizations are increasingly investing resources in the development of strong grassroots farmer organizations. They believe this approach is more sustainable, especially after so much history of failed top-down efforts.

The Citizen’s Network for Foreign Affairs (CNFA), Agricultural Cooperative Development International and Volunteers for Overseas Cooperative Assistance (ACDI/VOCA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United States Peace Corps, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UN/FAO), and other development organizations are in the forefront of assisting to strengthen these local farmer groups.

Methods

Here at Penn State, we have been involved with providing educational assistance to farmer organizational development in Zimbabwe (Indigenous Commercial Farmer’s Union), Zambia (Zambia Fish Farmer’s Associations), and to a lesser degree, South Africa’s Limpopo Province irrigation scheme farmers, and the indigenous Swaziland Sugar Cane Associations.

In Zimbabwe (2001) and Zambia (2002), the scopes of work were similar: 1). Improve their organizational development knowledge and skills, and 2). Improve their knowledge of, and capacity for, teamwork among many other important topics.

Major Points to be Shared

Early on in the workshops the Fish Farmer Association participants expressed the need for more cooperation and participation within their groups. Members claimed they needed better leadership and leaders wanted more active, contributing members.

Therefore, much of the “spin” on the workshops was directed at the fact that it takes more than just a few people to have a strong organization. Some of the leadership must come from the membership. Shared leadership. Many methods of involving members constructively in organizational operation were presented, along with exercises and examples. Leadership styles were discussed from the perspective of “sharing” leadership roles, thus broadening the leadership base and ownership of group activities.

Lessons Learned

As a result of the workshops, Peace Corps volunteers and farmer participants felt they gained a much better understanding of organizational development, along with key skills to take back to their groups for organizational improvement. The participants were involved in train-the-trainer exercises to provide them with experiences in presenting the workshop ideas to the others in the groups. Strategies were discussed to teach others in their local groups, such as:

- breaking workshop topics into units that can be delivered at each meeting without overloading the program
- teaming up with workshop participants from other groups; sometimes it’s more convincing to hear it from outsiders
- utilizing Peace Corps Volunteers as resource people at meeting presentations (15 attended the workshops)

Educational Importance

With the Zambia Fish Farmer’s Associations, it seemed as though group leadership, teamwork, and cooperation on projects is their greater limitation; more than technical knowledge and skills. Centuries of tribalism and decades of colonialism have left a legacy of autocratic processes with groups. Most participants were quite excited at the prospect of contributing to decision-making in the future; of “sharing” group leadership responsibilities and contributing to group decisions and processes with a feeling of ownership.