Establishing Community-Based Producer Working Groups in Ukraine: a Process Review

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Abstract
Two foundational pillars of Canadian civil society are the act of giving voice to the people, and for governments to be responsive to the voice of the people. This project saw the formation of two community-based producer groups with a mandate of informing the Tavria State Agrotechnical Academy (TSAA) of the agricultural production needs of household producers, small-plot producers and small private farmers. Even though this audience is a major producer of food in the oblast few resources or support services have been targeted to them. It is the desire of the TSAA to become more responsive to the needs of this target audience. This project will also see the enhanced ability of the TSAA to develop and effectively deliver extension programs to meet the needs of this target audience. An effective community-university partnership will ultimately see an improvement in both quality and quantity of agricultural production, with an associated elevation in the economic livelihood of household producers, small private farmers and their communities. The goal of this paper is to share experiences of the authors in this project.

Keywords: Ukraine, working community advisory groups, consensus building, extension program planning, community-university partnership
Introduction

Ukraine is in the midst of transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-driven economy. Being a largely agrarian society, this transition has had a major impact on rural communities, household producers, small-plot producers and small private farmers. Agricultural production has suffered with the dissolving of the state farms and transfer of the land to private farmers or farm enterprises. There are three broad classifications of farmers:

a. household producers who raise livestock and grow a variety of fruits and vegetables on less than 2 ha of land. It is estimated a total of 6.2 million household plots’ owners cultivate 3.2 million ha of land and produce more than 60% of the total food produced in Ukraine (SDC). There are an estimated 26,000 household producers in the Zaporazhskaya oblast where this project was centered.

b. small private farms (2 to 150 ha) represent an expanding segment of the agriculture industry. It is estimated that 42,400 private farmers cultivate 2.8 million ha of agricultural land with an average area of 66 ha per farm (SDC). These farms are most often mixed farms, producing a variety of outputs including livestock and livestock products, grains, fruits and vegetables.

c. large agricultural enterprises (privately owned) with various forms of proprietorship structures cultivate an estimated 22.5 million ha in the entire country. It is estimated the average size of these agricultural enterprises is 1,194 ha and they total 18,841 in number (SDC). These operations contribute significantly to the grains, feed dairy, and meat industries.

Household plots add significantly to the total food production in Ukraine. Although they farm roughly one third the land area of the large agricultural enterprises, household producers produce an estimated sixty percent of all food consumed in Ukraine. It is estimated up to 90% of some food products come from household and small-plot producers. The majority of household producers rely on the sale of produce from their plots to supplement their family incomes. Although small in size, the production from household plots is significant, yet little effort is made by the governments (including local administration and universities) to supply goods or services specifically for this target audience. Based on the authors experiences in Saskatchewan and other parts of the world, it is believed this sector has great potential to create, build, and expand intensive and value-added activities that will enhance the economic base of rural families and communities.

Both the economy and the community infrastructure have suffered as a result of the transition to a democratic society and a market economy. The project abstract reads that two foundational pillars of Canadian civil society are the act of giving voice to the people, and for governments to be responsive to the voice of the people. Indicators of democratic governments are openness, transparency, efficiency, effectiveness, focusing on people’s needs and involving the people in the decision making process. This project was based on two activities: establish working community advisory groups who on behalf of the small farmers, small-plot producers and household producers will make their agricultural needs known to the Tavria State Agrotechnical Academy (TSAA); and to assist the TSAA to be more responsive to the needs of small farmers, small-plot producers and household producers.
Purpose

Ukraine’s growing number of small private farmers and small-plot holders face numerous difficulties in growing and selling quality produce. Of significant importance are the lack of finances and business management knowledge, in addition to a lack of equipment, leading edge genetics, trusted supply of farm inputs, and regulations to guarantee quality in farm inputs. The focus of this project was to bring household producers (small-plot producers) and small private farmers together, to support them in developing a coherent voice, and to make known the agricultural issues affecting their livelihood. The focus was also on assisting the TSAA to be more responsive to the needs of small farmers, small-plot producers and household producers.

The approach taken in writing this paper was a reflective case study. The goal of this paper is to share experiences of the authors in this project. Specifically, the following aspects are discussed: applying a consensus building process, applying a program planning process, potential next steps, and authors reflection.

Context

This project was funded through the Facility for Agricultural Reform and Modernization (FARM) Program, managed by the Saskatchewan Trade and Export Partnership (STEP) in cooperation with the provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan and funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). FARM-funded projects are expected to support some or all of the FARM goals which are to:

- support the reform of Ukraine’s primary agriculture and food-related industries;
- facilitate the creation of profitable farms and improved rural livelihoods under a market economy;
- promote effective rural grassroots institutions participation in agrarian policy development; provide partnership opportunities for Ukrainian and Canadian companies and facilitate trade and investment links between Canada and Ukraine.

A review of the literature indicated several projects which were helpful in guiding the development of this project. Some projects from the literature review were dedicated to achieving increased employment, improved social environment, and reduction of poverty through sustainable community economic development (CBIE). Others had specific objectives of developing farmer marketing and procurement groups with the goal of improving marketing channels for fruit and vegetables, livestock and grain products in Ukraine (Agrilogistics); mobilizing community resources and strengthening the capacity of the communities (CBIE); and introduction of marketing cooperatives (USAID). Some projects were targeted to communities in southeastern Ukraine (Agrilogistics). Some were aimed at strengthening the institutional capacity to develop and deliver timely and relevant extension services (STEP), while others were targeted to household producers (Agrilogistics; USAID).

This was a short-term, small-scale project and was viewed as phase one in an anticipated series of projects. The stated short-term outcomes, anticipated upon the completion of this one-year project were:

- the establishment of two working community advisory groups
- an articulated list of important agricultural issues identified through a needs analysis conducted at two community meetings
- the enhanced capacity of the TSAA to work with household producers and small scale farmers.
Medium term outcomes to be realized two to three years after completion of this phase and with some additional input included:

- development of leadership skills within the producer community so they would be able to continue to deal with new problems as they arise, even after the project has ceased. This capacity building would involve an understanding of community development theories, principles and practices, and the ability to overcome barriers to community development
- greatly enhanced access of the household producer and small farmer to production and marketing information, and business management information
- a strategic framework in place within TSAA to support and foster growth of the existing working community advisory groups thus demonstrating a dedication to this target audience

The long-term impact of this project and continued projects in the series include:

- increased services and support for the household producer and small private farmer
- a well established framework within TSAA dedicated to supporting household producers and small private farmers
- a reduction in poverty, plus an improved social environment in the communities
- an established network of working community advisory groups in a number of communities and the TSAA
- a process that can be replicated with other communities in Ukraine
- empowered local people in the communities

**Theoretical / Philosophical Themes**

**Consensus building**

The first theme is that of introducing and implementing a consensus building process with the communities. Consensus-building processes allow everyone in the community to have input into decision-making processes, rather than leaving the decisions up to governments. During the process, individual issues and concerns are identified and discussed. Important is that this process helps the participants to see overarching themes arising from the identified issues which helps them establish a common understanding and framework for developing a solution to these themes.

**Consensus building - process**

Faculty were introduced to the basic principles of consensus building, as well as processes for establishing working community advisory groups. Printed materials supported the presentations and discussions. It was clearly stated that consensus does not mean everyone at the meeting would be in agreement with the decisions made. A consensus is a common decision made by a group of people but does not mean unanimity. One principle of civil society is the involvement of people in the decision making process, therefore it was imperative that consensus building was the appropriate process to use in identifying agricultural issues and concerns of the target audience.

The project coordinators, faculty and the local raion administration collectively coordinated meetings in two communities in the Melitopol region. Although the target audience was household producers and small private farmers, the meetings were open to all members of the communities. The local administration was charged with marketing the meetings. It was
clearly stated that participation in the meetings was voluntary. The meeting participants were introduced to the purpose of the project, objectives and processes to be used. They were introduced to the processes of consensus building and needs analysis. It was also emphasized that hearing the voice of the producers was a key component of the meeting. Immediately thereafter, producers were involved in a consensus building activity and asked to list on five recipe cards, agricultural issues that impact them. This represents the grassroots consultation phase of the process. The cards were collected and the participants arranged the cards into groups of similar. The participants saw their collective voice as their cards were posted on walls. All voices were heard. This represents the compilation of issues phase.

It was emphasized that the community must have a broader understanding of these agricultural issues, rather than looking at individual problems or situations with individual producers. In collaboration with the project coordinators, the meeting participants tabulated the groups of agricultural issues into larger themes, taking care not to lose or minimalize any card (voice). Each meeting participant was then given three stickies and asked to prioritize what they thought were the most important or urgent agricultural issues they face. The participants could place one, two or three stickies on any theme. This represents the priority ranking phase of the process. High priority themes emerged from this process. This process illustrated how an individual’s voice was heard and how they collectively identified the most pressing agricultural issues within the community. It also emphasized that no one person’s voice was louder than the others, as everyone had the same number of stickies. The participants were witness to a process that was inclusive rather than exclusive, a process where their participation was encouraged, and a process where they know their voice was heard. To bring an end to this phase of the process, the project coordinators summarized the process, the reasons for using this process, what was learned from this process, and the results of the priority issues.

There is a large bank of literature dealing with consensus building processes, community development processes, and collaborative problem solving which are all similar processes. The booklet *Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future – Guiding Principles* was used as a guide for this process.

**Consensus building – community leadership initiative**

After a short refreshment break the participants were introduced to the process of forming working community advisory groups. The project coordinators used examples of effective working groups from their home communities/province to emphasize the role that groups like this can play, the importance of groups like this to the field of agriculture, and how the groups function within the communities. Also explained was the role these groups play with publicly-funded and privatized agricultural extension organizations. Before asking for volunteers, the role of the working groups was explained - to collaborate with the TSAA in identifying their own agricultural problems, drawing on their community resources and expertise, plus designing and implementing a plan to address these agricultural problems. It was emphasized that these working community advisory groups would only be effective if the people were willing to put their minds and hearts together in mutual support and cooperation. Volunteers were then sought and received. Five volunteers were found for each of the communities.

A short meeting was held with the volunteer working group members. It was explained that the groups will follow the principles and practices of good governance - transparency, participation, openness and accountability and that they would soon be meeting with the TSAA to begin planning extension programs to solve their agricultural needs. These meetings are on-
going. The project coordinators advised the working group members that they must take the initiative to arrange meetings and to keep the project going.

Program Planning
There is an increasingly large body of literature on farmer participation in agricultural extension. Most international development organizations now strongly recommend the use of participatory extension processes when developing extension programs for farmers. The word participatory can be misleading. Farmer participation can be viewed on a continuum with minor and major involvement on opposite ends of the scale. Examples of minor involvement would include completing a needs analysis and supplying information to a university-run program planning committee. Examples of major involvement would include farmer participatory research in collaboration with a university, and a demand-driven farmer-led extension system. Farmer responsibility and decision making parallels their participation - the more the farmer’s participate in the decision making process, the more responsibility they take for determining their futures.

There are two components to extension education: technology transfer and adult education. Far too often, the emphasis is placed on technology transfer – getting information to those who need it. With the introduction of the internet, information is becoming more widely available world-wide. As the internet becomes more accessible to rural communities in Ukraine, more emphasis must be placed on adult education, and helping the learner understand the information so they can make informed management decisions. To ensure that the information transferred is appropriate in helping the farmer’s, their families and their communities realize their vision and solve their own problems, requires that the participants be involved in the needs analysis and program planning processes. Both needs analysis and program planning are an art and a science on their own, as is evident by the large body of knowledge devoted to each.

Program planning - process
The basic principles of adult education have recently been introduced in Ukraine and are already having an influence on agricultural extension services. Also having an influence is the connection between the three pillars that support the field of agriculture: research, education and extension. Each pillar was well developed under former soviet rule, but there was no connection between the three pillars. Extension, like research and education were very government controlled during former soviet times. The former extension system was not a demand driven system – the information that was created by government was made available to the state farm managers. The managers did not demand information. There was no pluralistic extension service. Private industry and international NGO extension was non-existent in the past. Farmer and commodity associations existed in former soviet times, but information they received came from and was controlled by the government. There was basically one source of information, and that was the government. The structure of the state farms also influenced the extension structure. Specialists on the state farms received information, but only in their area of specialization. A holistic approach to agriculture was prohibited because people only worked in their area of specialization. This has proven a challenge for small private farmers who now must have knowledge in all areas of agriculture.

Agriculture has changed as have the people in the industry and so must the agricultural extension system. From a holistic perspective, farmers must be involved in all stages of extension from the discovering of information (research) to the transfer of the information. Gone are the days of the “top-down” and “government knows best” approach to extension. The new
role of extension agents is to help farmers and rural communities organize themselves so they can take more responsibility for their growth and development.

Faculty were introduced to the study of adult education, the role of adult education in extension services, and most importantly to the pluralistic extension system that exists in Canada and other countries around the world. As governments downsize in many of the developed countries, extension services increasingly become the responsibility of other organizations including universities, commodity and farmer associations. It is common in Canada for farmer/commodity associations to be heavily involved in agricultural research and extension. In Canada, farmers are free to shop around for information and education, therefore governments (universities) must develop and deliver programs appropriate for their clients or risk becoming extinct. This concept will soon become important in Ukraine. There were several informal discussions with faculty on the topic of extension services: theory and practice, how extension services in Canada have morphed over the years, who is involved in delivering extension programs in Saskatchewan, and specifically how the farmers are involved in the extension program planning process.

Involving the household producers and small private farmers in the development of their extension programs was seen as an effective way of ensuring the TSAA extension services was relevant to the client. Faculty were introduced to a series of program planning models, each illustrating how to involve the learner in the process. Faculty were very familiar with the concept of program planning models but had not used a model or involved the learner in the planning process to the extent these models suggested. The book *Planning Programs for Adult Learners: a practical guide for educators, trainers and staff developers* was left at the university. This book was constantly used as a reference during the discussions.

A program planning model is a systematic approach resulting in a series of actions using a variety of tools to achieve an intended change. Despite being aware of the process, it was not a common occurrence for faculty to use a program planning model to effectively and efficiently guide them through the program planning process.

**Challenges and Results**

Two challenges were predicted by the project coordinators: the people’s willingness to participate in decision making processes, and the institution’s willingness to involve people in these processes. For a generation, Ukrainians were raised under the former soviet influence. People came to depend on the government for all their needs because they knew they would not be allowed to be engaged in the decision making processes. Therefore people seldom saw their direct agricultural production needs reflected in government programs and services. The few people in power had their voice heard, but the voice of the average person was lost. People became apathetic. With the breakup of the former soviet-union, the government was no longer in a position where it could supply its centrally determined goods and services to the farm community. NGO’s and international development organizations worldwide came to the assistance of the communities. They came to support the communities in helping transform their understanding of and attitude towards the problems they are trying to solve. They encouraged the people to take more responsibility in solving their own agricultural needs. They challenged the people to make decisions and work together to implement actions to solve their own needs. They began the re-creation of a civil society.

This project dealt with small rural communities quite removed from central government. It was anticipated that household producers would be leery of participating in the project because
of the historical distrust of government. Fifteen years of independence has had a positive influence in that the people trusted the project coordinators and the TSAA and they spoke freely about their agricultural needs. They also received assurance from the TSAA that their needs had been heard and actions would be taken to help them meet these needs.

The second challenge was that public institutions would be reluctant to change their power relationship with the people in the communities. It was anticipated that the university would be willing to work with the household producers to identify their agricultural needs so they could develop extension programs for these producers. This creates a situation of dependence until a more pluralistic extension system is created and the householders have other sources where they can obtain information. It remains to be seen if the university will support the development and expansion of the working groups to the point where the groups could control their own extension programs or contract their extension programs to other providers. It can be argued this may not be a transfer of power from the university to the people, but rather a rediscovering of latent power within the communities that has been suppressed for the past generation.

High priority agricultural needs
It was not surprising that marketing issues were identified as being high priority. Lacking in Ukraine is a supply chain for fruits and vegetables that links the producers and the consumers. Producers often lack the resources enabling them to market their products higher up in the supply chain. Entrepreneurs who pay little for the produce are often the only marketing option for household producers. Communities have expressed a need to develop a reliable supply chain and marketing channels.

Agricultural inputs were also seen as high priority. There are various issues here including the very high prices of inputs, the complete lack of regulations governing the quality or testing of inputs, the severe lack of inputs, and the unreliable information that accompanies the use of inputs.

Genetics was deemed a high priority, both in plants and animals. The local administration controls the release of new genetic materials but little if any research is being done on new varieties so new genetic materials are realistically not available.

Agricultural equipment is old and unreliable, thus forcing manual labour which restricts the size of operations for small private farmers. New equipment, if available is extremely expensive and totally prohibitive.

Finances were the last major agricultural need that was identified by the working groups. The ownership of farmland is still being decided in the courts in Ukraine. Obtaining funds from banks and other lending institutions is almost impossible as the farmer cannot use land as collateral.

Next steps
Many of the consensus building skills, needs analysis skills and community leadership initiatives skills learned by faculty at TSAA were learned in the field during the meetings. Experiential learning of this nature can be captured through an internship program. TSAA has indicated they are dedicated to serving the household producer, small-plot producer and small private farmer. Establishing an infrastructure – a unit dedicated to these target audiences would be seen as commitment. Incorporating this experiential learning into a degree course or program area would
also be seen as a commitment. Study tours to Canada to participate in community-based projects would be a valuable asset to faculty at TSAA.

TSAA has an extension services unit dedicated to supplying large agricultural enterprises with extension services, for a fee. In past, the university has not dedicated a unit to providing extension services to household producers because the university does not have the financial resources to do so. Securing long term funding for a unit like this could be a next step. TSAA must recognize that household producers, small-plot producers and small private farmers have the greatest potential to expand their operations and diversify their operations thus putting them in a situation where they could afford to pay for some services.

One desired outcome of this project is the development of leadership skills within the producer community. A possible outcome would be the development and delivery of some basic training workshops in areas of community development theories, principles and practices, and the ability to overcome barriers to community development. Resulting from this would be a support system of Ukrainians and Canadians – a critical mass of motivated, trained community development specialists dedicated to rebuilding their own and other communities.

There are now several examples of successful community development and extension services projects in Ukraine. It would be wise to take advantage of the local expertise – the people who have adopted and adapted practices from other countries and created a made-in-Ukraine extension system. Examples of successful projects include the Center for Private Farmer Training and Outreach in the Khmelnytsky Oblast, and the Center for Private Farmer Training and Outreach in the Vinnytsia oblast. Both projects are a partnership between universities, farmer groups and the local administration.

**Educational Importance, Implications, and Application**

*Lessons learned from this project:*

- the influence of the former soviet union is still evident in Ukraine and is visible through the reluctance to alter power-sharing relationships. Local administration was eager to take control if allowed, and community residents were eager to get permission from the local administration before making any decisions. The local administration still holds power and therefore to make things happen, it is wise to involve the local administration.

- community residents were genuinely excited at seeing their voice in the consensus building process, and knowing that their voice was equally as powerful as everyone else’s. This was a very empowering exercise.

- success will lead to success.. It will be vitally important that the first programs developed and delivered by the TSAA in collaboration with the working community advisory group be rewarding to the communities.

- restrictions identified by the household producers and small private farmers could be attributed to either a lack of knowledge and/or an overarching power preventing an action. It is important when conducting a needs analysis to use both the traditional (fundamental) and empowerment approach.

- many of the agricultural problems identified as being high priority were not caused by a lack of knowledge, and could not be solved by bringing international knowledge to the communities. The problems are a result of a power in-balance. The people know how to solve many of their own problems, and if resources were made available to them, these problems would be solved.
References