Youth Leadership for a Changing World:
The Future Farmers of Turkmenistan

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Abstract

An ongoing development project in the central Asian country of Turkmenistan, the Future Farmers of Turkmenistan (FFT), sought to organize a national youth leadership organization, patterned after the United States youth organizations of the FFA and 4-H programs. Initiated as part of the Farmer-to-Farmer program of the USAID and contracted through Winrock International, the FFT project began simply in small, scattered groups organized in several states or Velayats throughout Turkmenistan.

After the initial organizational phases of the consulting project and with the continued organization of FFT clubs, a national effort was undertaken to organize a national convention to standardize FFT policies, structure, and to develop unifying standards for the sustainability of the FFT. This paper will outline the organization of this inaugural national convention and the feedback and comments of the participants.
Introduction

In 2002 Winrock International volunteers undertook the task of organizing an agricultural youth leadership organization patterned after the National FFA Organization (formerly the Future Farmers of America) and the National 4-H Organization from the United States of America in the Central Asian country of Turkmenistan. This agricultural youth organization has taken the name the Future Farmers of Turkmenistan (FFT) or in Turkmen “Türkmenstanyň Geljekki Mülkdarlary” (TGM) or in Russian “Бщщие Фермеры Туркменстана”.

The tasks or goals of this fledgling youth leadership organization have been primarily focused on securing the necessary permissions from the appropriate governmental agencies, namely the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Education, at the local, Velayat (equivalent to our State level), and National levels. Once the approvals were obtained the selection of the FFT clubs was another task to be undertaken. Winrock International, the NGO charged with the development of the FFT through a contract with the USAID, initiated the development of these first clubs in locales where the had consulting offices or subcontractors that could serve as advisors to the fledgling clubs.

Since the initial project began in the spring of 2002, more than six FFT clubs have been started throughout the country of Turkmenistan. Clubs are currently found in five of Turkmenistan’s Velayats, with plans in place to organize a club in the Balkan Velayat or Caspian Sea region of the country. Currently FFT members range in age from 8 years old to forty-five years of age. FFT clubs have been sponsored by local producers groups, agribusiness consulting groups, interested adult agriculturalists, and two educational institutions. The Winrock staff has organized additional clubs since the conclusion of the last assignment. In each instance, unique problems and solutions have arisen concerning the formation and oversight of these clubs (Andreasen, 2004). Subsequent assignments have and will include establishment of national norms and standards and a reward and evaluation system for agricultural project assessments.

Purpose and Objective

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the formation developments from the first National Convention of the Future Farmers of Turkmenistan. The specific objective was to document the perceptions of the national convention participants.

Methods

The qualitative methods utilized in this study are based on the works of Fraenkel and Wallen (1999). They state that holistically collected data which rely on the participant’s perspective regarding the natural setting of the study, capture their attitudes, behaviors reasons, ad motives for participation.

At the conclusion of the FFT convention, a four question questionnaire was given to the participants. Respondents were asked to answer either in their native Turkmen language or in Russian. The results from the 22 youth participants and the six club advisors were then given to a contracted interpreter for translation. No attempts were made to assess reliability or validity prior to the administration of the questionnaire. Responses were summarized by
the interpreter with no attempt to attribute them to any demographical category.

Plans were made in 2002 to organize a “National Convention” which would standardize the operation of the FFT Clubs and assist in establishing a national leadership team. Since the initial project began, more than six FFT clubs have been initiated throughout the country with members ranging from 8 years old to forty-five years of age. FFT clubs have been sponsored by local producers groups, agribusiness consulting groups, interested adult agriculturalists, and two educational institutions (Andreasen, 2004). The Winrock staff has organized additional clubs since the conclusion of the last assignment. In each instance, unique problems and solutions have arisen concerning the formation and oversight of these clubs. Subsequent assignments have and will include establishment of national norms and standards and a reward and evaluation system for agricultural project assessments.

Because of these concerns and in spite of the problems which arose due to working in a dynamic political environment, the need to organize a national convention to standardize the FFT clubs, establish regulations and policies, and to organize a national leadership team was deemed paramount to the sustainability of the project. Consultants were located, locations scouted, and activities designed to accomplish the goals developed during earlier trips. The support of the Turkmen government as well as the financial backing of government and non-governmental organizations in the country was vital if this outcome was to be realized. Without such support, the sustainability of this project could very well lie in the hands of the Winrock staff, US consultants, and Peace Corp volunteers.

Philosophical Theme

Numerous studies have been conducted which focus on the leadership characteristics of FFA and 4-H members. These studies have also shown that these organizations are very successful in developing and organizing successful leadership programs. A study conducted by Townsend and Carter in 1983 found that the leadership traits of teens could be positively impacted through involvement and participation in FFA activities. Several studies have shown that participation in local, state, and national leadership programs (e.g. state and national conventions, Washington Leadership Conference) had a similar positive impact on the self-perception of the leadership abilities of the participants (Townsend, 1981; Andreasen and Perkins, 2001).

Findings

During the months of July and August, 2003 a national Future Farmers of Turkmenistan (FFT) conference was held in the capital city of Ashgabat. Representatives from six FFT clubs attended this three-day conference sponsored by Winrock International and USAID and supported with in-kind donations from the equivalent of the Turkmen Cotton Growers Association. Twenty-two FFT members and six advisors from five of the six Velayats (States) in Turkmenistan took part in this historic event. Several additional part-time attendees gleaned valuable information and training which contributed to the continued development of additional FFT clubs throughout the region.

Plans were made for the future development of a week-long conference where national elections, award recognition, and future national FFT development would occur. As
the first national FFT conference came to a close, participants completed a brief questionnaire asking for their impressions of the conference, the knowledge they gained, and their commitment to helping the FFT continue to grow. Responses indicated their satisfaction with the conference, their increased understanding of the FFT’s goals and purposes, and the value of their new-found friends from around the country.

In looking at the lessons learned from the FFT conventions, summated participant responses to question 1, “What did you learn from the FFT convention?” follow. “All the leaders of FFT Chapters learned a lot about the significance of being a good leader, helping students with their Supervised Agricultural Experience, significance of establishing National FFT Headquarters and unity of all FFT Clubs in Turkmenistan. They have new ideas about conducting of different cognitive activities for the young members of FFT Clubs. The leaders are eager to find the solution of four main issues discussed on the conference: Supervised Agricultural Experience, Communication, Recognition of Student’s Accomplishment and Rewarding, National Standards of FFT Clubs in Turkmenistan. Due to the different activities conducted by the USAID/FTF Winrock International Program Volunteers Randall Andreasen and Andy Giron, students got thorough knowledge about leadership, unity, support, team-building activities, communication, etc. Five of the FFT leading students plan to develop small projects in fundraising and try to involve as many students as they can. Students got the information about SAE and plan to discuss it with their chapter leaders. The concern of seven students is to improve communication between FFT Chapters and information exchange between FFT Chapters (e-mail, Internet, newspapers, magazines, etc). Two of the students are interested in Soymilk Production and think about the ways of raising the fund of FFT Clubs”.

Question 2 asked: “What was your favorite activity during the FFT conference?” “All of the participants got the great pleasure from the activities conducted at the conference. Especially, everybody liked the second day of the conference when they went to Chuli, where everybody could get more information about each other. During the conference FTF Winrock staff conducted activities developing unity among the students, leadership, support, finding the right solution and establishing strong foundation of FFT Clubs. One of the most interesting parts of the conference was the third day, when FTF Program Volunteers Randall Andreasen and Andy Giron conducted a seminar on fundraising, at the end of which volunteers handed certificates to the all participants of the conference”.

Question 3: “What will you do with the knowledge you gained at this conference in your FFT club?” “All FFT Chapter Leaders by the return to their clubs will conduct meetings and small seminars for sharing knowledge they gained at the conference. Also by the help of given textbooks students will have special lessons in farming. These books will serve as one of main information sources for students and leaders. All students of the conference gained knowledge in fundraising, SAE, development of small business plans for getting credit, FFT activities, leadership, etc. The concern of all students about this question is to share gained knowledge with other FFT members and try to involve more students in FFT activities. Students that were not able to present at the conference will get all information that other students and leaders got”.

Question 4: “What will you do to help FFT grow and develop in Turkmenistan?” “All the leaders of FFT Chapters would like to increase number of active students in FFT Clubs. The first problem for FFT members to be solved is establishing National FFT Headquarters and Standards. After the conference each student will begin working on their
small business plans and take some advices from FFT Chapter leaders about their Supervised Agricultural Experience. Students will work on fundraising and find new ways of fundraising that will be appropriate in Turkmenistan”.

**Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations**

Training activities on leadership, teamwork, group interaction, and communication were developed and delivered by the volunteers. Activities relating to and emphasizing these concepts were integrated into the leadership training and planning sessions over the course of the three-day conference. Group interaction among and between the six attending FFT groups was facilitated through structured activities conducted by the volunteers and FFT club officers. The activities provided the participants with the opportunity to realize how important group communication and cooperation are to successfully accomplish and achieve goals. Through participation in the different group activities students were able to develop a national FFT emblem, a program of national standards, and entrepreneurial activity awards and recognition (similar to the FFA’s supervised agricultural experience projects and Proficiency Awards).

The sustainability of development projects like the formation of the Future Farmers of Turkmenistan rely heavily on in-country leadership. With constant changes in the political landscape of the country and with the high turn over of volunteer leaders, a stabilizing force must be maintained in-country if these FFT clubs hope to develop into a cohesive, national organization. The NGO, Winrock International, has to date been able to provide this stabilization but changes in personnel, development emphases by donor organizations and funding issues raise the distinct possibility that this youth leadership project will cease to exist in the near future.

Recommendations regarding the sustainability of the FFT project center around the need to a stable and consistent presence of a national director. Such a presence could be filled by a NGO with a dedicated staff position overseeing FFT training and development, an international corporation (i.e. John Deere, Case IH, Monsanto) with a similar position, a government official familiar with rural youth development (some one with the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Agriculture), or an international governmental organization (USAID, British Embassy) committed to providing the funding and manpower necessary. Without serious commitments of time, money, direction, and leadership, the maiden attempt at organizing a national youth leadership organization in the country of Turkmenistan will fail and the potential that was the Future Farmers of Turkmenistan will not be realized.

**References**


