

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH EFFECTIVE FARMER GROUPS

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ABSTRACT

Group formation cannot simply be achieved by calling people together. The formation and development of an effective farmer group is influenced by the skills of the group promoter and the adherence to certain basic group dynamic principles. This paper reflects on the experience of establishing and working with farmer groups as they progressed through the different stages of group development and social capital formation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Farmer groups have become very popular in agricultural related activities in both developed and developing countries. These have been both formal (e.g. Cooperatives) and informal in nature. Many factors are motivating the formation of farmer groups, including an efficient means for communicating and transmitting information, sharing information (e.g. study groups, focus groups); identifying and evaluation of group techniques; improving on-farm and off-farm linkages and the encouragement and empowering of farmers. Farmer groups provide the ideal organisational structure (vehicle) to work collectively towards change at farm level and to the agricultural system in general (Röling, 1987).

Well functioning groups do not just fall out of the blue. The mobilisation of farmers into effective groups is a process that will take time to develop to a point where it can be effective and where the members feel connected to it. This paper reveals on some studies, and experiences with highly effective farmer groups in the Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces. Results and experience suggested that group efficacy is linked to several group dynamic variables, which are developed during the process of group formation. Group efficacy has a strong influence over the characteristics of group life, including the length of time that group members are willing to continue working together.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF EFFECTIVE GROUPS

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A group may look like simply a number of people coming together to have discussions, or to make plans, or for what reason one might imagine. But when one looks beneath the surface of just being together as people, the essential characteristics of an effective group is that members need to take ownership for their decisions and planning within a group. To summarise Hall (1950) define a mature group as “a self-direction, self-controlled body in which every member carries his part of the responsibilities for developing and executing the group’s plans”.

Factors affecting the adoption of new practices in agriculture relate to the characteristics of the new practice like financial and technical considerations and to farmer beliefs, value and social systems. But farmers do not operate in a vacuum: they are influenced by values and institutions, which embody the norms, and ways of doing things, “rules of the business” of the day and these in turn will determine the sustainable resource use and management. Kofman and Senge (1993) found that farmers who are involved in farmer organisations and study groups were more likely to adopt new practices in agricultural development.

Groups like individuals, however pass through several stages or phases as they learn together. These stages may be longer or shorter for each group, or for individual members of the group, but all groups will need to experience them. There seems to be no standard pattern of group development. The most popular views are that groups develop in five classical stages. To be able to form effective groups, it is necessary that the dynamics of group development must be facilitated well in order to get synergy between cooperation and combined action of group members, and several skills are needed to successfully guide a group through these stages (Stevens & Botha, 2003). The sequential stages of the process that must occur before members can support each other as they make changes to practices and learn together are summarised in the different stages of group development (Tuckman & Jensen (1977) and Forsyth (1999))

2.1 Forming or orientation stage

When the group is forming, members often go through an orientation phase characterised by mild tensions, uncertainty about the group’s purpose, structure and leadership. Group members are aware of a vacuum and a kind of dependency manifests. The situation is further complicated by the absence of specific norms relating to behaviour and the attainment of goals, as well as uncertainty about their role in the group. This is the phase where individuals getting to ‘know ‘ each other (history and future aspirations), and where shared values and trust is developed. This stage can be very stressful and therefore it is a time of “testing

waters” to determine what type of behaviour are acceptable (Stevens & Botha, 2003).

2.2 Storming or the conflict stage

Storming is characterised by conflicts within the group, as members struggle to define their group goals, their relations with one another, and the role that members will play in the group. Members accept the existence of the group, but there is resistance to the constraints that the group imposes on individuality. While during the first stage the member will accept the leaders' guidance with few questions, during this stage the purpose of leadership, individual roles and group norms are challenged. Members may manifest their dissatisfaction in the form of “fight” (against authority of peers) or “flight” (leaving the group). In groups where no leader has been appointed, conflict arises between members, as they “fight” for roles and status within the group (Forsyth, 1990). This stage of development is characterised where individual members acquire personal-self confidence in themselves and interpersonal skills and leadership skills are revealed.

2.3 Norming stage

During the third developmental stage inter member conflict is replaced with cohesiveness: a feeling of group unity, *camera die, esprit de corps* and coming to regard each other as credible sources of support and advice. In general there is a strong sense of group identity present and the mutual support, trust and co-operation between members increase, and decisions are reached through consensus. This increased cohesiveness reflects the development of group norms, which stabilise and harmonise the dynamic of the group.

2.4 Performing or the task performance stage

Performing manifests in a fully functioning and accepting the group. This is where the individual group member coming to regard other members as credible sources of support and advice, and a certain commitment to fellow members is illustrated. For a group to reach this stage of development, where group goals and objectives are attained, a certain level of group maturity is expected. Time and considerable change have take place before a group reaches this phase (Forsyth, 1999). Stage four is marked by interdependence in personal relations and problem solving in realm of task functions, and the group is in general focused on its purpose for establishment.

2.5 Adjourning or dissolution stage

With the task near completion, a group will move into what is called the adjourning period or transformation stage, in which finalising of a specific task and a changing of relationships is anticipated. This stage should be planned within farmer groups, and must take place when the goals, as set up by the group, have been accomplished or when the groups' time and resources have been exhausted (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). This can also be a stage where farmer groups revisit their focus, and identify a new focus for studying with new goals and objectives set.

This model of group development is therefore a *successive-stage theory* as it specifies the usual order or phases of group development or maturity level of the group. Sometimes however development takes a different course. This pattern of group formation and development is not universal and groups tend to "skip" particular stages. Unfortunately with relative ineffective study groups it was found that very few developed to a stage of "performance" or a relative stage of "maturity" in the group, and instead they became unmotivated or stagnated at earlier stages of group development.

3. GROUP CHARACTERISTICS AND CRITICAL FACTORS AFFECTING THE EFFICACY OF GROUPS

Group efficacy has been defined as the group members' collective estimate of the group's ability to perform a specific task (Gibson, 1999). When we look at Hackman's (1990) definition of group effectiveness, we see that short-term performance is only one part of the total picture of group effectiveness. Three dimensions of group effectiveness are proposed:

- Productive output: the degree to which the group's output meets the standard of those that receives or use it.
- Capability to work independently: the degree to which the group's members are able to work together in the future.
- Growth and well being of members: the degree to which the experience of being a group enhanced the individual members through their own personal learning or development.

According to this model, the group that performs its assigned task well but is not able to work together as a unit in the future is not a truly an effective group. The

purpose of this study was to identify the characteristics of an effective farmer group and to learn why some groups have stagnated in their development. The following factors and characteristics were found to be critical with efficient study groups in the Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces (Stevens & Botha, 2003 and Terblanché, 2000):

a) Existing structure

The performance of a study group may be shaped as much by the structures and set-up of the group as by the factors external to it (attitudes, introduction of new regulations, values, tradition, inadequate support). These internal structures, systems and procedures may constrain or support the organisation performance of a group. The organisational structure of a group may include the different individual roles, techniques, networks and the group dynamic processes that exist. Sobel *et al* (2001) suggest that the way these factors are applied produce patterns of behaviour in human organisations that also determines the productive capacity of the group.

Groups and group facilitators need to change the focus to what they want to achieve with a specific group rather than making the groups focus on member numbers and how well they perform within the traditional group structure. The development of group priorities based on appropriate expectations or indicators of success are important to maintain the engagement of group participants. However groups often see their success in terms of structure: How many members does the group have? How many meetings? How many members attend the meetings? How difficult is it to attract people of the executive? Then they usually focus on how they can improve their results in these areas. For example if people are not attending meetings then they try to address the issue by inviting more guest speakers or changing meeting time and venue.

These measures of success are most of the time imposed on groups through the expectations of external bodies. Measuring the performance of the group in terms of how well they match the group set up has often lead to a loss of engagement and motivation. Once a group has decided what they want to achieve they can choose the structure that suits them and their aims. This may not be the traditional group model; there may be other potential group designs and ways of running groups that may fit a specific situation better.

b) Shared vision and goals

High efficient groups clearly illustrated a shared vision, goals, objectives, and

motivation in order to provide a focal point for group activities (Beal *et al*, 1969; Stogdill, 1978; Terblanché, 1986). According to Beal *et al* (1969, p.130). "... A group unaware of its purposes is a rudderless ship". Terblanché (2000:64) founded that nearly 64% of the members of the more effective study groups have a clear knowledge of the group goals, while only 35% of members of the less effective groups indicated a clear knowledge of the group goals.

c) Setting norms and building trust through active participation

A participatory approach of operation is needed between members to develop shared values and visions in relation to the goals and task ahead for a group. Shared values relevant to the purpose of the group are seen as prerequisite for group effectiveness (Stevens & Botha, 2003). Skills in working together include communication, conflict resolution and group decision-making. To accomplish this, the group structure is playing an imperative role for improving the efficiency with which farmers can deal both in collecting and sharing of information. Effective communication exists when members feel free to express their feelings on the task as well as on the groups operation (Joubert & Steyn, 1971:161; Reeves, 1979:337 and Terblanché, 1986). According to Beal *et al*, (1969) the more group members actively participate and work together within a group, the more favourable are their attitudes towards the rest of the group members, and the greater the feeling of concern for and identifying with the group in future.

According to Terblanché (1986:76), 30% of the members of the less effective farmer groups are not satisfied with the communication pattern within their groups, while members of the more effective groups are much more satisfied that there is a two-way communication pattern within the groups (only 4% indicates their dissatisfaction).

To ensure continuity, transparency and accountability: agreement must be reached on the obligations of members and frequency of meetings and activities. These varied significantly between the different study groups. For example some of the study groups met monthly at different venues during the production season according to seasonal farm needs, while other were meeting more frequently to collect information on market trends and discuss marketing strategies. The more efficient farmer groups are according to Terblanché (2000:104) characterized by the fact that the venues for meetings rotates monthly, while the less efficient groups tends to meet monthly at the same venue. The members of the effective groups also perceive their venue more positively than members of the less effective groups and this difference is significant ($r = 0.235$; $p = 0.05$).

Lockie *et al.* (2000) found that experiential learning in groups is perceived to be effective for the majority of farmers. But even more important is the creation of opportunities for farmers to participate in the education and group activities as part of the learning process. A group can build social capital as they learn together and develop as a group through:

- Delivering of new knowledge and skills
- By providing interaction with researchers, advisors and other professionals
- The provision of opportunities to share information with fellow farmers

Farmers in general are more willing to listen and trust the experience and knowledge of other farmers who are in situations similar to them. Members have to agree on operational rules and norms applicable for the group, the assignment of responsibilities within the group and be willing to actively play their part in discussions and group activities. In a research study Terblanché (2000:1110) founded that the more effective groups make less use of experts address them during the annual program than the less effective groups. They make significantly more use of own members to complete tasks and discuss it at group meetings than the less efficient groups. There is therefore a higher degree of involvement and participation within the more efficient groups tat contributes towards group functioning and the increase in knowledge and skills.

d) Size of a group

There is evidence from this study that size of a group is related to the effectiveness, with smaller groups being more effective. The relative more effective groups were found in general to be fairly small (7 members), democratic and reasonably homogenous in terms of farming systems, needs and resources at their disposal (Terblanché, 2000:62-63). Under such conditions it was found that group members are more likely to trust each other and accept joint responsibility for any actions the group takes. Individuals must be able to perceive personal self-interest served within the collective group interest and it was easier to develop in smaller groups.

e) Leadership

The desirables expected by a group rarely occur spontaneously and need to be encouraged through sensitive and responsible leadership. Leadership according to Jordaan *et al.* (1989) is action, not position. Groups require skills in working together and leadership if they are to be effective. Leadership must communicate a vision of how cooperation can move the group from independent individuals to

interdependent individuals for the benefit of everyone. Although some members already possess strong leadership abilities, others enhanced their leadership qualities through on-job experiences by working with other members on issues that they care about and providing them with appropriate roles to fill within the group. At the same time, leadership qualities are further enhanced and made more versatile by providing opportunities for such individuals to operate outside their usual milieu (i.e. comfort zone). There is an increasing recognition that leadership is more effective if it is shared among a number of players, who have complementary skills (Beal *et al*, 1969; Baron & Byrne, 1991). Terblanché (2000:141-142) also found evidence that there is a tendency for a higher degree of shared leadership function among the more efficient groups (7.72) than among the less efficient groups (6.01) and the difference is significant ($p = 0.06$).

Three types of leadership have been identified according to the classification used by Chambers *et al* (2001), namely:

- 'Visionary' leader
- 'Strategist' leader and
- A 'facilitator'

Leadership however does require support in order to be effective, particularly in situations where something is being advocated that are different from the conventional wisdom.

f) *Networking*

It was found that networking between effective farmers groups were regarded as very important. Networking is viewed as critically important by farmers in sustainable agriculture as a means for accessing information that is not readily available from outsiders (Norman *et al*, 1996). Such networking can facilitate bonding, create feelings of mutual support and common destiny, and reduce feelings of isolation.

High-efficacy groups showed some form of networking with other farmer groups and is attached to higher levels of organized agriculture (Beal *et al*, 1969 and Terblanché, 1986). A total of 86% respondents of highly efficient groups indicate that it is absolutely desirable to form networking with other groups and even 60% respondents of the less efficient groups share the same vision (Terblanché, 1986:191). Such types of initiatives help to build and create feelings of mutual support and common destiny, and also play an important role in the validating or supporting of farmers' experiences.

g) Development of human and social capital

Bandura (1986) stated that group efficacy “ will influence what people will do as a group, and how much effort they will put into it, and their staying power when efforts fail”. Study groups that have experience high levels of success were more likely to set challenging goals for the group that led to achievement at a higher level and this also helped group members to experience higher levels of satisfaction.

It was found that individuals belonging to relative efficient study groups were more prepared to set higher goals for themselves and eagerly engaged in self regulation and monitoring of their own learning curve to achieve these goals. Usually in high-efficacy groups there are several opportunities for members to work with a certain autonomy and independence from the group itself. Members are prepared to take responsibility for the outcome of the action plan; they are very committed to the group and find satisfaction in participating in the group’s activities. In general group members were capable of handling their own individual work assignments and they have the ability to know when and if they require assistance from the group at large. Members of more efficient farmer groups also perceive that the completion of assignments did lead to an increase in the level of their knowledge (8.0) while members of the less efficient groups were more uncertain (7.2) and they made less use of this technique (Terblanché, 2000:68).

h) Monitoring and evaluation

Group members associated to highly effective groups also shown some willingness to engage in higher standards of regular self-evaluation. Periodically, the team will stop to examine how well it is functioning and how its effectiveness can be improved (Stufflebeam, 1971). Members also indicated that they have a great desire to spend time on concentrating on learning and self-development, as opposed solely on task performance.

It was found to be very important for high-efficacy groups to re-evaluate the constitution regularly (once a year) and if necessary, adjust their goals, planned activities and budgets based upon what they have learned from the recent past (Ohlson, 1977, Düvel, 1980 and Terblanché, 1986). There is considerable merit in adjusting goals and activities of farmer groups over time rather than disbanding and forming new ones.

Although each of the above-mentioned characteristics plays an important role in the efficacy of a group, Terblanché (2000) suggested that strengthening one or more of these characteristics is likely to have a positive effect on the other and ultimately on the group efficacy as a whole.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Effective farmer groups are a prerequisite for accelerated agricultural development in South Africa. Effective farmer groups are the “vehicle” to work collectively towards change at farm level and can help with the empowerment of farmers. This suggests that the quality of facilitation and attention required to the social processes of group development as been discussed are crucial factors for sustainable agricultural development. It was found that early levels of group efficacy have a strong influence on group processes and procedures during later stages of group development. It is especially important to ensure that these effects see to be set early on in the life of a group, emphasizing again the importance of the group’s start up-period and the associated process of the development of norms, roles and ground rules.

“Without leadership and organization, a community tends to stagnate, and even talented individuals within the community struggle to escape from the shackles of under-development” (Grobler, 2002).

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