

THE FIVE SKILL SETS

Combining skill sets

The key to this approach for strengthening capacity of poor farmers for market engagement is the combination of the five skill sets. Each set strengthens a specific capability that complements and reinforces one or more of the other skill sets. For example:

- Group management skills are strengthened when a farmer group does internal savings and lending, or when the group learns together in a farmer field school.
- Once a group learns to analyze market opportunities they often feel the need to learn experimentation and innovation skills because they need to improve some aspect of their production or post-harvest technology in order to compete in the market.
- Planning how to meet market demand often stimulates farmer groups to tackle aspects of sustainable production because they need better pest or disease control, soil fertility or irrigation.

Flexibility

A flexible approach to forming and using the five skill sets is important because a farmer group may have strengths and weaknesses in different areas. Some groups may need strengthening in one or two skill sets; some groups may be starting from scratch; and yet other groups may have elements of several skill sets but not be strong in any one.

There does not seem to be any obvious sequence in which the skill sets need to be acquired—except for the fact that the group needs to have the basic skills for self-management and decision making before they can effectively take on the other skill sets. But so long as they are able to organize and manage themselves effectively, the order in which they obtain the other skills can be quite flexible. For the very poor, the starting point for formation of these skill sets—whether they start with market

engagement or sustainable production, for example—seems to be less important than encouraging the group to understand how and why the skill sets are complimentary. With this understanding in place, a farmer group is in a position to take advantage of flexible facilitation that encourages a pro-active effort by the group to add skill sets according to their own felt needs and priorities.

Skill Set #1: Group Management Skills



Description and importance

What are the skills necessary for managing a functional group?

A functional group ready for agroenterprise is one that has basic capabilities and procedures for internal democratic management. These include knowing how to develop a shared vision, define common objectives, build mutual trust and responsibility, resolve conflict and sustain learning. The development of these skills builds solid groups.

Why are functional groups important for agroenterprise?

Many poor people find it difficult to engage successfully in markets. The barriers poor people face in markets include lack of financial and physical assets, lack of access to key information and services, lack of negotiating power and

competitiveness due to the production of very small volumes of low-quality products, and a lack of self-confidence. They also often lack a “voice” or equity in interactions with other market actors.

Functional groups have to be inclusive and democratically managed in order to help poor people to overcome these barriers to market entry. A common vision of collective marketing can enable the poor to supply the minimum volume required by buyers who reach a wider consumer base. Membership in a group can enable the weak and powerless to access services collectively which are denied to them as individuals. Overall, groups can harness the strengths of each individual by sharing responsibilities and allowing specialization to occur. Finally, *functional groups* may be an effective way for poor people to increase their self-confidence, manage conflicts and to advocate for themselves in the community, in the market and at political levels.

Tips for facilitators

➤ *Promote participatory group formation*

Help group members to develop a shared vision for the group that includes both long- and short-term benefits. The newer the group or the poorer the members, the more immediate and tangible the benefits need to be.

Reduce group time commitment and promote efficiency by promoting objectives that are simple and are few in number. This is especially important for the poorer group members who will require more of their time for other livelihood activities.

Do not impose outsiders’ ideas of what is good for the group, remember you are a facilitator.



➤ *Encourage a group to develop its own management capacity*

Promote basic planning skills within the group. Groups should learn to define specific objectives and create a detailed plan to reach them within a given time frame.

➤ *Emphasize and develop record keeping skills*

The group will need at least a few members with basic literacy skills to maintain written records. At the same time, promote a record-keeping system (memory based) in which all group members, regardless of literacy, can participate. This will help promote transparency and accountability.

➤ *Build participatory monitoring and evaluation into all group activities*

A shared vision helps a group to track progress towards collective goals. This also allows the group to hold its members, leaders and facilitator accountable for their obligations to the group in a timely fashion.

➤ *Encourage the group to share all learning broadly among its members*

This helps to minimize dependence on the facilitator as well as on those group members who hold more power in the local community.

Do not interact with only a selective few of the group members and ignore the rest. Be inclusive.

Do not skip internal monitoring and evaluation—detect problems early before they get out of hand. Be proactive in problem solving.

➤ *Establish order and trust within the group*

Develop internal rules and sanctions for rule-breakers. Ensure that the procedure for resolving internal conflict is locally acceptable.

➤ *Focus on building trust among group members*

Trust among group members is as important as trust between the group members and their facilitator. This requires that all group members and the facilitator meet their obligations, provide mutual support to one another, are faithful to the group's internal rules, adhere to the group's planned activities or change planned activities in a transparent way.

Do not ignore hidden agendas of group members. Create a democratic environment.

Tracking progress in group management skills

A group needs time to make progress in forming group management skills. Box 1 summarizes six characteristics of group management to look for in a functional group.

Box 1. Group management

A functional farmer group:

- Has a shared vision
- Has mutual trust
- Is capable of resolving internal conflicts
- Sustains and shares learning internally
- Has democratic management and the capability to follow its own internal rules
- Is inclusive

Resources for strengthening group management skills

Using participatory learning methods. 1997. Rome: FAO. <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/003/T1965E/t1965e02.htm#Chapter%203:%20Using%20participatory%20learning%20methods>

Group formation. 1997. Rome: FAO. <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/003/T1965E/t1965e03.htm#Chapter%201:%20Group%20formation>

Narayan, D. 2002. **Empowerment and poverty reduction. A sourcebook.** World Bank. This Sourcebook gives 20 Tools and Practices, which concentrate on a wide-range of topics to encourage the empowerment of the poor from poor people's enterprises, information and communication technologies to diagnostic tools including corruption surveys and citizen report cards. http://publications.worldbank.org/e-commerce/catalog/product?item_id=1256877

Preparing for income generation. 1997. Rome: FAO. <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/003/T1965E/t1965e03.htm#Step%201:%20Preparing%20for%20income%20generation>

What is a small farmer group association? 2001. Rome: FAO. http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/003/X9121E/x9121e04.htm#P0_0

Farmer groups for food production. This guide explains the advantages farmers can gain by using small group approaches. <http://www.rdfs.net/oldsite/en/News/Farmergroups-e.htm>

J. Cook and G. Thomas (eds.). 1997. **The Group Promoter's Resource Book.** Rome: FAO. <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/003/T1965E/T1965E00.HTM>

Appreciative enquiry for community development. <http://www.iisd.org/ai/>

Social Analysis Sourcebook. World Bank. PDF version in several languages. <http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/sdvtex.nsf/61ByDocName/SocialAnalysisattheProjectLevelSocialAnalysisSourcebook>

The Intergroup Resource Book. **A Guide to Building Small Farmer Group Associations and Networks.** 2001. Rome: FAO. In English, Spanish and French. <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/003/X9121E/X9121E00.HTM>

Small Group Communication. <http://www.abacon.com/commstudies/groups/group.html>

Small Group teaching. <http://www.uchsc.edu/CIS/SmGpChkList.html>

Agency for Agricultural Exchange and Study Tours. http://www.ingabo.peasantsworldwide.net/?website_id=7165

Skills for Rural Development (knowledge-sharing). <http://www.skilldevrural.net/login>

Gastil, J. 1997. **Common Problems in Small Group Decision Making.** Rome: FAO.

Westberg, J. and J. Hilliard. 1996. **Fostering Learning in Small Groups: A Practical Guide.** New York: Springer Publishing Company.

Small Group Communication. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Small_group

Feldstein, H. and J. Jiggins. 1994. **Tools for the Field: Methodologies Handbook for Gender Analysis in Agriculture.** Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.

The group enterprise resource book. 1995. Rome: FAO.

Participation in practice. 1990. Rome: FAO.