

Exploring the Barriers and Opportunities to the Development of Farmers' Groups in Selected Caribbean Countries

International Journal of
Rural Management
9(2) 135–149
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SAGE Publications
Los Angeles, London,
New Delhi, Singapore,
Washington DC
DOI: 10.1177/0973005213499220
<http://irm.sagepub.com>



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Abstract

Farmers' groups are being targeted as an important sector to hasten Caribbean agricultural development. The region however, has a recorded history of high levels of failure with farmers' group development; many are formed but few are sustained to contribute meaningfully to agricultural development. A focus group assessment was conducted with extension officers from St. Vincent, Grenada and Trinidad, three neighbouring independent islands in the Southern Caribbean, to

identify the issues related to the failures of farmers' groups and the actions critically needed for success. The main issues that limit group development include poor leadership, weak task cohesion and low levels of farmer motivation and lack of trust. There was consensus among the participants that improved group dynamics, good governance, increased government involvement and improved farmer motivation can impact the formation, functioning and survivability of farmers' groups. The findings help extension officers and policy makers to plan interventions that can promote the successful organization of farmers into groups, a key pre-requisite to meet regional agricultural development goals.

Introduction

Farmers in the Caribbean are becoming more collaborative in their farming activities and are organizing themselves into groups. According to Windapo and Afolayan (2005), a group is described as a collection of individuals among whom a set of interdependent relationships exist. The terminology 'farmers' groups' and 'farmers' organizations' are commonly used interchangeably when referring to collective action among farmers. There is one distinction however, in that farmers' organizations are considered to be a more formal entity in the form of agricultural cooperatives and associations. Hellin, Lundy and Meijer (2009) pointed to collective action as existing in the absence of farmers' organizations and that farmers' organizations were more formal expressions of collective action.

Collective action arises when people come together because of constraints and to take joint action and decisions to accomplish an outcome (Sandler 1992). Such collective action enables farmer empowerment. The term collective action as indicated by Meinzen-Dick and Di Gregorio (2004) refers to a sense of 'voluntary action taken by a group to achieve common interests.' Beaudoux et al. (1994) defines farmer empowerment in its minimalist sense as the 'development of farmers' capacities to initiate actions on their own or to influence decisions that affect their economic and social activities.' On the other hand, Sharma (2001) defines farmer empowerment as 'an activity that mobilizes and motivates people in the farming community to bring about positive changes within organizations.' The informal collective entity referred to as 'farmer group' or the formalized collective entity referred to as 'farmer organization' have in common the empowerment of farmers as a team for mutual gains. Gabre-Madhin and Haggblade (2004) stressed that farmers' organizations have become a powerful force for providing an array of collective services including technology development.

There are challenges however, to farmers' groups and organizations which can make them prone to failure. Danida (2004) reported on the problems facing farmer organizations. The report stated that (a) capacity building of farmer organizations was a slow and uneven process and that the outcomes are often determined as much by factors of social behaviour and cultural norms as by economic logic and (b) farmer organizations also suffer from problems concerning their legitimacy as

representative or membership organizations and the accountability of their leaders, in particular with respect to poorer farmers, to rural women and to other marginalized groups amongst farmers.

Previously, Ostrom (1990) also reported on the internal and external factors impacting farmers' organizations in their attempt for collective action. The internal factors included lack of capacity to communicate with each other, inadequate mechanisms to develop trust and no sense that they must share a common future. Alternatively, powerful individuals who stand to gain from the current situation, may block efforts by the less powerful to change the rules of the game. The external factors are that, some participants do not have the autonomy to change their own institutional structures and are prevented from making constructive changes by external authorities who are indifferent to the perversities of the commons dilemma, or may even stand to gain from it. Also, there is the possibility that external changes may sweep rapidly over a group, giving them insufficient time to adjust their internal structures to avoid sub-optimal outcomes. Some groups suffer from perverse incentive systems that are themselves the results of policies pursued by central authorities. Because of the exclusive nature of formal membership organizations there is always a risk that the poor will be excluded from becoming members (Collion and Rondot 2001). One of the commonly cited explanations for why farmers' organizations fail is related to their attempts to undertake activities that they do not have the experience or skills to undertake collectively (Stringfellow et al. 1997; FAO 1994, 2001). Additionally, Preville (2004) indicated that there were challenges facing farmers' organizations in the liberalized trading environment and that farmer' organizations needed to approach farming with a business mindset if they are to be successful.

Overtime, many farmer groups have been formed in the Caribbean. However, they exist only for a short time, going out of existence for a host of reasons. Literature searches have not revealed any studies which have fully investigated this problem in the region. Some actions are being taken however to promote the sustainability of farmers' organizations. Francis (2010) reported that the Caribbean Farmers network (CAFan), the Technical Centre for Agriculture and Rural Cooperation (CTA) and the Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI) are working to build and sustain farmers' groups and to establish clusters, a form of farmers' organization, for the sustainable development of agriculture. The Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) is also working to promote the sustainable development of farmers' groups in the Caribbean.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study was to identify the problems that act as barriers to successful farmer group formation and to solicit possible solutions to overcoming these barriers.

Methodology

Data Gathering Procedures

A qualitative study using a focus group assessment was used. This method of data collection is a type of group interview with a small number of individuals to examine in detail how the group members think and feel about a topic (Johnson and Christenson 2000). Focus group implies a group discussion in order to identify perceptions, thoughts and impressions of a selected group of people regarding a specific topic (Kairuz, Crump and O'Brien 2007). A focus group can be used to identify problems and clarify the way that people experience programmes, that is, what is happening in their world that facilitators may not see from their own world view (Morgan 1998). The establishment of consensus in a focus group can be used to reflect the participant's group dynamics and interactions (Crabtree et al. 1993). Consensus assessment was a strong part of this study.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the current study. Purposive sampling leads to greater depth of information from a smaller number of carefully selected cases (Patton 2002). Three countries were selected because of the similarity in farmer demographic profile to include age, gender, ethnicity, level of resources, farm topography, past similar experiences with group formation, technical capacity of extension staff and commodities produced. Nine (9) extension officers from Trinidad (n=2), St. Vincent and the Grenadines (n=3), and Grenada (n=4) participated. The recruitment strategy for participants involved screening for eligibility by use of a questionnaire and also by doing a background check on the participants' employment particulars. The participants were carefully selected from a pool of Caribbean extension officers studying at the Eastern Caribbean Institute of Agriculture and Forestry in Trinidad. This pool consisted of experienced extension officers who were sent by their respective governments for higher training in agriculture and who had significant previous involvement with farmers' groups. Participation was voluntary and some of the participants were already known to each other.

Guide Questions

Five major structured questions were developed and evaluated for content validity by two subject matter specialists in extension and one qualitative research expert. Lead questions that were asked to explore group development and sustainability included:

1. Farmers' organizations are important in modern day farming communities. How do you feel about this statement?
2. What do you see as the main advantages of farmer organizations?
3. Based on what you think and what you have heard others say, what do you believe are farmer's general feelings about farmers' organizations?

Are they happy to belong to such organizations? Or, do they mostly feel that it is a waste of time?

4. What do you think is the general position of Ministries of agriculture and by extension government/s on farmers' organizations?
5. What can be done to promote the sustained development of farmer groups in your country?

Data Collection

The focus group exercise took place in June 2011 at the main conference room, Eastern Caribbean Institute of Agriculture and Forestry, ECIAF Campus of the University of Trinidad and Tobago. One moderator, assisted by two note takers, conducted the focus group session. Their functions were to: guide the process; to manually record the discussions and to keep field notes which included non-verbal attributes among participants, distractions, expressions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction etc. The group was assured of confidentiality and anonymity and also informed that the session was being audio recorded. Notes were also taken regarding participants reactions to each other's comments. The focus group session lasted for approximately two and one half hours. A debriefing session was conducted after the focus group meeting among the facilitators to make a preliminary identification of the main issues that emerged. Detailed field notes were later transcribed and compared with recordings for verification and elaboration.

Data Management

The audio files were uploaded to computer and also fully transcribed by the researcher. The field notes taken by the facilitator, whose responsibility was to observe non-verbal communications, were cross referenced and linked with the transcribed document to determine the level of non-verbal consensus with expressed views among verbal participants.

Data Analysis

QSR NVivo, software was used for managing and organizing the data to identify emerging themes—thematic analysis. Such analysis is used to identify, analyze and report patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis is a search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon being investigated (Daly et al. 1997). In reporting the emerging themes, illustrative quotations were used to highlight the perspectives of the participants. The quotations were always written verbatim.

A matrix, as recommended by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009), was developed to assess the level of consensus among individual participants. Maxwell (2005) indicated that information about dissenters would increase the descriptive validity,

interpretive validity and theoretical validity associated with the emergent themes, which in turn would increase understanding of the phenomenon of interest. All names reported were pseudonyms.

Results/Discussion

Participants' Description

The nine participants (four males and five females) were between 30–35 years of age and all had at least five years previous experience working with farmers' organizations in their respective countries.

Thematic Analysis

The interpretations within this section are based on the notes made during the focus group, the audio recordings and the transcription notes of the audio recording. The emerging themes identified in the analysis were:

1. Group Formation.
2. Failure of farmers' groups (organizations).
3. Solutions for successful farmers' groups.
4. Government support for farmers' groups.

Emerging Theme 1: Group Formation. The participants indicated that farmers' groups were formed primarily out of some need. Participants agreed that groups were more effective in achieving goals. In some instances in Trinidad, the farmers formed themselves into groups for 'formation sake' and were primarily non-functional. The types of groups formed were either informal or formal. There are three models for formal groups; cooperatives, associations and not-for profit organizations. The cooperative model for farmers' groups is more transparent and enabled efficient marketing strategies. There were different approaches to the type of farmers' groups formed in each country.

In St. Vincent, there was a formal approach to farmers' organizations which enabled monitoring to be carried out by a government agency. In Trinidad and Grenada, farmers' groups are not seriously monitored. In the case of cooperatives in Trinidad, while records must be kept for review by the Ministry of Finance, for farmers' organizations which are registered as 'not-for profit' organizations, there was no legal oversight on the organizations' finances. In Trinidad, there was a natural evolution of groups in some cases, from informal groups to more formal groups or organizations, primarily in the form of associations. The pineapple farmers in St. Vincent marketed their produce solely through the cooperatives to ensure quality and price stability. The pineapple farmers, as a consequence, joined the cooperative for this specific benefit. In Grenada, there was no formal model

for farmers' groups. The farmers' groups in Grenada were informal, community based groups.

Discussions also revealed that: within recent times, funding agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) provided resources to farmers who were organized into groups. Such groups were either formed within geographic locations (largely district, or community based) or were formed as a result of the production of a common commodity. The commodity group enabled individuals regardless of geographic location to form a group in the interest of increasing productivity and marketability of that specific commodity.

Supportive Illustrative Quotations—Group Formation

1. 'There are two main reasons why farmers form groups, they either believe they are going to benefit from something or they have a problem.' (Jarron, Trinidad).
2. 'Some groups are formed for existence sake.' (Mike, Trinidad).
3. 'Groups are more effective than an individual farmer since farmers' groups can achieve more.' (Susan, St Vincent).
4. 'Farmers' organizations or groups come together in clusters based on geographic space.' (Mike, Trinidad).
5. 'Groups are formed not only based on geographic space but also based on specific commodities.' (Jarron, Trinidad).
6. 'Help form donor agencies, for example, FAO and IICA, have been coming since groups were formed.' (Susan, St. Vincent).
7. 'In St. Vincent all farmers groups must be registered.' (Bill, St. Vincent).
8. 'The situation in Grenada is different, we do not have a formal model for farmers groups.' (Lyn, St. Vincent).

Emerging Theme 2: Failures of farmers' groups. The participants indicated that when there were issues such as flooding and praedial larceny or when financial compensation were being made available, farmers' groups were strong. If there were no pressing issues, then the farmers did not see the need to be in a group and groups became nonfunctional. The issues affecting farmers' organizations that have contributed to failures are in many instances common among the countries. Participants pointed to several reasons why groups failed; the lack of trust in leadership, poor internal communication, the size of the groups being too large; the aged farmers in the groups, the absence of accountability, the membership composition with respect to the uneven social statuses of members and concerns that if members were indeed farmers, membership issues related to the payment of dues, competition and conflict within the group and the absence of extension personal trained in group work.

These reasons for group failures are different to those provided by Gyau and Takoutsing (2012) who reported on conditions for enabling successful collective

action. These conditions included small group size," clearly defined boundaries, shared norms, past successful experience, appropriate leadership, interdependence among group members, heterogeneity of endowment, homogeneity of identities and interest, and low level of poverty." The participants expressed that when individuals attempted to take over the group, it did more harm to the group than good and contributed to the failure of the farmers' group in some instances. Further, the membership of the group must be interested in wanting to be involved in making the group a success. All the participants agreed that there must be careful consideration as to who became the leader of any group and that there should be agreement among the membership on who should be the leader. One participant indicated that there have been occasions where an individual decided to form a group and made himself the leader. Another participant further pointed to the need for the involvement of extension officers in the group formation process as a measure to avoid failure.

Supportive Illustrative quotations—Failure of Farmers' Groups

9. 'Groups can be too large and the disputes among them can make the group fall apart.' (Carmen, Grenada).
10. 'Poor communication in the sharing of information accounts for the failure.' (Heather, Grenada).
11. 'Competition is a real issue, members of the group may feel that the leader of the group gets everything and keeps information.' (Carmen, Grenada).
12. '.....being the leader, everything comes to you first and sometimes benefits do not go down the chain to other members or there may be bias in the leader selection as to who receives benefit.' (Susan, St. Vincent).
13. 'Leadership not strong and non-friendly personality not attractive, making the group ineffective and eventually the group dissolves.' (Mark, St. Vincent).
14. 'Mistrust has a lot to do with it, a group is created, everything is well and vibrant, FAO and IICA pump money into it, the next thing you know, the president and treasurer disappear and then the group falls apart.' (Bill, St. Vincent).
15. 'When farmers know money is available, they form a group and get the money and then the group collapses. Also, in some instances the farmers in farmers' groups were aging and this will ultimately lead to its non-existence.' (Mike, Trinidad).
16. 'Trust and the fact that good governance training is taken for granted. Farmers are unfamiliar with how to hold meetings and how to handle membership dues and how to govern a group effectively.' (Mike, Trinidad).

17. 'Sometimes people try to take over leadership and the stability of the group is jeopardized. Sometimes these people are not farmers.' (Jarron, Trinidad).

Emerging Theme 3: Solutions for successful farmers' groups. One participant stressed that farmers' groups should not be viewed negatively based on past experiences and suggested that extension officers had an important role to play in breaking the negative stigma associated with farmers' groups. Akpabio (2005) reported that small farmers are easily mobilized and motivated to participate in development programmes through the formation of groups through which their views can be easily articulated for effective action. Gyau, Takoutsing, Degrande and Franzel (2012) discussed the significance of collective action specific to improving small-holder benefits in the value chain and suggested that it enabled them to gain market access and better bargaining power. Additionally, agricultural trade liberalization has led to the re-emergence of collective action in many developing countries (Coulter et al. 1999).

It is therefore advantageous to small farmers to not allow the past negative experiences associated with farmers' groups to hinder their formation.

Supportive Illustrative Quotations—Solutions for Successful Farmers' Group

18. 'We need to change this perception that the leaders in farmers' groups will take everything, once the mechanisms are in place to prevent such an occurrence. Things are changing in St. Vincent and we cannot judge the success of the group based on past experiences.' (Bill, St. Vincent).
19. 'In St. Vincent, the government formed a cooperative division to monitor farmers' groups. As a result, in the last five years the groups are progressing. We now have a structured and monitoring approach to farmers' groups and there is little room for "hanky panky", you cannot now just take fifty bags of fertilizer or be biased with the distribution.' (Bill, St. Vincent).
20. 'Monitoring is the key also in Trinidad, the cooperative model for farmers' groups is more transparent.' (Mike, Trinidad).
21. 'There should be some procedures' manual for group formation.' (Jarron, Trinidad).
22. 'Farmers' groups need to be trained in good governance and communication skills.' (Mike, Trinidad).
23. 'We, the extension officers also need training in group formation, governance and conflict management.' (Heather, Grenada).

Emerging Theme 4: Government Support. The participants who spoke on the issue suggested that: Governments have no choice but to become involved in

farmers' group formation and functionality since donor agencies preferably fund farmers' groups as opposed to individual farmers. Additionally, since governments are not able to treat with individual farmers, it is through the groups that policy directives and other supportive mechanisms can be disseminated. There is also the perceived risk that the involvement of government with farmers' groups can make the group vulnerable to political interference and discrimination. Sonam and Martwanna (2012) indicated that heavy support and involvement of government in the formation and development of farmers' groups retards the sense of ownership development in the group members. In spite of this, the participants were of the view that governments should provide funding to farmers' groups to help off-set the operational costs of the group.

Supportive Illustrative Quotations—Government Support

24. 'Governments have no choice but to support farmers' groups since donor agencies are not going to support individual farmers. FAO for example, will not work with an individual farmer.' (Bill, St. Vincent).
25. 'Funding from the government for farmers' groups is important beyond incentives offered for individual farmers, that is, there should be an incentive for the group as a unit.' (Jarron, Trinidad).

Consensus Assessment

Table 1 summarizes the level of consensus for expressed statements by participants for all the emerging themes. In the group formation theme, many of the participants were in agreement (A) with specific expressed statements. There was one expressed disagreement on illustrative quotation #4 relating to the issue that farmers' organizations are formed based on geographic space. Mike agreed with Jarron and supported Jarron's suggestion (illustrative quotation #5) that farmers' groups were also formed based on specific commodities. The illustrative quotation #8 clearly reveals that all the participants from Grenada were in agreement (A) with the statement, while other participants offered no comment.

There were no aspects of dissent for any statement for the possible causes for the failure of farmers' groups. There was a general consensus among participants for the reasons suggested for the failure of farmers' groups (illustrative statements 9–17).

There was a general consensus among all participants on the solutions for successful farmers' groups. Usually, the participants from the same country supported each other's statements related to this issue. Where there were no responses, it suggested that participants from the other countries were unfamiliar with the sentiments. The non-responsive (NR) position of the Grenadian participants for

Table I. Focus Group Consensus Matrix for the Illustrative Quotations for the Emerging Themes

Illustrative quotations for emerging themes	Country								
	St Vincent			Grenada				Trinidad	
	Bill	Susan	Mark	Heather	Lyn	Kimberly	Carmen	Jarron	Mike
<i>Group Formation</i>									
1.	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	+	A
2.	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	+
3.	A	+	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
4.	NR	A	NR	A	A	A	NR	SD	+
5.	A	A	NR	A	A	NR	A	+	SA
6.	A	+	A	A	A	A	A	NR	A
7.	+	A	A	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR
8.	NR	NR	NR	A	+	A	A	NR	NR
<i>Failure of farmers' Groups</i>									
9.	A	A	A	A	A	A	+	A	A
10.	A	A	A	+	A	A	A	A	A
11.	A	A	A	A	A	A	+	A	A
12.	A	+	A	A	A	A	A	A	NR
13.	A	A	+	A	A	A	A	A	A
14.	+	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	SA
15.	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	NR	+
16.	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	+
17.	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	+	A
<i>Solution for successful farmers' groups.</i>									
18.	+	A	A	NR	NR	NR	NR	A	A
19.	+	A	A	NR	NR	NR	NR	A	SA
20.	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	SA	+
21.	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	+	NR
22.	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	+
23.	A	A	A	+	A	A	A	SA	A
<i>Government Support</i>									
24.	+	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
25.	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	+	A

Source: Data collected and compiled by the authors.

Notes: + = Person speaking. A = Indicated agreement (i.e., verbal or nonverbal). D = Indicated dissent (i.e., verbal or nonverbal). SA = Provided significant statement or example suggesting agreement. SD = Provided significant statement or example suggesting dissent. NR = Did not indicate agreement or dissent (i.e., non-responsive).

illustrative quotations (#18 and #19) was attributed to the comments relating specifically to St. Vincent and the Grenadines, with which they were unfamiliar.

All the participants were in agreement that there is a role for government's involvement in farmers' groups. This was particularly to attract support from donor agencies for the improvement of farmers' groups' productivity. There was consensus among the participants for the need for financial support by the government directed towards farmers' groups (illustrative statements 24 and 25).

Discussion and Conclusion

The issues that relate to group development and sustainability in the Caribbean appear to revolve around the reasons motivating group formation, some management issues and the level of government support received.

Extension officers in the selected Caribbean islands are of the view that farmers' groups are formed to address issues related to the production of a specific commodity or for the resolutions of problems which they may encounter. Kariuki and Place (2005) suggested that collective action in the form of farmer groups/organizations can also promote linkages across the market chain and connect producers, processors and buyers into networks that would be beneficial for all actors. Farmers' groups were either commodity-based groups or community-based groups that were non-commodity specific. It is possible for a farmer to be within a commodity group and also be within a geographically, community based group. This has implications for group promotion. Group promoters have to keep farmers focused on specific commodities or issues if they are to stay together. As these issues are resolved, promoters should seek to identify other issues or commodities which can be addressed by group collective action. Farmers need a task to focus on and without that focus they may be disinclined to come together. MacCoun (1993: 291) indicated that, 'task cohesion refers to the shared commitment among members to achieving a goal that requires the collective efforts of the group. A group with high task cohesion is composed of members who share a common goal and who are motivated to coordinate their efforts as a team to achieve their goal.'

The management of groups appears to need serious intervention. The large group sizes seem to be a de-motivating factor for participation. Lack of trust in leadership, lack of financial accountability, poor equity in the distribution of group resources, poor communication, competition and overall poor governance were other main contributory factors to the failure of farmers' groups, according to the participants. Management can be fixed through training of group leaders and potential leaders in good governance concepts. The definition of good governance highlights participation, accountability, transparency, consensus, sustainability and the rule of law as key elements and emphasizes the inclusion of the poorest and most vulnerable people in making decisions about allocating development resources (United Nations Development Programme 1997). However, if group promoters such as extension staff and other development workers are not trained

in management principles and techniques and good governance, then groups will collapse. Even if they don't, they may become quite dysfunctional which can be detrimental to group formation in the future.

The organization of farmers into groups should increase knowledge sharing among the farmers and also enable efficiency in agricultural extension activities. The participants were of the view that Government, through their agricultural extension services, should support the formation of farmers' groups. The agricultural extension officers should play a crucial role in the group formation process. Governments' support for community collective action should be made explicit and group formation to access government services should not be as loose as it presently is in most of the region. The role of donor agencies however, needs to be carefully considered. While donor organizations are more likely to support farmers' groups rather than individual farmers and to some extent ensure the formation of farmers' groups, the proper functioning and survival of groups should not be solely dependent on donor support. Groups need to be empowered to manage their own affairs, seek their own source of funding and in the long term become self sustaining.

It appeared from the discussions that the survivability of a farmers' organization is dependent on lobbying and there may be opportunities to strengthen groups' ability to lobby for a particular common interest. It was pointed out that when there were no particular issues of interest, the group became non-functional and attendance at meetings became minimal. Eventually, meetings were no longer scheduled and the group may simply exist for the sake of existence or until something of significance arises. To improve the sustainability of farmers' groups, direct action by the farmers themselves, the support of extension services and indirect government support through legislation are needed.

In conclusion, while we do not wish to make generalizations for the entire Caribbean based on this exploratory study, we do believe that in as much as the people, their culture and agriculture are similar throughout the region, the findings of this study done on three countries may be useful to assist in group development elsewhere in the region. In this regard, we cautiously recommend that:

1. Training should be provided to agricultural extension in group formation. This training should be done pre-service as part of their formal agricultural extension training and also in-service as a component of a programme for the continuous training and development of extension staff.
2. Farmers' groups should be trained in good governance. This should be done by trained agricultural extension officers who function as a subject matter specialist. Good governance training would ensure good group dynamics and consequently group sustainability.
3. The inclusion of an extension officer as a member of the farmers' group to act in a limited capacity as a trainer and mediator to help resolve issues beyond the scope of the leadership within the group.
4. Government should ensure the registration of all farmers' groups and create legislation to monitor the operations of farmers' groups.

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