

## **Extension Agents' Perception of the Operations of Farmers' Groups in Trinidad: Implications for Agricultural Development**

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### **Introduction**

Farmers' groups in Trinidad are steadily increasing within various agricultural communities in rural Trinidad. A long tradition in extension is group promotion and group organization, and FAO's commitment to these purposes is well known (Rivera et al., 2001). The formation of these groups has an impact on the agricultural extension agents' approach to performing their duties. Some argue that extension can most effectively carry out its mandate, not by working directly with individual farmers but by working indirectly with and through farmers' groups or organizations (Byrnes, 2001).

Currently, there is a high ratio of farmers to extension officers in Trinidad which computes to an average of 568 farmers to one extension officer in an environment where there exist limited support facilities with which to conduct extension work (Kissonsingh, 2005). Increased efforts to organize farmers into groups has been demanded by policy makers, however increased demands for extension agent's service in this current scenario would likely predispose them to stress and frustration (Kutilek, Conklin & Gunderson, 2002). How extension agents' view working with existing farmer groups has not been explored in Trinidad and needs to be understood as it has implications for their technical capacity building and service delivery approach.

### **Purpose/Objective**

The purpose of the study was to describe extensions agent's perception of farmers' groups and to identify the issues related to their satisfaction with the operations of farmers' groups in Trinidad.

### **Methods**

This study used survey methodology to collect the data. The instrument consisted of twenty-two (22) closed ended questions using a five (5) point agreement scale. The population was agricultural extension agents in public and private agricultural institutions (N= 132). The

instrument was delivered to various agricultural institutions to participants in an attempt to obtain a census of the population. The Ministry of Food Production in Trinidad and Tobago approved this project. Ultimately, 123 extension agents responded, representing a response rate of 93%. Data were analyzed using appropriate descriptive statistics.

### **Results and Conclusion**

The majority (91.8%) of the respondents indicated low to moderate agreement with “Satisfaction of the operations of farmers’ groups in Trinidad”. Some 78.7 % of the respondents indicated moderate to strong agreement that “it was difficult to work with farmers’ groups”. The majority of the respondents had moderate to strong agreement with the concern related to “farmers’ groups being used as political tools” (94.3%), the competition that existed within groups (94.2 %), poor leadership style (96.7%), the dictatorial style of group leaders (84.6%) and the threats to land security (79.7%). There was low to moderate agreement among the respondents that government did not support and encourage farmers’ groups in Trinidad (76.5%) and similar level of agreement for the perception that farmer’ groups only existed for “existence sake” (86.2%). Data showed that extension agents had the perception that farmers’ groups were purposefully functional rather than merely existing. The issues which were significantly associated ( $p \leq 0.05$  level) with satisfaction with the operations of farmers’ groups were (i) the perceived threats to farmers’ land security and (ii) the need for monitoring the operations of farmers’ groups. Extension staff has serious concerns with the operations of farmers groups in Trinidad. It appears that farmers’ groups are also in need of some development intervention by authorities.

### **Recommendations and Implications**

Extension staff will never be able to meet farmers’ educational needs given current ratio of staff to farmers and there must be increased efforts in using the group approach. The perceptions identified in this study point to the need for training of staff in several areas well as capacity development to treat with the obstacles facing extension agents with respect to engaging farmers’ groups. The extension agent’s perception of satisfaction as it relates to working with farmers’ groups has implications for the sustainable development of farmers’ groups. Training farmers in the areas of team building, monitoring and evaluation, democratic principles among others can equip them with the necessary skills to effectively create more sustainable farmers’ groups. The cooperative department of the Government which has oversight of groups should be engaged by the Extension department and a holistic plan for the development of farmers’ groups should be developed and implemented.

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