28th Annual Ralph Melville Memorial Lecture delivered at the Annual General Meeting held at the Royal Over-Seas League on 24th November 2010

Farmers together for integral management and development

Ralph Melville, CB, CMG inspired younger tropical agriculturalists by his diligence, dedication and practically relevant focus. After Edinburgh and ICTA, he became an entomologist and coffee researcher in Kenya, developing into an international figure instrumental in FAO, advising governments, helping to found CGIAR and ISNAR, advising the CDC and becoming President of the TAA. He was a man who respected farmers, appreciated good management and contributed significantly himself to agricultural development and its multidisciplinary natural resource basis. I believe he would happily endorse the importance of the theme of this evening's lecture in his memory.

John Wibberley

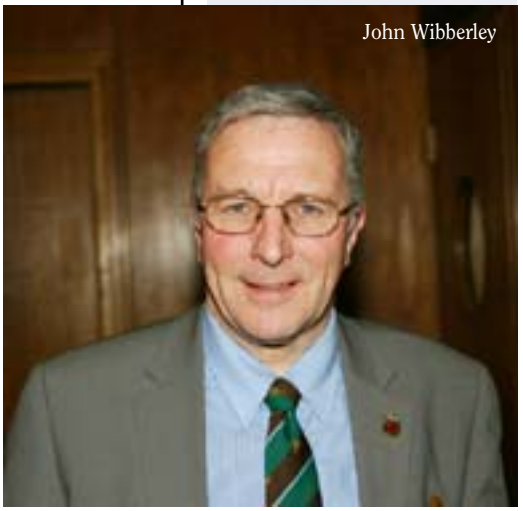
Professor Wibberley was previously Head of Agriculture at The Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester. He is an agriculturalist, author, development practitioner and resource management consultant working in the UK (including Chairmanship 1998-2003 of FCN, the UK Farm Crisis Network) and internationally, especially in Africa with RURCON (an otherwise all-African team) and with Farmers' Groups for over 35 years.

Email: ejwibberley@btinternet.com

Abstract

Farmers meet together too infrequently. Field meetings work best. Learning from studying others' farms is the preferred method, a basis for farmer-interactive extension. Too often, groups are imposed for an externally determined purpose rather than farmer-owned. If the purpose for a group's formation is to learn together, this gives time for relationships of mutual understanding and trust to develop among the farmer members who can then decide themselves whether or not to collaborate economically together. Farmers are 'integrated realists' who apply multi-professional skills of integral management to achieve sustainable farm and rural development, and who can benefit considerably from collaboration together given conditions for establishment of the mutual trust upon which successful collaboration depends. This paper outlines FARMS (Farm Asset Resource Management Study) Groups as practical means to such ends.

Keywords: *farmer-interactive learning; integral management; sustainable extension for development.*



John Wibberley

Introduction

Even large farms are small business enterprises in today's globalised world economy, vulnerable to extinction. Apart from its intrinsic benefits to participating farmers in terms of enjoyment and direct business applications, farmer collaboration is increasingly necessary to raise the political profile of agriculture internationally, and to combat farmer stress and its often dire consequences. India is currently suffering farmer deaths with some 200,000 farmer suicides there since 1997 (Nagaraj, 2010). Reasons cited by Professor Nagaraj in 2010 include:

- predatory commercialisation of the countryside
- massive decline in investment in agriculture
- withdrawal of bank credit at a time of soaring input prices
- crash in farm incomes combined with an explosion of cultivation costs
- shifting of millions from food crop to cash crop cultivation
- corporate hijack of every major sector of agriculture, including and especially seeds
- growing water stress and moves to privatise that resource.

While being particularly acute in India, similar reasons for undue pressure on farm businesses are encountered by farmers globally. With appropriate help, two or three of those factors that farmers can combat themselves include buying inputs together so reducing cultivation and other production costs, and by organising themselves into Trading Groups they can better resist corporate hijack. However, they need to know and trust each other sufficiently before such collaboration can work reliably. This paper explores how that might be more likely achieved. The opportunity and need for farmers to work together is huge in order to address current challenges. Under growing population pressure – with 110% increase projected by 2050 in sub-Saharan Africa, for instance – agricultural productivity must increase for food security yet without jeopardising the natural resource base. Land is required to deliver food, fibre and even fuel (though principally, it is hoped, from crop and animal by-products and field boundaries of *Jatropha* hedges and the like rather than fuel crops on land needed for food-growing). Land is also to sustain a biodiverse range of species, to allow recreation, education, enjoyment, well-being and to provide ecosystem services (notably catchment and storage of carbon and of clean water). Farmers, as the principal users and managers of rural land, are required to reconcile these wide-ranging requirements integrally. Genuine development cannot be said to be achieved unless there is real progress in managing this reconciliation of land-use objectives sustainably. Integral management (Kyamuwendo & Wibberley, 2009) attempts to address reality holistically by blending resources synergistically for productivity, profit, protection and provision – of sustainable farm livelihoods and landscapes. Effective extension has always provided a 'bridge' of understanding between the realities of rural communities, farmers' current practices plus farmers' problems on one hand, and on the other hand, research findings, available technologies and government policies (Joy & Wibberley, 1979).

Farmer Characteristics

The best farmers are reflective practitioners, that is, they work their own land considerately. They develop relational 'people' intelligence and realise that we are all ignorant of different things, so that together we are stronger. Such attitudes tend to develop within them what has been called 'integrated realism' – meaning at its best the ability to take due account of all factors that are relevant to the integral management of land and farm businesses (biological, economic, socio-cultural…). When such farmers work together, tremendous results can ensue. The rest of farmers can learn from the best of farmers. Typically though, farmers in many nations value their independence and may take this to such extremes that they are unwilling to collaborate even when it would be clearly in their own best interests to do so. In some cases, this reluctance and suspicion is well-founded being based on previous top-down coercion to join co-operatives that failed. However, farmer solidarity yields many potential benefits. This writer's work was inspired as an undergraduate by reading Mosher (1966) who wrote (p. 154) "Most farmers are so busy with the problems of their own farms…that unless someone encourages them to join together in group action for new purposes, and helps them make the necessary arrangements, they do not act together as much as would be to their advantage." People are the key to rural development (Schumacher, 1974; Batchelor, 1993, to whom I owe much mentoring gratitude).

People learn in contexts that relate to their everyday, integrated experiences. Agriculture itself is an integrated subject to which practically all school subjects of study can be related and, if this is done, taught in a context which is readily understood in rural communities (Fig.1). Farmers also have to think in such practically integrated ways. They have to be 'polymaths' (Jeffreys, 1966). Jeffreys perceived five decades ago that the polymath was already dangerously under threat such that 'the polymath is an extinct species' while 'specialists escape into the cocoons of their specialisms'! The polymath approach is now perceived essential for 'sustainability' with its cross-cutting scientific, social and environmental issues – with consequent enormous cross-disciplinary complexity of current scientific research (The Royal Society, 2010, p.41).

Fig.1. Agriculture is integrated – with relationships to many other subjects

Natural Sciences : Economics : Maths & Business studies

Social Studies, Domestic Science : AGRICULTURE : Craft, Design & Technology

Humanities—History, Geography : Physical Training : Arts, RE, Languages, Culture

Too often, extension methods have been didactic – simply seeking to teach farmers information gleaned from research or policy sources in a relatively top-down way. There needs to be a shift in emphasis from extension groups for farmers to extension groups by farmers (Fig.2).

In order to apply these shifts in practice, what is needed is an approach to knowledge that is *neither*:

A. Research>Extension> Farmers, i.e., top-down; *nor*:

B. Farmers>Extension>Research, i.e., bottom-up in terms of field to laboratory; but *rather*:

C. Farmer-interactive, i.e., with farmers' knowledge central but freely interchanging 'horizontally' with insights of research, commerce and extension communication. It may well be an extensionist who catalyses such farmer interaction and then seeks to lubricate its continuance but, crucially, farmers' knowledge is respected and used and farmers own their efforts towards practical progress.

Fig.2. Shifts of Emphasis needed for Farmer-Interactive Extension

FROM	TO
Selecting Opinion-leader farmers	Seeking farmers' opinions
Groups **for** farmers	Groupwork **by** farmers
Tutor's Group	Farmer-Dominant Study Groups
External information 1st	Indigenous Tech. Knowledge 1st
Measurable Facts only	Experience & wisdom too
Technology transfer	Comprehensive study together
Progress recipient farmers	Progress-generator farmers
Information Delivery	Information demanded
Technology adoption outcome	Whole Farm sustainability outcome

The author has sought to apply such an approach both in the UK and internationally for the past 35 years, including encouraging responses in the tropics, notably in sub-Saharan Africa. Examples within the UK have encouraged him, notably the example of Mole Valley Farmers (MVF) based in Devon and which celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 2010 (Wibberley, 2010). The secrets of MVF success appear to have been retaining a Board of Farmers throughout but engaging professional marketing staff to:

- Deliver substantial discounts to farmers on their input purchases
- Maintain minimal overhead cost structure
- Maximise advantage to members
- Publish MVF prices and rigidly adhere to them with integrity, with quantity-related concessions
- Pay Suppliers promptly
- Expect prompt settlement of bills from MVF by farmers – stipulated 'within seven days'
- Sustain a policy of minimal profit retention
- Retain openness to members in communication and admitting errors.

Such outcomes require thoughtful farmers committed to each other.

Examples of Farmers working together in the Tropics

In the Gambia, *Concern Universal* through its GIG ('Gambia is Good') programme, has encouraged many farmers to collaborate in the purchase of quality seeds, sharing of equipment and joint marketing of produce. In southern Africa, farmers have shared in learning dry season vegetable growing and other farming techniques. They have formed groups through ACAT (Africa Cooperative Action Trust; www.acat.co.za) in which members make secure investments of their savings, and then purchase inputs collectively. On the basis of trust engendered, they then make various decisions to work together for further benefit, such as sharing milling and other value adding facilities. In

Fig.3. Uganda Smallholder Farmer Groups (n = 400+) certified in Coffee Good Practice (*Kulika*)

Year	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Farmers certified (cumulative)	0	3044	6132	9372
Average yield per coffee tree (kg)	0.8	1.8	1.9	2.1

Western Kenya, groups of around 25 farmers working together have aggregated into clusters of 40 and together use a central meeting and training facility to promote the development of their villages (www.icfem-mission.org). In Uganda, farmers have worked together in groups under *Kulika* Trust in various ways such as those aimed at improving coffee-growing practices (Fig.3).

In Zambia, conservation farming has been promoted effectively through farmers' together. As the Chichewa proverb of Malawi states, 'If you are to farm, first cultivate the garden in your head'! This mirrors the reported statement of Charles Dickens on visiting his son at The Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester in 1868: "That part of the estate of a farmer or landowner that pays best for cultivation is the small estate within the ring-fence of his skull; let him attend to his brains and it shall be well with his grains"! As George Ewart Evans (1956) put it, "Ask the fellows who cut the hay". Experience shows that successful groupwork involves moving from teaching farmers to learning from and with farmers. There are several key pointers for effective operation of such groups:

- Meet in fields and from farm to farm of members with each participating for the sake of others;
- Catalyse and 'lubricate' learning of improved, integral management from each other as farmers;
- Take simple food together to develop 'togetherness'/enjoyment over some 20 such meetings;
- Expect those who learn together may decide to earn together, and collectively benefit environment;
- Farmers who collaborate have a stronger concerted voice on key development issues like trading;
- Farmer conservation is helped – reducing farmer loss rates, keeping farmers there to care for land;
- Farmer-interactive extension systems using relational intelligence harness farmers' experience.

In order to fulfil these operational pointers, the particular type of Farmer Group with which the present writer has worked for some 35 years has been described as the ***FARMS*** (Farm Asset Resource Management Study) Group (Wibberley, 2008).

FARMS (Farm Asset Resource Management Study) Groups

These groups need to be catalysed then lubricated by extension. In other words, the extensionist – like a good lubricant – is only noticed by the group when absent! Instead of the group being owned by the extension officer, he or she is an enabler rather than the leader of the group *per se*. Such groups are chaired by farmers and predominantly, though not exclusively, contain farmers. Group processes within them can be characterised by:

- Study together using Methodical Monitoring Management (MMM) of technical and financial factors;
- Development of mutual trust through group work over time, and enjoying being together;
- Through farmer-dominance within both membership and focus, develop and use 'integrated realism'.
- Farmers own these groups and they decide whether to start further farmer-controlled ventures.
- In terms of sustainable extension strategy, a network of *FARMS* Groups can be inexpensive and achieve durable group dynamics.

Farmers Together Action Plan for Development

Policy signals favour putting agriculture at the heart of international poverty reduction strategies and thus refocusing on agricultural extension (Birch *et al.,* 2010). In order to achieve this, there needs to be a new emphasis internationally on three key features of farmers:

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1. FARMERS' MULTI-PROFESSIONALISM needs recognition, respect and reinforcement; schemes for acknowledging and bench-marking this need encouragement globally.
2. FARMER CONSERVATION is imperative since they are being lost worldwide at a haemorrhaging rate; this can best be done by signalling trading threats, recovering food sovereignty – as agreed among tropical farmers from three continents at Nyéléni, Mali in 2007, and exploring other ways of sustaining farmers. It is vital to retain enough farmers 'there to care' for land internationally.
3. FARMERS' COLLABORATION needs canvassing (as to its benefits) and it needs catalysing and cataloguing as the major means of farmer-controlled and sustainable help farmers can give each other to survive and thus contribute crucially to humanity's future.

These features of farmers require widespread discussion and innovation to address them practically.

Conclusions

This short paper presents an appeal to review perceptions of farmers together and the ways in which they are collectively encouraged. It advocates adoption of FARMS Groups as means to enable farmers not only to share their practical knowledge and learning but also to develop mutual trust among themselves, without which subsequent collaboration is unlikely to work. Contrived or forced groups do not work effectively. There is no short-cut to bypass the necessary time it takes to develop the mutual relationships among farmers that can be shown to so benefit farmers in a number of cases. Experience suggests that learning together should precede earning together rather than trying to rush the process.

Solidarity among farmers who meet together results from a number of factors, notably:

- **Cohesive:** especially friendship and enjoyment;
- **Self-help:** especially encouragement to improve their farming and environment;
- **Motivational:** notably through exposure to the 'drive' of other farmers;
- **Performance:** notably cost-saving and gentle competition-related matters;
- **Information:** notably both technical and economic matters – though these are significantly less important than cohesive factors.

Farmers together beat farmers alone, not only on the grounds of integral management of resources, which requires 'brain-storming', but also in terms of long-term development, which has at its heart improved mutual relationships.