

*Cassette recorders  
provided an electronic  
meeting place for isolated  
farmers in Uruguay and  
strengthened cooperative  
action*

# FARMER-TO-FARMER COMMUNICATION

SUSANA AMAYA

**E**verything was going pretty well in the association El Espinillo until the other day, at the meeting of the executive board, when....

*Miguel:* Well, we've got a general meeting coming up.

*Santos:* That's right. Man, how time flies! Another year gone and it's time to hold another election.

*Miguel:* Yep. So we have to make up the list of candidates for new officers.

*Juan:* The list is always a bit of a headache, isn't it?

*Miguel:* No, not really. It just takes a minute. No need to hassle. Come on, Santos, get some paper and a pencil and let's get started.

*Juan:* Put the list of offices on one side — president, secretary, treasurer — and then we'll see who to put down for them.

*Santos:* Ready. Let's start. Vicente, what do you want to be this time — president or secretary?

*Vicente:* Me? Don't put me down for anything. If I have to be something, then let it be an alternate.

*Miguel:* You can't mean that!

*Vicente:* I do mean it, and I'm serious. I've been telling you for the last two years to get someone else. I'm getting tired, I've done my part. I've been working with this group for more than — well, let's see — for more than 10 years. First president, then secretary, back to president, and then secretary. It's time someone took my place. I'm retiring.

*Juan:* But you can't! You can't retire! What's going to happen to the associa-

tion without you? We need you really badly, Vicente. You're the key man!

*Vicente:* That's just the problem. There's only a few of us who do everything. What about the rest of the people? An association can't work like that; it can't make any headway... any progress. It comes to a standstill and stagnates. That's where we've gone wrong.

*Miguel:* But is it our fault if the others don't...?

*Vicente:* A rural development association has got to have everyone's help and cooperation if it's going to work. If it doesn't, then where's that famous cooperative spirit, that union of people we wanted to form? No, we have to throw it open, share, find new people, call on others, and...

*Santos:* But what others, Vicente? Who are you talking about? You know perfectly well there are only a few of us on the committee. The ones who do all the work, get things moving, who really look after the association... you can count them on the fingers of one hand, and you'll have a few fingers left over!

*Miguel:* If a couple more people decide tonight to do the same as you, Vicente, we can say "goodbye Rural Development Association of El Espinillo!"

*Vicente:* And the young blood? Where are the young people?

*Juan:* Oh, you know. They never show their noses around here!

*Vicente:* Then we'll have to find a way to get them in here.

*Juan:* We've tried that before.

*Vicente:* But we haven't succeeded, so we'll just have to keep trying. Lots of people live in this area, and we have a lot of members.

*Miguel:* Yeah, sure there are plenty of members on the roll, but when it comes to showing up at meetings...

*Vicente:* But we can't let that happen. That's what we've got to change. That's the reason I don't want to be on the executive anymore. First of all, I'm tired. And then I'm not sure if we're doing the association more harm than good by always being the officers. We need new blood here, young blood.

*Juan:* Young blood? Where are we going to find that?

This conversation never took place, although it might have. It is a taped dramatization distributed to groups belonging to a cassette forum project experiment run in Uruguay in 1977 and 1978.

This novel experiment attempted to introduce and evaluate a type of intermediate communication technology with groups of farmers, and between these groups and the leaders of the cooperative association to which they belonged. The experiment, supported by IDRC, aimed to contribute to the development of the small farmer through cooperative activities. The cassette forum was chosen because a rural communication service must have simple, inexpensive equipment. Requiring only a small recording studio, portable recorders for the production team, uncomplicated and hardy portable re-

corders for the groups, and a regular supply of 60-minute cassette tapes, the method seemed ideal.

The cassette forum works quite simply. A group of people listen to tapes on a portable cassette player; after listening, they discuss what they have heard and tape their observations on the unrecorded part of the tape. Once returned to the main production centre, the comments, suggestions, and responses of interest to all experiment participants are incorporated into a new message.

The experiment was conducted in the southern part of the country where there are mostly small fruit and vegetable farms. Some work was also done in the grain-growing western zone. The participating farmers were all members of cooperative associations, and for the purposes of the cassette forum experiment, they were placed in relatively homogeneous groups.

The Agrarian Cooperative of Rural Development Associations (Cooperativa Agraria Ltda de Sociedades de Fomento Rural), known as CALFORU, has concentrated its activity in production and export programs in the southern part of the country. Since 1960, CALFORU has handled the integrated commercial activity of the local cooperative associations. A part of Uruguay's rural development system, it brings together 200 local associations, totalling 16 000 small and medium farmers. It provides farmers with market studies, credit for inputs, technical assistance, finance, common markets that help make final prices remunerative, and an entrepreneurial structure that enables it to successfully compete on international markets. So far the most important production programs have involved garlic and onions for export.

Each local association is responsible for its regional production program and for managing this program. This requires discipline, group awareness, and a sense of responsibility. Maintaining participation and discipline is all the more difficult as the programs have been managed by the farmers themselves since 1977, through their elected committees.

Because of the isolation in which he lives, the Uruguayan farmer is traditionally individualistic. His *chacra* is his home and his place of work. As the farms are not grouped together in villages or hamlets, it is difficult to organize and integrate the small farmer in cooperative societies.

Due to the nature of its work, CALFORU is located in the capital, Montevideo, and is run by technical experts and functionaries who, as the association work grows, have become increasingly removed from local member organizations. The result was a communication problem that motivated IPRU, the Institute of Socio-Economic Development of Uruguay, to undertake the communication project. IPRU conducts studies on marginality, promotes rank-and-file organizations, and trains promoters and leaders. It has been carrying out

social and economic betterment programs in Uruguay since 1965.

The cassette forum experiment constitutes a first step towards integrating farmers into the discussion and decision-making process of the institute. In the process of doing this it teaches the farmers how to work in groups. The experiment was programed to last a year so that as much as possible could be achieved, different methods could be tried, and group permanence measured. There was one break during the summer harvest. Twenty-two cassettes were produced for meetings held every two weeks. Twelve groups — 125 people — representing member cooperative associations participated.

Each association appointed a group coordinator responsible for organizing and directing the group. Before the experiment began, the coordinators went to Montevideo for some brief training. Almost all of them were farmers or farmers' children.

CALFORU created an advisory committee for the cassette forum responsible for defining and directing topics and for obtaining and processing the

---

*The experiment resulted in two groups taking concrete action to solve their problems.*

---

feedback. The committee held its own meetings every two weeks and its message was produced by the production unit which also advised on communication and education matters.

The research unit was an essential part of the experiment. Prior to the experiment it conducted a topical survey among the farmers of 30 member associations. That revealed the farmer's preference for economic subjects like marketing and production. It also showed their pragmatic outlook and their limited perception of the socioeconomic situation in which they lived and its causes. These findings helped orient the first tapes of the forum. Specific topics were not established from the outset, but rather came out of the dialogue with the groups.

Getting back to the dramatization that opened this article, what in fact came out of it? There follows a long discussion on member participation and on the problem of the same people always holding office. Santos cannot forget Vicente's question: "And where are the young people?" He invites his son, Raul, to attend a meeting with him,

but Raul says that everyone at the meeting is old and that young people have no opportunity there.

Indeed, this was a problem the survey revealed, and why the cassette encourages the groups to invite young people into the associations and to train them to be future leaders. The results were surprising. One association completely reorganized its executive committee. It invited the farmers' children and organized a cassette forum with them. These young people will later replace the veteran leaders on the executive board. Another association formed a youth group for social and cultural activities, with its own production program. Thus, positive immediate feedback from two of the groups manifested itself in concrete action.

Another indication of the system's possibilities was the long-distance participation of the groups in the October 1977 Annual Congress of the National Commission on Rural Development. Before the Congress was held, the groups received two cassettes with the topics to be discussed at the Congress. Their recorded opinions and ideas on agenda items, reproduced and distributed to members of the Congress, played an important role at that meeting. The Congress also evaluated the cassette forum experiment and recommended that the program be extended to all cooperative associations at the end of the initial experimental phase, "in order to stimulate the training of capable new leaders, because the lack of leaders hinders the development of cooperative societies." Consequently this new means of communication will be permanently adopted by CALFORU and extended to reach all members.

The final evaluation of the program, carried out by the research unit, concluded that "the cassette forum was able to modify the traditionally passive isolationist attitude of the Uruguayan rural dweller." It also helped to attract young people to the associations. It not only contributed to developing and improving the ability to think and to express themselves of those participating in the experiment, but it also helped to create an inter-group awareness by placing different groups in contact with each other and by making them aware of their membership in an organization. The program also helped educate the advisory committee and a real dialogue was established with the local groups, thereby helping to explain policies and courses of action.

As the president of one of the cooperative associations summed up the impact of the program: the local farmer "who speaks up, talks into the recorder microphone, and knows how to express his ideas, is a new leader-in-the-making who is essential for our future." □

---

*Susana Amaya, formerly Associate Director of IDRC's Communications Division in Bogota, Colombia, is now a member of the Information Division of the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) in Cali, Colombia.*