

# Farmer Exchange Networks in Paraguay

## The approach of the TTR-project

by Ueli Scheuermeier, LBL

**Peter Schmidt responsible for Natural Resources Management projects at Helvetas headquarters has reviewed the young TTR program of Helvetas, Swiss Association for International Cooperation, in Paraguay. Based on this review Ueli Scheuermeier conducted an interview with him about the innovative networking approach of the TTR-program.**

*What does TTR stand for, and where is it situated?*

TTR is short for "Tekopora ha Tekojoja Rekavo". This is Guarani language, the indigenous Indian-language in the project area. It means something like "Looking united for a good life". The program is active in the eastern part of Paraguay. And let me say right away, that the TTR is only operating since May 2001. So whatever we discuss here is still based on very short experiences. Still, I find there are interesting issues that are emerging.

*So in order to put our discussion into context, tell us more about the general situation in which TTR operates at present.*

Paraguay has a continuously decreasing GDP, to which agriculture contributes 15-18%, mainly with cattle, cotton, soya-beans and sugar from large industrial farms. What I find important when comparing with other countries I know, is:

- There is a huge split between very large farms and smallholder farmers: 78% of all agricultural land is owned by less than 1% of the agricultural holdings, ie. commercial soya bean and cotton growers and large ranches with more than 1000 hectares. The 56% of all holdings that have a size of less than 10 hectares represent only 2% of the agricultural land. 33% of the rural households are landless.
- Nevertheless, the small farmers in Paraguay actually have landholdings and access to water that make them comparatively rich to other small



A welcome poster for the 300 participants of an TTR forum.



Participants of a TTR forum.

farmers in other parts of the world. They tend to live in settlements that are in between the large landholdings. Many of these settlements are only 30-40 years old. The project distinguishes between the settling campesinos of European origin, and the Guarani "Indios" whose cultural background is based in hunting and gathering.

*So, TTR is a new program launched by Helvetas in Paraguay almost three years ago. How does it operate?*

In a nutshell, operationally speaking this is what happens (for details see box 1):

- a) There is a highly qualified program-team, with very good facilitatory skills. This team goes out and identifies already existing farmer groups. These groups can be formal or informal, it doesn't matter.
- b) The identified groups are coached to develop an "initiative". An initiative is a plan for some productive activity. It should result in a cooperative economic effort such as jointly keeping a breeding bull, or joint running of a feed-mill, etc. The emphasis is on this cooperation – what they call "economic solidarity".
- c) The TTR-team then selects those initiatives which are mainly aimed at the cooperative/solidarity nature. 75% of the initiatives are selected in a competitive grant system.
- d) The selected initiatives are then financially supported by TTR with at present around 60-90%. However, financial contributions are generally small, i.e. few hundred Swiss Francs per initiative.
- e) TTR then also encourages similar groups with similar initiatives to meet and exchange on topics which they themselves decide. TTR-team facilitates and also organizes technical input in case it is requested. Each group sends a representative and also pays for travel and food. This makes the representatives accountable to the group that sent them.
- f) TTR also convenes regular large fora, where up to 300 representatives meet to discuss a topic, to

Box 1

#### **The key elements of the TTR approach**

The project identifies existing formal and informal farmers groups. They are invited to attend TTR events, which are organized in learning cycles of several months duration. In exchange with others the selected groups prepare so called initiatives. Initiatives are small projects related to agricultural production, processing or distribution (exchange of products or marketing). The farmers groups and TTR co-finance them. Initiatives are designed to foster principles of economic solidarity. If selected by TTR, the groups implement their initiatives during the next cycle. TTR events include presently so-called "Space events" when groups with similar interests meet and exchange about their topics. Progressively space events develop into Communities of Practices. TTR encourages groups to form alliances for production, processing and distribution between them. In regular intervals representatives of all TTR groups meet in TTR foro to build contacts between the groups. Groups are selected using a competitive grant system, which is based on a complex monitoring system. Learning of farmers starts from existing traditional knowledge that is exchanged from farmer to farmer. The project develops a database with resource persons ("Yellow Pages") who contribute, if invited, to the exchange between farmers.

exchange information and news, to make contacts and links, etc.

- g) Various cycles allow to take up new groups while existing groups can pick up new initiatives, etc.

*This sounds like TTR's main objective is actually the establishment of farmer-exchange networks, as opposed to increasing production for a particular target group.*

Correct! I find this is the innovative part of TTR. I have not yet found a program whose core-objective is so strongly aimed at establishing networks. Note, that TTR doesn't form groups, it identifies and then works with existing informal groups, so that they become capable and competent to exchange their ideas and experiences. In effect this is a program aimed at knowledge management among the farmers. As such TTR is an attempt at operationalizing the developmental theories of Amartya Sen of India (see box 2).

Box 2

**Amartya Sen**

Nobel Prize winning economist Professor Amartya Sen has focussed international attention on the significance of fundamental human freedoms and human rights for development theory and practice. In the past, dominant approaches have often characterized development in terms of GDP per capita; food security in terms of food availability, and poverty in terms of income deprivation. Emphasis was placed on economic efficiency – with no explicit role being given to fundamental freedoms, individual agency and human rights. In contrast, Sen's research has highlighted the central idea that, in the final analysis, market outcomes and government actions should be judged in terms of valuable human ends. His work has contributed to important paradigm shifts in economics and development – away from approaches that focus exclusively on income, growth and utility, with an increased emphasis on individual entitlements, capabilities, freedoms and rights. It has increased awareness of the importance of respect for human rights for socio-economic outcomes – challenging the proposition that growth should take priority over civil and political rights, while highlighting the role of human rights in promoting economic security, and the limitations of development without human rights guarantees.

*Is this explicitly mentioned in the TTR-documents?*

Well, we have a little problem here. The language and the terms that are used in the documents are derived from the theoretical jargon of Sen, plus some own jargon that the TTR-team has developed. This, combined with the innovative focus on enhancing and establishing indigenous knowledge-networks, makes it difficult to directly understand the documents and compare with other programs in other countries. However, when I translate the objectives into a more comparable format, it looks like this:

”Many and diverse groups of small farmers extend their capability

- a) to solve their problems,
- b) to have access to the required resources and
- c) to defend their interests by
  - 1) managing knowledge,
  - 2) forming alliances and networks and
  - 3) uniting in movements.”

*Okay, I understand managing knowledge through farmer-to-farmer exchange mechanisms, and that this can lead to networks, maybe even to communities of practice amongst the farmers. But what is ”alliances“ and what has this got to do with ”movements“?*

Alliances means the hoped for phenomenon, where various existing groups combine their resources to organize themselves some service or for trading resources amongst themselves. This is beginning to happen. For instance three groups combined their skills and resources for launching a cattle-breeding program for all their combined members. Some poultry keeping groups have jointly bought a mill to grind feed for the chicken, etc... As for ”movements“ the idea here is, that the fora would over time become a platform where small farmers can exchange information. That may lead to more political coherence that aims at defending their rights.

*This reminds me of what you told us a few years ago about Farmer Field Schools in Indonesia. The village-level FFS started to alliance themselves and actually did result in a movement that even had influence on the local political processes.*

Yes, however the difference here is, that the alliance-building amongst FFS in Indonesia was not an explicit program objective. It happened almost on its own. FFS was aimed at farmer groups learning about integrated production, not at alliance building. However TTR is the other way round: It aims at alliance building based on local knowledge-exchange mechanisms.

*So this means there is a political agenda in TTR? Outch! In view of the extreme split in landholdings and a third of the rural population without land, this looks like we are heading for conflicts ahead....*

Yes, I mentioned this as a concern to the project team. TTR certainly has an agenda to empower small farmers to be able to make a livelihood. And of course Sen's theories have an ideological push for the emancipation of poor people. The concern right now is, that the new government has said it will use a ”strong hand“ in order to stop the economic decline. So certainly we are facing conflicting times ahead, because no doubt the agricultural exports are important for the economy,



A group who is to improve chicken farming. A common chicken house has been constructed with the help of TTR and different feeding systems are tested.

and the land-tenure problems have deep roots. However, TTR believes it's approach will lead to a higher capability at the local level to deal with conflicts, ie. not to avoid them, but to be able to deal with them constructively. There are encouraging indications that this is already happening. For instance the knowledge exchange activities have already led to increased respect and even cooperation between campesinos and indigenous Guarani Indios. This was a surprise even for the TTR-team.

*So we could say TTR is also doing conflict resolution?*

Not directly, no! However what I find very interesting and innovative about TTR is that they concentrate on enhancing any possible information channels between farmers. In my view this can lead to a higher capacity amongst farmer groups to negotiate their common interest. If this leads to working alliances at a higher level – as is the intention in the objectives of TTR – then this can in my view help to create an environment in which existing and future conflicts can be creatively negotiated.

*How do the TTR-groups interact with the established research systems.*

Well, the objective is first of all aimed at enhancing farmer-to-farmer exchange mechanisms. For the interaction with outside knowledge the project maintains a data-base with resource persons. They call it the “Yellow Pages”. At the moment of my visit contacts with resource persons from the outside were rather the exception. However, I believe this will become increasingly important as the farmer groups mature and begin to push the technical limits of what they do.

*This all sounds rather innovative for a rural program aiming at working with farmers. How would you compare it with other programs that you know?*

I've tried to think this through by comparing with an other Helvetas program, the Rural Advisory Service in Kyrgyzstan, a program that I know very well. RAS is a modern effort at organising extension, so I guess it is fair to compare it with TTR (See box 3).



Now all families of a village bought a cow together and they care for it in rotation. The milk is for those families, who don't have a cow yet. An initiative of economic solidarity.

Box 3

**Comparing TTR with RAS**

Issue	TTR	RAS
Theoretical basis	Amartya Sen and others: development as freedom; e.g. freedom to connect and to experiment	Welfare economics
Fostered economic principles	Economic solidarity	Individual profit maximization
Development vision	Multitude of groups that continues to connect	Sustainable livelihood, satisfied basic needs and increased income
Sustainability strategy	Processes of converging in alliances and networks continue	Provision of development services continues
Project objective	Multitude of groups globalises their relations = networks of farmer groups	Support development of an extension system
Important indicators	Group performance, connectivity (= being connected), networks	Physical products (number of chicken), income generated, farmers' payment for services
Main role of staff	Facilitating farmer to farmer exchange and facilitating connectivity	Advising (information, adult education, problem solving, animation)
Key feature of approach	Exclusively working with existing informal groups	Working with individuals and groups (informal and formal; existing and new)
Initiatives and farmer projects	Less than 50% financed by farmers	100% financed by farmers (with few exceptions)

*What hits me when I compare these two approaches is the difference in how they deal with operational sustainability. RAS aims at 100 % financial independence by farmers for running their projects, whereas TTR provides more than 50 %. How does this work out?*

This is one of the main concerns I have with TTR. One could of course argue, that the farmers are too poor to pay more for their projects. But the facts do not bear this out. When for instance a group of farmers gets a dairy cow that is heavily subsidized by TTR, and within a short time can buy a second dairy cow with zero subsidies, then I begin to wonder whether the assumption of lacking resources is correct. TTR also argues that the reason for the subsidies is to "bait" the farmers for economic solidarity, ie. if the project heavily subsidizes a farmer project, the farmers will see the worth of cooperating. So the subsidies are only a tool to get cooperation going, to "bait" the farmers into cooperating with each other.

On the one hand TTR has been correct in this assumption: We asked farmers what they liked most about the TTR-approach and the answer has been, that they liked the experience of being connected with their peers, and that they intend to develop this connectedness further. It is quite surprising that the subsidies from the project did not come out at the top of what they liked. So TTR has been successful in its objective to promote what they call "economic solidarity". But on the other hand the argument cuts the other way too: Subsidies are not as important for the farmers as TTR assumes. And my most important concern is, that this will not be sustainable. We would probably need a lot of subsidies to encourage a sufficiently large number of farmers to engage in "economic solidarity".

*Exactly, so what is the coverage of the TTR-approach right now, and how will it spread?*

Box 4

**Comparison TTR-RAS for efficiency**

Issue	TTR (2003, year 2)	RAS (2002, year 4)
Coverage %	2.1	6.2
Groups/field staff	21	14
Farmers/field staff	150	131
Francs/group	2300	415
Francs/farmer	316	44

That too is a cause for concern. It is too early yet to see how it will spread. But TTR will have to be careful to monitor its costs for replicating the undoubted successes it has achieved so far. Right now they cover about 2.1% of the rural households in the total project area. Due to the competitive grant system the number of involved farm households will grow slowly only. But to reach a critical mass of involved households that will lead to self-operating alliance-building and the envisaged "movement", one would need to reach far more households. So one wonders how much the public would have to invest (in this case Donor programs) in order to reach this critical mass.

And here is where we are interested in efficiency. I have again compared TTR with RAS on the question of efficiency, and I must admit my concerns with TTR appear to be justified, particularly when I see how much it costs at present to involve one farming household (see box 4).

*You mean TTR has not yet developed a strategy for scaling up?*

When I look at the numbers and the costs, I guess that really this is the challenge TTR is facing right now. For instance I feel there would be very good opportunities here for close cooperation with a locally operating micro-credit organization in order to close the resource-gap for the farmer initiatives.

*So in conclusion I get the impression, that TTR is a very innovative effort at enhancing farmer-exchange networks, based on what is already there. In that respect it is a "modern" way of applying Knowledge Management in a rural development setting, with a clear objective of empowerment and poverty alleviation. However the biggest challenge facing the approach right now is, that it has to develop a scaling up strategy.*

I find TTR an interesting combination of post-modern development theories, latest learnings from knowledge management and participatory approaches. As you say, one of the key issues is how the project will reach a critical mass of farmers. Compared to other extension projects I know, TTR has a comparatively high chance for sustainability. The farmers' networks are likely to continue to exist and to develop after the project intervention. A further geographical spreading of the project and certain services of the project (like maintaining the "Yellow Pages" database and the facilitation of the big TTR foro) will need public funding in future and beyond the support of Helvetas too.

*Thanks Peter!*



A "community of practice" meets with a fish farmer for experience exchange and learning.