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# Package 83, Script 7

March 2008

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**Forming an effective farmers’ co-operative**

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**Notes to Broadcaster**

Worldwide, 800 million people are members of co-operatives, organizations that serve the interests of their member farmers. It is estimated that cooperatives employ about 100 million people.

The first co-operatives were groups of consumers who got together to start their own store, so that they could buy their goods more cheaply - and used any surplus to improve their communities. The idea was soon applied in other ways, with people running businesses to both provide employment and strengthen the community. In some rural areas, some farmers do not understand how cooperatives operate, nor their benefits. This script has been prepared to share information on how co-operatives can be formed and how they operate.

You might want to broadcast this script in combination with scripts 6 and 8, which also talk about cooperatives.

Here are some suggestions for adding to this script, or producing other programs on this topic:

* Interview a member of a successful local farmers’ co-operative on how the group began
* Write a drama which shows a meeting at a democratically-organized cooperative, in which important decisions are made.
* Write and broadcast a series of radio spots, each of which advertises one of the benefits of cooperatives.

**Narrator:** Good morning listeners. Today is a bright day for all those who are interested in working together, because here is an opportunity for you to do just that! Today’s message focuses on how farmers can best work and support each other in a co-operative. So do not switch off your radio or you will surely miss out!

*Short musical break*

**Narrator:** One day, Mr. Mkhumathela paid a visit to TRALSO offices. TRALSO is a land rights and development organization working with marginalized rural communities on issues of land and agrarian reform and sustainable rural livelihoods in the former homelands of Transkei in South Africa.

Mr. Mkhumathela had a problem. Fortunately he met Mr. Nkalitshane, who is an expert in rural community development. As a Rural Livelihoods Officer, Mr. Nkalitshane focuses much of his time on the formation of rural community co-operatives.

**Mr. Mkhumathela:** I have been producing maize for almost twenty years, but it seems that I haven’t reached my goal of producing enough to sell to big buyers, or even supplying the local households in my village.

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** Why is that?

**Mr. Mkhumathela:** I do not have much support from anyone, not even government. I have many challenges. I took my dream to the local Department of Agriculture, but the answer I received was that they were unable to help me as a single farmer. They can only help people who are organized!

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** What challenges have you faced as a farmer?

**Mr. Mkhumathela:** Hey! I don’t know where to start. There are many! I have problems with livestock trampling and destroying my plants. I have problems with people stealing my crop before harvest. I have problems because I lack production inputs. In fact, I have many problems! All these have kept me at the subsistence level of farming. I think I work very hard, but I get very little in return.

**Mr. Nkalitshane**: Do not worry, Mr. Mkhumathela! Your problems can surely be addressed. In fact, there are many ways of solving your problems. One of them is by working with other people with similar problems. In this way you can help each other. Soon, I will invite you to a very important meeting where you will meet other farmers with similar problems.

**Narrator:** The Rural Livelihoods Officer, Mr. Nkalitshane, knew that there were other local farmers in the same situation as Mr. Mkhumathela. After talking with Mr. Nkalitshane, Mr. Mkhumathela organized other farmers to come together for a meeting. The Rural Livelihoods Officer was invited to address the crisis at TRALSO’s offices. Mr. Nkalitshane made these remarks to a very attentive and curious audience:

*Fade in sounds of people sitting down in chairs and talking.*

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** (*Shouting*)Order! Order everyone! (*Normal voice*) Good morning, honourable ladies and gentlemen. You know what? Today is your freedom day! (*People start murmuring as though he is fooling them*)

**Voice:** What freedom?

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** I am here to introduce you to something called a “co-operative.”

**Voice**: (*Loudly*) What is this thing you call a co-operative?

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** Are you telling me you do not know what a co-operative is? Ok, let me tell you what it is. It is a self-governing association of persons who come together voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and desires through a jointly-owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

**Voice:** I don’t actually understand what you mean, sir.

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** (*Talking clearly, strongly and directly,* *trying to draw their total attention*) Look here, as the name suggests, a “co-operative” is all about working together and supporting each other toward a common goal. This goal could be anything from saving money, purchasing production inputs, marketing produce, building farmhouses, starting a business, or growing a high–value crop.

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** (*Realizing that most people do not understand, he explains in more detail*)A co-operative business is based on democracy - every member in the co-operative or group participates in making decisions that control the business. To become members, people buy a share of the co-operative, and get one vote each. Even if a company buys many shares in a co-operative, it still only has one vote, like everyone else.

**Mr. Mkhumathela:** Why is it necessary to form a co-operative? Why do we need to have the same interests and desires when forming a co-operative?

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** It is always preferable and important that farmers are organized into groups that will serve their interest and needs! If farmers don’t have common interests and desires, then the co-operative is likely to collapse as it will fail to meet the needs of the group members.

**Mrs. Nzimande:** How does a co-operative work? Will it take care of all my needs and those of my family?

**Mr. Gwanya:** Excuse me, sir! How do we go about forming an effective farmer co-operative? Can you start a co-operative with only two persons? How big should a co-operative be in order to be successful?

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** Effective farmer co-operatives are formed by farmers who rally around a common interest and a common goal. Having a common goal ensures that the farmers’ interactions and discussions about their problems remain focused and can be pursued successfully.

**Mrs. Nzimande:** What about leadership of the co-operative?

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** Members of the co-operative or group elect at least three directors, who manage the daily running of the co-operative and who are answerable to all the members.

**Mr. Mkhumathela**: Why are there only three directors? Can other members remove them from power?

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** It is because not every member can be elected a director at the same time! You need only a few to direct the operations of the group. Yes, you have the powers to change them when they do not perform according to the members’ expectations.

**Mr. Gwanya:** You have not answered my last question, Mr. Nkalitshane!

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** What is that question, Mr. Gwanya?

**Mr. Gwanya**: Can you start a co-operative when there are only two of you? How big should a co-operative be in order to be successful?

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** Actually, your last question is very important and I would like other people to listen carefully. When forming a co-operative, it is important to consider that the group remains manageable. If the group becomes too large, it may be unmanageable. Yes, you can start a group with two individuals, but efforts should be made to increase the number so that you can bring diversity to the group.

**Mrs. Nzimande:** I am a woman. Do you think I stand a chance to join a co-operative?

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** Oh yes! Women have brought good ideas to many existing co-operatives. It does not matter whether you are female or male! Actually, the groups should be composed of youths and females and males of varying ages, including senior citizens, as they have valuable experience and knowledge that can be useful in running the group. This diversity of membership will ensure that the group’s actions affect a wider audience! Women can even create their own co-operative if they want.

**Mr. Mkhumathela:** What about members who don’t participate in key activities of the co-operative? How do you deal with this?

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** It is good to think about these things when you are developing the idea for the group. Each group can make its own regulations. These regulations can include minimum levels of participation to be a member, such as meeting attendance, amount of crops sold through the co-operative, or number of hours contributed to the co-operative on a regular basis. You can also establish what actions are required for members who don’t participate.

**Mrs. Nzimande:** From what you are saying, I can see that information flow among the group members is very important.

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** You are very correct, Mrs. Nzimande. In addition, there is need to identify someone in the group who will update members on the farming activities and innovations in their local area. Regular meetings and workshops should be used as another way to share information. Depending on the situation, this person may receive a stipend to cover the costs of distributing information.

**Mr. Mkhumathela:** So how do we start?

**Mr. Nkalitshane:** You can start by approaching your local agricultural extension officer, or the department of agriculture and co-operatives or a development NGO in your area. Tell them your problems and challenges in your area and your desire to form a group. They will guide you through the process. (*Editor’s note: you will need to do local research in order to make good suggestions on where farmers can get help in forming a co-operative*.)

*Sounds of talking amongst the meeting participants, then loud applause fading under narrator and out.*

**Narrator:** After the presentation by Mr. Nkalitshane, there was thunderous applause from the audience. It was clear that the meeting has saved them from misery and demoralization. The people were determined to start their own farmers’ group!

**Narrator:** (*Pause*)If you want to form a successful co-operative, it is important to stick to the guidelines discussed today. Please feel free to contact agricultural extension workers and any relevant organization in your area for more information. Thanks for listening and good-bye for today.

## Acknowledgements

Contributed by: Navy Simukonda (Executive Director) and Nkosinamandla Mzantsi (Rural Livelihoods officer) of the Transkei Land Service Organization (TRALSO), a land rights and development organization working in the former homelands of Transkei (South Africa) on issues of land and agrarian reform and rural livelihoods.

**Reviewed by:** Rodd Myers, Senior Programme Manager, International Development; Agricultural Development Specialist, Canadian Co-operative Association

**Information sources**

Materials used to compose the script came from the work of both TRALSO and the Farmer Support Group (FSG) in KwaZulu Natal.

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