



AgEcon SEARCH
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search
<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>
aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

*Rural
organization*
June 1952

Progress Report Rs-14

GIANNINI FOUNDATION OF
AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS
LIBRARY

WITHDRAWN

NEIGHBOR GROUPS

Observations From Iredell and Rockingham Counties
North Carolina

By

William E. Barnett and Selz C. Mayo

Department of Rural Sociology
Agricultural Experiment Station
North Carolina State College
Raleigh, N. C.

R. W. Cummings, Director of Research

NEIGHBOR GROUPS

Observations From Iredell and Rockingham Counties North Carolina

By

William E. Barnett* and Selz C. Mayo**
Department of Rural Sociology

This report is based on the observations of Mr. Barnett and informal discussion with other participants. E. J. Niederfrank¹, Extension Rural Sociologist, U. S. D. A., and Frank Doggett, Extension Soil Conservation Specialist, S. C. S., N. C. State College, with Mr. Barnett comprised the team of observers. These observations were made during February 1952 in Iredell and Rockingham Counties in North Carolina. The participants were in the field only two days, consequently these observations must be interpreted as very tentative statements.

OBJECTIVES OF OBSERVATION

Three objectives formed the framework for the observations and the informal discussion:

- (1) To observe neighbor groups in action and to obtain a better understanding of the mechanism of a neighbor group;
- (2) In the light of insight gained into the mechanism of the neighbor group and the use being made of them by the Soil Conservation Service for the purpose of getting more of their conservation practices accepted by more of the farmers, to study the possibilities of adapting the neighbor group concept to the Extension Service's program;

* Research Assistant

**Associate Professor

¹E. J. Niederfrank, "The Neighbor Group Idea", Extension Service Review, Vol. 23, No. 4, April 1952, pp. 60-ff; and "Finding and Working With Neighbor Groups", Vol. 23, No. 5, May 1952, pp. 80-ff.

- (3) To study the potentialities of this concept in relation to community development programs. Do community development programs have something to gain in applying the concept or some variation of the neighbor group?

NEIGHBOR GROUP DEFINED

The neighbor group definition is based on the same general principle as the neighborhood; but whereas the neighborhood definition involves both a space concept (definite geographical boundaries) plus primary-type human associations or relationships, the neighbor group definition involves only the concept of primary-type human associations or relationships. The space concept is not a part of this definition. There is no contiguous or adjoining farm spatial pattern which is essential to developing such groups, although this pattern frequently exists. Instead, a neighbor group depends upon common bonds or ties -- visiting socially, exchange of work or tools, aid in times of need, face-to-face primary relations, etc., -- as the foundation for its existence. The neighbor group is a grouping on the basis of social strata which aid in developing the necessary common bonds or ties. Thus the criteria of the strata may be economic, social, educational, religious, or even political. This condition is not so evident or so true in the concept of the neighborhood.

The neighbor group appears to be a kind of adaptation to a changing social structure in rural life. Whereas such a group used to be more of the neighborhood type, now it is the neighbor group type. Whereas the neighborhood used to be the first group outside of the family to influence an individual, now it is the neighbor group. Due to these

changes the neighborhood may be composed of a number of these neighbor groups, which are seldom composed of more than 10 or 12 families. Some neighbor groups may be composed of families from two or more neighborhoods. The number of families in the groups observed ranged from 3 or 4 to 10 or 12.

Mr. C. C. Julian, who is in charge of the Soil Conservation Service office at Statesville, has conceived of his work with the neighbor groups in the form of plans reaching three associational levels. The first of these plans he has named the "Neighbor Group Plan - Neighbors Working Together"; the second has been labeled the "Community Plan - Neighbor Groups Working Together"; and the third is called the "Iredell Conservation Plan - Communities of Neighbor Groups Working Together".

NEIGHBOR GROUP PLAN - NEIGHBORS WORKING TOGETHER

Identifying Neighbor Groups. The first step in carrying out a neighbor group plan involves the identification of the group and its leader or "key man", and sometimes designated as the "key neighbor". The technique used so far has been a somewhat indirect approach but has proven rather successful. The agricultural worker goes into an area and establishes contact with a farmer. He asks him who his close neighbors are -- those with whom he neighbors, associates with socially rather frequently, would give him aid when he needed it in time of trouble, and would exchange work and tools with him -- and obtains additional contacts in this manner.

If the first contact is not the key man, then usually some mention will be made of a man who has had some influence in the decision-making of this particular farmer. This results in the first clue as to the identity of the key man. Those who have been identified by the first contact as his neighbors are then contacted and the same procedure followed until in the course of the conversations one man's name will have been mentioned often enough to indicate that his judgment is sought, his ideas listened to, and his influence rather strongly felt among those farmers already contacted. These clues point to the key man. They are like the spokes of a wheel pointing toward the hub -- the key man.

Once the agricultural worker has satisfied himself that he has located the key man, he contacts him and from him obtains, rather conclusively, the names of all those neighbors included in the neighbor group. It is well to note here that the key man occupies the position that he does because the other members of the group recognize that he has a strong interest in their welfare, and that his ideas and judgment are sound. In other words, they have a great deal of confidence in this man. Usually he is more of an innovator than are the other members of his group.

This accentuates the importance of the key man to the agricultural worker. It becomes important for the agricultural worker to gain the confidence of and sell his program to the key man if he hopes to reach all of the other members of the neighbor groups in the immediate future. If he should approach some other member of the neighbor group,

he may find that man unwilling to express his opinion or to commit himself in any way until he has had an opportunity to discuss it with the key man of the group. Thus, the importance of making the selling approach through the key man is indicated. If, in the case of a conservation practice or plan, the key man thinks it is a good idea, then he will want to give his neighbors an opportunity to benefit from it. This presents the next step in the process. The key man is asked if he would like to get his neighbors together in order to have the plan presented and to discuss it. All steps are taken in terms of the normal functioning of the neighbor group.

One of the reasons that the neighbor group is so important as an avenue of reciprocal relations between the farmers and the agricultural workers is that it is a group that "thinks out loud". The members of this group can get together as a group, and because they all know each other well they never hesitate to discuss the problems at hand and to express their ideas on them. But this may not be true if these men are placed in a larger group where all present are not well known to them. Then they have the tendency to remain silent and not express themselves on the program being presented to them.

Neighbor Groups and the Agricultural Worker. Therefore, the Soil Conservation Service worker in Iredell County presents his programs through the medium of the neighbor group. Once the neighbor group is called together as a group by the key man, the worker presents

his program and the members of the group will discuss its merits. Since the key man is already much in favor of the program, the others are very likely to fall in line. In the case of the soil conservation program, they all agree to having land capability maps made of each of their farms. The finished product is a complete land capability map plus a map of their neighbor group for each member of the group. As soon as each has received his map and begun to follow the plans laid out, interest in the program increases and there is usually a noticeable improvement in the cohesiveness of the neighbor group. Prior to this each farmer has been thinking in terms of his own farm, but group approval becomes a force when they have become a part of a recognized plan.

Informality is Stressed. Another important thing to note is that seldom are the members of the neighbor group consciously aware of the roles they are playing. It is believed that the normal functioning of the group would be disrupted if any degree of semi-formalization of the group were to occur. For example, the role of the key man as the leader of the group should not be emphasized either in his eyes or in the eyes of the other members of the group. When the group is called together it should never be in the sense of a consciously selected leader calling together the group but in the sense of one neighbor asking his other neighbors to meet with him. This is taken into consideration in connection with the publicizing of the neighbor group teamwork by the Soil Conservation Service.

Each week a column publicizing the work of a neighbor group is put in all three of the Iredell County newspapers. But the important point is that the article says nothing about any member of the group being the leader; instead, some reference is made to each member of that group as to what they have said or done with regard to the soil conservation plans they are carrying out. The importance of this method of publicizing the neighbor groups lies in the fact that it makes the members more group-conscious and adds to the cohesiveness of the group. Also, it develops a degree of competition between neighbor groups which benefits both the groups and the Soil Conservation Service. The groups benefit from making use of the conservation practices to a greater degree according to their desire to do a better job than another neighbor group, and at the same time it makes it possible for the S. C. S. to do a better job of disseminating conservation information and getting conservation practices put into effect.

It should be noted at this point that the soil conservation program is particularly well adapted to dissemination through this type of group. The soil is basic to farming and constitutes a common interest among all farmers. This means that all the members of a neighbor group will have an interest in the soil in common, whereas with regard to other farming practices in livestock, crops, etc., there may be special interests and a resulting diversity of interest among the members of the neighbor group itself. This does not mean that the neighbor group is not adaptable to the work of other agencies, but rather that it is especially adaptable to the soil conservation program.

Community Leader a By-Product. In connection with the identification of key men for the neighbor groups, the soil conservation agents believe they have established the identity of a community leader -- community in the sense of a neighborhood composed of a number of neighbor groups. This man is supposed to be a leader in the "community" who knows all the leaders of the neighbor groups. This leader operates on a broader scope than that of the neighbor group level and is not a neighbor group leader himself. Instead, he is a leader commanding the respect of the neighbor groups and their key men.

This "community" leader is identified in much the same manner as is the key man of a neighbor group except that the clues to his identity are more likely to come from the key men of the neighbor groups composing the "community" of neighbor groups. Once this leader has been identified and sold upon a program in which the neighbor groups are involved, it is believed that he can be of considerable value in helping the groups maintain their interest and activity.

Very little use has been made of the "community" leader in the soil conservation program as yet, so it is difficult to determine just how realistic this concept may be. Only one "community" leader was interviewed and observed during this short period of observation. On the basis of this one contact, it would be unwise to attempt to draw any definite conclusions.

COMMUNITY PLAN - NEIGHBOR GROUPS WORKING TOGETHER

The second plan worked out at the Statesville Soil Conservation Service office, "Community Plan - Neighbor Groups Working Together", reaches a somewhat higher associational level. This plan has been worked out but has not been put into action. Briefly, it involves bringing together the neighbor group leaders or key men for the purpose of selling the program to these neighbor group leaders who in turn will carry it back to the members of their groups. The term "Community Plan" is not used in the sociological sense of the word "community". Community as used here is the same as the sociological definition of a neighborhood. Even at this associational level all the neighbor group leaders know each other and will not hesitate to express themselves in a meeting. A group meeting of this sort also makes it possible to further the ends of the Soil Conservation Service by developing competition between the neighbor groups.

COUNTY PLAN COMMUNITIES OF NEIGHBOR GROUPS WORKING TOGETHER

The third plan as outlined by the Statesville office of the Soil Conservation Service is still in the process of being planned and is rather tentative. The plan, "Iredell Conservation Plan - Communities of Neighbor Groups Working Together", reaches an even higher associational level than does the second plan. At this level there would be meetings composed of the neighbor group key man from all of the neighborhoods in the county.

DANGERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

From the viewpoint of a sociologically oriented observer, the community and county plans have the inherent danger of introducing formalization in these associations. If this should happen, it might well defeat the purposes of the plans. There is even more danger in the county than in the community plan because it is based on a higher associational level. In both plans it must be remembered that when the key men come together for meetings they should be as representatives selected by their neighbor groups rather than as agency-recognized leaders called together by an agency.

In addition to this danger, the county includes another. When the key men from all of the county meet together there will be many who do not know each other or who know each other only casually. This group is likely to lack the free expression of ideas and opinions that is found in the neighbor groups which tend to "think out loud". Of course, it is recognized that this can be overcome to some extent by the use of other techniques of getting ideas across. For example, demonstration techniques could be used, but even then without some expression of opinion it would be impossible to know what they think of the idea, program, practices, etc. It would seem that these are several of the dangers that must be taken into consideration by the agricultural workers or anyone else attempting to make use of such normal relationships as are the neighbor groups.

There are other dangers involved in taking advantage of the neighbor group as a means of bridging the gap between the individual

farmer and the agricultural agencies and workers. First, there is the danger of permitting agricultural workers with little or no conception of the sociology involved to work with these groups. It is important that a worker have considerable appreciation and as much training as possible in the sociological approach to working with these neighbor groups (the Soil Conservation Service is already carrying out such a program). And there is the second danger of overworking the neighbor group as a means of reaching the individual farmer. In other words, if the group is going to be be-deviled by a number of individual agricultural agencies making separate and independent approaches to the group in an attempt to put across their programs, then much of the strength is going to be negated. A possible solution to such a problem may lie in a more unified agricultural program.

If the way to the neighbor group has been paved by one agricultural agency, then let that agency serve as the coordinator of the entire program. As the farmers are faced with problems outside the realm of this particular agency, then this agency suggests another or other agencies which could aid in the solution of the problems. It would not be necessary to wait until the farmers are aware of a problem, but much could be done in making them aware of their needs and thus providing a normal avenue for other agencies to put across their programs. These dangers may paint a black picture in the minds of some, but all that is being emphasized is that the neighbor group must be handled with care in order to realize the maximum benefits for both the farmers and the agricultural workers.

The advantages of the neighbor group -- both as a group and as a concept -- are rather obvious. The neighbor group opens up an avenue between the agricultural agencies and the individual farmer. It provides a much better two-way exchange than now exists. It makes it possible for the agricultural agencies and their programs to more nearly reach all of the farmers. It serves as a means of taking advantage of group approval in order to get things done. Each farmer wants to keep the approval of the others in his neighbor group, and also he does not want the others to get too far ahead of him.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, there is every indication that the neighbor group has value for extension work, and in addition to this it has a very definite potential for use in community development programs. In short, the neighbor group has potentialities as a means of improving rural living -- if handled properly.