



Contributions to group work and to the management of collective processes in extension and rural development



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ABSTRACT

Working with farmers' groups, associations and cooperatives constitutes a fundamental element of extension work with family farmers. Despite the fact that extension practitioners face many problems in this area of their work, there is currently a lack of academic literature that systematically addresses the topic and offers concrete guidelines for practice. Thus, this paper will aim to clarify the benefits of farmers' groups, associations and networks within the context of family farming, systematise problems faced by rural extensionists when working with farmers' groups and associations, provide conceptual tools for understanding group and associative processes, and construct a set of guidelines and recommendations for facing said problems. In order to achieve these aims, the authors conducted an extensive literature review and drew upon their personal experience on the topic.

Results suggest that some of the benefits of associative work are: better access to inputs, produce and credit markets, the facilitation of learning processes, the empowerment of family farmers as social actors, and a reduction of rural extension costs. Additionally, with respects to the problems faced by extensionists, the following can be highlighted: individualist attitudes and conflicts between farmers, scarce participation and commitment, problems with leaderships and with organisations' administrative management, and the lack of extensionists' training to address these processes, among others. With regards to the factors that increase trust and cooperation are: interpersonal communication and mutual knowledge, sharing problems, values and objectives, and the existence of shared rules for the functioning of the group that include sanctions for transgressors. In this context, the extensionists' role will be that of facilitating processes of construction of group relationships, creating rules for the groups' functioning and developing the group's capacities for self-management.

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1. Introduction

Rural extension, advisory services (particularly those that are public), and rural development interventions in general, are usually carried out by means of methodologies, approaches and settings that require working with groups of people (mostly farmers) and coordinating between different social actors or interested parties. That is, they have to deal not only with technical issues, but also

with group and inter-institutional processes.

In this line, it is clear that group methodologies are widely used in rural extension and advisory services as a means to reach farmers (e.g. Agbamu, 2015; Matiwane and Terblanché, 2012; Ndoró et al., 2014), and that supporting farmers' cooperatives and organisations is often the objective of many rural development initiatives (Alimirzaei and Asady, 2011; D'Haese et al., 2005; Landini, 2016a). Likewise, nowadays, different approaches highlight the importance of interinstitutional articulation and coordination, and consider them to be key components of rural extension work, innovation processes and management of natural resources (e.g. Cacivio and Ringuélet, 2012; Catullo et al., 2013; Herrera Tapia, 2006; Leeuwis, 2004; Ojha, 2011). Thus, it becomes apparent that the

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management of collective processes (i.e. processes that take place among individuals and among groups of individuals such as organisations and institutions) is at the centre of rural extension and advisory services.

Now, in the context of the management of collective processes (on a group and on an interinstitutional level), rural extensionists and advisors have to carry out a series of key functions that involve the facilitation of relationships and consensus building (Abdu-Raheem and Worth, 2011; Gutiérrez, 2014), the development of group and self-management capabilities (Boas and Goldey, 2005; Boza et al., 2015; GFRAS, 2012; Rendón et al., 2015), the support of horizontal learning processes (Samuel et al., 2012; Selis et al., 2013), and mediation and conflict management (Berger and Neiman, 2010), among others. Thus, it is clear that the role of rural extensionists and advisors requires a strong psychosocial component (Landini, 2016b; Landini et al., 2014a; Méndez, 2006) that should not be neglected. However, most extensionists and advisors worldwide are specialised in agricultural production but not in management of social processes (Alves and Saquet, 2014; Landini, 2015; Landini and Bianqui, 2014; Landini et al., 2009; Selis et al., 2013). In consequence, the importance of training rural extensionists in the management of social processes (Cuevas et al., 2014; Landini, 2013a; Leeuwis, 2004), and of interdisciplinary rural extension work (Carballo, 2002; Landini, 2007a, 2016b) becomes apparent.

In this context, it is not unexpected that rural extensionists and advisors tend to face different problems in the areas of group management and interinstitutional articulation (Ekasari et al., 2013; Landini, 2012a; Matiwane and Terblanché, 2012; Nogueira, 2013). Likewise, nowadays, there is a lack of academic articles that systematically address the problems faced by rural extensionists and advisors in these areas or that propose a structured set of guidelines or recommendations to deal with them. Such a paper would no doubt be useful, particularly for extensionists' and advisors' training, but also for researchers who have to address these processes. Thus, this paper will aim to (1) clarify the benefits of farmers' groups, associations and networks within the context of family farming, (2) systematise problems faced by rural extensionists while managing collective processes, particularly when working with farmers' groups and associations, (3) provide conceptual tools for understanding group and associative processes, and (4) construct a set of guidelines and recommendations for facing said problems.

2. Benefits of family farmers' groups and associations

Different authors have claimed that family farmers' groups, associations and networks possess multiple benefits for farmers as well as for the extensionists that assist them, even though it is also important to note that such benefits are not always materialised (Abebaw and Haile, 2013; Alimirzaei and Asady, 2011; Karaya et al., 2013; Vasconcellos and Vasconcellos, 2009). In fact, admitting that expectations are not always met leads to the need for caution and the realisation that partaking in farmers' groups and associations is not the solution to all family farmers' problems. Likewise, it is also important to acknowledge that all farmers do not necessarily benefit, in an equal manner, from partaking in groups or associations. In fact, some studies suggest that men tend to obtain more benefits from associative work than women (Ampaire et al., 2013; Garforth, 1994), which is an invitation to pay close attention to the possible existence of gender inequities within collective processes.

Farmers' groups can be of a varying nature and shape. For instance, they can spontaneously have emerged from within the local community dynamics, or instead have been supported by

public institutions or NGOs (Boas and Goldey, 2005; Garforth, 1994). At the same time, they can have different degrees of formalisation, from community groups supported by interpersonal bonds to formal organisations adapted to legal regulations (Lapalma, 2001), such as cooperatives or even commercial companies. In terms of what they signify for their members, they can be perceived as a place where farmers with similar problems gather (De Dios, 2011; Mora, 2014), but also as spaces of resistance against economic inequity and expulsive economic and productive systems (Berger and Neiman, 2010).

In order to meet the first objective of this article, the benefits of family farmers' groups and associations, as outlined in academic literature, will be systematised and presented. It is worth mentioning that some of these benefits are mentioned more frequently than others. Nonetheless, this does not mean that those mentioned more often are superior or more important than the others. This is particularly relevant when considering that what really matters is that those benefits exist and can contribute to extensionists' and farmers' work, depending on the interests of the group, of the advisors, or on the institutional, economic and productive context.

The first benefit is general, in the sense that it includes others that will be expanded upon later, and refers to the role that farmers' cooperatives play in the provision of, and access to, different services. In this line, authors have highlighted that farmers' cooperatives can help provide access to products and services that otherwise would be inaccessible for small agricultural producers. These products and services are diverse and include agricultural inputs such as seeds and agrochemicals (Abebaw and Haile, 2013; Gutiérrez, 2014), credit (Karaya et al., 2013; Ragasa et al., 2016), training and technical assistance (Boas and Goldey, 2005; Karaya et al., 2013), transport services (Gutiérrez, 2014) and support for commercialisation (Abebaw and Haile, 2013; Boas and Goldey, 2005), among others.

With regards to having access to the market, family farmers often mention problems related to the sale of their produce, a topic also mentioned frequently in academic literature on the subject (Landini, 2016a; Silva and Leitão, 2009). This problem emerges mostly due to farmers' small produce volume and their limited negotiation power with regards to other actors that make up part of the commercial chain. In this sense, it has been argued that farmer associations allow for the increase of the scale of operations (Landini, 2007b; Olatunji and Letsoalo, 2013) and for the design of joint marketing strategies (Boas and Goldey, 2005; Estevam et al., 2015), thus increasing their negotiation power with potential buyers (Caicedo Díaz, 2013; Camacho et al., 2012; Sari, 2011), which allows them to sell their product in better conditions. Likewise, it also has been mentioned that this negotiation capacity also facilitates access to input markets, acquiring seeds and fertilisers, among other elements, in bulk at lower prices or better conditions (Abdu-Raheem and Worth, 2012; Sibiko et al., 2013). However, it is also important to note that farmers' associations or cooperatives not only contribute to commercialisation by means of a more fluid integration within long commercial chains, that is, those wherein multiple links exist between producers and consumers, but also through the development of short chains and local markets, where producers and consumers interact without any intermediation (Cieza, 2012; Paz et al., 2013).

Likewise, cooperatives and farmers' groups have been specifically mentioned as a means to facilitating the access to credit (Ifenkwe, 2012; Ragasa et al., 2016; Samuel et al., 2012). For instance, it has been argued that many cooperatives provide credit to their associates (Alimirzaei and Asady, 2011; Boas and Goldey, 2005) or that farmers' self-help groups can be a means for sharing financial resources by gathering small amounts aimed at

providing credit (Ofuoku and Albert, 2014). Moreover, academic literature suggests that one of the most important ways for farmers' associations to access credit is through public funds in the context of rural extension or development projects (Abebaw and Haile, 2013; Adesoji et al., 2006; Garforth, 1994). Thus, greater access to credit through cooperatives and farmers' groups should not be understood in terms of bank credits being more accessible but, instead, in terms of having access to credits whose conditions are a better fit for their particular needs.

In connection with the aforementioned self-help groups, it also has been argued that certain types of farmers' organisations and networks allow for farmers to provide each other with support and mutual help on a permanent basis or in situations of special need (Mora, 2014; Ordóñez and Ruiz, 2015). In this case, we are not referring to big associations or cooperatives but to small, local groups wherein members have strong, interpersonal ties. Examples of this are the exchange of labour force (Landini, 2007b), the implementation of group activities (Wellard et al., 2013) or mutual support during pressing or hard times (Karaya et al., 2013; Samuel et al., 2012).

When addressing the issue of the benefits to be gained from farmers' groups and cooperatives (and in this case also from farmers' networks) it is also important to highlight the role they play in the exchange of knowledge and experiences (Cittadini, 1995; Sibiko et al., 2013; Szmulewicz et al., 2012). In fact, specific extension techniques such as farmer-to-farmer methodology or farmer field schools focus on such processes (Allahyari, 2008; Rivas et al., 2010; Samuel et al., 2012). At the same time, it is important to note that farmer's groups and associations also facilitate the access to market and technological information (Boza et al., 2015). In this very line, yet from a traditional extension approach (focused on the transfer and adoption of technologies) it has also been pointed out that farmer organisations favour the diffusion and adoption of technologies (Abdu-Raheem and Worth, 2012; Alves and Saquet, 2014; Okuthe et al., 2013), perhaps due to their role in the exchange and circulation of information regarding farming practices.

Additionally, different authors have also argued that providing rural extension and advisory services to farmers' groups is more efficient than providing them to individual farmers (Boas and Goldey, 2005), given that it lowers advisory costs (Garforth, 1994; Ndoró et al., 2014). Likewise, due to greater efficiency in terms of cost or institutional decisions, diverse governmental agencies prefer to provide advisory services and resources (even exclusively) to grouped or associated farmers (Adesoji et al., 2006; Alimirzaei and Asady, 2011; Zamora, 1999). This strategy, undoubtedly, allows agencies to reach more farmers (Wellard et al., 2013). Additionally, from a family farmer's point of view, access to extension services and public resources is easier when grouped or associated (Mora, 2014; Ofuoku and Albert, 2014; Szmulewicz et al., 2012), given rural extension and development agencies usually prefer to work with already conformed groups in order to avoid the time and effort required to consolidate them (Karaya et al., 2013).

Finally, it has also been suggested that the dispersion that characterises family farmers or their tendency towards individual action radically limits their influence over institutional and public decisions. Thus, authors highlight the importance of developing farmers' associations, networks or movements as a way to strengthen and empower the sector to exert influence on a social level (Rodríguez, 2005). In this vein, agricultural cooperatives and other types of organisations can allow farmers to defend their economic and politic interests (Gutiérrez, 2014) and to have influence over the decisions that affect their lives (Ferrer et al., 2013; Garforth, 1994; Samuel et al., 2012). Likewise, it has also been argued that groups give their members voice (Wellard et al., 2013), thus giving them the leverage to make the government aware of

their problems and needs (Landini, 2007b; Szmulewicz et al., 2012). Furthermore, and in a different sense, it also has been argued that farmers' associations and groups are a privileged way of presenting their needs and expectations to extension services (Abdu-Raheem and Worth, 2011; Garforth, 1994) in the context of approaches that focus on the articulation between the supply and demand of technical advice (Chowa et al., 2013).

In this heading, the results of a systematic literature review were presented and different contributions made by farmer's groups, associations and networks were identified. Taking these contributions into consideration, we can conclude that farmers' groups, associations and networks provide multiple benefits for their members and help extension practice in general. However, farmers and extensionists have to face different problems in order to access these benefits. In the following heading these difficulties are identified and described.

3. Problems faced by extensionists when working with farmers' groups, associations and cooperatives

Partaking in groups, organisations and cooperatives provides multiple benefits to family farmers. For this reason, rural extension worldwide tends to support these types of initiatives (Agbamu, 2015; Ndoró et al., 2014; Wellard et al., 2013). However, according to Berger and Neiman (2010), farmers' organisations should not be thought of as a starting point but instead as an issue to solve. In fact, the emergence of problems in the area of group or associative dynamics, within the context of extension practice, is not uncommon (Landini, 2015; Zamora, 1999). After surveying extensionists from ten Latin American countries, Landini (2016a) found that the most common problematic areas are group work among farmers and interinstitutional articulation. Thus, it is clear that, although partaking in groups, organisations and cooperatives can provide multiple benefits, these benefits do not always materialise in practice (Gutiérrez, 2014). In consequence, based on a wide review of the literature written on this subject, this heading will present the most important problems faced by rural extensionists when working with family farmer groups and associations. For organisational purposes, four different types of problems will be presented: farmers' lack or limited interest in partaking in groups and associations, lack of commitment when partaking, groups' and organisations' internal problems, and political interference.

One of the most commonly mentioned problems in academic literature, and perhaps the first practitioners find when they start working with farmers, is that they often are not really interested in taking part in groups or associative projects or initiatives (Alimirzaei and Asady, 2011; Landini, 2015; Olatunji and Letsoalo, 2013). Moreover, farmers' preference for addressing problems in individual and not in associate terms seems to be a general trend, at least in practice. However, the key lies in understanding why this is, and what can be done to change it. Several explanations will be presented in this section and in ones that follow, but before that, it is important to highlight that there are two, contrasting approaches that attempt to make sense of this situation. On the one hand, following a traditional or diffusionist extension approach that *a priori* assumes the usefulness of its own proposals (Landini, 2013b), there is the idea that farmers are responsible for their lack of interest and commitment, which is usually described in terms of their characteristic 'passivity'. In contrast, this situation can also be understood on the basis of the contextual difficulties that limit farmers' possibility to participate (for instance, due to lack of time (Ferrer et al., 2013; Karaya et al., 2013; Szmulewicz et al., 2012)), and on the cultural and historical dynamics that make extensionists' proposals unviable from farmers' point of view, which calls for the design of new extension strategies and methodologies.

Undoubtedly, the first type of interpretation is more frequent and even unthreatening, given that it does not challenge the extensionists' approach due to assuming that farmers are the cause of the problems. Conversely, the second alternative adopts a much more critical approach, thus leading to question extensionists' own assumptions and practices (Landini et al., 2009; Landini et al., 2013) and striving to find strategies to overcome the problems identified. In the end, adjudicating the lack of participation to an "internal" problem of the farmers is no different than blaming them for what we do not understand. Moreover, expanding our understanding of social and historical dynamics, and critically analysing our own extension approach implies acknowledging that our extension strategies may not be the best ones. Interestingly, this puts into question what we do and how we do it, as well as our own certainties and self-esteem. Nonetheless, this is the only way to go beyond our limitations, striving for strategies for a better future.

Different authors have pointed out that farmers' reticence towards partaking in associations, cooperatives or similar forms of organisation is due to their individualism and to the existence of conflicts among farmers. In this line, it has been argued that farmers tend to be particularly individualistic (Boas and Goldey, 2005) and that they do not have an associative tradition or culture (Alimirzaei and Asady, 2011; Alves and Saquet, 2014; Szmulewicz et al., 2012). Despite the fact that this approach may help us understand the problem under analysis, it seems to be important to dig deeper. In this vein, it has been mentioned that lack of trust (Rodríguez and Guzmán, 2014; Szmulewicz et al., 2012; Torres et al., 2015) and conflicts (Berger and Neiman, 2010; Boas and Goldey, 2005; Landini, 2015) within farmers' groups or associations is a problem frequently faced by farmers. Thus, it could be considered that farmers' reticence to partake in associations or other types of organisations could be related to the existence of historically constructed distrustful expectations, and to past experiences with group-level, interpersonal conflicts (Landini, 2007a).

Another problem frequently mentioned in academic literature is that groups, associations or cooperatives created with the support of extension practitioners are generally not sustainable in the long-term (Boas and Goldey, 2005; Nogueira, 2013). As argued previously, working with groups and organisations is one of the most common tasks of rural extensionists, and often includes partaking in their creation. However, Samuel et al. (2012) point out that group conformation processes often go against local communities' dynamics. What's more, there are cases of groups formed without even consulting their alleged members (Garforth, 1994) due to institutional or administrative urgencies. Nonetheless, the most frequent problem encountered in the context of group conformation as an extension strategy is that members are summoned under the extensionists or institutions' promise that they will obtain resources, such as inputs or money, as a result of said participation (Karaya et al., 2013; Landini, 2015; Toledo and Presno, 2014). Thus, the problem that emerges is that farmers' participation in groups is motivated by the possibility of receiving external benefits and not by the possibility of obtaining other results that can come out of working with others, which makes these organisations unsustainable in the medium term. According to Gutiérrez (2014), because of their own structure, these organisations are dependent on external aid, even for their own functioning. Thus, there exist many cases of organisations that disintegrate when aid appears, or when technicians withdraw (Garforth, 1994; Zamora, 1999; Zwane, 2012), which can be interpreted as a difficulty in the group and organisations' capacity for self-management.

A different angle for addressing the problem of scarce long-term sustainability of farmers' groups, associations or cooperatives generated with the support of extension workers focuses on the fact that these initiatives and projects frequently neglect family

farmers' point of view and rationale. In this line, Méndez (2006) argues that neglecting the particularities of local communities leads to the risk of unilaterally imposing extensionists' point of view over that of farmers'. Likewise, the existence of different visions of what 'success' means within rural extension work has been discussed (Garforth, 1994; Rodríguez, 2005), which shows that extensionists, as well as family farmers, usually have different goals when working together. However, according to De Dios and Gutiérrez (2012), development projects usually leave little space for diagnosis and participatory project design, which leads to top-down planning (Ferrer et al., 2013; Vasconcellos and Vasconcellos, 2009). Thus, project goals are accepted by farmers at a discursive or formal level, based on an expectation of obtaining different benefits, but without any real and felt commitment to the aims of the projects (Landini, 2015). As a result, it becomes apparent that the sustainability of extension initiatives, as well as farmers' groups based on them, will be very low.

Additionally, scholars have also mentioned different problems related to the internal functioning of farmers' groups and associations. With regards to the interpersonal relationships between members, as mentioned earlier, it is common to find a generalised lack of trust and many interpersonal conflicts in different types of organisations, in this case farmers' organisations. In this very line, Landini (2007b) highlights the problems faced by farmers when attempting to reach a consensus, as well as the fact that, often, tasks are not distributed equally amongst group members. Likewise, Abebaw and Haile (2013) show that the benefits obtained from cooperative work are sometimes unfairly distributed. In consequence, fear of opportunistic attitudes increases (Gutiérrez, 2014; Szmulewicz et al., 2012), particularly in the cases of insufficiently consolidated groups (De Dios and Gutiérrez, 2012) or when having to deal with situations related to the use of resources obtained collectively (Toledo and Presno, 2014). Thus, we can observe a general difficulty for making joint decisions and for creating rules that regulate and organise the functioning of groups and organisations (Landini, 2007b).

A second problematic area regarding the internal functioning of farmers' groups and associations refers to leadership and lack of capabilities for administrative and organisational management. Clearly, farmers' associations and cooperatives need leaders and administrators that promote group dynamics and manage collective processes (Ofuoku and Albert, 2014). With regards to leadership in farmers' organisations, different authors point out that it tends to be weak and ineffective (Alves and Saquet, 2014; Karaya et al., 2013; Zwane, 2012). Likewise, it also has been argued that farmers tend to have paternalistic expectations and to adopt a passive attitude vis à vis leaders or managers of their organisations (Landini, 2007a, 2012a; Toledo and Presno, 2014), which increases the probability of distrust being generated, given the lack of understanding of the leadership's role within the context of the organisation.

At the same time, it is not uncommon for leaders and administrators of farmer organisations, particularly in the case of small-holders and family farmers, to have low educational levels as well as limited capabilities for managing and administrating (Boas and Goldey, 2005; Lobos, 2005; Zwane, 2012), which limits their work effectiveness and efficiency. In this line, Mora (2014) highlights that the people responsible for these organisations also have to devote time to their own production and families, all of which leads to farmers' organisations, particularly those of family farmers, being weak.

With regards to a different area of problems, several authors highlight that political interference can generate important problems in farmers' groups and organisations (Gutiérrez, 2014; Karaya et al., 2013). This problem can appear in different ways. For

instance, Zwane (2012) points out that, in some opportunities, group leaders are more interested in their political ambitions than in the group's common good. Likewise, it has also been argued that clientelist political contexts tend to disarticulate farmers' organisations due to understanding them as potential nuclei of alternative means for power (Landini, 2007b) and that farmers sometimes fight over political differences during electoral periods (Landini, 2007a). Additionally, clientelist assistentialist logic also tends to inhibit associative processes, because it favours individual types of assistance (Ferrer et al., 2013).

Additionally, other difficulties in the area of group or associative processes have also been mentioned, such as: extensionists' lack of commitment to their job due to problems with their own institutions (Ifenkwe, 2012), farmers and extensionists' tendency to overestimate the potential benefits of farmers' associations, and to neglect the difficulties that arise from this type of work (Landini, 2007a, 2007b, 2015), the existence of barriers with regards to women's participation (Szmulewicz et al., 2012), farmers' impatience with regards to obtaining immediate results (Szmulewicz et al., 2012) and extensionists' lack of acknowledgement that interpersonal ties and even groups themselves do not begin with their intervention but exist from long before their arrival (Rodríguez, 2005).

Moreover, if rural extensionists are to create and support farmers' groups and organisations, and we acknowledge that conflicts are a part of their nature (De Dios, 2011), it is important, then, for extension workers to have the necessary knowledge and capacities to manage group processes and conflicts. However, as different authors point out (e.g. Allahyari, 2008; Selis et al., 2013), in general terms, rural extensionists do not have the required capabilities to manage groups' social and communicational processes, and thus need additional training in areas such as communication (Garforth, 1994) or management of group processes and conflicts (Landini, 2015).

In brief, multiple problems were identified in the area of extension practice and farmer groups and associations. In the following heading, different conceptual tools will be presented in order to gain a better understanding of these problems and thus develop strategies to address them.

4. Conceptual tools for understanding group and associative processes

With the aim of constructing proposals and recommendations, we will first develop a theoretical framework for understanding cooperative processes. When we talk about a 'cooperative relationship' we are referring to a set of parts that collaboratively work together to reach one or more objectives (Landini, 2007b). A collaborative relationship requires at least two parts. However, in rural extension, when we talk about cooperation, we are referring to a group of farmers, or to a platform or network of institutions that work together in order to reach goals that none of them could obtain alone, or at least with the same efficiency or to the same degree. Durston (2002) highlights that, in this context, individuals or institutions' goals should be shared. Nonetheless, Feger (1995) argues that those objectives merely have to be compatible. This difference is important. Although having a group or collective with the same objectives is desirable, it is enough that they are compatible. That is, that collaborative work helps all participants reach their own goals, even when they are different. For instance, in a family farmer's cooperative, some members may be interested in improving commercialisation, while others may be looking for the soil preparation services offered by the cooperative, and still others may obtain satisfaction from the social interaction of the cooperative (Diale, 2013). Nonetheless, what is important is that, in a

cooperative or collaborative relationship, all participants can reach their goals more easily due to working with others.

The core of the cooperation problematic is easily understood when analysed using the concepts of *interdependence* and *risk*. Interdependence refers to the fact that other participants, for example a group of farmers aimed at improving commercialisation through a cooperative, depend on their peers to reach their goals. In this sense, there is the risk that some farmers will opt to sell their produce outside of the cooperative to obtain individual circumstantial benefits, leaving the collective in a more fragile position due to reducing the volume for sale. On a conceptual level, risk refers to the possibility that one or more participants do not take into account the needs of others or the commitments assumed with the rest, taking advantage of their help but without contributing as expected (Landini, 2007a; Osorio and Betancur, 2007). This is denominated "social uncertainty:" the possibility of being cheated or being taken advantage of in social relationships (Páez and Campos, 2004). Thus, cooperation leads to a dilemma, given it is possible to assume the risk with the expectation of obtaining greater benefits, or to act independently reducing possible outcomes but also potential risk. In this context, the reticence farmers express with regards to partaking in groups or associations does not seem strange, particularly if one considers that several studies have shown family farmers' tendency to reduce risks in the context of their economic and productive activity (Landini, 2011).

Thus, having framed the problems in this way, focusing on the factors that reduce or control the inherent risk of participating in associations or cooperatives takes on a central value. In this context, multiple authors have highlighted the fundamental role played by interpersonal and interinstitutional trust in cooperative behaviours and practices (Cegarra et al., 2005; Feger, 1995; Ngowi and Pienaar, 2005; Payan and Svensson, 2007; Silva and Leitão, 2009; Velázquez and Rosales, 2011; Volk, 2008). Rotter (1971) defines interpersonal trust as "an expectancy held by an individual or a group that the word, promise, verbal, or written statement of another individual or group can be relied on" (p. 444). Mayer et al. (1995) highlight that to trust implies making oneself vulnerable to someone else based on the expectation that he or she will carry on a promised action. Nonetheless, following Boon and Holmes (1995), it seems that trust does not require any explicitly assumed commitment or the expectation that others will comply with specific actions or promises, but simply the subjective certainty of others' good intentions towards them. In contrast, distrust refers to the uncertainty or doubt over others' true intentions (Barcellos et al., 2012; Tanghe et al., 2010).

Taking into account that trust and cooperation reduce transaction costs among the members of farmers' organisations, it is interesting to note that they can be considered a competitive advantage in the context of economic studies (Tacconi et al., 2011). Thus, in what follows, a set of factors that contribute to trust and cooperation are mentioned briefly, focused particularly around the aims of this paper.

Most factors that increase trust and cooperation among people do so by means of reducing the interpersonal risk involved. One of the most commonly mentioned in academic literature is interpersonal communication and pre-existing knowledge. Interestingly, communication and interaction among people, and the availability of information regarding potential partners increases the probability of cooperation (Cegarra et al., 2005; Good, 1995; Raven and Rubin, 1981; Rodríguez and Guzmán, 2014). This is, in part, because it makes it possible to assess others' reliability. However, it also seems that all interpersonal exchange as well as the reception of information about others, increases the probability of cooperation regardless of its content or relevance to the task at hand. Additionally, Cohen et al. (2010) have also shown that

communication regarding shared tasks or issues increases cooperation among people. Interestingly, it has also been pointed out that trust building is a progressive process. This implies that mutual trust progressively 'grows' with time and interaction, because it allows partners to get to know each other (Ngowi and Pienaar, 2005).

In the same vein, it has been shown that people trust and engage in cooperative relationships more frequently with those who have a positive reputation (Masuda and Nakamura, 2012; Tacconi et al., 2011). Reputation refers to a person or institution's prestige or value in a specific social context, with regards to how reliable they are or how ethically correct their actions are. Defined in this way, a positive reputation can also be considered an indicator of reliability, in this case supported in the socially shared knowledge about that person. Additionally, a positive reputation should not only be seen as an indicator of reliability, but also as an incentive that we know the other person has to continue maintaining correct and ethical behaviour, because in the context of close social relationships, where interactions are frequent, a stain on one's reputation can cause multiple negative impacts on social life (Camacho et al., 2012). In contrast, it has been shown that to lie undermines trust and cooperation, though it is better tolerated when it aims at helping others or, at least, does not directly affect them (Suárez et al., 2009).

From a different perspective, the existence of rules that regulate groups or organisations' functioning, and that clarify what can and cannot be done, lends predictability to members' behaviours, thus reducing risks and increasing cooperation among group members (Camacho et al., 2012; Rodríguez and Guzmán, 2014). In the same line, the existence and application of sanctions that control the fulfilment of such rules is an incentive for cooperation, in the sense that it dissuades possible transgressions (such as taking advantage of the trust deposited by the group) (Camacho et al., 2012; Landini, 2007b), but also because they help reinstall social equilibrium when applied, given the fact that the person who received a sanction already 'paid' the debt generated by having failed the group.

Moreover, it also has been shown that when people share expectations over what can be obtained in the future by working together (Silva and Leitão, 2009) or become aware that they share similar interests (Ekasari et al., 2013), their tendency to cooperate increases. Additionally, in general terms, the knowledge that other people share one's values also generates a favourable climate for cooperation (Olatunji and Letsoalo, 2013). Thus, it can be argued that sharing values and goals with potential partners increases cooperation and trust. Interestingly, this can also be understood in terms of risk reduction, in the sense that if all potential partners share the same objectives and values (that is, the same rules for doing things), there will not be any reason or incentive to take advantage of others so as to obtain a personal benefit, because everyone wants the same things.

The theory of social identity (Tajfel, 1984) can also help us identify relevant and useful factors that contribute to trust and cooperation. That is, it predicts that people have a preference for those who are a part of their same social group (which is known as in-group bias), and implies that it will be easier to cooperate with people who are perceived as being similar to them. In a sense, it could be explained in connection with the idea of reputation (in-group bias could lead people to believe that group members have a better reputation in general), or as an indicator that they share the same values and objectives. Nonetheless, regardless of the reasons that explain this, what is important is to acknowledge that belonging to the same social group increases trust and cooperation.

In a research conducted in the Argentine North, peasants tended to identify with their neighbours and with those who were poor (Landini, 2012b), which suggested that they were more likely to work in groups with them than with anyone else. Nonetheless, as Volk (2008) reminds us, social identity theory argues that social categories such as sex, nationality or age can generate unconscious self-categorisation processes, leading to prioritise members of the same social category over those who are not a part of it, even when these categories are irrelevant with regards to the aims of the cooperative's initiatives.

Lastly, it is also important to note that expectations regarding future interactions increase cooperation and positive interactions. When people expect to stay in contact with each other in the future (for instance due to being part of other groups or being neighbours), the probability of cooperation between them increases (Raven and Rubin, 1981; Rabbie, 1995), possibly because these people are already familiar, because their reputation can be assessed, or simply because of the discomfort that they may derive from being an individualist with regards to their relationship with others (Good, 1995).

Undoubtedly, there are other factors mentioned in academic literature that favour interpersonal and interinstitutional trust and cooperation. However, the ones mentioned here seem to be the most important for rural extension practice. Beyond this, in what follows, new factors will be introduced when contextually pertinent.

Before finishing this heading it is interesting to add a comment. On a superficial level, it would seem that trust is always positive and distrust, negative. Nonetheless, the problems is not whether or not to trust but in who and when. Those who always trust, assume too much risk of being exploited in social relationships, while those who never do, cannot benefit from working with others. In this sense, it seems useful to think of trust and distrust as states that can change with time, based on shared experiences and available information regarding others. Interestingly, according to Berg (2010), people tend to intuitively or automatically distrust when in unfamiliar situations, which leads them to act with others in a competitive rather than cooperative manner. Thus, it seems advisable to be aware of these automatic attitudes, in order to look for available information in the environment, so as to actively decide whether or not to trust and to cooperate with others based on information and not on unconscious attitudes.

5. Strategies and proposals for working with farmers' groups and associations

In this subtitle, different ideas and recommendations for working with family farmers' groups and associations, in the context of rural extension, will be presented. They are supported in the literature review as well as in the authors' theoretical reflection and practical experience. Because of their origin, these recommendations should not be considered as being certainties or absolute truths, but as ideas or proposal whose pertinence has to be debated and assessed in each situation and context.

5.1. Group formation and participatory planning processes

As argued before, multiple rural extension initiatives require the creation of, and the work with, farmers' groups. In this context, one of the first mistakes extensionists commit in this process is to believe that groups are born in the very moment that they are generated with the support of extension institutions, forgetting that people usually have previous, shared stories and experiences

(Rodríguez, 2005), even prior experiences of associative initiatives, many of which failed. As Tarazona (2013) argues, communities usually have invisible, latent social networks that can be activated in situations of need or in specific contexts.

In practical terms, extensionists tend to play a fundamental role in the initial moments of the creation of groups or associations that are going to be beneficiaries of advisory services or development projects (Berger and Neiman, 2010). Therefore, taking into account that a group is not a mere set of people but that, in order to be a group, interpersonal bonds, group norms and a shared identity is needed (Landini, 2007b), different authors have recommended working with already existing groups that have undergone an appropriate maturation period (Karaya et al., 2013). However, often, the creation of a new group is necessary, and thus it is advisable to support groups of relatives or people who know each other, preferably those who have already worked together (Rodríguez, 2005), or to follow local grouping or categorisation criteria (Landini, 2007b; Samuel et al., 2012). At the same time, it is also important that groups are composed of people who have shared characteristics and needs (Matiwane and Terblanché, 2012), and who have a good reputation within their local context (Camacho et al., 2012; Masuda and Nakamura, 2012), all of which helps increase their cooperation capacity. In summary, it is important to create groups according to flexible criteria, favouring pre-existing groups or those that can be created based on previously existing relationships of mutual knowledge and trust.

Assuming that most groups whom extensionists are going to work with have no prior existence as such, it is advisable to accompany that group for a prudent period of time with the objective of developing and consolidating interpersonal bonds and group rules (Landini, 2007b), even when it is also true that extension projects and public policies usually have deadlines that are unfit for both communities' rationales and the amount of time group dynamics require in order to be properly consolidated (De Dios and Gutiérrez, 2012). In this line, within project planning, it is of utmost importance to include a period of time for the group itself to develop and grow stronger thus making the need for participatory diagnosis and planning (as a way of generating shared opinions, objectives and expectations among group members) a fundamental one. Additionally, it also has been argued that the delivery of subsidies, free inputs or similar benefits to farmers' groups before they are mature enough to manage them is a well-known source of in-group conflict and even dismemberment (De Dios and Gutiérrez, 2012; Landini, 2007b), and should be avoided when possible when working with non-consolidated groups.

With regards to the reasons why people create groups or associations (or accept being a part of them), authors usually argue that it is with the expectation of facing a felt, shared problem using the strength provided by working as a group (De Dios, 2011; Garforth, 1994). Thus, it is essential that group members are aware of the fact that participants have shared problems and needs, and of how the group or association can help face them. Furthermore, it is also fundamental to allow members to feel that they are part of a common experience, that is, that they are part of the same social group (in terms of social identity theory), which will lead to an increase in participants' trust and cooperative attitudes and behaviours.

In this process, rural extensionists have to clarify not only the benefits of partaking in farmers' groups or associations, but also the costs, in terms of work, effort, time and even money, that the group membership is going to require, given that it has been observed that excessive expectations regarding the benefits, coupled with the minimisation of the efforts required to obtain them, are

negative for the group in the medium and long term (Landini, 2007b).

One of the most important problems commonly faced by rural extensionists is the creation of groups based on the family farmers' expectations of obtaining external resources, such as inputs or subsidies, from the government or other institutions, which has the effect of overshadowing the interests and potential that the groups might have beyond these external benefits (Szmulewicz et al., 2012). In consequence, farmers will tend to support the project and the group as long as the expectation of receiving external help remains, re-interpreting its sense and usefulness in terms of their own individual goals (Landini et al., 2014b). In this context, farmers' groups or associations will frequently face destabilisation and dissolution when aid is received or utilised, without ever obtaining long-term consolidation, although this is usually the objective promoted by extensionists and extension institutions (Boas and Goldey, 2005). Certainly, this is a difficult issue, because it involves the intertwining of multiple logics, including communities' rhythm and expectations, and the structure and dynamics of development policies and extension projects. The following headings will present different recommendations for dealing with this problem.

Continuing with the analysis of the process of group formation, different authors have pointed out the importance of participatively building, in conjunction with the beneficiaries, the diagnosis and the objectives of the shared project (Boas and Goldey, 2005; Ferrer et al., 2013; Landini, 2013b; Landini et al., 2009), given that top-down planning, wherein needs and objectives are defined by external experts are much more likely to fail (Méndez, 2006; Toledo and Presno, 2014). To achieve the subsistence of groups beyond institutions' specific interventions requires that (1) projects tackle farmers' felt needs, and that (2) beneficiaries feel that they are active participants and an essential part of the project, which will lead to their considering the proposal as their own (Boas and Goldey, 2005; Landini, 2012a; Matiwane and Terblanché, 2012). Thus, projects will cease to be something to circumstantially take advantage of, and instead become something that expresses their own needs and priorities. In this way, we will be contributing to overcoming the structural contradiction of every extension proposal supported in associative initiatives based on the promise of external aid or benefits.

5.2. Construction of trust, group relationships and conflict management

Different authors have highlighted the importance of the dynamics of rural extension groups, both in their success as well as their failure (Diale, 2013; Garforth, 1994), which makes this a fundamental topic. However, highlighting its importance does not mean arguing that trust and harmonic relationships are always positive while conflicts are always negative. Conflict is characteristic of every group dynamic (De Dios, 2011). Conflicts are not the actual problem; instead, the issue lies in how they are managed. Well-managed conflicts can impulse improvements and developments, while neglecting them can cause group dissolution (Ekasari et al., 2013). Thus, in this heading, reflections and recommendations that favour trust and good group relationships, as well as those used to tackle conflicts, will be presented.

5.2.1. Strengthening trust and group cooperation

There are multiple strategies, proposals and issues to consider when aiming at strengthening in-group trust and cooperation. First of all, trust among members of farmers' groups is fundamental.

With this objective in mind, it seems advisable to work with previously consolidated groups that have a shared story, or with groups composed of members related by kin, friendship or vicinity. However, it is also important to acknowledge that interpersonal problems among relatives and neighbours frequently exist, which makes prior consultations convenient. Now, as argued previously, communication and information about other group members increases cooperation, which implies that any activity or strategy aimed at facilitating participants' exchange and sharing at a personal and humane level will prove valuable. Additionally, in situations in which some group members do not know each other, providing personal information about them could help build trust (Feger, 1995), for instance, where he or she lives, who their family members are and what the names of their children are, even when this information is not relevant in terms of the objectives of the shared work.

Likewise, it also has been argued that trust is built in an interpersonal communication process that takes time (Lacerda, 2008; Miles, 2009; Nayak, 2014; Ngowi and Pienaar, 2005). People share, get to know each other and show commitment to the group by taking part in meetings and other planned activities, and complying with their responsibilities (Hawkins, 2010). Thus, it is important to acknowledge that it is a progressive process and to support it when possible, favouring communication and exchange, and making sure commitments fulfilled by participants are visible to all.

In this line, different studies have shown that cooperation tends to increase and be maintained when cooperation benefits start off being small and increase along time (Good, 1995), perhaps because gradualism allows group members to progressively build mutual trust (Landini, 2007b). Thus, progression in the amounts of help and/or subsidies received seems advisable, starting off with small amounts and increasing them over time. It is possible that a member of a group might decide to take advantage of the situation and take for himself collective benefits if they are considerable, but there is less of a chance that he will do that if they are tiny, given that the social and subjective consequences will not outweigh the benefit received. Furthermore, when the relationship has grown and trust is consolidated, the interpersonal bonds constructed will limit possible members' misconduct, even when benefits have increased.

Within the factors that help strengthen group trust, the importance that group members (including leaders and even external facilitators) have good interpersonal relationships has to be highlighted. Having good interpersonal relationships includes being nice with each other, respectful of different points of view and, most importantly, open to constructive criticism (Szmulewicz et al., 2012). In this line, Miles (2009) argues that apologising can be important when it is culturally and contextually required, as it can have a positive and restorative effect. Likewise, publicly recognising members' efforts in front of the group seems to be an effective tool for making sure that their efforts do not go unnoticed. Clearly, nobody is arguing that obtaining all of this is easy, but that accompanying groups in order to help them work together productively and interact in a positive manner is fundamental, and thus could even become a topic for the group to discuss and reflect upon.

Finally, it is important to note that trust and good relationships not only refer to farmers but also to the link between them and their extensionist, since a good farmer-extensionist relationship is fundamental for obtaining good results (Landini et al., 2009; Landini, 2016b), and particularly because small farmers are said to have the tendency to perceive extensionists as persons who are trying to take advantage of them (Landini, 2007b, 2013a). Obtaining this is not an easy task, and will depend, to a great extent, on the

extensionists' character and attitudes. In this line, having a sincere commitment to farmers, keeping their word, and being explicit with what is out of their control in the context of extension projects, particularly when it comes to money, seem to be valuable strategies. Likewise, extensionists have to be willing to listen to farmers' needs and worries, and to value their knowledge and experiences, always within a context of a horizontal, dialogical relationship versus a top-down diffusionist one (Landini, 2016c; Pérez and Clavijo, 2012).

In the second place, as argued previously, sharing problems, values and objectives within a group enormously favours cooperation among their members. This leads to the need for creating or generating groups with farmers that face similar practical problems that are contextually relevant, for instance poor access to markets or water scarcity, or share values that are important to them. In practical terms, shared values can be difficult to detect but, in certain contexts, religious, ethnic, social and even political identities can work as articulators. However, acknowledging the role played by shared problems, values and objectives in terms of group cooperation and trust also highlights the importance for the joint creation and construction of these problems, values and objectives. In this sense, extensionists could help groups identify and reach agreements with regards to which shared problems are the most relevant, which values should guide group dynamics, and which should be the groups' objectives. Interestingly, the simple verbal expression of these problems, values and objectives in a collective space generates the construction of a group identity and a perception of unity that consolidates the group as such. At the same time, frequently repeating these shared problems, values and objectives in the context of the group dialogue (Olatunji and Letsoalo, 2013) will help members to keep them in mind and continue working together.

Thirdly, the existence of rules or guidelines that order and organise the way the group functions is key to minimising conflicts, increasing results and improving participants' satisfaction (Mannix et al., 2010). With clear rules, all group members know who has to do what (that is, which are their responsibilities), who has the authority to make decisions and in which context, and even what will be done in case of disagreements. Hawkins (2010) highlights that rules for group functioning reduce transaction costs among individuals, making their work more efficient, and Gutiérrez (2014) argues that cooperatives need rules to regulate benefit distribution, price policies, as well as the conditions required for becoming a member. Nonetheless, groups and organisations also require rules for handling exceptions to rules (Gabbita, 2008), and for facing conflicts (Camacho et al., 2012). Additionally, Landini (2007b) highlights the importance of 'institutionalising' distrust, establishing norms that force members, as well as authorities or leaders, to present receipts regarding their use of money, while other authors mention that generic strategies for monitoring rule fulfilment are required (Ferrer et al., 2013; Hawkins, 2010). Although it is of potential interest to have written rules (Schivoni, 2006), this will depend on the needs and context of the particular group, since their existence does not guarantee that the group considers them to be their own.

Furthermore, it is important for the group to construct its own rules, a factor that will make these rules relevant to their problems and needs, and avoids them being too formal or normative (Lacerda, 2008). Thus, incorporating or using regulations created by others will not be a solution, although they can be used to contribute to the group's discussion. In this line, it is important that group members discuss openly, share information, and decide how they should proceed when facing specific situations that can occur in the context of the group (Landini, 2007b), which will lead to consensual guidelines and procedures that are felt as being their

own (De Dios and Gutiérrez, 2012; Edlin, 2005). Thus, they will have rules to help them face those situations when they occur. In this sense, extensionists can play a fundamental role in facilitating the construction of group rules (Ferrer et al., 2013), demonstrating the need to create them and presenting potential situations that the group may face, in order to allow group members to define how they would like to handle such eventualities.

Another fundamental element for good group functioning is that the rules legitimise and establish sanctions¹ against individualistic behaviours, the exploitation of other members, or behaviours that go against group rules in general (Barcellos et al., 2012; Camacho et al., 2012). Likewise, authors such as Ferrin and Dirks (2003) argue that not only punishments, but also the existence of rewards or active encouragement of pro-group behaviours, favour group cooperation. In this very line, the importance of accompanying groups in the initial process of its conformation and rule construction has to be acknowledged (De Dios, 2011; De Dios and Gutiérrez, 2012; Ferrer et al., 2013). Furthermore, this accompaniment does not imply simply assuming the leadership of the group (even when it may be required sometimes), but instead, helping the group, association or cooperative to generate capacities to be independent and be able to progressively self-manage.

5.2.2. Conflict management

According to De Dios (2011), conflict is inherent to group dynamics, so it cannot be avoided. Although some authors consider group conflict as always harmful (Barcellos et al., 2012), conflicts can be positive as well as negative (Ekasari et al., 2013) and should not be feared. In this vein, what is needed are the tools to manage conflicts when they appear (Papenhause and Parayitam, 2015), procuring to avoid unproductive ones, and to benefit from those that can contribute to group growth or development, since different types of intragroup conflicts have different effects on group performance (de Wit et al., 2012). Furthermore, it is also important to note that many conflicts, although perceived as being negative, can also be approached as opportunities for growth and change, depending on their nature and on how they are managed (e.g. Jehn and Mannix, 2001). Next, some ideas and strategies for working with conflicts that may appear within group contexts are presented.

If a problem arises because one or more members broke group norms, and sanctions for such misbehaviours are in place, applying them is fundamental. Firstly, because the existence of sanctions only dissuades participants from acting distrustfully or exploitatively (García et al., 2005) when group members are willing to apply them (Shapiro et al., 1992). Secondly, because cooperation within a group tends to increase after punishments were applied (Sigmund, 2007). And thirdly, because if action is not taken, group members will tend 'to take the law into their own hands,' retaliate, and behave in a conflict-inducing way (for instance verbal harassment or physical violence) (Korsgaard et al., 2008). Obviously, all this does not mean that additional, related conflicts cannot appear as the result of the fact that a member broke relevant group norms, but the enforcement of punishments will help moderate or reduce them.

¹ The word 'sanctions,' may seem quite strong. Nonetheless, it is a very common notion within the field of psychology, particularly when addressing social norms and intragroup conflict (Irwin et al., 2014). Here, sanctions should be understood as the consequence a person or a group implicitly or explicitly impose on other(s) as the result of having broken a rule, a principle or a value accepted by them, and not necessarily as formal or even legal instruments. In this context, sanctions could be, for instance, a fine for not assisting a group meeting, a suspension in the right to vote in a cooperative as the result of not paying the annual fee, or expulsion from a group for stealing others' property.

If the group has no clear, commonly agreed upon rules in place (that are perceived as being fair) to deal with a broken commitment or a transgression (that is, to enforce any sanction or punishment), it will have to define what to do and how to do it. Interestingly, the acknowledgment of the lack of such group norms would be a good opportunity for rural extensionists to facilitate the construction of rules that will help these groups to handle similar situations in the future (Landini, 2007a). Next, some additional ideas for managing conflicts in farmers' or rural extension groups are presented.

Conflicts, differences, or problems within groups should not be hidden, because this can be lethal to the group (Ekasari et al., 2013; Mannix et al., 2010). Avoiding conflicts may seem to be an easy strategy when addressing group or interpersonal problems, but evidence shows that it is ineffective because avoidance is not going to make them disappear (Benítez et al., 2012). Thus, actively addressing them is highly advisable, because they can otherwise undermine group unity.

In contrast, an integrative strategy for managing conflict seems to be both effective as well as socially accepted (Benítez et al., 2012). An integrative style of conflict management tries to solve problems in a collaborative way, to encourage the sharing of information and opinions and to support the acceptance of different perspectives and interests (Gross and Guerrero, 2000). In this context, highlighting the importance of shared values and objectives, helping members understand different participants' views (Stephan, 2008), and contributing to finding an equilibrium between involved parties in conflict through mutual concessions (Rubin, 1994), are useful strategies.

Additionally, it is important to note that conflict situations make people emotional (Papenhause and Parayitam, 2015). In this context, experience shows that inviting group members to take emotional distance in order to rationally analyse problems can be an alternative. However, if nothing seems to be working, taking a break or simply deciding to address the problem later are also viable options.

Addressing group conflicts also requires acknowledging that there are different types of them, such as: relationship conflicts (between group members), task conflicts (about what to do) and process conflicts (how to do it) (Mannix et al., 2010). Interestingly, different authors have shown that task conflicts can have positive effects on group performance when they do not co-exist or mix with the other types of conflicts (Benítez et al., 2011; de Wit et al., 2012). Thus, when addressing conflicts in a group setting, it is crucial to identify which types of conflicts are being dealt with so as to avoid the confusion between task and process conflicts, and relationship ones, considering that all conflicts can induce negative emotions (Mannix et al., 2010). In this context, making the type of conflict at hand explicit, and inviting group members to reflect upon the problem instead of react to it emotionally, as well as avoid direct, personal accusations or recriminations, will help focus the discussion on the problem that generated the conflict and on how to solve it.

Finally, it can also be positive to show the group that conflicts are problems but are also opportunities for improvement and a means to strengthen groups and enterprises, since they can lead to positive changes in the way things are done (de Wit et al., 2012). Likewise, it can also be valuable to ask the group what was learnt after having overcome the conflict or problem, aiming at the development of the group's capacity to deal with and manage conflictive situations in the future.

5.3. Organisational dynamic, leadership and management capacity

Within academic literature, different authors argue that many organisations and cooperatives usually have, at their origin, the

support or even the enthusiasm of extensionists or community leaders (Berger and Neiman, 2010; Toledo and Presno, 2014). Garforth (1994), in particular, highlights that farmers' groups are more likely to persist in time when a respected member of the community supports it. In the case of organisations that are externally supported, in particular those that are supported by rural extension institutions, the importance of accompanying the group for an appropriate period of time is highlighted (De Dios, 2011; Ferrer et al., 2013; Luwanda and Stevens, 2015; Tort and Lombardo, 2010), because it will allow the group to consolidate and develop relationships and rules for its functioning, as well as develop capacities for self-management. With regards to this, Garforth (1994) underlines the risk of changing the extensionist that is accompanying the process before the group is consolidated, and even more, of withdrawing his/her support because of political changes. In fact, this would lead to strong negative effects, not only in the present but also for future proposals because it would instil in the community a distrust of external agents.

In this line, the fundamental importance of group leadership in the process of obtaining expected results has also been highlighted (Landini, 2007b; Szmulewicz et al., 2012). With regards to this, some authors have argued that leaders are important because they provide a sense of unity and cohesion to groups (Boas and Goldey, 2005; Ofuoku and Albert, 2014). Likewise, a highly discussed topic is the relationship between leaders and the groups' members, which also involves leadership styles and members' participation in decision-making. One of the most observed obstacles is participants' passive positioning or attitude towards leaders or institutional authorities (Landini, 2007a), which undoubtedly constitutes a comfortable position for group members to take, because it allows them to assign leaders full responsibility for any future failure, or to criticise them when decisions are made. Likewise, the importance of having group norms that control how authorities manage the group has been highlighted, particularly regarding the use of money, so as to encourage transparency (Landini, 2007b).

Moreover, it is worth underlining the importance that a group, organisation or cooperative's participants take active part in the collective's meetings and activities (Szmulewicz et al., 2012), as well as in the decision-making processes (Barcellos et al., 2012). Taking part in the group's meetings and activities not only allows for a greater interaction between participants and for increasing trust, but also helps people feel part of, and commit to, a shared destiny. This is even more important with regards to decision-making processes, considering that they are often delegated to a single person or a small group. When decisions are made together, participants tend to feel more strongly that they are a part of the group, given it has been shaped by their own interventions. At the same time, when group members have taken part in democratic decision-making processes, complaints about negative consequences of such decisions lose strength, and leaders cannot be blamed as easily. In this context, authorities or group leaders play a fundamental role in promoting participatory and democratic decision-making processes (Boas and Goldey, 2005; Ofuoku and Albert, 2014). In order to tackle participation problems within large organisations, Gutiérrez (2014) recommends that a relatively ample group of members, for instance between 15 and 40, take turns in playing an active part in decision-making processes, while Szmulewicz et al. (2012) highlight the importance of creating task forces to deal with different areas within the association and implementing periodical assemblies to address issues that concern the whole association or cooperative.

It is worth acknowledging the existing contrast between the fact that rural extensionists often have an orientation that leans towards technical assistance and technology transfer (Schaller, 2006), and the importance given by different authors to farmer

organisations' managerial, administrative and commercial capacity for survival and success (Boas and Goldey, 2005; Gutiérrez, 2014). It is true that these capacities can take on different forms in organisations with different objectives, for instance, they can be aimed at mutual help, market insertion or positioning as social actors in the political context. However, in either case, these capacities are still relevant for the group or organisation's functioning, particularly those referred to the management of internal organisational dynamics. In this sense, the authors reviewed highlight the importance of groups and associations having the capacity for organisational management (Costa et al., 2015; Luwanda and Stevens, 2015), for negotiating prices in the market (Sari, 2011), and for the developing norms that regulate group functioning (Landini, 2007b), amongst others.

Additionally, it is also fundamental to take into account the importance that groups and their authorities have the capacity to coordinate meetings in an effective way, identifying issues to work on and strategies to address them, aiming to reach to conclusions without allowing meetings to dissipate or stop making sense to their participants (Szmulewicz et al., 2012). Although this can be seen as something unimportant, in operational terms, it is fundamental, given that this is the basis for group management and consensus building. Nobody wants to participate in meetings or collective spaces where no result, conclusion or product is obtained. Additionally, organisations also need the capacity to evolve and transform. Neither the objectives originally defined by the group nor the rules established for its functioning should last indefinitely. A vigorous organisation has to know how to develop new objectives (De Dios, 2011; Ferrer et al., 2013), as well as new premises and functioning rules. This capacity also has to be valued and developed, given it expresses the organisation's potential for learning and innovation.

Considering what was stated previously, it is of fundamental importance that rural extension teams not only support farmer groups, associations and cooperatives in productive and technical areas, but also, and particularly, with group management skills and communication (Garforth, 1994; Zwane, 2012), development of administrative capacities (Costa et al., 2015; Luwanda and Stevens, 2015; Rendón et al., 2015) and articulation with the market (Sari, 2011).

6. Conclusions and final reflections

In this article, we identified multiple problems that rural extensionists and other types of rural development practitioners frequently face when working with farmers' groups, associations and cooperatives, and developed theoretical tools and practical recommendations to address them, something that has not been done in a systematic manner within academic literature until now. In this sense, this paper constitutes a clear contribution for those who address these topics from a research perspective, but also for those who work as extension practitioners.

Nonetheless, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, in the sense that the ideas and recommendations that we have presented should be considered as being preliminary and not taken as definitive or final answers to problems faced by extensionists when working with groups. On the contrary, we recommend that they be thought of as tools that should be critically assessed in every context.

Before concluding, some final reflections are worth presenting. Firstly, it seems convenient to avoid any type of idealisation of farmers' groups, associations or cooperatives in extension and rural development. Many extensionists and social activists tend to think of them as the strategy to solve every problem, even when many farmers do not feel drawn to this alternative. Undoubtedly, in the

context of family agriculture, partaking in farmers' organisations can provide multiple benefits, but it also requires great effort from its participants, and involves the risk of failure due to different problems. Thus, it is advisable not to overestimate the expected benefits of working collectively, and, instead, adopt a realistic perspective with regards to the amount of effort required to maintain this type of work. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that potential problems may arise, from a farmer's point of view as well as from an extensionist's. It is neither a panacea nor a useless tool; it is a potentially beneficial work methodology or proposal that requires much effort. In consequence, generating farmers' cooperative groups should neither be the answer to everything nor the best option for everyone.

Another related risk is to think that the results of every associative proposal depend exclusively on what the extensionists who accompany the process do or not do. This places the extensionist in a difficult position, because it makes him or her responsible for every outcome. However, it should be clear that multiple factors influence the success or failure of rural extension associative initiatives, including market conditions, institutional environments, cultural contexts, and political dynamics, as well as the participants' own positioning. Obviously extensionists have a margin of influence over the results of their interventions, but it is clear that we are referring to multi-determined social processes.

Additionally, it is also important to note that the role proposed for extensionists with regards to their work with group and associative processes, as well as the capacities they are required to have, are quite different from those that characterise the traditional, diffusionist extension approach. Working with group processes requires that extensionists assume the role of facilitators, not of technical experts. This leads to the need for focusing on the education and training received by extensionists, which is generally aimed at productive specialisation, and not at the management of complex social processes. This situation invites us to reflect on the need for extensionists with the conceptual as well as operational tools needed to fulfil their role effectively, which is not easy, because it does not refer only to the incorporation of productive or technical knowledge, but also to the development of interpersonal capacities for social management. Undoubtedly, the development of such capacities constitutes an important challenge for those working in the field.

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