Social and Professional Skills to Work Effectively with Small and Urban Farmers
Background
Working effectively with small and urban farmers requires social skills, specialized knowledge, understanding and experience. Generalizations in this fact sheet have come from a variety of researchers in the field of information diffusion and adoption of agricultural practices. Additional observations are based upon personal experiences working with small farmers in four different countries. However, it would be a mistake to treat these generalizations as road maps for all situations. Rather, these ideas are meant to add to your own experiences and successes in working with small and urban farmers.

To add “life” to this fact sheet and make it more understandable, a fictitious character, “Maria Garcia”, will be used to portray a small farmer. The scenario is intended to assist Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and partner staff to understand steps to take in assisting small and urban farmers.

Understanding Maria’s Situation
Let’s presume that Maria Garcia is like thousands of other small or urban farmers in that she is a bit hesitant and skeptical in accepting most changes, which can be attributed to Maria herself and to the situation in which she is in. She and her predecessors have developed traditional ways of doing things and have had satisfactory results so far. The mere fact that she is still farming means that she has not made too many costly mistakes. She farmed for many years in her homeland and without receiving help from government agencies. Understanding the farmer and their situation is the first and most important step in assisting small farmers. It is required to understand Maria, her farming experiences, family and community.

Maria has a husband and four children and a definite position in relation to other family members. What she can and cannot do is partly a function of this position. As a wife and mother, she has certain obligations. Because of such obligations, she may not be able to take certain risks that might threaten her and her family’s future. She lives in a community surrounded by friends, relatives, and neighbors. Her farm, her family and community should all be considered when providing any natural resource advice.
Helping Maria See Change Can Be Beneficial

For initial contacts with Maria, it may be difficult for her to see that she can address resource issues on her farm. It should be remembered that Maria has lived for years without the likelihood of improving her family’s way of life through agriculture. Part of your challenge is to raise Maria’s expectations that natural resource protection and conservation can lead to personal and community benefits. A personal philosophy or ethic about conservation can be instilled in Maria’s way of thinking.

It is important to ignite her interest in listening to radio programs and watching social media (if possible) that discusses the benefits of conservation. Encouraging her to visit the field office or making simple program information brochures available, will help her become aware of available technology and/or technical assistance from the agency. Visual resources such as YouTube videos, websites, blogs or fact sheets can effectively show conservation benefits. You can convey the message to share what other small farmers in different locations are doing and of the successes they are achieving.

Field tours to neighboring areas where other small, urban farmers are successfully trying conservation practices can be recommended. This essentially would increase Maria’s contacts with other small farmers in locations and communities where changes are taking place. If language is a factor, NRCS has resources to assist with translation and interpretation (see resources at the end of this fact sheet).
Adapt Conservation Recommendations to Maria’s Norms and Traditions

It is common to find that small, urban farmers like Maria are often reluctant to change. Her behavior, however stubborn and unreasoned it may appear to an outsider, is the product of years of past experiences. Maria is pragmatic; she is not going to give up her habitual ways of doing things until she is convinced that she will benefit by doing so. You may encourage her to see that the future holds new things for her while respecting the importance of her past experiences and especially her culture.

Be mindful of the fact that wisdom, culture, and tradition carry more weight with Maria and with other small farmers as well. Therefore, proposing conservation technology may set Maria in a defensive posture. She knows that her individual productive capacities, with traditional means, will provide enough but her margin of survival and/or resources may be so slim that she may feel that she cannot take the risk with something new or that she cannot afford. Hence, the conservation solution for Maria must be flexible enough to tailor to her pre-existing norms and traditions to enhance the likelihood of adoption.

Identify a Few Small, Urban Farmers Who Seem to Have an Interest in Conservation

It is often possible to encounter small and/or urban farmers, unlike Maria, who would be more inclined than others to try new things. Try to identify such individuals who are interested in conservation ideas and solicit their cooperation for introducing changes to others. It is also likely that you may know some small farm leaders who others consult in relation to farm problems. These people are respected for good judgement and successful experiences. It is important to know who these leaders and farmers are and start working with them. Obviously, these farmers are likely to function as good demonstrators. When such farmers adopt and start using a new conservation practice, others are likely to follow.

Conduct Result Demonstrations and Ensure Success

Research shows that demonstration or model farms are one of the most effective ways of communicating with small farmers like Maria about a new idea or practice. Research also indicates that the agricultural professional (NRCS or partner employee) is the most respected information source during the trial stage of the individual decision-making process. Therefore, by virtue of the NRCS or partner employee’s position among small and urban farmers, he or she must know how to help the demonstrator farmer have a successful experience. When a demonstration is a success, other small farmers will be more receptive to similar recommendations.
Such demonstrations should be carefully planned and carried out because if they are carelessly done, it may prejudice the other small, urban farmers and create barriers to subsequent change. We need to realize that the other small farmers may be highly critical of new practices and will not be as receptive to new conservation practices if a demonstration is not successful and does not send the intended message. Media may be interested in such projects as well, which can be a positive method to gain additional interest and support. Although, care must be taken to ensure media accurately portrays the project or obstacles could be created.

**Communicate with Maria Simply and Precisely**

Often, when communicating with people, we may get in the habit of talking in agency jargon. We may carry over this tendency and use specialized words and expressions in communicating with small farmers like Maria. Urban farmers are not likely to understand such terms, though they may be members of the same culture and speak the same language. It is for this reason that effective communication is so important in introducing conservation technology and practices. Refrain from using acronyms for program names, conservation practices, USDA agencies and positions.

Communicating with Maria means that conservation ideas and techniques must be presented verbally, visually, and conceptually so that Maria perceives the potential advantages in much the same fashion as the field staff. In essence, the field staff must see that Maria does receive, understand, accept, and act upon the idea that has been communicated. It is Maria’s action in the right direction that should guide you in all future communications with small farmers, not your perception that she agrees with you.

**Offer Information to Groups to Increase Acceptance of Conservation Practices**

Most rural communities are organized in some fashion. Many of the groups are kinship groups, but other specialized groups are also prominent. Small and urban farmers may organize because they can accomplish certain things through group organization that they cannot otherwise achieve as individuals. It is important to identify some of these groups and to know who belongs to which group.

Group discussions are one of the most effective teaching methods of adult learning. This method ensures that adults learn from one another and if given the opportunity, dialogue amongst members of the group, enhances the learning. Small, urban farmers may tend to do what other, similar farmers feel comfortable doing. The group method can create support for conservation ideas throughout the entire community. This would allow Maria to compare the experiences of a neighbor and colleague with her own farm and family situations and would also help her to discuss the application of the practices with others who are in the same situation as herself. In fact, comparing situations is what small farmers are inclined to do in making up their minds when they have such an opportunity. Once a group opinion is formulated and expressed, it acts as a compelling influence on other members of the group.
Reinforce Maria’s Decisions

It is important to understand that if you have been able to successfully share the merits of a conservation practice with Maria, she will probably adopt it. Unfortunately, the acceptance of the new practice by Maria does not ensure that she will continue to use it. Research has shown that it has been a common practice with many farmers who had once adopted an innovation to discontinue the idea or practice for one reason or another.

Often, as NRCS and partner employees, we don’t realize that following the adoption stage the primary educational need is one of reinforcement. The value of reinforcement is to help Maria continue to utilize the adopted practice and understand how important it is to her farming operation. Maria may still need advice and support in some areas if she is to continue to use the practice on her farm. To continue providing support, help Maria assess her own results and get her acquainted with the results of other farmers or neighbors who have successfully adopted the same conservation practice. If Maria needs assistance to implement some adjustments to the practice or her farming operation, assist her with those allowed adjustments.

Don’t Forget to Sell Yourself

Create situations to demonstrate to small and urban farmers that you are sincere and truly do care about them and their farm operation. Try to develop a trusting relationship with Maria (See Gaining Trust of Small and Urban Farmers fact sheet). This is important because among small farmers, advice is not accepted until a person is accepted. There are no fixed steps to follow to be accepted by others, but you can set a few guideposts to monitor your progress toward this desired goal.

While working with Maria or any other small farmer, you should always show respect for her and her work. Demonstrate that you feel she is a competent and capable farmer. There does not need to be flattery in this attitude shown toward her, but rather to follow the advice of the late Dr. Lyman Bryson who often urged workers “not to look for excellent people but for excellence in all people.”

Even though there are individual differences, Maria represents a personal collection of experiences, wants, convictions, taboos, enthusiasms, and habits. You must show respect for all her ideas and beliefs and try to understand her way of life. This will probably mean you need to spend a sizable portion of your time listening to and trying to understand Maria’s situation.

It is not easy to predict how best you can gain acceptance among small and urban farmers, but it is a proven fact that if you want to contribute to the knowledge and experience of small farmers, you must identify with those like Maria. If you can’t truly identify, show your interest in her farming operation, family
and, community and allow Maria to teach you. If needed, it's important to ask appropriate questions to further understand her situation.

**Communication is Key**

When working with small, urban farmers be sure that your communication is not top down or one way. Both you and the farmer need to be allowed and encouraged to make suggestions based on past experiences. A solution, recommendation or new practice, no matter how good, is usually not appropriate for everybody and may be downright wrong for some. It is likely that small farmers will be quick to detect this and perhaps earlier than the NRCS or partner employee. Communicate such matters to your supervisor and invite feedback from other field staff. In this way, field staff are aware of problems of a particular practice and suitable actions can be taken or adjustments made.

To be effective in introducing change, we need to be able to understand, recognize and evaluate properly the motivation of the customer groups and the benefits that adoption of the conservation practices can have on these individuals, their families and the community.

**Resources Assisting Small and Urban Farmers**

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<th>Small and Mid-Sized Farmer Resources</th>
<th>Small Scale Solutions for Your Farm</th>
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**Topics Covered**

- Accessing Capital
- Risk Management
- Locating Market Opportunities
- Land Management
- Food Safety
- Educational Resources & Outreach
- Additional Resources & Support

**New Farmer Resources**

[https://newfarmers.usda.gov/](https://newfarmers.usda.gov/)

**Topics Covered**

- New Farmers
- Women in Ag
- For Youth
- Veterans

Provides jobs sheet for small scale farmers, including Spanish language job sheets.
USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer and lender.

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