

The Puebla staff studied the proposal of Guanomex and decided that the potential advantages for the small farmers in Puebla of having this additional source of nitrogen available at a lower cost outweighed the risks involved in moving ahead with a technology that had not been tested locally.

Therefore, the technical assistance agents began meetings in early April to inform farmers of the availability of the new source of fertilizer and credit, and to explain that the cost of nitrogen in the form of aqua ammonia was expected to be about 60 per cent of that of solid materials. They also described the characteristics of aqua ammonia and the precautions to observe in its application, etc. Although many farmers were not convinced that aqua ammonia was equal to the solid sources of nitrogen, they were attracted by the lower cost and seemed confident that it must be satisfactory, since the technical assistance agent was recommending it. More than 2,000 farmers signed up to use aqua ammonia on some 5,000 ha of maize.

Guanomex made a horse-drawn applicator available in late April for testing in the Puebla area. It turned out to be almost impossible to handle the applicator in the field, because of its excessive weight and high center of gravity. The farmers were invited to offer suggestions on how to improve it. Several farmers agreed to assist in redesigning the applicator. Within a short time, a much lighter, better balanced, applicator was developed, although still not totally satisfactory.

It was late May before the redesigned applicators were available to the farmers, and the plant for the production of aqua ammonia was in operation. By that time, most of the farmers who had signed up to use aqua ammonia had found it necessary to arrange for solid materials in order to make the sidedressing application of nitrogen at the proper time. Guanomex had provided many of these farmers with urea and ammonium sulphate through two of its local distributors. In total, aqua ammonia was used by about 250 farmers on approximately 500 ha.

More Effective Group Action

When Project technicians began to promote the organization of farmer groups in 1969, they expected that these groups would gradually develop into strong farmer organizations, with the capability of taking the leadership in finding solutions to many of their problems. By early 1972, such development had not occurred. Most farmers looked upon the groups solely as an instrument for obtaining credit and fertilizers. Once this was accomplished, they had little interest in meetings or other group activities until it was again time to arrange for credit.

As Project technicians and advisors explored ways of developing the effectiveness of the groups, they were acutely aware of their lack of experience in such work. Thus, arrangements were made for a sociologist with many years of experience in organizing small farmers in Mexico to devote a part of his time to providing technical assistance to Project staff.

A new strategy for working with the farmer organizations was not adopted until mid-1973. Each of the technical assistance agents then began to hold general meetings, inviting the members of the several groups in his zone. The technician presented the proposition that many problems prevented the farmers from improving their agricultural production, net income, and general welfare. He suggested that the farmers themselves could best resolve these problems. He pointed out that people like himself and representatives of the service agencies could help, but, in order for their help to be effective, the farmers would have to participate more actively in deciding what needed to be done and how to do it.

Several general meetings were held over a period of several weeks at which the farmers discussed the problems which they felt to be the greatest obstacles to progress. Gradually, they were able to define a small list of problems that were most pressing, and, of these, the one which they felt should receive top priority.

The next step was to form a new organization of those farmers interested in working together to resolve common problems, and, specifically, the problem they had given top priority. These new organizations are still in the process of development and consolidation.

The Union of Progressive Maize and Bean Farmers of Zone III is an example of these new farmer organizations. This organization held its first meeting in August 1973 and has been meeting regularly every two weeks. It decided to give top priority to finding means for members to obtain chicken manure at a lower cost. After a few weeks of study, the Union discovered that by eliminating the mark-ups by two middle men—the truck driver and the administrator of the chicken farm—the current price for manure (about \$112/truck load) could be cut in half. The Union began negotiating directly with the owners of the chicken farms to obtain this better price.

Although the Union has made some progress in its efforts to make manure available to its members at a lower cost, it has encountered many obstacles. Its lack of legal status, for example, has prevented the Union from negotiating long-term contracts with the manure producers. It is expected that this problem can be resolved through legalization as a Civil Society.

In 1973, the Union had 95 members from nine villages, with a Governing Board composed of 18 farmers, who are the old group coordinators and their alternates from the nine villages. The affairs of the Union are administered by a president, secretary, and treasurer and their alternates.