




# REACHING THE HEARTS AND MINDS

**How extension workers in  
Egypt educated farmers in population  
and environment concerns**

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ISBN 92-5-105452-5

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**Dedicated to**

Millions of small men and women farmers of the developing countries who are eager to learn and follow if agricultural and rural extension messages make sense to them within the context of their daily life





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## FOREWORD


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Both environmental pollution and food insecurity issues have been surfacing in Egypt as a result of rapid population growth. The Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation has taken several steps to tackle these issues, such as enhancing agricultural production, bringing new lands under cultivation, and resettling agricultural graduates on the New Lands. All these efforts have been made over a period of many years in line with the overall development policy of the Government of Egypt, and as the positive results show, significant progress has been made in alleviating the problems. The efforts, however, continue.

Egypt has brought its agricultural extension service in action to combat the problems of population, environment and production. For the last nine years, one project, in particular, has been helping the rural population through integration of population and environment educational messages into ongoing agricultural extension programmes. The project is funded jointly by the Government of Egypt and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and technically supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

The innovative technical strategy of the project brought three ministries together on the same platform for achieving a common goal in the field. The lead Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation received full cooperation from the Ministry of Health and Population and the State Ministry for Environment as they not only served on the Steering Committee of the project, but also their field staff worked with the extension agents like a team. The book, *Reaching the Hearts and Minds*, is the story of the project, written in an interesting fiction style by Dr. M. Kalim Qamar, FAO Senior Officer for Agricultural Training and Extension, at FAO Headquarter in Rome, who not only assisted the national counterparts in designing the innovative strategy but was also the Technical Officer for the project throughout its life.

This work has been completed in collaboration with Dr. Ahmed Wahba, who was the National Project Director of the project. This illustrated book, written within rural Egyptian context, also contains fact sheets about the project. It represents perhaps the very first attempt in presenting the history of



a project in a fiction style, which is obviously far more reader-friendly than a conventional technical report.

I congratulate both Dr. Qamar and Dr. Wahba on producing this innovative piece of development literature. I am sure that this work, which is being published in English and Arabic versions, will serve as technical guidance for agricultural extension services in many countries, which are confronted with the problems of rapid population growth and environment pollution in the rural areas.

I also take this opportunity to express my thanks to UNFPA and FAO for providing financial and technical support respectively to the project as well as in producing this book in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation.

**Mr. Amin Abaza**  
**Minister of Agriculture and Land Reclamation**  
**Cairo; March 2006**



## A FEW WORDS

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It is our pleasure to introduce this original book on the project “Integration of Population and Environment Education in Agricultural Extension in Egypt”.

The project was jointly funded by the Government of Egypt and UNFPA and was technically backstopped by FAO. The result of this project served as the basis to produce the present book, written by our FAO colleague Dr. M. Kalim Qamar in collaboration with the National Project Director Dr. Ahmed Wahba. The success of the project has been widely acclaimed, and was an excellent example of cooperation between not only two UN agencies, but also between three ministries namely the Ministry for Agriculture and Land Reclamation, the Ministry for Health and Population, and the State Ministry for Environment.

We will certainly need more projects to be designed for the implementation of the excellent recommendations and results obtained, in order to sensitise the rural people on population dimension and its relationships to the natural resources sustainability, for the required agricultural production improvement and food security in the country.

Social and economic development has been the goal of the Egyptian Government since several decades. There have been noticeable successes, but development will have little meaning unless it can be sustained. The accomplishments described in this book are a step towards the integration of social concepts into ongoing agricultural extension programmes, for insuring the desired sustainability.

The story of the book is simple and sends a clear message that retains the interest of the reader. The hand-drawn illustrations make the presentation even more colourful. We have no doubt that this book,



written in a fiction style, based on project experiences, will be well received and enjoyed by readers at all levels, not only in Egypt but in other developing countries of the Near East region and beyond.

**Faysal Abdel Gadir Mohamed**  
United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)  
Resident Representative

**Abdellatif Tabet**  
FAO Representative for Egypt





**Chapter 1**

The concerned couple


## Chapter 1: The concerned couple

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This is late winter night of January. It is very cold and the pale moon is half hidden in fog as if trying to protect itself from plunging temperatures. Its dull, shivering rays are entangled in the leafless branches of trees. The inhabitants of *Qaryat Al-Nasr*, a small village located in a governorate not far from the city of Ismailia, are deep asleep. Once in a while, the barking of wild dogs, cock's hoot or the screeching noise of crickets punctures the silence of rural night. Samia Ali and Ibrahim Hassan, a recently married couple, are still awake and talking about life in the village.



Samia Ali is a beautiful and healthy woman of about twenty two years. She has a relatively round face with almost sharp features, and shoulder-long curly, thick, dark black hair. Her complexion is fair. Her eyes are big and intelligent with long lashes and sharply curved eyebrows. Samia Ali is confident in her speech, and leaves an impression of being a serious and practical woman of warm nature. Within a month of arriving in *Qaryat Al-Nasr*, she has been



able to win a teacher's position in the girls' preparatory school of the village. Until her marriage, she was living in a tiny town, located on the bank of the River Nile. Two months have passed since she moved to this village, and within this relatively short period, she has earned a respectable name among the villagers. Her students adore her as well.

Ibrahim Hassan, Samia Ali's husband is a tall, dark, handsome man in his late twenties. Like most villagers, he is a well built and muscular person, a reflection of his tough manual work in farming. Ibrahim Hassan owns a small piece of land, but is recognized in the community as a progressive farmer. He is a high school graduate, and an orphan as his parents passed away when he was in his final year of school. He could not get further education and decided to settle in farming -- his parents' and their parents' profession, going back many generations. Before he entered into full-time farming, Ibrahim Hassan met Samia Ali in a wedding ceremony in the city where she lived with her parents. Both instantly fell in love with each other.

Even though Samia Ali's parents had reservations about this relationship as, unlike their daughter, Ibrahim Hassan was not that educated and lived in a village, yet they gave in to Samia Ali's wish to marry him. They had realized soon after the wedding that their son-in-law, although not highly educated, and from a rural background, was a man with integrity and decent manners, who not only truly loved their daughter, but also respected them like his own parents. They were now sure that Ibrahim Hassan will be able to keep their only daughter happy.

"Ibrahim, did you ever notice how people in this village throw piles of trash and garbage any where they want. *W'Allah*, this place stinks no matter which street you go to", Samia Ali says with a frowned face, huddled in an embroidered *lihaf* to keep her warm.

"I am also fed up with this menace but do not know what to do." Ibrahim Hassan answers in a sleepy voice. "And the problem does not end up here. I am sure you have seen how women wash their clothes and bathe cattle in the *Tera'ah*, not to mention so many children swimming like fish specially in summer in that polluted water. Sometimes, the noise of children and lowing of buffaloes is so loud as if they are competing with each other. Really disgusting!"




“Oh those children, I cannot imagine how those poor farmers can afford to have so many children. The other day, I saw two of them helping their father in preparing pesticides, for spray. *Ya khabar!* I was really frightened to see how dangerous that was. I hope they do not fall sick”, says Samia Ali uncomfortably.

“Look my dear,” Ibrahim Hassan says, raising his head slightly from a bulky but soft *mekhhadda*, “I feel very bad about all this pollution and about so many children exposed to dangerous materials. But being a small farmer, I cannot do much to solve this problem. I am sure you and I are not the only ones who think like this. There have to be others in this village who want to improve living conditions at this place.”

“I heard some family planning programme was launched in this village but did not work so well. Is that true?” Samia Ali asks, turning her big eyes towards her husband.

“Yes, that was many years ago when I was in high school. I remember many villagers did not like to hear blunt messages on keeping the number of children



low and ...” Ibrahim Hassan suddenly breaks into laughter, momentarily shedding off his slumber. “I recall how they distributed condoms in the village to the distaste of people, and then the wrath they attracted from a religious man, who has now passed away. *Allah yarhamo*, the old man ran after the family planning workers with a stick in his hand, cursing them loudly. It was quite a scene.” He concludes drowsily, recalling the scene, his sleep seemingly overcoming his speech.

“I wish someone with better understanding of rural culture could start such a programme,” Samia Ali sighs, changing side on the colourful *sreer*, which she had brought from her parents. “I wish this village were as clean as the tiny city where I grew up. That will be good for all the inhabitants.”

“I agree with you, my love” Ibrahim Hassan affectionately pats his wife’s pink cheek, putting her *lihaf* properly around her, “but we better sleep now. I have to go to the fields in the morning.” And tired as he is, before Samia Ali could respond, he puts his arm under his head and instantly falls asleep.

Samia Ali, still wide awake, gazes at the dark ceiling. Then suddenly the image of a girl emerges in the darkness. She recalls a young girl of about twelve years, who lives a few houses away, and seems to be in the habit of gazing at her from behind a tree or door, but always from a distance. She is a pretty girl, with very fine features and blondish, curly hair. Her clothes are usually quite shabby -- more rags than a dress. Samia Ali does not know her name. The girl is too shy and every time Samia Ali tries to go near her, she runs away. Samia Ali has not seen her in the village school she teaches at. Perhaps she is not a student. But why does she always run away from her? Thinking about the stranger girl, Samia Ali also drowns in the deep sea of sleep.

Outside, at some distance, a cock screams in high pitch, announcing the arrival of morning. It is instantly followed by *azaan*, the call for the *fajr* prayer, coming loud from the village mosque. Soon the eastern horizon will be filled with fascinating bright mixture of red, orange and pink shades. The shadows of low flying birds are floating in circles.



**Chapter 2**


The Creative Extension Group

## Chapter 2: The Creative Extension Group

Not far from *Qaryat Al-Nasr*, in the tiny city where Samia Ali grew up, two men and two women, in somber mood, were sipping *shai* in a small office building. Cold wind was blowing, and the strong gusts were constantly banging against a rusted signboard hanging outside, which read, “Creative Extension Group, Government of Egypt”. The men, Dr. Abdul Aziz and Zakie Mobarak, and the women, Fawzia Sallam and Saeda Alhaj, were discussing the same subject as the village couple Samia Ali and Ibrahim Hassan had been talking about - rapidly growing population and environment pollution in the rural areas.



Dr. Abdul Aziz was in his late fifties, with slightly heavy-built physique. He had bushy, greying moustache and French beard, fast balding head, with glasses perched on his nose-bridge. Usually, a smoking pipe loosely hung from the corner of his mouth. More lost in thoughts than talking, and dressed in a loose suit, he looked like a philosopher. Dr. Abdul Aziz had a Doctorate degree in agricultural extension from USA, and had worked on several overseas



assignments with the United Nations. He enjoyed excellent reputation among his professional colleagues.


Zakie Mobarak once was a student of Dr. Abdul Aziz when the latter taught at a national university of repute in Cairo. He was about 35 years of age, with a tall but slim body, always well dressed, with sharp observation and mild manners, and had immense regard for his old professor. Many years ago when the Creative Extension Group was created, with Dr. Abdul Aziz as its head, Zakie Mobarak had left his previous job to join the group to continue learning from his mentor.

Fawzia Sallam and Saeda Alhaj, who were in their late 20s and long time class-fellows, had joined the group soon after graduating from university. Both were pretty, with attractive personalities. They were fast friends, but had different taste in dress. Fawzia Sallam, who was a rural sociologist, covered her head with *hijab*. Saeda Alhaj, an extension specialist, with blondish, trimmed hair, was more outgoing and preferred western dress. Except Dr. Abdul Aziz, whose wife was a college professor, and had two children, none of the group members was married.

All four professionals were aware of the fact that some family planning programme in the past had met only limited success. As far as pollution was concerned, they had not heard of any significant attempts made at grassroots level to alleviate this problem. And all these facts presented a challenge to the Creative Extension Group that had several success stories to its credit. The group's work on bringing positive behavioural change among villagers was acclaimed nationally. After almost a daylong discussion, the group members had come up with the following seven conclusions.

First, the problems of rapid population growth and environmental degradation are indeed affecting the quality of life in rural areas in an adverse way mostly due to widespread ignorance and lack of education. Agricultural extension workers are in unique position to take action to rectify the situation. Second, a strategy needs to be outlined, which could be built on a context familiar to the farmers in order to reach their hearts and minds. Third, funds are needed to put the strategy into action. Fourth, an institutional structure should be built in support of the strategy. Fifth, as it was not effective to concentrate on the





individual farmers, the farmers will have to be organized in groups. Sixth, as the agricultural extension workers were never involved in population and environment education, they need to be prepared for these innovative tasks. Seventh, the field staff of the Ministry of Health, called Home Visitors, needed to be included in the team along with the Village Extension Workers of the Ministry of Agriculture, and Ministry of Environment as well.

The Creative Extension Group members divided among themselves various tasks to be performed. Dr. Abdul Aziz, who was the senior most in the group, took the responsibility of outlining an extension and non-formal educational strategy, which should have strong appeal to farmers. He also agreed to seek funding for implementation of the strategy due to his knowledge of possible national and external sources of funding. Zakie Mobarak said that he would think of an appropriate institutional arrangement, in view of his contacts in the government bureaucracy.

Fawzia Sallam had been active in village development work; she expressed willingness to look into various options to organize men and women groups at village level. Saeda Alhaj, who was known for her training skills, took the responsibility for capacity building of the extension workers and other staff to put the strategy into action.

When the meeting finished, the group realized that it was already nine o'clock in the evening. Satisfied with the day's work, the members debated on the choice of any restaurant nearby. Once consensus was reached, they locked up their office, bundled themselves up in woollen clothes and as strong wind howled, they left for the restaurant for dinner. Suddenly, the surroundings were washed in blinding brightness by a sweeping lash of lightening, instantly followed by a deafening, lengthy thunder of clouds. Perhaps it was going to rain. No one could have imagined that these four human shadows racing down the deserted street in this stormy night were about to launch an initiative, which will be remembered in the history of agricultural extension in Egypt.

The image features a minimalist design with several overlapping rectangular bars. A large blue vertical bar is on the left. A grey horizontal bar is positioned in the middle, overlapping the blue bar. Below this, there are smaller blue and grey horizontal bars. A long, thin blue vertical bar extends downwards from the center. The text 'Chapter 3' is written in white on the blue bar, and 'A strategy is created' is written in black on the grey bar.

**Chapter 3**

A strategy is created



## Chapter 3: A strategy is created

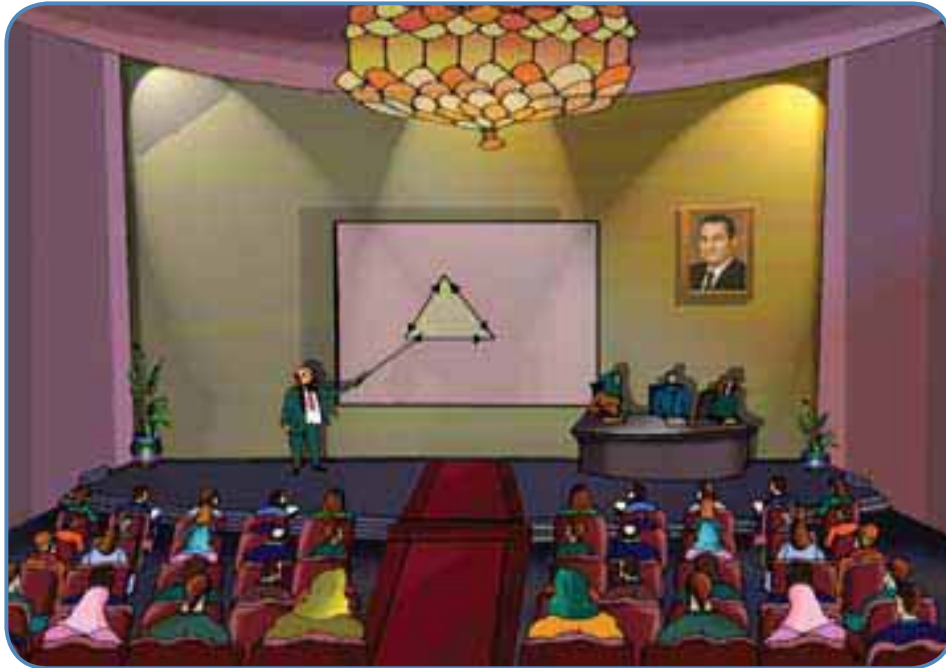
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**T**wo weeks later, the team of the Creative Extension Group was sitting in Cairo at the sprawling premises of the Ministry of Agriculture, eager to present its strategy for combating pollution and unchecked population growth in villages to no one else but the Senior Advisor to the Minister and other high officials including those from the United Nations family. The members of the group were known for their excellent achievements in the past and the participants were looking forward to their new presentation. It was one of those occasions awaited anxiously by those who were genuinely interested in rural and agricultural development of this country.

The Ministry used the spacious auditorium, which could accommodate up to two hundred persons, only for important presentations. At this time, there were about fifty persons including ten women, some standing and chatting, and some sitting in the chairs, looking around lazily. The technicians were busy in making sure that the Power Point projection arrangements were flawless, and the audience would be able to watch high quality images on the big screen. A comfortable temperature level was maintained inside. The side floors were covered with thick carpets, which absorbed even the slightest noise produced by walking steps. A huge and expensive looking chandelier glittered overhead, hung from the high ceiling. An impressive portrait of the President of Egypt decorated the front wall. The members of the Creative Extension Group were busy in welcoming the guests, among them several old acquaintances.

As the clock ticked ten o'clock, the chairman, a senior and elderly officer of the Ministry requested the audience to be seated so that the programme could be started. The members of the group were sitting in chairs next to the chairman, the closest being Dr. Abdul Aziz, who had just lit up his pipe. As usual, he was dressed in a loose fitting navy blue pin-striped suit with a pale yellow necktie, hanging a bit too low. The chairman explained the purpose of the event and then briefly introduced the four members of the Creative Extension Group.


The impressive Power Point presentation started with Dr. Abdul Aziz,



who drew the attention of the audience to many serious problems caused by population explosion and increasing pollution in villages. One imminent problem was a threat to food security due to the fact that the agricultural production, population and environment were closely interrelated. Poor environment will cause not only health and sanitary problems but will also threaten the sustainability of natural resources. The unabated speed of population growth will offset gains in agricultural production, and at the same time will create environmental problems of its own. Finally, food security will be determined by both healthy environment and an appropriate population growth rate.

The audience were aware of the importance of the three components but they had rarely seen before so clearly an interrelationship among food security, environment and population. Indeed none of the components could be developed in isolation from the other two components. There was definitely interdependence among the three factors.

“This is the rationale and the basis of our strategy, Sir, that we are going to propose”, Dr. Abdul Aziz declared, looking towards the chairman, his face




beaming from controlled optimistic excitement, and the pipe clutched in his right hand fingers, shaking slightly.

“The core of the strategy is: present the issues of population and environment to farmers within the context of farming practices, agricultural production and food security, which they are closely familiar with, and you will touch their hearts and minds. They will learn to appreciate the importance of population control and environment protection because if they do not pay attention to these factors, they are going to suffer from losses due to fallen agricultural yields and weakened food security, the factors which are so close to the heart of every farm family. Not only do small farmers survive on what they produce but they also earn money from selling the surplus production for meeting their non-food needs. Any factor which has anything to do with the yield is taken seriously by these producers.”

“But who is going to teach farmers in these subjects?” An impatient participant, apparently some senior official from the Ministry of Agriculture, interrupted Dr. Abdul Aziz. “The Village Extension Workers, for years, have been engaged in the transfer of improved agricultural technology. Their technical mandate is quite precise, and they have neither been trained nor is it in their terms of reference to cover subjects other than agriculture. We do not have any environment educators in the field. There, of course, are a number of Home Visitors who help farmers mostly in health matters, but they know little about the environment, let alone agriculture”. The participant concluded his well-elaborated question. Several persons nodded, acknowledging the importance of the concern expressed.

Before Dr. Abdul Aziz could answer, Zakie Mobarak raised his hand hinting that he wanted to speak, and Dr. Abdul Aziz allowed him to do so. Zakie Mobarak had put on his best combination for today’s event - a camel shade double-breast jacket, with a matching necktie, and dark brown trousers.

“It is a good question and the very response which I am going to give is the starting point of our creativity in this important subject. My colleagues and I have discussed these issues. The discipline of agricultural extension is under close examination and is changing fast. Institutional and operational reforms of great significance are being introduced in the national agricultural



extension systems worldwide. Broadening the technical mandate of extension is one of those reforms, so that the extension services may successfully handle the global challenge of sustainable rural and agricultural development, which goes far beyond the traditional and passive transfer of agricultural technology. As such, the extension system of our country also needs to be reformed. As a first step, we are suggesting that the Village Extension Workers get involved into population and environment issues.”


Zakie Mobarak paused, noticed and ignored some raised eyebrows, and then continued.

“The interrelationship among agricultural production or food security, environment and population, just explained by my able colleague Dr. Abdul Aziz, is, in fact, an important pillar in the concept of sustainable development. Our strategy calls for a meaningful institutional arrangement to meet our goal as well as for preparing the Village Extension Workers and Home Visitors to play their new role. While my colleague Miss Saeda Alhaj will later explain the steps to be taken for preparing the field staff for this new role, allow me to explain the institutional arrangements we are proposing.”

There was pin-drop silence in the room. The audience were fully absorbed in listening, which gave Zakie Mobarak even more confidence.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Even though our national ministries meet one another on several matters, yet this will most probably be the very first time in our country that we shall bring three main ministries, namely Agriculture, Health, and Environment at the same platform for achieving a very specific common goal. We shall create a national level steering committee, which will comprise members from these three ministries and some other relevant institutions. As we intend to start our programme in selected governorates, such steering committees will be created at governorate level also. We shall also make some sort of institutional arrangement at village level involving extension workers, health staff and rural community representatives. The village level plans will be explained later by my colleague Miss Fawzia Sallam.”

Zakie Mobarak stopped and poured himself some water from a glass jug. He knew he had spoken well as was evident from so many among audience nodding their heads in appreciation.



“Thank you Zakie Mobarak for this useful contribution,” said Dr. Abdul Aziz, glancing at his watch. “Ladies and gentlemen, hot tea and some refreshments are waiting for us. We shall resume after twenty minutes. I request you to be punctual as we have to give you a lot of additional information.”

As the audience dispersed for the break , one could see the participants from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Environment talking to each other, expressing deep interest in cooperating with the Ministry of Agriculture.

The image features a complex abstract graphic design. A large blue vertical rectangle is positioned on the left side. A horizontal grey bar intersects this rectangle, and the text 'Chapter 4' is written in white on the blue background within this bar. Below the grey bar, a blue vertical line extends downwards. To the left of this line, there are several horizontal bars: a blue one, a grey one, and another blue one, all partially overlapping the vertical line. The overall composition is minimalist and modern.

## Chapter 4

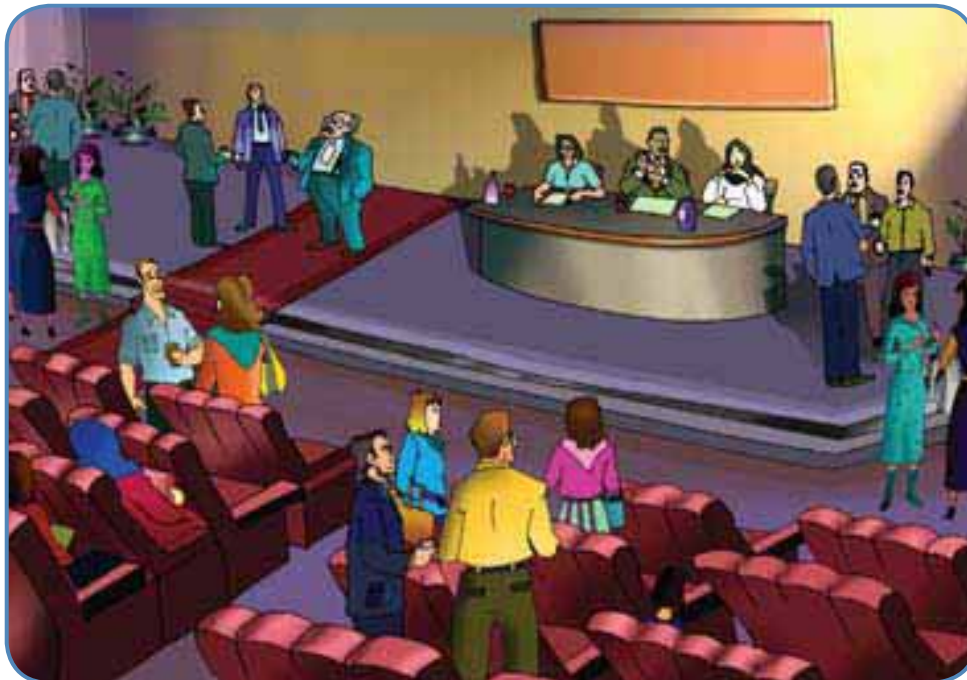
### The initiative gains momentum



## Chapter 4: The initiative gains momentum


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**D**uring the break, the representatives of two main United Nations agencies, who had been listening to Dr. Abdul Aziz with great interest, approached him, and after appreciating the strategy outlined so far by him, promised to consider any government request for financial and technical assistance. This unexpected offer boosted Dr. Abdul Aziz's morale, and after thanking the representatives, he immediately shared the good news with Zakie Mobarak, Fawzia Sallam and Saeda Alhaj, who were engaged in conversations with small circles of the audience. The group members were overjoyed and their resolve to tackle the issues of over population and environmental pollution in the rural areas strengthened more than ever. The instant positive response



from the United Nations agencies was very encouraging and meant a lot at this moment as it underlined the importance of the subject. To the group members, it meant that the United Nations officials were thinking on the same lines as they were.

The time for the break had elapsed but many persons standing in the room



were still engaged in discussions. The chairman had to bang a small hammer repeatedly against the desk top to convince the participants to return to their respective seats.


The session resumed and Saeda Alhaj took over the podium. She was dressed in a grey, western style business suit, with prominent make-up on her face. A single red pearl embedded in the centre of her *silsila* decorated her neck, and a delicate ladies' watch wrapped around her wrist shone as she moved her left hand while speaking. A pair of delicate red *halak*, matching the pearl of her *silsila* hung from her ears.

Using the Power Point projection, as Dr. Abdul Aziz had done, she explained how the extension workers, health staff and rural community leaders will be prepared through training for the entire programme.

“At present, there are no training materials readily available, that we may use for training the staff. As our strategy is an innovative one, many things will have to be done for the very first time. We shall prepare special curriculum and training aids on the subject of interrelationship between food security, population and environment. Then the curriculum will be used to prepare training modules on various technical components which will contain information on topics such as, what will be the training content, who will be trained, who will provide training, how much time will be needed, what will be the training methodology, what audio-visual aids will be used, what will be the training location, and how will the training conducted be evaluated later...?”

“How will you train so many field workers? Won't it be too costly?” An impatient person raised his hand and interrupted Saeda Alhaj with the abrupt question. Someone among the audience chuckled.

“I was just coming to that.” Saeda Alhaj, who had stopped speaking in order to listen to the suddenly raised question, smiled and continued. “Yes, indeed the training of so many field workers will be a hard, expensive and time demanding task. Therefore, the strategy we shall use is to select a small number of persons using certain criteria and train them so that they could serve as Master Trainers”, explained Saeda Alhaj moving her forefingers of



both hands as if writing quotation marks in the air. “These trained Master Trainers, who will include both men and women, will then provide training simultaneously to a specific number of male and female Village Extension Workers and Home Visitors. Thus our multiplier effect training strategy will be both cost- and time-effective.”


She paused for a moment, pursed her lips as if thinking something, and then spoke. “As far as training aids are concerned, we intend to prepare a variety of audio-visual materials which will be used not only in training activities but also in a vast extension campaign that is an important part of our strategy. I promise you that these audio-visual materials will be attractive, colourful and gender-, culture- and religion-sensitive. When we reach that stage, and if requested, we would be willing to give you a separate brief on these extension and training materials, which constitutes a subject in itself. That’s it for the time being”.

Saeda Alhaj returned to her seat, leaving the podium for Dr. Abdul Aziz.

“Respectable audience,” Dr. Abdul Aziz spoke, wiping the lenses of his glasses with handkerchief. “I do realize that we are running out of time but I am sure you would like to have a brief description of the activities that we intend to carry out at village level”. Then he turned around to look at Fawzia Sallam, “Miss Sallam, could you please come here and very briefly explain the planned activities.” He invited his colleague who has not yet spoken to the participants. Then he settled in his chair, sticking the pipe between his lips.

“The village level is the most crucial because that’s where our target population lives, I mean rural men and women”. Fawzia Sallam started without saying any formal pleasantries. As always, her head was covered by *tarha*. She was dressed in an embroidered, black *abaya*. Although her face was lightly made up, there was no jewellery on her, at least none visible if she had any.

“We shall follow participatory group extension approach and shall organize separate or mixed groups of men and women farmers, depending on the customs of each location. Although we shall involve formal leaders of the villages, the groups of farmers will also be encouraged to nominate their own informal leaders. These groups will be formed in each village and the



Village Extension Workers and Home Visitors will have discussions with these groups and deliver educational messages on the subjects of population, environment and agricultural production, but not separately.”

“As my senior colleague Dr. Abdul Aziz has explained earlier, the constant emphasis will be on explaining the interrelationship among these three components within the framework of farming practices, agricultural production and food security so that men and women farmers can comprehend these concepts in a context which they are closely familiar with. These messages will not be like commands but educational in nature. The decision on accepting these messages though will rest with the farmers.”

Fawzia Sallam cast a wide glance at the audience, grinned and continued speaking.

“Finally, we intend to use a number of innovative and creative extension techniques to motivate and enhance learning among the farmers. Some of these techniques include rural folk theatre, extension knowledge contests between groups of the same or different villages, based on small non-monetary rewards. That’s all I have to say at this moment. Thank you.”

When the members of the Creative Extension Group stopped speaking, the chairman uttered a few words of appreciation to the speakers and wished them success in their constructive initiative. As no more questions were asked, the session was concluded amid generous applause of the participants.

When the speakers were packing up their belongings, the Senior Advisor to the Minister assured the members of the Creative Extension Group that as the two United Nations agencies have offered assistance, the Ministry would also provide matching funds for the programme from its own budget. The Senior Advisor, however, gave a piece of advice before leaving.

“Why not do a situation survey in the areas where you intend to run the programme? Later, at the end of the programme, you may conduct another survey in the areas. This will give you a good picture of the impact of the programme.”



Dr. Abdul Aziz accepted this useful suggestion wholeheartedly.

That evening called for celebration by the Creative Extension Group members as the briefing session proved to be more successful and productive than they had expected. They enjoyed dinner at a popular boat restaurant in the Nile along with some senior officials from the Ministry. The colourful reflections of boat lights kept playing hide and seek in the mercuric waves of the river. Further discussion on the ideas put forth during the morning's presentation continued till late at night.

The initiative taken by the Creative Extension Group was already gaining the momentum.

The image features a minimalist abstract design. A large blue vertical bar is positioned on the left side. A grey horizontal bar intersects it, containing the text 'Chapter 5'. Below this, a blue horizontal bar is partially visible. A thin grey horizontal bar is positioned below the blue one. A blue vertical bar extends downwards from the intersection point. The text 'The good news comes in' is centered within the grey horizontal bar.

**Chapter 5**

The good news comes in

## Chapter 5: The good news comes in

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**B**right white clouds of different shape and size rushed under the blue sky as if heading towards some known destination. Tree branches were mostly bare, having lost their leaf- cover to the aggressive winter. A taxi of very old model was crawling on dusty road in the direction of the city, loaded with at least seven passengers from *Qaryat Al-Nasr*.

Samia Ali was returning home from the school after the classes were over. Today, she was dressed in a black *abaya*, with a white *shaal* wrapped around her shoulders, carrying a stack of books along with a purse in her hand. As before, she sighted piles of trash in the village streets, which had attracted clouds of flies, and the polluted *Tera'ah* where dozens of naked children and cattle were submerged in the water while several women washed their clothes - no doubt a perfect place for mosquito breeding and spread of infectious diseases.

In front of a mud house, an old man dressed in a long, soiled white *galabia* wearing a pair of worn out *bulgha* on his dusty feet, was burning crop stems and trash as if standing in a trance, unaware of his surroundings. The strong odour mixed in the rising smoke was spreading all over the street. A buffalo and a donkey tied to their pegs nearby jumped and swiftly changed their positions, most probably frightened by the flames leaping from the burning trash.

Samia Ali also passed by another house where, a few days before, she had witnessed very unsafe handling of pesticides by two young children and their father. She could still notice the whitish powder remains on the dark, muddy ground. What if this powdery chemical substance infects the barefoot children, Samia Ali thought uncomfortably; they will certainly fall sick.

All this was disgusting for Samia Ali, and she had been questioning her wisdom in moving to the village rather than convincing her husband to join her in the city. She loved Ibrahim Hassan and after marrying him, decided to live in the village to enjoy rural simple life where she expected pollution-free fresh air and a lot of greenery. The greenery she did find but the dream of



clean fresh air remained a dream so far. When she saw *Qaryat Al-Nasr* from a distance for the very first time, she felt as if it was hanging with tall pillars of smoke reaching apparently about halfway to the sky. In utter bitterness, she wondered if one day the smoke pillars will dissipate in the air like magic, crashing the entire village down along with its pollution.

Suddenly Samia Ali spotted Yousef Ali, the Village Extension Worker, who being a friend of her husband, was the first one to invite her and Ibrahim Hassan to dinner, after they arrived in *Qaryat Al-Nasr* as a married couple. Yousef Ali lived in a neighbouring village but like many other villages, *Qaryat Al-Nasr* was also under his jurisdiction. He was in his early 30's, still single, and had been in agricultural extension service for almost seven years. His casual dressing habits showed his rural background. With thin, curved sword like mustache on a bony face, slim body and cheerful manners, he was well respected in the villages. Farmers always looked forward to meeting him to seek his advice on farming matters even though he could not visit them as often as he wanted due to the fact that he had to cover a significant area of cultivated lands, spread over many kilometres.

Yousef Ali had just arrived in *Qaryat Al-Nasr*, in all probability, to meet some farmers, and was still on his motorcycle. Upon seeing Samia Ali, he shut off the engine and got off the motorcycle in respect to his friend's wife. He welcomed Samia Ali with a broad smile. After exchange of greetings, Samia Ali asked him a question.

“Brother Yousef, as you can see for yourself, the environmental pollution in *Qaryat Al-Nasr* is becoming unbearable, and the population here is increasing at such an alarming rate that even the elderly are surprised. Since you are an experienced government employee, can you do something to solve these two problems?”

Yousef Ali chuckled as if Samia Ali had said something funny.

“Sister, I am not a high level government official, but a humble extension worker. I also notice these problems whenever I visit *Qaryat Al-Nasr*, but I am afraid I cannot do much in my position. My job is to assist farmers, like your husband, in improving farming. That is the job I was trained in, and



have been doing for years. We have limited experience about environmental pollution, let alone population”.

Yousef said with a troubled face, looking at the rising column of smoke from the place where the trash was being burnt.

“However, I think the Home Visitor from the Ministry of Health, Om Kalsoom, who visits *Qaryat Al-Nasr* now and then, might be able to do something about the rapid population growth.”




“Oh, her”! Samia Ali said, recalling Om Kalsoom, a young lady with a likeable personality. “I have spoken to her. Om Kalsoom is a nice lady, but it looks like as you have been trained in agriculture, she has received training in general health issues. I once heard her talking to some women on the subject of population, but her advice has fallen on deaf ears. I am sure there must be other ways to convince men and women of this village”. Then she glanced at her watch, “Let us talk about it some other time. I must rush because my husband will soon return home from the fields.” Samia Ali turned around to leave.

“Okay sister, please give my regards to Ibrahim Hassan. Tell him I shall visit some time next week.”

Yousef Ali said goodbye, sitting on his motorcycle and kicking it to start noisily, as a pair of farmers passing by with their herd of three buffaloes offered him their greetings aloud.

As Samia Ali reached near her house, she spotted the young girl standing under a tree, whose name she did not know. It was cold but the girl had no sweater on her.



As usual, she was gazing at Samia Ali, making her a bit uncomfortable. At this moment, Samia Ali could not afford to engage her, but she promised with herself to catch hold of that girl the next time she sees her.

Back at home, Samia Ali quickly prepared *khudaar* and *ruz*, and was just putting a set of colourful *taba'a*, and *shafshaq* full of water and some types of pickles on a dining table when Ibrahim Hassan entered the house. He had been working in the fields since early morning and looked tired, but he was overjoyed upon seeing his bride. Samia Ali greeted him with a smile and gave him Yousef Ali's regards, telling that he would visit next week.


"*W'Allahy*, Yousef Ali is a good man. But I have some good news for you", Ibrahim Hassan said, taking off a piece of cloth wrapped around his head and putting the *fa'as* and *man'ara* in a corner. Then he went to the hand-pump and pumping water, washed his dust-covered face, hands and muddy feet thoroughly, "something to do with your concerns about pollution and population in the village," he kept talking while padding his face with a dry towel.

Samia Ali became attentive and looked at her husband curiously.

Ibrahim Hassan started talking again before his wife could say a word, "Our neighbour Reyad had gone to the city to purchase fertilizers. There, he met the Agricultural Extension Supervisor who has just returned from Cairo. He said, the government, with the assistance of the United Nations, is about to launch a programme in certain governorates, under which the agricultural extension staff would be engaged in population and pollution issues. I think, the other night when you were talking on this subject, *Allah* heard the painful complaints of my very lovely wife." Ibrahim Hassan winked mischievously and grinned, settling himself on a *kanaba* besides the dining table.

"That is indeed wonderful news." Samia Ali said cheerfully, "I hope this governorate will be covered by the programme." She also sat on a *kanaba*, lying on the other side of the table.

"Of course, that is why the Extension Supervisor was given the news in the first place. But he is not happy." Ibrahim Hassan quickly added, hinting



Samia Ali at the same time to start eating. He himself broke a piece of *aish* for himself. He looked hungry.

“Not happy? Why not?” Samia Ali enquired, pouring some water into a glass from *shafshaq*.

“For decades, agricultural extension staff has been delivering messages on improved farming technologies. It has neither qualification nor mandate to talk about population and environment problems.” Ibrahim Hassan said, chewing the food, “I saw two of his colleagues in his office. They also did not look happy.”

Surprisingly, Yousef Ali also said similar things even though he was not aware of this new programme. Samia Ali frowned. She was puzzled. If the extension workers do not like this, how can the government force them? And even if they are forced into doing this, they will have no drive or motivation to perform well, she thought.

“But I have another fear,” Ibrahim Hassan said, drinking water, “my worry is that the extension workers, who already visit our village so rarely, may not be left with any time to visit us when the new programme starts. They might become too busy in their additional duties.”

Samia Ali, thinking like a school teacher, responded. “That should be our last worry Ibrahim. Once the programme starts, the extension workers will have to perform certain tasks, and for that they will have to visit the villages, and my hunch is, more than before. The only thing we should worry about is to ensure that the programme does cover *Qaryat Al-Nasr*. I am sure they are going to teach the extension workers something new which will help them in carrying out their new responsibilities regarding environment and population. Then they will have to visit the farmers.”

“I hope you are right,” said Ibrahim Hassan, nodding and yawning simultaneously. He seemed ready for siesta.

Just outside the house, someone hurled a loud curse on his stubborn donkey for not racing fast enough, causing a vague smile on Ibrahim Hassan’s sleepy face.

The image features a minimalist abstract design. A large blue vertical rectangle is positioned on the left side. A horizontal grey bar overlaps the bottom of this blue rectangle and extends further to the right. The text 'Chapter 6' is written in white on the blue rectangle, and 'Completion of groundwork' is written in black on the grey bar. Below the grey bar, there are several overlapping horizontal bars in blue and grey, and a long, thin blue vertical line extending downwards from the bottom of the grey bar.

**Chapter 6**

Completion of groundwork



## Chapter 6: Completion of groundwork

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As millions of people, vehicles, motorcycles and donkey carts raced in various directions in the morning rush hours of vast Cairo, all members of the Creative Extension Group were in a taxi heading towards the Ministry of Agriculture. Dr. Abdul Aziz had received a telephone call from the Ministry last night instructing the group to come to Cairo to collect some important documents. Trying to bridle their excitement, they were absorbed in deep thoughts, speculating about the nature of the documents. There was no talking in the taxi. However, it did not take them long to see the fruit of their labour.

The Creative Extension Group had done it again.

Barely four months after the impressive presentation was made at the Ministry of Agriculture in Cairo, the delighted members of the Group had in their hands an approved and signed programme document, which had been jointly and generously funded by the United Nations and the Government. The duration of the programme was four years and the budget, close to a million dollars, contained provisions for substantial human as well as physical resources. Technical assistance component was also included, under which several national consultants could be hired, and a United Nations advisor was to monitor the progress and provide occasional expert advice throughout the programme.

Now the group members were ready to face the challenge of putting their elaborate strategy into action, using the resources available.

Once the decision to select certain governorates and villages within them was taken, Fawzia Sallam was the first one to go into action. Recalling the advice of the Senior Advisor to the Minister, she contracted a well known national agricultural extension research institute to conduct a pre-programme survey in the selected areas. Fawzia Sallam explained to the contractor that the survey should cover not only basic facts of the villages but also the current level of knowledge, attitude and practices of the farmers on the subjects of population and environment. The field survey work was to be completed in two months, including data collection, analysis and report preparation.



While Fawzia Sallam was busy in the survey matters, Dr. Abdul Aziz and Saeda Alhaj entered into discussions with experienced national consultants for preparing training modules for various target groups. This was no easy task. No one had ever prepared training curricula, let alone modules, on the subject of the interrelationship between agricultural production, population and environment. No ready references were available.

They spent two weeks on exploring various options and on further clarification of the concept within the context of the programme's objectives. Within a period of three months, all training modules were ready. Some of them focused on purely technical subjects such as nutrition, communication skills, religious awareness and natural resources conservation, while others concentrated on human and social development topics such as community participation, rural leadership, group dynamics, and youth development. Each module contained details like technical content, objectives, duration, practical exercises, training methodology, audio-visual aids, training location, and evaluation. The modules were placed in a manual form ready to be used when needed.

Zakie Mobarak, meanwhile, had been working on two other fronts, with occasional help from Saeda Alhaj and Fawzia Sallam. Those two fronts were the development of an appropriate training strategy, and the preparation of a variety of audio-visual materials that may be used in both training and extension activities. Like Saeda Alhaj and Dr. Abdul Aziz, he had also been receiving assistance from two national consultants. The training strategy was developed following multiplier-effect formula, as had been described by Saeda Alhaj during presentation at the Ministry. They developed a set of criteria to select men and women Master Trainers, who once having been trained according to the training modules, will provide training to the Village Extension Workers and Home Visitors. Those field workers, comprising men and women, will then deliver necessary messages to the farmers' groups and will also help them in the preparation of extension plans on the subject of interrelationship between agricultural production, population, and environment.

Saeda Alhaj was amused to envision that at the end of their training, the Village Extension Workers would have sufficient knowledge on population growth and environmental pollution matters, something they were reluctant to engage in. Similarly, the Home Visitors will be equipped with the information


on environment issues, and at the same time learn about extension techniques, which will be new areas of knowledge for them. It was a pity that these field workers, belonging to two different ministries, had been working separately for so many years, Saeda Alhaj thought. The new, creative strategy will put them in multi-disciplinary teams, which will be working for a common purpose. That will be a breakthrough in its own right.

Zakie Mobarak and the national consultants remained engaged in the conceptualization and preparation of prototypes of audio-visual materials. Once the prototypes were all done, they were field-tested under real-life



conditions. Just as the development of training modules on this unique topic was a novelty, the same was true for the development of extension and training materials. Within a period of four months, all the materials were ready in the final form, and duplicated as necessary. The colourful, attractive materials comprised video-cassettes, audio-cassettes, clips for television and radio spots, posters, brochures, flip-charts, coloured cards for playing educational games, transparencies, leaflets, booklets, and many others.

The Creative Extension Group now possessed training modules, a detailed



training strategy, and a rich variety of extension and training materials, and it was also known which governorates the programme was to be launched in. Now was the time to do some preparatory work in the field.

The group members were aware that they had yet to cross a major hurdle; they had to convince the sceptical agricultural extension staff for playing this broader technical role. The agricultural extension staff may strongly oppose the entire idea as they had done nothing except transfer of agricultural technology since entering the extension service. Another worrying factor was the uncertainty about the reaction of the farmers to this programme. Just a few years back, family planning was treated as a sensitive and controversial issue, and any efforts made in this area had failed miserably.

Such were the thoughts, concerns and the worries that disturbed the sleep of the group members from time to time. Such sleepless nights were no stranger to them. They had confronted them every time they launched a new idea. Nonetheless, it was indeed time of intense suspense for them.





**Chapter 7**

Villagers talk about the new  
programme

## Chapter 7: Villagers talk about the new programme

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It was a wedding party in *Qaryat Al-Nasr*. No less than a hundred guests had gathered for celebration at the big house of the Village *Omda*, Abdallah El Qatri, including men, women and children wearing colourful traditional dresses and displaying jewelry pieces. With loud live music being played in the background, an elaborate lunch feast had just ended. The guests, with their bellies full, were still appreciating the good taste of *kuskusi* and *ruz bil-laban*, which they had relished. The bride and the bridegroom, both in mid-20s, dressed in bright coloured traditional costumes, sitting in a high throne like decorated chair, were receiving gifts and greetings from a long queue of well wishers. A large number of children filled the place, running and gliding around like butterflies, occasionally drowning the loud music in their louder noise.



Ibrahim Hassan and Samia Ali got out of the noisy room and walked to the vast compound of the house for some fresh air. Ibrahim Hassan was dressed in an expensive looking black *abaya*, with smart *bulgha* on his feet. Part of his grey *sederi* was visible under a woollen *galabia*. Samia Ali looked


graceful in a precious *malas*. A shining *kirdan* hung around her cylindrical, delicate neck, with a matching pair of *halak* in her ears. Today, she had also worn a gold *ghuwesha* around her wrist, the same she had worn on her own wedding.

“Come here, join us Ibrahim Hassan”, a male loud voice invited the couple.



Ibrahim Hassan saw about a dozen men and women guests, sitting in a corner of the compound on *kanab*, against huge *tekayas*. Two robed teenage men were sitting on *haseera*- topped *mastaba*. All the guests held glass *kubayat* in their hands enjoying steaming *shai*.

The man who had addressed Ibrahim Hassan was Yousef Ali, the Village Extension Worker. Surprisingly, next to him was Om Kalsoom, the Home Visitor. Ibrahim Hassan instantly recognized all the persons with the exception of one man who was reclined in *kanaba*, covered with a light pink coloured cotton cushion. The man, who was about fifty years old, with a wrinkled but healthy face, was smoking *sheesha*. A thick-framed pair of glasses perched over his nose bridge. His lips were mostly hidden behind greying bushy



mustache. He did not have much hair and a bald skull glistened in the middle of his head. The man was dressed in dark green western suit, with a matching necktie, which hung too low and rested on his potbelly stomach.

Ibrahim Hassan and Samia Ali shook hands with every one and only then did they come to know that the stranger smoking *sheesha* was Abdul Hameed, the Director of Agricultural Extension, who was responsible for extension activities in the entire governorate, and happened to be a far relative of Abdallah El Qatri, the Village *Omda*. Ibrahim Hassan settled down next to Yousef Ali while Samia Ali found space close to Om Kalsoom.

“Sister Samia Ali,” spoke Yousef Ali, with usual grin on his face. “That day you were talking about pollution in the village and you were also concerned about the rapid population growth. Mr. Abdul Hameed has mentioned that the government is about to launch a programme to address exactly these two issues. I thought you might be interested in learning more about this”.

“Thank you Brother Yousef,” Samia Ali said with a controlled pleasure in her voice, “my husband has already given me this good news, but of course I would like to know the details of the programme.” She looked towards Abdul Hameed.

“Indeed, the programme is going to start soon,” said Abdul Hameed, taking a long puff from the *sheesha*.

His voice was loud and deep, as if coming from some radio announcer, thought Samia Ali.

“This is a joint programme of our government and the United Nations. The government has selected four governorates, including ours and incidentally, *Qaryat Al-Nasr* is one of the villages being considered for the programme.”

An instant smile spread over several faces. It was difficult for the simple-hearted villagers to hide their happiness over this good news.


“What is the objective of the programme? I hope it is not like the old family planning campaign under which so many of us received order like blunt

instructions to produce small number of children.” Ibrahim Hassan enquired, casting a glance at Om Kalsoom out of the concern that his comments might have offended her.

Samia Ali smiled, recalling Ibrahim Hassan’s gesture at home a few days ago, explaining how the now deceased religious man in the village had chased the family planning workers, with a stick in his quivering hand.



“No, it is not at all like that,” Abdul Hameed responded with a hint of excitement in his tone. “According to the brief I have received from Cairo, it will be a non-formal education programme for men and women farmers, mainly run by agricultural extension workers, in active collaboration with health and population staff. Under the programme, substantial training will be provided to these workers. In fact, I am expecting an invitation letter from the Ministry for orientation. The senior staff of the selected governorates is being invited to Cairo.” Abdul Hameed concluded authoritatively and gripping the thin long pipe of the *sheesha*, he took three hurried puffs.



“And what’s about the pollution problem?” Samia Ali asked anxiously, worrying momentarily that this aspect might have been dropped. Ibrahim Hassan also thoughtfully nodded.

“Environment is certainly another component of the programme.” Abdul Hameed responded to much relief of Samia Ali. “However, frankly, at this time, I do not know who is going to provide advice on environmental issues.”


Yousef Ali spoke at this point. “No Village Extension Worker has ever been involved in advising farmers on population affairs. The same is true for environmental issues. I wonder how the government expects us to take these additional responsibilities. In any case, population is not responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture because it is the Ministry of Health which is responsible for this subject. Isn’t it true Sister Om Kalsoom?” He turned around and sought confirmation from the Home Visitor, who had been listening to the conversation patiently and was startled a bit by the question suddenly directed at her.

“You are absolutely right. Population projects have always been done by the Ministry of Health”. Om Kalsoom responded in a composed manner, waving her right arm for emphasis, a beautiful *ghuwasha* distinctly visible around her slim wrist.

“But on certain issues, both ministries did cooperate in the past. Remember the campaigns against smoking and *bilharziasis* disease alleviation, about two years back? They worked together.” Abdul Hameed intervened. “And for your information, these are not only two ministries, but the Ministry of Environment is also supposed to join them. Isn’t that something?” He grinned from behind his dense mustache.

“That is indeed great”. Samia Ali welcomed the news. “As far as I know, this will be the very first programme where these three major ministries will act together. I am sure it is an important programme because the United Nations is also involved in this.”

Several persons nodded in agreement and whispered to one another. The



joining of three ministries and the United Nations as well could be any thing but a minor affair. The audience seemed excited that the programme would cover their village also.

“I am looking forward to this programme”, Haj Abid Hussain, a farmer in his early eighties, expressed his opinion in a shaky voice. He had a long grey beard. His head was covered with a white *taqia* with red stripes, and an old, brown blanket was wrapped around his weak physique. “However, I can detect from the conversation that there is still some mystery about the programme. One thing is quite clear though”, Haj Abid Hussain paused for cough, “I see some uncomfortable feeling on the part of Yousef Ali and Om Kalsoom to perform certain tasks, which are not their normal duties. My humble advice to them is, just wait till you receive more details.”

“I heard from someone that the District Extension Supervisor is also reluctant to accept non-agricultural responsibility”. Ibrahim Hassan, who had been mostly quiet, shared the information with others.

“I agree with what Haj Abid Hussain just said.” Abdul Hameed said putting the *sheesha* aside and combing his thinly haired head with his fingers. “Rather than speculating negatively or positively, we should wait until details of the programmes are made available to us.”

At this point, a heavy-built elderly woman, dressed in an expensive looking *malas*, with her multilayered neck decorated with shining gold jewelry, emerged from the room where the newly wed couple had been receiving gifts. She announced with shy grin that all the persons move to the other part of the house for enjoying folk songs and dances.



**Chapter 8**

Field workers' new role




## Chapter 8: Field workers' new role

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All four members of the Creative Extension Group were engaged in deep conversation with a group comprising five Agricultural Extension Supervisors, five Home Visitors, and five Village Extension Workers. The place was the office of Abdul Hameed, the Director of Agricultural Extension, who had already participated in the programme orientation session organized by the Creative Extension Group in Cairo.

Dr. Abdul Aziz, Zakie Mobarak, Fawzia Sallam and Saeda Alhaj had arrived here the previous evening, after visiting the other three governorates to be covered by the programme. The purpose of visiting the governorates was to meet the selected field staff of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Health at the respective Directorates of Agricultural Extension, and alleviate their fears about covering the subjects of population and environment on top of agriculture. They had had excellent meetings at the three governorates and this was their last stop. The group was satisfied with the positive outcome of the previous three meetings, and was confident that the outcome of this last meeting will not be any different. They had started talking about fifteen minutes ago, giving a good brief on the programme, and were now responding to the queries of the participants.





“What I do not understand is that why do you treat agriculture as a discipline which has nothing to do with population and environment.” This was Dr. Abdul Aziz who was answering a question raised by a Village Extension Worker.

“Your all agriculture depends on natural resources such as soil, water and organic matter. Proper management of natural resources is the main thrust of environment protection in agriculture. I mean, how properly you use chemical fertilizers so as not to damage the soil, and how you can stop excessive application of pesticides in order to avoid killing friendly insects and polluting the soil, vegetation and the underground water. This constitutes environment aspects which, I am sure, you are already familiar with to some extent.” He stopped and looked at the Village Extension Worker who had questioned him. His name was Gamal, in early forties, with an experience of over twenty years in agricultural extension. He was dressed in dark blue soiled clothes as if he had come to the meeting straight from the field.

“That sounds really familiar.” said Gamal grinning, a bit surprised. “I was under the impression that the government wants us to cover pollution caused by cars and factories.”


“You do not have that many cars and factories in rural areas in the first place. Let me ask how many do you have in the village you live in?” Dr. Abdul Aziz asked, with tongue in cheek.

All started laughing.

“But although you will not worry about cars and factories, there are more than enough other ways to pollute the environment in villages.” Dr. Abdul Aziz turned towards Fawzia Sallam.

“Miss Sallam, could you please give some examples of pollution that some of our villagers are so fond of spreading. You have been working in rural areas for such a long time”. He hit his pipe against the top of the desk, perhaps to reshuffle the burning tobacco.

Dr. Abdul Aziz was a good leader in any meeting. He always provided



opportunity to his colleagues to speak their minds whenever he saw one. He had full confidence in their creativity and ability to handle such situations, no matter how complicated and difficult.


“With pleasure.” spoke Fawzia Sallam, holding a pencil in her long fingers. “Let us start from farming practices. As Dr. Abdul Aziz just said, excessive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and even too much irrigation water damages soil. The storage of grain and fertilizer on roofs of the houses is an unhealthy practice. Unsafe handling of chemical sprayers is a common problem. Burning of agricultural residue such as rice straw is seen almost in every village, and you can imagine the harmful effects of smoke on humans when they inhale it.”

She paused for a moment to think of other examples and then spoke, “You must be familiar with the way the villagers use *Tera’ah* or for that matter, any stream of water passing near the village. *Tera’ah* are normally full of cattle and bathing children. Some don’t mind dumping trash in them. Women wash their laundry, and believe me, I have seen in some cases that the water from the same polluted source is used for animals’ drinking. This presents high risk of spreading diseases. The list is so long that I can go on and on”.

Fawzia Sallam stopped and took a sip of *shai* from a glass *kubaya*.

Dr. Abdul Aziz resumed from this point, holding the pipe in his right hand fingers. “Such are the issues that you people are going to cover under environment. We shall provide you with necessary knowledge and skills needed for integrating environment education messages into your extension programme”, Dr. Abdul Aziz gave final touch to his reasoning about relationship of agriculture with the environment.

“What you said makes a lot of sense,” one of the Home Visitors appreciated the logic offered by Dr. Abdul Aziz, “but how are the Village Extension Workers going to talk about population? Traditionally, this subject has been our domain. I do not see what agriculture has to do with population,” spoke the Home Visitor named Nadia Ghannam who was dressed in a sober red *galabia*, and had her head covered with blue *tarha*. She was relatively an elderly lady, well versed in the matters of health and family planning.



“Dr. Abdul Aziz, please allow me to answer this question.” Zakie Mobarak requested. Dr. Abdul Aziz pursed his lips and hinted him with his pipe to go ahead.

“First of all,” started Zakie Mobarak, “let me make it clear to all of you that we do not expect the messages on farming, environment, and pollution to be delivered to the farmers separately from one another. We want you to develop integrated messages on these subjects, because they are closely interrelated. In fact, that is the main thrust of our strategy. I shall explain because this is of extreme importance that this interrelationship is clearly understood. For a start, let me ask some questions and you please answer them.”


Some of the participants changed their postures uneasily, as they were expecting explanation not questions. A broad smile spread over Director Abdul Hameed’s face. No matter how old a person becomes, the challenge to answer questions still fills him with fear of uncertainty, just as in childhood, he reflected with amusement.

Zakie Mobarak asked the first question. “If the crop yields go up at the rate of two percent but the population increases at the rate of four percent, do you think we shall be happy with the increase in the agricultural production?”

Many persons shook their heads, but Yousef Ali, the Village Extension Worker, answered the question aloud, “No, because all the gain in the yield will be offset by the rapid increase in population.”

“Very good!” said Zakie Mobarak grinning. He knew that answering such simple questions correctly boosted the morale of people in front of him. He noticed sudden surge of interest and renewed attention among those whom he was addressing.

“Okay, the second question,” Zakie Mobarak spoke. “If the rate of population growth is very high, the villages will obviously become more crowded and then there will be a lot more people to use and demand limited resources such as land and water. Similarly, the current practices to pollute the village environment, as mentioned by Miss Fawzia Sallam, will be increased in



all probability”. He cast a quick glance at the attentive audience who were eagerly waiting for the question. “So, the question is, will the rapid increase in population lead to clean environment or more pollution?”

“More pollution,” several persons spoke the same words in unison, and it was obvious that the group of Village Extension Workers and Home Visitors was feeling relaxed. They were looking at one another with broad smiles. A bit of nervousness displayed earlier on some faces had disappeared.


“Let me go one step further and ask you just one more question.” Zakie Mobarak spoke with more ease. “If the environment is polluted owing to fast growth in population and the people get sick because of living in unhealthy environment, will they be able to work harder on their farms to obtain higher crop yields to feed the fast growing number of mouths?”

“The answer obviously is no.” Nadia Ghannam, the Home Visitor replied and the others nodded excitedly. The audience had understood the point clearly, more than ever.

“So, as you see, the agricultural production or rather food security, environment and pollution are closely interrelated. Positive or negative change in any one of them will affect the other two accordingly. Now, let me come to your original question,” Zakie Mobarak pointed at Nadia Ghannam, without forgetting where his interaction had started from.

“There is no need for further explanation Mr. Mobarak. My question has been answered,” The Home Visitor said before Zakie Mobarak could start explaining.

“Although we have not yet started training of the staff,” Saeda Alhaj jumped into the session, “yet I can give you a few examples of extension messages on the interrelationship among the three components. One message will be “as appropriate spacing is necessary between plants for their proper growth, in the same way, appropriate spacing is necessary between children for their proper upbringing, and we may add, for proper health of the mother”. Another message could be “as fertilizer is needed for nutrition of the soil to gain healthy crop, similarly proper nutritious diet is needed for pregnant



women for their own good health and to deliver healthy babies. With a little imagination, we can create many such messages.” Saeda Alhaj concluded and felt pleased on seeing smiles on many faces. Her message was not only well received, but also the participants were clearly enjoying these examples. It was obvious that they had never before thought about this interrelationship, and more important, it looked so easy and natural to them. In fact, most of them considered creating such messages a fun.

“Excellent.” Dr. Abdul Aziz applauded, and the participants also clapped enthusiastically. He knew that the climax had been reached and the participants were convinced to a satisfactory extent. This was the right moment to conclude the meeting. He made some additional remarks in the way of assuring the field workers of providing full technical support and necessary training and made the final announcement, waving his pipe in the air.

“Dear colleagues, let me conclude by letting you know that, under the new programme, the Village Extension Workers and the Home Visitors will not work separately in isolation from each other like they have been doing in the past. They will instead work in teams along with the persons who are to be trained as Master Trainers. They will have joint discussions with men and women groups, and will make joint visits to rural families. Thank you for your attention and active participation.”

All the participants applauded aloud, a solid proof that they were looking forward to joining the programme.

The members of the Creative Extension Group were convinced beyond doubt that one main hurdle had been crossed. Now the only group they had to talk to was the farmers themselves, which to them was a group no less important than the field workers.

A small feast, arranged by Director Abdul Hameed, followed the session. The menu comprised *fool*, *taamia*, assorted cheese and hot *shai*. The final touch was a most pleasant surprise - a charming tune on *naai*, accompanied by *rababa*, and both instruments were played by two young Village Extension Workers.

The page features a decorative design with a large blue 'T' shape. A vertical blue bar is on the left, and a horizontal blue bar is at the top. A grey horizontal bar is positioned in the middle, overlapping the vertical blue bar. The text 'Chapter 9' is on the vertical blue bar, and 'Preparatory meeting of the villagers' is on the grey bar. There are also some smaller blue and grey rectangular elements scattered around the main shapes.

## Chapter 9

### Preparatory meeting of the villagers



## Chapter 9: Preparatory meeting of the villagers

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*Qaryat Al-Nasr* was shrouded in millions of dust particles suspended in the air for the last two days. The visibility was very poor. Just one day before the dense clouds of dust descended on the village, a huge thunderstorm, accompanied by strong winds and heavy rain had struck, making the village streets terribly muddy and almost impassable. Then a fine spray of dust descended, which covered every thing under the sky, including donkeys and buffaloes. Cold winds started blowing. The temperature plunged suddenly, throwing *Qaryat Al-Nasr* in the grip of a cold wave. Most of the residents stayed indoors waiting for the dust to settle and the sun shine on their homes and fields. The village school remained empty and very few men visited the mosque.

These weather conditions gave ample time to Ibrahim Hassan and Samia Ali to discuss the organization of a meeting of those farm families who were inside their close circle of acquaintance. Unfortunately, it was not possible to contact Yousef Ali, the Village Extension Worker and Om Kalsoom, the Home Visitor. They both lived in the neighbouring village, which was about two kilometres away. However, given the weather situation, there was no easy way to send them invitation. Telephones had not yet reached these villages.

By now, Ibrahim Hassan and Samia Ali had obtained sufficient information on the new programme. Yousef Ali had briefed them well upon returning from the meeting with the Creative Extension Group members that was held at the office of Abdul Hameed, the Director of Agricultural Extension. According to Yousef Ali, the group members were going to visit *Qaryat Al-Nasr* within next few days to have a meeting with the farmers to discuss the programme, and most probably, Director Abdul Hameed and some Agricultural Extension Supervisors would accompany them.

This news brought great joy to Samia Ali. She was hoping that once the programme started, the ugly columns of rising smoke and the burning of stinking trash in the open will start diminishing, if not disappearing altogether. Besides clearing up of the environment, she was also expecting that the




women and their husbands will be given enough education aimed at keeping the number of children low, and one day the streets of *Qaryat Al-Nasr* will not look so crowded and congested with people.

Both Ibrahim Hassan and Samia Ali were of the opinion that a preparatory meeting of their friendly couples must be held prior to the main meeting with the Creative Extension Group, and they had been planning for this.



Two days after the sun started shining over the village and people started coming out of their homes, a meeting of five like-minded couples was being held at the house of Ibrahim Hassan.

Samia Ali had prepared special lunch for the occasion comprising *lahma*, *khudaar* and *ruz*, and had borrowed some additional chairs from the neighbours to accommodate the guests. The objective of the meeting was to share the information about the new programme so that the participants could inform the other persons in the village. In addition, any issues that the farmers wanted to raise in the forthcoming meeting with the Creative Extension Group were to be identified and discussed. Later, it was Ibrahim Hassan's responsibility to brief the Village *Omda* Abdallah El Qatri about the outcome of the preparatory meeting.



“My dear friends”, Ibrahim Hassan started his opening statement, trying to make his face as sober as possible to give an impression that they were about to discuss a serious matter, “we are meeting today to... .” He was interrupted by a loud knock on the house’s front gate.


“I shall see. You may continue,” Samia Ali got up and went to the door. The next moment, Ibrahim Hassan and others could hear her joyful voice, “*ahlan wa - sahlan*,” warmly welcoming Yousef Ali and Om Kalsoom.

All inside got off their seats, standing to greet the Village Extension Worker and the Home Visitor. They all had wished from the beginning that both of them could attend this meeting but had no quick means to contact them. And now, most unexpectedly, they both were in front of them, their faces beaming with joy. Om Kalsoom was dressed up in a purple *abaya*, and a matching *shaal*, while Yousef Ali had put on light coloured pants and a dark jacket. “Just in time, isn’t it?” Yousef Ali spoke aloud, with Om Kalsoom behind him, displaying wide grin.

All settled down in their respective places. *Shai* was served and after exchange of greetings, Ibrahim Hassan got back to the business.

“We are very lucky to have Brother Yousef Ali and Sister Om Kalsoom among us. The purpose of this rather small meeting is to take preparatory steps for a big meeting that is soon going to be held in the village and which will be attended by very senior government officials. As many of you have already heard, a new programme is going to be started in several villages of four governorates. We thank *Allah* that *Qaryat Al-Nasr* is one of those villages. My suggestion is that in this meeting we identify the main issues related to population growth, environment protection and, of course, agriculture. Then we should discuss about forming the groups of men and women in the village, and lastly, we shall try to identify the formal and informal persons of influence in the area who should be involved in the programme”. Ibrahim Hassan finished his statement, maintaining eye contact with most of the audience to note any confusion; there was none.

Yousef Ali raised his hand to draw the attention of the audience. “*W’Allah*, I am so glad to be here. I am sure Sister Om Kalsoom also shares my feelings.



By calling this meeting, the hosts have made our job easy. In fact, Om Kalsoom and I wanted to come earlier to *Qaryat Al-Nasr* for the same reason, but the bad weather did not allow us. However, it is a pleasure that you folks seem to be ahead of us.” Yousef Ali chuckled with genuine optimism. “The agenda announced by Ibrahim Hassan is good, but I would like to suggest that in this meeting, we concentrate mainly on population and environment issues and not spend too much time on agriculture. Agricultural issues are already well known and many of you have discussed those issues with me on several occasions.” He looked around for response, all were nodding their heads in agreement.

“I fully agree with Brother Yousef Ali’s suggestion,” Samia Ali said. “It is not that agriculture is less important, but given the time constraint, the suggestion makes sense. So, let us start identifying the population issues first. I am taking notes.” She waved a notebook and a ballpoint pen she was holding in her hand.


Both Yousef Ali and Om Kalsoom also produced pencils and small notepads from their pockets, ready to take notes.

“Too many children in the village!” One young woman named Rehab Esa spoke loudly, making everyone laugh. Her husband Ahmed Younes pinched on her back mischievously and she chuckled abruptly. The couple was married about one year ago, but could not resist teasing each other in public, which in fact betrayed their extreme love and affection for each other.

“Do we know the reason for that?” Om Kalsoom started laughing.

“There may be so many,” said another woman Ameena Shams, a mature person in her late fifties, trying to bring the issue back to a serious discussion, “but I believe, lack of planning for adequate space between the two births is the main one.”

“Absolutely, this is the main reason,” Om Kalsoom endorsed enthusiastically. “In old days, when health facilities were poor, the main rationale stated behind having so many children to start with was the high mortality rate of infants due to early childhood diseases. But that is a thing of the past. We now have



very good health facilities, which have tremendously improved the survival rate of infants.”

“Another relevant problem is inappropriate diet during pregnancy.” This was again Ameena Shams. “I have seen so many pregnancies gone wrong just because of this factor.”

“This is a really important issue. Most women whom I have met in *Qaryat Al-Nasr* and other villages as well, have little concept of what constitutes appropriate nutrition for a pregnant woman.” Om Kalsoom gave many examples showing how lack of education, ignorance and blind belief in traditional medicines and customs had created serious problems related to population growth.


The debate turned towards whom to blame for this situation - wife or husband. After lengthy exchange of opinions, the consensus was reached that both were to be blamed, and therefore, on population issues, the new programme should target both men and women.

Further brainstorming was done, and in about one hour a long list of population-related points was produced that, to great surprise of many present, went far beyond inadequate space between births and inappropriate nutrition during pregnancy.

Apparently, apart from a general feeling, hardly any of them had ever given serious thought to this subject. With a little effort and by joining their heads, they were able to identify so many important points and reasons which one hardly pays attention to in daily life. All felt a sense of having accomplished something important.

“Let us quickly have a go at the environment problems in *Qaryat Al-Nasr*, after which I shall serve the lunch. The topic of leaders to be involved may be discussed later.” Samia Ali proposed, looking at the wall clock, which showed twelve-thirty in the afternoon.

The lunch in fact was ready, and two elderly women helpers from the village were already setting crockery including *taba'a*, *shafshaq* and a set of colourful *kubayat*, on *keleem*-covered floor in the verandah.



“That *Tera’ah* in the village,” Mohamad Abbas, a teenage man pointed out, “That really disgusts me whenever I return to *Qaryat Al-Nasr*.” Mohamed Abbas was a second year college student in Ismailia city, and having heard of the meeting, had come along with his parents. “This is not only the ugliest spot on our village’s image, but also a source of germs, bacteria and diseases. The naked children swim amongst so many buffaloes. My mother keeps warning many women who wash clothes in the *Tera’ah* that it is really unhealthy and dangerous to put on those washed clothes but her warning seems to fall on deaf ears. It is really bad, polluted water.” Mohamad Abbas twisted his nose in disgust as if smelling something awful.

“A very good start indeed and that should be on top of the list. Thank you, Abbas, for the good input. What else?” Yousef Ali enquired.


“The burning of trash, rice straw, maize stems and other crop residue in the streets.” Samia Ali was anxious to add this particular problem to the list of environmental issues which had given her headaches from the day she had entered this village. “My first sight of *Qaryat Al-Nasr*, when I arrived as a married woman from the city, still haunts me, because what I saw from a distance were several plumes of dark smoke billowing from the streets of the village. And of course, as Mohamad Abbas said, another unforgettable scene was of the *Tera’ah* which was filled with buffaloes and an incredibly high number of naked children.” Samia Ali started laughing. “I asked Ibrahim, is this the paradise you had promised me before wedding?”

Ibrahim Hassan’s face turned red in an attempt to control his laughter. The other men and women were also laughing hilariously.

“Okay”, Yousef Ali announced seriously, “that goes on the list as the second most serious issue, although at this moment, I have no idea what to do with that infamous *Tera’ah*.” Yousef Ali took note in writing. “I can add one more issue, and that is the use of house roofs as storage places. It attracts rodents and insects to the house, which bring diseases to the residents.”

“And not to mention, the risk of fire that could burn down the village.” Mohamed Abbas added fervently.

Many male and female voices rose in agreement. Enthusiasm was enhanced



and additional ideas on the environmental issues started flowing in. In about forty-five minutes, the group had prepared a considerably long list of issues.

“I am hungry,” Ibrahim Hassan roared, getting off his place.

“Lunch is ready,” Samia Ali responded. “Let us continue our discussion after lunch. Those who wish may say *zohr* prayer. That *zeer* in the compound contains clean water in case you would like to wash up.”

The discussion on the population and environment issues continued during lunch. They also talked about bad weather, which had kept the village life paralysed during the last few days. Another favourite topic of conversation was the Creative Extension Group members whom both Yousef Ali and Om Kalsoom had known well by now.

When lunch was over and fresh oranges had been served as dessert, finishing with *shai*, both men and women said the prayer. Then the participants returned to their respective seats and started discussing the last part of the agenda - the key persons to be involved. That did not require too much thinking. Very soon, a list of the prominent residents of the village was drawn. It included the Village *Omda* Abdallah El Qatri, and the *Imam* of the mosque, Hosni El-Masri, all teachers of girls’ preparatory school, including Samia Ali, Village Extension Worker Yousef Ali, Home Visitor Om Kalsoom, five progressive and educated farmers in-charge of the Rural Youth Club, and some others.

As this productive meeting adjourned, Ibrahim Hassan asked for leave, as planned, to go to the *Omda* to give him a briefing on the outcome of the meeting. Both Yousef Ali and Om Kalsoom volunteered to accompany him.

As the men and women departed after repeatedly thanking the hosts for their warm hospitality, their faces beamed with the expression of satisfaction with their recent accomplishment. It was not difficult to guess what kind of thoughts were going on in their minds while they headed home and were passing by the polluted, crowded and noisy *Tera’ah*. Suddenly, they had to move swiftly to get out of the way of three buffaloes, which were running towards the *Tera’ah*, creating a cloud of dust in their wake. Half hidden in the dust was a slim boy holding a long stick in his hand, sitting oddly on the back of a nervous donkey, chasing the buffaloes and making noises, which sounded like war cries.