

Session 1: Dealing with Resistance and Emotions in Change (09:30–11:00)

Objective

Tackle the inevitable **resistance** and emotional turmoil that accompany change processes. Participants will learn that resistance is a natural human response and not a sign of failure – and more importantly, they will gain techniques to address it constructively. Explore further the **Satir Change Curve/ Kubler-Ross Curve** to understand typical emotional stages (denial, frustration, exploration, acceptance) that individuals or groups go through. Advisors will practice strategies for guiding people through these stages, such as providing empathy during the “chaos” phase and reinforcing positive steps as acceptance grows. We will cover methods to reduce resistance: building trust, finding and addressing root causes of fear, turning resisters into collaborators. Through a role-play or case discussion, participants will hone their ability to stay calm and effective when confronted with negativity or backlash. By the end, they should feel more prepared to handle objections, conflict, and setbacks in agroforestry change projects, maintaining momentum without alienating stakeholders.

Key Topics

Understanding Resistance – It’s Not Futile, It’s Human

Begin by normalizing resistance. Ask: “*What kinds of resistance have you observed when introducing new ideas to farmers or colleagues?*” Participants might mention: outright refusal (“*No, I won’t do that*”), excuses (“*I am too busy, maybe next year*”), passive compliance (nodding but not following through), or even community pushback (rumours, meetings opposing a project). List these.

Discuss why people resist: fear of loss (money, status, comfort), fear of failure or the unknown, lack of trust in the idea or the person proposing it, previous bad experiences, peer pressure to stick with the norm, or simply change fatigue (too many changes at once). Emphasize that resistance often comes from legitimate concerns; it can be a protective mechanism. In agroforestry, for example, a farmer’s livelihood is at stake – it is rational to be cautious. This reframing helps advisors approach resistance with empathy rather than frustration.

The Change Curve (Satir / Kübler-Ross Adaptation)

Present a simple diagram of the change curve: a horizontal axis of time and a vertical axis of morale or performance. Typically, it shows:

- **Status Quo:** initial comfort zone where performance is normal.
- **Foreign Element/Disruption:** the introduction of change (e.g., advisor suggests a big shift). Often followed by...
- **Resistance/Denial:** initial reaction might be to deny the need (“*Everything is fine, why change?*”) or resist (“*This won’t work here*”) A very Irish expression of resistance to change is “*My forefathers would turn in their graves, if I did so...*”). Emotions: shock, denial, anger. Performance may dip slightly as energy goes into opposing or avoiding the change.
- **Chaos (Satir) / Depression (Kübler-Ross):** As the change progresses and old ways are destabilized, people can hit a low point of confusion or poor performance – the “*valley of despair*.” They might feel lost, anxious, or incompetent with new tasks (e.g., trees die because of new maintenance mistakes, leading to “*See, this is bad*” feelings). This is the critical phase where many give up if not supported.
- **Gradual Acceptance/Integration:** If they persist through chaos, they start finding new solutions or seeing small successes. Mood improves, confidence returns. They explore the new ways more positively (“*Maybe this can work after all...*”).

- **New Status Quo:** Finally, if the change is successful, a new normal is established at equal or better performance than before. People accept or even champion the new practice, and it stabilizes. Often morale is higher at this end point due to mastery of a new skill or seeing benefits.

Explain that different people move through these stages at different speeds; some might never fully accept (especially if change was imposed). Advisors can use this model to diagnose where individuals or the group are and adjust their approach. For example, if most are in denial, focus on urgency and information (unfreeze stage). If they are in chaos, focus on hands-on support and encouragement (do not introduce more changes at that moment). If nearing integration, start empowering them to take ownership and celebrate progress.

Strategies for Managing Resistance

Provide concrete approaches:

- **Build Trust Early:** We keep coming back to trust because a lot of resistance softens when there is trust. Advisors should invest time in relationship building. If people trust your intentions and competence, they will be more open to following you through the uncomfortable phases. This means being transparent (no hidden agendas), following through on promises, and sometimes starting small to prove yourself. For instance, advisors might pilot a tiny change with a farmer and do it well – that success builds trust for bigger asks.
- **Listen to Understand:** Use the active listening from Session 3. Often, letting someone voice all their objections without interruption already diffuses some resistance – they feel respected. Ask probing questions to get to root causes. What is the *real* barrier? Sometimes the stated objection (“no time”) masks a deeper one (“I’m afraid of failing”). By understanding, you can address the right issue.
- **Provide Support and Reassurance:** During the “chaos” phase, people need extra reassurance. For farmers, this could be making yourself more available (extra field visits, phone check-ins) when they first implement the new practice or pairing them with a friend (maybe an early adopter mentor). Reassure them that struggles are normal (“*Yes, those seedlings dying are part of the learning – we anticipated some losses, don’t be discouraged*”). Remind them of the vision or reasons they started.
- **Adjust the Pace if Needed:** If resistance is extreme, it might be a sign things are moving too fast. It is okay to slow down the change or break it into smaller steps. For example: If a community resists converting 50ha to agroforestry at once, maybe start with 5ha demonstration and evaluate after a year. Gradual success can melt resistance.
- **Involve the Resisters:** This may seem counterintuitive, but bringing a resistant person into the project planning can convert them. Give them a role or ask for their input: “*How do you think we could make this idea work better for farmers like you?*” Sometimes their criticisms contain valid points that, once addressed, improve the project. Also, being on the inside often changes their perspective (they feel heard and responsible for success).
- **Use Peer Pressure Positively:** Just as peer pressure can cause resistance (nobody wants to be the odd one out trying something new), it can also reduce it. Work to get a critical mass or influential community members on board. As more people start to accept, the remaining resisters may gradually follow (“*If my neighbour is doing it and hasn’t gone bankrupt, maybe it is okay*”). This is where Kotter’s “guiding coalition” and “short-term wins” help – they create social proof.
- **Offer Incentives (and Reduce Risks):** Sometimes resistance is practical – “*I can’t afford this.*” Work with what motivates people. Can you secure a subsidy for participants? Provide free seedlings or fencing for the trial period? Can risk be reduced by guaranteeing that if the farmer loses money due to the experiment, the project will compensate (if such funds exist). Even moral incentives like public recognition can help – e.g., an “Innovation award” for participants. Be careful: incentives support change, but should not be bribes that are

the only reason people participate; the goal is genuine commitment, but a nudge can help overcome that initial barrier.

- **Stay Positive and Patient:** The advisor's demeanour during resistance matters. If you become defensive or angry, it fuels the fire. Instead, maintain a calm positivity. Express confidence in the community: *"I know we can figure this out together."* Share reminders of progress: *"Remember, last month none of these trees were in the ground, and now you've planted 50 – that's an achievement!"* Optimism is contagious, especially when grounded in real milestones. Patience is key – some people may come around only after seeing results over time. As one proverb says, *"the best advocates for change are often former sceptics who saw the light on their own terms."* Give them that time and keep doors open.

Dealing with Emotional Outbursts or Conflict

Sometimes resistance can manifest as public confrontation (e.g., a farmer shouting at a meeting *"This is nonsense!"*). Coaches advisors on keeping composure:

- **Do not respond with anger or dismissal.** Acknowledge the emotion: *"I hear that you're really upset and this issue is important to you."*
- **Remain respectful:** *"Thank you for sharing your feelings. Let's discuss this."* If needed, suggest a break or a private talk if the setting allows.
- **Find any point of agreement:** *"We all want what's best for our community's farms, on that we agree. We just have different ideas of how to get there."* This can lower the adversarial tone.
- **If the conflict is between stakeholders,** act as a neutral facilitator to let each side be heard (as touched on in Session 3). Remind everyone of the shared goals.
- **Safety Valve:** In some cases, creating a channel for venting can be useful – for example: an anonymous question box or survey where people can air concerns without fear. The advisor can address those concerns in a subsequent meeting (*"Some of you have worries about... here's some info on that."*).

When to Persist vs. Pivot

Advisors should also discern if resistance is telling you something fundamental. Is the change itself flawed or ill-timed? For example, if after much effort an entire community is resistant because the practice truly does not fit their context (maybe an agroforestry design that isn't culturally acceptable or economically viable there), an attentive agent may **pivot** – adjust the change approach to better meet local conditions, rather than bulldozing through. Share that it is important to get feedback and be willing to adapt the plan (Agile mindset). However, distinguish that from normal resistance which can be worked through. This comes with experience – but basically, if the majority are resistant and you have tried all inclusive methods, ask *"Are we addressing the right problem? Is there another way to reach the goal that they would support more?"* Sometimes a small adjustment (different tree species selection, different scheduling) can turn resistance into acceptance.



Activity – Resistance Role-Play (30 min):

This exercise gives participants practice in a tense scenario. Form new small groups of 3: one person is the **Extension Advisor**, one is a **Resistant Farmer**, and one is an **Observer**. Provide each "Resistant Farmer" a specific persona card describing why they are opposed. For example:

- Farmer A: Very traditional, says *"My father and grandfather farmed this way, trees have no place in our fields. You outsiders don't understand."*
- Farmer B: Very concerned about short-term income, *"I have debts; unless you can prove this pays off this year, I can't risk it."*



- Farmer C: Past negative experience, “*Tried planting trees 10 years ago and it failed. Never again, it was a waste of time.*”
- Farmer D: Community leader who thinks “*This project favours some farmers over others; I won’t support it unless it’s fair.*”

The Advisor’s task: engage in a 5-minute conversation to try to move the farmer from an emphatic “No” towards at least openness. They should use active listening, acknowledge concerns, and employ some strategies discussed (e.g., offering a small trial, mentioning a success story, finding common ground).

The Observer’s task: watch and note what techniques the advisor used and the reaction. After 5 minutes, have observers give feedback: *What did the advisor do well? Was there a moment that defused some resistance or perhaps triggered more?* The farmer can share how they felt too – did anything the advisor said make them soften a bit? Then rotate roles if time permits, so each gets a turn as advisor dealing with a different type of resistance.

Debrief with whole group: “*What was the hardest part about dealing with resistance?*” (e.g., managing emotions, finding the right argument, etc.) and “*What approaches seemed to work?*” List effective tactics they found, reinforcing those that align with our covered strategies (listening, empathy, offering solutions, etc.). Discuss that not every resistant person will be convinced in one conversation – it often takes multiple interactions and seeing real progress. The aim is to practice staying constructive under pressure.



CASE STUDY: Turning Resistance into Collaboration- Mixed Systems & Farmer Involvement (Greece/Spain)

María Rosa Mosquera Losada, Nuria Ferreiro-Domínguez, Francisco Javier Rodríguez-Rigueiro, Ana Couso-Viana, Antonio Rigueiro-Rodríguez, Rosa Romero-Franco, Juan Luis Fernández-Lorenzo, María Pilar González-Hernández, & José Javier Santiago-Freijanes. (2025). Mixing Livestock in a Forest. AF4EU. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18504066>

Georgios Mpakogiorgos, Vassiliki Lappa, Andreas Papadopoulos, & Anastasia Pantera. (2025). Mixing Livestock in a Forest: Silvopastoralism. AF4EU. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18505644>

AF4EU practice abstracts frequently highlight mixed livestock systems (e.g., combining grazing animals in forested areas) as innovative but initially controversial practices. Farmers often resisted due to concerns about management complexity, animal health, or unfamiliar techniques. Advisors addressed this by involving sceptical farmers directly in planning and testing systems, allowing them to influence decisions and observe results firsthand. This participatory approach helped uncover practical improvements while building trust. Over time, former sceptics became advocates as they experienced benefits such as improved forage diversity and ecosystem resilience.

Key takeaway:

Resistance is not a barrier but an opportunity—**engaging sceptics as partners strengthens both the process and outcomes of change**. There is a potential hidden value in resistance – it can highlight issues to solve and create strong champions once addressed.

Tip for Success: “*Keep the door open for late adopters.*” – In any change, some will embrace early, others will hang back until they’re convinced. Never write anyone off permanently. Continue to share information and welcome them, even if they said ‘no’ at first. As they observe others benefit, they may change their mind. By not alienating or shaming the resisters, you make it easy for them to join later. An advisor’s impartial support for *all* farmers, not just the early enthusiasts, builds a reputation for fairness and patience, which eventually erodes resistance.