AGRICULTURE

Extension Services and the Small Famer

Many of the problems faced by small farmers in the rice growing regions of the developing nations arise from the lack of an efficient system of extension services. In Sri Lanka, for instance, as far as the small farmer is concerned defaults in the repayment of loans has been a major problem. Numerous reasons have been attributed to the non-repayment of loans by small farmers, but the basic causes have been traced to defects in the agrarian and credit organisational structures and attitudinal conditions not favouring repayment. A fundamental drawback in the agrarian structure which has prevented the small farmer from repaying his loans has arisen simply out of his inability to obtain a sufficient income to repay what he has borrowed. The main reason for this is that his family subsistence expenditure and other immediate financial commitments exceeds his farm income; while he is unable to generate an adequate income owing to inadequate agricultural inputs. It is here that the country's extension services have failed him —the productivity potential of his land holdings has been low, with irrigation facilities and other inputs such as fertiliser and pesticides of good quality and at reasonable prices not available to him in time, while proper storage, milling and marketing facilities and remunerative prices have not been readily available. Any attempts to increase agricultural production therefore necessitates a more effficient system of extension services than what is now available to the small farmer in this country.

Agricultural extension covers those activities directly connected with the improvement of cultivation practices and is basically meant to change the outlook of the traditional farmer in order that he may improve his farm conditions and also help him to adopt improved practices and develop new skills. Extension services no doubt have created a very favourable impact on agricultural production but the exact extent of this impact is not easy to assess. Agriculture is a very complex activity with many interacting factors making it almost impossible to determine exactly what part of any increase in production is due to which variable. For instance, it is difficult to adjust for variations in weather and this complicates comparisons between different years. Or again comparisons between farmers, for instance those covered by extension services as against those not covered during the same year, can be questioned on the grounds that perhaps only the better off farmers were included in the extension service, and therefore they would have obtained higher yields. Or even in the case of the farmer who follows the Agricultural Extension Officers advice for use of a particular manner of sowing and his yields increase, still it would be difficult to assess whether it was because of this step or that he used more fertilizer or managed his water better or increased labour. If it is the result of a combination of extension services and other factors, what is the extension's share?

Perhaps the most convincing testimony to the effectiveness of the extension approach is the reaction of the field-level extension staff. In many countries they have been found to be a dispirited group, having an enormous task, with inadequate administrative and technical support and insufficient motivation. In the few instances where they have continued to show enthusiasm their services have apparently been effective.

An attempt to assess a fundamental aspect of the effectiveness of agricultural extension services was made recently in Sri Lanka when the ARTI carried out a study on "The Effectiveness of Agricultural Extension Methodology". This study found that interpersonal contact with the farmer still occupies more than half the working hours of an extension worker. And this, according to the ARTI study, was considered to be the most effective method of diseminating information to the farmer.

Among the most popular methods adopted by local extension workers are inter-personal contact; demonstrations, field aids; farmer training classes; mini kits and production kits; journals, advisory leaflets and radio programmes. The ARTI study which was confined to the Amparai District revealed that inter-personal contact, though it is the most costly extension method, specially in a "small farm — high population" situation such as is found in Sri Lanka, still appeared to be the most effective. The number of clients that could be reached through this method, however, is low and this results in a tendency to concentrate contact with farmers who show "a friendly, co-operative and 'progressive' attitude", often at the expense of those who may need the extension worker most. The ARTI study maintains, however, that though the "efficiency of personal contact as an extension method is questionable under these circumstances it could be widely used by the extension workers as a means of identifying the "key" people who by their innovativeness would help in the lateral spread of information, thus causing a multiplier effect. This helps in establishing a base for the gradual use of less personal methods", says the study.

Inter-personal or individual contact methods are exemplified by the extent and frequency a farmer seeks the assistance of the extension worker in his area, which is invariably dependent on the personal relationships that the extension worker has established with his clients. According to this study over 90 percent of the farmers knew the Agricultural Instructor (AI) and Krushikarma Viyapthi Seveka (KVS) and have visited both officers during the period of the two seasons under study. The purposes of these visits are shown in the table below.

Distribution of farmers by reasons for visiting AI and KVS officer
N = 157

Reasons	AI		KVS	
	No.	%	No.	%
For advice	116	74	104	66
Obtain seed paddy	107	68	93	59
Obtain other seed	51	32	28	17
For pesticides	25	16	22	14
Obtain fertilisers	9	5	4	2
	5	3	2	1

The table above however reveals that an equally large proportion of farmers did visit AIs and KVSs for the purpose of seeking advice when compared to those who visit for plan-

ting materials and other inputs. However, two earlier ARTI studies revealed that only a small percentage of farmers knew the AI and the KVS and made visits to their offices, while more farmers visited the offices for inputs rather than for advice.

The latest ARTI study shows, however, that the Agricultural Instructor has an average of 3,000—6,000 farm families and a KVS an average of 700—1,000 farmers in their area of operation and very frequent contact with a few selected farmers would be at the risk of neglecting those who may need extension personnel most. It is apparent that this method could result in the specific needs and priorities of the low income agricultural producer and workers being overlooked. It is generally established that most of the early adopters of the new extension methods comprise the higher income group within the village, who could afford to take the risk and avail of the facilities involved in the new technology. However, the basic question. as to whether the extension and training methods being advocated are aimed at the better endowed farmers who are usually hailed as being "progressive" has not been raised. The aim of our Agricultural Extension workers appears to be to help farmers to increase their production. These extension workers have not realised that their efforts should not be at the expense of a better distribution of their services and of improving the producing power of the wider groups of farmers who are less well-off. Often the extension worker carries on with his objective of helping to increase rates of production, but as to who benefits from the increased production is rarely considered.

Initiative stifled by rigid structures

This problem is not confined to Sri Lanka alone, it appears to be typical of the Asian Region. At a recent 'Participatory Training for Development' programme, organised by the FAO sponsored Freedom From Hunger Campaign, where participants visited several Asian countries, the role of government servants as change agents was discussed at length with the farmers themselves. It emerged from these discussions that village people often had a bad opinion of government servants. Some of the peasants whom the group met said that the officers came as masters to push and order them around. They seldom had the time to sit down to talk to them, to live with them. They came in their awe-inspiring uniforms and were always afraid of soiling them in the dirt and dust of village problems. All they were interested in was good reports from their bosses and not good relations with the poor people. The group felt that individuals in government service cannot always be blamed for their behaviour because of the rigid structures of government service. All orders come from top. The people in the field have only to implement whatever is ordered. Reports are given more importance than actual work. If your report is alright, you are alright. This being the case the field workers spend most of their time doing paper work. The emphasis is on pleasing the bosses rather than the farmers. The bosses seldom consult the field workers before laying down policies or formulating programmes. Various examples of such cases were cited.

Since there is little scope for initiative and drive, and swimming against the current is difficult, those who join the government service with initiative, drive and idealism, lose it after some time. It was felt that there is very little scope for free and frank discussion within government offices. Those who are interested in an honest soul-searching have to do it outside the office as an 'extra curricular' activity.

This problem is further borne out by recent studies on Sri Lanka. In the course of a recent People's Bank study on agricultural credit in the Polonnaruwa and Vavuniya districts it was found that the majority of farmers were of the view that Extension Officers rarely visited them. In the Vavuniya district the farmers went on to add that even if Extension Officers visited them they felt they had little to learn from these officers and that their traditional knowledge and techniques were good enough. It is possible that either the techniques of the Extension Officers were not effective enough for farmers to benefit from the new knowledge or that the officers are more concerned with the reports and paper work in their offices.

Targets

Another recent study on these aspects of Agricultural Extension, by Robert Chambers and B. E. W. Wickremanayake, published in the Cambridge Commonwealth Series under the title "Technology and Change in Rice-Growing Areas of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka", draws attention to the problems of targets and reporting of Agricultural Extension Officers. They maintain that the achievements of targets becomes "largely a book-keeping affair" and they quote — a study by Byron Mook of the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, where the District Agricultural Officer tells his extension officer *"we have achieved all our targets. Do you understand? Make all the necessary arrangements in your blocks"*. They argue that the credibility of the extension worker becomes a cause for doubt because of the pressure to falsify and invent returns and the connivance at this, all up the line. While this system persists, without reform, the extension agent becomes discredited in his own eyes, in those of his supervisors and in those of the public.

A corollary of targets is reporting. Wickremanayake and Chambers, whose study covered the Hambantota district, show how one Agricultural Instructor was required to submit no less than 29 reports and returns a month or 348 a year. New reports are added but old ones are not stopped. They go on to state that in Sri Lanka one effect of the creation of an extra Ministry in Colombo was to add to the reports required from the field. Moreover, as part of the food war there was a flow of urgent demands for ad hoc information, demands to the District Agricultural Extension Officer having often to be repeated to AIs and from them to KVs who then reported back to AIs who reported back to the DAEO.

"It would be an over-statement to say that the food war became a paper war, but the food war did add to the reports and information required from the and information required from the field, did increase the burden of paperwork on junior staff, did consume more paper, ink and typewriter ribbon and did perversely tie extension staff more than ever to their offices. Often too, in such situations, much of the extra information demanded is already available in other reports but senior officials do not bother to find this out. This common failing is remediable, Without reform the extension agent becomes a clerk."

These issues only bring into focus the urgent need to make a complete evaluation of the objects and effectiveness of the country's Agricultural Extension Service. There is hope, however, that it is been increasingly realised that development cannot merely be brought to a people. It must come largely from within them through the unleashing of their enthusiasm, creativity and energy; and it is they who have to be actively involved in the process of change.