

AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION 'MODEL' FARMER APPROACH

A 'model' farmer approach to agricultural extension is being adopted in selected areas of Sri Lanka with the objective of intensifying the extension effort. This system has been in operation for almost two years in Anuradhapura district. The aim of agricultural extension should be to provide information and help farmers in developing new skills. The methodology adopted in this regard should be modified in accordance with the local conditions and the stage of development of individual farmers. Getting the farmers to give up traditional, primitive methods of agricultural practices and adopt new technologies could be best achieved by way of education. Furthermore, rapidly advancing farming technology requires constant farmer-education which is one of the functions of agricultural extension. To fulfil these objectives the more common methods used at present by extension workers for the dissemination of information among farmers are: (1) personal contacts between extension workers and farmers, (2) demonstrations, (3) conducting farmer-training classes, (4) organising field days, (5) distribution of 'minikits', 'production kits' and printed materials, (6) use of mass media and so on.

The Method

The 'model' farmer approach is a method of agricultural extension in which the extension agents work closely with a few selected farmers in an area hoping that other farmers in that community will be favourably influenced by the success of the 'model' farmers in making innovations. In the 'model' farmer approach the extension activities in an area are centralised around a few selected farmers (normally 1-10% of the total number of farmers). This will enable the village level extension workers (Krushikarma Viyapathi Sevaka) to work with the same farmers throughout the complete cropping season. These farmers are generally the progressive farmers in the area and are recognised as opinion leaders. The selection is done by the extension personnel. Once the model farmers are selected the extension worker is

expected to visit him at least once a week on a specific day. He will then render extension advice to the model farmer. The other farmers of the area too could participate in the extension activities if they so desire. The important aspect of this system is that the farmers of the area will be aware that the extension worker will be with the model farmer of the area on the specific date and they too could contact him in case of need.

This strategy has been adopted on an experimental basis for the past 2-3 seasons in selected areas of Sri Lanka, though this system has been adopted in some other countries even earlier. For instance this method was used as an extension strategy in some of the package projects for rural development in Ethiopia, during the period 1967-1975.

The method of concentrating extension activities on selected 'contact' or 'model' farmers could be economical, especially in the context of shortage of agricultural extension personnel. A 'model' farmer is expected to lead in the adoption of new technologies. This is considered to be an effective way of spreading information as they are the 'opinion' leaders or the 'respected' men in the farming community of the area.

This method though effective may give rise to certain problems. Therefore, research is necessary for ascertaining the usefulness of 'model' farmers in bringing about farm innovation and consequently increasing agricultural productivity. One major criteria for assessing the impact of any agri-support service should be the analysis of the distribution of benefits among the different income classes. In Sri Lanka an Agricultural Instructor covers an average of 3,000 to 6,000 farm families and a K.V. S. an average of 700 to 1,000 farmers in their respective areas of operation according to the *Draft Agricultural Development Plan 1971 - 1977; Perspectives and Implementation Policies, Vols 1 - 2*. Therefore, frequent contacts with a few selected farmers would be at the risk of neglecting those who may need their advice most. As mentioned earlier 'model' farmers are the most progressive farmers in an area or in other words they are the 'early adopters'. It is generally an estab-

lished fact that most of the early adopters comprise the higher income group, who are prepared to take risks of investing in new technology. Hence the model-farmer approach may lead to widening the unequal distribution of income if the majority of the beneficiaries happen to be from the higher income group. There is also the possibility that the frequency of visits by the K.V.S. may be much below expected levels unless there is some provision for feedback between contact-farmers and higher-level extension workers such as the Agriculture Instructor.

In view of the existing wide gap between the potential and actual levels of agricultural production in the country (or the wide gap between experimentation results and farm-level yields) the role of the agricultural extension service is exceedingly important. In this context, careful testing and evaluation of models borrowed from other countries is imperative before widespread adoption can be advocated. Hence evaluation of the performance in the areas where it is now implemented should be accorded high priority.

THE MAHAWELI PROJECT

The impact of the Mahaweli Diversion scheme on dry zone cultivation is now gradually being felt. The main pre-occupation of the Settlement Planning Division of the Mahaweli Development Board during 1976 has been the selection and settling of farmers in the newly irrigated areas on the Kalu Oya Basin. By the end of 1976 about 2,000 families had been settled on nearly 6,000 acres of newly developed land. In the period up to the end of April 1977, another 2,000 have been allotted land in the 112 area of the Mahaweli Project. Some settlers are entering their third season of cultivation with the current Yala.

General drought conditions that prevailed during 1976, permitted the cultivation of only about 3,000 acres of paddy and 2,000 acres of highland, as the volume of water diverted remained low. The diversion of the Mahaweli waters to several tanks in the Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura districts had created a potential to double crop 134,000 acres of paddy lands under irrigation tanks. However, it has not been possible to cultivate a greater part of this acreage in Yala 1976, largely due to the low rainfall in the catchment area of the Mahaweli river in the first half of 1976 and a high rate of water absorption by the soil due to the parched condition of many tanks and canals after the severe drought in 1975 and 1976.

In 1976, the asweddumized acreage under the existing irrigation network and the extent newly opened in the Kalawewa area amounted to 20,000 acres. Nearly 55 per cent of this acreage is for irrigated paddy cultivation while the remainder is for highland crop cultivation. However, owing to the delay of the North East Monsoon and the low discharge of Mahaweli waters in 1976, farmers were unable to cultivate their Maha crops in time and only about 3,000 acres of paddy and 2,000 acres of highland crops have been cultivated in the Kalawewa area during Maha 1976/77.