

## ARTICLE REVIEW

by A.W. van den Ban

### Comments on "typical farmers: the strategy galjart did not explain"

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The idea that extension agents should not work with progressive farmers, but with "typical" farmers is not new. Benor and Baxter (1984:48) say, for example: "The VEW should ... attempt to identify contact farmers proportionally from the dominant farming patterns so that all farmers in the group can benefit from the VEW's advice to those who are in a situation similar to their own. In particular, great care should be taken that large-scale and progressive farmers, and also farmers using irrigation, are not disproportionately represented among the contact farmers compared to their representation among the farmers of the group as a whole". The authors are correct, however, in saying that this instruction of the people who designed the T and V system is often not followed, but instead the more powerful and progressive farmers are selected as contact farmers. The interesting question to consider is: Why? In my hypothesis one reason is, that Village Extension Workers often need the support of powerful farmers to prevent them, for example, from being transferred to a location where it is unpleasant for them to live.

The authors seem to assume that lack of resources is always a serious constraint for farmers to adopt innovations. Research shows, however, that this is sometimes but not always the case. In a thorough review of the literature Lipton (1989) found, for example, that in many areas small farmers have adopted high yielding varieties and fertilizers to at least the same extent as large farmers. Kumar and Singh (1993) report that in India farmers with less than one hectare of land use 50% more plant nutrients from fertilizers per hectare than farmers with more than four hectares.

It is also useful to make a distinction between new technologies and new farming systems. In many countries, due to increasing incomes, the demand for animal products, vegetables and flowers has increased much more than the demand for cereals. It is no exception that it has mainly been small and poorer farmers, who have grasped these opportunities in the market, see for example, van den Ban and Bauwens (1988).

It is not possible in any country for extension agents to visit all farmers regularly. The authors discuss some of the criteria which should be used in deciding whom should be visited, but there are other criteria which should be considered as well:

1. Quite frequently, it is necessary to adapt an innovation to the local situation, for example, to use for new varieties in specific locations other cultural practices than for older varieties. Often experimentation by farmers plays an important role in discovering the necessary adaptations. Hence, extension agents should try to learn from these farmers by joining their experiments (Scoones and Thompson, 1994).
2. Seldom is it possible to develop a new farming system in a research institute. This is mainly done by progressive farmers who are a very important source of information for the extension agents (van den Ban and Hawkins, 1996).
3. Extension agents can increase their impact on the farming community as a whole by concentrating on opinion leaders, who are often progressive farmers as well (van den Ban, 1964).
4. Often a major task of the extension service is to increase food production. In many countries the Ministry of Agriculture considers this more important than equity. Adoption of yield increasing technologies by large farmers has more impact on food production than such an adoption by small farmers. In my opinion this is a political decision which should be taken by the people in the country concerned and not by expatriate consultants.
5. In all countries, due to economic growth, the proportion of the labour force working in agriculture is decreasing (Clark, 1957). It is, therefore, not beneficial for extension agents to invest much time in teaching new agricultural technologies to farmers who will leave agriculture anyway within a few years. It makes more sense to help them with the decision whether or not to leave and what to do if they take this decision, but this, however, is seldom done in developing countries (Hoffmann, 1992).

These comments are not meant as criticism of this article, but rather additions to it which make the planning of an extension programme more realistic and also more difficult.

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