

Decreasing Poverty Among Farmers

A. W. van den Ban

Jayaramaiah (1998) has provided us with interesting ideas on how extension can help to decrease poverty among farmers. However, he does not mention one crucial aspect: As long as in India 2/3 of the population depends for its livelihood mainly on agriculture, most of the farm families will remain poor. In industrial countries, it is now possible to produce food with 3% of the labour force working in agriculture. It is clearly shown that with an increase in per capita income the proportion of the labour force which can make a living from farming decreases (Clark, 1957). The World Bank estimates that in 1994-96 the agriculture added value per worker in India was \$ 404, whereas in a number of richer countries this value was over \$ 20,000 (World Development Indicators 1998). Extension workers may help Indian farmers to increase their productivity to \$ 2000 per worker, but the markets will not be able to absorb a five fold increase in food production. Jayaramaiah is right that with the increase in incomes, which we see in recent years in India, consumers will eat more high value horticultural and animal products. For some poor farmers, this offers an opportunity to increase, but most other will only be able to reach this goal by finding non-agricultural employment.

In India, there are several difficulties in using this approach to reduce poverty among farm families. With economic growth, employment opportunities outside agriculture increase, but not at a rate that all people who cannot make a good income from farming can find a job or a business outside agriculture. Those who can find this, will often have to migrate to a city perhaps in another state, which causes major changes in their social relations with relatives and friends. In the village, these farmers earned little cash income because they consumed, to a large extent, the products from their own

farm. In their urban job, their employer pays them a wage from which they are supposed to be able to buy all the food their family needs. However, they are not used to see so much cash and they may waste much of it shortly after they have received their wage, e.g. on drinks. This can make it very difficult for their wife to buy enough food and other essential items for their family.

My conclusion is that extension can help to realise some reduction, poverty among small farmers by helping them to change their farming system and to use the opportunities in the market by the increased demand for higher value products. However, more can be achieved by helping them to decide whether they or their children will find a non-agricultural income and how to adjust to the change in living conditions this involves. However, this requires quite a different kind of competence than most agricultural extension workers have at this moment.

REFERENCES

1. Clark, C. (1957). *The conditions of economic progress*. London MacMillan, 3rd ed.
2. Jayaramaiah, K.M. (1998). An approach to reach the unreached farmers in India, *Journal of Extension Systems*, 14: 87-97.
3. World Development Indicators 1998, Washington, D.C., World Bank, Table 3.3.