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IMPLICATIONS OF A RECENT STUDY ON RELATIONS
BETWEEN FARMERS AND ADVISERS

by

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Surveys have been made in the Netherlands on the number of farmers who had contact with their local adviser of the agricultural extension service in 1953 and in 1962. Other surveys show that very few Dutch farmers have contacts with the specialists of the extension service without also having contact with their local adviser, but they may have had contact with an adviser from a commercial firm. Both surveys only included those who received their labour income entirely from farming; part-time farmers and horticultural growers were excluded; but certain farmers also grew some fruit or vegetables. The 1953 survey also excluded non-married farmers and widowers.

Of about 2,200 farmers interviewed for the 1955 survey, 38% said they had not had any contact with their local adviser, 28% had contacted them 1, 2 or 3 times and 34% more often.* Of the 1,217 farmers interviewed for the 1962 survey by the Soil and Crop Testing Laboratory, 55% had not been visited by their local adviser during that year, 30% were visited once or twice and 15% more often.** The figures of the 1962 survey for the different farm size groups are given in Table 1.(See overleaf).

There are several reasons for the difference in the findings from the two years. Firstly, there is an important difference in the definition of contact: the 1962 survey included only farm visits by the local adviser, whereas the 1953 survey also included other personal contacts: at the home of the adviser, on the telephone, a personal discussion of a farm problem after a meeting, etc. Secondly, from 1953 to 1962 the number of farmers per local adviser increased from about 400 to about 450, despite a decrease

* A.W. van den Ban, Enkele kenmerken en eigenschappen van de vooruitstrevende boeren (Some characteristics of progressive farmers) Bull. 10. Dept. of Rural Sociology, Agricultural University, Wageningen, 1958, ch. 2.

** Boer en onderzoek, Uitkomsten van een in de winter van 1963 gehouden enquête (Farmer and research, Results of a survey held in the winter 1963) Bedrijfslaboratorium voor Grond - en Gewasonderzoek (Soil- and crop-testing laboratory) Oosterbeek, 1964, p. 11.

Table 1. FARMERS VISITED IN 1962 BY THEIR LOCAL ADVISER, ACCORDING TO FARM SIZE IN HECTARES

FARM SIZE	ABSOLUTE NUMBERS				PERCENTAGES		
	NO VISITS	1 OR 2 VISITS	MORE VISITS	TOTAL	NO VISITS	1	2
0 - 3	27	1	1	29	93,0	3,5	3,5
3 - 4	48	8	2	58	82,7	13,8	3,5
5 - 7	119	41	17	177	67,2	23,2	9,6
8 - 10	132	62	33	227	58,1	27,3	14,6
11 - 14	121	80	38	239	50,6	33,5	15,9
15 - 19	78	61	26	165	47,3	37,0	15,7
20 - 24	66	43	25	134	49,2	32,1	18,7
25 - 29	25	19	10	54	46,3	35,2	18,5
30 - 39	34	25	7	66	51,5	37,9	10,6
40 and larger	21	21	25	67	31,3	31,3	37,4
	671	361	184	1,216	55,2	29,7	15,1

in the total number of farms, and there is a tendency for the local adviser to spend less time in individual farm visits and more in group advisory methods. Thirdly, the 1953 survey is not based on a random sample of Dutch farms, whereas the 1962 survey is. The 1953 survey is based on a random sample of farms in 21 communities from all over the country thought to be representative of their district. Of the farmers interviewed for the 1953 survey, 62% had received a vocational agricultural education and 70% were members of a farmers' organisation; whereas figures for the country as a whole were nearly 40% and 56% respectively. Therefore the 1953 figures probably give a too optimistic picture of the real contact with local advisers.

An additional study was made in June 1964 in one advisory district by the use of anonymous, mailed questionnaires, of which 60% (934) were returned.* This is an exceptionally modern district, being the new polders in the central part of the country where the farmers settled during the nineteen-fifties. Of these farmers, over 90% received a vocational agricultural education. The advisory staff is larger here than in other parts of the country, because the farmers pay on an average about 100 Fr. a year in addition to the normal payment by the government; but during the

* G. Tory, Uitkomsten van een enquête naar de waardering van "De landbouwvoorlichtingsactiviteiten in de Noordoostpolder" (Results of an evaluation of the extension activities in the Noordoostpolder), Landbouwvoorlichtingsdienst voor de IJsselmeerpolders, Emmeloord, 1964, p. 45.

last few years the turnover among advisory staff had been extremely high. The number of times those who replied to the questionnaire had had contact with staff of the advisory service was:

weekly	6 %
once a fortnight	6 %
monthly	33 %
twice a year	32 %
once a year	7 %
seldom	12 %

Contacts between farmers and advisers took many forms: 50% of those replying had received a farm visit, 59% had had discussions at the weekly market, 47% contacts by telephone, 40% participated in small group discussions in a farmer's home, 7% visited the district advisory office, about half of the farmers visited an experimental farm and somewhat less an advisory meeting. The farm visits are the most highly valued and there were many complaints that farmers are not visited more often and only when they specifically ask. 58% of farmers prefer to discuss plant diseases, fertilizing, animal nutrition and other aspects of their farm with the advisers; whereas 42% would rather discuss the management of their farm as a whole. A discussion with an adviser is considered by 55% to be mainly for advice on a special case, by 38% as a checking of their own opinion, by 25% as listening to the opinion of a practical man, by 24% as receiving a new opinion on a difficult farm problem, and by 17% as receiving the information they lack. For 69% the advice is followed more or less in the same manner as discussed, whereas 18% prefer to first discuss the advice given with others before taking a decision; 6% do not follow the advice without making important changes to it.

The conditions in the districts are extremely favourable, partly because of the open-mindedness and good education of the farmers, partly because there is an advisory staff of 25 for about 1,700 farmers. This staff also helps farmers during the first year of starting to farm on newly reclaimed land. Even in this situation only a minority of the farmers receive farm management advice, partly because the advisory staff lack time, partly because the farmers lack interest.

It is not known what proportion of Dutch farmers in other districts received farm management advice, but undoubtedly it is considerably less than the proportion which have contact with their local adviser. In my opinion, it is completely unrealistic to expect that the majority of Dutch farmers will ever receive personal farm management advice without a large increase in local advisory staff. I even doubt whether it is necessary to try to reach all farmers with farm management advice, because as a rule most farmers learn more from other farmers than from their

advisers, as is shown in Table 2, for example, which is based on interviews with 303 farmers in three Dutch communities.

Table 2. PERCENTAGE OF FARMERS WHO CONSIDER DIFFERENT SOURCES OF INFORMATION AS MOST IMPORTANT:
a) TO FIRST LEARN OF THE EXISTENCE OF A NEW FARM PRACTICE, AND b) TO DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT TO ADOPT THE PRACTICE¹

SOURCE OF INFORMATION	TO FIRST LEARN	TO DECIDE
Farm papers, radio and other mass media	70%	4%
Mass media in combination with some other source of information	5%	2
Demonstrations, experimental plots, meetings, etc.	6%	12%
Local adviser	3%	20%
Other farmers	11%	43%
Other farmers in combination with some other source of information	2	8%
Salesmen	3%	4%
Own experience	0%	3%
Other combination of source of information	2%	3%
No answer	0%	4%

1. Source: A.W. van den Ban, Boer en Landbouwvoorlichting; De communicatie van nieuwe landbouwmethoden. (The communication of new farm practices in the Netherlands) Assen, Van Gorcum, 1963, p. 98.
2. Coded as other combination.

This does not mean that if 10% or 20% of farmers are reached by farm management advice everything is all right. Communication amongst farmers about farm management must be improved. I have the impression that Dutch farmers are much more inclined to talk about crops and cattle than about the management of their farms. One of the reasons might be that at school they received a much better training in animal and crop husbandry than in farm management. Another reason is that they are afraid to talk about their financial position. Experience shows; however, that in many parts of our country it is possible to have good discussions on farm management in study groups, and probably these stimulate informal discussion on this subject, especially if the conclusions of such a study group are reported in a village meeting.

The communication with their colleagues of farmers who are reached by the advisory service depends to a certain extent on the question, what is their position in the social structure? Coughenour found in a survey in Kentucky, for instance, that new farm practices are rapidly adopted in townships where the influential farmers have considerable contact with

the extension service, but slowly in townships where this is not the case.* Quite probably the same holds true for the communication of new ideas on farm management. This makes it rather difficult to use this informal method of communication effectively in many traditional communities, where the leaders are not yet interested in farm management. There the advisers are probably most effective if they start with the felt needs of the people but try, after they have gained the confidence of the local leaders, to create a situation where these leaders discover that farm management is important for them.

Another point is that communication between the different social levels of the community might be blocked. It is possible, for instance, that only the large farmers receive farm management advice from the advisory service, but that they do not discuss this advice with the small farmers, because of a lack of mutual confidence and because the problems of the small farmers are quite different to those of the larger ones.

* The rate of diffusion among locality groups, American Journal of Sociology, 69 (1963-1964), 325-339.