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Problems of Agricultural Extension in Developing and Former Communist Countries

A. W. van den Ban

This note is written as a part of the preparation of the International Agricultural Day of the Royal Agricultural Society of the Netherlands in November, 1997. It gives my personal views. Readers should realise that other people have somewhat different views in order to be brief I will neglect in this note most of the large differences which exist between countries.

Role of extension in agricultural development

1. At the one hand it is rather generally recognised that it is not possible to realise agricultural development without effective extension organization(s). At the other hand there are serious doubt whether many extension organizations are effective at present. How can this contradiction be reconciled ?
2. Many studies show a high Internal Rate of Return for investments in agricultural research and extension. Rates of over 40% are no exception at all. This is much higher than the rates of return for most other investments in agricultural development. Most of this return is for the consumers and not for the government, which paid for these investments or for the farmers. In the Netherlands e.g. in the past 40 years milk production per man increased more than eight fold. As a result the number of people employed in milk production has decreased a lot. Most of the people who had to leave agriculture, could find more productive employment elsewhere, but this is not the case in all countries. Real milk prices have decreased much less than would have been possible because

of government policies such as milk quota. The political rate of return from various investments can be very different from the economic rate of return.

3. The studies found large differences in the rate of return to investments in agricultural extension. Probably the major explanations for these differences are :
 - Extension is only one of the elements in the agricultural development mix, which is only effective if it is well combined with other elements such as research, input and credit supply, marketing of produce, and price policies.
 - There is a lot of difference in the effectiveness of extension management, influencing motivation of the staff to work in the interest of the farmers, research extension linkage, etc.
4. Thirty years ago many experts were afraid that soon tenths of million persons would die from hunger, because increase in food production was lagging behind population growth. Instead per capita food production has increased in the world (not in Africa). At this moment again many experts are afraid that food production will lag seriously behind increased demand, because :
 - in many countries increased incomes result in a rapid increase in demand for more expensive food products.
 - much of the potential of the high yielding varieties has already been realised and there are not many technologies on the shelf which can result in a considerable further increase in yields.
 - many of the present production techniques are not sustainable, but cause a decrease in soil fertility, soil erosion, depletion of aquifers, pollution, etc.

To overcome these problems require a higher level of com-

petence among the farmers.

5. Market liberalisation, e.g. the GATT agreement, make it difficult for farmers in countries with low level of productivity in agriculture to compete with farmers in more productive countries. Often looking for a job outside agriculture is no solution, because these countries have also difficulties to compete in the world market in other fields. An increased level of competence among farmers can reduce this problem. At the same time this liberalisation and the increased demand in many countries for vegetables, fruits and animal products offer opportunities for competent farmers to increase their income.
6. As a result of points 4 and 5 the importance of agricultural extension for food security and economic development is increasing in many countries.

Extension problems in tropical countries

7. Agricultural extension in these countries is often based on the assumption that researchers and high ranking government officers know what is good for the country and for the farmers and farmers do not know this. Therefore farmers should be obedient and do what their extension agents tell them to do. The T & V system usually operates in this way. However, farmers are not obedient and do what they are convinced that is in their interest and the interest of their family.
8. Often uniform recommendations are given to all farmers in a fairly large area without taking into account the large diversity among them in :
 - size of farm, amount of capital and labour and other resources,
 - access to inputs, credits and markets and prices on these markets,

- opportunities to use their labour and capital outside agriculture,
- goals.

Most farmers are wise enough not to follow these recommendations, but they decide for themselves what is the optimal production technology for their situation and their goals. Village extension agents are often not sufficiently trained in farm management to be able to help their farmers in making these decisions.

9. For agricultural development is not only important that the farmers make good decisions on the choice of production technologies, but also on :
 - the management of these technologies,
 - farming systems, taking into account changing market opportunities,
 - social organizations such as farmer's unions and cooperatives.
10. Agricultural extension often supports individual decision making by farmers, whereas in the present era collective decision making is often at least as important for agricultural development to develop sustainable agricultural systems, integrate crop and animal production, prevent soil erosion and pollution, improve irrigation, make optimal use of new opportunities in markets, etc. What should be the role of extension in supporting these decisions and in trying to resolve conflicts between different groups and how can this be done?
11. The points mentioned above require a more participatory and less top-down approach to agricultural extension. This is not needed or even desirable to the same extent in all situations. It is less needed in situations where new production technologies are available which are profitable to nearly all farmers, e.g. when the high yielding wheat varieties were introduced in irrigated areas in India, the areas where the T&V system was

developed. It is more needed in the highly diverse in risk prone areas. The farmers, extension agents and researchers have to cooperate to develop suitable production technologies for each situation. This implies not Transfer of Technologies is the main role of extension, but offering a basket of opportunities which can be tested in different situations. This testing is a joint learning process in which farmers learn as well as extension agents and researchers. This often results in modifications of the production technologies developed at the research institutes. For new farming system innovative farmers are often a more important source of information than research institutes. A participatory approach to extension requires delegation of decision making the extension organization and hence high level of competence of the staff at all levels in this organization.

13. A more participatory relationship between the Village Extension Agents and the farmers require a more participatory style of leadership in the extension organization. Changing this behaviour of extension managers is often more difficult to realise than changes in the behaviour of farm families.
14. The vast majority of the extension agents are males, whereas in many countries most of the work in agriculture is done by women and often, not always, they play also an important role in decision making. Many extension services have not yet succeeded well in reaching them.
15. In the past it was assumed that farmers get their information for the extension service, but in reality they use also many other actors in the Agricultural Knowledge and Information System as source of information. One reason is that farmers do not only need information on production technologies, but also on markets, government policies, possibilities to cooperate with different people and organizations, etc. Another reason is that even on production technologies valuable information is often available from other farmers, NGOs, commer-

cial companies, etc. Each organization involved in the AKIS should decide which information or education it can provide better or cheaper than other actors and how it likes to cooperate or to fight with actors. In many cultures, not in all, farmers learn mainly from the experiences of innovative colleagues. An important task of extension is to stimulate and guide this learning process.

16. In most countries there is a tendency towards privatisation of government agencies. This is often necessary, because the government spends more money than it receives from taxes and other sources. In which situations is privatisation of agricultural extension or of some tasks of the extension service desirable? For this decision one has to balance the advantages and disadvantages of privatisation, whereas the World Bank often looks only at the advantages.
17. In the present era extension organizations have to change rapidly, because their environment is changing. A major task of extension managers is to guide to facilitate this process of change. Most of them are not trained for this task.
18. In many extension organizations the agents are trained in what to teach, although not always adequately as we indicated, but have very limited training in how to teach and to communicate.
19. In many extension organizations the planning of the extension programme is weak. A major weakness is often that one does not analyse why farmers make certain decisions and hence, continues to give farmers recommendations of which the farmers have already decided for a long time that they are profitable or suitable for their situation. Also it is often not clear to what extent it is the task of extension to educate farmers in order to increase their competence as farm managers or to provide farmers with information.

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Agricultural extension in former communist countries

18. In most former communist countries agricultural extension only started after the division of state and collective farms into small farms, often in farms which are too small to make a living. This implies that one has to learn what extension is and how it can be realised.
19. Most new private farmers have been in the past specialised workers on large farms, and lack many of the competences a successful farmer should have. If they have been e.g. a member of the crops brigade, they may not know what feed to give their animals. They have no experience in working in a market economy which involves e.g. deciding which crops are most profitable to grow or which animals to raise, which investments will increase profits and which will decrease costs. A consequence is that agricultural extension and other forms of adult education have a more important role to play in these countries than elsewhere in the world.
20. It is hardly possible to find extension agents, who can teach farmers how they can make a profit in a market economy.
21. Extension is based on confidence of the farmers in the competence of the extension agents and in their motivation to help the farmers to realise their goals. It may be possible to find former specialists in the state and collective farms in whose knowledge of production technologies many farmers have confidence, but through their behaviour in communist times they have often lost the confidence of the farmers that they are willing to help them to realise their goals and not to work only for their own profit. An alternative is to work with agent who left school recently and lack field experience.
22. Agricultural extension is ineffective without a good system of input and credit supply and of marketing of produce. Such a system has to be developed. This includes the development

of entrepreneurs who can organise input supply and marketing in a way which is profitable for themselves as well as for the farmers. Farmers have usually learned the hard way that they cannot trust cooperatives for this purpose.

REFERENCES

- Anonymous (1995) Agricultural extension, Swiss Development Corporation, Bern. A good discussion of the decisions which have to be made for donor support to extension organizations.
- A. W. van den Ban and H.S. Hawkins (1996) Agricultural extension. Blackwell Science, Oxford, 2nd ed. Discusses privatisation more in detail in Sections 9.6 and 10.8.