

Frédéric Prat

**T**he technical school at Matagalpa was established in 1986 as part of the agrarian reform. Its aim is to offer training which would help peasants to identify and solve their main problems in their home communities. We quickly recognised the need for a library to support the learning efforts of both students and teachers. The only problem was: books are costly and we had very little money. So: how to go about it and where to start?

Before starting, it's a good idea to check out local schools, government ministries, city administrations, associations etc. You may be pleasantly surprised to discover that the library you want to set up already exists. Unfortunately, however, there are not many information centres specialised in ecological agriculture. So they have to be created.

#### What information is needed?

First, an attempt must be made to identify precisely the topics which will be useful to the library at present and, if possible, in the future. Getting hold of a book often requires writing numerous letters, and it is a waste of time for books which will never be used.

The needs can be grouped into technical topics (but pay attention that the techniques can be applied to local conditions) and methodological topics. Information on how to study reality, to make projects participatory or to transfer knowledge is just as important as information on the agricultural techniques themselves.

You also have to identify who will be using the books, so that books of the right level are collected. For us at Matagalpa, we had to respond partly to the demands of teachers in the school and partly to those of the students (peasant farmers). It was much easier to satisfy the former (technical and scientific books) than the latter (more practical, illustrated books). But some nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) produce simple booklets, well illustrated with diagrams, drawings and photos, which can be understood by peasants who recently learned to read.

#### Where to find it?

Once the needs have been defined, the existing resources should be assessed. In Matagalpa we made an inventory of the books already in the school and were amazed to find that each teacher had his own (admittedly limited) literature but had not thought of letting his neighbours benefit from it. All these books were then lent (not given) to the library so that they could be made available to everyone.

To add to these books, two complementary paths are possible: to obtain

*Creating a specialised library in ecological agriculture with very little money: a dream comes true at the peasants' technical school in Matagalpa where more than 3000 useful books, journals and audiovisuals were collected within 3 years. This report by Frédéric Prat suggests an approach that many others could adapt to their own reality.*



Photo: Frédéric Prat

## Launching a local library at low cost

books free and to buy them. In both cases, national sources of books are often preferable to those from abroad, as what is recommended in the latter is usually not so well adapted to local conditions.

From the Ministry of Education we managed to obtain numerous school-books (mathematics, biology, geography, social sciences etc) as well as texts for adult education. The Ministry of Agriculture had simple extension manuals for peasant farmers. But we had to be careful: these manuals, although prepared by technical specialists in the same country, often reflected "modern", "intensive" agriculture of the "green revolution" style. We had to learn to say no when the information being conveyed did not suit our purposes. This applies to any book, wherever it comes from: just because something is expressed in print does not mean that it should be done. The importance of always keeping a critical eye on the content cannot be overemphasised: technology is never neutral!

Many local development NGOs publish simple booklets which they sometimes distribute free of charge. It is always inte-

resting to find out about the activities of other local groups and, when you go there to seek books, you often come away with new ideas, joint projects and new friends, as well.

At the international level, a simple letter is sometimes sufficient to receive some books. We had good contacts with the Ministries of Agriculture in Costa Rica and Spain and some international research centres such as CATIE, CIMMYT, CIP and ICRAF, as well as the FAO and several NGOs in the North and South. Wherever possible, we tried to establish an exchange: either sending in return books which were not useful to us because they were at the wrong level, or at least a description of our activities and our library and the offer of certain services (eg. bibliographical searches on certain themes).

#### Buying books

If the collection of free books is not sufficient for the needs of the small library, funds must be found to buy books. Depending on the organisation being addressed, requests for financing can be

*Cupboards to protect the books from the rats! Well-ordered books and a smiling librarian in the Matagalpa Technical School.*

made, ranging from funds for a few books to the salary of a librarian or the purchase of equipment. If you have already started collecting books, this proves to the organisations being approached that your project is serious and that you are highly motivated. Moreover, it is then possible to be more specific in what you order and to get what you really need.

Often, a practical problem arises: how to pay foreign bills? To do this, we opened a bank account in foreign exchange, which allowed us to pay in any currency. But the bank fees are high and it may be preferable to seek other solutions (eg. international coupons, postal money order).

Once this problem has been solved, you need to obtain addresses of overseas publishers. Your Ministry of Agriculture may be able to provide lists. Often, the addresses can be found in books from these publishers and in bibliographies. To be sure, it is often difficult to write a letter in another language: that was why the people we contacted were mainly in Latin America and Spain. But some international centres, NGOs and publishers also publish (and can respond to letters) in several languages, eg. FAO, AGRECOL, Agromisa, DCFRN, Peace Corps, GEYSER.

### Classifying the books

Once some books have been collected, they have to be classified so that the information can be found quickly. One practical detail: the place where the books are kept should be well protected (especially from rats!). To classify the books, you can use an internationally standardised list of key words (thesaurus). If you are part of a network of libraries, it is best to adopt the thesaurus used by them, rather than try to develop your own special system. A special thesaurus for ecological agriculture has just been prepared in English, French and Spanish by a European network of information centres to which ILEIA belongs.

Then comes the long and sometimes boring - but absolutely necessary - work of systematically classifying each and every book. It should be possible that everyone finds the information being sought, also when the librarian cannot be there.

As we did not have access to a computer, we worked with cards: two for each book. With one set of cards we could find the books classified according to subject, and with the other set according to author.

### Keeping the library going

Collecting books is not an aim in itself: the library has to be useful and viable - useful

in that it serves a maximum of potential users, viable in that it manages to obtain the minimum of self-financing necessary to ensure its survival (to pay the librarian, material costs, journal subscriptions etc).

The library needs to find ways to make itself known. At Matagalpa we started by asking the Ministry of Agriculture for books, but soon it was the specialists from that same Ministry who were coming to consult books in our library. This broadening of the group of users is also a means of selling or profitably exchanging services: book loans (free of charge or not, depending on the user), producing and selling bibliographical lists, producing texts inspired by own experience, question-and-answer service etc.

To make good use of the available information, some means of production or reproduction are needed: mimeographing machine, photocopier, even a small printing press. But here, too: be careful! You have to take into account the costs of both obtaining and maintaining the machines and whether after-purchase servicing is even possible. In the case of photocopiers, for example, these costs are very high.

You can also acquire audiovisual equipment (camera, projector, video etc) to be able to hear and see information produced in these forms, or to produce them yourselves. But that is a further phase of libra-

The full names and addresses of the organisations mentioned in this article can be found in Frédéric's longer paper. Useful information about setting up small libraries can also be found in: Eva Philipps, 1990, **Documentation made easy: a library manual for nongovernmental organizations specialising in appropriate technology and rural development**, Braunschweig, Vieweg Publ., 207 pp. Available (now also in Spanish!) from: GATE/GTZ, PO Box 5180, D-6236 Eschborn 1, Germany.

For organisations able to set up somewhat larger libraries, using computers for classification, a useful reference is: G Naber, 1991, **An agricultural library: its start and management**, 123 pp. International Institute for Land Reclamation and Improvement, PO Box 45, NL-6700 AA Wageningen, Netherlands.

If you have further tips for groups trying to set up small low-cost libraries on sustainable agriculture, please send them to us or to Frédéric Prat, and we will try to make them more widely known.

ry development, for such equipment demands money, training and motivation. At Matagalpa, we have everything needed to produce recorded film strips. But they have never been used, because slides film is difficult to obtain, photo labs are few - and information was lacking!

### If you want to know more ...

We hope that this quick overview based on our experiences will encourage others to start up their own local libraries. We do not deny that it is a difficult task which takes several years, but the results and the dynamics of collaboration which develop around the establishment of a library are very enriching.

This article comes from a longer paper entitled "An experience in establishing an agricultural library in the South", available in French, English and Spanish, with an annex containing numerous useful addresses for acquiring books and other library support. If you would like a copy, contact ILEIA, or:

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Photo: Frédéric Prat

*A display of the latest books acquired by the library. It is important that information be spread about what is available in the library.*