

Improving small farmer agriculture

- a realistic approach

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The fundamental problem confronting agriculture is not so much the adoption and spread of any particular set of physical inputs or of economic arrangements or of organisational patterns or of research institutions. Rather it is to build into the whole agricultural process an attitude of experiment, trial and error, continues innovation and adaptation of new ideas."

Food production in Sri Lanka has been traditionally relegated to a large number of small farmers whose individual plots rarely exceed one hectare in extent. These small plot sizes have frequently been blamed for the relatively low productivity of Sri Lankan agriculture. In a bid to increase overall food production and following global trends, the government has embarked on a new agricultural policy which advocates increased commercialisation of 'non plantation agriculture'.

It is also intends creating a land market and levying charges for irrigation water. Our new policy on rural development (rural economic advancement program - REAP) makes a radical departure from a poverty alleviation focus to economic development placing heavy emphasis on the identification and selective development of areas having high potential for economic growth ('growth nodes'). Implementation of the above policies would most likely lead to increased marginalisation of the poorest sectors of the rural community - viz. the Small Farmers.

Unable to survive on their micro plots of land, many of these small farmers will be compelled to seek off-farm employment. It is highly unlikely that the economy will be able to expand sufficiently (in the short term at least) to provide adequate productive employment for a larger number of small farmers unable to cope with the pressures of commercialisation and globalisation.

Safety net programs like 'Samurdhi' may provide some relief to these people, but it cannot possibly cope with the magnitude of the problem. Is the small farmer (once considered to be the 'backbone of the nation'), doomed to the misery of urban slums seeking alternate employment?

Role for NGOs

Even during the best of times, public sector research and extension has not been very effective in reaching the poorest farmers. With present government policy being heavily biased towards the more entrepreneurial farmers inclined towards commercialisation, there is even a lesser chance of poor farmers receiving adequate support from public sector research and extension. Given the will, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can play a very effective role in Small Farmer agricultural development.

'World Neighbours' - a small private voluntary agency working with a wide variety of local, national and international organisations in several countries (Guatemala, Colombia, Mexico, Indonesia, India) has shown that it is indeed possible to significantly increase agricultural productivity of even very small farmers provided the right approach is adopted. Effective agricultural improvement work grows out of years and years of trying one approach after another, of searching constantly for new, more effective ways of working.

The world neighbours approach to small farmer improvement - referred to as 'people centered agricultural development' has shown that families' basic grain yields could be tripled to at a program cost of less than US\$ 400 per family.

Even more significant, has been the ability of these farmers to continue to increase yields on their own after program intervention. In one area, "15 years after program phase out, yields had once again doubled".

A 'World Neighbours' publication titled 'Two Ears of Corn' by Roland Bunch, contains the distilled wisdom of 30 years of struggle attempting to improve small farmer agriculture in several Asian, African and Latin American countries.

These experiences can be very valuable for Sri Lanka at the present time. As such, this article attempts to highlight some of the most important learning points contained in the 'World Neighbours' publication.

Program goals

"The goal of an agricultural development program should be, on the one hand, to train and motivate the farmers to teach each other the innovations introduced and, on the other, to teach them how to improve on these innovations by themselves. In short, the goal should not be to develop the people's agriculture, but to teach them a process by which they can develop their own agriculture." Programs that teach only technological innovations are des-

igned to either become permanent fixtures in the area, or pull out, leaving the people to gradually slide back to their previous levels of production.

Start small

"A great deal of heartbreak which in the past has too often turned over-optimistic idealists into later cynics, would be avoided if those who wish to help in agricultural development could learn to be content to do good slowly."

Small and simple programs can play a unique, invaluable role in Small Farmer agricultural improvement. They can meet the specific needs of specific cultures, markets and microclimates and can build upon existing local resources such as tradition-

have done so long ago. "We should do only those things that the people cannot, or in the beginning, will not do themselves."

If we are to avoid the paternalism of giving things or doing things for people, we must motivate the people to do for themselves by creating enthusiasm.

Creating enthusiasm

Enthusiasm, in the present context, is the determination, drive, commitment, motivation and the desire or willingness to work in order to reach a goal. It is the basic dynamic of any true self-help program. It may be created and made to flourish by ensuring the following.



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al knowledge, exceptional leadership or indigenous forms of organisation. They have the flexibility to be creative and respond to changing needs without bureaucratic delays. Organising large and complex programs makes meaningful villager participation impossible. Once this error is committed, programs invariably take one of two courses of action. The first is that of outsiders running the program in perpetuity. Local representation may be set up, but the real power behind the throne remains in the hands of outsiders. The second alternative is to turn the program over to villagers before they are at all capable of running it.

"The result, whether it be a Caribbean canning operation, a rabbit cooperative in Guatemala, or a fishing cooperative in India, is invariably the collapse of the work within a year or, perhaps even worse, the survival of the work through ever-deepening crisis until the leaders finally give up in humiliation and exhaustion."

Being more flexible, small programs can change in response to villagers' feedback, making villagers feel that their participation is valuable and thereby motivating them to participate more. "Large programs run the risk of being poured in concrete before the wrinkles are worked out. They wind up either living with the wrinkles for a long time, or spending a lot of extra time and money to smooth out hardened concrete".

Avoid handouts

Give-aways (handouts) can blind people to the need of solving their own problems. "When the only progress villagers see is accompanied by handouts, villagers can easily become convinced that they are incapable of making progress by themselves. This feeling of inadequacy, in turn, creates dependency and subservience, robbing people of their self-respect."

Likewise, doing things for people, also creates a sense of dependency and inadequacy. "The 'please, won't you give us something?' changes to the equally obsequious 'Please, won't you do something for us?'" The helplessness and dependency are the same. On the other hand, programs must do something for the people. If the people were able and willing to solve all their problems by themselves, they would

(i) A program that works towards solving 'felt needs'. The people must want the problem being worked on to be solved.

(ii) The people must believe in their ability to solve the problem. That is, the solution must be simple and inexpensive enough to be perceived as within their means.

(iii) The program personnel must achieve credibility in the eyes of the people - i.e. know enough to competently help the farmers, and also convince the farmers that they are genuinely working for the farmers' benefit (rather than to cheat or manipulate them.)

(iv) The people must participate in program planning.

(v) They must participate in the program's work, so that when success is achieved, they feel a sense of achievement.

Limit the technology

"It is better to teach one idea to hundreds of people rather than hundreds of ideas to one person"

"In many cases a simple change in farming practice may be most strategic in removing bottlenecks and providing a basis for accelerated development". When we work with only one or two practices, we can select those that combine simplicity and low risk with major increases in productivity. In this way we have the best chance of achieving a high rate of success. The program gains credibility not only because of its success, but also because it wastes little of its own or the peoples' effort on less effective innovations". Extensionists teaching twenty different practices cannot dedicate enough time or energy to any one practice. Thus the people are often neither sufficiently convinced nor sufficiently well informed about any one practice to do it well.

Appropriate technology

'World Neighbours' experience has shown that the following questions need to be asked in selecting appropriate technologies:

(1) Does the technology meet a felt need?

"Agricultural programs have too often scratched where there wasn't any itching. "If people are to

adopt a program innovation, they must become convinced that it meets an important felt need.

(2) Is the technology financially advantageous?

Farmers, even subsistence farmers, become interested in an innovation only to the degree that it promises them a substantial and dependable increase in either food supply or income at local prices.

(3) Does it bring recognizable success quickly?

If a program's first technology does not produce a recognizable success within one or two years, the program may run into serious problems. Not only will the program lose momentum, but also its credibility may be called into question.

(4) Is the technology relatively free of risk?

If a rich man's crop fails, he merely draws down his bank account, or takes out another loan. When a poor man's crop fails, he may go hungry. Poor farmers simply cannot afford to take the same risks that more prosperous farmers do.

(5) Is the technology culturally acceptable to poor farmers?

(6) Is the technology simple to understand?

(7) Is the technology aimed at adequate markets?

- Are market prices adequate and reliable?

- Is the market available to small farmers?

- Does the market have sufficient depth?

(8) Is the technology safe for the area's ecology?

(9) Can the technology be communicated efficiently?

Is the technology simple to teach? Simple technologies require less time and effort to teach. Simple technologies are also learned sooner and spread faster. Simple technologies result in fewer failures and allow modification without being discarded as a whole.

10. Does it arouse enthusiasm among farmers?

"Technologies that fail to arouse the people's enthusiasm will spread only as far as the paid extensionists personally take them, whereas those that do create enthusiasm will spread with phenomenal rapidity from one individual to another with very little outside stimulus".

Farmer experimentation

Motivate and teach farmers to experiment with new technologies on a small scale, thereby reducing the risk of adoption and providing a means for them to continue to develop, adapt and adapt new technologies in a permanent scientific process of innovation. Use rapid, recognizable success in these experiments, rather than artificial incentives or subsidies to motivate farmers to innovate. As a rule, recognizable success will come sooner with crops already familiar to the people.

As farmers experience success with one innovation, they gain trust in the program and in the process of change itself.

They gain sophistication, self-confidence and enthusiasm for trying more innovations. Each step forward, successfully taken, makes more steps possible.

Critical mass

People in traditional communities are accustomed to living in an environment of consensus. With regard to most issues of life - customs, values, beliefs ways of doing things - they enjoy a high degree of consensus.

(To be continued)