

Improving Small Farmer agriculture - a realistic approach - part 2

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by Ranjit Mulleriyawa
(Continued from 12/05/2000)

This consensus is comforting, it reduces psychological tension, and it is probably an important factor in the off-observed sense of dignity and self-worth among traditional villagers. A lack of consensus produces anxiety. It is painful.

"The percentage of people in a community that must experience success with an innovation to turn the tide of consensus in favour of the innovation instead of against it, is what we call the critical mass. If fewer than this number of people in a village adopt a given innovation, it will tend towards extinction. However, when the number of successful adopters reaches the critical mass, the pressures in favour of the practice outweigh those against it. Gradually the innovation spreads through the community spontaneously until its use is virtually universal."

In a given culture, it will vary according to the influence of the adopters and the simplicity, advantageousness, and ease of adoption of the innovation. "It can be surprisingly consistent within a given culture. The experience of several programs in Latin America indi-

cates that the critical mass normally varies between 25% and 45% of the community."

Farmer extensionist

Limit the number of external professionals (program extensionists) and pay greater attention to developing villager extensionists (farmer extensionists).

Farmer extensionists have a number of advantages over outsiders as extensionists. They understand the people with whom they are working. Being of the same culture, they have a "feel" for the villagers an intimate understanding of their feelings and reasons behind their actions. Having been poor themselves, they understand the villagers' economic problems and priorities. They also speak the same language and use their vocabulary. "City language, especially technical language and that of the universities, can be as unintelligible to villagers as a foreign language".

Villagers also often work harder at a extension work than outsiders. They are accustomed to manual labour and walking long distances through wind, rain and mud - impor-

tant for working in isolated areas where the need is greatest. They identify more closely with the villagers' hardships than outsiders. They are also more accessible as they live close at hand.

Farmer extensionists also can show their fellow villagers (students) that they have already done what they are urging their students to do. When an outsider plants a field as a demonstration, villagers may say, as they do of experiment stations, "we could do that too if we had the money he has". But villager extensionists can tell their students, "you can do this, because I did it, too".

Perhaps the most important factor in engaging villager extensionists is that employing villagers is in keeping with the primary goal of our work - teaching villagers how to solve their own problems through the process of learning by doing. If villagers are to learn to solve their own problems, they, not outsiders, must be the ones who do solve them.

'World Neighbours' has found the simple methodology described above to be highly effective in improving the productivity of small farmers on three continents Asia, Africa

and Latin America. In fact, this methodology achieves more than mere agricultural improvement. By using agricultural improvement (a widely present 'felt need') as an entry point, it sets in motion a process that provides a series of skills and attitudes that will enable the people to improve their own well-being in many aspects of life - from income generation to organizational management and health improvement, and from employment creation activities to home betterment. The methodology; is particularly suited to the NGO sector. It does not need much money, but it does require considerable flexibility and patience on the part of both donor and implementing agency, and a high degree of professionalism and commitment on the part of program personnel.

(The author has had over thirty years experience in small farmer oriented agricultural development programs in Sri Lanka and other Asian countries. He has also personally experienced the realities of small holder agriculture operating a two hectare farm in the dry zone for ten years. He holds a Masters degree in Agriculture.)

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