

Extending Extension Education: New Roles for Agricultural Extension Services in Changing Societies and Economies

Prof. Milan Slavík^a, Prof. M. Rolls^b

^a *Institute of Education and Communication CULS Prague, Czech Republic.*

slavikm@ivp.czu.cz

^b *University of Reading, United Kingdom*

Abstract: The origins of Agricultural Extension as an organised activity in rural areas were in the 19th Century. In addition to programmes managed by Extension organisations with their intentions for Education, the personal relationships between some of their staff and some of the farming community led to specific, helpful advice being given to some farmers. The central, simple concept was to make the new knowledge of valuable technology coming from research or teaching institutions available to those who could use it, to make an increasingly productive farming industry. The 21st Century has seen growing complexity and diversity in what is possible on farms and what is now being done in many rural areas. The essential nature of these changes derives from the changes occurring in rural societies and economies. Farms are increasingly seen as areas of land and associated spaces, and capital invested in buildings and equipment, to be managed by ‘farmers’ through wider application and use than only in food production. In order to produce efficient responses to these changes, there is need to closely follow and understand them by all those concerned with education, information, knowledge and skills. Farms may be viewed as space and facilities for the storage of many kinds of materials coming from urban activity, for the provision of adventure walks and recreation, for the observation and understanding wild plants and animals. The need is generally to promote understanding and action by urban people who are increasingly separated from the natural resources and processes which are basic to our care for the planet.

Key words: extension, extension education, diversification, new approaches, rural community

Introduction

For very many long-past centuries, the food supply for Man was obtained by hunting wild animals and gathering edible fruits and native local plants. The big step was then taken to develop farming as an activity in which animals were kept enclosed and cared for, prior to their slaughter and processing, and in which plants were grown and cultivated in soil in chosen plots of land, before harvesting.

Knowledge of how to do these things was accumulated through observation and experience; and so Agriculture was developed as a fundamental area of human knowledge. In time, this knowledge became organised into concepts and structures that could be taught to practising farmers and newcomers. This was done formally in teaching institutions, and more informally as writings in the mass media (as literacy became more common within the rural communities) and through discussion and debate.

Extension Development

Albeit greatly simplified and generalised, this introduction notes the substantial benefits to farmers from the research carried out into the anatomy, physiology and genetics that have helped to explain animal and crop husbandry practices. Research also helped to identify new possibilities for increased production. The return on investment in state financed research and development for agriculture, was realised when possible innovations were communicated to students in Agricultural Education institutions, and to farmers, followed by their adoption in farming practices. Special Agricultural Extension Services originated in the 19th century in Europe and the Americas, to organise activities for farmers in programmes and within the

resources available. Specialised Extension staff defined aims and objectives, which were largely focused on the dissemination and adoption of valuable technology. This was made available to those who could use it.

The 20th century, and especially the more recent decades, has seen an increasing complexity and diversity in what is possible on farms and on what is now being done in many rural areas. Farms, their buildings and their equipment, are increasingly seen as areas of land and the spaces associated with them, and to regard the capital invested in them as issues to be managed by the farmers. This is through a wider application of resources than their use only in food and fibre production. It must be noted, however, that increasing national and world populations make food security still a matter of great importance. Some examples outlined in brief, will indicate how agricultural development leads into rural development, and how farmers become enterprise developers rather than solely food producers.

Examples

Farms may be viewed as giving space and facilities to many kinds of materials and goods coming from urban and industrial activity, to be temporarily stored until their new destination is organised. These materials may be from homes whose residents are relocating, or from small-scale manufacturing which requires storage. These may then be used in quantities greater than can be met by costly urban sites (assuming that these are available), and for the finished articles before they are distributed. The farmers' incomes are from rents for the space and buildings provided. There are, of course, issues of insurance and security which are new areas needing farmer competences.

Another development, aimed at a different audience, is the provision of walks both to see farming activities, and to take part in adventure walks and challenges which are set up by the farmers. These appeal to youngsters, young families and even the more elderly, either accompanied or alone, and involve supervision by the farmers. Introductory explanations and often some hospitality with food and drinks are sources of income to the farmers involved. These are examples of the recreational use of farms.

The next example is the provision for observation and learning about wild plants and animals which are the features of the area. This may involve explanatory talks, provision of information boards, recorded talks and the distribution of leaflets and bulletins to give information about what can be seen and heard. There is value in collaboration and advice sought from learned societies which are active in many areas. They meet the interests of local people in urban and rural situations. At its most fundamental level, the aim is to promote respect and care for all those forms of life which share the planet. This is important for people who are increasingly separated from nature and its processes by modern urban life.

Our final example follows from these considerations noted above. It is to create areas around the boundaries of fields, and to use land that is not suitable for cultivation, in which to protect and preserve the local flora and fauna. The areas can be relatively small. What is most important is to link them, to facilitate some movement along protected chains in which nature can be seen to function, rather than to produce separate, isolated patches.

Agricultural Extension in Czech Rural Areas

This is aimed not only at its commercial, i.e. primary-producer oriented part, but increasingly at the educational, cultural and social areas, as well as human resource development. In each region, so called local action groups (LAG) are established. LAG is a politically independent community of citizens, NGOs, private enterprise and public administration. These cooperate to develop the countryside and agriculture, and to gain financial support from EU and national programmes. The fundamental objective is to improve the quality of life and the environment

in rural areas. The basic working method is called LEADER, based on the principle from below upward. All ideas and projects should derive from ideas and motions made by local rural subjects and citizens. It represents a typical non-directive approach which is not managed by regional, state or European political power.

To a large extent, it also emphasises the active participation of citizens in local administration, as well as in civic and cultural life in rural areas. Currently in the Czech Republic, there are two contradictory trends: rural areas are becoming depopulated, as many young locals stay in bigger towns after graduating from schools and colleges. On the other hand, some city people and families with young children tend to choose a calmer life in the country. In some suburban housing areas, many citizens have moved from urban agglomerations into rural residences. Unfortunately, these modern housing estates of detached houses have become mere places to stay overnight and active participation in public life has not taken place. Another frequent option is to purchase an old deserted or abandoned real estate, a farm or a country cottage, or even a larger derelict property. What new owners, as well as native owners, their families and descendants share is a common interest in creating an informal rural community linked to modern housing, civic and transport services as well as cultural activities connected to local traditions. It is this development of a local cultural tradition on which emphasis is placed. The development of these activities has been unprecedented in recent years, and one can say that as far as cultural and social life is concerned, the countryside has been enlivened. The assimilation of inhabitants and their coexistence is a long-term process, yet not impossible. What is seen to be of great benefit is the improvement of native rural inhabitants in terms of their care for the environment and sustainable development. Social, social-ecological and cultural aspects intermingle and this is a challenge for the educational facet of Agricultural Extension.

Conclusions

We now turn attention to the implications of these social and economic changes which are occurring on farms, and in rural life, for the Agricultural Extension Services. As our title implies it is a matter of broadening and intensifying the traditional roles, rather than to completely change direction.

The networks of exchanging information and ideas need to be extended to include a wide range of professionals such as planners, media staff, administrators and architects. These can work with the farming communities to make the most efficient and effective changes exemplified above.

The creation of the new vision needed can be helped by Extension staff working directly with farmers to promote learning, and to identify the possibilities which otherwise may only remain latent.

Consequently there is need to follow closely and understand the changing situation by all those concerned with education, information, knowledge and skills. The traditional concepts can then be translated into new, expanded and challenging roles for those involved.

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