

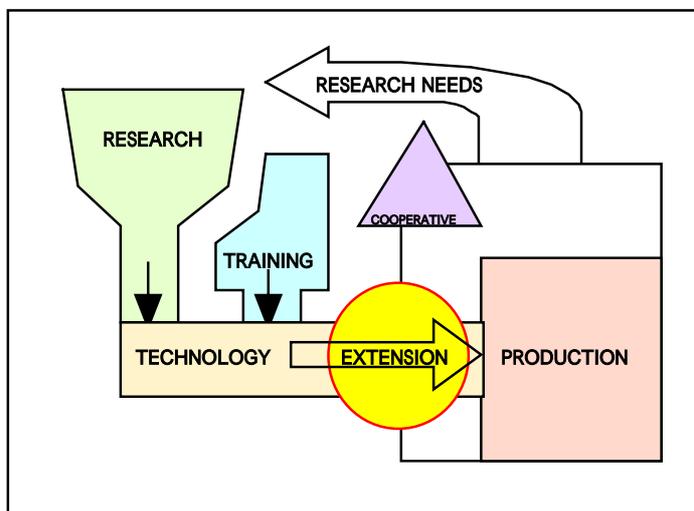
Agricultural extension and training for agricultural extension agents in Syria

Part 1: Why agricultural extension today?

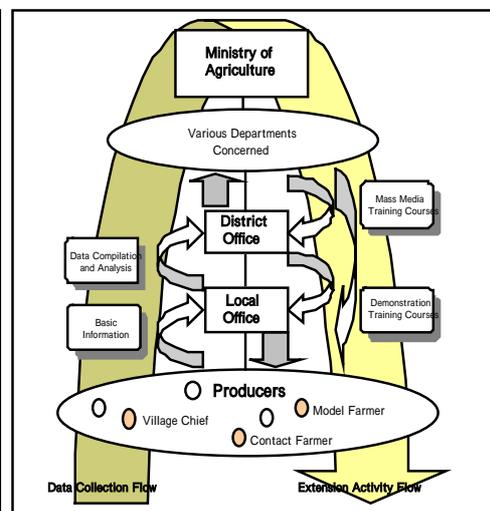
"The goal of technical assistance for development may be summarized in a phrase: "To build up people, the country and heart-felt communication." As thus stated, the fundamental objective of any technical assistance project is to foster the local manpower that should become the main actor for building up their own respective developing countries. So far, certain types of technical assistance, such as the dispatch of experts or Project-type technical cooperation, have spent a great deal of time and energy in developing appropriate technologies which could be adopted and used in the recipient country on a permanent basis. Also effort has been made to transfer technologies to relevant government officials. However, such efforts do not always produce visible outcomes, and recently more "visible" results are starting to be expected from recipient developing countries. In this context, it seems the importance of extension activities is being recognized, in order to make compatible both activities for "building up people" to facilitate people's self-support in developing countries and for producing "visible results". Moreover, while in recent years, cases for software projects are becoming priority subject of development study, the role of those experts working on agricultural extension and farmer's support is becoming increasingly significant. This is because agricultural extension activities to transfer appropriate technologies, information and knowledge to small-scale farmers play a very important role in raising their income level, which normally forms the basic priority in planning rural agricultural development.

Looking at the specific role of agricultural extension agents, their role as promoters of rural development activities by means of organizing farmers is becoming more important than their role simply as conventional technical instructors. This was also evident in the history of Japan's agricultural development. In such agricultural extension activities it is necessary to be comprehensive as well as systematic in working on the improvement of agricultural productivity and the living environment, and in the training of local human resources. For this purpose, today, agricultural extension agents often form an instruction team in accordance with the conditions and needs of the respective locality. At the same time, the importance of the participatory approach in development has been recognized in the field of technical assistance, making it important for agricultural extension agents to master such an approach. Moreover, they are expected to play a role not only as specialists conducting technical transfer but also as co-coordinators for organizing farmers. In turn, it is becoming more and more important for us to develop such multi-talented and capable specialists.

Through our development study experiences in Pakistan, Laos, Brazil etc. we have learned about various forms of agricultural extension in developing countries. There are some problems observed in agricultural extension activities in all these countries, such as organizational difficulties and the capacity and capability of agricultural extension agents engaged there. In addition, it has been pointed out in many countries that "facilities are not sufficient for the extension activities", "collaboration between the extension organization and research organization is poor", or "basic information needed for efficient agricultural extension is not provided at the ground level". Meanwhile, AAI has sent an expert to work on the project of agricultural extension and improvement in Syria on a long-term basis. This was followed by the dispatch of another specialist to work on the education and training plan for agricultural extension. In the following issues we would like to report on our agricultural extension activities and training for extension agents in Syria, and discuss the future tasks in this field.



Conceptual map of agricultural extension in Syria -

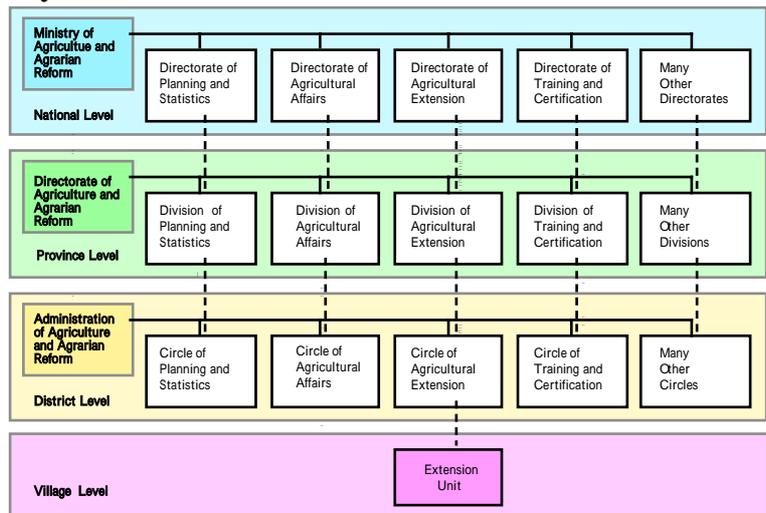


Proposed flow of agricultural extension activities in Laos -

Agricultural extension and training for agricultural extension agents in Syria

Part 2: Agricultural extension system in Syria

In Syria the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, which was established by merging the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Agrarian Reform, is in charge of the entire agricultural administration. The agricultural extension system is being set up under the auspices of the Directorate of Agricultural Extension. In terms of the organizational structure of agricultural administration, as shown in the table, the same structure at the central government level is copied at the provincial and district levels. This means, for example, the agricultural extension division of the provincial level comes under both the central and provincial directorates, as if the division has two heads. The Agricultural Extension Division is divided into four sections, namely the Technical Section, Media Section, Planning Section and Home Economics Section. This structure is again the same at the provincial and district level. At the village level, branch offices called Extension Units are placed, and each Extension Unit takes charge of several villages, sometimes presiding over as many as ten villages.



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One of the main activities of agricultural extension is the nation-wide study led by the Technical Section on various problems faced by farmers in different types of agriculture. Based on the findings they are trying to better understand the current situation of agriculture in Syria and to draw up appropriate agricultural extension programs. One of the actual promotion activities in the field is the so-called Field Day demonstration in collaboration with experiment and research institutions. On such occasions, under the initiative of agricultural extension workers, researchers and innovative farmers present the results of their experiments, and also there are some other activities to show appropriate technologies in the field. The Media Section provides various types of information to farmers through the mass media such as radio and TV, and it also conducts a unique activity in the form of a mobile theater group. The group, which consists of agricultural extension workers, goes around villages and performs musical pieces of different content which change depending on the target region and the season. The musical performance has become very popular especially in remote areas with little entertainment, and the troupe can get quite a large audience.

In this way or the other, in Syria great efforts are being made to establish an agricultural extension system, and the number of the Extension Units is as many as 800, with some 4000 staff involved. If this system works efficiently and effectively, no doubt it will play a significant role in the agricultural development of Syria. In reality, however, there are a number of problems which still need to be overcome one by one, and among these the main ones are as follows:

- * The role of the Agricultural Extension Directorate within the Ministry of Agriculture is not clear, neither is the role of each section under the Directorate, and that of each staff member within each section. Besides, the division of responsibilities between the central, prefecture, district, and Extension Unit levels is also not clear-cut.
- * Collaboration between the Agricultural Extension Directorate and other related directorates is so weak that the information about farmers' problems held at the Agricultural Extension Directorate is not shared with other directorates, and results gained by the latter are not incorporated into the agricultural extension activities.
- * There is no systematic training of agricultural extension workers, and the knowledge and experience of those staff who participated in training courses or seminars inside or outside the country are not effectively shared.
- * Due to the planned economic system, production of the main crops is still controlled by the government, and agricultural extension workers are seen as a watchdog of implementation of the prescribed crop production plan. This makes it difficult to establish a good working relationship between farmers and extension workers.
- * With an insufficient budget for the agricultural extension activities, they tend to depend on financial support from development aid donors. The Agricultural Extension Directorate, with little ownership, tends to suffer problematic dealings with the donors, and it appears to be inviting "development aid hazards".



Agricultural extension and training for agricultural extension agents in Syria

Part 3: Agricultural extension agents training in Syria

This page in the previous issue reported on the Directorate of Agricultural Extension of Syria's Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. The training for their agricultural extension agents is undertaken by the Department of Training and Qualification (DTQ). This department is divided into two sections, one in charge of "in-service training" for agricultural extension agents employed by the government and the others in charge of "pre-service training" for students of agricultural high schools and vocational schools (training for students studying agriculture at university is the responsibility of the Ministry of Higher Education.) The department has five national training centers: two agricultural extension training centers in Damascus, two agricultural machinery training centers in Dara and Aleppo, and one stockbreeding training center in Homs. In addition there are training sections attached to agricultural departments at the provincial level, conducting various types of training within the respective provinces. The number of training courses conducted under the DTQ during the year 2000 both at the national and provincial levels was 2,155 in total, and the number of trainees amounted to a total of 41,220 people:- 14,350 extension agents; 20,790 farmers; 6,080 students. The wide range of the training themes include general agricultural expansion, rural life improvement, crop cultivation, fruit cultivation, stockbreeding, forestry, environmental conservation, irrigation, agricultural machinery, bee-keeping, and computing. The maximum number of trainees at each course is set at twenty, and the duration of courses can vary from one week to one month.

Apart from those provided by the Syrian central or local governments, there are some training programmes conducted by international organizations. Currently the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is carrying out five projects of regional agricultural development, and one of their project components is the improvement of agricultural extension activities and training for agricultural extension agents and farmers. Also, FAO has been conducting a project for organizational empowerment regarding agricultural policy planning and analysis since 1998, and another TOT (training of trainers) project to upgrade the quality of trainers of agricultural extension agents since 1999.

We discussed in the previous issue how the Directorate of Agricultural Extension is well structured as an organization, and similarly the training courses for agricultural extension agents are well formed with a good variety of subjects. If these courses could live up to the initial expectations, they would contribute greatly to the development and problem solving of Syria's agriculture. In reality, however, the training efforts have not proved so successful. Why? The following are some of the reasons:

1) Means as the objective: DTQ tends to be satisfied with the mere execution of training courses, and to care less about the contents and results of their own training than about figures, such as the number of courses run and that of participants per year. The head of DTQ also tends to request donors to supply material or financial support (as opposed to technical assistance), under the pretext of conducting new training courses with new technologies and information.

2) Prevalence of "incentives": In Syria it is a common practice to provide so-called "incentives", namely a daily allowance for participants on various training courses. Officially the purpose behind this is to encourage more participation and thus increase the effect of the training. However, increasingly this incentive is making the training itself a dead letter, giving the contents of the training secondary or even less importance.

3) Lack of needs assessment: At the beginning of every year, DTQ draws up an annual plan, according to which it conducts various types of training. However, in many cases the same training courses are repeated year after year simply because they have been conducted in previous years, without assessing whether every and each project is required and necessary.

Apart from these main drawbacks, there are other problems such as that trainees cannot gain practical skills since the contents of the courses are not practical comprising mostly lectures and with few opportunities for field work, and that there is too much emphasis on the appearance and the show of the training. This latter point can be seen as a fundamental problem leading to the above three major problems, and also it is a common feature not only in terms of agricultural training but also in various aspects of Syrian society in general.



Training for farmers



Training regarding olive cultivation

Agricultural extension and training for agricultural extension agents in Syria

Part 4: Agricultural extension and improvement plan in Syria

In this series I have reported about the significance of agricultural extension, the current system of the agricultural extension system and the training of extension staff in Syria. In this issue I would like to give a report on my experience in Syria as an expert for three years from 1994, when I worked on the agricultural extension improvement plan on the request of the Syrian government's Directorate of Agricultural Extension of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform.

Although the government of Syria makes it a top priority in its national development policy to increase agricultural production, the country has not achieved food self-sufficiency due to still low levels of productivity, the increase in population and an associated increase in food consumption. The Directorate of Agricultural Extension is a fairly large organization with 800 extension units and some 4,000 staff across the country. If effectively and efficiently managed, the Directorate is sure to play an important role in the agricultural development of the country. However, at present the collaboration among different directorates is rather weak, and for instance the information collected at the Soil Directorate and the Statistics Directorate is not communicated to, and not at all utilized for the activities of agricultural extension by the Directorate for Agricultural Extension. Moreover, the network ranging from the head office in the capital, its branches in provinces and counties to extension offices at the village level is not functioning effectively. To this background, I was invited as an expert to improve the agricultural extension system as a whole, by giving technical advice and training to farmers, training extension staff and drawing up new extension planning.

Based on discussions with the Directorate for Agricultural Extension staff, during my mission I got myself engaged in various activities aiming at: (i) systematization of basic information needed for agricultural extension activities; (ii) improvement of the agricultural extension planning based on the results of the on-going farm survey; and (iii) technological development for sustainable agriculture. Regarding the systematization of basic information, we got all the extension units and the areas under their responsibility plotted on the map, while incorporating the soil map, climatic division and other statistical information into a GIS system, so that the extension staff can easily grasp the characteristics of the areas under their charge. As for improvement of the agricultural extension planning, first of all we introduced computers for conducting farm surveys and analyzing the results. A unified format according to crop types was employed for the survey, and now data could be collected and analyzed at the district, province and national levels. With this system it became easy to understand the geographic distribution of farmers experiencing different problems at different levels. Moreover, through the technological development activities extension staff leaned to investigate the problems of irrigation management and crop rotation scheme which had been causing salinization of soil, and to see what water-harvesting farming and agroforestry were like.

Though my mission in Syria was only limited to three years, through the collaboration with such related bureaus as the Soil Directorate and Irrigation Directorate for systematization of basic information, staff members of different directorates started to communicate with each other. In addition, as whenever possible I took some head office staff in the capital to extension offices in the field, it made a good opportunity for them also to learn what difficulties the field staff were facing day by day. In this way, I hope I as an overseas expert could contribute to activating the horizontal and vertical relationships surrounding the head office of the Directorate of Agricultural Extension. I also hope that the information and equipment provided to agricultural extension staff during my mission will serve to upgrade the quality of the staff themselves, and that there will be more and more staff members well trusted by farmers. And I would sincerely like to expect that the results coming out of my three-year mission will eventually lead to more active agricultural extension activities in Syria in the future.



Training in irrigation



Training in handicrafts



Training in crop cultivation

Part 5: Improvement of agricultural extension staff training in Syria

As mentioned in the last issue, between 1994-1997 and 1995-1997 JICA experts on agricultural extension (crop cultivation and livelihood improvement) were sent on long-term missions to the Syrian Directorate of Agricultural Extension of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. During this work it was felt necessary to increase the quality of the extension workers, and it was proposed to provide technical support to the extension staff training center which worked with the Training Directorate. Consequently an expert was sent to the Training Directorate for two years from 1999. His main task was to improve the training for agricultural extension staff at the training center. Specific instructions were given for review and improvement of curricula and training materials, as well as for training of trainers of extension staff.

As a result of reviewing the existing training courses, some problems were pointed out, which were also mentioned earlier in this report (Part 3). Based on the analysis of the current problems, the following suggestions were made in order to improve and make the contents of the training course more effective.

- 1) Training according to the different levels of trainees: The training course should have different contents and levels according to the ability and amount of experience of individual trainees. Also, in order to deal with varied and specific needs from the farmers' side, high-level extension staff, such as SMSs (Subject Matter Specialists), should be trained with specialized knowledge and techniques.
- 2) Organic linkage of training between the center and local areas. The role of, and linkage between, different trainings at the center (national level) and the local (prefectural / provincial level) should be clarified. For example, the TOT (Training of Trainers) can be conducted to foster high-level extension staff, who could engage themselves in training ordinary-level extension staff at the local and provincial level.
- 3) Dissemination of new research findings and information: One of the roles of agricultural extension is to disseminate new research findings at research institutions to farmers, so that they can improve the current farming techniques. To do this, the Agricultural Extension and Training Bureaus need to constantly liaise with other related organizations and maintain a smooth flow of new information. This should be reflected in their training courses as well.

Based on these suggestions some new training courses were drawn up and conducted in an effort to make them more practical and meaningful. As computers have started to be used more and more widely in Syria, there was strong demand for computer training related to agricultural extension activities. Therefore, a new training course was carried out with the counterparts, focusing on using statistical data, making promotional pamphlets and creating simple databases etc. Moreover, for a country with a vast portion of semi-arid land, sustainable agricultural development, which considers environmental conservation, is a very important theme. Therefore, a training course on environmental conservation was also conducted. Also as the first stage of the SMS training course, a new course was established with support from short-term experts focusing on cultivation of fruit trees, one of the most important agricultural products of the country.

Though the two-year mission was very short, what we tried to stress to the counterparts and training participants throughout the planning and implementation of new training courses was the importance and joy of thinking with their own heads and hands. One of the immediate future tasks may be to consider introducing some evaluation system and certification system, because at the moment the quantity (e.g. the numbers of training session conducted, of number of days they lasted and the number of participants) rather than quality (specific achievements) is more appreciated. Also, in order to encourage the staff's active participation and to increase the effect of training, it is important to create some sort of incentive. For this purpose, for instance the salary scheme may be reviewed to allow pay rises for those who received certain certificates after training. It is also necessary to assess the very needs of such training, which is linked to the basis of the training planning, asking why certain training is necessary. Therefore, workshops or training courses are also needed on conducting such needs assessment / surveys with the PRA method.



Using computer for agricultural extension activities



SMS training course by a fruit tree cultivation expert



Making a map for a better understanding of the region

Agricultural Extension and Training for Extension Workers in Syria

Part 6: The future of agricultural extension and extension staff training - the common problems and the prospect of extension -

In recent years as the focus of development aid projects has shifted from 'hard' to 'soft', the training of extension staff in the field of agriculture and rural development has become a very important theme. At the same time, however, such common problems as the incapability of the extension staff, insufficient facilities and equipment needed for extension activities, the vulnerable linkage between extension activities and research etc., have not yet been solved in many developing countries including Syria. In the final part of this series we would like to ask the question as to whether there is any concrete and effective remedy for such problems.

First of all, is there any problem in the current agricultural extension system itself? Will the traditional existing system keep functioning effectively in the future? The same shortfalls have long been pointed out about the system. Then, isn't it the case that there are some problems in the very current extension system / method itself? Take the example of the agricultural extension system in Syria. The number of extension staff is greater than 5,000, and at a glance it looks like a well organized system. What about the reality though? Aren't there some unattainable unrealistic preconditions for this system to function well? Then, isn't there any realistic and specific solution? Let us think of some.

1) Separation of extension staff into 'Specialist' and 'Generalist' categories

It would be useful to create two different categories of extension staff, that is: the senior extension staff who are trained in good technologies for specific matters (thus called SMS: Subject Matter Specialists), and who would lead farmers and other ordinary extension staff; and the Generalist staff who would act as village development co-ordinators; not employing specialized technologies but rather applying their general overall knowledge. Different types of training should be conducted for these two types of extension staff. This is to solve the problem of the lack of capacity of the extension staff. It is necessary to give the most appropriate training according to each trainee's ability and needs, rather than to give the same sort of training to everybody.

2) Learning from successful farmers in the locality (Farmer-to-Farmer Extension)

In general, farmers are conservative people who are reluctant to change their traditional methods or to try something new. However, if they are shown that a certain method is beneficial and profitable for them, they will introduce the same system without being forced to do so. Especially when farmers themselves try out some new technology and it turns out to be successful, other farmers will readily follow suit. Often that is the most realistic, non-text-type technique of extension, without any incomprehensible special terminology. What is to be learned is already there in front of their eyes. Often such technology and information that proves to be acceptable for the farmers spreads by word of mouth. Sometimes such a pretext as "there are not enough motorbikes" is used for unsuccessful extension activities. However, if that is a problem, then another method of information/technology transfer which doesn't require such modes of transportation should be used.

3) Charge for the agricultural extension service (privatisation or creation of incentives)

In addition to the insufficiency of equipment for agricultural extension activities, the low salary level is another main reason for extension staff's complaints in many developing countries. In principle, agricultural extension activities are free of charge and are conducted as a public service. This said, there is a need for the system to give some further income for extension staff with their special abilities and technology/techniques. In Syria most civil servants have second jobs. For instance, after working at the Irrigation Bureau during the daytime, one of the staff members works as an irrigation-related consultant in the evening, planning irrigation facilities or giving technical advice. If the technical ability of agricultural extension workers leads to additional income, that would give a good incentive for extension staff to increase their knowledge and technologies. And this in turn may lead to the development of new technologies that are actually useful for farmers.



Training for farmers (Syria)



**Learning from a successful farmer
(Zimbabwe)**



PRA survey (Laos)