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# Recent Public Policies and the Small Farmer

*By W. L. Turner*

Considerable attention is being given to the small farmer and his problems. In recent months, the President of the United States, Congressmen, agricultural editors, research and extension workers in agriculture, and many others have focused attention on the small farmer and his low earnings.

On January 9, 1956, President Eisenhower's message to Congress included a special request to Congress entitled, "Rural Development Program," asking for an assistance program for low-income farmers. His message pointed out that the chief beneficiaries of our farm programs have been the two million larger, more productive farm units and that production on approximately three million other farms is so limited that the families thereon benefit only in small degrees. He pointed out that, despite limited assistance and appropriations, interest in this program was so great that pilot work was under way in over 30 counties throughout the country and in more than one-half of the states.

During the last few days of Congress, money was appropriated for a rural development program providing for work in pilot counties. Section 8-A of the Rural Development Act lists the following examples or circumstances which indicate the nature of the "disadvantaged areas" where work is to be done.

1. There is concentration of farm families on farms either too small or too unproductive or both.
2. Such farm operators because of limited productivity are unable to make adjustments required to make profitable operations.
3. Capacity of the existing farm unit does not permit profitable employment of available labor.
4. Because of limited resources, many of these families are not able to make full use of current Extension programs designed for families operating economic units, nor are Extension facilities adequate to provide assistance needed to produce desirable results.

The question may be raised — do we have a small farm problem? Suppose we review the facts and figures briefly.

In the United States, there were roughly 5.4 million farm operator families in 1950 (Table 1). Of these, about 1.5 million had cash incomes for the entire family under \$1,000 a year. About 3.3 million had gross sales of farm products of less than \$2,500 a year. Low-income farms are found in all parts of the United States, but the most serious

areas of low farm income are in the South and the Appalachian Ozark mountain regions.

In 1950 less than a fifth of the farms in these areas produced and sold \$2,500 worth of products. The investment in land and buildings is only about one-third that of the rest of the country. Cropland averages only 40 acres, compared with 120 acres outside these areas. Eight percent of all sharecroppers in the country are located in the areas. Only a third of the farms in the areas reported tractors in 1949 in contrast with three-fourths of the commercial farms in the rest of the country reporting one or more tractors. In the problem areas, farmers have completed an average of only 7 years of school, and only 1 out of 10 is a high school graduate, whereas farmers in the nation average 8.5 years of school, and 1 out of 4 is a high school graduate.

The small farm problem and low incomes exist in every state in the problem areas. In North Carolina, in 1950, 56 percent of the farm families had net incomes of less than \$1,500. The number of disadvantaged farms has increased considerably since 1950 due to substantial decreases in the acreage of tobacco, cotton, and peanuts, which altogether supply about three-fourths of the gross agricultural farm income of the state.

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF FARM OPERATOR FAMILIES WITH SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS, CLASSIFIED BY NET FAMILY INCOMES, UNITED STATES, 1950<sup>1</sup>

Type of Farm Family	Total	Net Cash Family Income from All Sources	
		Under \$2,000	Under \$1,000
	<i>Thousands</i>	<i>Thousands</i>	<i>Thousands</i>
All farm operator families	5,379	2,849	1,513
Farm operator families on small farms <sup>2</sup>	3,287	2,145	1,269
Farm operator families on small farms with heads under 65	2,680	1,691	943
Families with operator working off farm 100 days or more	1,091	404	156
Families with operator working off farm less than 100 days	1,589	1,287	787

<sup>1</sup>Derived from "Farms and Farm People," a Special Cooperative Report, U. S. Department of Commerce and U. S. Department of Agriculture, June 1953.

<sup>2</sup>Farms where the gross sales of farm products were less than \$2,500 in 1949.

## **EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM FOR LOW-INCOME FARM FAMILIES IN NORTH CAROLINA**

Two more or less experimental extension activities have been conducted in North Carolina during the past ten years — the Clay County and Edgecombe County projects. The experience with these activities indicates that the Extension Service can give material assistance to low-income families. The most recent activities are the farm and home development work conducted during the past two years, and the rural development program, which is just getting under way.

### **Clay County**

Clay County, one of North Carolina's most inaccessible mountain areas, was considered very backward in 1940. Average cash receipts per farm were only \$92, and there was no opportunity within the county for nonfarm employment. Clay County had 1,097 farms averaging 55.2 acres per farm. Farming was almost entirely of a subsistence nature. The total fertilizer used in 1942 was 120 tons. Many of the steep hillsides were unwisely planted to row crops, predominately corn. Average per-acre corn yield was 17.7 bushels. Average hay yield was 1.2 tons. Other crop yields were in proportion. There was no alfalfa or improved pasture. Only 74 dwellings had electric lights. There were 30 trucks, 12 tractors, and 145 automobiles on farms. Of the 1,401 occupied dwellings, only 92 had running water, 36 tubs or showers, and one central heating. In 1940, 370 families were on the public welfare rolls.

In 1941, the county government voted against appropriating salaries for an extension staff. Four experienced workers, two men and two women, who had an exceptional record of getting farm people to work together, were sent to the county in 1942. Clay County was to become a "pilot" county in intensive farm and home educational work.

The extension team led in the organization of the thirteen communities, and each community worked with the agents in developing plans for the community, home, and farm. Each community elected a committee to serve on a county planning organization. While community organizations were set up, they were used primarily as planning devices. The major extension methods were visits to farms and homes to help the individual families prepare farm and home plans.

From 1942 to 1946, primary efforts were devoted to building the soil, producing food, participating in wartime drives and activities, creating a desire for better living, and developing leaders. In 1946, all farms in the county were divided into four groups according to

size, and representatives of the different groups met with the extension team and specialists to appraise their situation and make plans for improving it. With an abundance of technical help available, the farm people of Clay County suggested plans for individual farms in each group and guided the implementation of the plans. These planning sessions indicated that dairying, poultry, and vegetable production offered the greatest opportunities for farm income in the county.

From 1940 to 1953, average cash receipts per farm increased from \$92 to \$1,870. This was accomplished by expanding production of hatching eggs and milk from enough for home use to commercial production. Row crops were greatly reduced. The county now has 3,200 acres of improved pasture. Corn yields averaged 51 bushels per acre in the favorable season of 1948, which is almost triple the 1940 average. Hay yields increased from 1.2 tons to 2.5 tons per acre. The county now has 58 Grade-A dairies and 335 commercial poultry flocks. Where there was but one purebred beef bull in the county in 1940 (and it was owned by the bank), there are now 15.

Farm homes with electricity increased from 7 percent to 98 percent. The number of tractors increased from 12 to 200, mechanical refrigerators from 55 to 660, and homes with running water from 92 to 630.

Only one family is now on public welfare. Thirty-two churches have been rebuilt or remodeled. Hayesville, the county seat, razed 12 dilapidated buildings in the county square and erected modern business buildings.

Agricultural industries, including a dairy processing plant, hatchery, and feed mill, have come into the county. Dependable markets have been developed for milk, eggs, and chickens.

The Clay County agents used the intensive unit approach, which is now known as farm and home development. They found through trial and error that it was the only feasible approach in Clay County.

The agents helped 831 of the 1,065 farm families draft farm plans. Each family was visited several times while plans were being prepared, and many additional visits have been required to help farmers adopt the plans.

In addition meetings have been held with small groups in homes throughout the county.

### **Edgecombe County**

Edgecombe County is quite a contrast to Clay County. It is in the heart of the fertile and productive coastal plains. It has large acreages

of tobacco, peanuts, cotton, and corn as well as hogs and beef cattle.

While the county gross sales are high, Edgecombe County has a problem of low-income farmers. The agriculture is organized into plantations. Seventy-eight percent of the approximately 4,000 farm families are tenants, and most of the tenants are really classified as sharecroppers. The majority of the sharecroppers are low-income families.

Extension leaders met with local leaders in 1946 to discuss plans for improving conditions. This group decided to begin with an experimental program for sharecropper families. A team of an assistant farm agent and an assistant home agent was employed in the county. Twelve landlords with a total of 119 sharecroppers on their farms agreed to cooperate. The peak load was carried during 1951, when the agents were working with 16 landlords and 158 sharecroppers. Some plantations are dropped each year and others are added.

The agents were to contact each family once a month. About half of the contacts were visits to the sharecropper home and farm, usually with the landlord. Each January and February a simple plan was prepared with the sharecropper. This included crop acreages, fertilization, home food production, and plans for better family living, including health and sanitation. Several of the monthly contacts were meetings held on each plantation, often in the landlord's home or in a barn, or in some other out-building. If there was no visit or meeting, a circular letter was sent to each family. Most of the meetings have been devoted to method demonstrations.

Net cash incomes of the cooperating families have not increased substantially, but improvement in family living has been truly amazing. The families have better diets, make better use of family income, have many home appliances, produce much more of their home food supply, are healthier, and have better family relations.

Landlords have cooperated in substantially improving housing and surroundings. The sharecroppers have changed their attitudes and are better citizens.

Incomes have been improved some, largely through the use of better production methods and the addition of new skills. A few individual sharecroppers, and all sharecroppers on one big plantation, have raised net incomes until they are no longer low-income families.

The important point of the work in Edgecombe County is that it has proved that the situation of people at the bottom of the economic ladder can be improved substantially through an intensive educational program. The fact that almost 100 percent of the fam-

ilies made adjustments in family living, which is the area they do control, is further proof that these families will improve their economic and social position.

### **Farm and Home Development**

North Carolina's concept of farm and home development and objectives for this work are somewhat different from some other states. This program is considered an extension method which includes two somewhat unique elements. First, it involves personal work with the family, with at least part of the individual contacts being made on the farm. Other contacts with the family are made in groups and through mass media. Second, a unit approach is used. The unit is the family and its resources. The unit approach simply means helping solve problems, or achieve goals of the family.

Two groups of objectives for farm and home development have been set forth. The first deals with farm people, the second with the Extension Service. The objective of farm and home development in regard to farm people is to help families increase incomes and levels of living, through: (1) teaching and encouraging the adoption of new technology, (2) optimum allocation of resources, and (3) use of sound business methods.

The objectives of farm and home development in regard to the Extension Service are to strengthen and to redirect our efforts so that more people may be assisted in attaining the level of living that is potentially possible.

Many of the families included in the farm and home development program are low-income families. The agents quickly learn not to tell the families that they have been selected for participation in a special project, because this often causes them to refuse help. Most farm and home development agents approach new families by simply dropping in for a visit and commenting that since more help has been added in the Extension office, they now have time to visit farmers. Most likely an agent strikes a cord which will open the door for a return visit. After confidence has been established, the agents will, on an informal basis, examine the total farm and home situation and help to identify the problem the farmer faces.

Farm families, particularly low-income families, do not always recognize their major problems. Sometimes when a problem has been identified the farmer can supply the answer. More often the agents may need to help families outline alternative solutions and help them appraise these. Once a family selects an alternative solution, the agents must follow through in helping the family put the plan into

effect. This includes teaching the families new skills, helping to identify and correct mistakes, and perhaps equally important, providing encouragement. The most important thing is to get the farm family to analyze, to think, to plan, and to act.

## **Rural Development**

Section 8(c) of the Rural Development Act, authorizing rural development, has the following to say concerning Extension's responsibility:

Assistance shall include one or more of the following:

1. Intensive on-the-farm educational assistance to the farm family in appraising and resolving its problems.
2. Assistance in counseling local groups, and appraising resources for capability of improvement in agriculture or introducing industry designed to supplement farm income.
3. Cooperation with other agencies and groups in furnishing all possible information as to existing employment opportunities, particularly to the farm families having other underemployed workers.
4. In cases where farm families, after analysis of its opportunities and existing resources finds it advisable to seek a new farm venture, the providing of information, advice, and counsel in connection with making such change.

To learn more about economic development under diverse conditions, the North Carolina Rural Development Committee has recommended that work be undertaken in three "pilot" counties. These counties are: Bertle County in the old plantation section of the Coastal Plains, Anson County in the Piedmont, and Watauga County in the mountains. The purpose of this project is to provide assistance to disadvantaged areas and disadvantaged rural families in order that they may achieve incomes and levels of living comparable to those of other groups.

The scope of extension work has been broadened under the Rural Development Act. In the past the Extension Service has been responsible for providing intensive on-the-farm educational assistance to disadvantaged rural families. The Rural Development Act indicates additional responsibilities to these families.

The over-all objectives of rural development are: (1) to improve the income and level of living of the disadvantaged rural families and to help them make a greater contribution to the welfare of the nation, (2) to develop the disadvantaged rural areas to their potential in agriculture, industry, institutions, organizations, and public facilities, and (3) to learn effective techniques and methods of pro-



cedure for working in rural disadvantaged areas and with families within these areas.

The objectives of Extension in working with individual disadvantaged families are to identify and locate the disadvantaged rural families; to motivate these families to utilize effectively their material and human resources; to supply these families with pertinent information and to help them apply it in making the needed changes relative to agriculture or off-farm employment; and to acquaint these people with the services and assistance available from other agencies and organizations, and to help them obtain the services and assistance needed.

#### **APPROACHES USED IN CONDUCTING EDUCATIONAL WORK WITH LOW-INCOME GROUPS IN NORTH CAROLINA**

1. Low-income families want a better income and a higher level of living and will work for it provided they have encouragement and assistance.

2. The Extension Service, or whoever works with them, must take the initiative and contact the family. Usually several personal visits are required to establish confidence in the worker. All of our studies and experiences indicate that these families will not come to Extension or any other agricultural agency. They are skeptical of all public agencies. The first step is to change the farmer's attitude about the value of science, the role of agricultural workers, and the public services.

3. Intensive assistance must be provided for a considerable length of time. These families often have little formal education. They have less knowledge than other farmers about modern farming practices, skills, management, and marketing.

4. The extension worker must know the possibilities available to low-income families and the requirements for attaining possibilities, and must have the patience and skill required to work with low-income families. For example, in Edgecombe County the real possibilities for increasing sharecropper incomes was not in keeping grass out of peanuts, etc., but in enlarging tenant units, mechanizing operations, and changing enterprise combinations — organization and production decisions which must be understood jointly by landowner and tenants.

5. Workers must follow an educational process in working with families; simply telling is insufficient. The educational process must

be used to change attitudes and to increase knowledge and skills. Putting it another way, the family must understand the possibilities and must decide what action to take.

### **CONCLUSION**

The status of low-income families can be improved immeasurably by helping them take advantage of opportunities both on and off the farm.

Certain conditions are required for progress. There must be markets, credit, reasonable and fairly stable prices, and off-farm employment opportunities.

The attitudes, knowledge, and abilities of low-income people must be changed. These changes are brought about by diligent, persistent educational efforts.

Extension's responsibilities have been broadened. The rural development program has one additional feature that should add great strength — that is, advising on nonfarm employment opportunities and furthering the development of industry in low-income areas.