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***DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHING MATERIALS FOR
AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS***

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ABSTRACT

It is contended in this paper that in the general universities teaching agricultural economics as a subject has received unduly low preference. There are many reasons for this, one of the most important being lack of teaching materials based on local farming systems, experiences and data. Efforts to improve the situation have been identified and possible future actions suggested.

Agricultural Economics has long been taught in the university departments of Economics in Bangladesh as a branch of Economics at Degree Honours level. Although there was no separate department for its teaching or arrangements for offering degree in this subject, it occupied a separate position in the courses on Economics. To the students it represented an easy course where one would not find the rigour of analysis as in other papers on Economics. In the examination, questions requiring descriptive answers were set and, therefore, required memory more than comprehension. Few teachers would teach the subject and take interest in it. As a result the subject as a branch of Economics remained long outdated.

The syllabus contained, most importantly, topics like agricultural fundamentalism, credit, co-operatives and almost everything that was included in the books of Cohen and O'Brien. These two books were commonly available in the libraries. References were made to situations obtaining in the advanced countries. History of cooperative or credit arrangements and land reforms used to receive undue emphasis. On the one hand, examples of developed agriculture made things alien to the students, on the other hand, a historical treatment of the topics made them look less like economics courses where analytical rigour was expected. For example, going far back into the history of cooperative movement at the expense of analysis of cooperatives as an organisation of production would detract from the economic value of the topic. Again, use of sorgum or oats production in bushels in tractor operated hectares of land to exemplify production technology would inadequately inspire and enthuse the student to know the subject.

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What is intended to convey in the above paragraphs is not an impression that the syllabus in the past was all irrelevant and the teaching, uninspiring. In fact, there were more relevant things than otherwise, and excellent handling by some eminent teachers made some rather unfamiliar issues easy to grasp. What, however, is to be pointed out is that the syllabus did not adequately accommodate some important topics or adequately emphasise important aspects of some other. Conceived of as a course of study of the economics of agricultural production, consumption and distribution, the subject syllabus would look different from what it looked like in the 1950's and 1960's. The emphasis then was on topics like agricultural fundamentalism, role of agriculture etc. Thus, to start with the student gained an impression that place of agriculture in the economy was in dispute. Therefore, what appeared important to them was to know that agriculture actually was fundamental rather than what the economics of agriculture is about. A misplaced emphasis on peripheral issues or aspects shut the core course out to students.

During the last one decade or so the subject syllabus has undergone an almost thorough recasting. It is interesting to pause here to ponder why it could not be done before or why the old state of affairs prevailed and how the departure was made possible. The reasons for the prevalence of the old syllabus are many and the following are probably the most important ones.

(i) Like other branches of Economics, syllabus in agricultural economics in our universities were adopted along lines of western universities. But because of infrequent contacts with the outside world, updating of syllabus could not be made possible.

(ii) Published materials about the working of our agricultural sector were lacking and instances to illustrate problems or solutions could not be cited from domestic materials.

(iii) Since topics on production, consumption or distribution were taken care of in the syllabus of economic theory, inclusion of such topics in the syllabus of agricultural economics was considered to mean repetition. In the earlier books of economics, as the two cited above, problems of agriculture as a sector were given all attention and micro analysis was lacking.

(iv) Agricultural economics was not a prestigious branch of economics nor could it attract talents. Therefore, very few amongst the early scholars of economics opted for specialised higher training in agricultural economics. Opportunities for teachers and researchers were also few in this field.

In such a situation, designing agricultural economics syllabus to accommodate the needs to acquaint the student with the theory as well as domestic situation of the business of agriculture requires back-up support for the universities. The needs at present are to

make available sufficient materials published at home and abroad ; collect and compile information on all aspects of domestic agriculture ; prepare and publish class materials on issues of Bangladesh agriculture ; train personnel to shoulder the responsibility of research and teaching in this field.

Unfortunately, universities and research institutions in the country have taken little initiative to provide the above services. Because of insufficient collaboration and communication between institutions, their limited efforts also failed to produce desired results. These gaps are now being filled by some overseas agencies. Some of their activities have started showing results. To report only a few the efforts of the Ford Foundation, the Agricultural Development Council Inc., N. Y., the International Development Research Centre and the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council may be cited. The examples given are, however, from the personal experience of the author and do not include the whole area in which these institutions have provided some support.

The Ford Foundation has been actively supporting projects to improve the teaching and curriculum of Social Sciences in Bangladesh. Department of Economics, Chittagong University received Ford grants for a cell called Rural Economics Programme for (1) procurement of books and materials, (2) action research and survey research on issues of agricultural/rural development, (3) reproduction of materials, production of class materials from primary and secondary sources, (4) development of M. Phil programme within the department, and (5) training of teachers who were supposed to receive an exposure to course work abroad and do research (for degree) on return.

Agricultural Development Council, Inc. is another organisation engaged in programmes to improve teaching materials in the subject. It has been distributing small books published in its teaching forum series for a long time now. Besides, conference and other specially edited volumes are also being made available to the departments. Its research programmes include survey research on issues of agriculture yet inadequately attended. An example is the livestock study at Chittagong university. Its scholarship programme for training have benefitted the departments at Chittagong in the field of agriculture, fishery and forestry.

International Development Research Centre is yet another important institution which has been trying to attract research on hitherto neglected fields like economics of forestry and fishery. The Chittagong University Economics Department completed a project on fishery with IDRC funding and a publication is due from Ottawa. This organisation also makes research and seminar issues available through distribution of its publications generously to teaching departments.

Many local institutions are also engaged in the production and dissemination of materials relevant for teaching agricultural economics. Of the university departments/Faculties, the Agricultural Economics Faculty at BAU deserves special mentioning for successfully continuing the publication of the Bangladesh Journal of Agricultural Economics. A much less professional publication is the ADAB NEWS. Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies has published a lot of materials in addition to the journal, Bangladesh Development Studies. There are many others who deserve mentioning but a complete listing is not within the scope of the present paper.

Such activities have been highly productive in making teachers of the subject more equipped and in making materials available for class room use. To conclude, it seems relevant to identify a few aspects of Bangladesh agriculture which we, in Chittagong University, have been able to incorporate in our syllabus as a result of our collaboration with programmes of these agencies.

1. Agricultural Organisation (Nabajug Tebhaga Khamar) : It is an experiment where we find the farmers to agree to the 3 share system of output distribution. A managing committee of farmers who undertake the responsibility of providing all inputs (except labour) at the right time and at the right place has helped utilize an area of about 100 acres around a deep tube-well and a cross-dam. The system works only in boro season where the role of purchased input is very important.

2. Rural Credit (Grameen Bank) : It is an experiment at providing credit to the landless/assetless people in rural areas who have nothing to offer as collateral (and therefore, would ever remain out of the coverage of institutional credit) but who have some knowledge of a trade or craft. In the process, the landless acquire some asset at the expiry of loan and remain employed in his trade. He is to form a group with members of his trade to qualify for this loan. Here the bank goes to the client and not the client to the bank.

3. Fishery Economics. The main thrust is to understand the socioeconomics of fish culture in Bangladesh. The syllabus extends to include the natural depressions and the organisation and technology of capture fishery in rivers.

4. Agricultural Insurance. A comprehensive document has been produced as a result to the effort for one year of a Rural Economics Programme Fellow. It includes all aspects of agricultural insurance and suggests an alternative to the present individual type approach to crop insurance, being operated by Sadharan Bima Corporation since 1977. This work spells out the theoretical and practical advantages of an area approach insurance over its alternatives. It also offers a design as to how the idea may be put to practice.