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Agric - Econ Aspects

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ADJUSTMENTS NEEDED IN EXTENSION WORK

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The fact that in this year of 1958 we will produce the largest output ever experienced in American agriculture, from the fewest acres in 40 years of agricultural reporting, is not only a tribute to the farmer and the agricultural scientist but serves to re-confirm what we all know - we are living in the middle of a profound technological explosion or break-through.

Besides this technological break-through, there are at least three other important concurrent revolutions taking place. With no particular emphasis on order of importance, I would list them as follows:

- 1) The rapidly evolving socio-economic culture of rural people that makes them almost indistinguishable from their urban neighbors in terms of standards of living, general values and political persuasions.
- 2) The revolution in communications, including not only the automobile and aeroplane, the radio and TV, but also the quantity and quality of modern farm publications. Underpinning this communications revolution is the rapidly increasing educational level of all rural people and commercial farmers in particular.
- 3) The third, perhaps most significant of all is the development and introduction of specification buying, or more popularly, vertical integration.

I mention these revolutions, not because you are not familiar with them and perhaps even sick-to-death of hearing about them, but rather to re-emphasize that we are all privileged to be on the scene during the most dynamic times ever experienced in agriculture - anywhere in man's history.

Now, these facts considered, it would be somewhat of a miracle if the institutions surrounding agriculture adjusted even half as rapidly as the dynamics of the situation demand.

The question I wish to pose is how badly out-of-step are our institutions, especially the Cooperative Extension Service?

Looking backwards, for the moment, and on the credit side, it seems to me that it must be admitted that Extension has done a commendable job in making technological information available to American agriculture. This is not to say that it has always been the early innovator or that it has always reached all economic classes of farmers equally well; however, there would appear to be little doubt that this vast system of agents and specialists, together with their meetings, and extension literature, mailing lists and demonstrations, has hastened and evened the spread of technological or scientific findings. Secondly, the "Service" no doubt has done a yeoman's job as "errand boy" for the rest of the USDA in spreading information on credit, conservation, price supports, soil bank, social security, income tax, etc. Thirdly, it seems to me that a reasonably commendable job has been done in assisting farmers with the mechanics of forming various specialty groups and organizations such as co-ops, commodity associations, breeding organizations and the like.

On the debit or critical side, we might next ask how well we have done in our Agricultural Extension program in connection with four revolutions already mentioned - that is, technological, sociological, communications and integration. Unfortunately, it is a great deal easier to be critical than constructive, but let us start with some criticisms and very brief examples.

In terms of function, we are still doing too many things because we have always done them. We are, for example, still supervising D.H.I.A. and training cow testers - or again, in New Hampshire we still have a "300-bu. Potato Club" despite the fact that we have very few potato growers and that anyone who produces less than 500 bushels just isn't trying. Any of you could add to this list indefinitely. This is a serious problem not only because it wastes resources badly needed elsewhere but also because sometimes we get going in the opposite direction from the rest of the world so far that we do not even know we are lost. In Extension Marketing, for example, we are so busy cutting up chickens and wrapping up celery that we have just now noticed that the integrators are cutting up the farmer and wrapping up the marketing system.

Secondly, in regard to function, after 20 years of being the "errand boy" of the USDA, we have almost forgotten about our original and basic function of being the off-campus adult educators for rural people. We currently consider a large part of our job as being the "service" one. In some places, we are selling woodchuck bombs and in others are doing income tax work, accounts & records, entertaining Grange meetings, being secretaries to committees, supervising and judging Fairs, etc.

In the field of communications, we have done little to use the knowledge made available by modern psychology to understand why and how people learn. Our "in service" training programs are particularly barren of teaching methods and teaching knowledge other than continued emphasis on varied aids, most of which eventually are handi-crafted in our own offices - and look it.

Our most singular failure, however, is oddly enough in the area in which we have experienced our greatest success - that is in the spreading of technological data.

Extension's traditional "recommended practice" approach to farm adjustments is a useful and usable teaching device so long as you have a "horse and hand" agriculture, operating at low levels of resource use and at low levels of purchased inputs. Under these conditions, the most an operator can lose in adopting a recommendation is some of his time (which isn't very valuable). Almost any recommendation on a practice basis will leave him better off than he was.

However, we have apparently failed to understand that as the amount and variety of technology has increased the number and complexity of the management decision making problems. Technology in itself is meaningful to the individual farm only to the extent that its adoption is economically justified. The problem of determining what technology, how much of it and when to adopt, is, and will increasingly continue to be, the most difficult of all the myriad questions that plague the individual farm operator. Extension, in the past, and at the present time, finds itself not only reluctant but ill-equipped to come to grips with this management or business end of agriculture.

It is much easier to find and point to some symptoms of Extension's "illness" than to determine the causes thereof and recommend cures. Certainly, the causes are many and complex but I would like to name at least 3 which seem to me to be fundamental.

First, the agricultural section of Extension today does not have a clear cut, definite policy. A fundamental need of Extension Service is to stop running off in four directions long enough to sit down and carefully and critically appraise the changed world in which we live - and simultaneously develop a re-oriented philosophy of what our job is, how to allocate our resources and how to re-train our staff to accomplish this job. The first step, as I see it, is for top administrative levels within Extension to make a firm decision on how far Extension Service is going to go in attempting to be "all things to all men". This, at the present time, loosely represents the overall philosophy. I do not believe that it is a workable method of operation unless some fairly firm perimeters are established. Until we do this, our Extension policy and philosophy will remain a mystery of a magnitude equalled only by our Foreign Policy.

Secondly, in terms of internal weaknesses, I think it should be noted that Extension administrators are given responsibility but have no mechanism for authority. Apparently the Federal Director is without authority over State Directors and State Directors in turn either do not have or do not exercise much control over County Administrators.

Some people, I am sure, would argue that centralization of authority is unwanted and undesirable. I concur in that I personally prefer an operational climate free from dictatorial direction from the top; yet it seems to me only reasonable that any organization, once it lays down a broad policy, must expect and receive general compliance at all levels if it is to function with any degree of effectiveness.

Associated with this matter of authority is the fact that the more dynamic the situation the greater the number of decisions called for. This, in turn, necessitates an administrative structure which has built-in flexibility and a philosophy of expectation of continued change as opposed to a philosophy of status quo. The need for rapid and accurate decision-making is pressing. Such flexibility does not appear to exist in Extension Service at the present time.

A third built-in weakness of Extension lies in its dogmatic assertion that to be democratic it must formulate its programs at the local or "grass roots" level and from that point on operate on a "trickle-up" system.

I find two fundamental problems in this concept - first, I do not believe that lay committees have the necessary time, training or resources to make unbiased and critical analysis of the broader and longer range adjustments needed in agriculture. I think their advice and counsel should be sought but it seems to me that the necessary research, analysis and evaluation needed in program formulation is primarily an administrative responsibility. Secondly, I think that the "trickle-up" theory of programming creates a highly ineffective method of marshalling extension resources to meet the problems posed. There is a substantial time lag before administrators, supervisors and specialists know what the program of a dozen different counties are - as a consequence it's necessary to re-adjust work loads, prepare training programs and develop

Extension materials AFTER programs are initiated rather than PRIOR TO. Programming ought to be done on a long-range basis with policy, training and teaching materials "roughed out" before actual initiation. Only when it has been administratively determined where Extension resources will be allocated, is it possible to do the job of determining how they can be most effectively allocated.

Besides the problems present in administrative structure, Extension is in pressing need of examining its current performance as an adult education agency. In regard to the Extension teaching job of farm technology, several extremely knotty problems must be faced and adjusted to.

We must, for example, ask whether it is reasonable to expect the County Agricultural Agent to continue his traditional role as an overall technical advisor. With technological development coming in geometric proportions, it would appear an impossibility to expect one individual to be an expert advisor in all phases of production. Also, the growth of technical service work provided by large industrial firms - particularly by the integrated firm - raises the question of whether, in fact, the County Agent is not being superceded in many areas as a supplier of technical advice, especially insofar as these services are related to the commercial farm.

If these propositions are true, one must then ask what the function of the agent is in this area of teaching.

One possibility is to pursue an overt policy of intensified educational work with the less well-adjusted units in order to improve their competitive position. These will be those units not currently serviced by the highly trained specialist of the firm doing business with large and aggressive commercial farms; or those less efficient farms excluded from the integrated firm; or the specialty crop producer; or the self-integrated farmer.

A second possibility is to switch the present resource allocation within the Extension Service and provide fewer agents and more specialists. This might be accomplished by consolidation of county offices and specialized assignment among the larger staff. This system would probably move the agent towards being an overall area administrator whose chief function would be to direct and coordinate the work of the staff of specialists.

A third possibility would be to leave the existing structure about "as is" but to re-direct the function of the agent away from technology and toward management; this would make the agent the integrator of technology rather than the instigator. Essentially, this re-orientation would mean a highly stepped-up and speeded-up farm and home development program.

Besides facing up to the problem of the role of the County Agent as a vocational teacher of skills and practices, it also appears necessary that Extension re-evaluate its overall general educational aims. In regard to this job, I propose that there exists a teaching opportunity in the area of the general inter-relationship of agriculture and the rest of the economy. Particularly pertinent if the farm businessman is to adjust and succeed, is the need to increase his understanding of the economics of "the industry" as opposed to the economics of "the firm." Generally speaking, the major teaching challenge facing Extension today is that of "raising the level of economic literacy of farm people". A major recommendation that would appear valid here is what Jack Claar

labels a "problem" rather than a "program" oriented operation. The present Scope Report issued by the sub-committee of the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy shows awareness of this problem.

Next, in the general area of function, there is need of re-examining the service portion of the Extension job.

I think much could be accomplished by a critical appraisal of County Office work now being carried on, with the view to ruthlessly pruning that which is strictly "service". I do not wish to imply, however, that all service work can or should be dropped. There are two types of service work which I feel can be justified.

First is service work in the area where private industry or other agricultural agencies cannot or will not perform a needed function - such as disease diagnosis in poultry.

Secondly, there are situations where service work, as such, is the initial step to the establishment of a teaching opportunity. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to retain the service function and neglect the teaching job.

A final area in which Extension Work appears to need re-evaluation is its relationship to the private enterprise firm doing business with the individual farmer. The Extension Service has been extremely reluctant to allow itself to be associated with private firms. Admittedly, this is an area of considerable hazard but nevertheless one which I feel cannot be ignored. Private firms have become more than dispensers of goods to the farmer. They are now dispensing both technical, educational and management advice as well as management control. Their roles in these areas will increase through time. I doubt if we can successfully play any part in the arena between the firm and the farmer but it would seem possible that we can and must cooperate with private firms on an individual counseling basis, much as we do with individual farmers.

I believe that there will be opportunity to do work with individual firms and groups of firms, especially in connection with their economic education, as to the possible consequences of certain courses of action they are currently pursuing or considering pursuing. This would be roughly equivalent to our public policy work with farmer groups. For example, will present contractual relationships and pricing methods in the broiler industry lead to long-run economic justice for the producer and hence stability?

Lastly, in connection with this general problem of working with private firms, there may be occasions when Extension can serve the function of supplying neutral ground on which the private firm, the individual and the community can meet for exploratory consultation. It seems to me that the introduction of the hatching-egg industry into Washington County, Maine, is one such example of Extension serving in this type of capacity. Our problem is not whether we want to work with private industry but rather how and in what capacity?

In summary, the Cooperative Extension Service can be rather severely criticised for its failure to adjust to the dynamics of the world in which it finds itself. Certain inbuilt administrative weaknesses appear to contribute to its lack of flexibility. I would list the major of these as (1) a lack of any firm administrative philosophy, policy or program precisely enough defined to be manageable. This leads to a poor allocation of Extension resources;

(2) a lack of clear administrative responsibility and authority. This tends to result in non-aggressive leadership; (3) a "trickle-up" system of programming. This results in programs which are built on the basis of short-run expediency rather than programming to solve long-run problems.

Aside from these administrative weaknesses, Extension suffers from its inability to drop any job ever undertaken and hence an attic full of pieces of string too short for any other use. Also, many of its personnel due to lack of adequate training and orientation, see their jobs as "service" rather than adult education.

Lastly, Extension has not yet come to the realization that the commercial farmers' problem - due to modern communications, higher levels of education and entry of other institutions - is less and less technological information (as such) and more and more the economic consequences of adoption of technology.

Extension's most immediately pressing needs appear to be fourfold - these are (1) to strengthen its teaching function and reduce its service function (2) to re-define the role of the County Agent on a problem-oriented rather than a program-oriented basis (3) to learn how and where to cooperate with the private business firm and (4) to acquire more skills in the social sciences, even if at the expense of less in the physical sciences.

In conclusion, it seems to me necessary always to be aware that in the last analysis Extension is the frontier where transition is finally made from the laboratory and the classroom to practical or useful application. Here is where the theory of the teacher and the invention of the scientist finally affect peoples' livelihood and living. This is a job that can be difficult and frustrating as well as deeply rewarding. It requires both skill and art. I do not think it can be fully successful without complete and sympathetic cooperation from our fellow workers in the college and stations.

In fact, I will leave you with the question of whether at the Land Grant College level we do not need a single agricultural organization rather than the present three divisions. A general consolidation of both personnel and funds would provide great flexibility in making quick adjustments in the allocation of our scarce teaching and research skills as needs and problems arise - such a consolidation would be of particular value in the use of teaching resources - the rigid and arbitrary distinction between on-campus and off-campus teaching has always seemed to me to be without a rational basis.