

Agricultural Extension in Myanmar

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Introduction

Myanmar is an agriculture-based country and the agriculture sector contributes 34% of GDP (Gross Domestic Product), 23% of total export earnings and employs 63% of the work force. Although the country is rich in natural resources, Myanmar is one of the Least Developed Countries (LDC) in the world. 75% of the country's population are living in rural areas. One of the most striking features is the extreme isolation of people residing in rural areas. Villages as close as 6 or 8 km from a main road are cut off from many basic services.

The population will grow to about 60 million by the year 2010, and the demand for the local rice consumption will be approximately 20 millions tons. To be able to supply enough food for the increasing population and export the surplus, rice production will have to be increased up to 25 millions tons, by expanding rice grown area up to 6 million hectares. One of the major economic objectives is "development of agriculture as a base and all-round development of other sectors of the economy as well".

How to cope with this tremendous challenges? Myanmar still favours a traditional extension approach. In the beginning of 2001 the author collected data from selected extension agents through structured interviews to gain insights about the bottlenecks and potentials of the present approach.

Agricultural Extension Service in Myanmar

The agricultural extension service in Myanmar was started in 1927 by the department of agriculture. This service provided educational activities, collection of statistical data, enforcement of standard weights and measures, as well as procurement and distribution of improved seeds, farm implements, fertilizers and insecticides. However, extension work concentrated on the distribution of improved seeds and input delivery.

In 1976, a World Bank project introduced the Training and Visit system (T&V) and it was successful by providing subject matter specialists (agronomists, entomologists, etc.), and mobility facilities such as speedboats, small ships and motorcycles. At the end of the project the activities began to slow down, because of lack of resource persons and mobility.

From 1979 to 1986 the Selected Concentrative Strategy (SCS) approach was implemented in a special production program for high yielding rice varieties in irrigated areas. It works almost like the T&V approach, but was designed in Myanmar. The present extension approaches in Myanmar are SCS and the T&V system.

The Myanmar Agriculture Service (MAS) is one of 14 institutions of the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation (MOAI), and the Agricultural Extension Division (AED) nowadays is the biggest among the nine divisions of the MAS and absorbs a large amount of the total strength of MAS, having 11081 staff. The main objectives of the Agricultural Extension Division are

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the transfer of new agricultural technologies to the farmers and the identification and solving of farmers' problems in their fieldwork.



Organization of agricultural extension workers

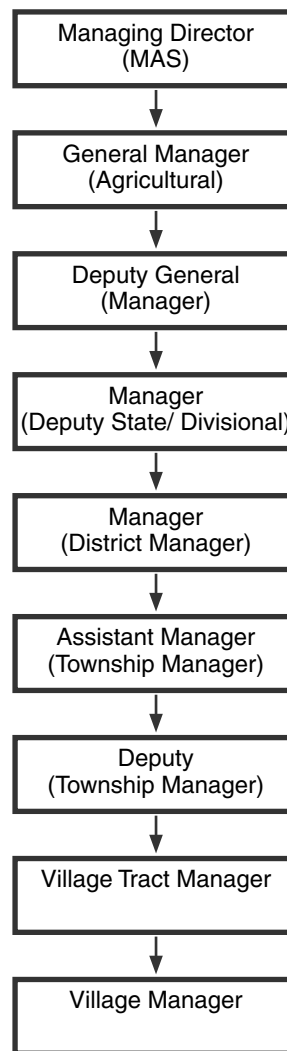
Although there are extension agents at each level, state and division, township, village tract and village, the number of extension agents is small when compared with the number of farmers and the cultivated area. The MAS follows the national administration format, therefore the AED plans the extension programs from the division to the village level.

To fulfill the main functions of the Agricultural Extension Division throughout the country, the extension workers have been organized as shown in the "Organizational Structure of the Extension Division of the Myanmar Agriculture Service (MAS)".

A village extension manager is in charge of a few village tracts or villages with 1215 to 2430 hectares of cropland depending upon the locality and communication, while a village tract manager supervises the work of 10 village managers who are in direct contact with farmers.

There are also 35 Seed Farms (SF), 17 Research Stations (RS), 53 Horticultural Farms (HF), 10 Field Crops Farms (FCF) and 5 Crop Substituting Farms (CSF) in the opium cultivation areas under the Myanmar Agriculture Service. Among them all Horticultural Farms, FCF and CSF are performing extension activities which are related to crop production, horticultural crop production, crop protection, systematic fertilizer application and soil and water management under the supervision of the Agricultural Extension Division (AED). All the extension activities of the state and divisional research stations are organized by the Central Agricultural Research Institute (CARI) and the other extension activities related to pure seed production and seed multiplication are organized by the Seed Division. AED has the responsibility of seed

Organizational Structure of the Extension Division of the Myanmar Agriculture Service (MAS)



multiplication and distribution, in coordination with CARI and the Seed Divisions (SD) for some major crops, namely rice, maize, pulses, oilseed crops, vegetables and fruits.



Difficulties faced by the extension agents

The purpose of the study was to determine the extent of constraints faced by the extension agents in the practical implementation of the existing extension approaches namely T&V and Selected Concentrative Strategy. The author conducted structured interviews with 60 extension agents from January to April 2001. They identified the following important difficulties:

1. Non-involvement of local people in program planning:

According to all of the respondents, the most important constraint for extension agents in their fieldwork is the non-involvement of local people in program planning. As the organisation of extension division follows the national administrative system, extension workers have to perform according to the plan of MOAI and farmers have no chance to participate in program planning and decision making process. Therefore, local people are not involved actively in the implementation of new extension programs. For example, some areas are not suitable for rice, but according to the ministry, farmers in these areas have to grow rice and farmers lose a lot of money. Consequently the farmers don't trust the extension agents.

2. Lack of incentives for extension staff:

All of the respondents expressed that the lack of incentives for extension staff is the second most important constraint to perform extension work.

3. Farmers are very poor:

This is the third most important constraint for extension agents to perform their extension work. It is evident that even the farmers which are interested to practice new methods or technologies have no money for investments and once again extension is facing its limits.

4. Lack of suitable markets and favourable prices for farm products:

According to the planning of the ministry, extension agents have to organise the farmers to grow rice three times per year, but there is no market for their products and they have no right to export rice.

5. Farmers have no crop insurance:

It is evident that due to the successive growing of high yielding rice varieties, the soil fertility and subsequently the crop production is declining. Therefore the extension agents have no more strength to advise the farmers to grow HYV (High

Yielding Varieties) rice. A vast majority of the extension agents mentioned that the lack of a suitable market, lack of crop price insurance and lack of crop damage insurance for the farmers were also major constraints for extension agents to perform their fieldwork.

6. Inadequate extension staff:

The numbers of extension staff, who work in the AED, are not sufficient for the large number of farmers and the cultivated area. This is partly due the unattractive work conditions and they shift, whenever possible, to other departments. At present, extension agents cannot perform their fieldwork effectively and efficiently.

7. Transportation facilities for extension staff are very poor:

The poor transportation facilities for the extension staff is also a major constraint to perform the extension activities. If there were good transportation facilities for the extension agents, they could reach in time to farmers' site, and distribute and advice new and modern information, practices and technologies to farmers as well as they could bring farmers' problems to the respective research centre and find the solution in time.



Conclusion and recommendations

As the country has been under centralized administration for a long time, there are no community-based organizations in rural areas of Myanmar. People have been isolated from the international community since long, and are used to be under a top-down administration. They are familiar with following orders and instructions and the people under 50 have no experience with a democratic society. Myanmar citizens, especially rural people, don't know how to involve themselves and participate in such processes properly. They are afraid of challenges and responsibilities.

Extension workers just brought the farmer's problems to research centres and the decision-making process was done by researchers alone. Sometimes extension workers try to solve farmer's problems as much as they can. But the real problems of farmers could not be solved in time, basically because there was no relationship between the farmers, who are actually facing the problems in the field, and the researchers, who are trying to solve the farmer's problems at the research centres.

Based on the findings of the study, the following points are suggested and recommended for the development of a better agricultural extension strategy in Myanmar.

1. The best way to overcome these constraints might be the implementation of a new Participatory Extension Approach (PEA) instead of practising the existing ones. Government extension agencies, especially the AED should start to implement the new PEA in its own extension programmes.
2. A new extension approach should be set up based on participatory concepts by co-operation of government agencies and local people. All the extension methods and activities should be implemented with the new approach as soon as possible.
3. To boost up the successful implementation of extension activities in Myanmar, it is an urgent need to set up the citizen participation in the extension programmes planning, implementation, evaluation and decision-making processes in bottom-up manner.
4. Local farmers, related government agencies, NGOs and MAS should be equally and actively involved in these most important processes. This will bring more detailed information and will result in a more realistic and transparent extension work for every district.
5. It is very important to introduce new courses concerning PEA in the curricula of Agricultural University and State Agricultural Institutes. PEA training for the agricultural extension workers should be introduced at the training and education centres and respective departments of the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation.

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