

Attitudes of Agricultural Scientists, Extension Personnel and Farmers Towards Commercialisation of the Agricultural Extension Service:

A Study in Sri Lanka¹

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Commercialisation of agriculture has become a crucial issue in the context of Sri Lanka's economy. The paper discusses the attitudes of agricultural scientists, extension personnel and farmers towards commercialisation of the agricultural extension service.

It was found that the majority of the three groups did not agree for total commercialisation of the extension service. According to them commercialisation of extension for paddy cultivation is not acceptable due to a number of social and cultural reasons. They prefer commercialisation of agricultural extension only for commercial and horticultural crops, medium and large farmers, and farmers with better infrastructure. Also, they rejected full privatisation due to unpleasant experiences of privatisation in several other sectors in the economy.

After independence in 1948, the government attempted to develop the domestic agricultural sector through providing agricultural infrastructure such as irrigation,

storing facilities, training of experts, establishing research institutes & extension service, providing inputs, marketing and credit facilities, etc. Up to the late 1980s government maintained a well established and efficient agricultural extension service. In 1989, according to a political decision taken by the then President of the country, the total cadre of 2400 grass-root level extension workers (Krushi Viapthi Sevaka) of the Department of Agriculture were transferred to the Ministry of Public Administration as Village Officers (Grama Niladhari). The consequence was a collapse of the extension service at the village level (Mahliyanarchchi, 2002). Farmers now get rarely modern technological information especially in the food crop sector. A number of reforms were introduced later, but none of them paid attention to regenerate the grass-root level extension service in the public sector.

Today, Sri Lankan government as well as most of other developing countries is moving away from welfare approaches. Agricultural extension is considered as a 'private good' as other agricultural inputs such as fertilizer, seeds, agro-chemicals, machinery, etc. The prime objective of this study was to know the attitudes of agricultural scientists, extension personnel and farmers towards commercialisation of the agricultural extension service before implementing the commercialisation approach.

Why commercialisation, not privatisation?

Privatisation is mainly changing the ownership of the extension service to the private sector from the public sector. People in most of the developing countries including Sri Lanka have unpleasant experiences of privatisation. This is why the concept of commercialisation came into picture.

¹ from: „Commercialisation of Agriculture in Sri Lanka. Two Studies in Selected Sectors.“ by Dr. Rohana P. Mahaliyanaarachchi. Published by Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka
ISBN No.: 955-644-019-4

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Thirty scientists in agricultural sciences such as agronomy, livestock production, agricultural extension and agricultural economics were interviewed by using a structured questionnaire. Also 30 field level development workers (government and NGO) were interviewed. Apart from these field level workers, 30 field level extension personnel of private agri-business agencies operating in the study area were selected randomly for interviews. The sample size comprised 240 farmers in two areas with mainly intensive, commercialised agriculture.

The basic concept of CAES is that farmers have to pay for the service, which they receive. Whether farmers pay totally or partially, it depends on the extension approach. Farmers may pay full amount or part of the fee. Government or other funding agencies could subsidise it partially. Extension provider can be a government or semi-government organization, private company, non-governmental organization, co-operative or farmer organization. The important point is that farmers have to bear at least some percentage of the total cost of the extension service and extension providers are paid for their service.

Attitudes of the agricultural scientists towards CAES

The results of the study show that more than half of the agricultural scientists had a favourable (50%) and a most favourable (6.67%) attitude towards CAES. The favourable attitude of the scientists is attributed mainly to the positive aspects of commercialisation. According to the study their preference aspects could be ranked as follows:

1. Commercialisation minimises the financial burden of the government and, enhances the overall efficiency.
2. It provides them to work in a free atmosphere. That means, commercialisation allows them to work in a situation with less administrative and financial regulations.
3. Better financial benefits to the extension personnel, both top level and field level.
4. Flexibility in programme planning and implementation.

5. More demand-driven than supply-driven.
6. It enhances the quality of the extension service due to efficiency of extension delivery channels and economic efficiency of the services.

A substantial proportion (43%) of scientists show a less favourable attitude, because they think that a commercialised agricultural extension service is not suitable to small and marginal farmers and farmers in rain-fed areas. These farmers cannot meet with the financial demands of the commercial extension service. Research results reported that the agricultural scientists have agreed with the following statements.

- Commercialisation increases the accountability of extension personnel to farmers, because farmers pay full or part of the cost of the service provided.
- It helps to enhance the commercial agricultural production because of demand-oriented service.
- It ensures the quality of extension service. Only high quality service can survive in the competitive market.
- Commercialisation increases the professionalism of the extension personnel.
- It increases the farmers' commitment to extension service because they pay for it like other inputs such as fertilizer, agro chemicals, seed materials, etc.

It is interesting that 85% of the agricultural scientists stressed that extension service to the paddy sector should be under the control of the government and free of charge. The major reasons for this attitude were social factors instead of economic factors. Scientists indicated that paddy is the major agricultural crop in Sri Lanka and it has a social and cultural value. Therefore government has a responsibility to provide incentives such as free extension service, subsidies for fertilizer, etc. to protect the paddy cultivation.

With respect to preference towards commercialisation of agricultural extension service, the results indicated that, nearly half of the scientists (52%) preferred commercialisation only for commercial crops such as tea, rubber, sugarcane, coconut and spices and horticultural crops. The majority of the scientists (89%) agreed that

commercialisation is viable only for the medium (2-5 acres) and large (>5 acres) scale landholders. The results also indicated that nearly 60 % of the agricultural scientists preferred commercialisation of extension in the areas with better infrastructure facilities such as irrigation, road & transport, electricity. The major reasons for this was that extension personnel and farmers have better access to each other and farmers can adopt hi-technical recommendations which need irrigation, electricity, etc.

More than three-fourths of the scientists preferred privatising of plantation and horticultural crops. The main reason is that scientists consider the quick returns of these two types of crops. They agreed that commercialisation should be implemented on the basis of the socio-economic situation of the farmers because the most vulnerable farmers in the community could not afford commercialised extension services. Regarding the commercialisation approaches a majority of the scientists preferred contracting, farmer taxation or pluralism approaches. A lesser number of them preferred full privatisation.

Attitudes of the extension personnel towards CAES

The data reveal that the majority of the extension workers had favourable (24%) and most favourable (50%) attitudes towards commercialisation of extension service.

The results showed that the majority of the extension personnel of the government and the NGOs prefer not to charge for extension services for land preparation and paddy cultivation. They consider that scientific land preparation is needed not only for better farming but also for environmental protection, such as minimizing soil erosion, protecting flora, etc. Therefore, it can be considered as a public good. For public goods, it should not be charged from individuals. Regarding paddy, they considered it as a special crop that has a cultural and social value as well as economic value. Even though paddy is cultivated by individual farmers, it should be considered as a national wealth. Therefore, a country like Sri Lanka whose staple food is rice should offer special status to paddy.

The majority of respondents preferred to commercialise extension services in the areas of cultivation of horticultural crops, seed production and livestock production. The majority of the extension personnel from private agencies have been involved in marketing of seeds especially in horticultural crops. Farmers can obtain big profits by producing high quality seeds for the market and farmers would like to pay for the advices which they obtain. Further, the majority of the extension personnel agreed to commercialise the extension service in marketing and farm management practices. The reason for this was that these two areas have a higher commercial weight.

However, it is a general tendency that anything that is offered "free of charge" may be under-utilised. If it is purchased at a cost, then it will be used carefully and judiciously. This philosophy might have been very well experienced by the extension personnel while working with farmers. On the other hand, the efficient and appropriate extension services in the areas like seed-production, livestock production, marketing services, horticultural production, and farm management will definitely lead to profit maximization of farmers. Hence, extension personnel might have expressed their opinion that the extension services in the above areas were to be charged.

A big majority of the extension personnel preferred commercialisation for plantation and horticultural crops and for large and better income farmers. They have considered that commercialisation should be limited to the farmers with better socio-economic status. Further, nearly three-fourths of them preferred contracting of extension services and farmer taxation whereas half of them preferred public cost recovering and pluralism.

Attitudes of the farmers towards commercialisation of agricultural extension

In the study areas, farmers were exposed to government extension service until 1990. However, nearly for 13 years they do not have a well-organized extension service. Their major extension sources are neighbouring farmers and agro-input retailers in the area. There are a number of private companies that operate seed, fertilizer and agro-chemical marketing

Table 1: Constraints of the respondents towards commercialisation of agricultural extension service

Constraints	Farmers (%)	Extension Personnel (%)	Researchers (%)
1. Highly variable agro-climatic imbalances	34.87	80.45	78.04
2. Highly variable socio-economic imbalances	67.98	85.64	76.36
3. Large population of small and marginal farmers	69.65	90.48	74.76
4. CAES hampers the free flow of information	30.00	32.08	31.09
6. CAES is not desirable in the interest of the poor farmers.	78.43	89.05	90.87
7. CAES is a hindrance to employ group approach technique	48.97	94.04	70.65
8. Link between Research and CAES may be weaker	14.54	12.87	07.41
9. Highly trained extension personnel for CAES will be a problem	34.98	11.37	10.21
10. Over fragmented land holdings	45.97	42.87	48.98

* Due to multiple responses total is not equal to 100%.

intensively in these areas. According to the response of the sales agents of these companies, they have disseminated necessary know-how to the farmers in using their inputs. Generally, farmer's attitude towards any extension organization, whether private, government or NGO depends on profitability and availability of agro-inputs and technical and market services at the right time from the agency.

The results reveal that a majority preferred to pay for the extension service in the areas of seed-production, horticultural production, livestock production, marketing and farm management. Further, the majority of the respondents preferred a cost free extension service in the areas of cultivation practices of paddy, land preparation, and post harvest technologies. The results reveal that farmers were selective to pay for the extension service rendered. Farmers were ready for cost-sharing only when the benefits out-weighed their costs. The majority of livestock farmers were willing to pay for the extension services, which they received. The main reason for this was that their returns were quick and clearly visible. As far as cultivation of horticultural crops was concerned the farmers were willing to pay for the extension service rendered because of the commercial value of horticultural crops in recent years and also because of economic advantage in pro-

ducing horticultural crops for export market. Further, the majority of the farmers were willing to pay for the extension services for marketing and farm management as they are well aware when and for what they should invest.

Nearly half of the farmers preferred the public cost recovering approach and contracting of extension services. Total privatisation approach was preferred by a only diminutive portion of the farming community.

Constraints of the respondents towards CAES

The extension personnel and the scientists have similar views for most of the constraints statements. They have considered that commercialisation of agricultural extension is hindered in Sri Lanka due to highly variable agro-climatic imbalances, highly variable socio-economic imbalances, big population of small and marginal framers and a big majority of resource poor farmers. The majority of the farmers agreed that commercialisation is not desirable in the interest of the poor farmers and will lead to socio-economic inequality and regional imbalance.

Farmers, extension personnel and scientists all agreed that profit oriented commercialised extension services will not deal effectively with poor farmers. Resource

poor or small-scale farmers will be neglected by these extension services and will be automatically eliminated from the system.

Recommendations for policy implications

The recommendations made by this study mainly focused on policy makers are as follows:

- Extension services for paddy should not be commercialised. The main reason identified is that paddy has a special status in agriculture due to its social and cultural value. Extension service could be delivered by either public or private extension service, but cost should be totally born by the government. Government could contract it to a private company, NGO or farmer company.
- Commercialisation of extension is possible for the crops that are either mainly export oriented (tea, rubber, coconut, spices) or commercial type (vegetables, flowers, ornamental plants, sugarcane) and for medium and big farmers. It is highly recommended that respective authorities should implement the commercialisation concept on a selective basis only.
- Due to commercialisation small scale and resource-poor farmers will be neglected. The negligence of resource-poor farmers may lead to crucial socio-economic problems. They may leave farming and increase rural-urban migration. The low industrial development of Sri Lanka cannot satisfy the needs of these migrants, subsequently urban unemployment will increase rapidly. Policy makers should consider this situation seriously.
- Regarding the commercialisation approach, it is recommended not to move for total privatisation of agricultural extension in any case. Attitudes of the agricultural scientists, extension personnel and farmers are not favourable to full privatisation. The preferred approaches are mainly public cost recovering approach, pluralism and contracting. Historical evidences have shown that full privatisation is not the sole solution for thousands of problems in these countries.
- Finally, commercialisation of agricultural extension is a process that should be seriously considered by the policy makers before implementing it. However, there should be a public sector free of charge agricultural extension service along with other types of commercial extension services at least for another decade.