

WORKING ON NUTRITION — SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

In Papua New Guinea there is a lot of talk about increasing food production and improving nutrition. There are many good reasons for it: much money is spent on imported foods, many children are malnourished, and many areas are starting to face problems of land shortage. More details can be found in R.M. Bourke's article 'Improving food production and people's nutrition' (HARVEST, Volume 9, No. 1, pp. 11-23).

Although it is very easy to talk about helping food production and improving nutrition, it is very difficult to actually do anything. Many extension officers have found this to be the case.

I have been working as an extension officer for 5 years. I do not yet know the best way to help village people to grow more food and improve their children's nutrition. However, I have been trying different things for these 5 years. I would like to share with you some of the things I have learned during this time.

In this article I will divide my experiences into 3 periods. In the first period, I saw the problem of malnutrition as an outsider, and I tried things that probably would work in my own country. Most of these things were not successful.

In the second period, realising my mistakes, I tried to find out much more about how people lived, and what their problems were. I used what I found out to work in a new and more successful way during the third period.

1978-79 - WEST SEPIK PROVINCE

I was appointed as a Rural Development officer, general duties, in charge of the Oksapmin sub-district, West Sepik Province.

This area had a high malnutrition rate. I thought it was caused by lack of protein, as everyone ate kaukau and not much else. I tried 3 things to increase protein in people's diet:

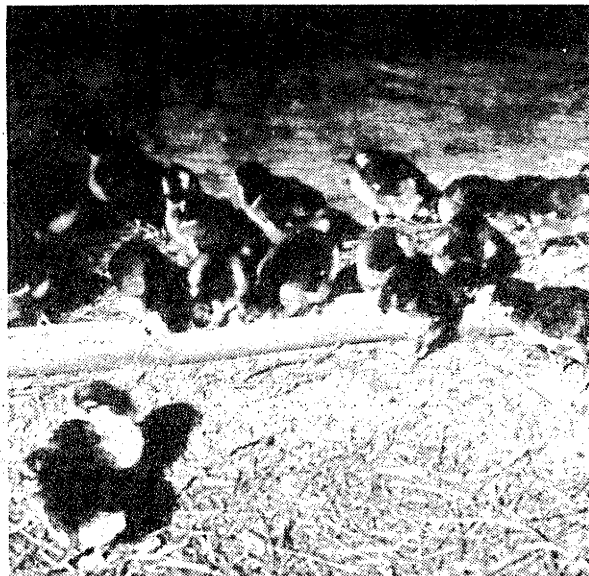
1. Poultry and pig projects

I introduced lots of chickens, ducks and pigs which I got from Labu, Lae and the Highlands Agricultural College. I reared them until they were old enough to survive in the village. Then I sold them to villagers, together with protein concentrate. But these projects did not work. Why?

- The animals needed expensive imported food to grow well. The villagers could not afford to buy this. Even if they could afford it, the supply was not regular.

- Villagers often did not have enough food in their gardens to eat themselves, so the chickens and pigs did not have enough either.
- When the chickens did lay eggs, villagers sold them to public servants. They did not use them themselves.

So my poultry and pig projects did little to help nutrition in the area.



Poultry projects often don't work as people cannot afford to buy a regular supply of feed.

2. Cash crops

I introduced coffee, chillies and European vegetables as cash crops. I felt that if people could get some money they could use it to buy tinned fish and protein foods from the store.

However, cash crops did not do much to help the nutrition of the villagers. Why?

- When I introduced the crops, coffee sold for K1.40 per kg and chillies for K1.20; transport costs to Wewak were 50 toea per kg. Two years

later coffee and chillies were selling for 30 toea and the cost of transport had increased to 60 toea per kg. It was no longer worth growing coffee and chillies, and most villagers stopped.

- I persuaded villagers to use land with deep fertile soil for their cash crops. However it was also their best land for growing food crops. So what the villagers may have gained through money for their cash crops they lost through losing good land, when land was becoming increasingly short for food crops.



Cash crops like coffee can affect nutrition because they take good land which could be used for growing food.

3. Seed distribution and nutrition demonstrations

I started a demonstration garden at the D.P.I. extension garden. I planted peanuts and different kinds of beans. I also gave out seeds to villagers and showed them how to plant them. When it was time to harvest the beans, I went round the villages and gave

cooking demonstrations on how to use the beans in 3 food group soup.

However, these projects did not improve nutrition in the area. Why?

- No-one came to look at the demonstration garden. It was not near the road or where people met together.
- People planted the seeds I gave them and harvested the crops but they didn't save any seeds, or plant the crop again.
- All the women came to the cooking demonstration and ate the soup, but they never made it in their own homes.



Often, cooking demonstrations serve only to provide people with a good meal.

Why didn't the people make all the changes I suggested?

If people don't do something there is always a reason. For example, I can think of 3 reasons why the villagers did not save bean and peanut seeds, even though they always save corn seed and yams for planting. These 3 reasons are often the reasons people do not make changes that extension workers suggest.

(a) The change you are introducing does not work. In my case, peanuts did not produce well because of the wet climate and rat damage. Winged beans produced less well than the green beans already grown. Soyabeans and mungbeans produced well but did not taste as nice.

(b) The change may work but something else could stop villagers adopting the change. For example, there may be not enough time or your suggestions may involve too much effort. In my case, to make the 3 food group soup, the women had to get the greens from a different garden from where they grew their kaukau, and they would need to fetch extra water. After a long day's work, women did not want to make the extra effort.

(c) Villagers may not see that your suggestions are important. The villagers in the West Sepik did not feel that they were short of protein. When they were hungry they wanted to eat staple foods like kaukau - not beans and peanuts which take a lot of work but do not fill your stomach up.

IF PEOPLE DON'T DO SOMETHING
THERE IS ALWAYS A REASON.
FIND OUT WHY!

At the end of 1979, I tried to find out how villagers in the sub-district made their gardens and prepared their food. I did this by going to work with people in their subsistence gardens. In just one day you can learn a lot about how crops are planted and how much work is involved in growing different things. Often you find out that the farmers have special ways of dealing with the soil conditions of the area.



Work with villagers in their subsistence gardens. If they see that you want to learn from them, they will be happier to learn from you.

Also, I carried out market surveys, garden surveys and food intake surveys. If you find it difficult to do these yourself you can contact one of the agricultural stations or the Institute of Medical Research in Goroka, for help. Sometimes there are foreign students who would like to come to Papua New Guinea to carry out this type of research.

I used the D.P.I extension gardens to carry out trials to try and find out what crops and gardening methods did well in the area. It is worthwhile trying out every new crop or

gardening method that you learn about elsewhere in Papua New Guinea in the D.P.I. garden or your own garden before you introduce it to villagers.

By first finding out why villagers do what they do, you can avoid introducing changes which villagers will not be able to follow. I found out many things in 1980, which helped to explain my previous failures. I even found out that the people were not short of protein - they were malnourished because they were short of food

In 1980, I persuaded leading villagers whom I knew well to try in their own gardens the methods and seeds that I was encouraging. I hoped that they would see that the changes were good and follow them later.

However villagers still did not start to plant peanuts and beans and change their gardening patterns as I had hoped. Nutrition did not improve. Why not?

- The leading villagers who made the gardens with me did not really believe that they would lead to better nutrition. Although I said to them that they must give many peanuts and beans to their children for them to grow strong, it was obvious that I was strong and I did not only eat peanuts and beans. I was strong because I had a wage and could buy tinned fish. The villagers followed what I did, not what I said. They preferred to try to find money to buy tinned fish rather than growing beans. Unless I lived like the villagers and only ate food which I could produce in the garden, people would not believe that they could live well and have well-nourished children on garden food.

Villagers did not think nutrition was important. They survived on a diet of just kaukau, and their children could do so too. People were not interested in learning about gardening and cooking. They were more interested in learning about new things like cows and cars and things that came from the town. I would have to show people that food gardening is important and can be interesting and good fun.

PEOPLE FOLLOW WHAT YOU DO,
NOT WHAT YOU SAY

1981-82 - EAST SEPIK PROVINCE

In 1981 I moved to the East Sepik to work with the Education Department. I worked on

improving agriculture and nutrition mostly through schools, but also partly through non-formal education working with school leavers, youth groups and women's groups.

This time I tried not to make the mistakes I had made in the West Sepik. I lived in villages, ate with villagers and made my own food garden with them. In this way, I showed people that I really believed what I said. Living with villagers and eating with them every day also made villagers like me much more. I made some very close friends. For me, as I was living and working with friends, I did not feel that I was doing a 7.45 to 4.06 job any more. Work became enjoyable, and just a part of living.

This time I also tried to use as many ways as I could to

DO YOU FIND IT HARD TO INTEREST PEOPLE IN FOOD GARDENING?

*** IF SO, YOU COULD TRY:

PRINTING T-SHIRTS

MAKING POSTERS

NUTRITION SONGS, GAMES AND DRAMAS

A FOOD PARTY (ON WORLD FOOD DAY)

VILLAGE COMPETITIONS FOR THE HEAVIEST BABY
THE BIGGEST KAUKAU AND SO ON



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ABIKA, YIA!



For materials and ideas, contact: Liklik Buk Information Centre
University of Technology
Private Mail Bag
LAE

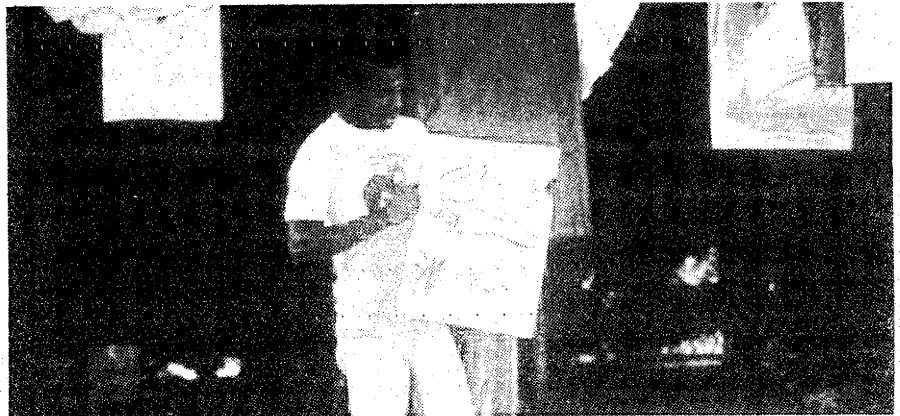
make gardening, cooking and living in the villages more interesting. If young people find gardening fun, not so many of them will want to run off to the towns. There are many things that one can do: work as a group, hold competitions, make up nutrition dramas and songs, print posters and 'T' shirts. Over the radio and in magazines young people get messages every day to buy store foods and enjoy things from the town. You can start an advert-

ising campaign in your area to promote local foods and village life.

I feel that what I am doing this time is more successful. Some villagers are eating more beans and peanuts and their children are becoming healthier. I have found that when men and women get involved in an advertising campaign to promote good nutrition, they come to believe that it is important.

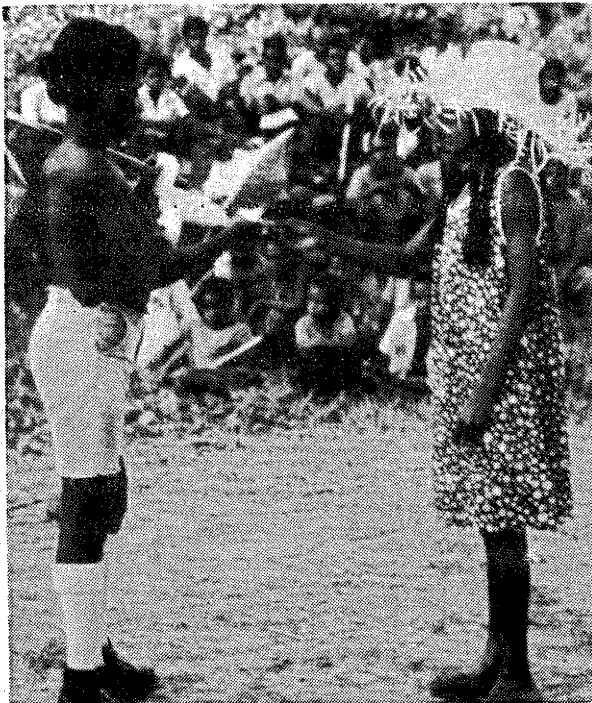
Getting people interested in food gardening and living in the village by:

Using posters.....



Holding nutrition dramas,

and puppet shows



I am still making many mistakes. One mistake I have made is that I am trying to work in too many villages at once. As a result I am not doing the job properly in any one place. Also, I am concerned that maybe still people are only following the rules of good nutrition because I am there.

However my biggest worry is that I have found that malnutrition is very often a symptom of bigger problems in the village. Why are some children short of food? Lack of knowledge about food and lack of good land are 2 reasons, but many more are appearing now. For instance:

- Father is at the tavern drunk most of the time, and can't be bothered to make food gardens.
- Mother has had a baby every year for the last ten, and is too tired to cook or garden for all her children.
- The strong young men of the village no longer help their parents in the garden. They are away at string band contests or in town.
- Some times a past government extension effort has seriously affected the food supply. For instance, in many villages people can no longer make gardens within half an hour's walk of the villages, because cows have broken out of a group cow banis and now roam all round the village area. The extension Officer who started the project did it to help the people get protein; but it now is the biggest cause of malnutrition in these villages.

All these things happen as the structure of village society in Papua New Guinea begins to break down. As people become more interested in following

Western ways and village traditions are lost more and more, the problems of malnutrition will become greater.

What can we do? As public servants we are often the only representatives from the outside world in a village. Villagers look at us to see how they should behave. Young men in particular tend to gather around us and follow us in our leisure time. If we go to town at the weekend and drink beer, they will do so too. If we stay at home and make a garden or go fishing, they will make a garden or go fishing also.

It is not necessary for you to leave your government house and go and live in a village. However if you show in your everyday life, particularly in your leisure, that you enjoy visiting people in the village, and enjoy festivals old (yam lining) and new (soccer), you will help people to appreciate their life in the village.



Taking part in local traditional activities shows that you appreciate life in the village.

Better still, you can take an active role in organising things to take place in the village, e.g. sports associations, youth clubs, women's clubs, celebrations for national and local anniversaries.

The greatest effect you can have on nutrition is to become good friends with one or two village people. Invite them to your home and eat with them. Make gardens with them and fish or hunt with them. Make them aware of what is happening in their village and encourage them to look after their own families, so that they will always have a lot of garden food and their children will be well nourished. If you can convince one man to work for better nutrition in his own family and village, you will do more good than 50 demonstration gardens!

GO TO THE PEOPLE

LIVE WITH THEM

LEARN FROM THEM

LOVE THEM

START FROM WHAT THEY KNOW

BUILD ON WHAT THEY HAVE

(A Chinese Proverb)