

RURAL ORGANIZATION IN SOUTH-EAST PAPUA

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The writer, Regional Agricultural Officer at Samarai, Papua, has established an organization of Village Agricultural Committees through South-East Papua. The committees, with their associated Women's Committees, are proving a strong force in the community not only for economic and agricultural progress, but also for social advancement. Mr. Cottrell-Dormer describes the organization, objectives and work of the committees and outlines future hopes for their development. They have already united into local associations and are developing towards the formation of district councils.

A RURAL organization is being developed in South-East Papua by the Department of Agriculture, Stock and Fisheries. The purpose of this organization in the first instance is to serve as a medium through which to bring agricultural extension activities to the native people in rural communities. But its objectives

in the broad sense are more difficult of attainment. These are to develop leadership and to foster good citizenship with all that this implies in economic and social development.

Hence units of the organization are encouraged to interest themselves not only in agriculture, but also in their religion, in public

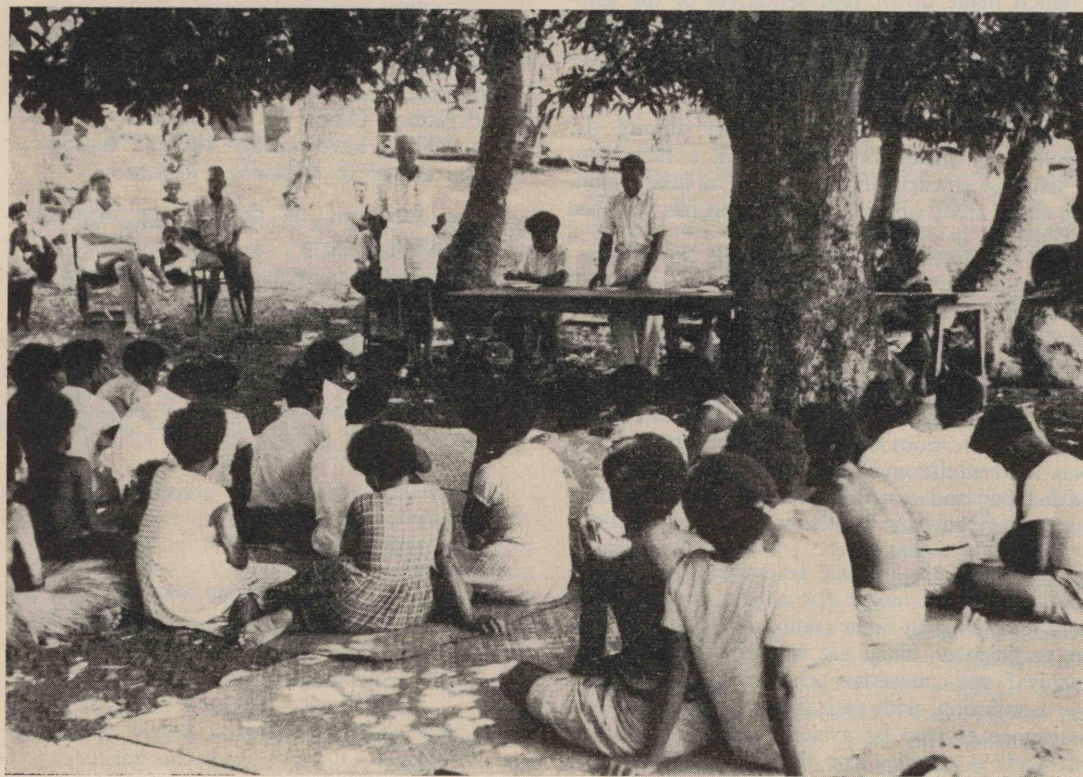


PLATE 1.—*The author addresses an Association meeting, held out of doors in the Milne Bay District.*

health, education, co-operative enterprise, civics and in all matters which may help the communities towards a fuller and more satisfying life. Their motto is: "Our work is for our people and our villages and our country."

The organization is made up of Village Agricultural Committees and Village Women's Committees. Where the committee work is sufficiently advanced, all the committees in a given linguistic or geographical area are combined into an Agricultural Association, which meets at suitable villages in the area about every four months to discuss and plan the work of the area. The chairmen and vice-chairmen of the associations make occasional patrols of their areas to keep in touch with the committees in their work. The Regional Agricultural Officer is kept informed of these activities and endeavours to attend association meetings, so that he can give advice where required. At present there are eight associations. It will be some time before we move on to the next logical step, the setting up of a District Agricultural Council made up of representatives of the associations, of the Administration, and perhaps of the planting community of other such bodies as it may at that time seem proper to include.

To encourage a sense of unity among the committees throughout the region, a newsletter is sent out to each of them every month, including those areas where no association has yet been formed.

As a further aid to developing this sense of unity and also to widen public interest in the work of the committees, the idea of an annual carnival and agricultural show for each association is being developed. It is impractical to stage District shows in the Samarai area because of communications difficulties. The first carnival was held at the end of 1958 at Waga Waga in Milne Bay and a striking feature was the strong support given to it by the women's committees.

The carnivals are not restricted to the committees, but are meant for all the people of the area and for such other communities as may wish to participate. They are organized by a native carnival sub-committee, chosen or co-opted by the association, with such European guidance and assistance as may be available. As a great deal of work is entailed for the host community, it may not be practicable to stage carnivals each year in each association area. Apart from the

difficulties of organization, there is also the risk of causing too much disruption in the normal gardening activities of the people.

Committee Organization

Representation on the committees is on the basis of totemic clans or hamlets, according to the manner in which the particular community is grouped or organized. Each clan or hamlet has one or more representatives, according to its size and importance. Where groups are very small, it is usual for two or more to combine in choosing a representative. Any adult person is eligible for election, including Village Constable, Councillors and members or representatives of other organizations.

Each committee chooses a leader whose duty is to see that regular meetings are held and to report to the chairman of the local association, to the Patrol Officer, or to the Agricultural Officer (or to the Welfare Officer when one is appointed) on the work of his or her committee and on any difficulties which are being encountered. Where there is an association, it is also his or her duty to attend association meetings and there to report on the work of the particular committee. Membership cards are issued by the Agricultural Officer to agricultural committeemen. These have prestige value. Another card is also issued to committee women.

The functions of the Village Agricultural Committees are :—

1. To provide a liaison between the Agricultural Officers and the people.
2. To give leadership to the people in ensuring that sufficient food is grown and that the people participate in an approved manner in programmes for the economic development of the area.
3. To co-operate with constituted authority and with the Women's Committees in improving village life.
4. Generally to give an example of good citizenship.

The functions of the Village Women's Committees are :—

1. To provide a liaison between the Agricultural Officers (and the welfare officer when one has been appointed) and the village women.

2. To give leadership to the women in improving home life and in providing a better environment for the rearing of the village children.
3. To assist in the organization of garden work (both subsistence and economic).
4. To co-operate with constituted authority and with the Village Agricultural Committees in improving village life.
5. Generally, to give an example of good citizenship.

Neither the committees nor the association have any executive authority. Nor is it intended that they should engage in business enterprise in any form, or raise money by levy. It is felt that such activities would end by defeating the objectives of the committees, which finally are the encouragement of good citizenship. These activities are best handled by Rural Progress Societies, Co-operatives, Village Societies or Councils. However, no objection is raised to the committees encouraging the people to get money together for some simple specific objective, such as a hot air copra drier, a coffee pulping machine, a village sewing machine, or a village pump. Sometimes they organize special plantings of cash crops for these purposes.

At the last count there were about 300 Village Agricultural Committees (throughout the Milne Bay District and in the Abau Subdistrict) and about 150 Village Women's Committees (mainly in the Samarai, Gehua and Esa'ala Subdistricts). However, the number has since increased because the movement is spreading of its own accord and more women's committees have been reported from the Esa'ala and Misima Subdistricts.

It must not be thought that these 450 or more committees are a smooth-working organization, bursting with zeal and activity. This is not the case. All states are to be found, from the moribund to the over-zealous. Nor are they to be thought of as committees in the strict European sense—they may better be termed "groups" of community representatives who have accepted certain responsibilities. Their manner of handling these responsibilities varies from village to village, but is gradually settling down to a definite pattern evolved by the people themselves.

Nor again is it to be expected that our Papuans can step overnight from an almost complete lack of organization in the modern sense to a smoothly-working system which meets all requirements. However, after more than four years' experience, it can be said that the organization is steadily maturing; that in time it is welcomed by the people; and that it is achieving results, both domestic and economic. This is particularly the case where women's committees have been established, because they definitely result in fuller acceptance of and participation in our extension programmes by the people generally. In nearly all cases, wherever our agricultural patrols may travel, there are representatives of the people ready to help the patrol and to further its purposes.

These results do not come from merely setting up Committees. They come from the follow-up work which is done afterwards. Where there is insufficient patrolling (especially in the more primitive areas) the people are apt to mistrust the committees and to reject their advice, or alternatively, individual committeemen are apt occasionally to assume powers which they do not possess.

To overcome these difficulties, committeemen and elders are encouraged to come to our training centre for special training and to join in patrols to other areas to see what other committees and communities are doing. During the course of the agricultural patrols, on-the-spot schools and field demonstrations are given in their home areas and elsewhere to committeemen and where desirable, to committee women as well. This is done so that they can learn new techniques and become responsible for the adoption of these techniques by their people.

In addition, local youths and men are taken to the training centre for periods of several months to a year or more so that they can go back and teach their committees and supervise their work. We do not yet have a training centre for girls, so in the women's work we depend largely on the support of the Missions—and so far this has been very good. Even in the primitive areas, where language barriers are sometimes formidable and where committeemen have made some silly mistakes, the organization is developing satisfactorily and producing good results. It will be persevered with because the need for it will increase as economic

development progresses and because it is a useful agency for the preparation of the people for greater prosperity. Also, from the immediate viewpoint, it is a valuable medium in our extension work.

To round off this brief account of our rural organization in South-East Papua, there is one interesting point to add. That is that the organ-

ization is giving opportunities for boys and girls to make use of and practise crafts that they have been taught at school. To a worthwhile extent, through the activities of the committees, the older people are beginning to realize that there is a place in village life for the "three R's", home management, infant welfare and other subjects, which in the past were looked on as useless new-fangled notions.