

AGRICULTURE EXTENSION AND ASSOCIATED FACTORS IN EASTERN HIGHLANDS PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT

Agriculture remains (and will for sometime yet) the economic base of the subsistence farming population of this province. Changes are continually being seen and adopted in the varying species of livestock and crops and in their management practices. On the scene are now, more progressive and responsive farmers who, if guided and assisted well can become effective and efficient producers. In doing so, the need for extension services may be removed and diverted into other areas such as Infrastructural Developments, Rural Credit, Down Stream Processing and Marketing etc.,

Key words: Eastern Highlands Province, extension, infrastructure development, rural credit, down-stream processing, marketing.

CURRENT AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES DEVELOPMENT

Within the "economic belt" line of this province, agricultural activities and their levels of development are varying.

We are seeing changes from the more accepted long term cash crop (Coffee, Chilly, Cardamon) to short term quick return (vegetables) activities.

This has largely been due to the drop in prices of the cash crops and to some extent, the kind and attitudes of the farmers that are on the scene now.

"Community Social Status Symbol" and direct household food security, reasons for farming not so long ago are not so much important now.

Producers are now cash driven, having been exposed to likings that they have developed for these things.

Although, not seen in large areas due to topographical reasons and the high cost of developing such areas, there is a shift from multi-intercropped traditional system to mono semi-intercropped commercial/commerical farming.

As a result of this, Eastern Highlands Farmers, probably the most progressive in the country can be seen selling their produce in almost all the coastal cities and towns of the country without DPI help.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENT LIMITING FACTORS

Farmer Training

As the farmers are having to deal with more and more foreign species of vegetables and livestock, they need to be, as best and as much as possible trained in the basic aspects of that activity's management.

Besides that, these activities are the basis of their livelihood unlike extension officers that have a pay packet at the end of every two (2) weeks.

Rural Credit

A lot has been said at different forums on rural credit.

Whilst the farmers in most cases may have the land, time, skill experience etc, they never usually have the financial means to undertake any project.

Relevant Government lending institution's lending policies need to be revived and revised.

Many Provincial Governments have come up with their own credit schemes, defeating the purpose of the Government established institutions.

Produce Marketing

Apart from the domestic consumption of food produced, large proportions of the produce are usually marketed for cash.

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Good return with total effective disposal generally means continuous production to the farmer.

On the other hand, less sales and poor return means a reduction or a complete stop in production.

Government at all levels (if not in farmer training & rural credit) should look deeply into this area and develop the infrastructure network. The machinery can then be taken over at a cost by farmers or farmer organisations.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Farmer Organisations

Farmers of today are quite affluent and capable of looking after themselves.

For far too long, extension officers have tended to "Shove" things down the throats of farmers.

It is probably time now, we facilitate their get together and observe how they go.

Their weak areas should become our action areas and their strength areas might become our learning areas.

Down Stream Processing

The absence of simple processing means a poor returns to farmers.

To maintain a high level of consistency in production and the return spread widely, Government initiative and input is required initially to have the processing set ups.

"GOOD WILL" FACTORS

Resources

As in every profession, extension officers require specific "tools" to undertake effective extension/advisory work.

Good will and appreciation from the high up "Masters" on the roles of agricultural extension officers and the importance of agriculture is never there.

Infrastructure

For meaningful sustainable development, infrastructure such as roads is an important consideration. Government, at all levels, need to be constantly reminded of the importance of maintaining all weather roads at all times.

CONCLUSION

Agriculture is a renewable resource activity area. This has been said many times. Successive governments, at all levels, have been ill advised to the point where resources have been negligently thrown around.

A concerted effort needs to be instituted where streamlining and rationalisation take place, where the input is justified by the outputs.