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ZANZIBAR'S STUDENTS BECOME EXTENSION AGENTS

by VIRGINIE PRICE

Virginie Price is employed with the Ministry of Agriculture in Tanzania based in Zanzibar. She here describes the extension program of an IDRC-supported cassava improvement project, which well illustrates the difficulties encountered in agricultural extension work.

It may be stating the obvious to say that the aim of an extension program is to inform the greatest number of interested people of some new development, in the most effective and efficient way. Few would argue that point, but many would debate what is the most effective and efficient way.

There are, in fact, many ways to initiate the spread of information, from reliance on word-of-mouth and rumour to highly structured methods involving the help of extension officers, scheduled meetings, and audio-visual aids. Which one to choose depends, of course, on the program and the goals to be reached as well as on the funds and number of personnel available.

The extension component of the cassava improvement program in Zanzibar is small: our main concern is to develop cassava cultivars resistant to diseases and pests, such as Cassava Mosaic disease and green mites, that are prevalent in the area and are causing considerable losses in terms of yield and quality. At present, few farmers are aware of the disease problem, blaming low yields on the weather.

Our extension scheme is aimed at making the farmers aware that the diseases are present, teach them how to recognize them, and show them how

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they can minimize their losses through good cultural practices. This is essential if the farmers are to accept foreign cultivars that are different from local varieties in shape, tuber size, and taste.

The number of people potentially interested in obtaining cuttings of disease-resistant, high-yielding cassava is large and not restricted to any particular region. But because cassava is not a cash crop, few farmers bother to visit regional demonstration plots. On the face of it, they have very little to gain from such an expedition, made all the more difficult in areas where transportation facilities are few or non-existant. Moreover, there are no trained extension officers in Zanzibar to visit villages and farmers' fields in order to introduce the resistant material, the practice of roguing diseased plants, burning infected stalks, and other ways of combatting the problem.

Some low-cost method had to be found to bring this information to a large number of farmers without depending on qualified help from the Ministry of Agriculture. The program would need to introduce the varieties developed at the research station, explain their cultural requirements and cooking properties, and provide information and facts about the disease problem.

I therefore decided to use the rural schools as centres for cassava extension. Education is free and compulsory for all children in Zanzibar, and each rural school has a plot of land tended by the students, under the supervision of their school masters. The school's routine would not be altered in any way, and -- depending of course on how seriously the master takes his duties -- the plots' upkeep would be assured. The risk of losing the consumers' confidence would also be minimized as the children would not lose face if the experiment failed.

My theory was that the students would return to their homes with news about Cassava Mosaic disease and green mites, information about what varieties to plant and why, and also about the possibility of growing hybrid cultivars in the near future. They might even bring their parents to visit the school plots. At harvest they would prepare and taste the tubers, and carry cuttings home to plant for themselves. They would be the extension agents.

Thus the program was launched. We, of course, supply all the inputs. A booklet giving detailed instructions for plot lay-out, dates of planting and harvesting, and established periods for recording observations is provided. Details on how to screen the plants are given, and a class demonstration is held before the trials begin.

The plots are occasionally visited by an officer of the Ministry of Agriculture to ensure that all prescribed steps have been followed and to remind the students that they are doing something important. At the end of each observation period the completed booklets and recording sheets are collected, and thus the scheme provides the cassava improvement project with feedback from different regions on varietal performance, regional differences in yield, disease, and taste preference. And although this information is not conclusive, it helps to confirm the observations made at the research stations.

The program has developed well. I did, however, receive quite a blow when I first went to introduce the idea to the principal of a rural school. I had brought with me a sample booklet with plot layouts, varieties to be used, blank pages for observation, booklets to be given to each participating student. I promised that all the inputs would be supplied, and that we would try to provide whatever assistance was required.

He listened to my ramble, then shook his head: "I am sorry, it is impossible", he said. I looked at him, disbelieving. "But this would be an educational experience, it would provide information to your government, it would..." As many good reasons as I could think of were given to try to make this simple program appealing.

Finally, I asked why. The answer was just as simple: "Our students have no tools."

There I met the inevitable constraint. And although we haven't the funds to supply every school with 20 hoes, they were found for this one.

No matter how well thought-out and appropriate a program seems, it invariably meets with unexpected problems: some plots are never inspected,

others are never planted; elsewhere, observations are never made. Nevertheless, the cuttings are moving slowly from the research station to the surrounding countryside and word is travelling. Given the circumstances, this is proving to be the most effective and efficient method.

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