

Agricultural extension and training for agricultural extension agents in Syria

Part 3: Agricultural extension agents training in Syria

This page in the previous issue reported on the Directorate of Agricultural Extension of Syria's Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. The training for their agricultural extension agents is undertaken by the Department of Training and Qualification (DTQ). This department is divided into two sections, one in charge of "in-service training" for agricultural extension agents employed by the government and the others in charge of "pre-service training" for students of agricultural high schools and vocational schools (training for students studying agriculture at university is the responsibility of the Ministry of Higher Education.) The department has five national training centers: two agricultural extension training centers in Damascus, two agricultural machinery training centers in Dara and Aleppo, and one stockbreeding training center in Homs. In addition there are training sections attached to agricultural departments at the provincial level, conducting various types of training within the respective provinces. The number of training courses conducted under the DTQ during the year 2000 both at the national and provincial levels was 2,155 in total, and the number of trainees amounted to a total of 41,220 people:- 14,350 extension agents; 20,790 farmers; 6,080 students. The wide range of the training themes include general agricultural expansion, rural life improvement, crop cultivation, fruit cultivation, stockbreeding, forestry, environmental conservation, irrigation, agricultural machinery, bee-keeping, and computing. The maximum number of trainees at each course is set at twenty, and the duration of courses can vary from one week to one month.

Apart from those provided by the Syrian central or local governments, there are some training programmes conducted by international organizations. Currently the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is carrying out five projects of regional agricultural development, and one of their project components is the improvement of agricultural extension activities and training for agricultural extension agents and farmers. Also, FAO has been conducting a project for organizational empowerment regarding agricultural policy planning and analysis since 1998, and another TOT (training of trainers) project to upgrade the quality of trainers of agricultural extension agents since 1999.

We discussed in the previous issue how the Directorate of Agricultural Extension is well structured as an organization, and similarly the training courses for agricultural extension agents are well formed with a good variety of subjects. If these courses could live up to the initial expectations, they would contribute greatly to the development and problem solving of Syria's agriculture. In reality, however, the training efforts have not proved so successful. Why? The following are some of the reasons:

1) Means as the objective: DTQ tends to be satisfied with the mere execution of training courses, and to care less about the contents and results of their own training than about figures, such as the number of courses run and that of participants per year. The head of DTQ also tends to request donors to supply material or financial support (as opposed to technical assistance), under the pretext of conducting new training courses with new technologies and information.

2) Prevalence of "incentives": In Syria it is a common practice to provide so-called "incentives", namely a daily allowance for participants on various training courses. Officially the purpose behind this is to encourage more participation and thus increase the effect of the training. However, increasingly this incentive is making the training itself a dead letter, giving the contents of the training secondary or even less importance.

3) Lack of needs assessment: At the beginning of every year, DTQ draws up an annual plan, according to which it conducts various types of training. However, in many cases the same training courses are repeated year after year simply because they have been conducted in previous years, without assessing whether every and each project is required and necessary.

Apart from these main drawbacks, there are other problems such as that trainees cannot gain practical skills since the contents of the courses are not practical comprising mostly lectures and with few opportunities for field work, and that there is too much emphasis on the appearance and the show of the training. This latter point can be seen as a fundamental problem leading to the above three major problems, and also it is a common feature not only in terms of agricultural training but also in various aspects of Syrian society in general.



Training for farmers



Training regarding olive cultivation