

Agricultural extension and training for agricultural extension agents in Syria

Part 4: Agricultural extension and improvement plan in Syria

In this series I have reported about the significance of agricultural extension, the current system of the agricultural extension system and the training of extension staff in Syria. In this issue I would like to give a report on my experience in Syria as an expert for three years from 1994, when I worked on the agricultural extension improvement plan on the request of the Syrian government's Directorate of Agricultural Extension of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform.

Although the government of Syria makes it a top priority in its national development policy to increase agricultural production, the country has not achieved food self-sufficiency due to still low levels of productivity, the increase in population and an associated increase in food consumption. The Directorate of Agricultural Extension is a fairly large organization with 800 extension units and some 4,000 staff across the country. If effectively and efficiently managed, the Directorate is sure to play an important role in the agricultural development of the country. However, at present the collaboration among different directorates is rather weak, and for instance the information collected at the Soil Directorate and the Statistics Directorate is not communicated to, and not at all utilized for the activities of agricultural extension by the Directorate for Agricultural Extension. Moreover, the network ranging from the head office in the capital, its branches in provinces and counties to extension offices at the village level is not functioning effectively. To this background, I was invited as an expert to improve the agricultural extension system as a whole, by giving technical advice and training to farmers, training extension staff and drawing up new extension planning.

Based on discussions with the Directorate for Agricultural Extension staff, during my mission I got myself engaged in various activities aiming at: (i) systematization of basic information needed for agricultural extension activities; (ii) improvement of the agricultural extension planning based on the results of the on-going farm survey; and (iii) technological development for sustainable agriculture. Regarding the systematization of basic information, we got all the extension units and the areas under their responsibility plotted on the map, while incorporating the soil map, climatic division and other statistical information into a GIS system, so that the extension staff can easily grasp the characteristics of the areas under their charge. As for improvement of the agricultural extension planning, first of all we introduced computers for conducting farm surveys and analyzing the results. A unified format according to crop types was employed for the survey, and now data could be collected and analyzed at the district, province and national levels. With this system it became easy to understand the geographic distribution of farmers experiencing different problems at different levels. Moreover, through the technological development activities extension staff leaned to investigate the problems of irrigation management and crop rotation scheme which had been causing salinization of soil, and to see what water-harvesting farming and agroforestry were like.

Though my mission in Syria was only limited to three years, through the collaboration with such related bureaus as the Soil Directorate and Irrigation Directorate for systematization of basic information, staff members of different directorates started to communicate with each other. In addition, as whenever possible I took some head office staff in the capital to extension offices in the field, it made a good opportunity for them also to learn what difficulties the field staff were facing day by day. In this way, I hope I as an overseas expert could contribute to activating the horizontal and vertical relationships surrounding the head office of the Directorate of Agricultural Extension. I also hope that the information and equipment provided to agricultural extension staff during my mission will serve to upgrade the quality of the staff themselves, and that there will be more and more staff members well trusted by farmers. And I would sincerely like to expect that the results coming out of my three-year mission will eventually lead to more active agricultural extension activities in Syria in the future.



Training in irrigation



Training in handicrafts



Training in crop cultivation