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PROVIDING INFORMATION FOR RESOLVING FARM AND COMMUNITY PROBLEMS*

by

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The purpose of this paper is to describe the kinds of problems that are important to Colombian agriculture and to discuss the extent to which these problems receive attention in the Colombian press. To make an analysis of this kind, it is first necessary to list the major Colombian farm problems and to describe briefly their characteristics and origins.

The kinds of problems we are concerned with are those that rural people confront as they: (1) try to manage production processes in the face of physical, economic and environmental constraints, (2) participate in community functions and collective activities which provide services such as roads, markets, schools, credit, and other inputs needed to complement production inside their farms, and (3) engage in interpersonal relationship with members of their families and with other persons inside and outside their communities.

Because agriculture is mainly a mechanical and biological process, there is a strong tendency to view it largely in terms of technical production problems.[1] This

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[1]This, of course, is the case in the physical and biological sciences but there is also a strong tradition in the social sciences to focus on technology--especially its adoption. See Everett M. Rogers, Diffusion of Innovations (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962).

is a mistake under development conditions. Any discussion with farmers in Colombia, for example, or a serious review of research about agricultural problems always reveals numerous farm problems that are not of a purely biological or technical farm management nature.

In order to understand this concept more fully, it is necessary to understand where problems come from. Let us picture agriculture as a process which consists of farms, farmers, and a structure or environmental setting within which decision and production take place.[2]

The farmer is the actor in this setting and is the one who experiences or "feels" the problems. Putting aside purely personal or family problems, his agricultural problems are found in two areas: (1) the farm--in trying to organize and manage production processes, and (2) the structural setting--in trying to organize and regulate community services, infrastructural investments, and other group functions which aid or hamper individual farming activities.

This distinction between the farm and the structure is important because the two areas present different kinds of problems, and their resolution requires different approaches as well as different kinds of information.

Farm level problems are dealt with largely by individual decision. That is, the producer acting independently can decide what crops to plant, how much fertilizer to use, when to harvest, where to sell, and what to do with the income that is generated annually. The fact that farm level decisions are almost all individual is of central importance to information agencies, extension workers, news media, and others who give technical advice to farmers. It means that farm level problems will be removed or resolved by convincing or informing farm managers essentially one at a time. If a farmer is not using pest controls, for example, extension agents may help him by taking pesticides to his farm and demonstrating their use, or by persuading the farmer that he should use a certain pesticide in a certain way. If the farmer decides to act, he can resolve his problem by going to the market, buying the material and applying it, all largely individual operations.

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[2]For further elaboration of this point see: Arthur T. Mosher, Getting Agriculture Moving (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966).

But what if the farmer faces a structural problem? Let us say he needs a road to his farm, as many Colombian farms do, so that he can haul surplus production to market. Persuading the individual farmer that a road is needed will not resolve the transportation problem. The farmer, once convinced, cannot go to the market place and buy a road system. Simply knowing methods of road building and financing is also not enough. A different information approach is needed for this situation.[3]

Structural problems are those which farmers confront together and must resolve by group action. Many decisions in agriculture are of the structural or group type. They include decisions about the operation of educational systems, public health services, roads and transportation, agricultural research services, public utilities, and governmental procedures like taxation, control of public investments, administration of justice, registration of property, and similar governmental tasks.

When problems arise in these structural areas, as they often do, the individual is helpless to solve them by individual decision and action. Yet these problems must be resolved for continued agricultural production and the well-being of rural people. Just as information agencies must understand how individual decisions take place in order to make their information useful, in the same way they must understand how group decisions take place in order to provide useful information in the structural area. The two characteristic features of much information for individual farmers are that it is information of a technical nature and it is often persuasive. But when farmers in a community need a structural change, persuasion and technology are not enough.

This is so because group decisions are made only <u>through the medium</u> of organizations. Before a community can resolve its road problem (in spite of the fact that all members of the community may agree about what is needed), it must devise and apply a mechanism whereby the group's collective interest can be reported and tabulated. This means some kind of organizational machinery. Since organizational instruments are a necessary part of group

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[3]This discussion is not meant to imply that all information is persuasive. Information may also be a neutral and objective presentation of alternatives with the decision maker left to choose one of the alternatives based on his situation and perceived need. See, for example: Richard F. Carter, "On Defining Communication," paper presented to the National Society for the Study of Communication, Chicago, Illinois (December 30, 1966).

decision making, an important function of information agencies assisting in the area of structural problems is to provide information about how to organize and how to arrive at group consensus.

Some kinds of group problems come up repeatedly (like education and transportation). For this reason, every society maintains some organizational and informational machinery on a permanent basis. Such permanent machinery is called government.[4]

Using the distinction between individual farm decisions and group decisions, I have divided agricultural problems into two groups--individual and structural. The following list of individual farm problems was compiled from agricultural research reports of the Colombian Agrarian Reform Institute, the Ministry of Agriculture, the National University, and the University of Valle, and from interviews with Colombian farmers.[5]

TABLE 1.--INDIVIDUAL FARM PROBLEMS FREQUENTLY REPORTED IN COLOMBIA

1. Farmers lack education.
2. Farmers lack management knowledge.
3. Farmers lack personal savings.
4. Farmers lack political influence and group expression.
5. Farmers lack land resources.
6. Farmers choose inappropriate physical inputs.
7. Farmers apply inappropriate technology.
8. Farmers have traditional social values.
9. Farmers have negative attitudes toward business and management.
10. Farmers have ignorant habits.

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[4]It should be pointed out that the preceding model of group decision making does not apply in all places. If decisions about infrastructure are made by dictators or technocrats then directing information to the group is probably of minor importance.

[5]For references see: Luis de J. Pérez Cordero, Bibliografía del Sector Agropecuario Colombiano (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de la Reforma Agraria, 1967). Farm field data are mainly from studies by L. Harlan Davis, Emil B. Haney, Jr., James E. Grunig, and Herman Felstehausen, all of the Land Tenure Center, Colombia.

The same studies and sources also provide us with a list of structural problems.

TABLE 2.--INFRASTRUCTURAL PROBLEMS CONFRONTING COLOMBIAN FARMERS

1. Land distribution--large and small farmers do not have equal access to land.
2. Markets--there are poor standards and controls, often large margins, sometimes limited capacity and access.
3. Roads--most farms are inaccessible by road.
4. Technical information--practical and appropriate information is lacking or poorly distributed.
5. Institutional credit--there is a scarcity of credit for some kinds of farms and some areas.
6. Labor--skilled workers are scarce, labor quality is low.
7. Community services--services such as education, health, and public power are extremely limited in rural areas.
8. Group instruments--rural people do not have organizational mechanism available to plan, construct, finance and manage infrastructural services.
9. Physical inputs--factor inputs are sometimes scarce and often poorly distributed.
10. Climate and soils--natural features make many areas unsuited to intensive production.

In the research reports, these problems were often mentioned as being more urgent than individual farm problems. There is also evidence that Colombian agricultural extension workers consider structural problems to be more important than individual farm problems. A group of 100 candidates for extension posts in Colombia were asked to list what they considered to be the most important problems confronting Colombian agriculture.[6] The five most common responses in order of frequency were:

1. There is a shortage of appropriate technology for farms.
2. It is difficult to obtain credit or capital for farm investments.
3. Farm people are poorly educated.

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[6]From a course on Extension Methods presented by the author to candidates at the Instituto Colombiano Agropecuario, Bogotá, May 1968.

4. Farm land is badly distributed.
5. There is a shortage of educational facilities and opportunities for farm people.

Note that all of the items except number three represent structural problems and even number three is the result of structural failures. These responses are surprising from candidates for extension posts, since they have all been trained to work almost exclusively on problems of individual farm technology and will be required to restrict most of their efforts to those problems when they take positions with extension agencies.

To what extent does the content of the Colombian press reflect the important individual and structural problems of Colombian agriculture? Information to answer this question is drawn from a comprehensive study by Jaime Gutiérrez made in 1965 which reports the agricultural content of the main Bogotá newspapers.[7] Gutiérrez developed subject matter categories for agricultural news and measured the column inches of space devoted to each category of material in El Tiempo, El Espectador, El Siglo, and La República, all Bogotá dailies, and a sample of the content from the weekly agricultural paper, El Campesino. The period studied was January 17 through May 2, 1965. The daily papers generally printed agricultural news on Saturday or Sunday.

The results from the study of the dailies are grouped together with El Campesino reported separately since it is an all-agricultural paper and contains a larger quantity of agricultural news.

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[7]Jaime Gutiérrez, "Content Analysis and Readability Study of the Agricultural Pages in Five Colombian Newspapers" (Madison, Wisconsin: Unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of Agricultural Journalism, University of Wisconsin, June, 1966).

TABLE 3.--COLUMN INCHES OF AGRICULTURAL NEWS IN FOUR BOGOTÁ DAILIES AND ONE AGRICULTURAL WEEKLY FOR PERIOD JANUARY 17-MAY 2, 1965

Category of agricultural news (in order of importance for dailies)	Column inches for dailies	Column inches El Campesino	Rank in El Campesino
1. Meetings and organizational activities of large farmers	1,130	114	6
2. National government programs and foreign trade	1,052	544	3
3. Crops	984	736	2
4. Poultry	659	66	8
5. Livestock	523	223	5
6. Public programs to aid agriculture	458	820	1
7. Markets and prices	339	250	4
8. Pest controls	306	63	9
9. Rural educational needs and other community programs	234	79	7
10. Fishing	171	40	10

Dailies reflected considerable variation in the distribution of content for some subjects, but in agricultural production areas they often agreed closely. Here is an example.

TABLE 4.--EXAMPLE OF VARIATION IN SPACE DEVOTED TO TWO SUBJECTS AMONG PAPERS STUDIED

Rank of Subject	El Tiempo	El Espectador	El Siglo	La República	El Campesino
1.		X	X		
2. crops	X	X	X	X	X
3.				X	
4. meetings and organ-izations	X				
5.					X
6.					
.					
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.					
10.					

There are some difficulties in making the comparison between problems and press coverage since the Gutiérrez content analysis was not made with our problem categories in mind. Gutiérrez found the press dedicated most of its agricultural news space to meetings, public relations type articles, national government activities, technical production problems and some news about credit, farm inputs, markets and a few rural structural problems. Most structural problems, however, were given little attention. In other words, it appears that Colombian newspapers do not make special efforts to choose agricultural content on the bases of what experts and farmers consider to be principal problem areas.

Newspaper editors, along with comments from Gutiérrez' study, provide some clues as to why this might be the case. First of all, newspapers lack the necessary editorial staff to develop comprehensive and selective coverage. They

depend primarily on news releases provided by national agricultural organizations which tend to emphasize professional and official activities--consequently the press has a heavy concentration of news about meetings and professional groups.

Second, the daily newspapers in this study circulate primarily in Bogotá and other large cities. They are not widely read by campesinos and farm workers, thus editors are reluctant to use costly space to give broad coverage about rural problems.[8]

These two factors do not explain completely why some structural questions receive so little attention in the total analysis. There appear to be two additional factors. One is that some subjects like education were covered in other types of articles throughout the paper. The other is that agricultural scientists, technicians and writers have stressed the "individual" and "technical" nature of agricultural production and decision making for so long that many reporters, editors, planners and administrators simply do not consider structural problems when they present agricultural information. Yet there is little doubt that both farmers and technicians are aware of these problems as evidenced by the number of times the problems are mentioned in rural studies and other reports. This is a paradox of the gravest kind. Information and extension agencies can hardly go on pretending they are not interested in structural problems if the country's agriculture is to be developed.

Newspapers are in a position to play an important role in generating and distributing the three kinds of information that are basic to the treatment of structural problems. They can encourage and assist organizational efforts among farmers, they can provide technical information needed for group as well as individual decision, and they can use their reporting capabilities to assist in the process of tabulating opinion and speeding collective decision.

This work, of course, must often be done at the local level. Large urban dailies cannot provide the individual detail each rural community needs in order to resolve its specific educational, health or transportation problems. For this reason local and regional media coverage is also needed for agricultural development.

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[8]Author interviews with editors of El Tiempo and El Espectador.

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