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ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA
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Seminar on Correspondence Education
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TRAINING IN AGRICULTURE AND CO-OPERATIVES THROUGH CORRESPONDENCE COURSES^{1/}

It appears to us appropriate, if we are to retain our objectivity and realism, to evaluate the scope and impact of a given type of training, using not only the yard-stick of its content, but also that of its practical application by the recipients. It follows directly from this that in two spheres that affect rural producers as closely as those of agriculture and co-operatives, the preparation of correspondence courses remains a relatively complicated matter, as three essential features are required if it is to be functional:

- (1) Such preparation must provide the elements of a balanced training;
- (2) It must impart knowledge applicable to conditions encountered in the field;
- (3) It must leave scope for uninterrupted further training.

As should be understood, this list is scarcely exhaustive, as it is rather designed to give a direction to training that may yield good results in the Region. Indeed, the extent of the problems involved in training rural manpower in each of the African countries is sufficiently well-known in terms of magnitude, but it deserves to be better appreciated in terms of its multifarious nature.

We immediately reach a point where we must ask ourselves two questions:

^{1/} Mr. P.D. Sam, Regional Officer (Agricultural Extension and Education, Rural Youth), FAO Regional Office for Africa, Accra (Ghana).

- (a) In what realms is this training in agriculture and in co-operatives justified?
- (b) Does it complement some other training?

Logically, the answers to these two questions will emerge from the group discussions that will occur during the course of this meeting, since it provides an excellent opportunity for all the participants to turn to good account the varied experiences of the different countries, and to determine, as a consequence, the constant factors to be singled out from the various individual cases submitted to them for diagnosis.

In our opinion, what lends an indisputable value to this meeting of technicians organized by ECA and SIDA is the chance afforded us of arriving at an interpretation of the true conditions of the peasants in each of the countries under consideration, made by those responsible for this type of training, and of judging the use made by the recipients of the information provided in such courses. This will make it possible to lend well-deserved encouragement to the efforts exerted by such well-known Institutions as INADES^{1/}, which is, through both the quality and the practical nature of its projected courses, lending unchallengeable support to the extension services, for it obviates that "loss of know-how" to which technical staff are exposed both because of their isolation in the villages and because of the tremendous educational tasks with which they are confronted.

These comments could equally well be applied to numerous institutions represented here, whose efforts are certainly concerted with those of organizations like FAO, in order to face the tremendous responsibilities of helping governments and institutions at least to ensure improved nutritional and living standards for the communities of the Region.

Let us now endeavour to appraise the sectors in the realms of agriculture and co-operatives in which the contribution of correspondence courses could play a prominent part.

The justification for correspondence courses in
agriculture and co-operatives

At the present time, the countries of the Region that are in fact best provided with advanced training institutions are quite unable to provide like

^{1/} Institut africain de développement économique et social.

facilities to all their medium-grade staff who are undergoing in-service training and who wish to increase their knowledge both of agriculture and of other fields such as, for example, the co-operatives.

Now it turns out that it is this very trained staff, operating at district (arrondissement) or sub-prefecture level, who are responsible for the immediate supervision of the staff that comes in direct contact with rural families. Any attempt to increase their effectiveness in the field presupposes a sufficient mastery of technical questions and a knowledge of the techniques involved in approaching rural families. All this trained staff consists of the officials concerned with development whose lot it is to face, day by day, the socio-economic problems imposed by the struggle to achieve progress.

When we take into account the fact that budgetary restrictions very often prevent the maintenance of a rate of trained staffing in agriculture of more than one training instructor to every 600 or 1000 operating units (and since this rate frequently drops to 1 for every 2000), it is only logical that the continuous training of such staff constitutes a problem in logistics. Indeed, training centres cannot be multiplied indefinitely, owing to the cost of their installation and running. It thus follows that certain rural areas come to receive less favourable treatment than others and so, as a consequence, does the training staff stationed there.

When we consider that the average yearly running costs of some residential centres capable of boarding between 40 and 50 trainees amount to approximately 4 million francs CFA, we may speculate how many centres can be put into operation by each prefecture in normal circumstances.

Furthermore, very few teaching materials, books, technological reviews, suitable educational films and further training fellowships are available at the regional level. In these circumstances, "loss of know-how" occurs, which is accompanied by decreased effectiveness and lessened prestige with the populations for whom the trained staffing is provided.

In these circumstances, correspondence courses - despite the evident limitations inherent in their very nature - remain a weapon in the struggle to achieve development of which the public services, especially those concerned with agriculture, as well as bodies responsible for promoting co-operatives, must make the maximum use.

Moreover, it must not be forgotten that the introduction of the social change to which these officials and technicians aspire, rests upon their knowledge of a relatively broad spectrum of disciplines and activities. The strategy to be adopted presupposes at the outset skills in priority fields and, in this connexion, we should not regard the use of correspondence courses simply as an alternative solution, but should rather appreciate its practical and economic advantages.

In view of the fact that correspondence courses are spread out over the entire year, it thus follows that the subjects dealt with in each batch of mailed material are limited, and that their progressive presentation in the form of pamphlets, brochures and folders, which can easily be sent through ordinary postal channels and which can be used by staff, even when they are travelling from place to place, is thus facilitated.

According to our records, the subjects connected with agriculture and co-operatives about which requests for information are most frequent may be classified as follows:

1. Material on preparation of the land;
2. Dry farming and irrigated farming;
3. Annual crops;
4. Fruit tree production;
5. Fertilizing;
6. Establishment of improved pastures;
7. Soil conservation and water conservation;
8. Livestock feeding;
9. Control of parasitic infections;
10. Food preservation;
11. Farm management;
12. Organization of producers' associations;
13. Training of association leaders;
14. Training of producers' groups;
15. Management of co-operatives;
16. Problems connected with marketing products;
17. Organization and conduct of co-operative studies;
18. Improved use of foodstuffs.

Training by means of correspondence courses is therefore justified in the national context when it may be considered that its aims are adapted to field work. It would, however, be necessary to simplify such aims in conformity with the requirements for trained staff after repeated evaluation at intervals of five or six years. Against this background, it would be appropriate to prepare brochures for the basic training staff of the various ministries concerned with rural development, which would be produced simultaneously with the teaching materials prepared and distributed by the extension services, if only in order to achieve an identical terminology for use in the dialogue with the peasants.

There would thus emerge a composite body of thousands of technicians belonging to different disciplines, which would be taught on an equal footing within one country. Indeed, in order to provide the inhabitants of rural areas with information that is apposite to the various situations encountered, the training instructor or local government official must be able to single out and then neutralize pockets of resistance "opposed to the introduction of progressive methods, and to provide technical answers to the problems raised".^{1/}

This would not only present advantages, but would also involve one major and inherent disadvantage: namely, that of failing to achieve effective co-ordination in the preparation of technical documents, or to respect the true content to be conveyed in each of the disciplines involved. Hence the necessity for an ad hoc committee of supervision and evaluation.

In many cases, teaching materials derived from a given country and concerned with a given subject may, after slight modification, be disseminated in another where rural conditions are nearly similar. In other cases, as we are well aware, that would not be possible owing to the specific features that inherently characterize each of the countries involved, such as the cultural standard reached by its inhabitants and its special needs.

^{1/} Dr. Kahneman to Mr. E.O. Schied (Training officials concerned with social change in Israel).

Action that may be envisaged to make better use of institutes at present responsible for conducting correspondence courses in agriculture and co-operatives

Such action should, in principle, be indicated by the group discussions, with the proviso that these should remain strictly within the confines of financial limitations and of those imposed by the scarcity of technical supporting staff in the countries of the Region. On the most favourable assumption, where for instance there existed certain financial resources and a minimum of staff, it would be necessary to avoid indulging in illusions, since the preparation of teaching materials of high quality is dependent upon the possession of appropriate skills, upon accumulated experience and upon identification of areas in which action might be taken on the basis of certain priorities in requirements.

Within the framework of a functional association of institutes engaged in training by means of correspondence courses, the problem would be simplified. If such an association does not exist, it appears to us expedient that we should work towards its establishment.

One of the foremost tasks of such an association, working in conjunction with a specialized section of ECA, would be to draw up an inventory in an accurate manner showing what had already been produced by the various national institutions operating, and to address a request to some specified financial institution to meet the expenditure involved in making such an inventory.

Using this as a starting-point, it would be desirable to make this inventory available to the institutions represented at this meeting, so that a certain measure of selection could be exercised to meet the countries' individual needs, and accordingly to envisage the copying or reproduction of the inventory. In the sphere of agriculture, the advice of FAO and UNESCO could be invited, and similarly that of the ILO could be requested in the sphere of co-operatives, not forgetting the other international or national institutions competent in the field.

If this result were to emerge from our meeting, we should be entitled to consider that a worthwhile step forward had been made; and we hope that matters will turn out thus, since we are all associated in these efforts to achieve development, "for better or for worse".