

Problems Facing Rural America

**Better individual decisions are not
synonymous with better leaders—
Extension should aim for both**

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THOSE IN the Cooperative Extension Service who work intimately with rural people know that our rural population (especially farmers) have been, are, and will continue to be under great pressures from all sides. They have, over the past decade, been subjected to constant and unrelenting economic pressures arising from national and international economic forces. They have seen their local, state, and national farm organizations engaged in bitter recriminations among themselves. Farmers have borne the brunt of constant harassment by the urban press which has evidenced a complete lack of understanding of the problems of farm people and rural areas.

Whenever farmers gather, their talk turns to the frustrations that face them in public actions. They talk of higher taxes and rising school costs, of inadequate local and state governmental services, of the failures of farmer-groups in bargaining for higher product prices, and of the failure of farm organizations to exert real influence in state and national political affairs. Despite the fact that they are doing a better individual job of producing farm products, farmers find their collective impact and influence declining and their attempts at group action thwarted at every turn.

As members of one of the major institutions serving rural America, you do not have to be told of these problems. Moreover, I am certain you recognize that the Cooperative Extension Service cannot survive as a viable institution unless the group that it was primarily designed to serve continues to exist as a vital group in our society. In my mind there is a strong relationship between these

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pressures I have sketched and the continued doubts about Cooperative Extension work evidenced at appropriation time in many states.

Underlying the kinds of reactions I have outlined are a series of problems that can be classified as public problems. By this I mean that they are problems that must be dealt with by collective action of farm people rather than individual action. I am not implying they should be dealt with by government, for there are many examples of private group action. They are problems different from the individual farmer's decision on which seed, level of fertilization, and insecticide to use. These issues can be decided individually even though they often have broader ramifications.

Extension has been extraordinarily successful in educating farm people so that they are better equipped to make these individual decisions and deal with those kinds of problems. Continued effort on these lines will be needed as the business of farming becomes more complex. But, I believe we have been less successful in helping farm people understand and cope with the problems which they must deal with via group action. I shall attempt to identify and discuss some of the issues in this area. The ones I shall concentrate on are (1) the identification and training of rural leadership, (2) the relating of leadership to the changes in the power structure, and (3) the use of the first two to remake the institutions serving rural people.

RURAL LEADERSHIPS

The mass of statistics showing the changes in American agriculture is so great that by the time we have looked it over we have too little energy left to digest its important implications. By now, all of us know that the number of farmers has been declining rapidly and that this decline is likely to continue for some time. Our total economy benefits by our continuing to produce more farm products with fewer persons; the Cooperative Extension Service has been an important contributor to this ability. But this process has significant effects that go well beyond the economic impact.

Reduction in the number of farms and farm people occurs primarily by a reduction in the rate of new entrants into agriculture and by a rapid out-movement of the youngest persons already in the industry. This leaves a farm population with a highly skewed age distribution, with persons over 45 a steadily increasing portion of the total. The median age of farm operators in the United States rose from 43 years in 1920 to 50 in 1960. This changing age structure in agriculture is bound to affect the type of leadership in the industry and, as a result, the ability of farm people to solve their public problems.

I have no particular prejudices against older persons as such; in fact, I expect to be one myself some day. But I think that different generations view things differently. One reason is that they have had different experiences in a different world. Also, young people have more to gain or lose as a result of certain types of public action. Moreover, in the United States each generation exceeds the preceding one in its average level of formal education, so that older leaders in agriculture often have to deal with leaders in other fields of a different generation who have substantially more formal education.

A Major Problem

But the major problem is not now, but five, ten, and twenty years ahead. Look around in your advisory groups, farm organizations, breed associations, etc., and see how many of your leaders are under forty. Have you identified the younger men and women who will replace or, if necessary, push aside the present aging leadership in rural areas? We are doing a good job of developing leadership in our youth programs, but much of this training benefits the non-farm economy where most of our farm youth end up. Young people staying in farming are probably fully as intelligent as those leaving, but the characteristics of the ones leaving agriculture are those generally identified with successful leaders. Thus, you will not only have a smaller sample of rural young people from which to draw, but you may also have a sample in which much of the reservoir of natural leadership has departed.

It is common knowledge that college graduates, even from colleges of agriculture, generally do not return to farming. Thus, you will have to draw leadership from a group that usually will lack the formal education of their non-farm counterparts. This makes the training aspect of the leadership problem even more acute inasmuch as you will need to provide more education for such individuals than might otherwise be the case.

I am not suggesting that Cooperative Extension programs be turned into one big series of leadership training meetings. What I am saying is that the main role of Extension is to develop better rural people and better rural communities. Better crops, better livestock, better farm management, and better family programs are ways to improve the welfare of farm people and hence their communities. But if, in the process of building breed associations, soil conservation districts, DHIA's, and the other organizations used in Extension programs, we fail to identify and train rural leadership, we are only doing half the job. Better individual decisions are not synonymous with better leaders and our programs should aim for both.

Some have suggested that Extension meetings be evaluated by the criteria of whether or not people attending benefit enough to be willing to pay the cost of the meetings. If the only purpose of Extension programs were to improve individual decision making, this would be a valid criteria. If the purpose is also to train rural leaders, it is not a valid criteria. The value of better leadership accrues to the community at large, not to individuals, and there is no reason to expect individuals to pay for the benefits going to the community. Since I believe that Extension programs should have a dual purpose, I doubt that willingness to pay for them is a valid criteria by which to judge.

The nature of private and public organizations serving agriculture is such that they generally require the services of full-time employees. As a result, they tend to become a bureaucracy. In the absence of competent lay leadership it is highly probable that the real leadership of these rural institutions will rest in the hands of that bureaucracy—this means farm organizations run by their executive secretaries or district field men, school boards run by their superintendents, and county ASCS offices run by the office managers. If farmers' organizations are run *by* the professional bureaucracy, they may also be run *for* the bureaucracy rather than for farm people.

RELATING TO THE POWER STRUCTURE

Leadership, however able, has little value in the area of public problems unless it is effectively related to the power structure of the society in which it operates. Great generals, for instance, have frequently made poor political leaders because the power structure whereby one gets things done differs so greatly in military and civilian governments. Like generals in civilian politics, farm leaders suddenly find they are operating in an unfamiliar power structure.

The political structure which farmers helped to create and which has operated successfully for rural people for more than half a century is gone. At one time, most county boards of supervisors were dominated by farmer-members who understood and could maintain the interests of agriculture at that level. This is no longer the case in most counties. State legislatures used to be controlled by representatives of rural areas who would deal with rural issues without reference to partisan politics. This is no longer true; and in the future the balance will tip further toward urban areas. At the national level the "farm bloc" could for many years get any legislation it wanted; and it did, Presidents and Secretaries of Agriculture notwithstanding.

The days of rural dominance of political affairs at any level of government is gone and nostalgia will not change this fact. There is evidence that many of our present agricultural leaders who are products of an earlier age and political structure do not understand the changes that have occurred and how to be effective within the new environment. Unless the control over rural public policies is to pass entirely to urban groups, rural leaders must be helped to understand the new power structure and ways of exerting influence within it.

The key to understanding the new situation is to understand the difference between majority and minority politics. Majority groups tend to concentrate upon legislators without regard to party—and rightly so, for this will maximize their power. Minority groups, however, can have their greatest leverage with the executive branch of government, which is more concerned with the marginal effects of defections by minority groups. But to be most effective, minority pressures must be channeled through the mechanism of the political party, which is mostly concerned with capturing the executive branch.

If farm people are to have an effective voice in determining the course of public politics of crucial importance to agriculture, they are going to have to become active participants in the partisan political processes—and in both parties. Politicians listen far more carefully to those who participate than to those who do not. Part of the reward for participating is the reward of getting heard on policy issues. I am not suggesting that Cooperative Extension workers rush out and engage in partisan politics; both good sense and the Hatch Act prohibit this. But farm people and their leaders must learn to participate to be effective.

Another feature of successful minority groups is their willingness to recognize legitimate claims of other groups and their willingness to adjust their own claims so as to make them appeal to other groups for support in the power structure. Majority groups need not be as concerned about the public interest and minority group concerns. Minority groups must continually consider how their concerns can be forwarded in ways which are compatible with the goals of other groups. Much of the hostility in the urban press in recent years arises from the fact that some farm leaders have given evidence of being almost totally insensitive to the major real problems of non-farm groups.

These changes in power structure will make the job of those of us working with farm people more difficult. Farm people and those who work with them have had their way in government affairs per-

taining to rural areas so long that it comes as a rude shock to find that they must play the game with new rules if they are to play at all. The easiest thing for Extension would be to shift its attention and focus to the rising urban majority and leave farmers to fend for themselves. To do so would be unfortunate for Extension and tragic for farm people.

REMAKING RURAL INSTITUTIONS

Given leadership with sufficient access to the power structure in society, will the public problems of rural America be solved? Indeed not, for the greatest project—that of restructuring rural institutions (public and private) which must serve rural people—has not yet begun. One cannot live and work daily with rural people without feeling the increased strain on the rural institutions and, to a degree, an increasing estrangement between the rural people and the institutions which have been developed to serve them, both private and public.

Considering some of these private and public institutions involved in public decisions in rural America, it should be recognized that institutions are the fabric of society, designed to bind it and give form to it. By their very nature, institutions are a product of their times. The question that must be asked is whether the old institutional patterns can be adapted to the present needs or whether they will become increasingly binding until they must be broken or cast aside in order to weave new institutions to fit today's and tomorrow's needs.

Let us start with the voluntary private institutions—the farm organizations. The oldest, the Grange, was a product of the post-Civil War period; the Farmers Union, of the early 1900's; and the Farm Bureau, of the 1920's. The Farm Bureau and Grange have their power in their county units of organization. Meanwhile, the steady shift of power from county units of government to national level has increasingly divorced their membership base from the effective power structure. It is not surprising that farm organizations organized to influence governmental units of forty years ago are having to reorganize to bargain effectively for their members with buyers of farm products representing large private concentrations of economic power. It is worth noting that a new farm organization—the National Farmer's Organization—is today attracting interest and attention of farm people, and in some areas their allegiance. It is a product of the 1950's. Certainly much of the inter-organizational feuding of today is the result of the pressures for farm organizations to enter new areas of major concern to farm people. They will need help in dealing with these new concerns and situations.

An even greater problem exists among governmental institutions. Township and county units of government are the product of a century ago with its sparsely settled population limited by pre-machine transportation. Townships, and even counties, cannot cope with the major problems of today's rural America—the problems of area development, area conservation and flood control, industrial growth, and education in a mobile society. The theory that every school district can be completely autonomous and locally supported is fine—if its policies were of local concern only. But today the quality of education in every rural school district is of vital concern to outside areas that will take the products of that system into colleges or into its communities as neighbors and fellow workers.

Federal and state institutions serving rural America are also products of bygone days, often oriented to the past. The Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service is the direct descendent of the AAA that arose in the 1930's as a result of the agricultural crisis. The Soil Conservation Service has the same depression vintage, as does the Farmers Home Administration and the Rural Electrification Administration. Despite several name changes, these institutions, by and large, have the same basic orientation they had in the beginning—and in some cases the same personnel. It has been said that generals are always prepared to fight the previous war. Could it be that our agricultural institutions are always prepared to deal with the problems that were important to farm people two decades earlier?

The Extension Service got its start in the 1910's and '20's. It is still heavily tied to county units which were then the effective units of government—and in many cases may be dealing with problems farm people faced then rather than those they face now. Are our Extension structure, our subject matter, and our methods of operation really attuned to the 1960's?

CONCLUSION

There appears to be a rising tide of anti-government sentiment among rural people. I would speculate that this is the product of their frustration with present governmental services which deal ineffectively with problems farm people face. The problem of re-vamping the institutional structure serving rural America is a major one—the most important one that must be faced.

Economic and social changes in agriculture need not be regarded as being written by some unseen hand which never wavers nor changes its course. Farm people can and should have some control over the kind of agriculture and the kind of rural communities we have in the future. But they will need help in achieving these future

desires—help in the form of new and more dynamic rural institutions. The Extension Service can and should be willing to provide help in building these new institutions.

In this regard, the Extension Service is totally unique among institutions serving farm people. It is a part of a university and a university is an institution which has, in part, effecting and guiding change as its purpose. Whereas most institutions are to maintain the fabric of stability while change occurs, the university is an institution which has as its purpose the inauguration and guidance of change in the society in which we exist. The university is different from private farm organizations, government agencies, and secondary schools, and this difference is such that if effective institutional change is to occur it must be a major catalyst and mover in such changes. However, to be effective in that task the university must be willing to adapt and change its institution to meet new needs of farm people, as well as to help farm people bring about changes in other institutions.

Thus, it seems that a solution for the public problems of rural people depends upon three major achievements: (1) the continued identification and development of capable young leadership in rural communities; (2) the relating of that leadership to the effective power structure at the local, state, and national level; and (3) the revitalization and restructuring of institutions serving rural people. Unless these three steps can be accomplished, few of the problems that beset rural people will be solved via public action. Since many problems are not solvable by individual action under the present rural economic structure, the pressures on farm people will increase rather than diminish.

The Extension Service has a vital role to play in these steps to aid farm people. It cannot and should not do it merely by specialized leadership and action programs. Instead, these goals should be woven into every one of the various Extension programs. Moreover, we should constantly re-examine our own structure and programs to the end of better educational service to rural America. Neither farming, farm people, or rural areas are things of the past. Let us try to help them to achieve the future that is technically possible for them.