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Agricultural Extension as a Profession

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ABSTRACT

The important and complex tasks associated with agricultural development in Nigeria require the knowledge and skills of very capable Agricultural Extension Service Officers. Are such Officers considered to be professional personnel? They can be so considered if their performance is based on a formal and somewhat standardized training programme; if their work is performed according to accepted standards of practice; if they exchange information and experiences with each other; if there is continued research to add to their knowledge and such information is reported in the professional literature; and if such officers are guided by a code of professional ethics and possess a strong sense of public responsibility. Evidence presented in this article points to the fact that the Agricultural Extension Service in Nigeria is attaining new levels of professionalism.

INTRODUCTION

THE level of professional competency is increasing in all fields of endeavour. The extent of formal study, the types of practical experiences and the high levels of professional achievement required of persons engaged in agriculture are continuing to increase each year. Certainly the professional qualifications expected of the Agricultural Extension Officer as an educator is no exception.

In the years ahead agriculture in Nigeria and throughout the world will be called upon, to an increasing degree, to supply added foodstuffs for a rapidly growing

population. The development of densely populated urban centres, the establishment of home industries for processing agricultural products and additional export trade will require that agriculture become more specialized, more diversified, more mechanized and much more efficient than is the case today. The fact that approximately 70 percent of the income of Nigerians is spent on food (Anthonio, 1964) would, in itself, emphasize the continued importance of agriculture as a field of work that offers many professional opportunities.

A more scientific approach to the field of agriculture will be required if it is to measure up to the demands being placed on it today and in the foreseeable future. Many of the important tasks which must be performed are tasks for professionals.

The purpose of this article is three fold. First, the writer endeavours to define a profession by identifying its basic criteria set forth in the relevant literature on this subject. Secondly, the ideal characteristics of an Agricultural Extension Officer in general, as well as in Nigeria, are discussed. Thirdly, an attempt is made to answer the question, "Is Agricultural Extension a profession?"

CRITERIA FOR A PROFESSION

The task of defining a profession, and a professional person, is obviously not an easy one. The absence of any commonly accepted definition is testimony that the characteristics of a profession in general are not precisely stated. Consequently, it is rather difficult to identify the precise characteristics of Agricultural Extension as a profession. It will help to examine what the authorities writing in the field of professionalism say about the subject.

Webster's dictionary defines a profession as "... a calling in which one professes to have acquired some special knowledge used by way of either instructing, guiding or advising others, or of serving them in some act ..."

Mortimer J. Adler (1959), an American newspaper columnist, under the byline, "Great Ideas from Great Books," writes as follows: "In common usage, the word 'professional' is applied to anyone who shows tested competence in performing a given task. In this sense the word is merely a synonym for 'skilled'. But in the original and deeper meaning of the term, a professional man is one who does skilled work to achieve a useful social goal".

The famous English economist, R. H. Tawney, gave a comprehensive definition of a profession as quoted by Mr. Adler (1959): "It is a body of men who carry on their work in accordance with rules designed to enforce certain standards, both for the better protection of its members and for better service to the public.

"It has long been recognized that certain activities necessary for the preservation of society require an organized or concentrated effort on the part of men with special knowledge or skill. To meet this need the traditional professions developed. Other professions which have a long history are the traditionally recognized professions of theology, law, medicine and teaching".

In the light of these definitions can we consider a career in the field of agriculture as truly professional? Does work in the field of Agricultural Extension in Nigeria measure up to the criteria of a profession as set forth by Lieberman (1955)? He described a profession as:

1. A unique, definite and essential social service;
2. An emphasis upon intellectual techniques in performing its service;
3. A long period of specialized training;
4. A broad range of autonomy for both the individual practitioners and for the occupation group as a whole;
5. An acceptance by the practitioners of broad personal responsibilities for judgements made and acts performed within the professional autonomy;
6. An emphasis on the service to be rendered, rather than the economic gain to the practitioners, as the

basis for the organization and performance of the social service delegated to the occupational group;

7. A comprehensive self-governing organization of practitioners; and
8. A code of ethics which has been clarified and interpreted by concrete cases.

Yoder (1954), in considering whether the performance of a job is professional, stresses the concept of continued learning, as noted in his desire for maximum exchange of information and knowledge, extensive research and familiarity with the literature. His criteria are as follows:

1. Professional performance usually reflects a formal and somewhat standardized *training*;
2. Professional performance implies a considerable area of widely accepted *standard practice*;
3. Professional performance presumes the regular, formalized *exchange of information and experience among practitioners*;
4. Professional performance implies a knowledge of and a familiarity with a continually growing field of *professional literature*;
5. Professional performance reflects *continued research*;
6. Professional performance is guided by an accepted system of *professional ethics* and a strong sense of *public responsibility*;
7. Professional performance, finally, is earmarked by the most important distinctive characteristic of the professional -- that suggested by the designated "learned professions" -- a continuing *attitude of learning*.

Flexner (1951), suggests that professions have still other criteria:

1. They involve essentially intellectual operations;
2. They derive their raw material from science and learning;
3. They work up this material to a practical and definite end;
4. They possess an educational -- communicable -- technique;
5. They tend to self-organization;
6. They are becoming increasingly altruistic in motivation.

When the criteria of a profession in general, as set forth by Lieberman, Yoder and Flexner, are compared and analyzed one finds that several points are emphasized by each authority. Translating these criteria in terms of characteristics of an ideal professional person in Agricultural Extension, Clark (1965) suggests that such an individual would:

1. Have a thorough knowledge of the professional literature in the field of technical agriculture and educational methods;
2. Be particularly skillful and proficient in interpreting his knowledge and skills to his colleagues and to farmers;
3. Possess a never ceasing quest for learning and improving one's skills;
4. Be ready and willing to accept new facts and methods as revealed by research and extended experience;
5. Have a desire to interchange information and ideas with his associates;
6. Be dedicated to advancing one's profession of Agricultural Extension and the standards established for it;
7. Possess a strong sense of public responsibility, service to others rather than personal gain; and
8. Have the ability to plan and work cooperatively, but also to practice autonomy in decision making.

People engaged in agriculture, and particularly in Agricultural Extension, are recognizing that they have professional status only to the extent that they create it themselves. Also, such status must be recognized by those who employ them and use their services. The primary bases of such status are unique skills and/or knowledge that takes years to acquire, a recognition by the public that such are highly desirable and needed, skills and knowledge that are in short supply and that the people who possess such are especially good in that they excel in their field of work.

PROFESSIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION OFFICERS

Do people engaged in Agricultural Extension create the definite impression that they are professionals and should be credited with professional status? Individuals with certain outstanding personal qualities, who specialize in a job, and who do it better than anyone else, should be entitled to the recognition and compensation of a professional person.

Agricultural Extension is an organization of Government made up of people; its effectiveness and success rest upon them. What then should be their personal qualities?

First of all is flexibility of mind. One who possesses this quality is capable of bold and original thought. He is willing to express his ideas and argue in support of what he believes to be right. Yet he does not hesitate to ask for counsel and be guided by it when the advice is sound. He does not hesitate when the need arises to depart from traditional thought and procedure.

A second desirable quality of an Extension Officer is the ability to assimilate quickly a large and perhaps

diverse number of facts and relate them to solving problems of agricultural people and of staff members in the Service. This quality obviously implies a natural curiosity, well ordered mental processes, and imagination tempered by common sense.

Thirdly, the Extension Officer should be a person with the ability to speak and write clearly, concisely and accurately if his knowledge is to be shared with farmers and others concerned with agriculture. He should determine what he wants to say and then say it in an interesting, friendly manner.

Fourthly, personal enthusiasm, a strong sense of balance and proportion, and a whole hearted spirit of cooperation ranks high for the Extension worker who is recognized as a professional person.

Fifthly, emotional stability is essential to continued good judgement as well as to the indispensable quality of reliability.

Lastly, the Extension Officer must be able to coordinate the precise technical knowledge of the staff expert with his general knowledge about agriculture, farm people and village life. Results of such knowledge is measured by whether or not the farmer is evaluating and accepting the facts that will help him solve his problems.

Extension Officers, as a group, are generally responsible for three broad fields of knowledge, usually:

1. Technical subject-matter pertaining to plants, animals, soil, equipment, chemicals, credit, economic and social problems, etc.;
2. Skills required to be an effective educational leader in the teaching-learning process, how to introduce and gain acceptance of new farming schemes, use of credit and payment of loans as well as how to *evaluate programme accomplishments*;
3. Knowledge and skills essential in supervising and administering a large staff, a complex programme of services that may involve several agencies and a sizable amount of money.

In a sense then, the Agricultural Extension Officer is a specialist, not only in one or more fields of technical subject-matter, but as a leader in group planning, decision-making, public relations and in identifying and developing leadership among village farmers.

It is apparent that there is no substitute for the highest possible quality of formal study, extensive practical experience and in-service training for Agricultural Extension Officers if they are to be professionally qualified for their varied responsibilities. The body of knowledge with which they must be concerned is both comprehensive and varied. Furthermore, it is continually changing with advancements in research and technology. The many different types of duties to be performed can only be mastered through fundamental experience in many different jobs, both in the field and at headquarters.

IS AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION A PROFESSION?

Work in Agricultural Extension in many countries of the world is generally recognized as a profession comparable with research and on-campus teaching in agriculture. The primary reasons for this distinction are that this professional field of essential educational service measures up, in many respects, to the criteria earlier described as characterizing a profession and a professional person. Further examination of several of these criteria is in order in attempting to help the reader answer the question for himself, "Is Agricultural Extension a Profession in Nigeria?"

Agriculture in this country is developing with the aid of a body of knowledge based on systematic, scientific investigation by a research staff in Ministries of Agriculture, in the Universities and to an increasing degree in Research Institutes. However, much more research is needed. Such new knowledge is related to problems of the production, distribution and marketing of food and fibre as well as effective use of mass communication media, use of teaching aids and how to motivate people to accept new ideas. Consequently, the Agricultural Extension Officer has a much larger storehouse of knowledge to draw upon concerning *what to teach farmers* as well as *how to teach them*. The important questions are, "Is the Officer acquainted with this knowledge?" "Is he making use of it?" "Has he become particularly skillful in interpreting his knowledge so that farmers can understand and put it to use?" The degree to which both the individual officer and his employer can answer "yes" to these questions is indicative of one's professional standing. Certain persons have achieved a high degree of professionalism in respect to these criteria. Other officers are striving to attain such a standing.

Continued research and the exchange of information among the researcher, teacher and Agricultural Extension Officer is characteristic of the field of agriculture. But the degree of coordination is far from ideal. Extension personnel must know when and how to explore essential information with the research worker. The Extension Officer must thoroughly understand the process for refining this information: the adding, subtracting, tempering and testing which can and should be used to further the interests of agriculture. In this refining process, some officers have the experience and training to appreciate the degree of improvising when essential knowledge is missing, and the logical sequence to follow in interpretation of information. The most professional person realizes that the product has no real value unless it can be used.

The Extension Service in the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources has established definite requirements of training and competency as a basis for entry into the profession. Such training and competency may be obtained through formal study in Schools of Agriculture and Universities. It may also be developed through many different types of practical field and administrative

experiences. Such on-the-job learning is supplemented by effective in-service training under skilled supervisors. Probably the most ideal way of becoming highly professional would be through a combination of many years of very successful work experience, formal study, and in-service training while on the job.

The greater majority of the highly professional staff in Agricultural Extension in Nigeria have achieved this distinction by demonstrating their knowledge and skill in performing many duties exceptionally well at various levels within the organization. They have continually engaged in a self improvement programme of reading, in-service training, preparing and presenting technical papers and progress reports at meetings of professional societies. Yet these same highly professional persons are among the first to recognize the need for formal study, leading to at least a B.Sc. degree.

The personal encouragement and financial support which is currently being provided Extension Officers for University training is ample testimony of the importance of more formal study to achieve the level of professionalism that all aspire to attain. However, the writer would be among the first to argue that a B.Sc., M.Sc. or even a Ph.D. degree does not, in itself, qualify a person to be accepted into the Agricultural Extension profession. One or more such degrees should be a contributing factor especially as the clientele become better educated. The crucial test is in proven ability of the Officer to meet the critical demands of different assignments with the present clientele of the Service.

It is generally recognized that the training requirement and practical experience for Field Overseers is very short of what they themselves may aspire to attain as well as what is required for them to serve as effective educational leaders of farmers. The same applies, but to a lesser degree, to Agricultural Assistants. However, such foundational experiences, if performed with distinction, plus a desire by the individual to continually improve himself, does provide a firm foundation for advancement, for formal study and for a higher degree of professionalism. Every professional field recognizes in-service training as being a supplement rather than a replacement of the all important extended period of organized instruction leading to a diploma or University degree.

Fortunately an increasing number of the young Agricultural Extension Officers with a good academic record, ambition, self-confidence and high ideals have the opportunity to participate in formal study. In the opinion of the writer the degree to which the field of Extension can truly be called a profession in the full meaning of the term will depend on the extent to which many more competent officers can be given such support.

To say that Extension Officers are made, not born, implies that there are no substitutes for training, continuous study, conscientious effort and years of experience. As in most other professional fields, the mechanics of training is not enough; the motivation

most come primarily from the worker himself. No outside assistance can be of lasting value without a determination on the part of the individual to become not just another Extension Officer but the very best. The impressions that others form of "how professional are we in our job", based on our attitude, our training and our demonstrated ability on the job, are major factors in judging the standards of the Service.

The administration of Agricultural Extension is frequently forced to follow a centralized pattern of decision-making in determining programmes in Nigeria. Generally, such a policy is contrary to the wish of administrators. All too often staff members at the lower levels in the organization do not exercise their opportunities and responsibilities to make known to higher authority their recommendations concerning how to solve local and regional problems. However, there may be instances, where field workers are not encouraged to express their ideas or exercise self-direction in formulating and implementing local programmes. An important test of professionalism is the degree to which all Officers are qualified and are encouraged to express what they truthfully feel is best for the development of agriculture and the Service in general. The fundamental principle of *planning with people* rather than *for people* applies to Agricultural Extension as well as to other professions.

CONCLUSION

Marked progress is being made in Nigeria in selecting and training new personnel for the Agricultural Extension Service. Competent, aggressive and dedicated Officers are being retained in the programme. Conditions of work and financial incentives are being improved. Equipment and facilities required to do the work effectively are being modernized. "Technical know-how" is being added to continuously through research and drawing on experiences of other countries. The demands for such "technical know-how" and supporting services are being requested to an increasing degree by farmers. Channels for communicating such information to

farmers are expanding. Certainly the bulk of the evidence points to the fact that the Agricultural Extension Service in Nigeria is attaining new levels of professionalism by any criteria that is employed to define the term. In this respect, Nigeria is no different from any other country that aspires to advance its agriculture through a well organized educational programme directed by highly competent Extension Officers.

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