

Key areas in agricultural development

Dr. Manuel S.J. de Leon

Dr. Manuel S.J. de Leon, Senior Program Officer (Agriculture), will retire from full-time service in the APO Secretariat at end June 2004, after 18 years of dedicated service. He will continue to assist the Agriculture Department in organizing APO projects on an assignment basis. Dr. de Leon wrote this article, at the request of the APO News, to share his thoughts on the future thrust of the APO Agriculture Program.

I am pleased to share a few thoughts with APO News readers on the areas that we could perhaps continue to focus on in our program for the improvement of agricultural productivity in member countries. After working with the APO for so many years, I have become convinced that more resources should be channeled to training projects in the following areas: 1) productivity management tools for agriculture; 2) ICT applications for agriculture/rural development; and 3) greater value addition in agriculture through entrepreneurship development. By highlighting only these areas, I do not mean to imply that there are no other important areas of concern or that they are less important. I highlight these areas simply because I consider them to be inherent to the core productivity mission of the APO and in which the APO has, over the years, acquired a “comparative advantage” vis-à-vis other international organizations.

It is well known that in the industry sector productivity management tools such as quality circles, 5S, quality management, and other improvement activities, for example kaizen, have been instrumental in the development of businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises, in many member countries. Some of these tools could be further developed to provide agricultural producers with the same types of useful methods for improving their productivity. Some of the methods would need to be adapted to the agricultural setting and might accordingly require pioneering efforts on the part of the APO.

There is also a vital need in the agriculture sector to establish mechanisms to get information to those who need it as quickly and accurately as possible. In the age of globalization when knowledge is a vital factor of production, ICT is increasingly becoming an indispensable tool for improving productivity. In the context of Asian



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agriculture specifically, ICT would facilitate to a large degree technology transfer and market development in member countries. For example, Web-based training could be used increasingly to upgrade the knowledge and skills of extension workers, while ICT-based information systems could be set up to deliver to farmers/producers the necessary information on market trends and requirements efficiently and at low cost.

The lack of value-adding activities in agricultural/rural areas appears to be a major reason why the development of agriculture in some member countries has remained sluggish. One important strategy to increase farm incomes and revitalize rural areas is to promote more value-adding activities by developing entrepreneurship among rural people. Specifically, under the APO Agriculture Program this would require putting more emphasis on entrepreneurial and management skills development in the agriculture/rural sector.

Addressing all of the above areas would involve capacity building, which is a core function of the

APO. This was also reflected in the reference above to the desirability of allocating more resources to training-type programs. Finally, I would like to reiterate that I have been very selective in identifying the focal areas. For reasons of space, I was not able to address the important issue of sustainability in agriculture. ☺

