

Keynote Speech

Economics & Extension in Rapidly Changing Times: A View from the Outside

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It is often educational to compare two contrasting processes or things; for instance, we can define black from white, the process that includes from the process that excludes, and vice-versa. My own background is in natural sciences and from a completely different field than agriculture, but both are primary industries. We exploit and tame nature, doing it either manually or using more and more new technologies. The latter add value, increase productivity, but also leads to labor surpluses and social and economic issues. Thus, the differences are not black and white, rather different shades of grey. But, I will still use the comparative method to highlight differences and lead to some general conclusions as to what the economics of extension were, are and may look like in the future. To be honest, I know very little about agriculture, I am a newcomer to Sri Lanka, and I only have basic experience on extension, a process that is nearly the trademark of agriculturists. To make it clear too, this is not a speech, rather a chat. I choose to illustrate the importance of extension with a recent industry, the marine aquaculture in Norway. This industry has had a development that is relatively easy to describe; it has happened in the last 20-30 years and has gone through many of the stages that old industries have experienced in centuries. Its present output in volume and value are enormous, and it is mostly an export-oriented industry to demanding markets. It is branded as an economic success by some, and as a large environmental evil by others. It creates a lot of (good and bad) envy, and the argumentation is often emotional.

In this chat I will share some of the experiences and knowledge that were very educational to me. I am sure that they can be obvious for many of you. I will call them lessons and, illustrate each one of them with examples and pictures. So, my lessons are related to different propositions: the role of extension within the product chain; the successful spin-offs of extension; extension in these rapidly changing times and cultures; how limited are the objects (i.e. the users) of extension to understand the message; what is the essence of extension and technology; what is a production web; and who is in control of the quality and stated characteristics of the products. Finally, I will address a venerable agro-industry from Sri Lanka and try to match its development to the aquaculture industry. I will also attempt to make some propositions about its future, potential and needs. This is a bold suggestion, since I know so little about this industry. But, maybe the audience may be stimulated to come up with better suggestions. If that is the case, we have reached a good harbor.