Agricultural Information Need and the Most Popular Sources of Information of the Farmers

Madhavi Wijerathna[1] Kumudu Perera[2] and L.D.B. Suriyagoda[3]

[1]Department of Agricultural Extension, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Pearadeniya, [2]Department of Agriculture Systems, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Rajarata, [3]Department of Crop Science, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Peradeniya

Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate the agricultural information need and the most popular sources of information of the farmers in Mahailluppallama block of the Mahaweli system-H in Anuradhapura District which comes under major irrigation scheme and an important agricultural production area in the dry zone. Investigation was made by interviewing randomly selected fifty three (n=53) farmers using a semi structured interview schedule. Most demanded information by the farmers was on pests and diseases, seeds and planting materials, and marketing in the order of importance. Majority of farmers rely on the Agrarian Service Centre, farmer organization, fellow farmers and agriculture input shops in the order of priority to receive information. Results revealed that although mass media such as, radio and television play a potential role in reaching a wider audience instantly, farmers do not use such information sources significantly. Nevertheless, 42 (79%) farmers read newspapers and pay special attention to agricultural information whiles the rest 11 (21%) do not read newspapers as a habit. Only 9% of the farmers had computers at home, however, no one was using computers to get agricultural information and had connectivity to internet providing an example for digital divide in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, 75% of the farmers had telephone facilities. However, only 17 respondents (32%) were aware about the Toll-Free agriculture advisory service (1920) of the Department of Agriculture and only 5 (9%) respondents had used the service, highlighting the need for awareness programmes. Agricultural programme formats in radio and television should be designed creatively to capture the interest of a wider audience in rural farming communities.

Key words: Agricultural information, Information need, Sources of information

Introduction

One potential mechanism of increasing the agricultural production is the use of new technologies. Agricultural information and communication play a major role in this process by allowing farmers to adopt improved technologies. In addition, information exchange has an important implication in developing market systems and providing its benefits to all stakeholders of the market chain including the producers or the farmers. Development of information and communication technology provides a new avenue to deliver agricultural information. The mobile system is seen as a significant system for agriculture information seeking in the future as the mobile phone users are increasing day by day and the mobile system has a huge potential to be further improved (Hassan *et al.*, 2010). However, it is not possible to neglect the role of traditional sources of information in the rural farming setup.

Farmers need various information on agriculture and meet their information needs through different sources of information depending on the availability, affordability and various other socio-economic factors. Efficiency, effectiveness and the other characteristics of the information source is also affect on the farmers' use of different sources. Access to information and improved communication is a crucial requirement for sustainable agricultural development. However, it is observed that the rural populations still have difficulty in accessing crucial information in

order to make timely decisions (Anandaraja *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, it is vital to understand the information need, the existing sources of information and information seeking behavior of the farmers in order to improve agricultural communication thus use the present mechanisms in delivering agricultural extension services to the farmers. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the information need, sources of agricultural information and information seeking behavior of the farmers in Mahailuppallama area (block) which belongs to the Mahaweli system H in the Anuradhapura District of Sri Lanka.

Materials and Methods

Investigation was made by interviewing randomly selected fifty three (n=53) farmers from three farmer organizations in Mahailluppallama which consist of 266 farmers. Semi structured interview schedule was used as the tool for data collection. Socio-economic factors such as age, gender, education level, and problems faced in agriculture and information need (seeds and planting

materials, labour, marketing, pest and diseases, irrigation) and availability and usage of television, newspapers, telephone, community based organizations, government organizations, computer facilities were studied as the independent variables. Dependent variables were the information need and the most popular sources of information. Key informant discussions were conducted to supplement and verify the data gathered. Descriptive statistical analysis was performed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results and discussion

All respondents in the sample were fulltime farmers. Majority of them were males 47 (89%). Most of the respondents 26 (49%) were old (>50 years) and 20 (38%) were in the middle age (41-50 years). Education level of the 45% was below Ordinary Level (O/L), 35% had O/L qualifications and only 20% had Advanced Level (A/L) qualifications.
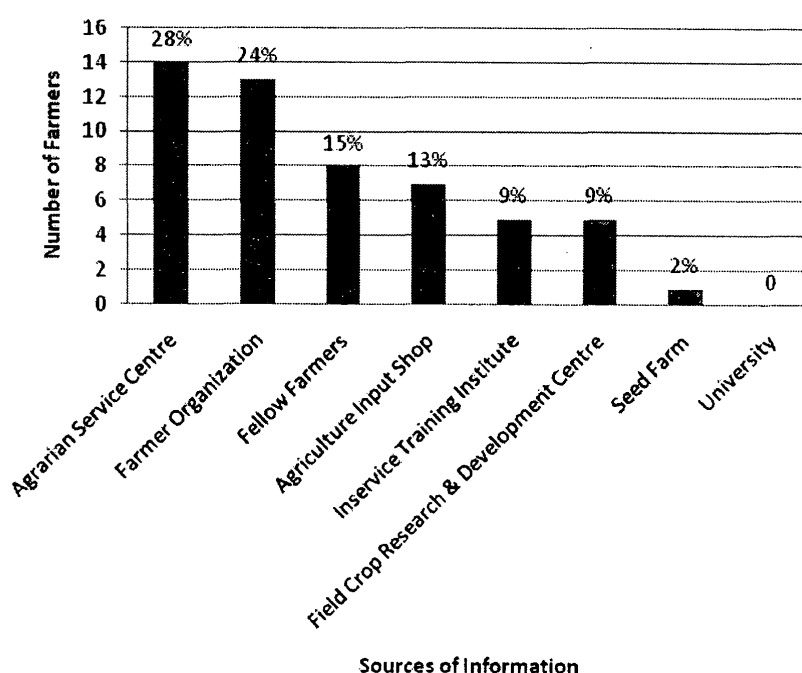

Sources of Information

Figure 1. Sources of information for the farmers

The types of information mostly needed by farmers were investigated. Accordingly, most needed information (54%) was about pests and diseases. This may be due to the keen attention of the farmers to minimize the yield losses and thereby to increase the profit margins. However, the absence of proper channel of information leads to an indiscriminate use of pesticides. Second most needed information by the farmers was on seed and planting materials (17%) and thirdly on marketing information (8%). Similarly, the problems faced by the farmers were investigated. Major problems were on irrigation (61%), labour scarcity (36%) and planting materials (34%). Attention should be paid to solve possible problems by providing the correct information and facilities at the correct time through proper channels.

Farmers use different information sources to meet their information needs depending on the type of information they need, accessibility to information and various other socio-economic aspects of their lives. The figure 1 shows the most popular sources of information among the farmers.

Majority of the farmers received information from the Agrarian Service Centre (28%) and the Farmer Organization (24%). Most farmers (96%) were members of farmer organizations. Thirdly they received information from fellow farmers (15%) and from the agriculture input shops (13%). Several important agriculture related government institutes are located in the study area namely Field Crop Research and Development Institute, In-Service Training Institute, Seed Certification Service, Seed Farm and Sub campus of the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Peradeniya. Although farmers (9%) receive information from In-service Training Institute and Field Crop Research and Development Centre No one use the sub campus of the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Peradeniya as a

source of information. The present mechanism of university-community interactions are not adequate and farmers do not perceive the university as a possible source of information. These institutes have the potential to disseminate and share information with the nearby farming community but the potential has yet to be exploited.

Mass media such as, newspapers, radio and television play a vital role in disseminating information quickly, reaching large number of audience at once. All these media content includes at least few agricultural messages/programmes per week. According to a content analysis of three major national newspapers in Sri Lanka in the year 2009, percentage (space) allocated for agriculture related information were 0.4%-0.8% (Abeyrathna *et al.*, 2010). According to the present study, 42 (79%) farmers read newspapers and paid special attention for agricultural information but 11 (21%) did not read newspapers as a habit due to various circumstances.

Majority (75%) of the farmers in the study sample had telephone facilities (either land phones or hand phones) and 26% of the farmers are used telephone to get agricultural information. Toll free agriculture advisory service (1920) was established by the Department of Agriculture to respond the farmers' inquiries immediately. However, only 17 (32%) farmers in the Mahailluppallama area were aware about the service. Only 5 (9%) farmers had used that service to obtain relevant information. The call centre enabled information systems requires only that the user is able to hear and speak. To access the internet-enabled information system requires that the user be familiar with computers and have professional operation ability. (Wen *et al.*, 2007). According to the present study, only 5 (9%) respondents had a computer at their homes. However, no one used

computers to get the agricultural information and no one had connectivity to internet. As an ICT (Information & Communication Technology) initiative, "Cyber Extension" mechanism was implemented by the Department of Agriculture in 2004 (Wijekoon *et al.,* 2010). However, farmers did not have cyber extension facility at close vicinity and did not aware about that.

Irrigation, seeds and planting materials and labour problems were the major issues faced by farmers. However, pest and diseases, seeds and planting materials and marketing related information were the most demanded agricultural information by the farmers. Majority of farmers rely on the Agrarian Service Centre, Farmer Organization and fellow farmers in the order of importance to receive information on agriculture. Therefore, these information sources can be identified as effective channels of message transfer in agricultural extension and rural development programmes. Majority of farmers were not aware about the toll free agriculture information service of the Department of Agriculture highlighting the need for awareness. Farmers received agricultural information through newspapers than radio or television. No one used computer based information sources to receive agricultural information and had connectivity to interment providing an example for digital divide in Sri Lanka. As most of the government agricultural institutes are located in this area programs should be designed to strengthen the information sharing with farmers.

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