

The Relevance of Foreign Agriculture

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Abstract

A course in international agricultural development is described. The goal is to educate university students in the theories and case histories of agricultural practice in countries with varying physical, economic, and social resources. Student interest in world agricultural problems has been assessed, and challenges for teachers of such courses are outlined.

A substantial disparity of living standards and per capita income exists between different countries despite the expansion of commerce between nations and efforts of the developed nations to assist the less developed ones. There seems to be a general lack of understanding as to the reasons for this disparity. Yet, one need travel no further than to the local market to realize the great interdependence we have on other countries. Industrial goods, apparel, and many other items produced in other countries are available in abundance. Even the grocery store contains a wide variety of imported goods, from exotic fruits to coffee and sugar. On the way to the market, we may have driven a foreign car powered with imported fuel.

One would think that, with all this trade, most people would be familiar with domestic and foreign problems or at least have a keen interest in foreign countries and how they produce and sell the goods we buy, and that they would be concerned about the people, their problems, and aspirations.

We often hear that our domestic food supply is dependent on the well-being of our farmers. What about our supplies from abroad and our markets in foreign places? Are not these also dependent upon the well-being of farmers and others who live there? How are they progressing? What is the state of economics in those places?

Economic development attempts to organize theories and principles upon which economic progress is made. According to Mellor (1), "Economic development is a process by which a population increases the efficiency with which it provides desired goods and services, thereby increasing per capita levels of living and general well-being."

Since agriculture is often the major industry of the less developed country in terms of income or numbers of people employed, agricultural development is either the major force or one of the major forces in general economic development.

Lack of Development Explained

There are several explanations for lack of development in many of the world's agricultural areas. One is that less developed countries are poor because they lack resources necessary for development (2). Population in excess of adequate food is one evidence of this. Other writers have emphasized illiteracy, religion, traditions, and customs as reasons for lack of development. Still others blame political systems and government restrictions as the impediment to development. Some even question whether development is desirable as it tends to be exploitive of resources.

Many less developed countries lack the technical expertise to organize a development program and have enlisted aid or permitted experts from elsewhere to assist in the process. Even in these cases, the motives of those assisting are often questioned.

Many theories have been devised as to how development actually occurs and what might be done to speed the process. A good summary of these theories and the role of agriculture is found in work by Hayami and Ruttan (3).

The major emphasis in the study of agricultural development is not that it occurs, but how it can be started and hastened by internal or external stimulation. Even though theories for the process have been devised, sufficient differences exist so that each development program needs to be tailored to fit its own unique circumstances.

The challenge of teaching agricultural development seems to have two phases. The first is to organize meaningful information that has been observed about agricultural development. The other is to present it to students in a way that is understandable and useful in explaining the present conditions of agriculture in the various countries. Some characteristics of three phases of development are shown in Figure 1. Some nations clearly are developed, a few clearly are less developed and a great number are in between.

Thus the task of teaching agricultural development is a difficult one. It not only involves a comparison of developed and undeveloped nations in terms of food and fiber production, but also requires teaching a set of principles or conditions in which development can take place. The difficulty of the latter is that agricultural development is a rather new subject and many of its theories are just not being tested or are yet to be tested. To complicate the picture even more, no two nations are alike and a development procedure that works in one place may very well fail somewhere else because of differences in location, climate, customs, traditions, form of government, or other social institutions. Not only are conditions different between countries, but conditions within a country are constantly changing as time passes.

Some theories of agricultural development have grown from an observation of how the developed nations attained their status. These should explain how developed nations achieved their developments, and they

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Figure 1 Characteristics of Nations in Various Stages of Development

Less Developed
Subsistence farming
Low per capita income
Tradition bound society
Large proportion of labor force in agriculture ¹
High birthrate
High or declining death rate
Transition
Increasing productivity
Declining death rate ² — rapid population increase
Labor shifting from agriculture to manufacturing or services
Educational opportunities improving
Rising per capita incomes
Developed
High per capita income
High productivity per person ³
Developed markets—both domestic and foreign
Stabilizing population
Large demand for goods and services
Small proportion of labor force in agricultural production

¹Millikan, M.F., and D. Haggood, eds. *No Easy Harvest*. Little Brown, 1967. This work suggests that in general an undeveloped country may be identified as one having more than 40 percent of the labor force in agriculture. However, some notable exceptions are indicated.

²One difficulty in successfully moving from the less developed to the developed category is that birthrates often continue to be high long after the death rate has been curtailed, resulting in rapid population growth. The problem is to increase productivity enough to feed the growing numbers of people and produce a surplus with which to improve living standards. If population is expanding by 3 percent a year, agricultural output needs to increase by somewhat more than this before real progress can be made.

³As agricultural production per person increases, labor can shift out of agriculture into other activities. This, of course, means that other industries and services must be developed along with agriculture. Japan is a good example of a nation that successfully developed into an industrial nation.

should serve as a guide to the development of the agriculture of less developed nations.

Course in World Agriculture

A few years ago a course in world agriculture was introduced at the University of Idaho. Because most of the course material centered on less developed countries, it was later changed to a course in agricultural development, with greater emphasis on development theories and case studies of attempts to develop agriculture in various countries. The course was originally introduced, with some encouragement from university administrators, because of the greater involvement of our students in careers and occupations that either took them abroad or brought them into contact with foreign trade. Thus it was felt that the opportunity for the student to acquire some general knowledge about foreign agriculture was desirable.

The enrollment in the course has been modest and some problems have been encountered. Those taking the course have ranged from a few with a genuine interest in foreign agriculture and development to some who merely wanted to take a different kind of class and get the credits. The majority of students who have taken the class have an interest in what other people do but have no real intention of working with or in foreign countries. Most of our agricultural students are heavily area-oriented with little desire to leave the western states for anything other than brief travel experience. Such a course

might be better received in a school with a greater enrollment of foreign students and located in an area with greater exposure to the foreign element.

In early spring of 1975 a survey was made of students enrolled in an introductory course taught in the College of Agriculture at the University of Idaho to determine what interest students have in foreign agricultural problems. This was not a random sample but is believed by the author to be fairly representative of students in the College of Agriculture.

Of the 69 students who filled out the questionnaire, 62 were from Idaho, 6 were from other parts of the United States, and only 1 was from a foreign country. The class enrollment was quite evenly distributed between freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Responses to six questions regarding to the students' future plans and their relation to foreign agriculture were as follows:

1. Planned occupation	Percent
Farming or ranching	63
Farm related business	18
Professional agriculture	8
Other	11
	100
2. Where do you plan to work after college?	
In Idaho	62
In other western states	31
In a foreign country	4
Other	3
	100
3. My attitude concerning agriculture in foreign countries is:	
Extremely interested	23
Mildly interested	36
Curious	23
Not very interested	18
	100
4. I believe the relative importance of foreign agriculture to farmers and other agricultural people in Idaho is:	
Negligible	9
Of some importance	61
Extremely important	30
	100
5. Because of my attitude concerning agricultural problems in foreign countries, I believe I should:	
Learn all I can about foreign countries, including one or more university courses	36
Read popular articles but not take a class	51
Travel in foreign countries and/or join Peace Corps	9
Ignore foreign agricultural problems	4
	100
6. Many less developed countries have severe food-population problems. We should:	
Try to help them by giving technical assistance	79
Help with money and other assistance	11
Leave them alone to solve their own problems	10
	100

Teaching agricultural development is a challenge with this kind of interest in foreign agriculture. However, the fact that the student chose to enroll in the course is evidence of some interest in foreign agricultural problems, so there is a seed to work with.

Ideally a class such as this would travel to one or more less developed areas and observe agriculture and related social conditions first-hand. Unfortunately, present means do not allow this kind of experience. A limited number of appropriate films can be obtained. There are also several people in the university community who have spent considerable time in various foreign places and are usually quite willing to come to the class and give their impressions of foreign agriculture and its problems. Some of these reports are not entirely objective but seem to be useful in giving the student more of a feeling for problems encountered in development.

Class Project Report

One class project that has been well received by the students and seems to be useful in tying together much of the course material is a report by each student on a less developed country. This report includes a study of present and recent past social conditions and a rather detailed description of agriculture in the chosen country. Agricultural imports and exports are considered in their relationship to agricultural and general economic development. Finally, proposals are formulated for future development of agriculture in the country. This project is based on individual research plus information gained in the course, most of which precedes the class project. When time permits, the highlights of the reports are presented and discussed by the students. This is not

possible when the class enrollment is greater than 25 or so. In some conditions a team approach might work in larger classes.

Problems encountered in the course relate to the fact that the field is new and each country presents a different set of conditions. Some textbooks treat the subject but in all instances a considerable amount of other, current material seems appropriate to supplement the texts. A mountain of material is published regularly on various phases of agricultural development. It is difficult to sort this and pick out a few morsels to use in instruction. Finally, there is the problem of stimulating the student to the extent that he will begin analyzing problems in agricultural development and formulating his own plan or opinion regarding solutions to these problems.

Teaching agricultural development will be a rewarding experience for those who want to follow the growth of knowledge in this field. For those who want all of the pieces to fit neatly together, however, it will be a frustration. In any event, it seems desirable to give agricultural students at least a general understanding of foreign agriculture in relationship to the agriculture in the United States. Events in recent years have emphasized the tremendous impact foreign agricultural trade can have on our own farm situation.

References

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CONTENT

In order for the book review section of the Journal to be of maximum use to college teachers of agriculture, each book review should provide the reader with:

- a. An overview synopsis of the contents of the book.
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