



Rice Production in Kerala, India

A Teaching Case Study (Mock Up)

This case study examines an example where strong links between research and policy do not make for better policy-making. In the Kerala region of India, the Government is keen to increase rice production and a new study promises to show them how. There are doubts however, over the credibility of this work. We want to you to place yourself in the position of an independent researcher, working to strengthen and stabilize the Kerala economy in the year 2000, just after the study has been published. Given a brief overview of the political context and economic issues, your task is to suggest how to respond to the new publication.

Teaching Purpose: To explore the relationship between research and policy-making, and consider ways that, in the Kerala context, the quality and independence of research can be improved.

The story so far...

Since its election in 1996, the left-of-centre government in Kerala had been uncomfortable with external trade and keen to promote internal self-sufficiency. They had developed a number of initiatives to bolster rice production, introducing subsidies and legislation to reduce the trade of cash-crops outside the region. The conversion of paddy fields for other uses was made illegal, even though many farmers had been finding rice growing increasingly unprofitable and were keen to move to new crops like rubber. Levels of rice production had been in steep decline over the previous three decades, but the post-independent government were keen to put rice at the heart of their agricultural policy - it was seen as a symbol of their economic autonomy. The government was loyally supported in this by a militant union of agricultural workers, who had campaigned against paddy conversion and destroyed other crops, because paddy cultivation requires more labour than other crops.

In 1998/99, the Group Approach to Locally Adopted and Sustainable Agriculture (GALASA) ran an action research program with the objective of increasing paddy production. They argued that paddy production was low in Kerala mainly because the available technology was not being utilized. They estimated that scientific planting of good quality seedlings, adequate use of organic manure, integrated water and pest management would increase the rice yield from 3 t/ha to more than 10 t/ha. They advocated for the intensive popularization of these methods under the field supervision of agricultural scientists, which would supposedly double or triple the production of rice in Kerala. GALASA published their report in 1999.

Kerala is a wet, tropical area with a hilly topography, coastal planes, semi-arid areas and terraced valleys. The study was attempted in one agro-climatic zone (the semi-arid zone), and was only undertaken for one harvest in a 550 acre area. On this cropping, the yield was increased from 4 t/ha to 7t/ha. Independent studies have indicated that the topography and climate of Kasala will limit the enhancement of rice yield in the larger wet and tropical parts of the state. There are several other critiques of the research; GALASA argued for an increase in productivity of paddy fields, but it did not weigh up the relative profitability of rice cultivation as opposed to other forms of agriculture. The study also failed to factor in the 15-20% subsidy given to farmers as part of the project when it calculated the increased profitability of paddy fields. Other studies have also criticized GALASA's assumption that farmers in Kerala are ignorant of sophisticated technology in the light of Keralan farmers success in breeding modern crops.

The Challenge ...

As an independent researcher, you believe that the GALASA study is flawed and incomplete. However, the political climate is sympathetic to its argument and powerful groups have a stake in its success.

Your challenge is to consider how to respond to the GALASA publication. Discuss...

What happened next?

The government accepted the results of the GALASA study even before the final results were made known. Declaring the programme to be an 'unequivocal success', the finance minister offered government support to extend the project to 0.18 million hectares in his 2000 budget. The government increased the total farmers' subsidies to the tune of 800 million rupees. In the second year of study the project was run in another area, and rice yield was increased by a much smaller margin; from 4 t/ha to 5 t/ha.

In 2000-2001 Kerala suffered a major financial crisis. The finance minister was unable to honour his promise to fund the project. With a change of government in 2001, the programme faltered and was discontinued.

Similar patterns of using research in policy have been evident in other instances of Indian development. In the 'planned economic development' phase, research resonated with the dominant paradigm of policy makers to support the nationalization of banks in India. Although it was well adopted by policy makers, there is significant doubt over whether this research has led to improved and effective policy.

For more information, see the GDN case study:

http://www.gdnet.org/rapnet/research/studies/case_studies/Case_Study_02_Full.html

Questions

- What could be done to improve the quality of agriculture research?
- How could you mount a critique of the GALASA project against the tide of political will?
- What are the lessons for bridging research and policy?