Information Revolutions

How information and communication management is changing the LIVES of rural people

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Research and extension links

Information campaigns:
Fighting the hibiscus mealy bug

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The majestic samaan tree with its huge, sprawling branches had been a landmark in the city of Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, for over 150 years. It had withstood the elements during all that time, and seemed destined to last for several generations to come. But it was slowly dying. It had fallen prey to the pink hibiscus mealy bug, an insect pest that had made a rather inauspicious entry into the island just a few months earlier, in mid-1995.

The story began two to three years before that, when the mealy bug caused considerable damage to crops and other plants in neighbouring Grenada. But nothing more was heard for a while, and it seemed that the threat to other countries had passed.

Then a few localized outbreaks were reported in Port-of-Spain, where the harbour was located. The authorities thought that traders had brought the pest to Trinidad, so they imposed restrictions on them. At the same time, they tried to eradicate the pests in the isolated pockets where they were identified, using the "spray, cut and burn" system. However, reports of the mealy bugs quickly multiplied: they were spreading fast.

The mealy bug seemed to prefer hibiscus, a pretty flower found in many gardens. As the pest spread, it became clear that the public had to be alerted via the mass media. So the Ministry of Agriculture began an information campaign in earnest, appealing to the public to "spray, cut and burn". Since without control, the mealy bugs could spread very easily, the ministry hired teams to carry out the job if necessary. But officials had to rely on reports from the public – reinforcing the need for a national thrust.

Love your enemies

Despite all these efforts, the bugs did not seem to notice: they spread to crops, trees and other plants. Sorrel, used to make a traditional Christmas drink, was severely affected. Mealy bugs became media stars.

It was clear that "spray, cut and burn" wasn't working. New ideas were needed.

The new approach was based on integrated pest management, with biological control as the core. Biological control relies on natural enemies: spiders, dragonflies, lacewings, parasitic wasps and other insects that kill pests. Two of the mealy bug's natural enemies were introduced into Trinidad, and they eventually managed to control the mealy bugs.

Anatomy of the campaign

How did the lowly mealy bug come to loom so large in the public eye?

Not surprisingly, a lot of planning and attention went into the effort. Two committees were established – a technical advisory scientific committee, and a task force implementation committee. The same person chaired both: Cynthra Persad of the Ministry of Agriculture. The technical committee was made up of representatives of the ministry's Extension Division and all the major agricultural research organizations operating in Trinidad – local, regional and international. It made technical recommendations and devised strategies for dealing with the problem. The implementation committee consisted mainly of representatives of the various divisions of the Ministry of Agriculture. Its main role was to coordinate the implementation of strategies and to provide feedback to the other committee.

The committees recognized that public awareness and extension programmes were essential to alert people to the mealy bug and the devastation it could cause. The Extension Division used different types of media, particularly radio and television, to inform people and to tell them to report the bug to the authorities if they saw it. Even later, when the control efforts shifted from "spray, cut and burn" to biological control, it was still important to reach the public to know where the predators should be released, and to monitor the level of control.

Three- and five-minute radio programmes were broadcast on various stations. To enable people to identify the insect, detailed descriptions and pictures had to be widely distributed. Colour posters and handbills were distributed to the public. At the height of the campaign, short television programmes were also produced.

Since messages had to get out to as many people as possible very quickly, the ministry's limited facilities for producing mass media materials could not handle the job. Cable television has made Trinidad's viewers a sophisticated lot, so the television programmes had to meet

BOX 15

Jingle bug

A radio jingle was produced for the campaign. It went like this:

If you see the mealy bug
Report it right away
Don't delay...
Stop its destruction

demanding broadcast criteria. Extension Division staff drafted the technical content and the scripts; the production was contracted out to commercial media houses. Similarly, since the posters aimed to show the symptoms as realistically as possible, printing was also contracted out. The factsheets and leaflets were developed and produced in-house.

Timely and appropriate dissemination of the message was key. Normally, commercial radio and television stations broadcast the government's educational materials outside the peak viewing and listening times. But media surveys showed that those times were not suitable. The same surveys suggested which stations were best to reach specific audiences. For example, certain radio programmes were geared to commuters, young people, people with certain cultural backgrounds, and so on. For television, programmes on the mealy bug were shown at prime time, or at other times when many people would be watching.

Money well spent

It didn't come cheap: the commercial stations did not broadcast these programmes for free. But it proved to be money well spent. Surveys later showed that most people had heard about the mealy bug through the mass media.

How was it possible to get such resources from the government relatively quickly? Perhaps it was the very visible destruction caused by the pest in other countries, and the realization that the same could happen in Trinidad.

The information and education strategy did not depend only on the mass media. The extension field staff were mobilized to deal with the threat, particularly in areas where outbreaks had occurred. They visited households, held programmes in schools, gave talks at Rotary Club meetings and community organizations, and came armed with lots of materials to give away. They set up exhibits in shopping malls and outdoor markets. Very importantly, too, they responded to numerous telephone calls by the public: the publicity materials advertised numbers that people could call to report the bug or to ask questions.

The reasons for success

The programme was successful: only a small amount of damage eventually occurred. The samaan tree in Port-of-Spain was saved, and is flourishing today. Newspaper editorials acclaimed the Ministry of Agriculture and its staff. With FAO's help, the experience has been shared widely, both within and outside the Caribbean.

The reasons for success? The matter of appropriate technology and the way it was handled perhaps stand out. The biological control methods were introduced at the right stage, and this was possible only because the national committees had been put in place as soon as

the problem appeared to be a difficult one. Having one person chair both committees ensured a built-in link between research ar extension.

The communication effort was also crucial in arousing concern in various quarters and in mobilizing resources. In some ways th communication effort broke new ground – by contracting out certain aspects of production and dissemination. But in other ways it stuc to certain basic principles – relying on its foot soldiers, the much-maligned extension field staff, to bring the message home to the peopl

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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