

Reaching out to Milk Farmers in a Plantation Community In Sri Lanka: A Case Study

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Abstract

The paper describes experiences of conducting an information programme for milk farmers in the Maskeliya plantation area, Sri Lanka by the Public Library Maskeliya, with the primary objective of facilitating grass-root level communities to access information. Information and data for the paper was collected from a mini survey of feed back of the participants and also from secondary sources.

The broad objective of the information programme was to create an information platform for the milk farmers to obtain vital information needed for their livelihood. Specific objectives were to educate milk farmers on cattle diseases and how to control them; to make them aware of obtaining accurate and reliable information and the available mass media sources for information and to provide information about livestock training programmes conducted by the Dept. of Animal Production and Health.

The performances and the constraints of the livestock sector is discussed. The need for public libraries intervention with the grass-root level communities for expansion of their capacities is emphasised.

The Maskeliya Public Library was chosen for the information programme because of the presence of dairy farmers in the area. The information programme was organized with the collaboration of the AGRINET librarians, the Ambagamuwa Pradeshiya Sabhawa, the government veterinary surgeon, estate managers of the tea plantains and Maskeliya Public Library Readers Club.

The information programme consisted of two presentations, a CD-ROM demonstration, a display of farmer focused publications and free distribution of an information package. The challenges of the programme were the linguistic problem and the literacy level. An interpreter was used to communicate the presentations in Tamil language.

One hundred milk farmers, which was 10% of total milk farmers in the area attended the programme. Written feedback was collected from 55 farmers who could write. The major problem faced by milk farmers were cattle shed problems, low milk prices, lack of medical facilities, cattle feed problems, low incomes etc. The public librarians were required to build up partnership with influential people and institutes in the area through professional lobbying. Language skills of the public librarians were a requirement to reach out to grass-root levels.

Keywords: Community Information; Rural Information needs; Agricultural Information

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Introduction

Agriculture and livestock production has a close relationship and it is an integral part of the farming systems in some farming areas of Sri Lanka where the farmers rear cattle and buffaloes along with their cultivation practices. Sri Lanka continues to be known as an agricultural country although the contribution of agriculture to the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) shows a significant decline for the last two or three decades dropping it down from 24.2% in 1986 to 11.9% in 2007 (Central Bank, 1987, 2008).

The sectoral performance of agriculture is such, 72% of the total population in Sri Lanka continue to live in rural areas and the majority of them are engaged in agriculture as their main livelihood.

Livestock sector

The contribution of the livestock sector to the GDP is 0.9% (Central Bank, 2008) which is comparatively very low although 1.4 million people are engaged in livestock production for their living, and out of the total number, 250,000 milk farmers supply milk to the formal dairy market in the country (Dept.of Animal Production & Health, 2008).

The local dairy production is only sufficient to meet 12.5% of the milk requirement of the country. The balance 87.5% of milk requirements are met by the dairy imports

(Dept.of Animal Production & Health, 2008). The situation is more intensive as the cost of dairy imports are growing up at an exponential rate, and expenditure of dairy has increased from Rs.13.5 billion in 2005 to Rs. 17.4 billion in 2006 (Central Bank,2007).

The development of the livestock sector will not only improve it's contributions to the national economy at macro level, but it will directly contribute to improve the

nutritional status of people in the country, reduce malnutrition specially among children and will also help in poverty alleviation in the rural areas.

The majority of farmers who are engaged in crop cultivation and dairy production are small-scale farmers who are directly involved in meeting the food demand of the country by producing for the domestic market. Although the responsibilities are high the small scale farmers produce under extreme conditions, lacking the basic facilities to earn a reasonable living. Uplifting the small-scale farmers by addressing their critical issues and expanding their capacities is a responsibility of all stakeholders in the country including policy makers, administrators, public, private sectors and NGOs etc.

The main government and semi-government institutions involved with the livestock sector are as follows.

- Ministry of Livestock Development
- Department of Animal Production and Health (ANPH)
- Provincial Departments of Animal Production and Health
- National Livestock Development Board (NLDB)
- MILCO

In the dairy sector 95% of the producers are small-scale farmers, and their herd sizes depend on the areas they live and their income level. In the Kandy district the average herd size is 05 cattle (Kothalawala, 2008) but in the upcountry it varies.

People living on the plantations specially in the upcountry tea plantations, contribute to the dairy industry with their small numbers of cattle that they could afford to maintain. The plantation communities are involved in producing milk on their small households under severe constraints such as economical, infrastructure, medical, transport and marketing facilities to name a few.

The policy makers have identified the major deficiencies in the livestock sector (National Committee on Livestock Aquaculture and Fisheries, 2007) which are shown below.

- Animal breeding and reproduction deficiencies
- Inadequate feed resources
- Inadequate animal health services
- Marketing problems of livestock products

The state governments have taken policy decisions and have implemented development plans to promote the livestock sector in the country from time to time. In the recent past, the livestock sector has shown a remarkable growth from 1.5% to 7.3% according to the economic indicators of the Central Bank (Central Bank, 2008).

Further, educating and training of farmers also has been identified as an important area by the stakeholders. It is very vital that livestock farmers are constantly educated using a variety of information transfer methods such as farmer information programmes, mass media, agricultural exhibitions, farm visits etc. in order to expand their knowledge base for them to sustain and continue in the industry as an economically viable livelihood.

Public Library Intervention

In this context the public librarians as information gatekeepers have the capacity and the responsibility to reach out to grass- root level farming communities to educate, direct and facilitate them to obtain vital information for their livelihoods. Sri Lanka has about 1200 public libraries located in all local administrative segments such as municipal, urban and pradeshiya sabhas (formally village councils) in the country.

The mission of public libraries is to provide and facilitate access to information by the local populace. Since there is more emphasis and discussion on shifting the traditional role of librarianship to more outward bound community- based information systems the public librarians should be able to reach out to disadvantaged communities who do not aware of libraries, who do not have the

time and the language skills to use a library to obtain some kind of basic guidance in the form of information.

The farming communities are a group of people who need very vital kind of information or direction to combat a practical problem at a rapid speed. If there is a delay in finding a solution to a problem the destruction of a crop or a loss of an animal is unaffordable for them in terms of monetary value. It is revealed at farmer information forums that the farmers whether in the crop, livestock or fishery sector do not consider local libraries are places for them to get guidance or to get information which is a very critical issue.

The adult population in Sri Lanka specially in the rural sector are of the view that libraries are meant for educated people who could read and write.

There is a great challenge ahead of the public librarians, for changing beliefs and attitudes of local populace by building credibility of themselves as a knowledgeable person in the society who has the capacity to assist disadvantaged communities with their information or literacy needs.

Information Programme conducted for the Milk Farmers

A farmer information programme was organized by the Public Library, Maskeliya (Ambagamuwa Pradeshiya sabhawa in the Nuwara Eliya district) with the guidance of the AGRINET (Agriculture Information Network of Sri Lanka) group of librarians in May 2007. The public library Maskeliya managed to get the partnership of a group influential people and organizations in the area including the government veterinary surgeon, in the Provincial Department of Animal Production and Health, the officers of the Ambagamuwa pradeshiya sabhawa, and the estate management of the tea plantations in the area and the members of the Maskeliya Public Library Reader's club.

The objective of the Information Programme

The long-term objective was to create a information platform for the milk farmers to obtain information of vital importance to them.

The specific objectives were noted below.

- To educate milk farmers on vital areas of milk production such as protection against most common disease the cattle very often get affected in the area.
- To make the milk farmers aware how to obtain reliable and accurate information and to make them aware of mass media dissemination of information such as television programmes, newspaper supplements etc.
- To make the farmers aware of education and training programmes conducted by the Dept. of Animal Production and Health free of charge specially targeting youth for self employment.

Background Information of the area

Maskeliya is a small city surrounded by up-country tea plantations in the Nuwara Eliya district. The majority of the population in the Nuwara Eliya district are of tamil (57.1%) ethnicity and their spoken language is tamil. The sinhala population accounts for 40.2% from the total population (Dept. of Census and Statistics, 2005). The tea plantations in the area are mainly under company management. A few private estates are also in the area. Maskeliya is renowned for its high quality tea grown for the export market.

Selection of the area

Maskeliya area was chosen for the information programme because of the presence of considerable number of milk farmers in the area also with a milk factory located in a neighbouring city. The target group of milk farmers for the information programme were plantation workers of tamil ethnicity who lived on tea estates.

Contents of the Programme

The information programme for milk farmers was pre-planned to include two public presentations by the veterinary surgeon of the area and a librarian of AGRINET respectively. The other items were a display of farmer focused publications including leaflets etc. produced by the Dept. of Animal Production and Health, a CD-ROM demonstration of cattle and goat breeds and free distribution of an information package containing leaflets related to the topics discussed at the programme and a public open discussion forum encouraging farmers to present their problems, concerns, views etc..

The information provided by the veterinary surgeon was translated into tamil and produced on a leaflet by the members of the Maskeliya Public Library Reader's club for free distribution among the participants.

Challenge of the Programme

- **Linguistic problems**

The linguistic problem of the resource persons was a challenge for the organizers for the effective delivery of the programme. A Livestock assistant (LDI) of tamil ethnicity, in the Provincial Department of Animal Production and Health who was conversant in both tamil and sinhala language was assigned as an interpreter to help both resource persons.

- **Literacy level of the participants.**

The literacy rate in the Nuwara Eliya district is relatively low (82.6%) compared to other parts of the country (Dept.of Census and Statistics, 2005). Further there are pockets specially in the up-country plantations, where the literacy rate is much below than the average. Some of the milk farmers who attended programme had difficulties in reading and writing. More pictorial presentations are useful for such groups of people.

Announcement of the Programme

Announcement of the information programme was done by the Librarian with the help of the local authority. The announcements were sent to the tea plantations in the area and the estate management has made arrangements to notify it to the estate workers.

Time and Venue

Since plantation workers work on the estates from Monday through Saturday, Sunday, the only convenient day for them was chosen for the programme. A central school (Maskeliya Tamil Maha Vidyalaya) was the venue for the programme as the Maskeliya public library lacks space for a public gathering.

Participants

The total number of registered milk farmers in the area was 1067, out of that 1045 and 20 were of tamil and sinhala ethnicity respectively (Govt. Veterinary Office, 2008). About hundred (100) milk farmers (10%) of the total number participated in the information programme.

Conducting the Programme

The government veterinary surgeon explained about three common cattle diseases (mastitis, milk fever and a worm disease) in the area with a drawing on the school chalk board. These diseases could be fatal unless they are not treated in the early stages. The librarian explained about how to get reliable and accurate information to solve farmer's problems, linking the public library as an information platform for them to get guidance and direction to relevant authorities. A CD-ROM demonstration of cattle breeds was delivered. The information packages were distributed. The open discussion forum was facilitated with the help of the interpreter.

Feed back

At the end a simple written feed back was collected from the participants. Out of the 100 participants only about 40 had the writing skills, however 55 written responses were collected with the help of fellow participants. The most important fact revealed from all participants was that the first information programme initiated by the public library for milk farmers was very useful.

A simple analysis of the responses given in the feed back provides baseline information to identify the community problems, concerns and difficulties in the area and to direct them to relevant authorities, forums etc. and also the information is useful to develop future programmes. The participants were from the following tea estates.

Name of the Estate No. of participants

Brownlow Estate	08
Brunswick Estate	05
Duncken Estate	01
Fairlawn Estate	01
Glentelle Estate	07
Goverawila Estate	05
Olton Estate	01
Maskeliya Estate	05
Mahanelu Estate	03
Mocca Estate	05
Mincinlane Estate	01
Moussakelle Estate	02
Murray Estate	01
Norwood Estate	04
Portmore Estate	01
Stratspey Estate	04
Stockholm Estate	01
Total	55

Out of the total number of responses it is revealed that 45 farmers rear cattle, 08 farmers raise poultry and 02 are goat farmers. From the written feedback of the milk farmers, the major constraints and difficulties faced by the milk farmers in the Maskeliya plantation area were revealed. The issues can be categorized and shown in the table below.

**Table 01- Problems of milk farmers in the Maskeliya Plantation Area
N=55**

	Frequency	percentage
• Cattle shed problems	26	47%
• Low price for milk	17	31%
• Cattle diseases/deficiencies in Medical Services	15	27%
• Cattle feed problems	05	09%
• Low income and financial Difficulties	05	09%
• Water problems	03	06%
• Lack of good breeds	01	02%
• High cost for cattle	01	02%
• Lack of land	01	02%

The major problem faced by farmers in Maskeliya plantation area is cattle shed problem which also have many implications on the gravity of the problem. In the up country plantation areas, an intensive farming method is carried out and the cattle are kept in the sheds all the time. The farmers have pointed out that they do not have space to expand the cattle sheds, cannot afford to repair the sheds because of their income level and high cost of building materials and have no incentives for building materials etc.

Price of milk is another major concern of the milk farmers in the Maskeliya plantation area. Low prices of milk and high cost of production has become a national issue in the country which adversely affects the sustainability of farmers in the milk industry.

Cattle disease and lack of medical facilities are other critical issue the milk farmers very often face in the area, and this leads to lower productivity.

Non availability of feed resources and high cost of feeds is also a constraint identified by the milk farmers in the plantations. One person has pointed out that loss of grass due to spraying of herbicides to protect the tea crop on the estates contributes to the problem of feed resources.

The feed backs of the information programme provided a good cross section of constraints, shortcomings, deficiencies faced by a grass-root level multilingual plantation community in the up-country which could be used as a information base for providing guidance and direction to them and also for organizing information programmes in future.

Lessons learnt from the Information Programme .

The information programme for milk farmers opened up many opportunities for the public librarians to reach out to the grass-root level communities.

Professional lobbying

A community information programme cannot be organized without the support of influential persons, institutes, organizations, societies etc. in the area. The public library should build up good relationships with the above group for mutual understanding in organizing a community programme. The government veterinary surgeon in the area, school principals, estate managers, officers of the agrarian services centres, officers of the Provincial Department of Agriculture are some of the key persons the public librarian should foster connections.

Overcoming the challenges

Linguistic problem and the literacy level have to be considered in advance in organizing an information programme for the local communities. One approach to overcome the linguistic and the literacy barrier is using many pictorial and graphical information sources in the form of posters, charts etc. CD-ROM presentations, multi-media presentations with pictures and video clips and film shows will be another channel of communication for overcoming linguistic and

literacy barriers. It is advisable that public librarians should have the language skills of the spoken languages in the community.

Conclusion

The information programme conducted by the Maskeliya Public library opened up many opportunities to build up the credibility of librarians as information agents in the society.

The programme further helped the public librarian to shift from the traditional role of librarianship to more outward-bound community based information system and to prove that they have the capacity to become change agents of the society in connection with information, knowledge and literacy.

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