Growing journalists from agriculturalists

Restoring culture in agriculture in T&T

Media Consultant Dr Kris Rampersad focuses on how agriculture has been marginalized in Trinidad and Tobago. Opportunities within the energy sector – gas and oil in particular – are seen as the basis for development. Imported agricultural products and foodstuffs are seen as a measure of status and advancement. She argues that agriculture must develop its own links with the media. A proactive approach that includes making full use new media and of establishing direct contact with individual journalists could lead to a stronger, more positive image of agriculture and its critical importance.

Dr Rampersad is spearheading the Caribbean input into Role of the Media in Agriculture and Rural Development in Brussels Oct 12-16. She is also coordinating the IICA/CARDI Excellence in Agricultural Journalism Award launched this week in Trinidad and Tobago.

In Trinidad and Tobago, not unlike many other parts of the Caribbean and the developing world, agriculture and development are inherently contradictory terms. Deeply rooted in the region’s labour history of slavery and forced indentured labour, children are educated away from agriculture; their ambitions nurtured to aspire to life in industry or professional services that are as far away from the land as is possible in the belief that agriculture offers only limited life chances. This attitude to agriculture - as a peripheral activity - translates into the policies and practices of the adult world. In Trinidad and Tobago, where there is an abundance of alternatives to agriculture in the country’s energy resources, policy planning ensures that there are sufficient incentives for the private sector to invest in the exploitation of more oil and gas reserves. At the same time the private sector is berated for not investing in agriculture although it is offered little inducement to do so. Support for farmers and agricultural interests are not viewed as viable and economically-sound investments. There is no real link between the products of agriculture as core to personal survival as there are with the oft-reiterated links between energy as core to economic survival. The quantity of food on one’s table from the outside world is believed to signify the level of development. Import labels imply that the household is on its way, like the national policy agenda, to developed status. The household with mainly local products on its table is considered to be on the lower rungs of the social and economic ladder.
National media replicate and perpetuate these perceptions of and attitudes towards agriculture with - perhaps not deliberate but inadvertent - negative imaging of the sector. It is not unusual to see or hear feature and news stories in print and electronic media that tell of “the once sleepy agricultural village is now awakening to development (read: non-agro based industries). In effect, there is no culture of agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago.

The media is one of the most powerful modern engines for creating, nurturing and sustaining tastes, perceptions, habits and beliefs. As a creative catalyst, an agent of culture, and a stimulant of public opinion, it is recognizably best positioned to reversing such attitudes and approaches that have worked against the sector. But the limitations on media as an institution in the region are not much different from those of the agriculture sector. It too views itself as disempowered and functioning with limited capacity, resources and investments in its professional development. Perhaps we need to turn the spotlight not just on what journalists can do - which has already received considerable attention - but what agriculturalists can do to empower themselves by increasing their capacities to use media in their outreach.

It is a fact that the media is attracted to power and success like insects to a source of light. Empowering the agriculture sector to utilise the wide array of media tools and opportunities is key to attracting media attention to agriculture. The agriculture sector has to develop and establish strong bonds with conventional mass media as well as explore the potential of expanding outreach and impact through new (e.g internet) and alternative (performance arts) media. Agriculture must reach out to create understanding and awareness and then a one-to-one approach - reporter to agriculturalist – rather than trying to convert the entire media. The sector will also benefit if it develops its own expertise in journalism; package products, feed articles and stories to media outlets and filter its expertise through the system as editors, producers, reporters and opinion leaders, for example. In addition it should draw on the opportunities for citizen journalism and the kind of target community the online social and professional networking channels provide.

Such a proactive approach will help project an image of an empowered sector and help counter negative imaging. Support by new technology and with the objective of gaining fuller control over content and message will enable the sector to target its audiences and readership in a more systematic way and emerge from the niche into which it has been squeezed by the conventional media. One particularly effective mechanism for stimulating media interest and awareness is the outdoor outing - taking journalists away from the daily grind of the office to field projects. At the same time, there is enormous potential in training and using the sector’s ready cadre of extension officers - already experts in transferring technical scientific information accessible to lay farmers/communities - to be effective conduits of information, potential media liaisons, and agricultural stringers and journalists.
In an ideal world, the media may train or seek out journalists with expertise in agricultural reporting, but given its own resource limitations, and the reality that media managers have not yet seen this as a necessity, the agricultural sector can well capitalise on and create its own opportunities for public outreach by growing its own journalists.

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