

# *Adapting Extension to Urban Environment*

## *Internal Forces*

**Efforts to inform urban people that Extension is available  
will be ineffective unless changes are made  
in organizational structure, programs, symbols**

EMORY J. BROWN

IN MANY urban areas throughout the United States Extension agents conduct programs such as gardening, landscaping, home grounds improvement, horticulture, floriculture, and most aspects of home economics. Except for home economics subjects which are less residentially oriented, most of these programs have been a "spillover" from the program developed for rural people. The most common approach in urban areas is to use radio, television, and newspapers and to answer requests from urban residents by telephone. Few guidelines are available to aid agents who are interested in developing an educational program for urban areas.

Why is Extension interested in serving urban people? One factor is the shift in population from that of an agrarian society to an urbanized society. Another is the organizational structure of the Extension Service with the basic unit the county. Only 37 per cent of the counties in the United States are completely urban. Most counties have a mixture of urban and rural people, and it is not feasible or efficient to isolate the rural segment from the urban, especially since rural and urban areas are so interdependent. Many counties contiguous to cities have recently become urban. Since the organization is partially supported by county funds, and many local people have developed a vested interest in the Extension program, it becomes well nigh impossible to discontinue the program because a county has changed from a rural to an urban population.

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The objective of this paper is to analyze some of the major factors in adapting Extension to the urban environment. This problem has two major dimensions, the internal organizational dynamics and the organizational environment. One is internal and the other external. Both are inextricably interrelated. That is, the organization is related to and articulates its activities with various publics. The internal forces influence the success of this adaptive process. This paper focuses on the internal forces.

Several organizational components are relevant in adapting Extension Service to the urban environment: (1) the objectives or goals of the organization; (2) program content; (3) personnel; (4) resources; (5) supporting public and clientele; and (6) methods and techniques. Each of these components will be discussed.

#### GOALS

Since the Smith-Lever law which established Cooperative Extension refers to diffusing information among "the people," no major legal difficulties have been encountered in extending the program to urban people. The law charges the agency with responsibility for diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects related to agriculture and home economics and to encourage application of the same. This law was promulgated at a time when the population was largely agrarian. The implicit intent was to help farmers and rural people increase their standard of living primarily through economic efficiency on farms. Agricultural Extension rode into a vacuum in 1914. No other organization existed to extend knowledge to the farmer. This is not the case in cities today. There is a whole complex system of agencies, organizations, and industries competing to provide services and education for urban people.

What is the purpose of Cooperative Extension in urban areas? What is going to be extended? It is assumed that the organization extended the research findings of the experiment stations to the people in rural areas. What is the body of knowledge which is to be extended in urban areas? Extension has dealt essentially with the farmer as an economic unit rather than as a social unit. The problems of the city dweller were never seriously considered part of Extension's programs. Problems were more likely focused on soil conservation, crop rotation, fertilizer, insecticides, and seeds. The farmer accepted and adopted the practices recommended by the agent primarily because of an economic motivation. What will be the motivation in the urban area?

Is it the purpose of Extension in urban areas to diffuse agriculture and home economics information? Is it to assist urban people with problems of a management nature? Is it to assist groups, organizations, and agencies in planning and coordinating their activities? Is it to assist with municipal policy making?

Two major processes could occur in organizations as adaptation takes place.<sup>1</sup> One may be a success of goals whereby new goals are substituted as old ones are achieved or old goals are no longer appropriate. For example, the "Polio Society" has changed its goals. It developed a remarkable ability to collect funds on a local basis as part of a major goal. Now the organization is faced with the crisis created by the fact that it has succeeded. In an analogous fashion, Gross points out that "perhaps the problem Extension faces is not how to attain its goal but rather that it has been only too successful in attaining its goal."<sup>2</sup>

The other process is called goal displacement, perhaps the most frequently noted pathological aspect of a large scale organization. In order to accomplish goals, organizations establish a set of procedures or methods. As these procedures are carried out, people in the organization to whom authority and responsibility have been delegated often come to regard these means as ends in themselves rather than means to achieve the organizational goals. Methods of doing things become sacred and retard adaptation. Reified policies and procedures may retard innovation and experimentation as Extension moves into urban areas. Even the individuals in an organization tend to develop a closed mind to innovations and new ways of performing responsibilities.

#### PROGRAM

One major strength of Extension has been the development of programs based on the needs of people. How do we determine needs of people in an urban area? Will these felt needs be compatible with the purposes of the Extension Service? Should the program be developed to fit the needs of groups, agencies, and organizations, rather than individuals?

Some public officials in urban areas feel that a program which provides information on lawns and shrubs or teaches homemakers to sew and cook does not tackle the major problems facing urban

<sup>1</sup>David Sills, *The Volunteers* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957), p. 62.

<sup>2</sup>Edward Gross, "Organization as a Means for Achieving Extension's Goal," in Robert C. Clark and N. P. Ralston (eds.), *Directing the Cooperative Extension Service* (Madison: National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, University of Wisconsin, 1962), p. 102.

areas. Rather, they say, the problems of transportation, water and sewage, health, education, unemployment, and juvenile delinquency are the urgent problems. It has been pointed out that commercial services are available for many of the programs conducted by the Extension staff in rural areas.

A particular goal in an organization requires a special set of values. When Extension goes into urban areas it must ask itself not only if it has an interest in such goals but also are such problems and the clientele with which the Extension Service is working consistent with the teaching and values of the Service? Agricultural agents and specialists have demonstrated a love for the farmer and rural values. The organization has been one big family, with conflicts minimized. The value orientation will no doubt have to change to one of sincere commitment to and understanding of urban people and the urban social organization.

In a recent study of a suburban area of Boston adults were asked what they needed information on.<sup>3</sup> Most often mentioned was information on pests and insects, followed closely by lawn care. Also, a very high proportion mentioned homemaking skills, flowers, gardening information, landscaping, and managing the finances of the home. However, agricultural agents were not perceived as being salient to satisfying these interests. Most people were likely to go elsewhere for information.

#### PERSONNEL

What type of personnel are needed in urban areas? Almost all Extension personnel are college graduates in home economics or agriculture. Few were reared in urban areas. The county agent has been part and parcel of the agricultural milieu in which he works. Many agents are vicarious farmers. No doubt the urban agent must become a part of the urban culture in the same way. He must have skills and competencies which are required to understand the urban social structure and types of programs needed. He must have the abilities to gain the support of influentials and work with urban advisory committees. He must be committed to serving urban society and not regard telephone calls from urban people as nuisance calls.

Since most counties include rural as well as urban people, the staff and advisory committees will need to agree on the allocation of resources for serving urban people.

Most agents have friendships with and established social rela-

<sup>3</sup> Francis Barcus, *Dissemination of Agricultural Information in the Suburban Community*, Report No. 3 (Boston: A Communications Research Center, Boston University, September, 1961).

relationships with rural leaders but not with urban leaders. The dress and behavior of the agents in urban areas will need to be symbolic of the urban professional. A plastic cow in an Extension office seems out of place in the city; many new symbols will likely be created to impress urban people with the relevance of Extension to their lives.

### RESOURCES

Where are the financial and educational resources to come from to serve the urban population? Most Extension administrators agree that first priority should be to farm and rural people and the additional resources required should come from urban areas. However, cities have generally not provided a stable basis of financial support. Administrative support and educational material must obviously come also from the college or university. Agents working in urban areas say that specialists, supervisors, and administrators do not understand and have had very little experience in the urban situation. The materials were usually not developed for urban areas. Most urban problems have not been studied in the colleges of agriculture or home economics. No doubt the trend toward having a total university extension organization will provide access to resources beyond agriculture and home economics.

### PUBLICS

Urban people know very little about the Extension Service. However, they do have an image of it that is primarily agricultural. Certainly this is a deterring factor in urban areas. The image is generally favorable but the program is seen as primarily for rural and not urban people. The impact of an intensive educational program to inform people that Extension is available to urban people will likely be ineffective unless changes are made in the organizational structure, programs, and symbols. The image people have of the organization will determine to a great extent whether or not they are willing to participate in it.

In the Boston study, groups of urban people had a rather stereotypical image of the general farm and home type radio program. These programs were thought by the supporting population to be aimed at some other group of people. They did not identify these programs as being responsive to their particular needs. If the radio programs are addressed to the suburban audience, then some type of consideration should be given to urban symbols (such as, entitling the program to indicate a closer tie to suburban problems). In

a Pennsylvania survey, town and city residents perceived the radio program as being for farmers even though the agents were purposely slanting the program to an urban audience.<sup>4</sup>

The advisory committee is a strategic client group. These people need to understand urban areas and to be sympathetic to serving urban people. Too often advisory committee members are oriented to the rural segment and have little knowledge or understanding of the urban segment. Many have a nostalgic longing for the rural area in which they were reared. Very few advisory committees include urban influentials or members of the power structure. Extension has been successful in gaining access to key influentials in rural areas but has been relatively slow or unsuccessful in involving key leaders in urban areas.

The relationship between the Extension organization and local government has been rather diffuse and ambiguous. This relationship will likely become more formalized in urban areas. In most cases, rural county officials support Extension financially because they understand Extension and have been reared with it. However, financial support from city officials is another problem. Considerable effort to acquaint most city officials with Extension programs will be a prerequisite to obtaining financial support.

#### METHODS

Will the same methods used in rural areas be effective in urban areas? Urban society includes a complex of businesses, services, and agencies who are already established to provide assistance on an individual basis. Hence, there is opportunity for Extension to work with existing channels rather than directly with individuals. Efficiency in communication requires a knowledge of the habits and preferences of the audiences with respect to sources of information. Perhaps the most important source of information in the urban household is the one called the "professional intermediary." Hence, it is to the garden shop, the hardware store, the florist, the landscaper, and the like that urban people most often turn for information on lawns and shrubbery. This middle man seems to be the key to the diffusion process in the urban community.

With certain problems, the communication might best be achieved through mass media. For other problems, it might be best to emphasize the professional intermediary channels—by making specialized publications available for secondary distribution

<sup>4</sup>Emory Brown and Cordell Hatch, "Extension Radio Audience in Blair County," Extension Studies No. 23 (University Park, Pennsylvania: College of Agriculture, The Pennsylvania State University, October, 1963).



through garden supply dealers and the like. In other areas, efforts might be directed toward establishing direct personal contacts with people by holding meetings, classes, or speaking to community groups. For other types of problems, especially when consulting with key government leaders, a personal method might be most effective. Undoubtedly there is no one best channel for disseminating information on all problems.

In a study of questions asked county agricultural agents in four Michigan counties, it was found that simple, inexpensive fact sheets were more efficient in answering questions than more expensive publications.<sup>5</sup> In working with urban people there is a general trend to shorter leaflets which contain subject matter and fewer notes of meetings.

In a recent Philadelphia study, it was found that newspapers as compared with radio and TV were more effective in motivating people to request a short publication. Of 13,000 requests for a leaflet on Japanese beetles, 7500 came from publicity in newspapers, 2200 from radio, and 3000 from TV.<sup>6</sup> These findings are in agreement with the previously cited Boston study in that printed media are more important sources of information than radio or TV.

More emphasis will be placed on series of classes covering a specialized subject, as opposed to working with homemakers clubs. A major problem facing the establishment of 4-H Clubs in urban areas is the number of youth organizations already in existence. Also, the schools, especially beginning at junior high, have a broad range of activities which compete for the time of youth. Public schools generally offer shop and home economics projects. Local governments in the urban areas are developing more comprehensive recreational programs, especially in the summer. A few states are seriously exploring the idea of an urban youth specialist to work with all youth organizations and agencies and, thus, provide access to the resources of the university. This role may be incompatible with that of a 4-H Club organizer.

#### IMPLICATIONS

If the Cooperative Extension Service decides to work in urban areas, here are some basic internal organizational guidelines:

<sup>5</sup>C. Lang, "A study of the Questions Asked of County Extension Agents in Four Michigan Counties and the Publications Available to Answer the Questions" unpublished Master's thesis, Michigan State University, 1959).

<sup>6</sup>Timothy Brown, "Japanese Beetle Project," *The Evaluator*, No. 16 (University Park, Pennsylvania: College of Agriculture, The Pennsylvania State University, November, 1961).

1. The goals should be clearly identified as to whether the purpose of the organization is to help consumers in decision making, to assist homeowners in problems of lawns, landscaping, and home repairs, to consult with organizations and agencies on problems, or to consult with government officials and assist them with decision making.
2. Agents working in urban areas will need to have access to educational resources of the university which are often outside the college of agriculture and home economics.
3. Staff with urban orientation, skills, and competencies are needed for work in urban areas. This criterion is more pertinent to the men agents than to home economists since many of them are already trained in and oriented to urban society.
4. The subject-matter competencies of urban men agents will likely be social sciences as opposed to technical agriculture.
5. The orientation and ideology of national, state, and county staffs should manifest a sincere appreciation and commitment to the urban inhabitants and their culture. The organization itself will have to become more symbolic of urban people and urban influentials.
6. For most effective operations, counties may need to be reorganized along metropolitan lines.
7. The social structure of urban areas should be analyzed to determine (1) the contribution which Extension can make, (2) the existing channels of communication, (3) the organizations and agencies relevant to the Extension organization and its functions, and to identify (4) the problems which the people and organizations in the urban area have.
8. Perhaps the major requirement is for the entire staff to take on an experimental and innovative attitude with respect to planning and carrying out the program in urban areas.

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LET US THINK of quietly enlarging our stock of true and fresh ideas, and not, as soon as we get an idea or half an idea, be running out with it into the street, and trying to make it rule there. Our ideas will, in the end, shape the world all the better for maturing a little.

—from MATTHEW ARNOLD as quoted in *Forbes*, XCII  
(August 15, 1963), 50.

COMMON sense is the measure of the possible.—FREDERIC AMIEL.