

Low-Income Farm People

An educational program for low-income farmers should
plan for the needs of the total family—
not just the farm

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Despite their reference to particular localities, the many studies of low-income farmers have recurring themes that stress the diversity among such people and suggest guides to programming for them. One such theme is that low-income farm people do not represent homogeneous groupings. Yet, five common characteristics have been identified and are discussed in this paper—some are fixed, others can be altered. These characteristics indicate some ability limitations of such people and the restrictions that available opportunities may impose on possibilities for programming. On the basis of this general analysis, program implications are identified.

GIVEN THE active current interest in problems of poverty it is rather common to hear the question, "Who are these people we're calling low-income?" If action programs are to be directed to the problems of low-income people, the necessary first step is to identify the target group. An implication of the question is unfortunate, however, in that it suggests that little objective information is available to help in identification and subsequent program planning. This is not the case. There is in fact much information available, perhaps too much.¹ The major difficulties are that many of the existent

¹ A now somewhat outdated bibliography includes 782 selected references from the period 1945 to 1955. See United States Department of Agriculture Library List No. 62, *Low-Income Farm People* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1955).

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studies and reports are hard to locate and, even more important, the materials typically have reference to a particular locality. In consequence, it is by no means easy to distinguish between that which is unique to a single community or county in some particular state and that which may have some general utility in a variety of locations.

The purpose of this paper is to describe some of the most important themes which recur in many studies of low-income farmers and to point to some of the program implications of these recurring themes. Existing studies will not be analyzed in detail; the quantity of material is almost overwhelming. Common themes do recur, however, and point to one over-riding conclusion: low-income farm people do not represent a homogenous grouping—they are not all alike, but they can be sorted into a small number of classes which are useful in many different locations. The major program implication is that no single type of program emphasis can be effective for all low-income farm people; differences among them are too great. A variety of programs is necessary. Essentially the same program "package" should be useful in most locations, however, with variation only in the emphasis on one or another element in the "package" depending on the particular situation.

IDENTIFYING LOW INCOME

Part of the difficulty in digesting the mass of information available about low-income farm people stems from three basic problems of definition. The first of these has to do with differences in the absolute amount of income used to classify people as either low or not low in income. The nature of low-income problems is not necessarily affected by the particular cutting point one chooses. From the point of view of identifying factors contributing to a condition of poverty, the choice of a given cutting point on an income distribution is an arbitrary matter and will be so treated here.²

The second problem of definition stems from a failure to include all sources of income in designating a certain proportion of a population as low-income, whatever the cutting point. Probably the most acute form of this problem, in the context of agriculture, is the assessment of farm income only, resulting in automatic low-income classification for many part-time farmers. This procedure not only inflates the low-income category in a numerical sense; it also dis-

² This problem is discussed in H. H. Humphrey, *War on Poverty* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964), pp. 17-19. This book is one of several recent and quite readable overviews on poverty problems, both rural and urban.

torts any analysis of the people so classified. Solving the problem consists of including at least all major sources of income in making the initial classification as to income level.³

The third, and final, problem of defining the low-income population stems from the incompatibility of definitions based on averages for a geographic area and those based on individual characteristics. For certain purposes the designation of entire areas as poverty stricken is useful and even essential. It can be argued, for example, that the phenomenon of poverty in the midst of a majority of poor people is different from that where only one or a few people are poor in a context of relative affluence. To the extent that distinct values and attitudes characterize the poor and contribute to their poverty, the reinforcement of such values and attitudes in areas of concentrated poverty is a factor which cannot be ignored. In fact, however, most efforts to combat poverty are focused on areas where poverty tends to be the norm rather than the exception; thus the problem of definition is not necessarily serious for program planners.

For present purposes, on the other hand, the definitional problem cannot be avoided as easily. Some reports on poverty include the entire population of an area, others focus only on the low-income segment in an area. In order to integrate the information resulting from the two approaches it is necessary to focus on the lower-income segment in discussions of area poverty. By doing this one can, hopefully, arrive at a set of common themes which help in dealing with the problems of poverty wherever they occur.

DIVERSITY AMONG LOW-INCOME FARMERS

Keeping in mind the various modes of identifying low-income people discussed above, much of the available information about the poor can be reduced to five major characteristics. These characteristics can be viewed as factors contributing to poverty. Some of them can be altered; others must be taken as fixed. A given individual may be subject to one or several of the characteristics but for present purposes they are viewed as discrete and of roughly equal importance. The importance of one or another factor will of course vary from one locality to another. The five characteristics will be briefly discussed below, with discussion of implications for action programs in the following section.

³ See, for example, H. F. Lionberger, *Low-Income Farmers in Good Farming Areas of Missouri*, Missouri Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 668 (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1956), p. 18.

A high proportion of aged people distinguishes most analyses of low-income farm people.⁴ Age is of course something which cannot be altered, no matter how desirable it would be to do so. It should be noted that disproportions of older people do not necessarily show up in analyses of poverty on a regional basis. The southern Appalachian region, for example, contains a proportion of people aged 65 and over lower than that for the United States as a whole.⁵ Comparisons of high- and low-income groups within a given rural area, however, typically note a higher proportion of older people in the low-income category.

A high proportion of physical handicaps has also been noted in various studies of low-income farm people.⁶ It is undoubtedly true that many of the handicaps cited by low-income farm people represent conditions which could be corrected with proper treatment. Until such corrections are made the handicaps will affect earning power and may well be especially important in the farm situation in view of the relatively high demand for physical activity in farm work. Other handicaps cannot be corrected and stand as fixed factors in limiting earning power.

An orientation to off-farm work is not at all uncommon among low-income farm people. The sheer fact of high proportions of part-time farmers in poorer areas is one index of this kind of orientation. The important point to be noted, however, even among full-time farm people, is that the major chances for economic improvement may be perceived as being in the nonfarm sector.⁷ Whether chances for economic improvement are objectively better in the nonfarm sector in any given situation is another matter and is the reason here for stressing off-farm orientation. Current involvement in agriculture, coupled with a perception of opportunities elsewhere, can lead to a stalemate and thus contribute to poverty, at least in the short run.

Commercial farm orientation without appropriate physical and financial resources is perhaps the most readily recognized charac-

⁴For a current summary statement, see Lee Burchinal and Hilda Siff, "Rural Poverty," *Journal of Marriage and Family Living*, XXVI (November, 1964), 339-405.

⁵Thomas R. Ford (ed.), *The Southern Appalachian Region* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1962), p. 51.

⁶See, for example, G. W. Hill and R. A. Smith, *Man in the "Cut-Over,"* Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin 139 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1941). This is an older study but stands as one of the more available comprehensive discussions of rural poverty.

⁷As an example, see F. C. Fliegel, "Aspirations of Low-Income Farmers and Their Performance and Potential for Change," *Rural Sociology*, XXIV (September, 1959), 205-14.

teristic of low-income farm people. It has been listed late in the sequence here because of the traditional stress on physical and financial resources to the relative exclusion of human resources as factors contributing to poverty.⁸ A full commitment to a truly commercial orientation is probably not as widespread, however, as might be desired. This point is pursued below.

A *subsistence farm orientation* among some low-income farmers has been less frequently noted in studies of poverty problems but probably should receive greater stress.⁹ The point to be made here is that adherence to such traditional values as ownership of land free of debt as a prime objective is not necessarily consistent with the maximization of profit central to modern, highly competitive agriculture. To the extent that a relative absence of commercial orientation has been noted in discussions of farm poverty, there has been a tendency to oversimplify and to distort by making at least veiled references to shiftlessness, laziness, and so on. Discussions on this basis easily lead to emotion-laden arguments and effectively obscure the fact that adherence to some traditional agrarian values can serve as an important block to raising current income levels.

The five points listed above summarize at least some of the major limitations of a physical nature in the low-income farmer, himself, and limitations in his opportunities and abilities which serve to perpetuate poverty. Other factors could be mentioned. Education, or the lack of it, is of course central to any discussion of poverty and is in fact implicit in the factors listed above. Three of these stress orientations to occupational pursuits which are in part a function of the level and type of training received by farm people. Race and land tenure are other factors which could be mentioned. Again these are implicit in the points which have been listed in that they become manifest as limitations in the opportunities and resources needed to increase income levels. The five points which have been stressed are intended to summarize, at the broadest possible level, the diversity among low-income farm people. They are viewed as common themes recurring in most low-income situations and may help to guide the planning of ameliorative programs.

PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS

Educational programs for older farmers could include providing information on the social security program so that the maximum

⁸ The U.S.D.A. Library List, *op. cit.*, reflects this very strongly.

⁹ This point is expanded in F. C. Fliegel, "Obstacles to Change for the Low-Income Farmer," *Rural Sociology*, XXV (September, 1960), 347-51.

number is enrolled. Many of these people would have an interest in obtaining information on lawns, gardens, and leisure time activities. For some farmers, assistance in transfer of property through father-son agreements and drawing up wills would be appropriate. There is little likelihood that these older farmers would be interested in becoming commercial farmers or even in borrowing capital to further develop their resources. The home economics program might emphasize the nutritional needs of older people and health education. Since many of these people are in incomplete families and have few personal contacts, a program which would facilitate contacts with others might be well received.

Educational programs to help the physically handicapped would need to be developed in close cooperation with other organizations and agencies, especially those of the health and welfare type. Linkages could be established with the medical professions and hospitals in the area. An educational program about alternative health insurance plans would be in order. Informing these people of the services available would be a major contribution. The major problem here is to restore these people to a productive life or at least minimize their physical handicaps. Skills in areas of clothing and foods could be adapted to the needs of these people.

For those farmers with an off-farm orientation, an educational program is needed to create an awareness of the off-farm job opportunities and to assist these farmers in developing skills and competencies which are required in these positions. Since migration might be the best alternative for some people, educational programs could provide information about the communities to which migration will take place so as to help with their adjustment. Tours to other employment centers would be appropriate. Extension would need to work with and through employment agencies and with industrial development councils. Many of these rural people need to be informed about and encouraged to enroll in job retraining programs.

Extension could assist those farmers with a commercial farm orientation who lack necessary skills to evaluate resources they have and to determine what is needed to make an adequate income from farming. No doubt this type of family needs considerable help in locating credit—requiring close working relations with Farmers Home Administration. At the same time, these families will probably need help in finding ways of supplementing their farm income.

In working with farm families having a subsistence orientation, an educational program must (1) attempt to change their values which are correlated with being subsistence farmers, such as lack of

willingness to go into debt, or (2) be adapted to the values of these people. In the latter case, the educational program would accommodate to the goals and aspirations of these people, recognizing their lower aspirations regarding production and efficiency. These people have a sense of insecurity; hence, they would have to perceive greater economic security before relinquishing the traditional values to which they have accommodated.

There are general implications which apply to working with all low-income farm people:

1. The traditional program developed for commercial farmers is not adequate to meet the needs of low-income farmers who differ in their aspirations and goals as well as in the resources accessible to them. A program with many facets is more appropriate.
2. Extension can maximize its contribution by coordinating efforts and resources with other groups and agencies who are also working with low-income people.
3. An educational program for the low-income farmer would plan for the needs of the total family and not just the farm. Remedial plans would involve the wife and children as well as the husband.
4. Working with community development programs would indirectly benefit these families. Improvements in programs and services of community institutions, such as schools, hospitals, industry, etc., are needed to ultimately solve the problems of these families. The culture of a total area might have to change so that new community norms and expectations emerge.

THE POOR have been made visible. There is sincere public concern for their plight. They cannot easily be swept under a rug. Experience has shown that their aspirations can be raised and their standard of living improved through a comprehensive consumer education program. Working hand-in-hand with economic development efforts, such a program can alleviate and perhaps eliminate poverty from our fair land. — MARGARET C. BROWNE.

TO PRAISE GOOD work or actions heartily is in some measure to take part in them. Because there are many times when it is necessary to deal sternly with people it seems only sensible to take advantage of every opportunity to recognize and compliment them. Dr. Samuel Johnson wrote with bitterness to the Earl of Chesterfield: "I had done all that I could; and no man is well pleased to have his all neglected, be it ever so little."

— THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA.