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# Agriculture journalism: the craft and issues

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The seventies was known as the Second Development Decade. The measure of development was now focused on the human being. Considered indicators of development were the following: (a) enough food, clothing, and shelter; (b) meaningful employment; (c) equality; and (d) education. In the Philippines, the Development Academy of the Philippines formulated the Philippine social indicators in 1973 to include: health and nutrition; education and skills; income and consumption; employment; capital and non-human resources; housing, utilities, and environment; public safety and justice; social mobility; political values.

The Third Development Decade refers to the '80s. After two decades, development was slow. Refinements were introduced in the effort to measure development. The decade saw the concern for issues that have arisen as a result of previous development work: women; environment; social dimensions; sustainable development.

When all is said and done, we can clearly say that development is really what people do to themselves, rather than what is done to them. This presupposes that a development project must be participatory. Participation is an indication that people are actively involved. For people to be able to do things for themselves, they have to actively participate in the process. Active participation, however, means that one has to be well informed. To achieve this, we go through the following:

- To facilitate active participation in the development process, we need to provide information. This information is a necessary intervention
- We provide information that will serve as basis for people to make their own decisions. The fundamental assumption is that the more informed people are, the better the decisions they make
- When we know exactly the direction of the development we want to achieve, we provide the necessary information on which people will base their decisions that will ultimately lead them to the development stage we had intended to achieve in the first place.

## THE PRACTICE

### Agriculture journalism: the craft and issues

**Zacarias Sarian**, agricultural columnist and editor  
*Bulletin Today* and *Agriculture* monthly magazine

Before beginning a career as an agriculture journalist, assess yourself as a writer in terms of resourcefulness; know-how; and ability to gather significant, accurate information. Do you know how to spot or develop the correct message?

Do you even like to write? Is it a passion? Is agriculture a passion, too? If you force yourself to write and writing is hard work, then you won't enjoy this career. If you believe that writing will benefit others, you'll derive self-fulfillment and monetary returns as well. But writing won't make you a millionaire.

#### Tips for writing the agri story

There are techniques in writing the agriculture story that will increase its chance of being published.

First, figure out what to cover. Animal husbandry covers carabao, hogs, poultry, ducks, quail, layers, among others. If you focus on plants, there's sugar, banana, pineapple, others. If you are well-versed with problems in specific areas, you can write new technologies that can solve certain problems. My favorite topic is the *sinta* papaya. This is the first papaya hybrid produced by the University of the Philippines at Los Baños. In Luzon then, papaya was wiped out by a certain virus, and writing about the *sinta* variety would solve the problem.

Second, show specific figures. To be effective, show believable, credible figures and actual results. I wrote about a certain Mr. Gomez who bought ₱1,000 worth of seedlings. After 8 months he had harvested ₱35,000 worth of papaya from the initial 300 papaya seedlings. He expects to harvest more in the next 1-2 years.

Third, focus only on an interesting aspect of that particular topic. Sometimes I receive manuscripts that are 10 pages

long, all about carabao, for example. In this case, it would be much better to focus on carabao meat -- it is tasteful and nutritious, especially the young. In other words, if the story focused on the quality of the meat, it would have had a chance in my column.

Fourth, study the type of stories that a specific publication prints. Remember that each publication has its own special target audience. Be familiar with each publication's character; the kind of people that read it. Note the type of stories it usually prints, the length of stories; know the deadlines and other requirements such as photos. Then tailor your story to the publication's style.

Fifth, you have to have credibility. When you write stories, you usually would like your audience to adopt the technology that you write. But when the readers come to learn that what you write are untrue, the next time they read your byline they won't believe you. Accuracy is one of the things you have to keep in mind when writing about agriculture especially when it comes to profitability, yield, or dosage of chemicals. If the dosage of malathion needed is 2 tbsp and you write 20 tbsp, it would damage the farmer's crop.

**How do you make writing interesting?**  
Agriculture is a dull subject, and not as exciting as sex, crime, sports, or showbiz. So, dramatize your writing. Example, explain what happens during sex reversal in tilapia. Or show the difference between using floating cages instead of raising them in ponds. If the difference is big, it is newsworthy. Show production per hectare, quality, and volume advantage. Avoid using long words like commercialization and generalization. Also, use active rather than passive voice. Avoid redundant words. Figure out what words to delete.