

Agricultural Statistics: A Vital Tool For Governments

Asif Khan

MORE than a million lives were claimed by a famine which struck Bengal, India, more than half a century ago. Yet, the calamity could have been averted had information about surplus food elsewhere in the sub-continent was available to the government.

The tragedy is cited by Om Prakash Kathuria, an Indian agricultural statistics expert working in Uganda, to stress the importance of effective food supply information systems for governments.

"In the case of Bengal, it was said that the famine was not a natural disaster; it was man-made," he said.

"It was said that there was no dearth of food grains in the country. Perhaps the government was not aware exactly where or in what quantities the surplus food stocks were available. Otherwise it could have moved them to Bengal where they were most needed."

"Accurate information about the country's food situation would have given it advance warning of the impending disaster, and it would have been better prepared to meet it."

Dr Kathuria is a former director of the Indian Agricultural Statistics Research Institute in New Delhi. He is now assisting Uganda and other African countries in their efforts to improve their methods of collecting agricultural statistics.

A satisfactory food supply information system, including a reliable data base on agriculture production, is crucial to food security and management, he says. It plays a key role in policy formulation and emergency planning.

The system is of particular importance to Africa, a continent which has had its share of famines and food crises.

Dr Kathuria, 60, is with the Institute of Statistics and Applied Econo-

mics in Kampala under the auspices of the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC), the Commonwealth's own development agency.

His services were provided by the Commonwealth Secretariat's General Technical Assistance Services Division following a request for assistance from the Government of Uganda.

The institute is an autonomous body within Makerere University, perched on one of the seven picturesquely green hills that make up the Ugandan capital.

It was established in 1969 to provide training in statistics and applied economics for students and professionals from Uganda and elsewhere in Africa.

Its other objective was to assist African countries with the formulation and implementation of national plans for economic and social development. It has trained more than 2,000 statisticians from 21 countries since its inception.

Dr Kathuria is responsible for setting up and administering courses in agricultural statistics and sampling techniques. He teaches students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels and supervises research projects.

Providing training and guidance to the institute's staff registered as Ph.D. students and advising national statistical offices in the region are among his other duties. One of these staff members, it is hoped, will take over from him when he finishes his CFTC assignment next year.

As well as his academic work, he has helped the institute plan, orga-

nise and run short-term courses, seminars and workshops for government officials from African countries. Subjects covered included agricultural sample surveys, crop yield modelling, crop forecasts and agricultural early warning systems.

He is now busy arranging a training course in food security, methodologies of agricultural sample surveys, crop yield modelling and computer applications.

The three-week course to be held at the institute from the end of June will be attended by middle-level agricultural statisticians from Africa.

The institute has collaborated, among others, with the Commonwealth Secretariat and the European Commission in mounting the exercise, the fourth in a series that began with India in 1992 followed by Uganda in 1993 and 1995.

The Secretariat has given high priority to assisting member countries in strengthening their food supply systems in response to a mandate from Commonwealth heads of government.

Dr Kathuria will run the coming training programme with colleagues from the institute, joined by senior officials from government ministries and organisations concerned with agricultural statistics.

He was no stranger to the agriculture scene in Africa or to the CFTC when he began his assignment in June last year. He had previously been involved with several courses on the subject, held in India and Africa and sponsored by the CFTC.

Dr Kathuria's past experience includes a spell for the FAO in Zambia where he was involved in a study to

develop a method for estimating agricultural production, based on interviews with farmers.

He believes Uganda can benefit from a similar study. He has recommended a joint research project between the institute and the government to take the idea further.

On joining the institute he found that all its courses needed substantial modification and revision. The students had a weak foundation in mathematics and statistical methods which had to be strengthened. Some modifications were made in the syllabus on his recommendation.

He said African countries have identical problems, one of which is lack of trained people.

"They need to develop indigenous capabilities to do their own research and produce the statistics they need. Courses at the institute should go some way towards easing the problem."

He welcomed the chance to serve the institute offered by his CFTC assignment, he said. "Having visited Uganda before, I developed a liking for the place and am glad to be back. It has a beautiful climate and a very clean environment.

"The students are well-behaved and want to learn things, but they lack text books and professional journals. The cost of imported materials is prohibitive, so they mostly have to rely on class notes."

He added: "This institute is one of the best in Africa, but it needs to be strengthened. We want to develop its capability in research and training for food security and agriculture information systems and make it a centre of excellence."

"I believe my coming here has been beneficial to it, and I am happy if I can make a small contribution to its development."

— Commonwealth Feature