

Traders, Farmers and Mango Development Projects in Kerala, India

René Véron

School of Oriental and African Studies

1 Introduction

It has become common for development planners to regard the knowledge of farmers as valuable. Over generations, farming communities have often used their resources in a sustainable way and have thereby generated a useful stock of indigenous knowledge. Even in the changed situation of today – i.e., globalised economies and reduced isolation of single communities – farmers are most familiar with their own micro-environment and so have an adequate stock of local knowledge.

In India, for instance, some development projects have started to combine local and indigenous knowledge with scientific knowledge. In the south Indian state of Kerala, for example, Santhakumar (1995) singles out the Kerala People's Science Movement (Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad), an influential non-governmental organisation, which – together with villagers – carries out action research for the sustainable use of resources.

Though it may be that farmers' knowledge is starting to be recognised, the knowledge of traders is still being neglected. It seems that the notion of the 'exploitative trader' continues to prevail and that development programmes continue to bypass them. Yet, traders accumulate a wealth of useful information – not only regarding marketing and prices (see Casley and Lury, 1987) but in many cases also regarding agricultural technologies. In the context of a commercialised agriculture, traders often form a 'natural' connection between local farmers and outside organisations – basically as a result of their business contacts. So they get to know about new technologies developed in research stations or in private nurseries as well as about on-farm trials by farmers under different micro-climatic and edaphic conditions.

Using mango cultivation in two villages (panchayats) of Kerala and related development projects as an example, this article shows how the influence and the knowledge of traders – knowledge that could be useful for sustainable agricultural development – is overlooked. The objective of this paper

is not to evaluate or criticise the respective mango development projects but rather to draw attention to the potential role traders may play in sustainable agricultural development. The article is based on qualitative information gathered in 1995 from rapid rural appraisals and semi-structured interviews with farmers, mango traders, bank and government officers in the panchayats of Kollangode and Muthalamada, Palghat District.

2 Trends in Mango Production

Kollangode and Muthalamada belong to the most important mango-growing areas of Kerala. Many small and bigger farmers have planted mango trees, on plantations as well as on homesteads. Since the mid-1980s commercial mango cultivation has increased significantly in that region. The advantage of mango production here compared with other part of India is the relatively early harvest season, thanks to different climatic conditions. Until mid-April (before the start of the peak harvesting season in the north), mango from Kerala can be sold in terminal markets in North India.

Particularly in higher-lying areas of the region, groundnut and cotton cultivation – increasingly unprofitable practices – are being replaced with young mango trees. This shift has had a positive environmental effect: The tree cover is increased and less water and chemical fertiliser is used, as of both, compared with groundnut or cotton. Experienced farmers, traders, and managers of local private nurseries say that mango cultivation is most appropriate under the micro-climatic and edaphic conditions prevalent in the higher-lying areas of Kollangode and Muthalamada.

3 Mango Development Projects

In 1994, three governmental development projects related to mango were implemented in that region: the Centrally Sponsored Scheme on Integrated Development of Tropical and Arid Zone, the Centrally Sponsored Scheme for Rejuvenation, and the Kerala Horticultural Development Programme (KHDP). The two Centrally Sponsored Schemes included cultivation subsidies to which rich farmers seem to have better access; the KHDP operated on a loan basis and comprised training and marketing components.

In 1995, none of the three projects paid attention to environmental aspects. There was still potential for the mango development projects to foster sustainable cultivation practices through the development, promotion and extension of eco-friendly technologies (e.g. mango-based intercropping or mixed cropping, integrated pest management in mango plantations that could replace the use of chemical pesticides).

Also the integration of local knowledge was not realised by the mango development projects. The three projects were oriented toward farmers, as well as toward their needs. But they did not pay attention to the knowledge of farmers. The traders were not considered at all, although valuable knowledge regarding commercial mango cultivation lies with them (see below).

Farmers in Kollangode and Muthalamada hinted on some shortcomings of the projects. They complain about the selection process for subsidies and loans and about the low quality of the provided mango seedlings. Besides, they have not as much confidence in the marketing system of the KHDP yet as in the well-established private marketing through local traders. The planned direct marketing to a fruit-processing factory owned by the KHDP would exclude the local traders and therefore dissolve the currently widely practised leasing system between farmers and traders – a system that reduces the farmers' risks (see below).

4 The Traders

Regional and inter-state mango trading from Palghat District developed about 20 years ago. A few wholesalers have established contacts with large commission agents in terminal markets in North India. Furthermore about 100 small country buyers and commission agents are involved in mango marketing in Kollangode and Muthalamada too. The role of mango traders, however, is not restricted to marketing. They also supply seedlings, advocate cultivation technologies, and lease-in most mango trees of the region.

The main motive of traders for leasing-in mango harvests is to ensure enough fruit for selling, considering the competition from other local traders purchasing mango. During the mango-flowering season in December traders visit the fields, inspect the trees and settle a price with the farmers for whole trees or even for whole plots. The full lease is paid in advance to the tree owner. Thereafter (i.e., from December to late May, before the beginning of the monsoon) the trader is fully responsible for the cultivation (weeding, spraying of pesticides, application of fertiliser) as well as for the harvesting.

At the same time, most farmers prefer to lease mango trees rather than to cultivate and harvest on their own. Main reasons for this include increased income security (all risks are born by the trader) and the reduction of cultivation costs and labour problems. In most cases, the role of farmers is limited to decision-making whether to plant mango trees at all and to the necessary care for the young trees during the first three or five years. Thereafter, farmers become mere 'tree owners'.

Under such a scenario traders are naturally more experienced and knowledgeable about mango cultivation than farmers. Traders have gathered much knowledge regarding cultivation practices and mango varieties under the local bio-physical conditions. Through business contacts the experienced wholesalers are also well-informed about scientific mango cultivation practices developed elsewhere. Traders know best about both the most marketable and the ecologically most suitable mango varieties. They usually recommend planting early-yielding varieties that fetch comparatively high prices. Farmers are also advised to grow four or five different varieties in order to reduce risks related to weather conditions, pests and disease as well as to lower dependence from single terminal markets, which tend to have particular preferences regarding fruit varieties. Farmers who do not lease their trees often rely on the seedlings provided by the governmental projects. However, the projects distribute only two varieties, both of which are not very popular in the market.

The influence and the knowledge of traders is well known by the local farmers, and the comprehensive services of the traders are generally welcome and widely used. Yet the mango development projects have so far disregarded this capacity. Rather than integrating the traders'

knowledge and services, the projects have tried to build up parallel structures of agricultural marketing. At best, the projects remain ineffective in increasing mango production as they fail to recognise that the traders are currently the most important producers. At worst, they disrupt functioning networks and marginalise resource-poor farmers who tend to be neglected by official development schemes.

Given the important position of traders, the mango development projects should seek their co-operation in sourcing and providing seedlings, inter-state marketing and advocating environmentally sound cultivation practices. Under a mutual arrangement, the projects could concentrate on the provision of cultivation subsidies and loans. Since the objective of the projects, i.e., increase in mango production, is compatible with the traders' interests, a co-operation is thinkable. When the traders realise that this co-operation has the potential for higher production, and thus for higher returns for themselves, they will be ready to give access to their knowledge. However, the projects must keep co-ordinating and controlling functions in order to prevent exploitative relations between traders and mango growers.

5 Conclusions

Although the case study may represent a special situation, it has shown that traders can play a significant role for agricultural development that goes beyond marketing to include extension and promotion of agricultural technologies and cultivation practices. However, traders and other actors who are directly or indirectly involved in cultivation are hardly considered in development projects.

A more thorough analysis of the locality-specific situations and a better consideration of the role played by various actors (including traders) may ensure that the laudable farmer orientation in agricultural projects does not lead to a "farmer bias". The case study on mango development has shown, for example, that local knowledge does not always need to refer to farmers only.

Through an active co-operation with traders, development-project activities can take existing structures and knowledge into account. This is useful in increasing efficiency and efficacy. Through co-operation and co-option, rather than competition, traders can be motivated to consider aspects that go beyond mere economic self-interest. In this regard, agricultural projects could also influence traders to advocate eco-friendly technologies and hence to contribute to sustainable agricultural development.

References

Casley, D.J. and Lury, D.A. (1987) *Data Collection in Developing Countries*. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Santhakumar, V. (1995) 'Research on Sustainable Agriculture Compared' *ILEIA Newsletter* 11(2): 24-25.

