

**THE ROLE OF LOWER LEVEL EMPLOYEES IN THE  
IMPLEMENTATION OF AGRICULTURAL INNOVATIONS IN  
TEA PLANTATIONS IN SRI LANKA**

**W.A.D.P. Wanigasundera**

*(Advisory Officer, Tea Research Institute of Sri Lanka,  
Talawakele, Sri Lanka)*

Sri Lanka nationalized all her plantations which were larger than 20.5 hectares, in the mid seventies, the majority of which were formerly owned by foreign companies managed by Colombo based Agency Houses. The tea plantations are presently being managed by two state organizations viz. Sri Lanka State Plantations Corporation and Janatha Estates Development Board which are undoubtedly among the largest plantation management organizations in the world having a well organized management system at national, regional and individual plantations level.

The style of management at the plantations level which is a good example of authoritarian management has not changed to any significant extent despite the changes in the ownership and management organizations. The rigid patterns of social stratification based on type of employment and working procedures have also remained unchanged since the company days. These tea plantations have three major levels of employees i.e. management, supervisory staff and workers. Unlike in most western organizations the power and authority in tea plantations are highly concentrated around the management. The supervisory staff are placed much lower and just above the workers in the authority structure, compared with the management. Hence in this paper the term "lower level employees" is referred to both supervisory staff and workers.

The objective of this short paper is to discuss the importance of the role of lower level employees in the context of a changing socio-economic and organizational environment. Data obtained from a field investigation will also be discussed to substantiate the changes that have occurred in the role of lower level employees in the implementation of innovations.

Plantation agriculture has become more systematic and scientifically organized mainly as a result of economic competition and the development of advanced technologies. The innovations related to certain field operations today are more complex and demand increased levels of knowledge and skills from the users. The political awakening and socio-economic development of the plantation societies together with the technological advancement have necessitated a shift in not only the strategies used by the authorities to implement changes but also in the means of organizational control.

The power strategies of effecting change is based on the control of rewards, benefits and punishments (Zaltman, David and Sirkorski, 1977). They also include deprivation and restriction of basic needs of employees who resist change. In the manipulative strategies, certain aspects of the environment are manipulated so that the users see the situation differently, that is in favour of the change. Change agents are employed in persuasive communication and training. In the rational strategies the potential users of change are led to believe that the change is in their own interest. Education and proper information transfer to all those who are involved in the change process are among the methods used in this strategy.

Using the results that emerged from various investigations, Czarniawska-Joerges (1987) has identified four main types of control used by the management. These differ in the target of control as well as the means used. The target can be (a) a total person or life of a person (Persona control); (b) behaviour (Action control); (c) ideas and perceptions (Ideological control); or (d) Environment of a person or a group (Ecological control). Coercion i.e. the application of force and sanctions is the main means of control used in persona control. Supervision, rules and regulations are used in action control. Persuasion by offering attractive new ideologies and criticizing the old ones are used in ideological control. In the ecological control the immediate environment is influenced instead of using force, rule or persuasion.

Let us apply these conceptual tools to the reality of Sri Lankan tea plantation organizations. It can be seen that similar to the use of power as a change strategy persona and action control have been the most dominant modes of control used by the plantation organizations. However the organizational and social changes that occurred during the last 2-3 decades have shown that the use of power strategies for implementing change or the persona and action control are increasingly becoming less effective to make the employees of plantations to adopt innovations geared to achieve organizational objectives. More and more emphasis have to be placed on ideological and ecological control and manipulative and re-educative strategies of change.

As a part of an overall approach in Sri Lankan plantations, a substantial proportion of investments made by the government have gone into the improvement of living and working conditions of plantation employees. Salaries, wages and other incentives have been increased substantially. These socio-economic changes appear to have been successful in satisfying some of the basic

needs of the lower level employees. In the use of power strategies attempts are made to motivate people by controlling their lower order needs such as physiological and safety needs (Maslow, 1943).

As far as the overall management strategies like management pattern and employer-employee participation is concerned very few seem to have overtly changed so far. The process of decision-making was studied in a field investigation conducted among a sample of about fifty state owned plantations (Wanigasundara, 1987). This survey revealed that in state-owned plantations decisions are made at several levels of the management hierarchy i.e. senior management of the central and regional offices, the plantation managers and their subordinates; within limits, each level can, if they so decide, involve the levels below. The plantation manager too can take his decision either on his own or he can consult and/or involve his subordinates. Depending on the style of management of the manager, and the level of competence of his subordinates, the latter too could take decisions and implement them in coordination with their superiors. This situation can be attributed firstly to the fact that under the present set up plantation management is increasingly being loaded with administrative responsibilities and therefore they are unable to look after all aspects of the plantation to the same extent they used to do.

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<sup>1</sup>According to Maslow there are five basic needs: Physiological, safety, love, esteem and self actualization. When physiological needs like hunger for food, water, etc., which are the most prepotent, are gratified the needs of safety like freedom from disease, crime, social disorganization, etc become dominant. Once adequate safety measures are ensured, a sense of belonging, of love and affection for family and friends arises leading to the need of esteem which involves achieving confidence, fulfillment, prestige, etc. Once all these four needs are met, people will still expect to be what he wants to be, i.e. self actualized.

Secondly, some have accepted that their style of management should be changed and have given their subordinates more opportunities to participate not only in the implementation stage but also in the decision making and programming of activities at local level. It was also found that members of field staff who possessed higher level of knowledge were taking more independent decisions than those who had low level of knowledge.

This study also revealed a significant positive relationship between the average knowledge level of the lower level employees and the performance of the plantations measured in terms of (a) the level of implementation of certain important field operations; and (b) yield per hectare. Although this concept does not show clearly the direction of cause and effect relationship, it undoubtedly supports the view that not all lower level employees in tea plantations are ignorant and unskilled, but rather they form a responsible group who can participate both physically and intellectually in the progress of the plantation.

Being profit making agricultural enterprises tea plantations adopt a great deal of intensive and scientifically organized processes. The agricultural knowledge system involved in the process of utilization of agricultural innovations is shown in Fig. 1. Creation of innovations is mainly done by the scientists working in the Tea Research Institute. In addition, commercial firms are involved in the production of specific agro-chemicals and equipment while enthusiastic practical tea growers also occasionally create useful innovations using their expertise.

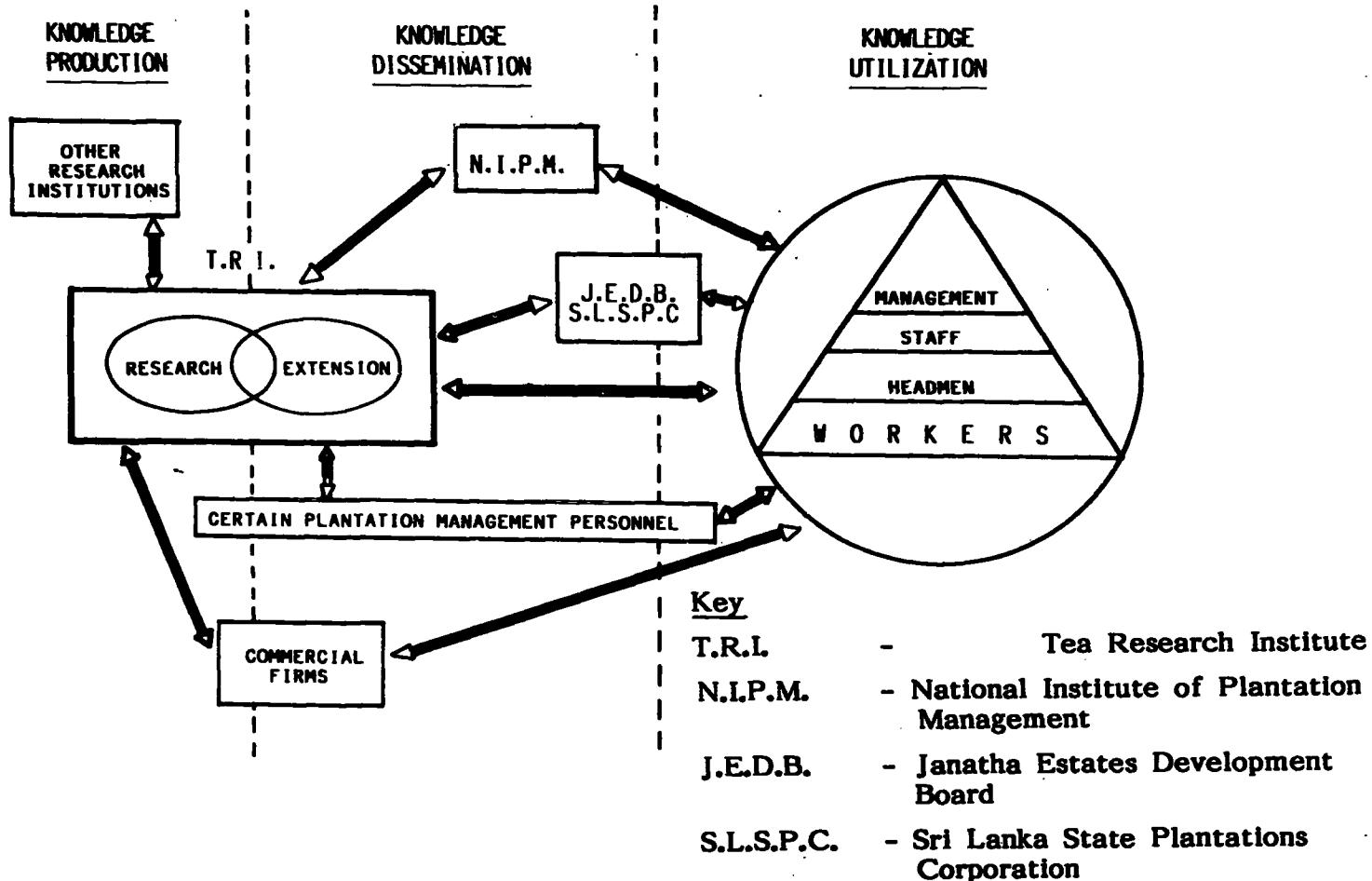
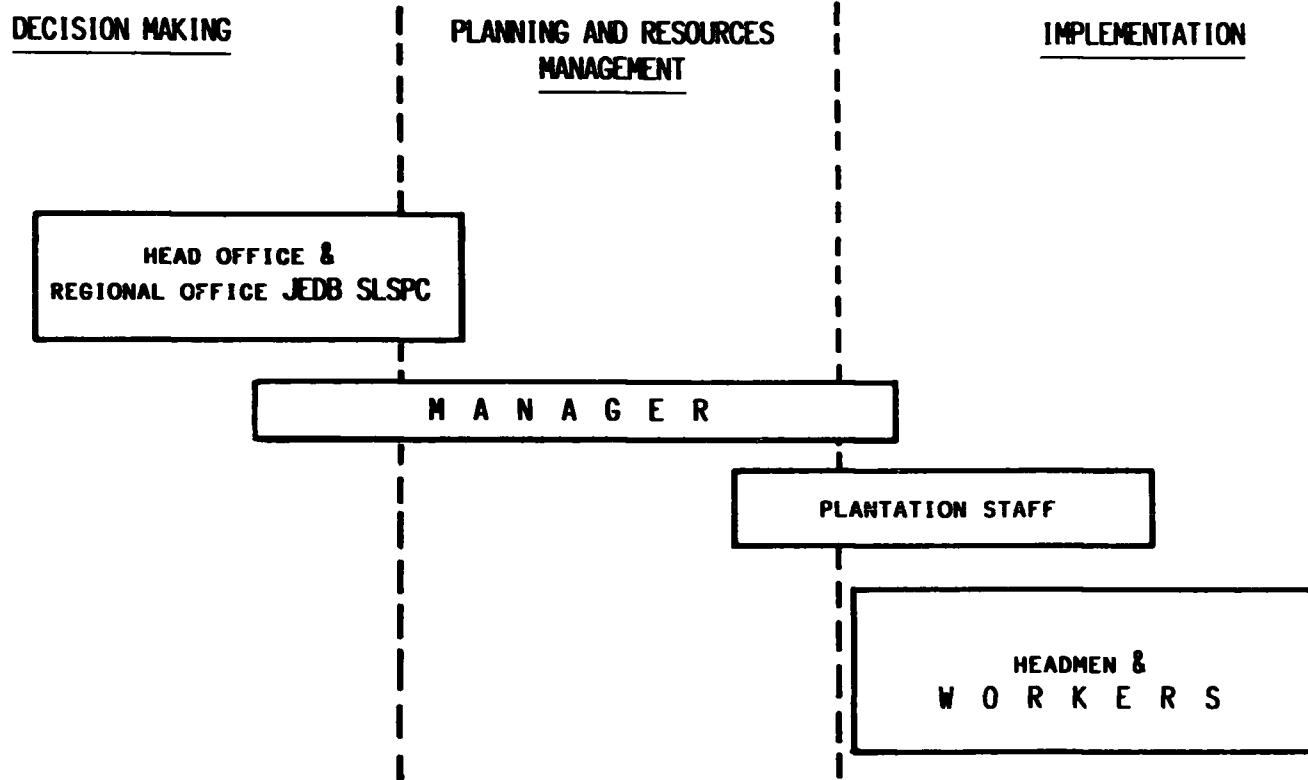


Fig. 1 - Agricultural knowledge system of tea plantation sector

The Advisory and Extension Service of the TRI is mainly responsible for the dissemination of agricultural knowledge to the plantations. In addition, the agricultural advisors (or visiting agents) appointed by the two management organizations, commercial firms and the National Institute of Plantation Management (NIPM) undertake a certain amount of knowledge transfer into plantations.

Once an innovation has been disseminated to plantations, different employees are involved in different stages of the utilization process (Fig. 2). The major decision whether to adopt the innovation or not is usually taken by the higher level management of the two state organizations. The plantation level managers may also be involved in these decisions depending on the expectations of the upper level management. Once an innovation is adopted as a policy, the planning and management of resources involved in individual plantation level is mainly done by the plantation managers together with their superiors. The actual implementation of innovations however is mostly done by the lower level employees. Except in a few areas in the high country, tea plantations now employ a considerable proportion of lower level employees from the nearby villages and townships. The management personnel have also gradually begun to break away from the "high class" and identify themselves with local communities.

In the above discussion, it was clearly evident that substantial changes have occurred in the structural, technological, socio-economic and socio-psychological aspects of plantation organizations during the last 2-3 decades, especially since nationalization. Agricultural knowledge transfer system in the plantations sector however, has not undergone necessary changes to suit the changes in most other aspects. The knowledge creators and the upper level employees of



**Fig. 2 - Utilization of innovations in tea plantations**

plantations still seem to believe that external sources of knowledge should reach only the management of plantations. This typical character of authoritarian management should be changed and new extension strategies should be formulated to satisfy the needs of all the levels of hierarchy of plantation employees. The indigenous technical knowledge of the experienced and dedicated lower level employees should also be used in evaluating the effectiveness of innovations and in making research and development policies. The overwhelming majority of workers and headmen have had 0-5 years, the supervisory staff 8-10 years while the management have had a minimum of 10-12 years of formal education. The form and content of the messages aimed at lower level workers should, therefore, be carefully selected and be more simple and practical. The present system of stepwise top-down exchange of information where the managers receive most of the information from the knowledge creators and pass it down at their discretion to their subordinates should be changed. Competent extension workers should conduct appropriate training programmes using the basic principles of adult learning processes to reach out all the levels of plantation employees.

The mere fact that the knowledge transfer process changed and more and more knowledge is given to the lower level employees alone may not guarantee that they will learn them efficiently and use that knowledge in performing their duties in the plantation. They have to be motivated to both learn and use what they learn successfully. To do this the management pattern and the organizational arrangements should be changed further. Lower level employees should be treated more humanely and provided with much more incentives than what they receive today. Organizations involved should adopt modern management tools which have proved successful in not only making the employees capable of achieving organizational goals but also make each and every individual committed collectively to achieve such goals.

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