

# SHOULD AN INSTITUTION GROW ITS OWN FOOD?

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## AN ECHO TECHNICAL NOTE

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### INTRODUCTION

Several times each year ECHO hears from someone (1) at an institution that is evaluating whether it should attempt to grow food for its [students, orphans, feeding program, staff, etc.] or (2) from someone contacted by such an institution and are asking ECHO's advice about whether/how to help them. Usually the institution has land that they could be farming or the government has promised to give it to them.

These requests are usually in four categories:

1. We plan to let the people benefiting do the work (students, orphans, etc.) and we will hire a farm manager to direct that work.
2. We plan to hire laborers and a farm manager to do the work.
3. We do not even know how to grow the food. Can you help us?
4. We have hundreds of acres and want to farm using modern farming techniques and equipment.

Let us look at each of these in turn.

#### **1. THE PEOPLE BENEFITING WILL DO THE WORK AND A STAFF FARM MANAGER WILL DIRECT IT**

This is by far the most satisfactory situation. The cost of labor for the institution is limited to the farm manager(s) salary. It allows people to have the dignity of contributing to their own sustenance and perhaps learn a trade in the process. Its success does not depend upon outside help. The biggest challenge is that it takes leadership and management skills to get these "volunteers" to work and to work effectively. People in this situation seldom call upon ECHO except where a specific need arises. Examples would be to find an answer to a particular question or to learn whether we might know of a training center in the area where their staff could gain specific skills.

ECHO can be of help in such a situation. If the farm manager has at least a high school education and can read either English or Spanish, he should join (at no cost) ECHO's network and begin receiving our networking bulletin, *ECHO Development Notes*. (We can recommend another organization's newsletter for people with less education or reading proficiency.) He can also write us with specific questions. ECHO staff can read letters in English, Spanish or French. We are set up only to reply in English so the director or someone else in the area that knows English will need to translate the materials we send to answer the question.

What if the farm manager needs training in agriculture? Should he/she come to ECHO? This is almost never the best solution. In most countries there are many NGO's (non-governmental or not-for-profit organizations) with more being formed every year. Many of these offer workshops and courses. Because they are local they know what the questions are, what has and has not worked, what other people in the country can offer resources etc. Dr. Don Cobb, an ECHO staff member, says that in two of the countries he worked (Malaysia and Kenya) the Ministry of Agriculture has Farmer Training Centers which provide excellent training. Sometimes the courses are only a few weeks long. For those just out of school they offer much longer courses. If the director of the institution asks around, she will usually be able to locate some of these opportunities.

## **2. LABORERS AND FARM MANAGER(S) ARE HIRED**

ECHO has consulted with institutions that have taken this approach. Often we have seen them stop after a few years and return to purchasing the food. The reason is that the cost of growing the food exceeded the value of the food itself. Institutions usually must pay top dollar for labor—far more than farmers receive per hour of work from sale of their own produce. Before any institution begins such a program they should estimate as closely as possible whether they might find themselves in this situation. Institutions that already have such a program should continue to monitor its cost-effectiveness.

## **3. THE INSTITUTION DOES NOT KNOW HOW TO GROW FOOD**

Such an institution should do some soul searching. Unless it is located in an area of unproductive land where there is no agriculture, there are SURELY farmers who know how to grow food. The real issue is most likely either that the institution does not have money to hire local farmers to manage the farm or the director knows so little about agriculture he does not even know how to identify someone that can be trusted to run the farm. If that is the case it should be clearly acknowledged and not confused with the need for external technical support. The potential donor can then decide whether it would like to make a gift to help the institution hire someone locally that does know how to grow food to lead this effort.

One approach that some have taken is to allow farmers to use parcels of land and give a percent of the harvest to the institution. This should not be done unless local laws guarantee that title to the land would remain with the institution. There are situations where a man farming a piece of land for some years ends up owning the land, or at least must be "paid off" to leave it.

It is a common mistake by people living in western countries to be too quick to assume that no one knows how to grow food in the area and that they must send in someone, perhaps a missionary, to show them how to do it. This is seldom the truth. In fact, someone from a foreign country will almost always know less about how to grow food in what is for them a totally new situation than will local farmers. The outside person might make some suggestions that might improve what local farmers are doing. Keep in mind, however, that unless the outsider is quite experienced, such suggestions are not always wise ones.

If it is located in an area that is inhospitable to agriculture and there are no local farmers (a very unusual situation) it will be extremely expensive to grow food. Quite likely it will make more sense to purchase the food. There is a good reason that someone is not already farming the land—no money can be made on it.

## **4. WE HAVE HUNDREDS OF ACRES AND WANT TO FARM USING MODERN FARMING TECHNIQUES AND EQUIPMENT**

Sometimes what is meant by "We do not know how to grow food" is not that local farmers do not know how to grow food but that the institution wants to farm a large tract of land. In other words, they want to use modern large-scale farming techniques with tractors, chemicals and heavy equipment. Indeed it may be impossible to find local farmers can be hired who will know how to farm this way. In ECHO's opinion, it is seldom a good

idea to try. The cost of production will almost certainly exceed the cost of buying the food on the open market. Even a skilled US farmer that might volunteer to run the farm would be totally unprepared for the realities of tropical agriculture. A potential donor should ask many hard questions before deciding to send a missionary (free staff), tractors, spare parts, pay for fuel etc. With such subsidies it would then be less expensive for the institution to grow food than to purchase it, but is what the donor wishes to achieve? Running a very large farm is an incredibly complex effort require a huge capital investment.

ECHO has no expertise in large-scale commercial farming in the tropics. We have specialized in helping development workers who assist small-holder farmers.