

My professional Adventures

By **Robi Auscher**

Bel Paese

In the mid-1980s a European Union mission that visited Israel was impressed by our agricultural advisory system dealing with crops irrigation and fertilization. The advisory network relied on regional Crop-Water-Soil laboratories to which the field advisors were bringing in their field samples to base their recommendations on objective, measurable parameters. These laboratories were backstopped by weather stations. The accumulated data produced long-term regional databases, fine tuning the seasonal recommendations. All field advisors were involved in applied research. They carried out on-farm trials testing irrigation patterns, formula, equipment, new fertilizers, crop requirements, soil and water salinity surveys. They collaborated with crop husbandry advisors, with researchers and with private firms, purveyors of irrigation equipment and fertilizers.

Italy was chosen as the EU Mediterranean member country where the applicability of the Israeli model could be tried out. The EU-funded project comprised Greece, France, the Netherlands, Belgium as well as Italy and Israel. Three provinces in the Italian Mezzogiorno (South) were earmarked as project sites: Abruzzo, Lazio and Puglia. We formed an Israeli team coordinated by me, consisting of three regional irrigation and fertilization (IF) advisors, one for each of the earmarked regions, an economist, an extension methods specialist, the head of our IF department and one of its state-level advisors and three directors of regional extension-advisory offices. EU was represented by John Scully, project leader, an authoritarian Irish economist and respective professionals from the involved countries. France, the Netherlands and Belgium shared their know-how in matters of irrigation. The first meeting was held in our country where the group was exposed to the field work pattern and to the overall methodology in the framework of a workshop. The project was kicked off in 1984 and wrapped up in 1988. In Italy we worked with two sectors. With Ministry of Agriculture, the public sector and with the regional water supply associations (Consorti d'irrigazione), the private sector. Signor Leone, a former big fish in the Ministry of Agriculture in Rome acted as door opener. Without such a function, it is almost impossible to get around Italian red tape. Traditionally, our field visits began at the regional Ministry of Agriculture offices where we had to listen to a lengthy, emotional harangue of the regional director. He was talking loud into the microphone, heavily gesticulating, sounding angry.

Map of Italy's provinces and the 3 project areas: **Abruzzo, Lazio, Puglia.**



These introductory meetings never lasted less than 3 hours. First, he began touting his own deeds. And then, the reverberating buzzword became "*La legge*" or the law, which constrained him in the authorization of any move in our project proposal. After this ordeal, we usually left for the field. The director never kept us company to the fields. The trips were led by the Consorzio's people who knew their way and had good contact with the growers. Lunch was never skipped and it took *de rigueur* a couple of hours. They knew the best places on their beat and the best of the typical local cuisine. In Lazio, the regional government was in the hands of the communists. They weren't happy with Israeli presence but pragmatic enough to glean the best out of it. They minded business, took part in all field trips and workshops and lent a hand. Since this EU project was a multinational, multilingual one, we were trailed by an army of interpreters who were doing everything by the book of EU rules and regulations. At the state-level meetings in Rome or Israel, simultaneous interpretation was used. To this end booths for all interpreted languages were set up with all the necessary wiring, microphones, headphones, amplifiers, etc. Each language requested a couple of interpreters who took turns and were allowed to interpret from a foreign language into their mother tongue. Their work time was limited to 45 minutes to be followed by a mandatory break. In summary, we had a long *derrière* of interpreters, technicians and equipment for simultaneous interpretation. However, the regional workshops held

in Italy were streamlined, being consecutively interpreted only from English to Italian and vice versa. EU supported generously the strengthening of the agricultural production capabilities of its member countries putting funds at the disposal of agricultural extension and research. In no time, our Italian colleagues became top experts on drawing EU funds. Thus, equipment for the newly established Crop-Soil-Water laboratories and weather stations was quickly put in place and the project moved ahead. Still, John Scully, the tall, dominant, one tough cookie project leader disliked Italians. He didn't appreciate them for being loud, garrulous and chronic late. He didn't conceal his views and whenever the bus didn't leave on time, or the meeting was late, he scolded them merciless. A resembling approach was shared by one of our irrigation specialists. He came across some imprecise information given by his local counterparts and from then onwards was investigating them and their submitted documents with the ruggedness of a police officer. I began to get phone calls from Lazio Consorzio's head claiming his head. Giovanni de Senen didn't speak but Italian and we had a hard time to communicate over the phone. I explained him several times that our advisor was an eminent professional, this was acknowledged by the other end, but they were offended. My last ditch defense revealed a sad truth. Our teammate lost his son, a pilot in the October war a few years before. They gave in, with understanding for the particular case.

You could never know when landing in Rome whether the strike will paralyze the airport, hit the bus service or the railways. Usually, a private bus would wait for us at some distance from the airport to bypass the inveterate strikes of public buses.



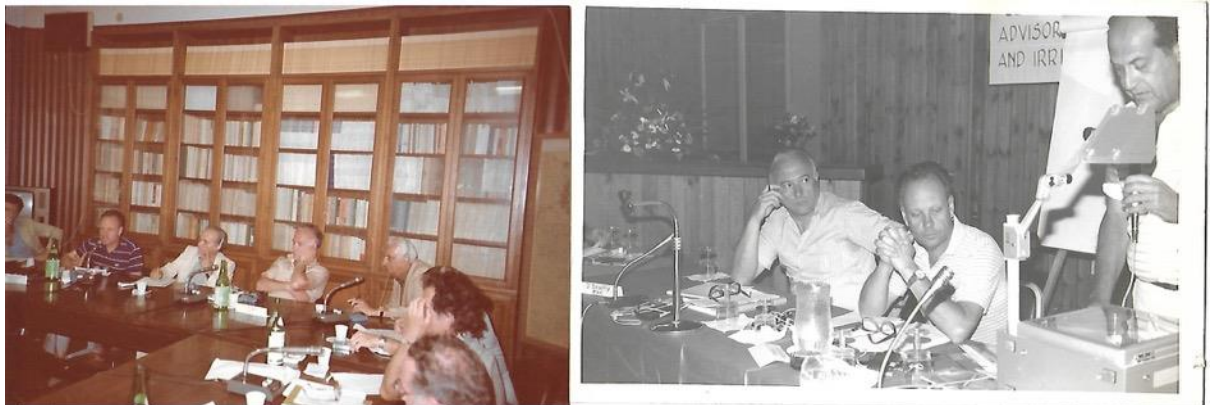
Montecassino Abbey, bombed out and rebuilt

It goes without saying that Italy is a charming country, *il bel paese*. Still, the two provincial capital towns where we worked: Cassino in Lazio and Foggia in Puglia were relatively new ones and didn't carry any historical or particular features. Pescara in the Abruzzo region, however, is a lovely and popular sea resort on the Adriatic coast. The work in Lazio provided the opportunity to visit Monte Cassino Abbey. The abbey's very long history culminated in WWII when the Allied forces bombed it from the air and destroyed almost all of it assuming erroneously that it accommodated German forces. We were guided by a monk who survived the attack, which killed many civilians. He shared with us his first-hand background. Closest cemetery to the abbey is the Polish war cemetery honoring the more than one thousand polish soldiers of the Andres Army who stormed the

bombed-out Benedictine abbey. Crossing Italy from west to east, from the Mediterranean to the Adriatic coast over the straight highways' splendid architecture is always an experience. On our field trips we were joined by teams from the Ministry of Agriculture in Rome. Hard to believe the still prevailing gaps between north and south. Most of the time our northern teammates couldn't communicate directly with Mezzogiorno's producers. They spoke an almost different language.

One day we visited a farm and the grower received us quivering, with tears in his eyes. He was still aghast by the early morning visit of the mafia with whom he played with fire, being slow to pay his debts. He got a gentle warning, they blew up his fountains leaving him without water for his house and fields.

All in all, the interaction between the European teams of professionals, the Italians and the Israelis created an excellent framework of creative imagination. The Israeli advisory model on the specific topic of irrigation and fertilization, based on the support of crop-soil-water laboratories and weather stations was played along and it upgraded the local system. It generated *in-situ* a replicable pattern for EU's Mediterranean countries. The Israeli advisors were happy to be involved in the program. They felt much professional satisfaction and enriched their personal record with valuable foreign experience. Real friendships were forged between them and their Italian peers rubbing shoulders in multiple mutual visits. The same is true for the project's managerial tier. We built up close and friendly relationships also with our colleagues from France, Belgium the Netherlands and Greece.



Workshop in Italy (l) and in Israel (r), sitting with John Scully.

John Scully used to come often to Israel to discuss with our staff the project's progress and to smooth out its impediments. Unfortunately, because of his wife's illness he retired early from his position in Brussels. His wife died shortly after, he was left on his own and out of job.



Dr. Ronny Adhikarya

In the early 1990s began to consult in China on behalf of the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN), namely with its Education and Agricultural Extension Division chaired by Dr. WD Maalouf, a Lebanese extension specialist. The chair introduced me to Dr. Ronny Adhikarya an Indonesia-born Chinese who graduated with a PhD in agricultural communications in the US. Ronny was in charge of the extension component of a comprehensive agricultural development project in northwestern China, while I acted as the field person. FAO is an executing agency. It has no funds of his own and it depends on the availability of such, mainly from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). FAO employs a wide array of professionals well-versed on the developing world. The World Bank, on the other hand, is a bank, a funding body employing mainly economists and some other professions for planning, appraisal and supervision functions. Often the Bank engages executing agencies to carry out its envisaged projects. FAO used to have a good reputation at the time it was manned by foreign professionals who worked in the former British, French and other colonies and had a good knowledge of the developing countries. FAO's Director General between 1976-1993 was Edouard Saouma from Lebanon. Saouma considerably increased the number of professional staff from developing countries at the expense of professionals from developed ones, which resulted in certain decline in FAO's general level of experience and expertise. Under Saouma's leadership FAO lost a substantial share of support from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and from several industrial nations. Just to give one substantial difference between FAO and the World Bank, Ronny Adhikarya was in charge, as project leader, of a portfolio of almost 40 projects. World Bank's project leaders would oversee usually one, and able to devote most of their time to its detailed needs and promotion. Thus, at briefing have received project outlines from a project leader who never visited the project site. In spite of this precarious point of departure, Ronny was a highly motivated, inspiring and meticulous project leader who kept track of all developments. All briefings, before departing for the assignment and debriefings after returning from mission were held in Rome. At briefing the consultant was fitted out with his terms of reference, per diem provided in cash and the air tickets. The building's ground floor accommodated a large travel agency.



F.A.O. headquarters, Rome

I left the FAO building with a nice bundle of bucks in my jacket's inner breast pocket. Clad in a trench coat with open buttons due to the nice weather. Three little Roma girls were squatting on the sidewalk holding newspapers and shouting after me, whether I want a paper in English or Italian? I just walked forth displaying self-confident lack of interest. Out of a sudden I feel my right arm being powerfully pulled. Instinctively I pushed away the little girl and continued walking. Put up even a bold front. Look how strong I still am. Two-three minutes down the road, I check my pocket. A part of the banknotes was gone. Looked back to the gate where all this happened. The gypsy girls were gone. I've been mugged. They pulled the following fast one on me: while I looked distracted to my ripped right arm, they raised a sheet of newspaper across my chest and sent sleek fingers underneath into the pocket. This trick can work on everyone no matter how big or strong you are. I hurried to the next police station to submit a complaint and got a written report. Police are helpless against the girls, they could be arrested but being below legal age, have to be released. I rushed next day to my department's administrator. Heard the usual wish-wash that cash isn't insured. Once this happens out of premises, they're not responsible, bla bla. I just hit the roof and went to see the head of administration. My argument being that FAO policy is to provide the consultants with per diem in cash and the trap was set up by choice to catch FAO consultants on their way out of the building. In a few days I was about to leave for China on an FAO assignment with a thinned out per diem. In a couple of days have been reimbursed for a good part of the missing sum, and to my biggest satisfaction a police car manned by two policemen was stationed every day by that gate.

This attempt to separate me from my money or goods wasn't the first one in Italy. I underwent four such attacks. Having the upper hand on two cases, buckling under in two. The score 2:2, just drew an inglorious tie.

Visited once Rome as a tourist. Carried a bag and boarded a crowded bus. The bag hung on my shoulder and was slightly pushed backwards. Apparently out of my sight. Someone took the opportunity and opened the bag's zipper to

slip off the wallet. Only at Villa Borghese's counter did I realize the rip-off. Cancelled the credit cards, conceding the loss of some cash.

Reached Termini in Rome with a suitcase in each of my hands. Two punks came out of the blue to grab the one my left suitcase and the other the right one. With both arms blocked, could only kick them forcefully with lots of people around until they dropped by the wayside.

Walked down the street while a gypsy woman with a baby in arms shadows from behind. All of a sudden I feel a strange hand in my pant's pocket. When I hit on it, she ran away already. Without any loot.

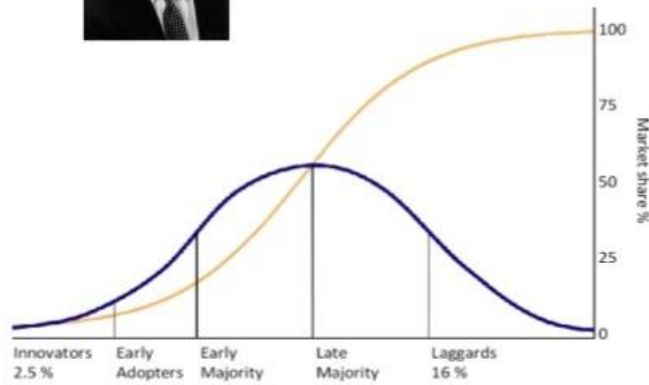
Being a PhD student of rural sociologist Prof. Everett Rogers, Ronny paid special interest to the introduction and adoption of new agricultural technologies. In this context, a hot issue in the mid-1980s was the utilization of microcomputers in agricultural extension, education and training. Back in 1980 I have been appointed as Deputy Director for Research and Development (R&D) of our Agricultural Extension Service with the main assignment of computerizing the service. In this realm have found much common ground with him. We had discussions on the topic during my visits to Rome which were basically focused on the agricultural extension project in China. Ronny commissioned a report from his tutor, Prof. Rogers. This report presented case studies from the developing world and a state-of-the-art review on the use of microcomputers in agricultural extension, education and training. Our next joint step was to organize in 1992 a technical meeting at FAO headquarters in Rome on Microcomputer Applications. Ronny and me coordinated the meeting and I could bring up the experience accrued in Israel on the computerization of our extension service over the last decade. The point being to generalize this approach for the benefit of the developing world. To this end have been commissioned by Ronny to prepare a study on the Potentials of Microcomputers. Have edited the book together with my associates - Gelb, Marom and Blum and it appeared as an FAO publication. The meeting in Rome was a special opportunity to get to know Ev Rogers. His *Diffusion of Innovations* became the second most-cited book in the social sciences. He grew up on a farm in Iowa and worked as a county agent in the 1940s at the time new hybrid corn varieties were introduced. Observing his producers' adoption behavior of the new technology, he generalized his initial concepts. After serving in the Korean war he then studied sociology and acted as professor at several leading US universities and world-wide, and consulted in the developing world. He is behind the most known theories on diffusion of innovations. It was a unique opportunity to meet and spend some time with a cutting-edge researcher in his field, who speaks with everyone at eye level in a low-key, disarming style.

Classical diffusion theory

When faced with **discontinuous innovations**, customers fall into **five broad categories** along an axis of risk-aversion.



Innovators
Early Adopters
Early Majority
Late Majority
Laggards



Everett Rogers's basic diffusion theory

From a professional standpoint I used to wear two hats. First and foremost - plant protection. Being with Extension Service, have paid, however, attention to extension methodologies as well. In other words, the various ways of disseminating technologies, know-how and information to the producers as well as our advisors' in-service training. Thus, between 1980 and 1983 have acted as head of our Department of Extension. FAO includes a large Plant Production and Protection Division with which I used to sustain contacts for years. Have discussed with Dr. L. Chiarappa, the division head the concept of Plant Clinics as a means to strengthen plant protection activity in the developing world. Chiarappa showed much interest in the topic. He was replaced by Dr. N. van der Graaff. In order to expose FAO to the concept have organized in 1987 a Workshop/Expert Meeting on Establishing and Operating Plant Clinics Integrated with Extension in Developing Countries. The meeting was hosted by the German Foundation for International Development, Feldafing, Germany. It was attended by the host institution, van der Graaff and his associates from FAO, experts in the domain from developed and developing countries and Israel. Have published the proceedings together with Dr. J. Palti. Basically, FAO liked the concept but it didn't find funds to its implementation and embraced the Farmer Field Schools (FFS) concept as a way to disseminate plant protection know-how in the developing world. The economic evaluations of this program didn't prove any straightforward benefits and FFSs turned into producers' discussion tools of general and not of specific professional nature. Have been invited by FAO to evaluate such a program in Indonesia but an entry visa had not been granted by then to holders of Israeli passports.

FAO employs thousands of consultants in the developing world. Many of them land in Rome, stay a few days and fly out to their missions. While in Rome they are accommodated in lots of hotels in FAO's neighborhood around Terme di Caracalla. I found one of these hotels, run by a Lebanese woman being the more attractive one. Every evening dinner was served at 8 pm on a very long common table in the dining hall. Consultants who prefer to have dinner at the hotel could gather there. The hall hosted a broad variety of people from various countries who work for FAO, in several parts of the world on various subject matter areas of the agricultural sector, *sensu lato*. It's a colorful mixture and you could always find someone affiliated with your professional area or with your target country and region.

FAO building is a huge and very confusing one. I have visited with many officials in the building. You always need a road map if you don't want to get lost and want to be on the button at your appointments. Have been impressed by one whose door was always open. An Indian personnel officer in charge of interface with consultants. Many non-stop consultants who make a living out of international consultancy are looking for additional opportunities and need to market themselves. This personnel officer had a picture of all upcoming projects and missions and their needs for subject-matter specialists, mediating between them and the various FAO units. He applied an open door policy and a laid back and supporting attitude, atypical of personnel officers. By and large, consultants are recruited only upon personal acquaintance with their prospective professional employer. *Curricula vitae* sent to various units rest for years in drawers and file cabinets until they turn yellow and obsolete. This person, however, displayed a commendable proactive recruiting manner.

Although have never studied Italian, could manage a basic conversation. This was most helpful in the EU project in the 1980s. It changed to the worse once I began to learn Spanish in a systematic way in the 1990s. Apparently, a well-sedimented language suppresses a weaker one in the brain's left frontal lobe. I had the same problem with Romanian, helpful up to a certain stage when learning Spanish, to disturb it later on. After retiring in the 2000s, we regarded Italy as a high priority destination of vacations and spent around ten days each in Rome, Florence, Padova, Genova, Bologna-Emilia Romagna, Turin, Toscana-Umbria, Chiavenna-Soglio. By this time my hibernating Italian became useless and preferred to speak, while in Italy, right Spanish in the hope that it is understood more often than not. It was especially helpful wherever the hotel housekeepers came from Spain.

Took the train from Rome to Florence for a weekend sojourn. We were just two in the compartment. An elder Italian man and myself. Following the customary silence and a few veiled blinks, we exchanged words of courtesy. He spoke but Italian and some basic German. After the usual where do you come from, and what do you do for a living, we found common ground. He

owned an aerial photography firm. His planes were parked in northern Italy and he carried out mapping, surveillance flights and was involved in some agricultural jobs. My department back home was keen on the development of aerial photography as a mapping tool of soil-borne disease patches and weeds as well as for an early detection of foliar pests and diseases. After mutual updating on this issue, he left for the restaurant or the bar and came back in good mood. He hesitated before opening up his heart. He was a high-ranking officer, in fact a colonel in the Italian (fascist) army in WWII. In charge of supplies. He visited Germany and Berlin quite often and met even Hitler in person. How the mighty have fallen. Due to a slip and ensuing falling out he was tried and sentenced. As such he was put into a particular division of the Auschwitz concentration camp. I took his story with a grain of salt, suspecting that he might hide its darker parts. At least some sort of embezzlement or much worse. It's the bottom line that counts. He talked with great emotion to conclude:

I have seen the Jewish people in the camp, in their darkest hours, emaciated, ill and beaten. In the shadow of the chimneys, threatened daily by imminent death. I admired the help they extended each other, the support, the friendship. You Jewish people are few but of quality. We the Italian, we're many. We don't stand out in quality.

We split up in Florence deeply moved.