

Rural advisory services – an essential for successful investment

No doubt advisory services play an important role in rural development. However, efforts made in establishing such services have not always met with success. Assessing local factors, recruiting suitable staff, and finding the right structures for provision and financing are among the issues that count in developing sustainable advisory services.

Rural advisory services (RAS) and training are critical knowledge sharing institutions that help to support responsible investments in value chains and innovation systems. RAS are crucial to putting farmers' needs at the centre of rural development, ensuring sustainable food security and poverty reduction, and dealing with risks and uncertainty.

There is renewed attention on the importance of advisory services and extension in rural development processes, including value chain development. This is due in part to new challenges such as climate change and globalisation. These challenges imply new roles and therefore new capacities for rural advisory services and the clientele that they serve. Training institutions are important too, for developing these new capacities and for enhancing existing ones.

While it is clear that rural advisory services and training are very important for effective value chains, there are critics

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Rural advisory services and their role in value chains

Rural advisory services, also called extension services, are the different activities that provide the information and services needed by farmers, their families, and other stakeholders in rural settings. Advisory services help rural people develop their own technical, organisational, and management skills and practices to improve their livelihoods and well-being. This includes support and advice related to farm, organisational, and business management, and facilitation and brokerage in rural development and value chains. RAS include a diversity of actors from the public, private, and civil society organisations who provide support to rural communities.

who say that these services have failed. For instance, much effort was put into the training and visit system to professionalise government extension, but in the end it was not financially sustainable. In past years, people have questioned the relevance and competence of mainly public RAS to deal with contemporary challenges. Governments responded to these criticisms by downsizing public extension, decentralising public extension to local administrative units, withdrawing from funding and delivery, and promoting privatisation (mainly cost recovery and outsourcing).

Meanwhile, the extension landscape has also undergone changes, becoming more pluralistic with the increasing participation of the private sector (dealing with agro-inputs, agri-business, financial services), non-governmental organisations (international as well as local), producer groups, coop-

eratives and associations, consultants (independent and those associated with or employed by agri-business/producer associations), and ICT-based services. All these have brought additional resources for RAS and also new knowledge, skills, and expertise. However, this pluralism has also resulted in additional challenges of ensuring quality, providing technical backstopping, and ensuring collaboration and synergy between diverse RAS providers.

■ Looking for the perfect mix

What then is the right mix of providers and sectors to achieve sustainability? Unfortunately there is no correct answer or simple formula to achieve this. There are many possibilities for both providing and financing advisory services. For example, in Kenya, the government extension services have

little operational funds but they do have a good number of well-qualified staff. The dairy-goat project FARM-Africa (a non-governmental organisation) had funds but no staff. Thus they used the government staff and provided them with lunch money and transport. Alternatively, the public sector could hire private consultants to provide services. To determine a good mix, designers should consider a structure based on the major characteristics of advisory services, which include: (a) governance structures, (b) capacity, management, and organisation, and (c) advisory methods. Four sets of conditions also need to be considered when deciding on these characteristics: (1) the policy environment, (2) the capacity of potential service providers, (3) the type of farming systems and the market access of farm households, and (4) the nature of the local communities, including their ability to cooperate.

As an example, if one wanted to implement farmer field schools, which are farmer-centred groups where learning takes place in the field, one should consider the cost and human resources available. Farmer field schools are effective but can be costly; thus they should be used for complex technologies that require substantial hands-on learning (such as integrated pest management). Farmer field schools also depend on high social capital and require specially trained facilitators. If one has relatively simple advice (e.g. recommended planting spacing or fertiliser requirements), then it may be more useful to use radio or flyers.

With this approach it is clear that there is no such thing as a 'one-size-fits-all' model. Rather, approaches to RAS and training should be flexible and tailored to suit local conditions. This then requires more skills, and not just technical skills, but 'soft' skills such as critical thinking, and has implications for the need for training and continuous learning. Training is needed at various levels. Basic training in sciences and com-

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munication should be the realm of higher-level secondary training and colleges. Specialised training for extension staff can be found at training colleges and universities. Several countries have modular training that allows certificate holders to continue on for university degrees. Continuous upgrading of skills must also take place, either through on-the-job training or special programmes such as that of the Sasakawa Africa Fund for Extension Education (SAFE; see www.safe-africa.net).

■ The pivotal issue of financing

Finally, what about sustainable financing – is this possible? Who should pay for advisory services? How do we deal with high cost of human resources? And how do we maintain political commitment? RAS projects have shown that the injection of project resources can mobilise service provision for a short period of time, but that the sustainability of these projects has generally been poor. Political will is key to long-term institutional support.

The spread of the Internet and mobile phones has shown the potential for enhancing access to information about markets, weather, and technological options, and improving communication among stakeholders. However, even these new ways to access information need to be anchored in an understanding of the need for a stable, institutionalised extension infrastructure for farmers and their families that will continue to exist. A weather forecast is important, but may only



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be useful if the farmer can discuss the implications of that forecast for what to plant, how to plant it, what the market is for the new variety, and how to reach those new markets. ICT options allow us to reach more people, but should be used with care to not exclude illiterate and women farmers.

There are several elements to sustainable provision and financing of services. These include government commitment and the use of alternate providers such as farmer organisations, NGOs, and the private sector. Effective forms of financing also exist, such as taxes and levies, and the use of basket funding in the case of donor-supported interventions. The farmer field schools in East Africa have introduced the self-financed and the semi-self-financed models for better sustainability. There is also a need for providing the evidence that extension and advisory services do contribute to the sustainable reduction of hunger and poverty, and for showing well-documented examples of RAS that works.

For more information on providing and financing rural advisory services, see the IFPRI publication 'From best practice to best fit', available at: www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/dsgdp37.pdf