

Rural advisory services – back on the development agenda!

Over the last few decades, the range of agricultural extension and advisory services as well as the notions of which tools and methods are most suitable have seen fundamental changes. Our authors give an overview of old and new approaches, showing what we already know and where there is a need for more information.

We live in a complex and ever-changing world, with a growing population faced with increasing needs for food, fibre, and fuel, coupled with the challenge of maintaining natural resources. When we throw in issues such as climate change and uncertain markets, this means that innovation in agriculture – with the requisite sharing of information and access to input and output markets – is essential to meet these challenges.

Agricultural extension and advisory services are increasingly seen as a key means to promote innovation. These services help farmers deal with risk and change, by improving their livelihoods and strengthening their capacities. They assist in spreading new ideas and sharing existing technologies and practices, as well as in supporting the organisation of farmers and linking them to markets. In addition to agriculture and production, advisory services are also hoped to address challenges such as nutrition education and rebuilding after crises.

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■ From a “green revolution approach” to a global forum

This interest has not always been a given. The first wide application of agricultural advisory services in developing countries took place in the middle of the last century. During that time there was concern about the growing hunger and potential starvation of millions of smallholders in Asia and beyond. Research and extension were deployed to address this challenge (mainly with high-yielding maize and wheat varieties) as part of the “Green Revolution”. Transfer of technology (TOT) was seen as an important way to assist farmers through the provision of improved seeds, fertilisers, and pesticides, along with training them in how to use them. Regarding the introduction of modern rice varieties, the transfer of technology was a success in broad terms (although

it did lead to ecological and biodiversity concerns). However, subsequent attempts to apply the TOT approach in other contexts – such as Africa – mainly failed.

Due partly to the perceived failure of extension services in terms of effecting the Green Revolution in Africa, and combined with forced public services budget reductions by lending institutions, support to advisory services (and to education and research) declined starting in the 1990s. This has led to an erosion of capacities in providers of advisory services, who find it difficult to perform traditional roles, let

Extension services are to become more demand-driven nowadays, with farmers being actively involved in the process of prioritising and generating extension content.



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Farmers' own knowledge is seen as an important resource to draw upon.

alone take on new ones. Despite a lack of funding and attention by the international community, non-governmental organisations and others sought alternatives to TOT and experimented with participatory research and extension approaches. At the same time, there was a growing interest in indigenous knowledge as a source of best practices and innovation.

It was then that a group of donors and other development agencies came together to discuss the role of extension in agricultural development. Called the "Neuchâtel Initiative," the group met yearly between 1995 and 2010 to discuss alternative approaches and set common frameworks on extension and advisory services. This led in 2010 to the establishment of the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services as a proactive functional body to provide advocacy and leadership for extension world-wide. It does so through providing voice vis-à-vis the international development community, providing a platform for exchange and strengthening of extension networks, and the development and synthesis of evidence-based approaches and policies.

■ Rethinking extension – the new pluralism

This renewed interest in extension runs in parallel with efforts in rethinking its role (see Box on page



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8). From a linear view of extension through TOT, the understanding has now shifted towards networks and innovation systems. In practice, this means that the role of extensionists is not merely to train farmers, but to facilitate between and link the different stakeholders in agriculture (e.g. farmers, research, traders, etc.) as well as maintain platforms for mutual learning and exchange. In addition, as any actor in the innovation system is now seen as holding and potentially contributing to the development of improved technologies and practices, the farmer's own knowledge is viewed as an important resource to draw upon. This is also apparent in the attempts to make extension more demand-driven, with new approaches and methods striving to identify farmers' needs by actively involving them in the process of prioritising and generating extension content as well as monitoring and evaluating the services. The important role of farmers' organisations in providing extension services is also recognised.

These new roles and functions have led to a growing pluralism in agricultural extension providers and methods. In addition to the usual government-funded extension services, advice and facilitation are now also increasingly provided by private companies, farmer organisations, and NGOs. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), too, are increasingly used for the sharing of knowledge and information, especially given the rising ubiquity of mobile phones in rural areas.

This pluralism arose partly as a response to the difficulties many government-funded extension services have in maintaining their effectiveness with often limited funds, and in adequately responding to the needs of their client base. And while it does broaden the reach of extension and advice, it also entails the risk of technological biases and path dependencies. Thus there is a danger of companies giving preference to their own products when offering advice. Neither is there any guarantee that the technology trajectories opted

Towards networks and innovation systems

Extension as viewed from the innovation systems perspective is a much different function than the linear model. The innovation system recognises the many different sources of knowledge and focuses on interactions between actors rather than just the actors themselves. It also notes the important role of the institutional environment. When seen in this light, extensionists have a critical brokering role between farmers and other sources of knowledge.

These new roles of extension are reflected in approaches to extension and development such as farmer field schools, study circles, innovation platforms, and farmer research groups.

More information:

GFRAS activities, documents, the 'New Extensionist' etc.: > www.g-fras.org/en

Farmer field schools: > www.farmerfieldschool.info

Rural Finance Learning Center: > www.ruralfinance.org

International extension conference: > <http://extensionconference2011.cta.int>

References and further links: > www.rural21.com

for, be it in good faith, from outside will really meet farmers' needs.

Pluralism is seen to contribute to the sustainability of advisory services, which is always an issue given limited government and project funds. However, political frameworks are needed to provide the setting for pluralistic and sustainable rural advisory services. Policies on rural advisory services also help to co-ordinate the different types of providers and to provide certification mechanisms and quality assurance.

Last but not least, there is also a growing recognition of the different roles and needs of men and women, as well as of youth and of the disabled in agriculture. In most countries, women and youth – and in some cases (e.g. after a civil war) even the disabled – are important contributors of the agricultural workforce, but have only limited access to information and other assets. It is therefore the task of extension to develop content adapted to their needs, and find means and mechanisms to have them participate.

In response to this changing understanding of agricultural extension, GFRAS developed a position paper called the 'New Extensionist' (see box). It offers a synthesis of extension's

expanding role in agricultural development, going beyond attempts at strengthening the knowledge and skills of the individual extensionists towards a look at the whole agricultural system and its mechanisms for knowledge creation and exchange.

More information, please: the need for sharing

The foundation of GFRAS and the 'New Extensionist' publication reflect how actors in development look to extension to address many of today's agricultural problems. In doing so, they are searching for information about advisory services, different models and approaches, with evidence of their effectiveness. Gaining this type of information is often difficult, however. Advisory services today are much more pluralistic and decentralised, making it hard to know how many personnel are out there working with farmers, and what types of programme and approach are being used. The only comprehensive study of extension services world-wide was conducted in the late 1980s (Bahal and Swanson 1988). This study and GFRAS' Directory of Extension Providers are the latest global attempts to quantify extension and to take a look at topics and finances of extension in

different countries. However, given the diversity of advisory services today, they are not comprehensive.

In addition to data around extension players, personnel, and programmes, evaluations and other assessments of existing extension approaches are scarce. This is due in part to the fact that extension impacts per se are very difficult to show, especially in terms of dealing with attribution issues and linking cause and effect quantitatively (Purcell and Anderson, 1997; for further details see Davis, 2008). However, in order to convince policy-makers and to guide investment in extension approaches and funding mechanisms, more information and evidence are needed. A systematised collection of good practices in extension and more rigorous assessments and other evaluations are therefore being spearheaded by GFRAS and partner organisations, including GIZ.

From vision to reality

Extension and advisory services have come a long way since the Green Revolution days. Today they are envisioned having a much broader, deeper, and more holistic role, which we hope will contribute to rural development goals worldwide. However, to ensure that advisory services effectively play their role in rural development, information about approaches and policies is needed. The capacity of extension organisations and individuals must be strengthened. Platforms have to be in place to share information at local, regional and global level. We need to advocate about the importance of rural advisory services to policy makers. These are all areas in which development actors, regional extension networks and a global network such as GFRAS work together to ensure that vision becomes reality. This issue of Rural 21 – for which several authors were found by using these networks – is a step in this direction.