

# Clarifying roles in extension processes

Rural extension services are an extremely complex affair. This is due to the wide range of constellations in which farmers operate nowadays, and also to the large number of players who are active in advisory services, with their different tasks, values and mandates. With reference to Germany's rural extension services, our author shows who is taking on which role and where conflicts might potentially arise.

"Don't solve other people's problems", is the author's advice for advisers. That, of course, immediately begs the question: what do advisers do, then, if they don't solve problems? Doesn't the phrase "advisory work" imply a duty to give advice? Who gives advice during advisory work is the central question about the players in extension processes. Who is involved in extension processes, and what are the roles that might be taken by advisers and their clients? What is the relationship between clients and advisers, and how does the relationship change when clients are not just individuals but groups, or, to go wider still, networks?

## ■ Our understanding of advisory work

Paradoxically, right at the beginning of this article, I offer a piece of advice to make it clear straight away that advisers should refrain from giving advice. This ties in with my understanding of advisory work, which I would like to put forward. When I talk about advi-

sory work, I have in mind situations of the utmost complexity. I see situations in which advisers value the capabilities, experiences and personality of those seeking advice and are able to establish a relationship as equal partners. Essentially it is about advisory processes and in particular about discussions that help to clarify the situation and raise awareness. Here I am assuming – in line with the client-centred discussion technique advocated by Carl Rogers – that the clients have the ability to manage their situation. Extension is the process by which the adviser uses intellectual assistance to endeavour to motivate and enable his partners to act in the right way to solve their acute problems. They "acquire greater insight into the network of problems affect-

ing them and recognise the alternative solutions available. They gain from this both the incentive to embark on problem solving and the direction to take. ... The relationship between advisers and their partners that is necessary to achieve this should be reciprocal, but the adviser being only committed to the welfare of his client. In this relationship, the partner's freedom to make decisions and to assume personal responsibility for his or her actions must be preserved in full, because she or he alone must ultimately bear the responsibility for the consequences of these actions." I quote Hoffmann et

*Advisory services for networks as part of the EU's SOLINSA (Support of Learning and Innovation Networks for Sustainable Agriculture) research project.*

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al. (2009, p. 25). Taking this definition as a basis, the players are described as advisers, partners and people affected.

### ■ Actors in their respective environments

What all these actors have in common is that they form part of organisational and business relationships, networks, families and social groups. Where farms are concerned, family models are generally assumed. This is often only partially accurate, as it presupposes firstly that there is a family, and secondly that family members are actively involved in farm work. However, in small-scale and part-time farming there are often arrangements where farming has to be coordinated with other forms of employment. This is important for extension services, since nowadays farmers work in settings strongly characterised by non-agricultural activities, since the farm – and the matters requiring advice related to it – is not necessarily the priority, and since farm goals and associated projects are now often only expressed for the managing generation. The clients articulate their desire for specialist advice, or for advisers who are seen as all-rounders, in all sorts of different ways, depending on the matter requiring advice and the type of farm. For the adviser this means constantly reviewing the contexts in which advisory work takes place and also reflecting on the implications for the clients' possible courses of action.

### ■ Groups and networks

Group advice and advisory syndicates or advice circles adopt the idea of learning from each other and of a shared

*Training session in non-directive conversation skills. It is important that especially young and inexperienced extension officers learn these basic skills so they can understand issues from their clients' perspective.*

search for better potential solutions. In these approaches particular importance is attached to the advantages of groups – a range of perspectives, a large pool of knowledge and experience, an opportunity to reflect on experiences, a reduced risk if something new is tried out on a farm for the first time. In addition groups benefit from the social support. Frequently individual and group counselling are combined, and there is a transition to educational work and training courses if special learning requirements are a priority.

Currently multi-actor networks far wider than groups of farmers are under discussion. Moving beyond (outdated) conceptions that assume linear knowledge transfer of research to practitioners via extension, now farmers, advisers, researchers, journalists, technicians, administrators etc. are coming together in networks of this kind to develop innovative projects. It is useful for farmers if development and practical trials are in close proximity. In general it is a learning process for all participants, as often it is a new experience for everyone to have to express themselves clearly in a network like this, and to acknowledge totally different target structures, totally different working methods and time budgets. In these networks extension is one player

amongst a wide variety of others. It is a real challenge for extension to see itself as an independent actor in these constellations and not as a mediator between the other players.

### ■ Organisational settings of advisers

In general advisers are integrated into organisational structures. For example, Germany has a particularly pluralistic extension system. In terms of types of provision, advisory syndicates, farm managers' working groups and individual counselling are especially important. There is a wide range of providers: the government, churches, businesses, associations, chambers of commerce, producer groups, banks, housing associations, energy companies, businesses upstream and downstream – the list goes on and on.

Just as farmers do not only farm, advisers do not only give advice. It is quite normal for advisers to offer services – especially if companies are the extension providers. It is also normal for advisory work to be closely linked to product or farm certification. Combinations like this are found in contract farming and in associations. In the case of official extension services, the over-



Photo: S. Hoy

*Extension is still perceived as a potential instrument to drive farm modernisation.*

lap between roles might be greatest if, as well as providing advice, the government departments offer training and further education, funding programmes, and support with applications, and also exercise control. From an organisational point of view this can be solved by one person fulfilling all these roles at once. It is especially important for clients that, for example, sensitive information and data from advisory processes are not used for other tasks, particularly control and funding tasks. The churches are among the providers who offer social counselling especially for farmers. This includes family counselling, farm transfer and debt counselling. It covers the whole range from telephone helplines for real crises to intensive individual counselling work that frequently goes on for years. This sort of counselling is accepted because it is often provided by “amateurs”, that is, farmers trained in psychology.

### ■ When roles overlap

Clients know exactly what to expect from advisers. However, particularly in the context of governmental extension services the players face further challenges. This can be the squeeze on public finances and thus the question of how advisory work is funded. It can also be pressure caused by matters of public concern, such as mitigating climate change or protecting waters and biodiversity, which have a habit of sneaking into extension targets as a way of legitimising the funding of advisory work. Extension is still perceived as a potential instrument to drive the modernisation of farms (see multi-actor networks). The spirit of partnership between clients and advisers is undermined by such instrumental perceptions. Advisers are assigned



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the tasks of transmitting knowledge for practical use and disseminating knowledge. In doing so, they slip into the role of experts or, to put it bluntly, know-alls. This can be seen in the jargon, with which advisers and farmers are doubtless familiar: suddenly the clients are “resistant to advice”, “not open”, they seem hostile. The type of relationship formed between the players sets the pattern for the communication process. Clarity of roles and consistency of behaviour are fundamental to this process.

### ■ Discussed together, decided alone

Advisory work is relationship work. If we expand the intellectual framework in which extension takes place beyond the adviser-client relationship, there are many different actors involved in extension processes. People who farmers know personally provide them with substantial help in solving their problems. In addition to them there are a number of other actors: banks, teachers and trainers, experts, and companies. Many business decisions are made outside professional extension contexts. Discussions take place

with people who are directly affected by decisions. In practice, researching information, setting development goals, defining problems, and weighing up possible alternative solutions include some planned elements, but often some entirely spontaneous ones as well. Particularly when decisions are very complex, a lot of actors, all with different perspectives, are called on for “advice”. If extension workers are actually brought in, all-rounders come together with professional advisers, and supposedly neutral advisers with company advisers whose products may later be taken into use. Government bodies are of major importance, especially when making applications, and fellow professionals and counselling syndicates are also essential. These groups work with or without professional advisers, in the original sense of the word counselling, which derives from the Latin “consilium”. This means discussing things together, exploring situations together, but eventually leading, after individual reflection, to a conscious decision by the farmer himself, who has personal responsibility for this decision, about what is important for him.

References: ► [www.rural21.com](http://www.rural21.com)