

NOTE 27: Professionalisation of Rural Advisory Services

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Introduction

Businesses and other institutions around the world are increasingly using the term 'professionalism' to describe their level of service provision. While some professions, such as medicine and engineering, have been well known and recognised through standard qualifications for many years, others – such as rural advisory services (RAS) – have only recently begun to aspire to a higher level of professionalism. The benefit of professionalised practices is evident for both practitioners and those who receive services. Many professional regulatory bodies exist that provide checks and balances on the performance standards of different sectors. While there are pockets of evidence on the professionalisation of RAS, the majority of countries are at the stage of seeking to professionalise their services, and need strengthened capacity to initiate this process.

Using the GFRAS scoping study on professionalisation of RAS (Terblanche 2017) as an entry point,¹ this note shares concrete examples of successful cases of professionalisation of RAS, highlighting what is needed to professionalise RAS, what capacities are required at what level, and what preconditions need to be in place.

Philosophy and principles

This section considers the terminology used in the professionalisation discourse (see Box 1). **Ethics** is concerned with encouraging actions known to be correct by considering all relevant sides of an ethical problem, considering basic ethical values, and acting within the codes of a profession. A **professional** is a person expected to have a special set of skills in a given field, acquired through formal education, experiential learning,

BOX 1: DEFINITIONS

Ethics: "A code of conduct or set of beliefs that dictate what is right, wrong, fair, and unfair."²

Profession: "The occupation which one professes to be skilled in and to follow. A vocation in which professed knowledge of some branch of learning is used in its application to the affairs of others, or in the practice of an art based upon it."³

Professional: "Person formally certified by a professional body or belonging to a specific profession by virtue of having completed a required course of studies and/or practice. And whose competence can usually be measured against an established set of standards."⁴

Professionalism in the workplace: "A specific style of behaviour; Values and professional roles; Exhibited in our behaviour; Respect for self and for others; Know-how; Mature responsibility; Problem solving perseverance."⁵

and practice, and accompanied by qualifications or accreditation of some kind. **Professionalism** is related to expectations or standards, behaviour, values, and image in the workplace.

Implementation

What do we need to professionalise RAS?

Some basic requirements need to be in place in order to professionalise RAS. These are fundamental and common to all countries and regions where RAS is a profession.

¹ Terblanche, S.F. 2017. Advancing agricultural knowledge: Improving the professionalism of rural advisory services. Lindau, Switzerland: GFRAS. www.g-fras.org/en/knowledge/gfras-publications.html

² My Accounting Course: Ethics, www.myaccountingcourse.com/accounting-dictionary/ethics

³ Oxford English Dictionary online: Profession www.oed.com

⁴ BusinessDictionary: Professional, www.businessdictionary.com/definition/professional.html

⁵ Shelvy, L., Campbell, M.S. and Taylor, D.D. 2014. Professionalism in the workplace. Presented at Starr Symposium, 15 October, University of Missouri-Kansas City. www.umkc.edu/starr/Workplace_Professionalism.pdf



They include legal bodies/structures responsible for managing the professionalisation of RAS, and applicable by-laws and standards that can be communicated and enforced.

Legal bodies and industry structures

There is a need for a specific legal body/entity or industry structure that is responsible for the professionalisation of extension and RAS. Depending on the country and region, these bodies or structures are hosted by different institutions, and may be governed by legal regulations. In some cases, these legal bodies may also regulate other agriculture-related professions, and may work closely with agricultural extension-related professional associations. Box 2 presents some examples.

Other countries – including Argentina, Australia, Republic of Ireland, the Philippines, and Switzerland – are also moving towards a professionalised RAS with legal coordinating bodies. In European Union (EU) countries generally, implementation of the Farm Advisory System⁶ requires national or regional training and registration systems for advisors who support farmers engaging with the Common Agricultural Policy.

By-laws

These are rules and regulations that govern the internal affairs of a corporation or society. The following by-laws are commonly applicable to the professionalisation of RAS. They are presented in order of priority as defined in the GFRAS scoping study:⁷

1. code of ethics/conduct
2. field of practice
3. continuing professional development (CPD)
4. standards of practice
5. disciplinary mechanisms.

Continuing professional development is an internationally recognised tool used by professionals to maintain and enhance their knowledge and skills. It is an essential part of supporting professionals in their current roles and career progression.

Capacities required

Competency can be defined as “a set of observable performance dimensions, including individual knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours, as well as collective team, process, and organisational capabilities, that are linked to high performance, and provide the organisation with sustainable competitive advantages” (Athey and Orth 1999: 216).⁸

BOX 2: EXAMPLES OF LEGAL BODIES AND INDUSTRY STRUCTURES

SIA in Canada: The Saskatchewan Institute of Agrologists⁹ is an organisation of university-trained professionals that protects the public by ensuring its members are qualified and competent to provide advice on agriculture and related areas. In Saskatchewan, the profession of agrology is regulated by provincial legislation (Agrologist Act 1994). This gives the Institute authority to make regular administrative by-laws concerning membership, code of ethics, meetings, continuing professional development (CPD), standards of practice, and discipline.

EUFRAS in Europe: The European Forum for Agricultural and Rural Advisory Services has adopted the Certificate for European Consultants in Rural Areas (CECRA).¹⁰ This is a voluntary industry-certified training programme (thus far), aimed at improving the professional skills of rural advisors and consultants in the areas of extension methodology, communication, and influencing people. In Europe approximately ten countries have already adopted CECRA in their national language.

SACNASP in South Africa: The South African Council for Natural Scientific Professions works in collaboration with the South African Society for Agricultural Extension (SASAE)¹¹ to ensure that extension advisers in South Africa register with the Council according to the Natural Scientific Professions Act 2003. As per Schedule 1 of the Act, no one may practise in any of 23 listed fields unless they are registered in a category of the schedule.

NAEPSDP in the USA: The National Association of Extension Program & Staff Development Professionals¹² provides an organised forum enabling professionals who are actively engaged in, or have a strong commitment to, programme and staff development in the cooperative extension system to come together, both physically and virtually.

Many organisations and/or programmes define the priority competencies that they require of extension professionals.¹³ Publications detailing extension and rural advisory competencies include Stone and Coppennoll (2004) and Suvedi and Kaplowitz (2016).¹⁴

Frequently identified essential competencies for RAS include:

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/direct-support/cross-compliance/farm-advisory-system_en

⁷ Terblanche 2017. Op. cit.

⁸ Athey, T.R. and Orth, M.S. 1999. Emerging competency methods for the future. *Human Resource Management* 38(3): 215–226. http://timatheyphd.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/EmergingCompetencyMethodsForTheFuture_TATheyPhD.pdf

⁹ www.sia.sk.ca

¹⁰ EUFRAS-CECRA, originally developed by the International Academy of Rural Advisors (IALB): www.eufRAS.eu/index.php/activities/cecra

¹¹ SACNASP: www.sacnasp.co.za; SASAE: www.sasae.co.za

¹² <https://naepsdp.org>

¹³ Examples include: GFRAS, www.g-fras.org/en/652-the-new-extensionist-core-competencies-for-individuals.html; University of Florida: Brodeur, C.W., Higgins, C., Galindo-Gonzalez, S., Craig, D.D. and Haile, T. 2011. Designing a competency-based new county extension personnel training program: A novel approach. *Journal of Extension* 49(3). www.joe.org/joe/2011june/a2.php; University of Nebraska-Lincoln. 2005. *Competencies for 21st century extension professionals*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

¹⁴ Stone, B. and Coppennoll, S. 2004. You, extension, and success: A competency-based professional development system. *Journal of Extension* 42(2). www.joe.org/joe/2004april/iw1.php; Suvedi, M. and Kaplowitz, M. 2016. *What every extension worker should know – Core competency handbook*. East Lansing, MI: Department of Community Sustainability, Michigan State University. www.canr.msu.edu/csus/uploads/457/48841/MEAS-2016ExtensionHandbook.pdf

- communication
- facilitation skills
- technical skills (e.g. animal production, plant production)
- sociocultural aspects/behavioural change (e.g. diversity, pluralism, multiculturalism)
- leadership development/group functioning
- extension research, education, and training
- agricultural entrepreneurship and value chains
- extension programme and project management
- extension tools and methods
- extension programme monitoring and evaluation
- information and communications technologies
- extension and organisational management.

For an example of competency rankings, see Box 3.

Costs

It is generally expected that individuals pay a small registration fee according to the level of registration. This may be embedded in the cost of approved training, or the professional person may pay an annual registration fee embedded in a membership fee. The administrative function, staff, and offices of the registration/certification body need to be remunerated from fees.

In the case of South Africa, for example, the annual registration fees in 2017 were as follows:¹⁵

SACNASP

- Professional Natural Scientist (Prof. Nat. Sci.): ZAR1210
- Candidate Natural Scientist (Cand. Nat. Sci.): ZAR460
- Certificated Natural Scientist (Cert. Nat. Sci.): ZAR740

SASAE

- A single fee: ZAR360.

Strengths and weaknesses

The following strengths and weaknesses are perceptions of the professionalisation of RAS scoping study respondents.

Strengths of professionalising

- Setting high standards to improve performance and deliver relevant services.
- Job satisfaction (pride, recognition, practising without fear/interference, remuneration/awards, support from colleagues).

Weaknesses of professionalising

- Disconnection from reality, advisors' work too theoretical.
- Work environment becomes discouraging, administrative burden, inability to practise with confidence.
- Poor fit with diverse work and business environment of advisors, better suited to larger groups and service providers.
- Cost to beneficiaries (who are expected to pay for services rendered).

BOX 3: NEW EXTENSIONIST LEARNING KIT – COMPETENCY RANKING

In the GFRAS professionalisation of RAS scoping study, respondents were asked to rate the competencies included in the GFRAS New Extensionist Learning Kit¹⁶ using the following scale: 1 = absolutely essential; 2 = essential; 3 = somewhat essential; 4 = not essential at all; 5 = don't know. The results were as follows.

Absolutely essential

- Communication for innovation
- Extension approaches and tools (changing role of extension in innovation and development)
- Adult learning and behaviour change
- Facilitation for development

Essential

- Agricultural entrepreneurship
- Extension programme management
- Professional ethics
- Gender and youth issues in agricultural extension and rural development
- Adaptation to change
- Value chain development
- Introduction to the New Extensionist

Somewhat essential

- Community development (mobilisation)
- Farmer institutional development

Best-fit considerations

When defining the preconditions for professionalisation of RAS, it is important to define the levels of professional membership and registration. There are no standard regulations on these, but each country needs to define these levels taking the specific context into consideration. The minimum qualifications required for extension and RAS professionalisation will differ. In South Africa, for example, the extension landscape recognises different levels of professional registration in agriculture (as a natural scientist) and in extension (as a professional extension scientist). These levels are necessary to redress the imbalances of the past: during apartheid, the majority of extensionists in South Africa were only able to enrol for a diploma qualification.

Some examples of membership levels in professionalised RAS of different countries are presented in Table 1.

Governance

The GFRAS scoping study shows that a specific legal body or structure specifically responsible for establishing and upholding professional standards, including respective by-laws, is crucial for RAS to follow the path towards professionalism in a specific country. Depending on the country and region, this legal body or structure could be a government, private sector, learning, or non-governmental organisation or institution that is legitimate and recognised. The responsibility should include defining the minimum standard, levels of registration, code of ethics and by-laws, and CPD, among others. The roles of the regional RAS networks and country forums as pluralistic and multi-stakeholder platforms need to be considered as they

¹⁵ SACNASP: www.sacnasp.org.za; SASAE: www.sasae.co.za

¹⁶ www.g-fras.org/en/knowledge/new-extensionist-learning-kit-nelk.html



Table 1. Examples of membership levels in professionalised RAS

Category	Membership level				
	1	2	3	4	5
Australia	Ordinary member	Student member	Retired professional	Life member	Corporate member
Ireland	Teagasc (all staff with degrees)	Private consultant associations (all with degrees)	Other advisors (some with degrees)		
Philippines	Individual member	Institutional members			
South Africa	Natural science: Prof. Nat. Sci.	Cand. Nat. Sci.	Cert. Nat. Sci.		
	Extension science: Prof. Ext. Sci.	Cand. Ext. Sci.	Cert. Ext Tech Level A/B	Cand. Ext. Tech. Level A/B	Assoc. Ext. Tech.
USA	Active member	Life member	Student member		

can provide a neutral, unbiased platform for discussion and exchange. Ideally, the legal body or structure should collaborate very closely with country forums or regional networks.

Evidence of impacts, sustainability, and scalability

The move towards professionalism of RAS and related standard qualifications has only recently begun to gain momentum, although the need has been stated in the literature since 2005. At the time of the GFRAS scoping study, 37 countries (the majority of which are in the EU) had professionalised RAS; 15 countries were in the process of professionalisation; and 21 aspired to become more professional. This signifies a strong need and demand for RAS to attain a professional level similar to that of other agricultural disciplines. In the case of South Africa, professionalisation of RAS has provided space to negotiate minimum wages as well as incentives for CPD, as it is required to maintain professional status. Countries that are in the process of professionalisation can draw lessons from these experiences.

Further reading

Davis, K. 2015. *The New Extensionist: Core competencies for individuals*. GFRAS Brief 3. Lausanne, Switzerland: Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services. www.g-fras.org/en/652-the-new-extensionist-core-competencies-for-individuals.html

Qamar, M.K. 2005. *Modernizing national agricultural extension systems: A practical guide for policy-makers of developing countries*. Rome: Research, Extension and Training Division, Sustainable Development Department, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Suvedi, M. and Ghimire, R. 2015. *Innovation for agricultural training and education: How competent are agricultural extension agents and extension educators in*

Nepal? Innovation in Agricultural Training and Education project (InnovATE). www.oired.vt.edu/innovate/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/SuvediNepalExtensionFINAL.pdf

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