

How to Develop and Implement Extension Policies? Lessons from Four Australasian Countries*

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Abstract

We should view extension policy as something beyond a statement of intent. It must be a means to develop strategies, procedures, and working relationships among a large number of other actors in the wider system where extension is situated. This note reviews the extension policy development process in four countries and examines some of the implementation challenges. It also highlights the need for more clarity on the purpose of policy, the importance of policy learning, and why efforts to achieve policy coherence are important for extension.

Context

Though extension (also called advisory services) is an important policy instrument to enable change in societies, very few countries have formulated extension policies to articulate and strengthen its role. Quite often extension is discussed in a separate chapter or within a few paragraphs of each country's national agricultural/livestock/fisheries policy. As the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Global Consultation on Agricultural Extension (1990) recommended, "All national governments should develop and periodically review their agricultural extension policy" (Swanson, 1990). This note is based on experiences from four countries that tried to develop and implement extension policies: India, Bangladesh, Timor-Leste, and Australia.

Policy development

Initiation

Extension policies are often developed through consultations among different agencies over a period of time. In most cases, the ministries involved in agriculture (India, Bangladesh, and Timor-Leste) or by a network of extension professionals (Australia) initiate the process. In India, the extension policy framework was a response to the need for extension reforms articulated in the National Agricultural Policy (2000). In Bangladesh, the Agricultural Support Service Project (Phase II), funded by the World Bank, supported the process of development of the new Agricultural Extension Policy (DAE, 1996). In Timor-Leste, several donors who were already supporting the development of a public sector agricultural extension under the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries backed the process. Bangladesh has revised its 1996 extension policy and has now a National Agricultural Extension Policy (DAE, 2012). In Australia, the Australasia Pacific Extension Network (APEN), a professional organisation of those interested and involved in extension, recognised the importance of a coordinated

extension policy mechanism negotiation to deal with increasing funding constraints and problems in coordination (APEN, 2007).

Development process

In all cases there have been formal consultations with stakeholders – mostly heads of other government agencies involved in agricultural development – and also with private sector, non-government organisations (NGOs), and farmer organisations. In India, the Division of Extension within the Ministry of Agriculture led the process of development of the policy framework for agricultural extension (DAC, 2000). Consultations were held with state governments and the private sector on a draft document developed by the Extension Division. In Bangladesh, a Task Force developed a draft New Agricultural Extension Policy under the chairmanship of the Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture along with representatives from three sectors: the private sector, the NGO sector, and the public sector (DAE, 1996). This draft was then used for wider consultations. In Timor-Leste, the first draft of the National Agricultural Extension Policy emerged from inputs and experiences from several donor project representatives who participated in a national workshop in 2006 (MAF, 2008). In Australia, the APEN facilitated extension policy negotiations, starting in 2002 and continues in that role today.

What is an extension policy?

Policy as a static document

While formal consultations with different stakeholders during the process of development of a policy are important, they do not ensure ownership or commitment to reform. In the case of India and Bangladesh, the extension policies remained static for more than a decade since they were developed. While Bangladesh revised its 1996 policy in 2012, the Indian Policy Framework for Agricultural Extension (PFAE) developed in 2000 has yet to be revisited. The Working Groups on Agricultural Extension constituted by the Indian Planning Commission to support preparation of the country's 11th (2007-2012) and 12th Five Year Plans (2012-2017) rarely reflected on the PFAE. The state level Departments of Agriculture, which are the main public sector field level extension units in the country, have never seriously followed up on PFAE. Moreover, the PFAE has not mentioned how the proposed reforms are going to be implemented, keeping in view the huge institutional inertia that constrains extension reforms.

In Bangladesh, though the New Agricultural Extension Policy (1996) was to be conceived and implemented as an inter-ministerial and inter-departmental policy, the policy was perceived by many agencies as a programme or activity of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE). Lack of proper communication and lack of efforts to strengthen inter-agency contribution effectively hindered implementation of this policy. The Government of Bangladesh developed an Agricultural Extension Manual in 1999 to support implementation of the extension policy and created coordination mechanisms at different levels to implement the policy. However, these coordination mechanisms stopped functioning in 2003 as the external funded project that supported the policy development came to an end. The country took 15 years to come up with a revised extension policy (2012). Bangladesh formulated the Livestock Development Policy (2007) and the National Fisheries Policy (1998) after the New Agricultural Extension Policy (1996). However, these documents didn't mention anything about the New Agricultural Extension Policy, though extension in the livestock and fisheries sectors were mentioned in these documents.

Policy as a means to develop strategies, manuals, and capacity strengthening

In Timor-Leste, there have been several follow up activities after the formation of the National Agricultural Extension Policy (NAEP) draft in 2008, which was finalized in 2010. The draft policy was followed up with development of a National Agricultural Extension Strategy (2010) to put the principles articulated in the policy into practice. This strategy document defined procedures and methods for implementing extension and fostered a common understanding among all actors on how to implement the National Extension Manual (2011). The Extension Manual was mainly meant to guide extension staff of the Ministry of Agriculture on planning and field-level implementation of agricultural extension activities. Since then, a number of activities to develop capacities of extension staff have been undertaken with donor support. Specific to Timor-Leste, the policy development and re-establishment of the extension system had been co-evolving only since 2008, so the policy hardly had to deal with any existing institutional inertia.

Policy as a continuous process

In Australia, the APEN began developing a National Extension Policy Framework in 2004 and has since been steering a “multi-stakeholder engagement and negotiation process” to advance coherent policies that correspond with the needs of sustainable natural resource management and agriculture in Australia. APEN currently gets invited to all national extension policy and strategy development initiatives in Australia. In Australia, extension policy is more about the process of continuous negotiations with different stakeholders who have an interest in extension, and it resists prescriptive policy implementation. APEN works with key extension stakeholders that include: state and federal government; State Extension Leaders Network (SELN), CSIRO, research and development corporations, and universities and research bodies, community groups.

Implementation challenges

There are several challenges in implementing an extension policy and these are organised as follows.

Lack of clarity on the content of policy

In most cases, policies comprise a list of objectives/values that extension should aim at, including demand-driven and decentralised extension, stronger research-extension linkages, use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), bottom-up planning, supporting climate change adaptation, linking farmers to markets, forming farmer groups, providing integrated extension support, and so forth (India, Bangladesh, Timor-Leste). Quite often the policy documents are more of a list of what to do, rather than how to do it. Ways of addressing institutional bottlenecks in implementing reforms are often missing. For instance, limited coordination and integration among different extension agencies due to separate administrative procedures is an aspect that affected the implementation of 1996 extension policy in Bangladesh (CASEED, 2009). As this issue is yet to be addressed, the implementation of the revised policy (2012) will also be affected. The same is the case in India, where there has been virtually no follow-up on the PFAE since its formulation in 2000, and whichever reforms that have subsequently emerged are not related to what is envisaged in PFAE. However, Timor-Leste has followed up the extension policy with an operational strategy and an implementation manual and initiated several steps to enhance capacities to implement the envisaged activities and this is perhaps the best way to go. These include: preparation and distribution of National Agricultural Extension Handbook to

extension staff of the Government and the NGOs; establishment of a field training centre at the Agricultural High School; introduction of a one year professional course for graduates of the Agricultural High School and training extension staff on planning, reporting and monitoring functions (GIZ, 2013).

Lack of policy learning

There is a need to move away from a prescriptive top-down policy process to one that is more interactive and which iterates between policy and implementation experience. In other words, extension policy should be less about the ideal things to achieve and more of a process of continuous experimentation, learning, negotiation, and change among the wide range of stakeholders who are interested and involved in extension and advice provision. Lack of capacity to learn from implementation challenges is clearly evident in the cases of India and Bangladesh, and this has been the main reason for lack of initiatives to revisit the policy for more than a decade. In these countries the bureaucracy in the national ministries leads the extension policy process where the capacity, skills, and even space for institutional learning and change are limited. Nevertheless, the importance of continuous negotiation and learning to have an enabling extension environment is recognised clearly in Australia where APEN is leading the change. Similar types of vertical networks of those interested and involved in extension are now emerging in these countries (e.g., India Extension Network, Bangladesh Extension Network) and hopefully they will play an important role in policy development and policy learning in the years to come.

Lack of policy coherence

Agricultural extension and advisory services are increasingly provided by several agencies at several levels. Policies developed by numerous agencies in different sectors (e.g., agriculture, livestock, fisheries, land and water, natural resource management, trade, technical education, rural infrastructure development, etc.) impact the performance of extension. Extension therefore needs a coherent set of policies that reinforces, supports, and enables extension delivery. However, there has been very little effort to find coherence across the broad range of policies in different sectors that influence extension performance. While this is clearly evident in the Australian case, in other cases, extension policy tends to be a document that will remain static for a number of years. One of the major functions of extension policy development should therefore be about bringing this policy coherence so that extension can contribute better to agricultural development. One way of doing this is to constitute an Extension Policy Working Group comprising representatives of the different sectors that meets at regular intervals to review policies in these sectors that influence extension performance.

Conclusions

Extension policy needs to be viewed as something beyond a statement of intent and should be seen as a means to develop strategies, procedures, and working relationships among a large number of other actors in the wider system where extension also belongs. As a document it should explicitly state how the existing constraints would be addressed. It should furthermore be seen as a living document that must be continuously reviewed and amended based on lessons from implementation. It should ideally be developed, promoted, and negotiated by a professional network in collaboration with the wide range of stakeholders and their capacities for policy learning, negotiation and change needs to be further strengthened.

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