



Building Knowledge Systems in Agriculture

Five Key Areas for Mobilising the Potential of Extension and Advisory Services

**Position Paper: Summary
June 2012**

Introduction

Extension and rural advisory services (RAS) are key to putting farmers' needs at the centre of rural development, ensuring sustainable food security and poverty reduction, and dealing with risks and uncertainty. Knowledge-sharing mechanisms must focus on critical areas including protecting natural resources, productive farming processes, product development, marketing skills, nutritional needs, and household health. Improving institutional capacity in extension will help us to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and any future Sustainable Development Goals.

The paper focuses on five opportunities to mobilise the potential of extension and advisory services: (1) focusing on best-fit approaches; (2) embracing pluralism; (3) using participatory approaches; (4) developing capacity; and (5) ensuring long-term institutional support.

1 Best-fit approaches to extension and advisory services

While policy makers are increasingly looking for 'quick-fix' approaches that can be easily implemented and scaled up, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to sustainable RAS programmes does not work. Rural areas differ in governance, levels of capacity, farming systems, environmental changes, market opportunities, and much else. There is also a need to apply the lessons learnt from past failures following attempts to introduce rigid models.

Best-fit approaches embrace pluralism of approaches and service providers. They are based on local conditions. They value local and traditional knowledge, as well as research and good practices.

The focus on best-fit approaches is an opportunity to shape services that are relevant and demand-driven, and to make RAS flexible enough to deal with current and future rural development issues and emerging crises. Policy makers and programme planners must be willing to invest the time and effort into moulding approaches to fit unique situations.

2 Pluralism in advisory service provision

Many different types of advisory service providers and approaches exist. Two basic categories are the public/government and non-state actors.

Public rural advisory services need to coordinate, provide technical information and assure quality within pluralistic systems. They are critical to reaching disadvantaged groups, dealing with national food security, providing objective information, and enabling farmers to deal better with risk.

Farmer organisations provide advisory services related to different commodities along the entire value chain. Non-governmental organisations tend to use flexible and cost-effective techniques, often apply a grassroots focus, and are usually driven by values related to social welfare, gender equity, and environmental sustainability. Private

companies, cooperatives, and individuals provide inputs and link producers to markets, thus increasing incomes.

Coordination of different providers is challenging, particularly in ensuring that vulnerable sectors of the farming population have access to services, and avoiding duplication of efforts.



3 Participation and ensuring accountability to local clients

'Demand-driven' and 'farmer-led' rural advisory services can promote downward accountability if they are anchored in bottom-up planning, monitoring, and evaluation.

It is important to think critically about who participates and who is accountable to whom. Gender, age, and ethnic differences can result in inequitable services even when ostensibly participatory approaches are used.

Farmer organisations are obviously one of the most effective ways to make RAS more accountable. The ways that RAS are financed can be a means of holding providers accountable for the quality of their services. When the client pays (perhaps with public financial support), service providers are motivated to attend more to clients to ensure their own economic survival.

Better ways must be found to measure and document the effectiveness of extension. We need more and better evaluation.

4 Capacity development

In many parts of the world, the skills of extension agents and the capacities of their organisations are declining. Capacity is a human system's ability to produce results, sustain itself, and self-renew. Public financial support is needed for its development.

Individuals' tasks require professional skills in critical thinking, problem solving, organisational development, and negotiation. Extension organisations need to be capable of managing innovation, coordination, alliance building, mediation, management, and facilitation. Institutional procedures, processes, and governance need to change if systems are to work. Resilience and risk management must be developed at all levels.

5 Ensuring long-term institutional support: Beyond projects to institutions

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. Even these new ways to access information, however, 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 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.

GFRAS is the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services. GFRAS is made up of various stakeholders worldwide who have an interest and role in rural advisory services (RAS). The mission of this forum is to provide advocacy and leadership by RAS stakeholders on pluralistic, demand-driven advisory services. The vision is to promote sustainable growth and reduce poverty. GFRAS and its partners have developed this position paper to focus attention on the need to revitalise knowledge systems in agriculture, with a particular emphasis on extension and advisory services.

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