

Influencing RAS Policy – The Experience of a Farmer Organization in the Philippines¹

By Raul Montemayor, National Business Manager and Program Officer, Federation of Free Farmers Cooperatives, Inc. (FFFCI), Philippines

The need to improve RAS

The need for effective rural advisory services (RAS) and pro-active RAS policies has gained added significance in recent periods. The pressure on millions of small-scale producers in developing countries to produce more food for the growing population using the same or even less resources is increasing by the day. Aside from this, farmers have to deal with unpredictable weather patterns, volatile market prices and land degradation. And the problems and constraints that have hounded them for many generations – small land sizes, limited access to capital, meager government support and weak market power – will continue to threaten their livelihoods. Clearly, there is an urgent need to equip farmers with the right technologies and capacities using effective extension and advisory services and to complement these with sustained support for infrastructure, credit, marketing, management and other critical services. Effective RAS policies will be a crucial component of this comprehensive effort.



Phot 1: A woman farmer from Iloilo tends to her okra crops

Improving RAS delivery and advocating for effective RAS policies in small developing countries like the Philippines is typically an uphill battle. The

deregulation of the national extension service to local governments has made it more difficult to transfer technologies in a concerted manner from research agencies to large numbers of farmers in remote production areas. Even before deregulation, support for extension services was comparatively weak. Many local governments have aggravated this bias by assigning their extension workers to collect market fees and do odd jobs instead of visiting and helping farmers in the field. Despite the already small budgets allocated to R&D and extension, resources are still often wasted due to duplication of activities, lack of coordination between researchers and extensionists, and research work that looks good on paper but is too costly or sophisticated to be of use to ordinary farmers.

Given these challenges and constraints, how can farmer organizations influence both the formulation of proper RAS policies and their translation into effective programs and services that actually benefit small-scale producers?

A crop diversification program and its implications on RAS policy

For several years now, our organization has been implementing a nationwide program to help our farmer-members diversify from monocrop production of rice and corn by going into small-scale vegetable cultivation. We train farmers to make their own organic inputs such as compost and fermented extracts to reduce their costs of production and minimize the losses which could incur in case of failure. The farmers are grouped into small production clusters and follow planting calendars so they can sustain their supply of products to pre-identified buyers. Farmers pool their products and sell as a group to their outlets in order to reduce marketing costs, tap larger buyers, and get better prices for their products.

While seemingly innocuous, the program actually challenges many of the traditional approaches and strategies of government policies and programs for agricultural development. Food staple production programs have consistently received a



Photo 2: Farmer training session in a remote village in Bohol

disproportionately large share of the budget pie, with the objective of ensuring adequate supplies for consumers especially in urban areas. In contrast, the per capita production and consumption of vegetables has declined over the years, to a large extent because of limited support from the government. The focus on monocrop production has made many farmers particularly vulnerable to climatic and market risks. Without other reliable income sources to bank on, many rice farmers often slide into heavy indebtedness, landlessness and bankruptcy. As a result, the government must provide price and other subsidies to convince farmers to continue planting rice.

The type of vegetable production that is often promoted also requires relatively large amounts of capital and resources that ordinary farmers do not have. These farmers will probably not be able to secure funding from formal lending institutions, nor do they often have the patience to fill out forms and go through the procedures of banks. Conventional horticulture technologies are also biased in favor of inorganic inputs and relatively large production module sizes with so-called economies of scale, and are often not suited for small-scale and low-input backyard production by small-scale farmers. Not surprisingly, horticulture is touted as a "high value" venture but is often equated to something that only rich farmers can afford to go into.

Diversification from monocrop rice/corn production to horticulture and even livestock requires technologies and systems that integrate various activities within a farm so that they complement and support each other. This requires a farming system and multi-dimensional approach to technology development and dissemination that is in stark contrast to the current emphasis on crop-based technologies and technicians with specializations in specific fields. Extension activities also need to be more participative, with farmers partnering with scientists in both research and technology dissemination. Finally, while the government has characteristically emphasized and poured resources on generating agricultural output, relatively limited effort and resources have been given to developing the marketing infrastructure and providing farmers with better access to markets for their products.

Advocating for radical changes in all these areas of current government policy and programs is clearly a large and difficult task and cannot be done overnight. Government officials may listen to proposals for change but often in the end only cosmetic changes if any are made with policies and budgets often following suit. It is challenging for farmer organizations to work effectively and collaboratively with government agencies, as these are two very different types of groups. Farmer groups are usually seen as “critics” and “trouble makers”, met with suspicion and resistance, while government agencies are often seen as bureaucratic, set in traditional ways of doing things.

Building on small visible successes and partnerships to influence policy

In many cases therefore, a roundabout strategy that starts with small initiatives in the field instead of attempts for big changes at the top may be more productive in the long run. For example, in the FFFCI’s crop diversification program, cooperative members started with small clusters of 10 to 25 farmers in a village, trained them on how to convert farm wastes into fertilizers and pesticides, and supplied them with small amounts of seeds of their choice good for 100 to 200 square meter vegetable plots. No loans were provided and farmers contributed their land and labor. The cooperative encouraged the cluster leaders to approach the local municipal agriculture official and get the support of local government officials. Scientists and even students from nearby agricultural state universities and colleges (SUCs) were also contacted to provide technical assistance.



Photo 3: Hands-on training on tomato processing in Mindoro Occidental

Once these initial experiments started bearing fruit, local government units, SUCs and other support groups began to express more interest and provide more assistance. This not only helped to expand the crop diversification program but, more importantly, it opened windows through which the farmer organization could start influencing programs and policies at the local level. FFFCI now has about 60 clusters in various parts of the country involving approximately 1,500 farmers. Although the program is still evolving, the accumulation of these small successes in various areas will conceivably produce new opportunities to raise advocacy initiatives to the provincial, regional and eventually national levels. By then, the farmer organization can point to concrete examples in the field to back up its proposals. More strategically, it will then have officials from local governments, SUCs, NGOs and even private businesses attesting to the credibility of the organization and the soundness of its proposals. Farmer organizations can capitalize on these gains to effectively push for changes in RAS programs and policies.

Riding on public concerns to push for RAS policies and programs

Linking advocacy activities to current issues and public concerns is another effective way to attract attention and generate support. After super typhoon Haiyan struck Central Philippines in late 2013, our organization and like-minded groups pushed strongly and successfully for support for small-scale vegetable production as the fastest and most effective way for typhoon victims to produce food and generate incomes for their families. Increasing public awareness and concerns about food safety, health and nutrition have also

generated support for increased production and consumption of vegetables. Public opinion, especially when projected by the media, has proven to be an exceptionally powerful tool for influencing government policy.

Institutionalizing private sector participation in RAS policy development

Institutionalizing the participation of key stakeholders in the decision-making processes of government agencies is another crucial step. This will ensure that the interaction with government officials continues even if current sympathizers retire or are transferred, or if budgets are suddenly cut. At present, many government bodies, including those involved in agricultural R&D and extension, have established multi-sectoral advisory committees to monitor and review programs and policies, screen project proposals, and provide recommendations to ultimate decision makers. In the case of the Philippines' Department of Agriculture, the level of participation has graduated into actual involvement in the programming, budgeting and monitoring bodies within the agency. All these provide opportunities to introduce reforms and adjustments that involve RAS programs and policies.

Influencing where the money goes

Ultimately, it is how policies are translated into budgets that determine whether changes actually occur in the ground. Budgeting is the inner sanctum in the decision-making process in government; even when consultations are done, they are often abruptly called when the budgets are almost complete and it is too late to introduce any major alterations. Again, a roundabout way to penetrate this secretive process may be necessary. In the case of FCCCI, they started with proposals to assist in the monitoring and evaluation of funded projects, which required the release of itemized lists of budgets and disbursements for projects. This eventually led to proposals being more involved in the planning process, and by necessity, the budgeting cycle. A Budget Committee with farmer and other private sector representatives has since been formed by the Department of Agriculture and provides a concrete window to introduce reforms and influence budgets in the future.

The role of farmer organizations



Photo 4: Farmers training in the field

Farmer organizations play an important role not only in channeling RAS services to farmers but also in providing feedback to policy makers and RAS providers on what needs to be done and how to do things better. Through the FCCCI's network of village, provincial and national chapters, the cooperative is able to compile, filter, refine and ventilate proposals and advocate for their adoption and translation into meaningful programs and projects. Producer groups that provide marketing, credit and other complementary services to their members also improve the chances that RAS services result in increased incomes and actual benefits to farmers.

Our advocacy efforts have yielded some concrete results in terms of policy. Nevertheless, much more needs to be done. Hopefully, the experiences of the FFFCI can provide insights into how empowering small-scale farmers through RAS policies and programs can be more effectively and persistently pursued.

The need for a comprehensive approach to solving farmers' problems

Farmer organizations can also influence policies and approaches to issues and that are outside the scope of RAS. Clearly, small-scale farmers will not have the incentive to adopt good technologies if the poor state of local roads and market infrastructure make it too expensive to buy inputs or bring their products to the market. Their options become even more constrained if they do not own and control the lands they till or their only access to credit is through loan sharks who charge interest of up to 100% per cropping season. Their ability to bounce back and recover from natural disasters and continue practicing correct farming technologies will be limited if they are not provided tools to manage risks such as crop insurance or disaster relief assistance. Even as farmer organizations advocate for appropriate RAS policies, they can contribute to a wider effort for more comprehensive reforms that involve government policies on budgetary support for agriculture, infrastructure investments in rural areas, access to agricultural credit, land reform, international trade, and other equally important issues and concerns.

Our advocacy efforts have yielded some concrete results in terms of policy. Budgetary support for horticulture and livestock programs have more than doubled in recent years and the idea of promoting these programs not only as stand-alone commercial activities but also as a means for diversifying income sources of small-scale farmers is now well accepted. Policy makers are now more receptive to our concerns about the profitability and market competitiveness of farmers, instead of focusing almost exclusively on increasing farm output. As a general rule, credit, marketing, extension and other support programs for farmers are now extended through, or with the participation of, accredited farmer organizations. Nevertheless, much more needs to be done. Hopefully, the experiences of our organization can provide insights into how the struggle to uplift the plight of small farmers through RAS policies and programs can be more effectively and persistently pursued.