Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

KIT

Towards inclusive Pluralistic Service Systems

Insights for innovative thinking

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List of Acronyms

AFAAS	African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services
AgREN	Agricultural Research and Extension Network
CONPAPA	Potato Producers Consortium (Ecuador)
CTA	Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FFS	Farmer field school
GFRAS	Global Forum on Rural Advisory Services
Helvetas	HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation
ICT	Information and communications technology
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
ILRI	International Livestock Research Institute
KIT	Royal Tropical Institute (Netherlands)
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PSS	Pluralistic service systems
RLDC	Rural Livelihood Development Company
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
T&V	Training and visit

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1 Introduction

Rural agricultural advisory services to facilitate farmers' access to information have made a remarkable comeback on the international development agenda. After years of neglect, much attention has recently been devoted to the emergence of pluralistic service systems (PSS), in which advisory services are provided by different actors and funded from different sources. Private companies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and producer organizations (POs) today play more active roles alongside traditional public sector providers. The promise of PSS lies in their potential to overcome the constraints and failures of previous approaches to agricultural advisory services – ranging from state-led public sector services focused on a linear transfer of technologies to market-based solutions through privatization efforts. While some positive results are documented, neither purely public nor privatized systems evidently reached the vast number of smallholder farmers in need of services by themselves, or demonstrated long-term impacts on improving rural livelihoods. Therefore, having a diversity of service providers through PSS has the potential to make services more inclusive, responsive to demand, context-specific and based on multiple knowledge sources (Birner *et al.*, 2006). This is particularly relevant, as farmers are highly diverse, differing in resources, gender, market access, crops and livestock systems, and therefore require different types of information and services to achieve sustainable productivity growth and better livelihoods.

Heightened attention to PSS has revealed that coordination and accountability are among the greatest challenges in such systems (Heemskerk and Davis, 2012). This has triggered a growing debate on the extent to which the emergence of PSS has indeed improved access to advisory services for heterogeneous smallholder farmers, as alluded to in the literature. "Access" refers not only to the physical proximity of services, but to their affordability, sociocultural appropriateness and context-specific relevance.

However, the way in which PSS are able to respond to diverse farmers' demands is still poorly understood (Chowa, Garforth and Cardey, 2013; Rivera, 2011). This paper therefore provides an overview of the current state of knowledge on "inclusive pluralistic service systems", examining the need for demand-driven service provision, the diverse providers and approaches to service delivery, and the policy considerations and institutional challenges constraining the operation of inclusive PSS. Advisory services[1] comprise:

> *all the different activities that provide the information and services needed and demanded by farmers and other actors in rural settings to assist them in developing their own technical, organizational, and management skills and practices so as to improve their livelihoods and well-being.*
>
> *(Sulaiman and Davis, 2012, p. 2)*

The role of advisory services thus goes beyond agriculture and includes issues of farmer empowerment, linkages to value-chain actors and to other service providers, and organizational development. Advisory services are considered inclusive if they are: responsive to resource-poor and vulnerable farmers, especially women; tailored to the multiple capacities, needs and demands of farmers; characterized by continuous dialogue and learning between farmers and service providers; and based on complementary services by different actors.

The review of existing literature is guided by two main research questions:

To what extent do pluralistic advisory service systems serve the needs and demands of smallholder farmers, and what measures can be put in place to ensure that smallholder farmers have access to services that are relevant and responsive to their demands?

1 The term "(rural) advisory services" is used here synonymously with agricultural extension.

In this paper, section 2 offers an overview of farmer heterogeneity and divergent needs for services, while section 3 examines the different categories of service providers. Section 4 then aims to obtain a better understanding of what types of services are most inclusive, and section 5 investigates the question of who is able and willing to pay for these services. Section 6 addresses the governance challenges of accountability and coordination, before section 7 translates the insights gained into guidelines for improving the efficiency and inclusiveness of PSS. Finally, section 8 concludes with a series of reflections as input for further debate on how rural advisory services can be made more inclusive for smallholder farmers.

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2 The heterogeneity of farmers and their needs for services

2.1 Services for whom?

Smallholder farmers represent a heterogeneous group. Wide-ranging differences exist in terms of assets, natural resource base, land size, crops, expertise, ethnicity, gender, labour and technology use, level of organization, and access to markets and services.

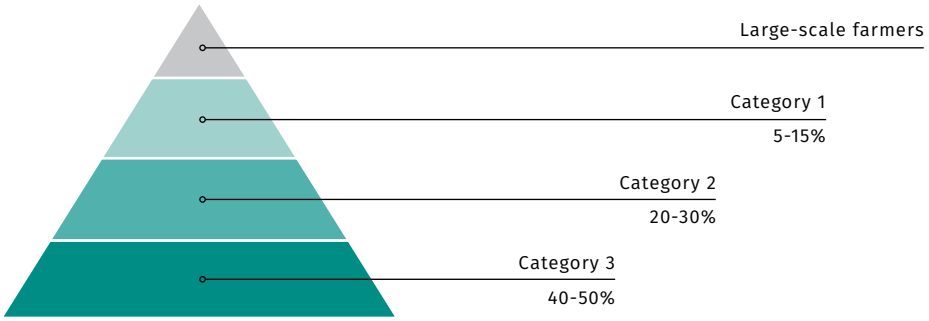
Recognition of this diversity has led to calls for differentiated policies based on a more nuanced categorization of farmers and understanding of their needs. While earlier studies focused largely on the asset base of farms/rural households or agro-ecological conditions (e.g. Vorley, 2002), more recent categorizations pay attention to the level of commercialization and market aspirations of farmers to highlight their need for assistance and advisory services (Hazell and Rahman, 2014; Spoor, 2015). According to the latter, smallholder farmers largely fall into three broad groups (Figure 1)[2]:

2 The categorization proposed in this paper serves to facilitate a discussion on farmer heterogeneity and to move away from overly simplistic discussions about "smallholders" that ignore the different needs and priorities of this huge group in terms of advisory services. It needs to be taken into account, however, that this categorization is (a) context-specific and may need to be adapted to different regions/countries, and (b) dynamic in that the categories and their composition change over time, just as the sectoral composition of an economy changes.

- **Category 1: Commercially oriented farmers** include those who own other assets in addition to their land, have sufficient access to inputs and services, and are already successfully linked to value chains. These farmers require entrepreneurial training and advice to allow them to move up the value chain, for example, by specializing in production or by processing and packaging their produce (Pye-Smith, 2012). Much of this assistance is geared towards high-value production, and service costs are incurred directly by the farmers (Hazell and Rahman, 2014).
- **Category 2: Semi-commercial farmers** comprise farmers with access to and control over land, but who are undercapitalized and poorly integrated into value chains. As a result, market access is unstable and/or market outlets are primarily local or regional. Many semi-commercial farmers are "farmers in transition", who can, depending on their circumstances, either move towards commercial agriculture or diversify through off-farm activities, thus partially or completely leaving agriculture (e.g. through urban migration) (Hazell and Rahman, 2014). To commercialize, these farmers require technical and financial advice, access to improved technologies and modern inputs, as well as marketing information, and business and organizational development support. Accessing specialized services for mechanization, certification, post-harvest handling and marketing is particularly feasible when smallholder farmers are organized in producer groups.
- **Category 3: Subsistence-oriented farmers** include farmers with fragile livelihoods who produce mainly for subsistence using traditional technologies.[3] While they may have excess produce, they lack access to formal markets and often do not adopt a "market logic" in their production activities (Spoor, 2015). A growing number of subsistence farmers depend on other income sources in addition to agriculture, such as low-waged casual labour, including (temporary) migration, remittances and microentrepreneurial activities. They require support to go beyond subsistence (e.g. through skills development and employment generation) and – importantly – to address the various factors leading to their marginalization, including nutrition, HIV/AIDS and the fact that they live in areas with limited agricultural potential and poor infrastructure (Hazell and Rahman, 2014).

3 A recent debate (Brüntrup, 2016; Kaegi and Schmidt, 2016) discusses whether the category of subsistence-oriented farmers should be subdivided to include landless rural households, such as landless workers in agriculture or sharecroppers. This debate is beyond the scope of this paper.

FIGURE 1. **Farmer categorizations**

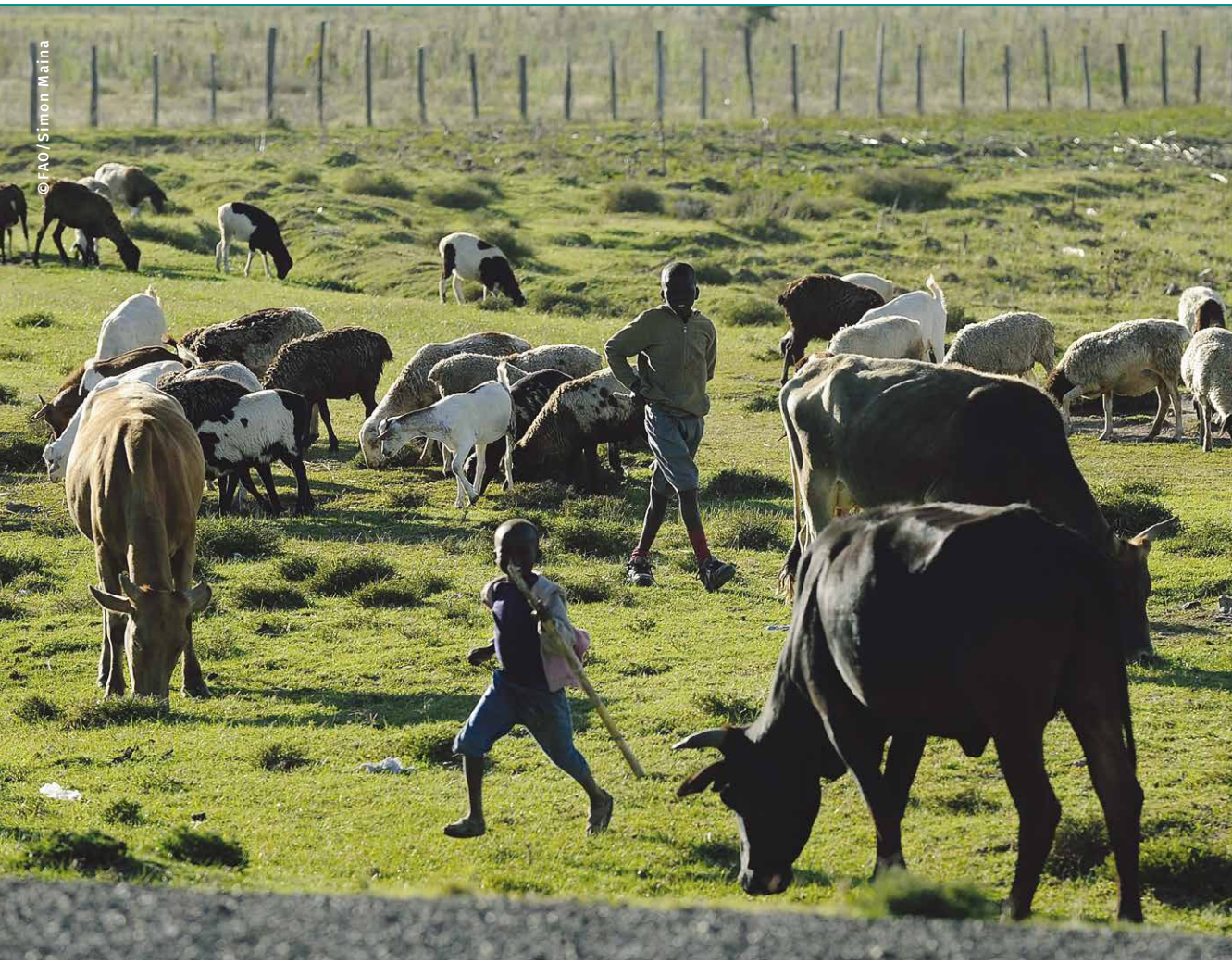


Source: Seville, Buxton and Vorley, 2011 (adapted).

Evidence presented in different studies suggests that farmers in categories 2 and 3 – i.e. those who constitute the majority of the "rural poor" – suffer from insufficient access to quality services (Birner, 2016). The FAO State of Food and Agriculture report on *Innovation in family farming* (FAO, 2014) presents household survey data from nine countries showing that the share of farms receiving advisory services increases with farm size. The smallest farms are always the least likely to have access to such services. Yet, these are the majority of smallholder farmers who manage most of the world's agricultural land, produce most of the world's food and are critical for poverty reduction and food security.

2.2 The gender and youth gap in advisory services

It is generally recognized that women are overrepresented among these neglected farmers, particularly in categories 2 and 3. On the one hand, women are marginalized due to deeply rooted gender inequalities at household and community level, as well as in the wider sociocultural context. In addition, limited access to land, education, productive inputs, financial services and producer organizations constitutes structural barriers for women, constraining their access to advisory services. On the other hand, how users of advisory services are defined and how services are delivered equally influence the inclusiveness of services for women farmers (Petrics *et al.*, 2015).



In many instances, advisory services tend to be biased towards male farmers due to a common perception that "women are not farmers" and that advice will trickle down from the male household head to other household members (FAO, 2011; Swanson and Rajalahti, 2010). Participation of female farmers in trainings and field demonstrations is often limited owing to women's responsibilities in other time-consuming household tasks and their generally low levels of education compared with men, as well as cultural barriers hindering effective interaction with mostly male service agents. Worldwide, only about 15 percent of extension agents are female, and incentives to reach women farmers are frequently lacking, revealing an

organizational culture of underserving women (FAO, 2011; Ragasa *et al*., 2013). Finally, advisory services often focus on disseminating technologies for cash crops, whether for export or for national food security. The related distinction between "women's crops" and "men's crops" falsely indicates that women do not participate in the production of cash crops – they actually do (Farnworth and Colverson, 2015), but they might indeed have few incentives to receive advisory services on cash crops when they are not able to control the income resulting from this production (Christoplos, 2010). This suggests that female and male farmers often have different service needs based on different production or household roles (Quisumbing and Pandolfelli, 2009). Yet, as women's roles and constraints in agriculture are underestimated, women are not considered important clients and are continually underserved by advisory services (Petrics *et al*., 2015).

Youth is another manifestation of farmer heterogeneity, as the needs, priorities and aspirations of young people in rural areas differ fundamentally from those of adult farmers. For example, youth usually have fewer resources to draw upon, particularly in terms of control over productive assets; their prime motivation may therefore lie more in engaging in agribusiness and other economic opportunities – including off-farm – rather than in agricultural production (Pyburn *et al*., 2015; Quisumbing and Pandolfelli, 2009). Already many young people are leaving agriculture and migrating to urban areas in search of jobs and income opportunities. The result is the "greying" of agriculture and rural communities. Yet only a few initiatives include youth as a distinct category in advisory services and little attention is given to shaping the future of young people in agriculture, for example, by facilitating access to land and other resources (Pyburn *et al*., 2015). If the most innovative young people are leaving agriculture and those staying behind are older farmers – who are generally less likely to adopt innovative production techniques – then what does this mean for advisory services?

Thus, the heterogeneity of farmers highlights the differentiated need for services, and this warrants further attention, not only from a provider perspective (who can offer services for whom?) but from the perspective of socio-economic transformation. Empowering women and promoting gender equality, creating a future for youth in agriculture, ensuring production for food security and improving rural livelihoods – all of these are issues that affect and are affected by the set-up of inclusive PSS.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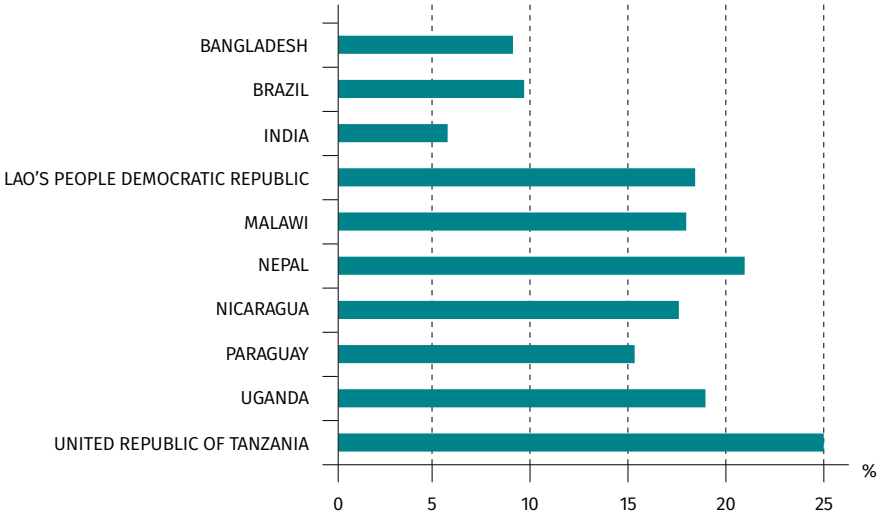
3 Reaching diverse smallholder farming households: a look at the different categories of service providers

Current PSS present a growing diversity of service providers as farmers search for information and knowledge from a variety of sources. The trend towards PSS is also underpinned by a conceptual discourse of international experts and the donor community pushing for more recognition of plurality in service providers (Mangnus and Bitzer, 2015). Yet, the mere presence of different service providers at country level does not guarantee that farmers can actually access these services at village level (Mangnus and Oonk, forthcoming). Making a distinction between the different categories of service providers can therefore help gain an insight into who is offering services for whom.

Much attention is directed at the public sector as the "traditional" provider of advisory services in most developing countries. However, estimates indicate both a gradual decline in access to services and an overall low reach of services. Figures from several countries suggest that on average public extension services reach 5–10 percent of farms, and in some cases up to 25 percent (FAO, 2014) (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. **Shares of farms accessing information through public extension services**



Note: Selected countries most recent year, from 2009 to 2014.

Source: FAO, 2014.

At the same time, access to public services generally increases with farm size, as services often focus on key food security crops (e.g. maize and rice) or on export crops to help generate foreign exchange income (FAO, 2014; Ferris *et al.*, 2014).

Different types of institutional weaknesses – including lack of accountability, supply-driven approaches, bureaucratic procedures, poor performance incentives for extension officers and fiscal unsustainability – result in a variety of challenges for public advisory services. These challenges include: insufficient farmer participation in extension planning and design; limited capacity for collective demand articulation by farmers; little farmer interest in services which do not respond to their demands; low programme and operational budget; poorly motivated staff; and limited outreach – all of which prevent effective provision of services where they are most needed to support public interests (Bitzer, Wennink and de Steenhuijsen Piters, 2016). Various studies indicate that the dominant top-down approach of public service delivery has largely failed to benefit resource-poor farmers (Benson and Jafry, 2013; Chapman

and Tripp, 2003; Feder *et al*., 2010). As a result, farmers rely to a large degree on other sources of information and knowledge, including other farmers, input dealers and – owing to the rapid advance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) – radio, video and mobile phones (Adhiguru, Birthal and Ganesh Kumar, 2009; Heemskerk and Davis, 2012).

Non-profit or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are thought to perform better in terms of providing relevant advisory services due to their proximity to subsistence and transition farmers and their participatory approaches. Against the backdrop of enhancing the resilience of vulnerable and chronically food insecure communities, much NGO work in agriculture has tended to focus on stabilizing the assets and production activities of subsistence farmers, before addressing more knowledge-intensive investments in production of surplus and building of better market linkages (Ferris *et al.*, 2014). Yet, in remote rural areas, NGOs (usually with international funding) are frequently the main providers of advisory services (Benson and Jafry, 2013).

At the same time, services by NGOs have been considered slow to catalyse income streams and durable trading relationships to improve smallholder farmers' livelihoods (Ferris *et al*., 2014). Finally, as most NGO work is project-based, the activities are frequently short-term and tend to be localized and limited in outreach. When trying to upscale, NGO projects are prone to losing focus, shifting from inclusiveness to institutionalization of new practices into existing structures, which risks weakening the participation of vulnerable groups (Kaegi *et al*., 2015). Crucially, upscaling also depends on agreement and coordination between service providers – identified as a key challenge in PSS (Bitzer, Wennink and de Steenhuijsen Piters, 2016; Heemskerk and Davis, 2012). Other experiences indicate that NGOs tend to move away from their original goal of empowerment of resource-poor farmers towards project-driven service delivery (Chowdhury, Hambly Odame and Leeuwis, 2014).

Experiments with contracting out public services to NGOs, private and other non-state service providers in various countries were intended to make services more demand-driven and increase the scale of operations. However, in many cases, non-state service providers were perceived as too expensive and cost–benefit considerations were hardly taken into account (Christoplos, 2010). Limited public funding or changes in national policies soon put an end to many of these experiments.

Other experiments in many developing countries included the (partial) privatization of advisory services, often promoted by multilateral donor agencies. However, the withdrawal of public services frequently left a void in service provision, as the transition to private and other non-state services was not properly planned or supported through adequate frameworks, ultimately offering few incentives for non-state providers to develop.

Even where private services have emerged to fill the gap resulting from the decline in public services, companies have seen little profit in delivering advisory services to subsistence and semi-commercial smallholder farmers, unless governments or donors – or to some extent farmers – pay for it. Smallholders growing lucrative cash crops are the exception in this regard, and have often seen private service delivery through contract scheme arrangements or through embedded services where advice is given when a farmer buys a product (pesticides, fertilizers etc.) from shops or sales companies. However, private sector providers are on the rise in many countries, especially in Asia in the form of seed and input companies, distributors and dealers, service providers, food processors, and mobile phone companies (Zhou and Babu, 2015; Kaegi and Schmidt, 2016).

Yet critical observers note that private sector services rarely reach down to poorer farming communities, simply because these farmers do not purchase (many) inputs and are characterized by diseconomies of scale (Ferris *et al*., 2014). This is related to the inherent difficulties in implementing cost-recovery approaches, as low-income farmers are often not able to pay for private advisory services themselves (Swanson and Rajalahti, 2010). An additional question is whether those providing embedded services can deliver impartial advice and cater to the information needs of resource-poor farmers.

Finally, producer organizations (POs), including village-level self-help groups, cooperatives, associations and their federations at regional or national level, can showcase various success stories in providing advisory services to their members. Studies have shown that advisory services provided by POs are often more relevant and tailored to farmer demands than services from other providers (Mangnus and Oonk, forthcoming). Accountability also increases, as the organizations are, in principle, directly accountable to their members (Feder *et al*., 2010). This indicates

a two-fold empowerment of producers: economic empowerment through relevant services and social empowerment through accountability and involvement in service planning (Heemskerk and Davis, 2012).

However, where farming households are diverse and more farm-specific advice is required, the comparative advantage of farmer-based advisory services is reduced (Feder *et al*., 2010). Studies also indicate that large-scale male farmers with more resources and power frequently dominate farmer-controlled advisory systems (Swanson and Rajalahti, 2010). Free-rider and elite-capture problems can be pronounced in this type of advisory services. This is one of the reasons why POs are often characterized by heavy dependence on external donor support to sustain their advisory activities (Bwana, Ruegg and Lyaro, 2011). Yet, it also depends on the commodity/crop around which services are provided. For example, cooperatives for export commodities (e.g. coffee and tea) and dairy cooperatives have been quite successful in delivering advisory and other services to their members (Chipeta and Blum, forthcoming). In these cases, the costs for advisory services are partially or fully financed through members' contributions, which seems to increase the relevance of services and accountability of service providers.

Experiences with various service providers to date suggests that the emergence of PSS is not only the result of previous failures to have monolithic (mostly public-sector-dominated) systems; it is also the promise of complementarities between different types of service provider who individually would be too limited to ensure inclusive service systems. At the same time, measures need to be taken to ensure an effective transition towards a pluralistic system. Such measures may include policy and regulatory changes, capacity development of service providers, as well as farmers and POs, funding provisions, and an incentive system for servicing resource-poor farmers.

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4 The diversity of service approaches: towards complementarity

The above overview of the different categories of service providers has revealed that despite the growing plurality of actors, outreach and inclusiveness are only realized to a limited extent (Kaegi *et al*., 2015). One of the reasons for this is that the approaches used in extension are not sufficiently inclusive, as farmers are not able to adequately influence the content and delivery of services. On the one hand, this has to do with the limited political voice of farmers and their limited capacity to collectively articulate demand. On the other hand, it is grounded in the continued dominance of extension approaches following the training and visit (T&V) model. As is well documented, T&V has not been able to engage farmers in learning processes, nor has it been able to differentiate between different farming systems and households, particularly gender (Chapman and Tripp, 2003). Gaps in linkages between the innovation stakeholders (farmers and their organizations, advisory services, research institutes, private enterprises, financial institutions etc.) have resulted in dysfunctional innovation systems that are unresponsive to farmers' needs. This has manifested in low adoption rates of new technologies by farmers and marginal productivity increases (Anderson, Feder and Ganguly, 2006), with often limited impact on improving livelihoods.

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Farmer field schools (FFS) are considered to make advisory services more demand-driven and benefit particularly those farmers who have difficulties accessing formal advisory services, notably women and less literate farmers (Davis *et al.*, 2010; Quisumbing and Pandolfelli, 2009). Despite these benefits, some challenges associated with FFS include vulnerability to elite capture (wealthier farmers are often overrepresented) and the high intensity of this approach in costs and labour, indicating that only a limited number of farmers can be reached (Feder *et al.*, 2010). FFS are therefore largely financed by external donors, as most governments are unable or unwilling to invest sufficient operational resources to scale up this approach across the country on a continuing basis (Swanson and Rajalahti, 2010).

In recent years, the spotlight has turned increasingly to ICT-based methods, including radio, video and mobile phones, to connect farmers to the information and knowledge they need. A major enabling factor has been the growing coverage of rural areas by

mobile phone networks, the improved availability of mobile phones (sales, networks, prices etc.) and the expansion of Internet access. These factors improve direct and indirect access to knowledge by reducing time and costs, and thus enlarge the service system's geographic scope and scale (Aker, 2011). ICT-based advisory services are promoted for their potential to enable targeted service delivery and offer diverse, real-time agricultural information through a range of different channels. Particularly women farmers who may otherwise not have access to this type of information may benefit from ICTs (Mbo'o-Tchouawou and Colverson, 2014). Yet this potential benefit of ICTs is still unclear due to the "digital divide", indicating that women's access to ICTs is generally lower than men's, in the face of lower numeracy and literacy levels, poorer technological skills, and limited control of mobile phones and other technological devices (Manfre, 2012). Capacities for exploiting the potential of ICTs are still weak, particularly in those countries where they are most needed, both on the supply side (system development, content and adaptation) and on the demand/user side (access, affordability, language, literacy etc.). ICTs are thus but one element in future inclusive PSS (Barber, Mangnus and Bitzer, 2016).

A less widely recognized, but nevertheless critical, problem deterring inclusive advisory services is the weak complementarity of service providers to ensure that the diverse needs of farmers are considered within their livelihoods strategies. For example, producers' demand for advisory services is related to their ability to access inputs and technology, which may depend on their access to financial services. Demand for these services, in turn, will also depend on farmers' access to market information, post-harvest facilities and output markets. From the perspective of service providers, their investments rest not only on their expectations of producer demand for their services, but crucially also on their expectation of supply of complementary services (Poulton, Dorward and Kydd, 2010).

Thus, linking farmers to different information services, to diverse service providers and to input and output markets is critical for inclusive advisory approaches. This bridging function is also referred to as part of the functions of the "new extensionist", which emphasizes the importance of different knowledge sources for farmers (e.g. Ferris *et al*., 2014; Sulaiman and Davis, 2012). This can be seen as an attempt to bring to bear the potential of PSS by drawing on the advantages of different service approaches while recognizing their individual limitations.


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5 Who actually pays for advisory services?

Increasing demand for diverse and high quality services from multiple service providers raises the question of financing PSS and who is able and willing to pay for advisory services. In many countries, government spending on rural advisory services has declined or stagnated at a very low level, and is often limited to staffing with very low operational funds. Donor funding is similarly constrained and only allows for time-bound projects on a limited scale. At the same time, it is unlikely that private companies will provide advisory services to resource-poor farmers if they are not subsidized with significant levels of public funds – unless cost recovery (fee-for-service) approaches can be implemented or service costs are embedded in contract farming arrangements (Christoplos, 2010). This is already the case with embedded services or private services for cash crops, and is a feasible strategy for working with commercial and semi-commercial farmers. On a large scale, however, cost recovery seems unrealistic until the majority of smallholder farmers become at least partially commercial farm operators and have the capacity and willingness to pay directly for these services (Swanson and Rajalahti, 2010). Estimates indicate that smallholder farmers in developing countries are likely to drop out of advisory services if their share of costs exceeds 10–20 percent of the total service costs (World Bank, 2005).

Unconventional approaches to cost recovery are potentially useful, for example: paying by result; offering services on credit (e.g. with the help of microcredit providers through collective liability loan agreements); working with groups to make advisory services affordable for smallholders (reduced costs per farmer and reduced transaction costs); and accepting contributions in kind (e.g. labour) as payment (Wongtschowski *et al*., 2013). A precondition for farmers' financial contribution to advisory services – in whatever form – is that these services are relevant and responsive to the demands of farmers as clients. Again, innovative financing mechanisms with user contributions need to be linked to increased empowerment and accountability towards farmers (Chipeta and Blum, forthcoming).

Demand-side financing mechanisms can also play a role in helping smallholder farmers to access advisory services, including vouchers (entitling farmers to access specified services from a particular provider), innovation grants (giving farmers or POs the financial resources to pursue innovative projects/activities), and grants to cover the POs' costs during identification, formulation and negotiation of demand for services. A study by Ton *et al*. (2013) concludes that there is a risk that vouchers may limit farmers' choice of inputs and promote "one-size-fits-all" approaches. Vouchers have also been found to be open to misuse, often becoming tradable commodities between farmers (Chowa, Garforth and Cardey, 2013). Current projects testing e-vouchers to avoid these failures therefore constitute interesting experiments. Ton *et al*. (2013) are more optimistic with regard to innovation grants for farmer groups, which empower these groups, sometimes in collaboration with other local stakeholders, to experiment and discover which practices suit them best. This also gives the opportunity to cover a broader range of issues – than do conventional advisory services – including technological innovation, business models, processing and marketing, and capacity development of POs (FAO, 2014).

6 Institutional and organizational challenges to inclusive advisory services

Two main challenges can be identified in many PSS relating to issues of the voice and influence of farmers and their organizations in advisory service provision: (i) downward accountability of service providers vis-à-vis those who receive the services; and (ii) coordination across different providers offering diverse services for a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities.

6.1 Accountability to farmers (downward accountability)[4]

Several studies have exposed widespread downward accountability gaps across service providers. Public service providers usually have some (albeit imperfect) form of upward accountability in place directed at bureaucratic hierarchies and donors, but they often lack downward accountability to clients (Wongtschowski, Oonk and Mur, 2016). There has been some progress in bringing advisory services closer to farmers and enhancing accountability through decentralization, but overall these efforts largely remain patchy (Benson and Jafry, 2013; Farrington *et al.*, 2002).

4 This challenge has also been identified for non-pluralistic service systems.

NGOs and private sector providers seem to have a stronger record in terms of downward accountability. For example, private sector providers have a greater interest in monitoring the quality of their services if clients, i.e. farmers, pay for services, and hence "customer satisfaction" plays a significant role. However, this is only the case if there are different providers that farmers can choose from, spurring competition between providers.

NGOs, on the other hand, may be required by their donors to show that they are accountable to farmers. They also tend to have more resources at their disposal, enabling them to experiment with innovative approaches to accountability. Wongtschowski, Oonk and Mur (2016) list a number of these approaches, for example, the Community Score Card, pioneered by the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) in Malawi in 2002 and adopted by others. Community Score Cards are a concrete example of a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system that leads to downward accountability, as well as learning and action. The basic idea of the Community Score Card is to establish a dialogue between providers and users, starting from the early phases of service provision and culminating in joint M&E. This implies a fundamentally different relationship between advisory service providers and farmers, based on joint activities and transparency, as compared to the "traditional" top-down approach to extension. More recently, ICTs have also emerged as new mechanisms for enhanced accountability of advisory services (Wongtschowski, Oonk and Mur, 2016). Examples include eliciting farmer feedback by mobile phone or via call-ins during radio programmes, and the use of electronic logbooks and online databases.

6.2 Coordination of service provision

Coordination is another major governance challenge for inclusive PSS. It is often considered the role of the public sector (at district, regional and national levels) to ensure that: the activities, scope and scale of the different service providers are aligned; the quality of services is assured; providers are accountable; farmers are able to influence advisory services; and lessons learned are shared among service providers (Heemskerk and Davis, 2012). However, experiences from different countries show that coordination is generally low due to the poor capacity of the public sector

and interministerial competition for resources (McNamara, Swanson and Simpson, 2011; Simpson, Heinrich and Malindi, 2012). In most countries, attempts to coordinate service providers are made in rhetoric, but rarely in practice (Bitzer, Wennink and de Steenhuijsen Piters, 2016).

As a result, advisory services tend to work in isolation, each concentrating on creating structures to implement their own projects rather than aiming for alignment and sustainable service provision (Christoplos, 2010). Mutual suspicion among service providers, as well as lack of incentives and skills among public sector actors to take up the role as coordinator, create barriers to effective stakeholder coordination, often leading to unnecessary costs, duplication and inconsistencies in service delivery (Chinsinga and Cabral, 2010). Major fluctuations in the number of service providers further leads to highly fragile systems in which the public sector often remains the most constant provider of agricultural extension services (Heemskerk and Davis, 2012).

As noted by Christoplos (2010), due to lack of harmonization, many PSS are fragmented as each actor promotes a different service model in each province, district or even village, with little choice provided to the ultimate clients of these services. "Plurality" then merely indicates the presence of different service providers within a particular country, without detailing whether there is plurality of providers at village or farm level, nor whether there are any functional linkages between these providers.

This raises the question, who can take up the role of coordinator when the public sector does not do so? In some cases, organized farmers have assumed a coordinating role by hiring their own advisers and by bringing in external advisers. For example, in Ecuador, the Potato Producers Consortium (CONPAPA) has started playing a central role in coordinating the different service providers (mostly government but also research and NGOs) on the basis of farmers' identified needs, and in representing the potato farmers (Mangnus and Oonk, forthcoming). However, CONPAPA still depends on

donor support to run its operations, and its coordinating function primarily benefits its member farmers. Similar examples of producer organizations as coordinators can be found elsewhere, such as dairy cooperatives in Colombia, cocoa cooperatives in Côte d'Ivoire and district farmer associations for bulk commodities in Uganda.

Innovation platforms have also been identified as mechanisms for coordinating agricultural development (Mur and Wongtschowski, 2013). While these are often broader in scope than agricultural advisory services and aim at stimulating collaborative innovation within a particular sector and/or region, case studies have shown that they can promote the coordination of advisory services for smallholder farmers on specific topics (Nederlof et al., 2011). However, incentivizing broad-based participation in innovation platforms constitutes a significant challenge, in addition to strong reliance on donor funding (Mur and Pyburn, 2014).

7 Putting lessons learned into practice: how to make PSS more inclusive

The call for advisory services that "reach the millions" of smallholder and marginalized farmers is becoming ever more prominent in the international debate on agricultural development (Kaegi *et al.*, 2015). Based on the insights gained in the sections above, the following points can be distilled to serve as guidelines to make PSS more inclusive.

7.1 Innovations in service delivery: tailoring services to needs and demands

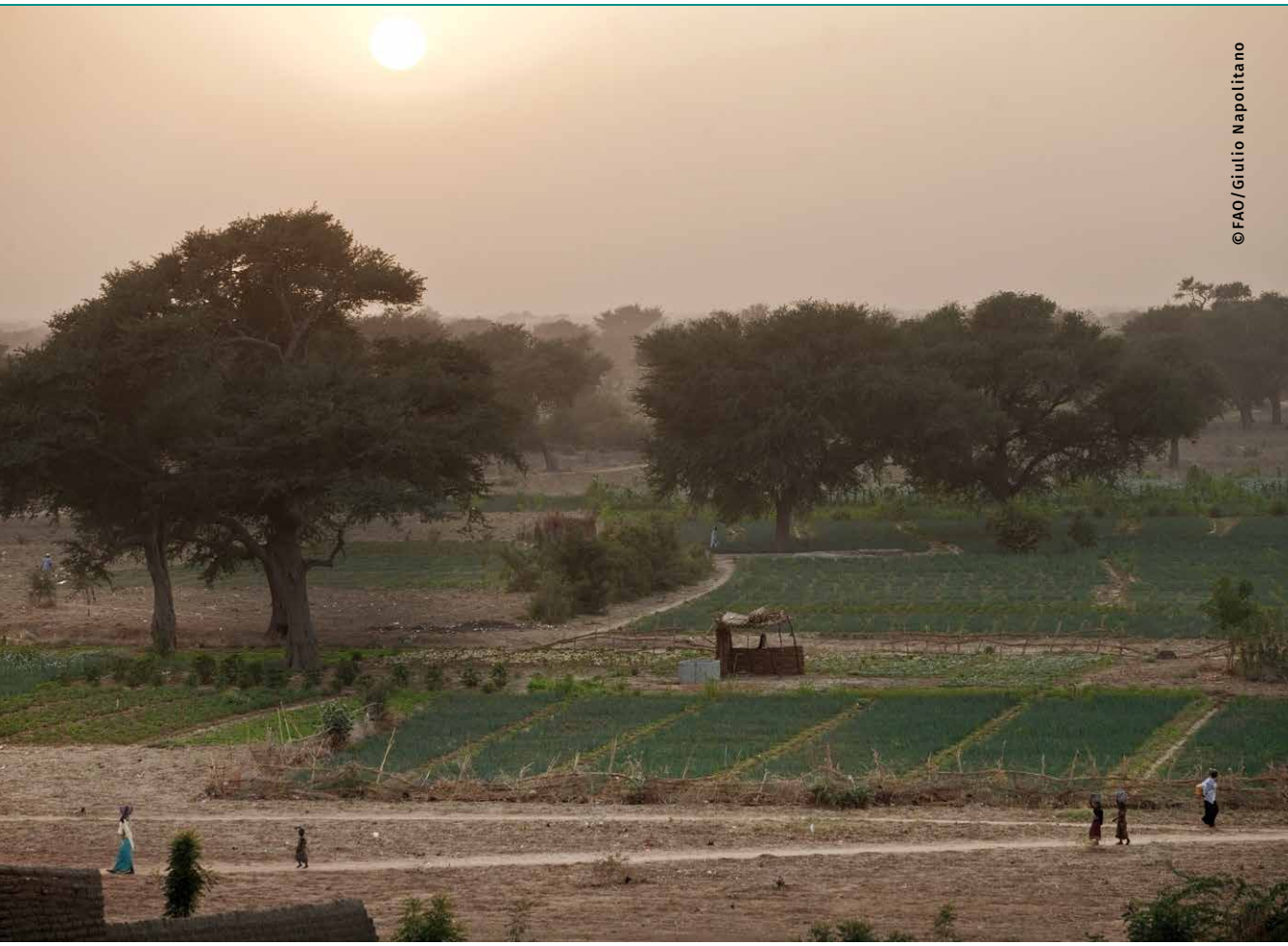
- Promoting inclusive advisory services needs to set out from farmer realities based on farmer participation and empowerment and the recognition that different farmer categories require different kinds of advisory services. Provision of organizational capacity development is a critical element in the development of smallholder farming, but specific needs vary according to whether farmers are already organized or still lack organizational structures. Linkages to banks are also essential for all types of smallholder producers, but whereas commercial farms require investments, semi-commercial and subsistence farmers first need basic

banking accounts and small-scale credit. This indicates that advisory services need to go beyond agriculture towards market orientation and complementary "livelihoods" advisory services. These can often not be addressed by one provider, but diverse advice is needed from various providers, including advice about financial services, business and farm management, post-harvest activities, marketing and organization.

- Assessment of both the needs and the capabilities of farmers is important when considering the appropriateness of different extension approaches. This holds particularly true for business development support and ICT-based solutions: the more complex the information and technology, the more training and qualified extension support it will require (McNamara, Swanson and Simpson, 2011).
- Services need to be gender-sensitive by taking into consideration the different roles, relationships and division of tasks between men and women at household and community level (Wongtschowski et al., 2013). Gender divides may be bridged by recruiting female extension workers, promoting women's participation and leadership in POs, bringing services closer to female farmers at times when they can attend meetings, and offering services adapted to women's needs and constraints (Quisumbing and Pandolfelli, 2009). This demands that service providers are sensitized to gender-based differences and conditions in service provision.

7.2 Effectiveness of service delivery: ensuring access to different types of services

- Specific challenges exist to providing services in regions with declining agricultural potential or in areas representing a high share of subsistence and vulnerable population groups (Kaegi, 2015). Lack of economies of scale prevents providers from reaching the poorer segments of farmers, which requires targeted efforts at group formation and group strengthening of farmers. In addition to group approaches, ICTs have the potential to significantly increase the outreach of advisory services.
- The choice of commodities around which services are provided has implications for the type of client and the inclusiveness of services. For example, in many



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areas, cotton is grown by smallholder, often semi-commercial farmers, while sugar cane is produced by commercial farmers. Services for "pro-poor" agricultural products need to be identified and delivered.

- Service providers need to avoid that the selection of clients is exclusionary. Currently extension agents often tend to select farmers who are likely to exhibit better performance, which restricts any attempts at inclusion of resource-poor farmers (Bitzer, 2016). Enhanced attention to pro-poor policies, strategies and incentives for working with and empowering smallholder farmers is thus urgently needed.

7.3 Relevance of service delivery: accountability and empowerment of farmers

- Accountability of advisory services vis-à-vis the users, i.e. farmers, needs to be strengthened by giving farmers a direct say before, during and after services through demand articulation and participatory needs assessment, influence in service design and participation in M&E. Once farmer participation is ensured, accountability of service providers to users becomes more feasible.
- Having farmers participate in service design and implementation, and holding service providers accountable is difficult without some form of farmer organization (Bitzer, Wennink and de Steenhuijsen Piters, 2016). Smallholder farmers suffer from limited political voice as a result of their low levels of education, weak economic power and geographic dispersion (Poulton, Dorward and Kydd, 2010) – a situation which demands targeted strategies, including demand-side financing, to promote collective action and enable farmers' voice and demand articulation.

7.4 Efficiency of service delivery: coordination to ensure complementary services

- Coordination is critical to make different types of services available to different categories, thus serving the diverse needs and demands of farmers. For example, public sector agencies are critical for the provision of certain public goods (e.g. environmental protection), ensuring that resource-poor farmers and neglected groups are included, and for quality assurance related to private services (Christoplos, 2010). NGOs and private sector providers have a comparative advantage in experimenting with new approaches and tools (e.g. ICTs) and in broadening the scope of advisory services to include access to value chains and credit providers, for example. Thus, pluralism in service providers must go hand-in-hand with complementarity in service provision.
- Coordination is also essential to improve the cost efficiency of advisory services, both on the supply side (by avoiding overlaps and gaps in service provision) and the demand side (by promoting group approaches and the use of ICTs).

- Furthermore, coordination is necessary to improve the transparency of service delivery for farmers: who provides what service, when, at what cost?
- Coordination bodies at different levels should be established for this purpose (Chowa, Garforth and Cardey, 2013). Local government can play a critical role as intermediaries in coordination efforts, liaising with donors, NGOs and other service providers for enhanced stakeholder buy-in and alignment with public development policies (Chowa, Garforth and Cardey, 2013). Where strong farmer organizations exist, these may also be able to coordinate relevant services to their members. Thus, different coordination roles can be played by the various actors in PSS.

7.5 Financial and institutional sustainability of service delivery: searching for new funding mechanisms

- Innovations in financing mechanisms for demand-driven advisory services are clearly needed, which match funding (e.g. from public sources) and service delivery (e.g. through NGOs or private sector providers) with increased farmer empowerment and accountability of services towards the farmers (Chipeta and Blum, forthcoming).
- Particularly public funding will continue to play a crucial role if resource-poor farmers are to attain and retain access to advisory services. Farmers should not be subsidized when they can pay for services, but if they are unable to pay the full costs, they should be enrolled in service arrangements that are at least co-funded by them and by public sources (Ferris *et al*., 2014), or receive grants which enable them or their organizations to pay for the services.
- National dialogue is needed to decide: which services should be funded by the government and for whom; what alternative arrangements and options exist for services that can no longer be funded by the government; and what capacity gaps and needs exist requiring what provisions. Measures need to be taken to ensure participation of all concerned stakeholders and competent representation of farmers and POs. Such dialogue would set the basis for sustainable institutional arrangements and funding for inclusive service provision.

8 New thinking required: reflections and looking ahead

Great hopes are vested in the ability of PSS to cater for a heterogeneous farming landscape – yet little has been written or documented on the inclusiveness of their service provision. Those studies that do exist indicate that the coverage and relevance of prevailing services provided to smallholder farmers are generally low, heterogeneity of farms and farmers is often not recognized (or acted upon), accountability of services to farmers is weak, and coordination between different service providers is often absent. Thus, there is relatively little documented evidence of vibrant, inclusive PSS operating on a large scale.

The insights gained through this literature review warrant some critical reflection. Three points are mentioned here:

First, no single category of service provider can deliver services covering the needs of all smallholder farmers, nor is there a "silver bullet" that reveals how advisory services become and remain inclusive and demand-driven (Christoplos, 2010).

Further insights might be gained through a change in perspective. So far, most attention has been paid to how advisory services do or do not reach the rural poor. Yet, how farmers reach services is much less understood and needs to come centre stage in the ongoing discussion on service provision. What are the main factors influencing how farmers access and make use of advisory services? What set of services do farmers need most, under what circumstances, and who can deliver such services? What type of contact (interaction) with advisory services is most useful for farmers? Such a shift in focus would move the debate from "all farmers need advisory services" to a more nuanced understanding of farmers' needs and priorities.

Second, studies frequently denounce the fragmentation of PSS in which different actors work in isolation, and call for coordination between service providers to make advisory services more inclusive. Yet the recurrent question remains: who can fulfil such a coordination function? Coordination is often assumed to be the role of the public sector, but most public efforts at coordination have failed due to lack of resources, capacities and/or willingness. So how can public coordination be promoted and incentivized, and if this fails, who else could engage in system coordination? The emerging examples of farmer organizations taking up coordination functions, often with donor support, offer interesting avenues for further research and emphasize that coordination is not a single task to be fulfilled by a single actor. As such, specific coordination functions and levels need to be identified to understand the possible roles of the different actors in coordination.

Finally, there is broad recognition that advisory services tend to benefit productive agricultural areas over marginalized regions, relatively resource-rich over resource-poor farmers, and men over women farmers. While this exclusionary nature of advisory services is universally criticized, it does not imply that future investments in PSS will automatically reverse this situation. On the one hand, reaching and involving poor farmers and marginalized groups, such as women and youth, has a cost – which requires financial and political commitment. Advisory service systems are part of the political economy in which imperatives of economic growth and political control may overshadow objectives of inclusiveness and improved smallholder livelihoods, especially in terms of resource allocation.

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On the other hand, PSS offer opportunities for cost efficiencies that are currently un- or underexploited, such as potential synergies based on complementarities of service providers and service approaches, or organizational strengthening of farmers for more relevant and cost-effective group approaches to service provision. Thus, the inherent potential of plurality needs to be utilized to address the challenge of making PSS more inclusive.

Looking ahead, where should future development investments in advisory services go, and what are the expected impacts of the different options in terms of inclusive PSS? While any decision and action will need to be context-specific, the insights of this paper outline important points for departure and offer a number of new directions for making PSS more inclusive.

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See also:

New Directions for Inclusive Pluralistic Service Systems

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Report of FAO Expert Consultation

Rome, 11–13 May 2016

Towards inclusive Pluralistic Service Systems

Insights for innovative thinking

A growing variety of public and private rural advisory services are available today, leading to increasingly pluralistic service systems (PSS) – in which advisory services are provided by different actors and funded from different sources. PSS have emerged in many countries as a response to a decline in public sector extension and the increasing demand for tailored, diverse and market-oriented services. Private companies, non-governmental organizations and producer organizations, today play more active roles alongside traditional public sector providers. The diversity of service providers in PSS has the potential to make services more inclusive, responsive to demand, context-specific and based on multiple knowledge sources. This is particularly relevant, as farmers are highly diverse, differing in resources, gender, market access, crops and livestock systems, and therefore require different types of information and services to achieve sustainable productivity growth and better livelihoods.

Based on extensive literature review, the paper provides an overview of the current state of knowledge on "inclusive pluralistic service systems", examining the need for demand-driven service provision, the diverse providers and approaches to service delivery, and the policy considerations and institutional challenges constraining the operation of inclusive PSS.

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