Fact Sheet on Extension Services

Position Paper: June 2012

Extension services are a key investment for sustainable agriculture

Extension services enable farmers to take up innovations, improve production, and protect the environment. Extension shows positive effects on knowledge, adoption, and productivity. With studies showing very high (13–500%) rates of return to extension, it is a cost-effective way to improve farmer productivity and income.

Experiences with extension programmes show the positive impact that they have on productivity and farmer incomes. For instance, a programme with cacao farmers in Peru saw productivity rise from 340 to 600 kg per ha in three years.

- **Investment in extension yields 80% annual rates of return (40–60% is the norm).**
- **Educating farmers can help to double crop yields.**
- **In 1988, US$6 billion was invested in extension globally.**
- **In 2009, US$582 million of World Bank funding went to research and extension – about 10% of the overall spend on agriculture.**
- **Around 43% of rural workers are women but only 5% of women have access to extension services.**

Great diversity exists in farmers' access to extension

Data on extension impacts are often difficult to find, and comparing figures can be complicated due to the variety of ways in which data is gathered and because extension seldom stands alone.

In some countries, public extension services reach a large number of farmers and the ratio of extension workers to farmers is quite positive. For example in China and Vietnam, on average there is one extension worker per 280 farm households. In Indonesia, it is estimated that each extension worker covers about 2.8 villages.

However, data also show that coverage is not always uniform, and that positions are not always filled, limiting the support farmers are able to receive. For example, in India, of the 143,863 positions in the Department of Agriculture, only 91,288 posts are filled. Combined with the large number of farm households in the country, this small number of positions means that on average extension services only reach 6.8% of farmers.

When farmers do not have access to formal extension services, they use other sources of information, sometimes using technologies such as mobile phones and Internet kiosks, or asking other farmers and their input dealers for advice. In India, as public extension is unable to reach many farmers, it is estimated that 17% of farmers get their information from other farmers and 13% from input dealers.

Additionally, there are often differences within countries. Governments with limited resources often need to choose which sector or which target groups will be prioritised. For example, in Vietnam, the national system has an annual budget of only US$20 million and targets mainly higher income farmers.

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Almost all extension services lack something crucial – female participation is very low. Women, on average, comprise 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries and account for an estimated two-thirds of the world's 600 million poor livestock keepers. Yet only 15% of the world's extension agents are women, and only 5% of women farmers benefit from extension services. This, in combination with a continuing gap in access to resources, inputs, and technologies, negatively affects women farmers' ability to create sustainable livelihoods from their farms.

However, innovative extension programmes are effectively reaching and benefiting poor people, especially women and people with low literacy levels. In East Africa, farmer field schools achieved an average of 50% female participants, whose per capita agricultural income was significantly increased by 189% across the project. The project also increased crop and livestock productivity for women and farmers with little education.

The need to reverse declining investment in extension services

Nearly all governments invest in extension services, often with the help of donor funds and loans. Global public investments in extension were estimated at US$6 billion in 1988. But in subsequent decades, public investment generally decreased. The recent food crisis, and concerns about the ability to meet growing demand for agricultural products sustainability, have contributed to a change in this trend.

World Bank lending to the agricultural sector more than doubled between 2006 and 2009, from US$2.9 billion to US$5.3 billion. However, the research and extension sectors did not benefit as much as other sectors, such as infrastructure, from the increase in investment and remain insufficiently funded. World Bank support for agricultural research and extension was around US$120 million per year during 2007 and 2008, rising to US$582 million in 2009, and around US$300 million in 2010.

At the national level, governments are also reprioritising extension. The Government of Ethiopia, for example, has recently established farmer training centres in every local administrative area (there are 18,000 nationwide) and three extension agents at every training centre. Between 2000 and 2008, the number of extension agents increased from 15,000 to 45,000, with the aim of reaching about 66,000. Reaching that goal would probably give Ethiopia the world's highest ratio of extension agents to farmers.

Sources

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Editing, design and layout: Green Ink (www.greenink.co.uk)

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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