

Rural extension - is back on the agenda

compiled by Sylvia Brunold and Daniel Roduner,
Agridea

Worries about food security, rising food prices and climate change have brought back rural development and agriculture on the agenda of the international development cooperation and thus agricultural development is profiting of rising investments. If agriculture needs to feed more people at reasonable prices and drive economic change then this has to be within the challenges of adapting and mitigating climate change. If this will be the future scenario what will be the role of extension (...or agricultural/rural advisory services or agricultural innovation systems___as it is called at present) within the agricultural system for responding the key challenges of mankind in the future.

Frank Hartwich, SHL

Looking back at 10 years of rural development¹. What were key issues? What dreams did (not) come true?

The key issues in rural development during the 20-zero years are centred towards the economic improvement of farmers - including disadvantaged farmers. This implicates a more important role for the private sector and the development of value chains to reduce subsistence levels and increase farm household incomes. The importance of bio-energy and climate change impacts was unexpected 10 years ago.

Important changes were observed at the development policy level: Rural and agricultural development is back on the agenda (i.e. World Development Report 2008); the specific role of small-holder agriculture in development is acknowledged (IAASTD report) and philanthropy discovered the topic (BMGF and others)..

We asked several international experts about their experience and opinion to contribute to the actual debate on extension and rural services.

Frank Hartwich from Swiss College of Zollikofen and Anne van den Ban from Wageningen took time to answer our question directly, other experts contributed with articles (see also: Andrew Barlett: Real World Extension). Bits and pieces from the contributions of E Hartwich and A.W. van den Ban were re-arranged and shaped in order to give some answers to a set of questions.

A.W. van den Ban

For a long time the major goal of agricultural extension was to teach farmers to use production technologies which increase the production per ha and per animal. This goal was widely realized especially in the Green Revolution in East and South Asia.

One result was that the World Market Price Index for agricultural commodities decreased between 1960 and 2000 with about 60%.

Which did not increase the income of most farmers and one realized, that the majority of the people who had to survive on less than one dollar a day where small farmers and farm labourers in developing countries

Also the large difference in income between these people and the population of rich countries endangered the social stability in our world.

¹A. W van den Ban: *I will talk mainly about rural extension services. These are a tool of government, farmers' unions, NGOs and commercial companies to realize their policy goals. The most important goals are usually to ensure food security for a growing population, reduce rural poverty and to empower farmers to influence rural development in their environment.*

Frank Hartwich, SHL

Participatory research, extension and development did not make a big difference; nor did the focus on rural livelihoods. It resulted in better understanding, but rural poverty did not reduce

What happened with the rural services within the last 10 years?

"What were key issues? What dreams did (not) come true?"

The key issues within the service sector also relate to the role of the private sector (i.e. how to privatize rural advisory services?). Experiments with the voucher system, contracting farming, knowledge-brokers, and farmer field schools were undertaken. A main insight is that not one concept fits all and a new understanding of the role of communication and networking needs to be discussed.

Other (multiple) players have entered the scene and enforced the need for pluralistic approaches.

The linear model of research - extension - farmer adoption has been buried, T&V is dead.

To a large extent agricultural advisory services yet did not deliver what they are supposed to deliver, that is knowledge and technology that improves rural livelihoods. And NGOs or private sector did not provide the missing elements.

What is the status quo?

The co-existence of different approaches and different advisory packages by a range of already existing players. Services to remote upland are less rendered than before.

A.Wi van den Ban

Therefore the UN formulated in 2000 Millennium Development Goals on the need to decrease this and other gaps and is now trying to find ways to realize these goals.

Increasingly one realizes that agricultural research and extension should play an important role in this process and that a mistake of past policies has been the decrease in the investments in agricultural development.

Agricultural extension did not have the expected impact on agricultural production in Africa. For instance the cereal yields per ha increased in East Asia and the Pacific between 1960 and 2005 with over 200% and in Sub-Saharan Africa with only 10%. There is not yet an agreement about the causes of this lack of successful agricultural development in Africa, but causes which are mentioned include:

1. lack of coordination between the different policy instruments,
2. lack of adjustment of extension messages,
3. lack of motivation of the extension staff,
4. lack of competence of the research and extension staff,
5. lack of joint active learning processes between farmers, researchers and extension agents
6. lack of vocational agricultural education for (future) farmers.

In Africa a low proportion of the government budget was used to promote agricultural development, partly because urban citizen had more political power than farmers.

Now an increasing number of policy makers realizes that we do not only have to increase the knowledge of farmers of modern production technologies, but also help them to adjust their farming system to new market opportunities, caused by the increasing demand for food locally and in global markets and recently also for bio fuels.

The interest of policy makers to invest in agricultural research and extension is growing.

Realizing these market opportunities does require a change in farming systems towards more production of high value crops and animals.

Not yet many people realize that extension on farming systems towards more production of high value crops require a different approach than extension on production technologies.

Frank Hartwich, SHL

The vision for 2020?

Food will remain a high value and bio-energy becomes of increased value, but also of a threat.

A focus on rural poverty reduction is needed. In combination with climate change compensation mechanisms remote areas may gain certain profit.

A.W. van den Ban

Changing the farming system may often be risky and may require changes in the whole way of life of the farm family.

Therefore the role of the extension agent becomes more to develop the entrepreneurship among their farmers to help them to recognize the new opportunities in the market and to make use of these opportunities in a way which helps their family to realize their goals.

The interest is increasing in innovation systems, which are a way to help understand how the process of innovation takes place.

Innovation studies show that for successful change it is also needed the whole social and economic environment of these farms. I hope that these ideas will soon be widely used in agricultural research and extension organizations.

However, much less attention is given to increasing labour productivity in agriculture, whereas in this way a greater contribution is possible to reducing rural poverty. Therefore much more attention must be given to off farm opportunities.

It is also clear that with economic growth the proportion of the labour force which can find employment in agriculture decreases.