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Five Key Areas for Mobilising the Potential of Rural Advisory Services



There is renewed attention to the important role of rural advisory services (extension) in rural development processes. This brief summarises the publication 'Mobilising the potential of rural and agricultural extension' that was prepared for the Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development (GCARD) in Montpellier, March 2010*. Rural advisory services are key to putting small-holder demands at the centre of rural development, ensuring food security, and dealing with risks and uncertainty. The brief focuses on five opportunities to mobilise the potential of rural advisory services.

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The five areas to mobilise the potential of rural advisory services are

- 1. focusing on best-fit approaches**
- 2. embracing pluralism**
- 3. increasing accountability to rural clients**
- 4. human resource development**
- 5. sustainability**

Rural advisory services, also called extension, are 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, organisational, and management skills and practices so as to improve their livelihoods and well-being.

ables must be considered when designing policies, approaches, programmes, and institutions. Most importantly, there is a

1. Best-fit approaches to rural advisory services

Rural advisory services (RAS) are increasingly recognised by many rural development actors as an essential vehicle to ensure that research, development of farmer organisations, improved inputs, and other elements of rural development support actually meet farmers and other rural actors' needs and demands.

While policy makers and planners are increasingly looking for 'quick-fix' approaches that can be easily implemented and scaled up, one cannot use a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to finding and implementing sustainable RAS programmes or models. Programmes must take into account the diversity found in rural areas, where governance, levels of capacity, farming systems, and many other factors differ. These vari-

need to remember the lessons of past unsustainable attempts to introduce rigid models and recognise that flexible approaches have been more appropriate. Rapid and unpredictable changes in markets and climates, and the diverse ways that these changes impact different target groups, mean that RAS cannot provide blanket advice.

Thus the concept of 'best-fit' approaches has been promoted by some RAS stakeholders. Best-fit approaches embrace pluralism of approaches and providers rather than a blanket approach or one provider. Best-fit solutions to RAS design are based on local conditions including governance structures, capacity, organisation and management, and types of methods used to provide RAS. Such approaches should fit into the overall agricultural innovation system.

The focus on best-fit approaches is an opportunity to shape services that are relevant and demand-driven. It is an opportunity to make RAS flexible enough to deal with current and future rural

development issues and 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

There are many different types of advisory service providers and approaches. This is appropriate, as the diversity of rural life and needs should be matched by diversity in services, approaches, and providers. Various service providers tend to reach different types of clientele. Three basic categories of providers include the public, civil society, and private sectors. While public RAS provision has often played a major role in development, private and civil society (non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and farmer organisations) RAS are also key players.

Public rural advisory services need to play a coordinating, technical backstopping, and quality assurance role within pluralistic systems. They should ensure that national development objectives such as poverty reduction are met and provide services of a 'public goods' nature. They have the advantage in offering impartial advice and dealing with issues related to sustainable natural resource management.

Civil society organisations have a key role to play as well. Farmer organisations are the most sustainable type of service provider. Farmer organisations organised by commodities provide advisory services related to the commodity along the entire value chain. Civil society and public providers are critical to reaching disadvantaged groups. They must have clear and steadfast commitments to serving these clients to overcome potential elite biases.

Private advisory services often assist a limited clientele, primarily related to high-value products and relatively well-off producers. Input suppliers



are increasingly providing information regarding new varieties and planting methods to all kinds of producers. While private providers are not likely to reach hundreds of millions of poor farmers, particularly women, they play an important role in linking producers to market and increasing incomes.

Institutional pluralism through different service providers must be matched by pluralism in financial flows if RAS are to be broadly accessible. Private investment will not address the needs of all rural producers. Hence, targeted public investments in RAS will remain crucial, even when services are carried out by non-state providers. Private advisory services may actually be better at reaching poor farmers than the public

sector if incentives such as subsidies are improved.

Pluralism in advisory services provides the opportunity to capitalise on the comparative advantages of different types of organisations – including public sector, farmers' organisations and NGOs, and the private sector. The trick, however, is in coordination of such providers, making sure that vulnerable sectors of the farming population are not forgotten, and avoiding excess duplication of efforts. Public financial support, technical backstopping, and coordination are thus needed. Governments must focus on meeting the needs of disadvantaged groups ensuring quality assurance of advisory services.



3. Increased accountability to rural clients

There are increasing calls for 'demand-driven' and 'farmer-led' rural advisory services. A shift to bottom-up planning, monitoring, and evaluation is often achieved through farmer organisations. A challenge here is the limited capacity of farmer organisations and their higher-level federations to plan and monitor RAS.

Additionally, there is a need to address gender, age, and ethnic differences when focusing on bottom-up planning and demand driven and farmer-led approaches. Policy makers and planners must ask hard questions about whose demands are being served. Women have an important role in agri-food systems. Different ethnic groups have unique links and obstacles to reach different markets. Agriculture is perceived negatively by many youth and seen as unrewarding. Climate change is having severe impacts on people living in 'hot spots'. Voice must be provided for all stakeholder groups in national fora where rural and agricultural issues are discussed.

Farmer organisations are not the only way to make RAS more accountable. Decentralisation, if well planned, can increase accountability to rural people through subsidiarity – placing responsibility for activities at the lowest possi-

ble level of aggregation. The ways that RAS are financed can be a means of holding them accountable for the quantity and quality of services they provide. When the client pays (perhaps with public financial assistance), this forces service providers to adopt greater client orientation to ensure their economic survival. However, local governments and other stakeholders need capacity to plan, manage, and monitor such programmes. Increasing accountability to rural people must go hand-in-hand with investment in the capacity of service providers and local authorities and assurance of quality to make these systems work.

Accountability to rural people also means knowing whether a programme, method, or organisational innovation actually worked or not. Much is still unknown about the effectiveness of RAS programmes and approaches. Methods for clear, rigorous, and participatory evaluation of programming for RAS make a gap that must be filled. Research is also needed to provide a better understanding of the complex relations and multiple accountabilities that exist between advisory services, their clients and other stakeholder institutions, such as local government, private investors, researchers, and farmer organisations. This offers the opportunity to make RAS more relevant and effective for rural people and their goals.

4. Human resource development

Human resources are a fundamental bottleneck to effective RAS given the new challenges facing rural development. Due to a lack of interest in agriculture and accompanying funding stagnation and brain drain, agricultural education came to a point of near-collapse in some areas. There are several different levels of need for human resource development for RAS: farmer level; extension agent level, and higher education/training institution level. Government officials also need enhanced capacities due to decentralisation efforts (see previous section).

Agricultural education and empowerment for farmers is an important component in efforts to enhance their capacity to demand and utilise advice. Farmers and other rural actors need technical and management skills, as well as the ability to operate in groups, use ICTs effectively, and seek markets.

Extension agents (be they public, civil society or private) need capacity development as well. Effective advice is no longer a matter of simply providing messages about set technological packages to rural people. There is a shift from technical approaches to those that are organisational, cultural, and social. Advisors thus need skills in building so-

cial capital, facilitating discussions, and coaching stakeholders in natural resource management and market supply chains. They must shift from lecturing to empowering clientele to deal with uncertainties and variability such as climate change and market trends. These tasks require professional soft skills in critical thinking, problem solving, organisational development, and negotiation.

Finally, there is a need to upgrade skills among **universities** and academics who are training people within the agriculture sector. There are some efforts being made to invest in agricultural education, particularly in curriculum adjustments at the tertiary level (e.g. Makerere University in Uganda). This should also lead to more human resource development throughout the agricultural innovation system.

For human resource development, state budget allocation is needed. Plans for RAS must reflect this human resource crisis and include concerted and sustainable investment strategies to address it. If the plans are followed through, it is an opportunity to equip advisors and other rural development actors with the appropriate skills to deal with the ever-changing and complex arena in which they operate.

5. Sustainability: Beyond projects to institutions

Sustainable rural advisory services need government commitment and effective forms of financing. 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. Additional temporary resources may be needed for particular campaigns or for dealing with temporary problems (such as responding to a drought). All too often, however, these high profile 'quick impact' investments have distracted attention from the need to strengthen the institutions that will carry out future programmes. Pressures to address the food security crisis and respond to climate change have meant that RAS are still often supported as a temporary component of broader projects addressing various themes. If this syndrome is to be avoided, project support must be balanced with sys-

tematic, institutional approaches to reform and strengthening pluralistic RAS systems.

The changing technological landscape, including the spread of internet and mobile phones, has shown the potential for enhancing access to information about markets, weather, and technological options, and improve communication and linkages among stakeholders. This has often been heralded as yet another 'silver bullet' for sustainability in that they are expected to avoid the problems of bloated bureaucracies and high recurrent costs.

The opportunity here is to ensure that these newer methods are integrated within the work of existing institutions and organisations. Methods must be adapted to existing capacities and the context where they will be used. As mentioned above, project support must be balanced with systematic, institutional approaches to reform and strengthening pluralistic systems.

Conclusions

While we have learned valuable lessons from past efforts, there is still much to be done. In spite of limited knowledge on the varying effectiveness of various approaches in terms of addressing different needs, demands, and capacity constraints, it is clear that RAS form an essential institution within rural development. We can mobilise the potential of RAS by focusing on these five areas: best-fit approaches, pluralism, accountability to rural client, human resource development, and sustainability in order for RAS to contribute effectively to rural development and poverty alleviation.

For further reading

Assisi Statement on Agricultural Advisory Services Worldwide
(<http://www.g-fras.org/resources/statements-on-ras/>)

Birner, R. et al. 2009. From Best Practice to Best Fit: A Framework for Designing and Analyzing Agricultural Advisory Services Worldwide. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute.
(<http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/rb04.pdf>).

*Christoplos, I. 2010. Mobilizing the potential of rural and agricultural extension. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations and Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services. Rome: FAO.



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