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Poverty, Pluralism And Extension Practice

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This Gatekeeper Series is produced by the International Institute for Environment and Development to highlight key topics in the field of sustainable agriculture. Each paper reviews a selected issue of contemporary importance and draws preliminary conclusions of relevance to development activities. References are provided to important sources and background material.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Extension is one of the few forums where government and NGO staff actually meet face-to-face with farmers to consider natural resource management decisions. As such, it is an institution through which poverty alleviation, environmental sustainability, gender equality and even democratisation goals can and should be addressed. Whilst extension cannot be responsible for poverty alleviation, it should, however, position itself within the farmers' own poverty alleviation strategies. Both farmers and extensionists live and work in increasingly turbulent and complex institutional, social and environmental settings. This suggests a need to rethink extension's role to take into account the challenges as perceived at field level.

This paper draws on the extension literature, as well as the author's experience with a project in Vietnam's Mekong Delta, to discuss the implications of using extension to help the poor in this pluralistic environment. The common failures of many extension approaches are analysed. This includes issues such as the inadequacy of assessing extension effectiveness based on simple production and adoption targets; and the fact that many extension institutions still work under simplistic diffusion assumptions that fail to take into account the diversity of activities which fall under the heading of 'farming'.

Technological change in a community is a process involving more than an individual farmer choosing whether or not to buy a bag of fertiliser. This realisation has led to a new way of conceptualising extension, referred to as the platform approach. The complexity of rural development demands that farmers, their neighbours, input suppliers, local officials and other actors meet and negotiate to arrive at joint decisions for addressing complex problems of natural resource management. Extension can play a key role in this process by initiating, organising, participating in and following up on these platforms. This suggests that extension institutions should no longer strive merely to deliver research results. They need to act as professional service organisations, being able to adapt priorities as ideas emerge from an ongoing dialogue between field staff and farmers.

New attitudes toward structural reform are required if extension services are to find niches that are appropriate, sustainable and adhere to a commitment to supporting the survival strategies of the poor. A starting point should be a frank assessment of how extension agents are being affected by an increasingly constrained public sector. With less and less financial, managerial and logistical support from central structures, the motivations of field staff are consequently more influenced by local factors. Most extension agents sincerely want to be respected in the community by finding solutions to their clients' problems. Extension planning should shift from its present emphasis on administrative directives, to instead identifying ways to strengthen the links between the satisfaction of the extension agent and the satisfaction of the farmer.

The paper closes with some challenges and recommendations on how this reorientation of extension institutions can be supported. These include the use of participatory methodologies to support platform approaches; flexible management to assist extension agents in meeting these challenges; ways to improve the relationships and communication among farmers, researchers and extensionists; and the development of more qualitative indicators with which to evaluate the success of this new extension in meeting the needs of the poor.

POVERTY, PLURALISM AND EXTENSION PRACTICE

Ian Christoplos

Agricultural extension is in crisis. The performance of extension institutions in supporting poor farmer livelihoods has been dismal. The failure of one methodological fix has usually resulted in several sprouting in its place. The resulting endless debate over models and methodological acronyms has overshadowed the profound choices for extension. Public services cannot do everything. It is time to confront the questions of ‘*Who we are serving?*’ and ‘*How sustainable are the livelihoods that we are supporting?*’ These questions demand a shift from traditional natural science perspectives which “target *crops* rather than people” (Moris, 1991). Extension must be ready to choose between investment in crops or in the concerns of people. This may in turn involve choosing between national objectives (national food security), and hunger (household food security). Targeting people rather than crops has fundamental implications for both central policy decisions, and also the day-to-day tasks of extension agents. It also demands that we try to understand how both farmers and extension agents interact with various public, private and non-governmental institutions as they struggle to create their own meaningful livelihoods. Drawing on the author’s own experience with a project in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta (Christoplos, 1995), and examples from the extension literature, the objective of this paper is to draw attention to the implications of using extension to help the poor in a pluralistic institutional environment.

First, the common failings of many extension approaches are analysed, particularly their inability to support farmers in complex environmental, social and institutional settings. This crisis has led to calls to rethink extension’s role based on an awareness of the ways in which farmers integrate technological information with other aspects of farm management. Extension has a profoundly new role to play in this decision-making. Approaches are suggested which acknowledge and analyse the pluralistic context in which farmers and extension agents live. The paper closes with some recommendations on how this reorientation of extension institutions can be supported.

Challenges for Extension in a Complex Environment

Extension is one of the few forums where governmental and NGO staff actually meet face-to-face with farmers to consider natural resource management decisions. As such, it is an institution through which poverty alleviation, environmental sustainability, gender equality and even democratisation goals can and should be addressed in a practical and concrete manner.

In the past it was assumed that successful extension meant that costs were lower than the value of the production increase resulting from adoption of the technologies being extended. This simple, seemingly common sense assumption is gradually being discarded.

Environmental sustainability, poverty alleviation and empowerment are objectives which require indicators highlighting a social process. These objectives cannot be directly correlated with aggregate production targets (Box 1).

Another simplistic assumption of earlier extension approaches was to equate success with adoption of whatever technology extension was promoting. Extension's role was simply to close the gap between what the farmers now do and what they 'should' do. Extension was automatically assumed to know what was best for the farmer. Farmer *adaptation* of technologies to local conditions, or discovery that there was a need to adapt the overall research and extension agenda to unexpected or changing farmer priorities were considered failures if *adoption* was the only measure of success.

An alternative to these approaches is to refocus attention on extension as a communication process. Are extension agents and farmers talking and listening to each other? Are they jointly and critically reflecting upon the applicability of the technologies at hand?

Box 1. Evaluation or Elitism?

Quantitative and cost-benefit evaluation of the impacts of extension investments can cause the extension service to adopt an elite bias. There are several reasons for this.

1. Administrative and logistical costs are lower in relation to potential production increases with wealthy farmers due to larger and more fertile landholdings. The extension agent needs to meet fewer farmers to achieve production objectives.
2. Diversified farming systems (such as home gardens), which are generally found to be more viable for poor and women farmers, are difficult to aggregate and quantify, and therefore are likely to be ignored.
3. Subsistence production is also difficult to measure, thus creating incentives for extension to direct efforts at cash crop production.
4. Use of many sustainable agricultural methods encourages optimal and stable production. Quantitative measures have a built-in bias toward high-external-input methods which maximise production through potentially unsustainable techniques.
5. If evaluation parameters based on production goals have been pre-set, the empowerment of farmers to change the extension agenda to meet their own needs will be judged as a failure of the project, rather than evidence of readiness to absorb feedback.

All of these points emerged in our small project in the Mekong Delta. The objectives of the project were qualitative and process oriented, which made everyone nervous. It was not clear how we would monitor the process of trying to target the poor without relying on production figures. There was a lively, ongoing discussion of whether we should change the objectives, and thereby accept a certain shift away from the poor, in order to make things more easily evaluated. In the end, one of the most important 'outputs' of the project was an increased awareness of how traditional, quantitative targets rule out the investment required in developing a relationship with the poor.

What is Extension, and For Whom?

In a given village, poor farmers may be small-holders, labourers, pastoralists, or merely food aid recipients. Individuals may even combine and shift between these survival strategies depending on the weather, conflicts and conditional access to resources. The question which emerges is how extension may follow the changing needs and strategies of the target group with appropriate technologies.

The complexity within the farm and diversity among poor farmers mean that extension should redirect attention to adapting technologies, since few technologies are appropriate for direct adoption by the poor. Extension must broaden its definition of the 'farmer' if it is to serve the poor. Whilst extension cannot be responsible for poverty alleviation, it should, however, position itself within the farmers' own poverty alleviation strategies.

Box 2. What is Extension?

Extension is communication. In essence, the basis of extension is the two-way flow of information between farmers and those advising them, be they governmental extension agents, NGO field staff, traders, input vendors or others. In addition to information about farmer needs and new technologies, this communication also often involves providing farmers with a knowledgeable discussion partner, with whom they can consider complex decisions about their livelihoods.

In many contexts it is difficult to extract information from other service functions which extension agents generally perform, such as managing credit or input supply. Many have recommended that extension focus entirely on information. This is difficult in practice. Farmers' demands for technological support rarely differentiate between information and other related services. Information gathering and the management of resources are integrated within one broad integrated activity called farming. In Vietnam, extension agents were embarrassed to even call meetings with poor farmers if those farmers had no access to credit. The extensionists (and even researchers as well) realised that any discussion of technological change was part of a broader, on-going dialogue about how to come up with the cash required for investments in land preparation and inputs. Even low-external input methods, such as integrated pest management, were only of interest to the poor within this broader discussion, since all new methods need to be put in the context of choice and access to inputs.

The conflict between Green Revolution approaches and the interests of poor farmers has led many to realise that interventions for sustainable agriculture require a deeper analysis of social context. Low-external-input agriculture requires open, two-way communication even more than other methods because such approaches are anchored in, rather than replace, the existing farming system. High-external-input agriculture essentially supplants the system which the farmer is already using, and can therefore sometimes be effectively extended as ready-made packages. Low-external-input methods involve rearrangement of existing elements in the farming system, and can only be adapted through an understanding of how those resources are presently being used. It is easy to explain to a farmer how to use pre-mixed pig fodder. It is more difficult to analyse how much protein and energy are available

in the scraps currently being fed to the pig, and even harder to take into consideration the choices farmers make between feeding their pigs and feeding their children (Christoplos, 1994). Extension agents must therefore act as discussion partners, and not just as channels for research results, if sustainable agriculture is to be supported.

It is within the relationships among farmers, extension agents and other rural service providers that constructive communication about rural livelihoods should be fostered (Box 2). In the current rural development debate, extension workers and farmers tend to be reduced to being bearers of models, not thinking and acting individuals faced with overwhelming challenges. Reconsideration of extension's mission must be based on an awareness of their concerns and mundane tasks.

Meeting the needs of the poor and building on local readiness to explore technological change also demand that extension be ready to address emerging crises, such as droughts, crop diseases and wars (Box 3).

Box 3. Extension and Crisis

Disaster relief and rehabilitation exemplify circumstances where extension agents should adapt to new challenges and new work environments. In rural emergencies, actors need to be brought together in *ad hoc* coalitions to address rapidly changing agricultural problems. Restocking of herds wiped out in droughts, replanting after floods, and assistance to intense vegetable production in urban areas under siege in wartime are areas which call for extension participation. Readiness to step out of traditional relief-development divisions is vital for developing trust among farmers who find themselves in a situation where they are desperate to use any links with service institutions. The platform approach (described below) becomes a life and death matter.

It has been found that mediocre extension agencies sometimes function *better* when addressing emerging crises. In her research in Brazil, Judith Tendler observed that formerly weak extension and research structures sprang to life when crop diseases brought different actors together to address a common, pressing problem (Tendler, 1993). In a recent major study of the role of farmer organisations in extension, ODI found that they *only* became involved in the search for new technologies when their constituents were facing a crisis such as a drought (Carney, 1996). Many NGO successes in agricultural extension may be attributed to the fact that they became involved in the extension system in the wake of major disasters, and therefore were able to take advantage of a dynamic atmosphere, where coalition building came naturally to a variety of stakeholders.

This empirical evidence raises fundamental questions about how to approach institutional development (Roche, 1994). Would extension agencies perhaps be better off readying themselves to joining in *ad hoc* efforts to solve emerging crises, rather than planning more 'sustainable' programmes? If so, what would such a 'disaster preparedness' approach to agricultural extension entail? How can we encourage the type of entrepreneurial managers who dare step out of formal structures and mandates to hustle resources to meet unexpected needs and sudden client demands?

Extension Within a Complex Social Context

Diffusion of new technologies occurs within 'knowledge spheres'. The 'community' is a highly fragmented entity, where social relations, power, gender, kinship, differing farming systems and a myriad of other factors limit the supposed smooth diffusion of technological innovations (Long and Long, 1992). A basic assumption of traditional extension approaches was that even if a technology is first adopted by wealthy men, it will eventually diffuse to poor women. Though few make such claims openly today, most extension institutions are still structured on such implicit assumptions. Particular and explicit emphasis must be placed on analyses of the existing knowledge spheres in order to expose these hidden assumptions and to meet objectives related to poverty alleviation, gender and addressing the problems of fragile environments.

One of the most common criticisms of agricultural extension programmes is that they fail to reach the majority of poor farmers simply because the majority of poor farmers are women, and extension agents do not work with women. Looking deeper into this critique, one quickly realises that the gender issue often reflects other critiques of extension. Extension tends to focus on exports, cash crops, grain crops, monocropping, input promotion, large animals and large-scale farms. Women frequently farm for subsistence. They often integrate small stock and horticultural food crops (e.g., cassava, yams and bananas) with low-external-input methods on household plots and home gardens. There is little research into technologies appropriate for women's farming, so extension may be unable to provide appropriate services even if they are willing to try. Extension's gender bias largely parallels its elite bias. Addressing the weak access of women to extension involves more than merely hiring female extension agents, providing gender awareness training, and calling meetings with women. To be accessible and appropriate for women, extension must engage in a broad reform of its technological messages and priorities; and changing these messages and priorities will only be effective if extension is targeted toward women.

Technological change always has social impacts. Many programmes which do not explicitly address the broader role of technological change in community development nevertheless affect local socio-political relationships. Community development is an ongoing process which does not necessarily need to be linked to a project. A seemingly simple attempt to transfer technology may result in conflicts within the community.

Platforms for Sustainability

The realisation that technological change involves more than an individual farmer choosing whether or not to buy a bag of fertiliser has led to a new way of conceptualising extension, referred to as the *platform approach* (Röling, 1994). The complexity of rural development demands that farmers, their neighbours, input salesmen, local officials and other actors meet and negotiate to arrive at joint decisions for addressing complex problems of natural resource management. Extension should play a key role in this process by initiating, organising, participating in and following up on these platforms. Many new participatory planning and networking methods, such as participatory rural appraisal and integrated pest management, essentially consist of methods with which to operationalise the platform

concept. These methods are a good start, but questions remain about how to move from creating a platform within a specific project to creating an enabling environment for continued collaboration among different actors with different agendas (Box 4). There is a need to move beyond thinking about platforms for projects, to focus more on mobilising platforms within a pluralistic institutional environment. This methodological challenge requires special attention.

Box 4. PRA, Platforms and Process

Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) is becoming increasingly popular as a practical way for extension agents to initiate platforms for different stakeholders to consider the broad implications of technological change. In the project in Vietnam, the PRA process turned into an opportunity for individual farmers, researchers, extensionists, local officials, an NGO and the farmers' and women's organisations to come together to discuss technological change. Discussions in the hamlets brought all these actors together as an 'event', but afterwards the extension agencies lost interest. They had their own programme, and the 'project' which emerged was perceived as belonging to another agency. The ideas for new activities which came up in the PRA discussions did not fit the routines of the extension structure. Farmers presented demands which the extension service could not address, and participation in the project would only confront the agents with expectations they could not fulfil.

New methods such as PRA have proven very effective in creating platforms while they are occurring, but experience is less promising in creating sustainable bridges across administrative boundaries. Engendering community ownership is one of the central aims of PRA, but further analysis is needed of how ownership can be developed in the extension service itself (or among other strategic actors in a pluralistic environment), when 'projectised' aid inevitably focuses on a 'lead agency' or 'project holder'.

Outside support to extension institutions is often placed within integrated projects in order to fuse efforts around the specific problems which the project is intended to solve. In an integrated project, the project agenda, be it soil conservation or food security, is given the resources and a structure to override the many pre-existing agendas of the different actors in the field. A paradox of integrated projects is that they are attempts to force formal co-ordination upon institutions which should already be co-operating. All agricultural development, with or without a project, must be based on an ability to co-ordinate credit, inputs, research and marketing. This is true for farmers and true for managers of agricultural development institutions.

Therefore the question is not *if* integration should be done, but by whom, and how? Should development planners try to plan how the various factors will be integrated, or instead merely try to remove the obstacles which prevent farmers and project managers from finding their own integrated solutions?

From this perspective, the three fundamental choices become (1) a donor imposed 'shotgun marriage' among relevant actors (the usual basis of integrated rural development programmes), (2) facilitating loosely-coupled informal coalitions among relevant actors, or (3) supporting the capacity of farmers, as the ultimate *integrator* of all these factors, to pull-

down the collection of services which they see as appropriate for their needs. The first option has been clearly proven to be unsustainable. The second option may be most realistic in many project contexts and may constitute a first step toward empowerment. The third option has proven the most difficult to achieve, but is also the most desirable. A precondition for all three approaches must be an awareness of the pluralistic environment in which farmers and extension agents live and work.

New Approaches to Service Organisations: From Fordism to Pluralism

In isolated rural areas, the only contact that many people have with the State is in the form of agricultural extensionists; individuals who may be the sole government representatives to ever visit the farm. It is through day-to-day relationships with these service personnel that farmers develop a perception of their relationship with the State. For this reason alone, consideration of the role of these front line staff should be seen as more than a peripheral administrative appendix to overall rural development planning.

Extension institutions need to develop and act as *professional service organisations*. This term has become a catchword for new ways of looking at organisations in post-industrial society (Peters, 1992). It stands for a realisation that the foundation of business is no longer the factory. The focus of any successful enterprise should instead be the relationship between customers and the front line personnel who are in direct contact with them. Marketing is not merely an activity to convince customers that they should buy what the factory produces. The factory should adapt to the ideas that emerge from the dialogue between field staff and customers. The parallel to extension and research issues is very strong, but the lessons learned over the years in the private sector have been slow in entering the debate on rural services. Assembly line metaphors (with research as the factory and extension as the delivery and marketing system), dominate extension planning. Extension is still commonly seen as a mere technical link (or perhaps a hitch) in the smooth flow of information products from research to farmers.

Due to *turbulence* in organisational environments, traditional planning approaches tend to constrain field staff who are trying to tailor services to the clients' needs. The State has lost control over many aspects of agricultural production, including pricing, input supply and marketing. Extensionists must be ready and able to adapt their messages on the spot to the actions of local and global private sector actors. Furthermore, public sector extension now operates together with a complex and changing array of non-governmental and private sector service organisations. To avoid wasteful overlap, each must choose a flexible niche.

Extension agents must be allowed, encouraged and *empowered* to be creative in their work with targeted farmers. This can only come about if the extensionists gain personal satisfaction by finding solutions and providing a valuable service to their clients. Many planning methods discourage field staff from achieving such satisfaction. Even new participatory methods may result in complex plans which are 'written in stone'. The agent may be forced to worry more about following elaborate community development plans than about continuing to listen to and please farmers in their day-to-day work. Better methods

for project planning are not enough. More attention must be paid to the creation of learning organisations (Pretty and Chambers, 1993), wherein continuous evidence of farmer satisfaction is the basis for extension evaluation, rather than mere fulfilment of tasks.

It has often been observed that extension services must be able to analyse local farming systems. But it is not clear how this information should affect the daily tasks of the extension agents. It is paradoxical that farmers have complex needs which include integrating a variety of on and off farm production systems, but extension has often been shown to develop more effective relationships with farmers when a simple, singularly focused programme is used. The complexity of poor farmers' problems cannot be addressed by instructing extension agents to promote more complex farming systems packages (Box 5). Extensionists have a better chance of responding to the ever-changing problems which farmers experience if they start by working with a narrowly defined problem, but also have the mandate and back-up to respond to the farming system which reveals itself as the farmer describes that problem. Extensionists should be empowered to adopt a farming systems perspective in their discussions with farmers, without being encumbered by an elaborate farming systems bureaucracy.

Box 5. Farming Systems Problems or Farming Systems Solutions?

In Vietnam I heard many researchers and extensionists lament that "The poor farmers cannot afford farming systems." This statement surprised me at first. Together with the researchers and extensionists, I was observing how the poor farmers were using very elaborate farming systems. It took some time to realise that the 'farming systems' being referred to were actually the complex packages of advice and inputs which usually were developed when the research and extension bureaucracy tried to break away from traditional single commodity approaches. Putting in place all the elements of the farming systems recommendations was far beyond the capacity of both the farmers and the extension service.

The extension agents had no difficulty in getting the gist of the farming systems which the farmers were using, and in seeing what problems they were experiencing. However, the extensionists did not see this type of problem analysis as part of their role in farming systems. For them 'farming systems' was a set of solutions based, not on the people's problems, but instead on a policy agenda to diversify production.

There are many factors in bureaucracies that tie extension to the use of standardised packages. This so-called Fordism (Chambers, 1992) is a central hindrance to reform, since farmers will not make demands, and extensionists will not consider locally perceived needs if both assume that extension only deals with fixed packages. A dominant assumption in traditional approaches to agricultural services is that extension can and should provide farmers with complete packages. This stems from a belief that our projects - as package delivery mechanisms - are the leading factor in rural development. This view is now being replaced by a humble realisation that extension agencies are not alone in influencing choice of technologies. In the end, the farmers will always assemble their own packages. This is the essence of farming.

Acknowledging Pluralism

A key concept in current discussions of various aspects of rural development is pluralism, the realisation that farmers are best served by the broadest possible array of information sources and structures. Agencies which had previously promoted set structural solutions to rural development problems are increasingly acknowledging that, not only did they have the wrong package, but also that the package concept was mistaken. The complexity of rural development demands a plurality of technological solutions and service structures, including a readiness to continuously unpack packages as situations change and become better understood.

If one observes the vast variety of activities going on in any given country which can be called 'extension', it becomes apparent that pluralism is something which has existed for some time. Though it can be supported, it does not need to be 'implemented'. The purpose of focusing on pluralism is to take into consideration the jumble of ongoing activities and, rather than trying to gain control over them, to instead choose niches and to identify common concerns where different approaches may lead to synergy. Awareness of pluralism allows extension planners to admit that they cannot co-ordinate all the variables and perform all the functions.

It is natural to be concerned that loss of control will lead to inefficiencies when different agencies provide similar services. Through acknowledging pluralism, a basis can be found to bring in those outside the official structure to discuss overlaps and co-ordination questions. At present there is a tendency in project plans to pretend that the public extension service is the only service. Acknowledging pluralism in implementing agencies and approaches may focus attention on the platform approach as an alternative conceptual model for adaptive planning and allocation of scarce public sector extension resources. It is a way of moving beyond making wish-lists of all the things we would like the extension service to do. Hard choices must be made about what government services can realistically accomplish, and what should be left to others. Priority setting should be based on discussion of values and principles instead of a drive to implement a model.

Pluralism is not a model, and donors, governments and NGOs are structured to implement models. Because of this, the call for pluralism raises more questions than it answers. What does pluralism mean to the lone consultant working together with government colleagues to design a single project? Even if pluralism is acknowledged to be 'good', how does it fit into the project cycle? What can a single donor with a small project portfolio do to cultivate pluralism? Can the advantages of unified extension structures be combined with preserving pluralism? How does one support pluralism while avoiding donor Balkanisation of extension services, whereby each province uses a different structure funded by a different donor? How does one extract the *principles*, which should be the basis of national extension policy, from the potpourri of structures, models and methods which overwhelm the extension debate?

Behind many of these questions are the fundamental issues of (1) whether we can achieve constructive co-operation among organisations without the trappings of control which usually accompany co-ordination initiatives, and (2) how can we retain a focus on our basic

development values of fostering equity and diversity while accepting that we cannot ensure that these values govern the contexts in which we work. These are questions which have no universal answers. Extension is but one example of this issue which is central to the overall re-assessment of the roles of the State, civil society and donors in all sectors (Hulme, 1994; Farrington and Bebbington, 1993).

Addressing Pluralism Through Extension and Research Staff

Discourse on the role of extension is shifting from a debate over design of the ideal public sector extension system, to a growing acknowledgement that extension is happening all the time, in a variety of institutional and social contexts. The question is no longer how the State should administer a national agricultural knowledge and information system, but rather how government agencies, NGOs and others can support the agricultural needs of specific social groups and meet specific objectives. Grandiose planning is giving way to an effort to understand and influence (rather than design and control) social processes. Pluralism is not a call to expand our planning efforts (as is often suggested). It is an acknowledgement that our plans are not the only ones out there.

A humbler approach to exploring these processes is to focus on the motivations of the extension agents. A frank assessment of most extension services reveals that we can no longer assume that extension agents feel obligated to follow directives. When staff salaries shrink to insignificant levels, and visits from supervisors become rare, vertical links consequently become weaker. If we look up from the formal plans and structures, and instead try to understand the pluralistic world of the extension agent, we may begin to understand the complex horizontal pressures and incentives which are increasingly dominating their working environments.

If weak States are not capable of controlling the behaviour of isolated field staff, this does not mean that we should abandon the objectives of either discouraging extension staff from taking bribes or encouraging them to adhere to programme objectives. We must rather think far more about *why* they may choose to do so. We must take into account the professional self-esteem and the ethical concerns of field staff. The motivations of extension agents are, however, only viewed as a *problem* by most extension planners. Their 'rent-seeking behaviour', where the agents only look after their own interests, is described as leading them to working with the wealthy, or not working at all. The obvious answer seems to be constrain this rent-seeking behaviour, which in turn creates situations where field staff become frustrated and demoralised. Most extension agents sincerely want to be respected in the community by finding solutions to their clients' problems. It is our task to identify ways to strengthen these links between the satisfaction of the extension agent and the satisfaction of the farmer (Antholt, 1991). We must concentrate more on how we can help them achieve this respect, rather than merely looking for ways to prevent them from doing wrong. *Good governance can only emerge by building upon, rather than suppressing, the motivations of field staff.* They must be seen as the solution, rather than the problem (Tendler and Freedheim, 1994).

The pluralism related issue which has received greatest attention over the years is the question of how research and extension institutions can collaborate more effectively. In most extension contexts there is a broad gap between researchers and extensionists, caused by unequal status; administrative divisions; different objectives and reward systems; different organisational cultures; and logistical problems hindering face-to-face contact (Kaimowitz, 1990). Attempts to address these dysfunctions have often emphasised feedback loops to research from farmers via extensionists. This approach is based on faith that feedback loops can change the internal dynamics of research and extension institutions. This has proven to be over-optimistic. Experience has shown that such feedback loops usually represent minor additions to the set of tasks that an extension agent should perform. Telling an extension agent to give feedback by writing another report every month will do little to address this fundamental problem. Instead, it is better to consider the practical incentives which may encourage collaboration between researchers and extension agents.

It is the motivations, values and work situations of researchers which isolate them from extensionists and vice versa. It is here where the solution must be found. It is essential that incentives and forums be designed for face-to-face contact among researchers, extensionists and farmers. For example, research-extension-farmer linkages can be reinforced by supporting programmes structured around participatory on-farm trials.

A New Role for Extension

The preceding sections have shown that if extension is to reach and support the poorest farmers, it must operate within an institutional setting which embraces pluralism. If farmers themselves are to pull down the services they need from a variety of institutions, new attitudes toward structural reform are required. We must find a way to admit that we cannot control the system, while at the same time being more explicit about our values. The following strategic questions set out the challenges faced by demand-driven extension programmes targeted toward the poor, in operational, ethical and policy terms.

1. **Trust and co-operation:** How can an institutional and social environment be fostered wherein extension agents, researchers and other actors in extension develop a commitment actively to explore ways to work together with poor and women farmers?
2. **Targeting and equity:** How can new approaches overcome the elite, high-external-input and gender biases which have affected extension?
3. **Integration:** How can efforts be focused on a realistic set of service components related to information and communication about agricultural technologies, while still maintaining awareness that farmers' needs are far more complex?
4. **Pluralism:** How can one agency work strategically within the myriad of organisations and individuals which provide information and other services to farmers?
5. **The view from the field:** How can objectives and approaches focusing on poor farmers be operationalised by extension agents in their day-to-day tasks?

6. *Costs, capacities and institutional sustainability*: How can extension be reformed in the context of prevailing crises in local government?

It is with some hesitation that this paper is concluded with a list of recommendations. Such lists tend to be used as a replacement for the dialogue which must be the basis for finding a way for extension to help farmers in pluralistic environments. This is not to say that concrete strategies are unimportant. The following points are intended as a guide for local actors, above all the extension agents themselves, to consider what specific strategies they wish to pursue in their own context.

Supporting Pluralism

- Pluralism should be encouraged by acknowledging that a broad variety of structures providing extension services are already in place in any rural development context. Pluralism is not something which a development agency can 'implement'.
- Pluralism is best promoted by refocusing national level efforts on vision and principles, while leaving methodological decisions to a broad spectrum of service-providing organisations.
- Failed models of controlling the vast and complex array of private, public and non-governmental institutions providing agricultural services should be abandoned. Instead, constructive co-operation in favour of chosen target groups should be supported. Methods such as participatory rural appraisal have proven effective for establishing platforms for including target groups in negotiating access to the services which they need.
- The various new participatory methods which lead to platform approaches (e.g., PRA) represent a fresh start for supporting pluralism. More attention, however, needs to be paid to exploring how the platforms thus initiated can be fostered over time and beyond project contexts.

Reaching the Poor

- Real reform of the agenda for agricultural services involves first admitting where research and extension currently have little to offer target groups such as the landless, refugees, pastoralists and women with home gardens; but then to see this as a challenge to establish a new agenda, rather than an excuse to fall back on merely supporting wealthy farmers.
- Meeting the needs of the poor and building on local readiness to explore technological change demand that extension be ready to address emerging crises, such as droughts,

crop diseases and wars. Entrepreneurial management and flexibility are key factors in enabling extension to respond to sudden change.

Institutional support

- Encouraging professional pride and personal satisfaction derived from performing a valuable service for clients should be a key factor in the working environment of extension agents.
- The quality of extension services depends on the quality of management. Good management structures should emphasise the need and skills for managers to network with relevant stakeholders, to obtain needed resources, and to adapt activities to the changing agro-ecological and socio-political environment.
- Extension agents work best if they start with simple, single issue programmes, but are then encouraged to respond to other emerging needs. Agents should not be burdened with implementing complex, multiple component projects, but there should be a farming systems oriented support structure (research, subject matter specialists, etc.) ready to address the complex problems which emerge in farmer-extensionist dialogue.
- Extension plans should be realistic about the prospects for administrative control of the behaviour of extension agents. These efforts may even be counter-productive if they make field staff more concerned about keeping their superiors satisfied than being accountable to their clients. Instead, positive incentives should be put in place for extension directed toward the poor.

Farmer-extensionist-researcher relationships

- The emergent property of the extension-farmer relationship is trust. This must be nurtured by structures which help extension agents to follow the dynamics of changing farming systems, including shifting along the relief-development continuum, responding to pest outbreaks, and helping farmers to obtain access to other services such as input supply and credit.
- The relationship between farmer and extension agent should be enhanced by experimenting with mechanisms which strengthen the power of target groups of farmers to pull-down services, and by making the extension agent accountable to clients. Providing funds to organisations of poor farmers to contract their own research and extension services may be a way to implement this objective.
- It is naive to expect that researchers, extensionists and farmers can be brought together as 'equals'. It is more appropriate to take into consideration prevailing power

relationships, so as to devise realistic approaches for enhancing the power of chosen target groups at agricultural development interfaces. Putting the different values of different actors 'on the table' in open and ongoing discussions (i.e., the platform approach) should be the focus, rather than merely emphasising project objectives.

Evaluating new approaches

- Simple cost benefit analysis yields little valuable information regarding extension effectiveness and may aggravate existing elite biases. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge that the subjective views of farmers, and evidence of demand-pull are the most appropriate indicators of successful extension projects. More work is needed to develop appropriate monitoring and evaluation methods, using indicators which can be correlated with social processes.

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