

Back on the Agenda: Extension and its Institutional Linkages

Some personal observations on the re-discovery of a key player

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1 Introduction

For some years now one can observe a fascinating phenomenon regarding development issues – poverty, food security, safeguarding the environment. There is wide agreement on the need to tackle these problems and, at the same time, a visible reluctance to commit the necessary funds. In some areas we have even experienced a reduction of resources, particularly in the field of agriculture and, even more so, in agricultural *extension*. While "agriculture" was a main thrust of development activities for a number of decades, even the word itself had more or less disappeared in the last few years from official documents, at least in our own country. For some time, extension was seen as something out-dated, to be replaced by...well, that was not quite so clear.

Fortunately, even though it did suffer from budget cuts, agricultural *research* never underwent this loss of status and the importance of research as a motor of development was never seriously questioned. The system itself proved to be extremely innovative during the last two or three decades, methodologically, scientifically, and organisationally. To name a few key words: the development of Participatory Technology Development, the scientific advances in genetics, the parallel growth of private and public research and their multiple linkages. The dynamics of the research process, the need to permanently respond to changing framework conditions were confirmed. The myth of "sufficient innovations on the shelf which just have to be disseminated to the farmer" lost its basis. Results of change in industrialised countries may raise awareness in developing countries for the need to vitalise research systems (BYERLEE AND ECHEVERRÍA 2002; JANSSEN AND BRAUNSCHWEIG 2003).

I feel that it is the very success of agricultural research which has helped to re-discover the importance of extension. After a prolonged period of down-sizing extension - materially and ideologically – there appears to be some light at the end of the tunnel. For the last 3 – 4 years, a number of questions that had been discussed from the research point-of-view are now being addressed to the dissemination activities within the Agricultural Knowledge System (AKS). It is the intention of this paper to summarise and comment upon issues which I consider of importance, both in terms of theory as well as in terms of practice. Nevertheless, a number of developments are *not* discussed here which are so complex that they would merit in-depth analyses and thus a separate paper: I will just mention the consequences of HIV-AIDS, or the diffusion of GMOs. Interestingly enough, these very serious issues have been discussed politically, technically, and morally but much less intensively in terms of organisational consequences for extension.

Let me start with two general observations and personal judgements. First, the present discussion on extension approaches, problems and solutions is less dogmatic than 20 years ago. Other positions are acknowledged and taken seriously, and that goes for both sides of the top-down vs. bottom-up or the public vs. private factions. Secondly, the discussion is something like a cosmopolitan learning process. It is not anymore the one model that

everyone has to accept but there is evidence for the strengths and shortcomings of many models world-wide which may be taken into consideration. This global view of extension is reflected in the fact that the main questions being asked to the Agricultural Knowledge Systems are similar in both industrialised and developing countries:

How to finance?

How to increase efficiency?

How to increase effectiveness or impact – in particular with regard to the poor?

How to deliver public goods?

Answers to these questions cannot be given separately as they are closely related. In the following, I would like to summarise some of the findings under three headings: New challenges; new organisational or institutional arrangements; and new linkages and players.

2 New challenges?

The question mark in the heading reflects my own scepticism as I can't see any real new challenge. There has neither been a qualitative leap (for better or worse) with regard to poverty nor with regard to natural resources issues. GMOs are the possible exception. Rather, there have been changes in our focus and we may now experience renewed or increased concerns about social and environmental questions which have waited for answers all along.

Poverty alleviation and sustainable food security were formally incorporated into the goals of the CGIAR system in the mid-1990s. This was of great practical importance as it committed all research centres to show the impact of technology development on poverty. The reflection on "pro-poor" innovations became a global phenomenon due to the intensive linkages of CGIAR centres with National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS) and other international bodies, like the World Bank and national development organisations. Unfortunately, there is no corresponding international organisation of CGIAR standing for extension. This may be one of the most important reasons for the lack of a coherent and binding policy statement. For more than a decade, the dominant question concerned organisational and financial points or cross-cutting issues like *gender*, *participation* or empowerment.

Towards the end of the last century things started to change. And although the rest of the document does not refer to poverty issues directly, the preamble of the 1999 Neufchâtel paper nevertheless states that with regard to "Reducing poverty and social inequalities, the sustainable use of natural resources... extension policies can make a significant contribution" (NEUFCHÂTEL GROUP 1999, 7). Three years later FARRINGTON, CHRISTOPLOS AND KIDD (2002) synthesise a series of case studies on extension, poverty and vulnerability and analyse the scope for policy reforms. Looking at extension from the poverty angle produces interesting insights:

- Broadening the definition of target groups by seeing the poor "...at the same time (as) producers, consumers and hired labourers..." (p. 2) and consequently differentiating the innovations to be promoted;
- Re-discovering what they call 'community development'-type efforts to identify 'para-extensionists' (p. x) ;
- A differentiation between pro-poor growth and vulnerability reduction (p. ix).

Many findings and recommendations concern organisational and financial questions and will be discussed later.

To digress a little: A similar development as with the poverty issue can be observed with regard to (integrated) natural resource management (NRM/INRM). Originally a research issue – CHAMBERS defined it incomparably well as "...the problem is neither the farmer nor the farm, but the technology...(CHAMBERS, PACEY AND THRUPP 1989, XIX) - , it is now also an extension problem again. With the participation experience of more than two decades approaches and instruments may have changed but the fairly trivial insight that even good things do not spread automatically has brought extension back as a development partner.

3 Pluralism: New organisational and institutional arrangements

For decades, extension organisations world-wide were rather easy to categorise. In the developing world, they were the out-growth of former colonial patterns. The ministry-based approach in anglophone countries, the sectoral approach in former French colonies – both strikingly similar regardless of the country or region. There was the short-lived *animation rurale*. The US land-grant model had some influence on the agricultural universities in India. There were the state operated extension systems in Europe (and, of course, in the socialist countries) and the singular case of Taiwan where extension was in the hands of the local Farmers' Associations. From the late 1970ies on, the World Bank sponsored Training and Visit (T&V) system experienced an unprecedented spread – further simplifying global patterns of extension organisation. The description by KHIN MAR CHO AND BOLAND (2003) of the Myanmar system holds true for most of the systems in the developing world: "...centrally controlled, bureaucratically oriented, and directed by professional staff...(with)...decisions taken "at the top"."

This fairly open extension landscape began to get increasingly complex during the last two decades, a movement which gained additional momentum in the 1990ies. Two major directions of thought are discernible:

- The commercialisation of extension services, consultancy replacing advisory work;
- The growth of so-called non-governmental organisations (NGO).

The rationale behind these approaches was different although it can be safely assumed that the initial discussion was triggered by some of the same reasoning. Both directions of thought responded to a lack of public resources for rural development in general and extension in particular. While the arguments for privatisation are largely concerned with *efficiency* issues, those in favour of NGOs stress impact factors, i.e. *effectiveness* in reaching specific objectives, for example gender fairness or pro-poor extension programmes. There are, however, a great number of cross-cutting issues: Funding and cost-recovery, decentralisation and subsidiarity, public or private delivery, and others.

These issues show that today the simple differentiation between NGO vs. commercialisation alluded to above does not sufficiently represent reality. The global extension situation is much more complex. RIVERA (2001 AND 2003) has been able to summarise and categorise the present state of extension reforms in a strikingly simple matrix. His central idea is separating the *delivery* from the *funding* function and then looking at the role of public or private providers.

Funding			
Delivery	Public		Private
	Public	A Decentralisation	C Cost Recovery
	Private	B Subsidies & Contracting	D Commercialisation & Privatisation

Adapted from RIVERA 2003 p. 7

Here are some examples for the different cases (RIVERA 2003, pp. 7+8):

- **Case A** covers moves towards decentralisation and deconcentration, applying the subsidiarity principle by giving the authority over extension to the lowest possible unit – the state, a university, a community. Reforms of this type have been carried through in Egypt and some Latin American countries.
- **Case B** includes various forms of subsidies to farmers in order to contract private advisors. This was, e.g., the original model when extension was privatised in a number of East German states after 1990. It may also include direct payments to local communities or NGOs to run their own development-cum-extension programmes.
- **Case C** is typical for cost-recovery approaches. Here, public extension advice is offered but farmers have to pay for some or all of the services received. In reality, we can find most of the non-commercial extension systems in this category. Both, in the USA as well as in Europe most public extension organisations are charging for some services while others are still free of charge.
- **Case D** covers the fully privatised and/or commercialised extension services, e.g., of the Netherlands, England, New Zealand and the German state of Brandenburg. Potentially, private consultancy firms may acquire public money to undertake public goods advisory activities but most of their revenue will come directly from their clients.

It is interesting to note that the federal system of Germany has produced organisational forms for all four cases – including the mixed forms mentioned. HOFFMANN (2002) has pointed out that reforms have often been without clear perspectives, half-hearted and in some cases counter-productive. He also insists that the problems to be solved are increasing and are more complex than ever before. RIVERA in his aforementioned study comes to the conclusion: "...that no single political or institutional strategy is dominant in the reform of public sector agricultural extension. In short, there is no formula for reforming extension." (RIVERA 2003, p. 8)

To expand on this observation: The central question is not which of the above mentioned cases is better than the other but which model (case or combination of cases) helps to achieve which societal objectives. FARRINGTON, CHRISTOPLOS AND KIDD (2002) have come up with a number of policy recommendations within the framework of poverty reduction. They see, e.g., a strong role of governments in strategy and policy formulation. It is obvious that market-driven reforms like the one in the Netherlands will minimise government interference. A plurality of objectives will, therefore, demand a plurality in extension organisation. In our view, in the present situation there is no proof which organisational form or which combination of forms will best serve which objective. We seem to know the shortcomings of traditional systems, i.e., what does *not* work, but it is far from clear whether the proposed alternatives can sustainably solve the problems they were originally designed for.

4 Agricultural Knowledge Systems revisited: New linkages and players

A first conceptualisation of the Agricultural Knowledge System (AKS) was research biased in terms of knowledge generation. Feed back from farmers and extension was largely seen as a means to influencing decision making and as a corrective element with regard to innovations (NAGEL 1979). RÖLING (1988) has pointed out that this view underrates the knowledge generation function of farmers, a function which has been widely documented in the last decade. In this paper I would like to comment on another aspect which merits reconsideration and expansion.

Three main players (= sub-systems) were identified in the original concept - research, extension, farmers – and all three were assumed to communicate through forward and backward linkages. Based on empirical research on the Fiji Agricultural Knowledge System, BACHMANN (2001, p. 32), has elaborated a platform concept which introduces a number of other actors and specifies the type of linkage. Elaborating the work of RÖLING (1995) and ENGEL (1995) and expanding the three sub-systems he identifies industrial actors, policy makers, donors, markets and trade. This theoretical move towards a more realistic picture of linkages, communication and power relations has direct repercussions for the patterns of extension and opens the debate on a number of issues.

To give three examples:

1. New players must find their exact place on the platform. In many countries, consumers are exerting an important influence, directly (market) or indirectly (policy), on the quality of agricultural produce. How and at what level will they be linked to extension?
2. Environmentalists both outside as well as inside the agricultural/rural sector are another group of players who influence the work of extension. In general terms, the same question we have asked with regard to consumers holds true. The specific problem, however, is about the way in which agro-environmental knowledge, i.e., public goods knowledge, may be handled in cases where demand-driven and commercialised extension models have been adopted.
3. The differentiation of extension clients is still an issue. For decades, we have talked about "target group orientation" only to find that most extension approaches are still too crude to solve individual or group problems. Until now, there seems to be an unbridgeable gap between tailor-made extension and broad-based advisory work for vulnerable groups. This holds true both for developing as well as for industrialised countries. There is a significant increase in urban farming and horticulture as well as in part-time farming. With the possible exception of Co-operative Extension in the USA – which also under enormous pressure – convincing organisational and funding concepts to deal with these groups are missing.

5 Concluding remarks

Extension is back on the agenda. There is a lively discussion on different ways to organise Agricultural Knowledge Systems and particularly the extension sector. Not expecting extension to be the panacea for all rural problems seems to be as common an understanding as the caution against *the one right* organisational pattern. So far, so good. It is necessary, however, to re-iterate the statement made in the beginning on the lack of resources. Unless one subscribes to a purely market-driven knowledge exchange, adequate public funding is as indispensable for extension as it is for agricultural research (WANDER 2003). This is not a trivial question. While we are now talking about the use of information technology in the field and even of virtual extension systems (FAO 2003), most extension field staff in developing countries still lack the most simple communication tools, are underpaid and lack proper

training facilities. It may sound like an academic question if we ask ourselves whether conventional extension ever had a *real* chance to fulfil the expectations it was confronted with in the past. We know it has failed in many ways, but do we know yet why? One should not forget the T&V euphoria of some 20 years ago and fall into the same trap. Unless we critically analyse and carefully manage the implementation of approaches that are presently being favoured we will simply repeat mistakes of the past at the expense of the farming community.

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