Commentary

Contemporary Experiences in Extension Reform: Insights from Pakistan and Mozambique

William M. Rivera
Associate Professor
College of Agriculture and Natural Resources
3119 Jull Hall
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742
E-mail: wr@umd.edu

Abstract
This commentary draws on the insights of two books, one on Pakistan and the other on Mozambique. Both describe contemporary experiences with privatizing extension. In Pakistan the World Bank advised the government to shift from public to private sector extension, but this strategy failed to reach small farmers. In Mozambique the World Bank in association with the Food and Agriculture Organization recommended that the public sector should fund private sector delivery of extension, but officials there have decided to study whether such a strategy will adequately build a national extension system. In considering the findings of these two country case studies, this commentary examines the policy background that led to the trend toward privatization and then reviews the more recent convergence of views on extension reform. It concludes with some general comments.

Keywords: Agricultural Extension, Privatization, Extension Reform, Trade Liberalization, Pakistan, Mozambique
Introduction

Extension worldwide currently operates in a reform-oriented arena. One reform strategy, promoted by the World Bank and other international organizations, is that of privatization. Is privatization a practical approach to meeting the demand for information by all or only some producers? Is privatization an adequate approach to building a national system of agricultural extension?

Two exceptional and much needed books in our field have appeared which respond to these questions: Privatization and the crisis of agricultural extension: The case of Pakistan by Davidson and Ahmad (2003), and Mozambique’s experience in building a national extension system by Gemo, Eicher, and Teclemariam (2005). The present commentary speaks to the issues they raise.

How did we get here?

We are more conscious than we were two decades ago that extension operates in an ideological context. The current trade-liberalization context influences the way we think and indeed for many of us has changed our thinking radically, particularly regarding the role and purpose of public sector agricultural extension systems and the involvment of the private sector. Even though the large majority of extension services in developing countries are still provided by public sector, “privatization in the context of national reform of rural extension services systems is an important strategic component…” (Connolly, 2003, section 2, intro.). In The Netherlands, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, extension has already been completely privatized or commercialized. In developing countries, however, the push tends to be toward “partial” privatization whereby the public sector funds and the private sector delivers extension services, usually through outsourcing, i.e. via contracting, arrangements (Rivera & Zijp, 2002).

The ideology toward public sector production and services changed in the 1980s. This ideology is encapsulated in the Washington Consensus (Williamson, 1990), which reflects the commitment to trade-liberalization reforms that began to be undertaken from the mid-1980s. The proposed reforms include privatization of state enterprises, including public sector agricultural extension services. Davidson and Ahmad suggest that the privatization reform measure reflects the trends in the 1990s toward “economic rationalism’ and partisan ideology.” Mathews’ (1997) article titled “Power Shift” notes the transition from public sector to private sector hegemony along with other globalizing and technological developments that tend to reduce the authority of the nation state.

The image of the nation state was seen as flawed, viewed as an inefficient intruder into individual choice and an impediment to human liberation (Davidson & Ahmad, 2003). In its place, a market orientation prevailed and this perspective shaped anew the way international officials began to think about society and social relations, and gradually set the context for major reforms of public sector extension.

During the 1980s, there was also a growing proclivity toward “technology transfer” extension, as evidenced by the World Bank’s adoption of the Training and Visit (T&V) Management System. The T&V approach advanced rapidly from pilot projects in Turkey and India in the late 1970s and early 1980s to become ultimately in the 1990s the basic system in over 60 countries worldwide. T&V is an example of a major effort to implant a system into developing countries without the necessary analysis of individual country situations and needs. T&V, though useful, proved to be rigid, costly, and in many cases adverse to local cultural traditions. When the problems of the T&V model began to be recognized, especially in many of the 22 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, World Bank officials came under censure. Without a repayment
model, in line with the “cost recovery” principle being promulgated in the late 1980s and 90s, T&V was seen as an embarrassment to the World Bank. At that point Bank officials changed direction and began to argue for decentralization and privatization of public sector extension systems.

Early in the reform context, there was strong pressure for extension to cross the threshold from “public good” to “private good” arrangements. It was only with the acknowledgement of the vast numbers of people in poverty experiencing food insecurity that eventually some backtracking by international organizations occurred, with the recognition that the public sector did indeed have a role to play in fostering the livelihoods of these 800 million to one billion people. In “Reaching the Rural Poor” (World Bank, 2003), the World Bank modified its privatization position, stating “Extension services will have to be publicly financed in the poorest countries.” But even this modification overlooked the public sector role in promoting “the public good” and ignored the responsibilities that only government (and national government) can, and should, carry out (Rivera & Alex, 2002).

Where are we now?

The Washington Consensus continues to prevail, as do the forces for decentralization of the nation state and the privatization of public services such as extension. Decentralization, privatization, and cost recovery are promoted along with efforts to advance pluralistic networks of public and private institutions. Nonetheless, concerns with rural poverty and the improvement of small-scale farmers’ livelihoods continue to resurface (Birner, 2005; Christoplos & Farrington, 2004; Hazell, 2003).

In an effort to explore the privatization paradigm and to determine whether there was a convergence of views regarding extension reforms, the World Bank, the USAID, and the Neuchatel Group convened a workshop in 2002. The Neuchatel Group, an informal group of representatives of bilateral and multi-lateral cooperation agencies and institutions, is particularly involved in agricultural development in sub-Saharan Africa. Together, these organizations brought to Washington, DC about 70 extension experts representing international donors and practitioners to review contemporary extension reforms and to establish whether there was “a convergence of views” (World Bank, 2002) on basic options for the reform of public sector extension systems. Indeed, a convergence formed around four basic approaches: decentralization, privatization, demand-driven programs, and revitalization of public sector extension. This convergence can be observed in the similar approaches to extension advocated in recent Neuchatel Initiative materials and those recommended in contemporary World Bank and FAO publications.

In addition, the workshop advocated four major areas for development: (1) pluralistic institutional approaches, (2) new funding sources and mechanisms for allocating public funds; (2) new extension challenges and approaches to promoting sustainable livelihoods; and (4) a reformulated role for the public sector in supporting pro-poor extension. In addition, two cross cutting issues were addressed: (i) participatory approaches to extension, and (ii) the use of information and communication technologies. A synopsis of the main findings of the workshop appears in the AIAEE Proceedings of its 21st annual conference held in San Antonio, Texas, under the heading “Extension Reform: the Challenges Ahead” (Rivera & Alex, 2005).

Privatization Outcomes in Two Cases

It is not surprising then that the World Bank and other donor organizations should promote privatization in developing countries. In Pakistan, faced with a large debt loan of US$60 billion, the World Bank recommended that Pakistan privatize its extension services (Davidson & Ahmad,
Davidson and Ahmad (2000) concluded that privatization in Pakistan was feasible and that it would serve the majority of farmers who are small-scale and resource-poor. Davidson and Ahmad found that neither the public nor the private extension systems were reaching the majority of the farming community. Their finding suggests “there is an urgent need to rethink agricultural extension services in Pakistan. Not only must this take into account farmers’ needs and well-being, but it must ensure sustainable agricultural practices that are more cost-effective in the long term and inclusive of environmental imperatives.” They argue “privatization may not necessarily provide the best solution to ‘get agriculture moving’” (p. 132).

Along similar lines, in 2000, the World Bank in conjunction with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), decided to send one of its extension staff (L. Van Crowder) and one consultant (myself) to Mozambique to “To Conduct Baseline Studies for the Analysis of Public-Sector Extension and Outsourced Extension in Selected Districts of Mozambique” within the framework of Mozambique’s National Agricultural Development Program (PROAGRI). PROAGRI, which constituted Mozambique’s first Master Plan (1999-2004), was intended to coordinate what was “a confusing and an uncoordinated arrangement of donor initiatives” (World Bank, 1999).

Again the support for privatization, led by the World Bank, called for reforms toward decentralization of the nation state and for privatization, via outsourcing, of Mozambique’s national extension system. For a detailed review of Mozambique’s PROAGRI, see chapter five in Gemo, Eicher and Teclemariam’s (2005) Mozambique’s Experience in Building a National Extension System. While Gemo et al. are not opposed to the proposition of outsourcing, their study argues that “policy makers and donors should discontinue the promotion of general prescriptions of downsizing, outsourcing and privatizing extension and instead focus on the particular case of a country such as Mozambique” (p. 106).

Lessons from Pakistan and Mozambique

For Pakistan, Davidson and Ahmad (2000) conclude “bold new innovations in extension systems (and development) are required that not only facilitate agricultural development, but ones that do not leave some farmers behind” (p. 142). Failing this, they argue, “It is likely that the agricultural situation in Pakistan and other countries with similar circumstance will worsen in the coming years and the gap between rich and poor widen. Neither Pakistan nor the world can ill afford this” (p. 142).

Are international officials listening? Certainly their influence is often paramount in public policy determinations regarding agricultural extension. However, it may be well to remember at this point that outsider influences have characteristically impacted agricultural research and extension institutions. In the United States, for example, Kloppenburg and Buttel (1987) remind us that the establishment of the public research and extension system in the United States, and generally elsewhere in the advanced countries, is that its impetus did not come from farmers. Private firms, bankers and financiers, and, later, U.S. public agricultural university officials were typically at the forefront of pushing for the expansion and rationalization of agricultural research and extension. Buttel (1991) argued this should be recognized as being less of an historical curiosity than it is a fundamental principle of agricultural R&D institutions….Agribusiness firms, U.S.D.A. officials, and land-grant officials continue to be the major groups that lobby most intensively on behalf of public agricultural R&D programs at the federal level. (p. 54)
Policy and Privatization

The Gemo, Eicher, and Teclemariam (2005) text confronts the political issue by arguing for individual country analysis and consequent development based on experimentation, study and accommodation to specific needs. As they point out, Mozambique uncritically followed in its first Extension Master Plan (1999-2004).

The general prescription of many donors to ‘free agriculture from the state,’ outsource extension to the private sector, and assume that poor farmers can buy their way out of poverty by paying for the services of private extension agents and thereby reduce the size of the public extension service and public funding of extension. (p. 106-107)

The assumption was that over time the private sector would replace public extensionists and cost sharing would reduce total government expenditure on extension.

Davidson and Ahmad (2000) also confront the policy premise for privatization (p. 3 ff.). In their case study, analyzing whether – as recommended by the World Bank – Pakistan should privatize its agricultural extension services, they came to four policy implications: (1) A simple strategy of privatizing agricultural extension will not be sufficient to provide the technology and support required by the majority of farmers; (2) Policymakers should be aware that those farmers who are excluded from public and private extension are forced to seek information from input dealers who may not be well informed or properly motivated to provide appropriate assistance; (3) Urgent attention is required for rethinking extension strategies for Pakistan so as not to exacerbate the growing information gap between rich and poor farmers; and (4) Policymakers need to also consider environmental and social justice outcomes in whatever course of actions is decided upon, using these as yardsticks in addition to conventional economic indicators.

Davidson and Ahmad (2000) ask whether the concepts and emerging practices of participation, education, and pluralism are moving us and “extension science” (Röling, 1988) toward a development ethic (Davidson & Ahmad, 2003, p. 133). They conclude: Nearly fifty years of efforts to stimulate and foster development have met with mixed success. In short, the overwhelming belief that free and unfettered markets will ultimately reduce poverty, reduce inequality, and address urgent problems of environmental degradation continues to shroud development. Little seems to have changed from Lewis’ (1955) dictum that the subject matter was about ‘growth, and not distribution.’ If nothing else, the extreme excesses of corporate avarice over the past two decades, the growing gap between rich and poor, and the threat (reality) of global warming are testimony to the magnitude of the problems we face. Somewhere the ethics of development keep getting lost, resurface and are lost again. Difficult questions must be asked and hard decisions made that will have far-reaching consequences in shaping the economic, political, social and cultural environments in which we live. We believe this is possible and necessary. (p. 141)

Conclusion

Privatization, like other reforms advocated on the basis of an ideology or economic premise, need to be analyzed in depth and recognized when and why they may not be the proper or adequate reform measure. As both Davidson and Ahmad (2000) and Gemo, Eicher, and Teclemariam (2005) indicate, reform strategies such as privatization may fail or be questioned as to their value in particular circumstances.

Extension reform is typically advanced in large part through the influence of national and international officials who help to determine what and how extension should or will be reformed. However, as
international educators we have a responsibility to show through our extension research how current reforms are turning out and what are their implications for various farming populations. Ultimately we in the profession have the task of undertaking research, as the texts reviewed herein have done, that advances knowledge aimed at shaping the policy and institutional development of extension.

References


