The Continuing Role of Government in Pluralistic Extension Systems

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Abstract

This paper underscores the position that “strong, effective, and efficient governments are essential to development, for they alone can create the enabling environment required for the private sector and civil society to flourish.” Ismail Serageldin (1996). The scope of public sector roles and responsibilities in extension is reviewed along with an in-depth discussion of ten key interdependencies of government and pluralistic extension systems. Although some countries are reconsidering their public role regarding extension, the developing world is still pressured to limit state involvement except as an enabler of the private sector and as a funding agent for private-sector provision of extension services. However, institutional reform through privatizing schemes such as contracting with the private sector and the establishment of partnerships in the provision of extension services is not always an easy process. The paper posits that within the coming decade, policy makers worldwide will find themselves challenged to confront again the role of national government vis-à-vis extension’s institutional pluralism and the challenges of critical development issues.
“Strong, effective, and efficient governments are essential to development, for they alone can create the enabling environment required for the private sector and civil society to flourish.” Ismail Serageldin (1996)

Contemporary thinking on extension often downplays the role of the public sector—especially of national governments—in agricultural and rural extension activities. This paper introduces a note of caution, arguing that only the public sector can effectively and efficiently carry out certain functions and that, indeed, only national governments can assume those responsibilities that affect the state as a whole. For example, only governments—national governments or state/provincial governments in large countries—can assume responsibility for ensuring that extension services deliver needed public goods and only these governments are well placed to promote increased institutional pluralism in extension service provision and oversee the quality enhancement and assurance necessary for rural development.

Most donor investments in extension stress the limitations of the public sector and encourage governments to support private provision of public goods and services. Potential sources of non-market or government failure are very real and include (1) information problems regarding the social benefits of provision of goods or services, (2) the inefficiency of state-owned public provision of goods and services, (3) inability to specify clearly the objectives of state intervention or (4) to devise appropriate rules for implementation, (5) incompatible or multiple objectives, (6) lack of worker incentives, and (7) lack of financial accountability (Smith and Thomson, 1991). Nonetheless, international organizations such as the World Bank have recognized that a pluralistic system of complementary extension services does not exclude the state (World Bank 1997) and that the public sector has a special role to perform in small farm development when this role is not fostered by the private sector, and. Indeed, this special role when performed successfully can be as important for economic development as for social equity (Bennett 1994; Cary 1998; IICA 1997; Rivera 1997; Rivera & Cary 1997, Swanson 1997). Some argued early on (Rivera & Gustafson 1991) that the impact of multi-institutional activities would create new roles and responsibilities for public sector agricultural extension.

The Scope of Public Sector Roles in Extension

Extension is—conceptually and in practice—more than it used to be. Its function and tasks are increasingly assumed by multiple public and private organizations. In some developed countries, and in countries where extension reform has been pursued, a pluralistic “complex” of extension providers now exists -- including non-profit non-governmental organizations, for-profit private companies, farmer organizations, commercial individuals and associations of extension specialists, as well as national, state and municipal extension services.

Extension is increasingly seen to consist of a range of services providing knowledge and information to rural people to enable them to modify their behavior and use of technologies to improve their livelihoods. These services are now recognized to be a function of both public and private agencies and institutions, and it has become clear that extension is
not necessarily a government program, but rather the complex set of institutions whereby rural people obtain new knowledge and information. As Maalouf, Contado and Adhikarya (1991) noted early on, no matter what the changes in funding or management, public sector extension alone would never attend the entire demand for extension services by the world's farmers.

The complexity of demands on extension has notably increased. In high-income as well as middle- and low-income countries, governments have started shifting their focus from that of increasing total production of basic foodstuffs to that of confronting related rural issues, such as the management of natural resources, rural development, the environment, and health. Poverty reduction and income objectives are replacing commodity production objectives. Both public and private extension institutions are important in responding to these critical public interest issues. Research in Bolivia, Colombia, India, Nicaragua, Uganda and Vietnam suggests that much broader, and more carefully differentiated strategies are required if extension is to reach its potential to reduce poverty among the rural poor (Farrington, et al. 2002).

With the widespread shift towards institutional pluralism in extension systems, the national government’s role in extension will not be the same in every country and will in fact often differ even between countries employing similar strategic approaches. Critical areas of government-extension service interdependencies are summarized in Table 1.

At its best, extension provides government with a vehicle to promote socioeconomic and technical goals, to respond to on-going public-good needs, and to meet unanticipated emergencies and emerging concerns.

**Public Policy Implementation Function.**

Traditional extension activities are often defined by the need to implement public policies that enhance the public good. Achieving policy goals frequently requires the education and mobilization of rural people to change behavior—an objective for which extension may be the best or only tool available to national governments. Four key policy objectives come to the fore—poverty reduction, food security, rural economic development, and environmental conservation. Only national governments with help from decentralized levels of government can respond fully to these public goods priorities. Providing a government presence in rural areas can be important to a wide range of public sector development activities and monitoring and reporting on agricultural production and emerging problems is important to the ability of governments to intervene to the benefit of their citizens. While government presence and intervention may be important it does not follow that these services must be delivered directly by government.

In poorer countries, productivity, growth and equity are recurrent, obvious and urgent concerns. In Africa, for example, agricultural performance has been for the past 30 years the worst in the developing world. Productivity has stagnated and agricultural growth has averaged two percent per annum, not even keeping pace with population increase. This has resulted in falling per capita incomes in agriculture and increasing food insecurity at both national and household levels. In this situation the public sector must foster investment by
### Table 1: Key interdependencies of government and pluralistic extension systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public policy implementation</td>
<td>Implementation of public policies that enhance the public good often requires the education and mobilization of rural people to change behavior—an objective for which extension may be the best or only tool available to national governments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information collection</td>
<td>Information on agricultural conditions and rural populations can often be collected most easily and accurately by extension agents already active in the field and knowledgeable about the rural areas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dealing with emerging concerns</td>
<td>Diverse new issues emerge on the extension agenda as a result of governments having to address new socioeconomic, political and technical developments, such as environment impacts of non-source pollution, animal welfare, fair business and employment practices, HIV/AIDS, and other human health issues.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Responding to emergencies</td>
<td>Only higher levels of government with the concerted help of local government can respond effectively to many emergencies; extension services are often the only widespread network of external—governmental or non-governmental—presence in rural areas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Risk bearing and sharing</td>
<td>Since government has the ability to bear the burden of risk more easily than can individual agents, government support may be essential in introducing new extension and rural development services, while promoting the institutional capacity of private providers to assume some, if not all, of these services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information provision</td>
<td>Extension services are key users of information on producers, social conditions, production systems, markets, and technologies for planning and implementing extension programs; government endorsement enhances the credibility and reliability of information.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regulation</td>
<td>Even when funding and delivery of extension services is left to the private sector, public sector oversight and regulation is important to protect the public. A regulatory function provides a minimum set of rules and regulations to define conditions under which extension activities can take place and to set some standards for service delivery.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality control and enhancement</td>
<td>Extension services rely on key support services, especially the education and training of extension and technical support from research and other sources of innovation. Government can bring important economics of scope and scale to extension support activities that other extension services providers lack.</td>
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<tr>
<td>System coordination</td>
<td>The government’s convening authority enables it to bring different service providers together to exchange information, develop new partnerships and collaborative mechanisms, and establish acceptable division of labor. This government coordination can improve overall efficiency and effectiveness of pluralistic extension services.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promoting reform</td>
<td>Extension reform requires a policy vision and a national strategy for implementation, whether this involves decentralization, privatization, new contractual arrangements, or user financing. Government must take the lead in defining new approaches and promoting changes in institutional capacity and interrelationships.</td>
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Existing and potential private sector participants and promote technology generation and adoption. In Africa and other developing countries, sustained productivity increase though technical change is likely to be the main engine for the future growth of agricultural income and of the rural economy.
Public intervention in support of technology dissemination is justified by the public good nature of much of the technology necessary to overcome the main constraints to sustainable development. Market failures also result from the limited capacity of smallholders to pay for services and the imperfections prevailing in output, input and credit markets. Market imperfections severely limit farmers’ ability to access new technologies, equipment and inputs. Thus, state provision of goods and services is often indicated where there are (a) natural monopolies that might require either public provision or public regulation of the market, (b) incomplete or absent markets, which tends to be the case in many developing countries, (c) inequities in income distribution, although this raises the difficulty of the incentive problem, and (d) “dynamic efficiencies” by which is meant that government may have access to better information about the future, that it is less risk-adverse, and generally has a longer time horizon than markets.

"One of the principal responsibilities of policy-makers concerned with rural development," according to Tripp (2001), "is to see that agricultural technology is adequately targeted…ensuring that technology is available for various types of farmers and that it supports equitable rural development". He concludes that re-invigorated and efficient public agricultural extension and research systems must ideally be able to interact with the private sector, help provide productive technology to support a robust farming sector, and contribute to the broader goals of enhancing rural livelihoods. A continued focus on promoting technological innovation by public sector extension in developing countries is still essential, as about 80% of the world’s extension services are still provided by the public sector (World Bank 2002).

Alex, Zijp and Byerlee (2001) also maintain that government investments in extension will continue to be needed, to develop (1) sound policy frameworks that provide a conducive environment for investments to achieve desired impacts; (2) clear national strategies that precisely articulate a long-term vision and the national policies, plans, and objectives for extension investments; (3) realistic benefits and expected outcomes that justify the investment; and (4) unambiguous equity programs with appropriate services available to the poor and minorities groups and with a keen recognition that farmers and herders are both male and female (Alex, Zijp & Byerlee 2001).

Information collection function.

The collection and provision of information has definite public-good attributes and can be important to national policy formulation, market development, and good governance. For extension agents – public and private – to facilitate market development, they have to know what the market demands, what the customer wants (Nielson 2002). Governments collect and disseminate information on producers, environmental and social conditions, production systems, markets, and technologies. Such information provides a base for national statistical services, for planning and implementing public and private sector investments, and for monitoring social, economic, and environmental changes. The presumed objectivity of government in compiling and distributing national statistics makes it the preferred, or only, source for much of such data. Since many government statistical services are poorly funded and ill-equipped to collect rural statistical information, especially as relates to agricultural systems, extension services are frequently called on to assist in statistical data collection.
This may be a controversial role for extension as it deviates from the “pure” role of technical advisor, but in practice there is often no one else to gather statistical data and, at least, the extension agents are familiar with the agricultural sector and the area.

In addition to potential roles in collection of “formal” statistical data on agricultural production, extension agents are a key source of informal data collection, being the government’s eyes and ears in the countryside and providing a potential channel for early information on crop and market conditions, security, and a wide range of issues.

**Addressing Urgent New Priorities Function.**

To date, extension's main responsibility has been the transfer of agricultural production information to farmers and farm families. In the future, diverse new issues, some agricultural and others not, are likely to emerge on the extension agenda as a result of socioeconomic, political and technical developments. Emerging concerns include environment impacts (e.g., through non-source pollution), animal welfare, fair business and employment practices, poverty reduction, and rural development. In developing countries non-agricultural concerns are pushed onto extension's agenda, including population planning and HIV/AIDs, while animal and possible human health issues relating to “mad cow” disease recently alarmed European countries. Public extension services may be the only—or most important—tool governments have available to address these new concerns.

In the United Kingdom, five years after privatization of the Agricultural Development Advisory Service, various events (outbreak of foot and mouth disease, mad cow disease, environmental conservation issues, etc.) led the U.K. Government to recognize that its need to communicate with farmers has increased rather than diminished (Garforth 2002). As a result the government is contracting out specific services to the private sector, establishing semi-autonomous bodies, and developing new in-house capacity (specifically the Rural Development Service). Garforth considers this development as probably inevitable given the diversity of the agricultural sector and its importance to national well-being.

Issues such as liberalized trade, food security, poverty alleviation, environmental protection, food safety, animal and plant health, and other formidable tasks (e.g. unanticipated priorities: animal diseases, HIV/AIDS, etc.) confront national government, and cannot be met adequately by local and state (provincial, regional) government, and certainly not by the private sector (Rivera 2001). National issues relating to agricultural and rural information dissemination go beyond the capacity and authority of sub-governments and the private sector to resolve for nations as a whole.

**Emergency Response Function.**

Natural disasters (such as flood, drought and fire), crop pest infestation, and widespread animal and human diseases require emergency response by government. Only higher levels of government with the concerted help of local governments can respond fully to such emergencies and extension services are often the only widespread network of external—governmental or non-governmental—presence in rural areas.
Today, governments are routinely called on to respond to emergencies threatening the lives and welfare of rural peoples. Floods, famine, civil unrest, and earthquakes may be no more common than in the past, but communications improvements bring these to the attention of national governments and the outside world more than in the past. Governments have always responded to such emergencies, but there is now a more clearly recognized moral responsibility for democratic governments and the international community to respond to humanitarian needs in rural areas. Extension services are often immediately and automatically called on to respond to the emergency. This responsibility often results from what Ulrich Beck has termed “the world risk society”, in which risk management as, ‘a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself (1999). Contemporary society, in contrast to previous societies, is characterized by new sources of risk and by a greater ability to respond to and mitigate the impacts of emergency situations.

**Risk bearing and sharing role.**

Government has the ability to bear the burden of risk more easily than can individual agents. Government support may be essential in introducing new extension and rural development services while promoting the institutional capacity of private providers to assume some, if not all, of these services.

Where market failure restricts the ability of individual private service providers to supply an optimal level and quality of services, government intervention may be essential to development of effective extension services. This frequently includes training for extension staff, development of communications products for effective extension, and assembly and packaging of information and knowledge of use to producers. In this, the public sector can frequently exploit economies of scale and scope. Although these services may need to be funded by the public sector, delivery can often be contracted out to the private sector to facilitate development of private services that may become viable and sustainable over the long term.

**Information provision.**

Extension services rely on accurate and detailed information—often available only from government sources—for strategic planning, priority setting, program monitoring, and impact evaluation. For extension agents – public and private – to facilitate market development, they have to know what the market demands, what the customer wants, and what production potential exists in available natural resource, infrastructure, and human capital (Nielson 2002). Governments collect and disseminate information on producers, social conditions, production systems, markets, and technologies, information critically important for planning and implementing private sector extension services.

**A regulating role.**

Even when funding and delivery of extension services are left to the private sector, the public sector retains important responsibilities for certain oversight and regulatory involvement to protect the public and minimize negative impacts on public welfare. This may
be especially important in programs of contracting out service delivery to the private sector, where some key public functions must be provided (Smith and Thomson 1991).

In short, a regulatory function provides a national set of rules and regulations to define the conditions under which activities can take place and to set some standards for service delivery. “Governments have the role, as the vice-president of Uganda (Kazibwe 1998) states, “of developing and implementing efficient and responsible regulatory and monitoring mechanisms in the production, processing, storage and marketing of goods and provision of services at all levels in the private sector.” Regulations should generally provide for minimum restrictions on entry of service providers, but focus on preventing fraud or dissemination of technical or managerial information with potential for significant negative social or environmental impacts.

**Quality control and enhancement**

Extension services rely on key support services, especially the education and training of extension professionals and technical support from research and other sources of innovation. The private sector, as pointed out later in this paper with respect to Honduras, is not generally able to assume the costs of providing these services at an optimal level. Ensuring quality of extension services relies on objective assessment of extension activities and on the economics of scope and scale that higher levels of government can bring to extension support activities. Agricultural research, technology identification, and technical support services are often relevant to all public and private extension services providers. Only national governments with the concerted help of local governments can respond fully to this need to continually train and upgrade extension professionals.

**System coordination**

Extension services oversight is an inherent aspect of the public sector’s responsibilities for policy formulation, safeguarding of public welfare, and development and design of reforms to promote pluralistic extension institutional arrangements. The government’s convening authority enables it to bring different service providers and agencies together to exchange information, develop new partnerships and collaborative mechanisms, and establish acceptable division of labor. Government oversight functions—quality control, regulation, promotion of reform, and support services, such as training, monitoring and evaluation and specialized technical support—legitimize and facilitate the coordination function. This government coordination can be counterproductive, but in the best of circumstances helps to improve overall efficiency and effectiveness of extension services. The larger challenge is to determine how best to oversee and promote coordination of services, and how best to intervene when necessary.

The traditional focus of extension is agricultural production and continues as an important objective in public sector extension programs. However as Bennett (1994) argues, the public sector role extends beyond concerns to promote applied and basic research on new research findings, and includes responsibility to validate commercial information, transfer practices (not just technology), conduct accomplishment evaluations and promote organizational action. For these responsibilities to be met, national governments must
recognize and extend their role to promote sharing of experience and coordination of the multiplicity of extension activities currently operating in their countries.

**Promoting Extension Reform**

Globalization, inextricably linked to privatization, confronts countries with a new and highly competitive global market. Major economic restructuring is taking place in both developed and developing countries, and has greatly changed the balance of responsibility between the public and private sectors (Fresco 2000). In many cases, trade liberalization puts developing countries at a disadvantage in the global market. Technological innovations, such as precision farming\(^1\), are revolutionizing agricultural systems. An expanding agenda and a variety of innovative approaches to extension, progressively being shaped by modern communications and information technologies, have come into being (FAO/World Bank 2000; Rivera 2001; 2002; Alex, Zijp & Byerlee 2002; and Rivera & Qamar 2003).

Public sector roles will change. What is likely to be needed are smaller, but more sophisticated and complex public extension institutions. The evolution of such public sector institutions and of the private organizations to provide direct services to clients will take considerable time, as will the evolution of “market mechanisms” for provision of services and allocation of funding for demand-driven services responsive to various categories of clients. Critical to the public sector role will be defining and driving reform of the overall extension system, drawing on public funding, strategy development, support and regulatory services, and other public policy instruments to shape an new and efficient pluralistic system.

Thus, while there may be a global “power shift” from public to private hegemony underway (Mathews 1997), it is only a myth that nation states have become powerless. On the contrary, the private sector is still dependent on the state’s support of an enabling environment that fosters private initiative. And national governments still set the rules and make the regulations that define the conditions under which activities can take place.

One reason to devise a coherent public sector policy on extension according to Carney (1998) is that “the extent to which other bodies will be willing to provide extension services is partially determined by government actions.” Hence she, like Serageldin in the epigram to this paper, concludes that: “The main emphasis of government policy should be to enhance the enabling environment for non-governmental provision of extension services”. Beyond its enabling function, government is likely to find that its other roles, including the regulation and coordination of a pluralistic complex of extension providers, the gathering of information on the various knowledge needs within the country and the provision of specialized information services to some segments of the population. Thus, some aspects of the role of government might actually need to increase (Rivera & Gustafson 1991).
Certainly the changed world environment, profound changes in agricultural systems, and the resultant changes in extension institutions, services, clients, and content require re-evaluation of the public sector role in extension.

**Concluding Remarks**

Extension reform is inevitable and will continue into the future. National policymakers responsible for societal direction, and international lenders, continue to find themselves called upon to consider, along with extension's commitment to agriculturally related advancements, extension's role in the development of rural economies, social equity, and the protection of the environment. Not just producers, but retailers and consumers will likely become end-users of extension knowledge transfer. In principle this would mean a serious review of public and private sector extension services and demand a more inclusive paradigm for extension.

In pluralistic extension systems, the exaggerated faith in the efficiency of the traditional private sector and non-traditional forms of private organization is subsiding. To date, there has been a tendency to implement reforms abruptly, assuming that markets will develop spontaneously and respond to farmers' demands for extension and information services. Hanson and Just (2001) underscore that universal privatization of extension finds its limitations when market failures occur, such as monopolized supply and incremental social benefits. Additionally, the demand side of the market for extension services has been poorly developed and accounts for much of the market failure in extension service provision. A better balance between market and state roles is pivotal.

Policy makers are and will continue to be confronted by new as well as old and persistent problems. Policy questions will remain as to (a) who should be served, by whom, for what purpose and through which programs--including questions of whether other policy determinations, such as price, markets and inputs are supportive of the extension effort. Organization questions will need to be considered as to extension structures, system planning and management, and institutional development. And if, as in the United Kingdom, national governments begin to reassert their concern to integrate advisory services and to re-create new in-house capacity for advising and informing farmers on new governmental policies and technologies (Garforth 2002), then basic issues of training, field methodology and program development strategies will once again need to be confronted. “Extension reform is a dynamic and permanent process... it is like riding a bike you cannot stop" (Berdegue 2002, personnel correspondence)

International organizations and governments are already anticipating new challenges and new priorities, including rural development, agriculturally related health concerns, the emergence of new clientele and the impact of global urbanization. With the coming decade, if not sooner, policy makers worldwide will find themselves challenged to confront again the role of national government vis-à-vis extension’s institutional pluralism and the challenge of critical development issues. Not only do extension services remain a concern of government, but also continued public sector support for extension is essential to realize urgent social and economic goals. Exciting reforms underway in many countries are attempting to make
extension services more relevant and effective, but the reform process will be a long one. Government and donors will need to stay the course to ensure the evolution of new institutional approaches and foster an appropriate division of labor between public and private sectors and civil society.

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