A PROPOSAL FOR TAKING THE UNIVERSITY TO THE PEOPLE: DEVELOPING AN EXTENSION MODEL FOR RUSSIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

M. Craig Edwards,1 Gary E. Briers,2 Glen C. Shinn 3

1 Visiting Assistant Professor
Instructional Materials Service
Department of Agricultural Education
Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas  77843-2588
Tel.: (979) 845-6601    Fax: (979) 845-6296

2 Professor and Associate Head
3 Professor and Head
Department of Agricultural Education
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX  77843-2116
Tel.: (979) 862-3003        Fax: (979) 845-6296
E-mail: g-briers@tamu.edu, g-shinn@tamu.edu

Abstract

The United States Land Grant University System receives credit for much of the economic and social prosperity that America enjoys. Cooperative Extension, in particular, is associated with the success of the American agricultural and natural resource system. Currently, Russian agricultural producers and rural communities are undergoing extreme economic and social hardships as Russia transitions to a market economy. This paper describes selected philosophical/conceptual bases that support the development and implementation of a “model” extension system in the Oryol Oblast of the Russian Federation. A proposal is discussed outlining three major problem areas to be addressed by the system—structural, information exchange, and skill building. Proposed enabling strategies, organizational units, and anticipated outcomes are described. If Russia’s transition to a market economy is to be successful, the educational and informational needs of its agricultural producers and communities must be addressed. An extension system may be a pragmatic and reliable solution.
Introduction

Since inception in 1862 and addendums in 1887 and 1914, the Land Grant System’s tripartite mission—teaching, research, and extension—has “taken root,” endured, and, by most accounts, thrived in the United States. Arguably, land grant universities have played an irreplaceable role for 140 years in serving the United States of America by creating much of the knowledge base that supports the economic, social, cultural, and political foundation on which the U.S. relies (Campbell, 1995). Historically, the extension components of the systems have been an essential outreach “conduit,” making it possible to “take the university to the people.” Emblematic of this knowledge transfer is the relationship between state Cooperative Extension Systems and stakeholders in the U.S. agricultural, food, and natural resource system, including agricultural production and business entrepreneurs, rural citizens, and the American public at large. Can important elements of this association be transferred to a country such as Russia and, if so, by what means?

Many rapid changes have taken place in the Russian economy since the breakup of the Soviet Union (International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX), 1998; Medvedev & Chiesa, 1989; Piñera, 2000). These changes have been especially destabilizing to Russia’s agricultural sector (Jones, Stallmann, & Infanger, 2000). As a result, there has been a significant decline in Russia’s agricultural production and productivity, the standard of living, and quality of life for many of its rural citizens (Gambold-Miller, 2000). Most farmland in Russia has been privatized. However, few programs have been developed to assist these new “private” farmers or their communities in facing the many challenges associated with “transitioning” to a market-based economy. For example, services and programs comparable to those provided by the U.S. Land Grant Extension model for American farmers and their rural communities have been virtually non-existent in Russia. Scribunova (2000) reported that the Center for Citizen Initiatives, an American NPO, has assisted in establishing Extension “centers” at seven Russian agricultural colleges. So, is it plausible that components of the U.S. Land Grant University System, for example, Extension, can be successfully “exported” to Russia?

To this end, it appears that several critical educational and information dissemination problems could be addressed by an effective extension system, thus increasing productivity and improving the quality of life for agricultural producers and other rural residents. However, Sanchez de Puerta (1994) warned, “there is always a risk involved in copying a model with a complete disregard for the actual socio-economic differences between importing and exporting countries” (p. 8). Yet, if efforts were made to “contextualize” a program to account for Russian “socio-economic” conditions (Jones et al., 2000) and other important “indigenous” variables (Christiansen, 2000), would chances for success improve?

Purposes of the Paper

A primary purpose of this paper is to explore selected philosophical/conceptual bases that support a proposal for developing a “model” agricultural extension system in the Oryol Oblast of the Russian Federation. The model (system), if implemented, would involve the collaboration of Texas A&M University and Oryol State Agrarian University, as well as other project cooperators—three rayons (counties) in the Oblast, the Oryol Oblast
Department of Agriculture, the Russian Ministry of Agriculture, and the USDA. Another purpose is to describe core problem areas (needs), enabling strategies proposed for addressing these needs, plans for project organizational units, and anticipated project results.

**Philosophical/Conceptual Themes**

Ellerman (2000) analyzed societies that were transitioning from centrally planned (command) to market-driven economies (e.g., Russia) and concluded that frequently there were two “approaches to social engineering” at work: “‘Big Bang’ Utopian Engineering” and “‘Gradual’ or Piecemeal Engineering” (p. 238). He likened these variant approaches to social change as being similar to the challenge of repairing a ship while in “dry dock” as opposed to rebuilding one while at sea. That is, the former approach does not have to contend with powerful and dynamic environmental (contextual) forces, while the latter is awash in a multitude of variables inherent to the “context,” and are inextricably linked to the ultimate outcome. Further, Ellerman posited, “the piecemeal approach emphasizes experiments and trial and error to obtain knowledge about the best way to proceed—all the while trying to have the appropriate continuity to preserve the social capital or other embedded institutional virtues” (p. 237). Thus, mindful that the opportunity for stasis or “dry docking” of the Russian nation and its agricultural sector is not an option, the “gradual” or “paving the paths” approach explained by Ellerman (pp. 239-240) undergirds this proposal.

The idea of an agricultural extension service is not a new one for Russia. Sanchez de Puerta (1994) has described the ideas and methods of A.V. Chayanov concerning Russia’s agricultural extension programming needs. Chayanov, a former Russian Deputy Minister of Agriculture, rural economist, and professor of pedagogy during the early 1900s, was deeply interested in the training of “social agronomists” (extension agents) and how they could best perform their role as “science transmission agents for farmers” (Sanchez de Puerta, p. 3).

In working with Russian farmers, Chayanov’s views on andragogical practice were based on a pragmatic philosophy (Moore, 1988) described by John Dewey (Sanchez de Puerta, 1994). Miller (1999) credited Kolb with synthesizing Dewey’s belief that “experience is the process that links education, work and personal development” (n.p.), when Kolb theorized the “learning cycle”: a series of cyclical events “wherein ‘experience is translated into concepts which in turn are used as guides in the choice of new experiences’” (n.p.). Too, Miller concluded that “Kolb’s model provides a rationale for encouraging experiential learning as an essential part of the learning process” (n.p.), including learning undertaken by adults.

Chayanov coupled Dewey’s principles of experiential learning (Fogarty, 1999) with the need for being attentive to the indigenous knowledge or “oral propaganda” deeply held by Russian peasants about agricultural practices. Other researchers (Van Crowder, 1996b; Van Crowder, Lindley, Bruening, & Doron, 1999) concerned with the changing role of agricultural education in rural development have posited a similar contention. Related to these philosophical precepts are postulates of the Russian learning theorist L. S. Vygotsky (Miller, 1999). Vygotsky, a cognitive psychologist, stressed the importance of social interaction (Doolittle & Camp, 1999) in the acquisition of knowledge; his theories are credited as being the foundation for much of the modern constructivist “movement.” Doolittle and Camp hold that one of the three basic forms of constructivism is “social constructivism” (p. 10), which focuses “on shared social experience and social negotiation of meaning”—the “construction
of an agreed-upon, socially constructed reality” (p. 10). Imel (2000) has argued that “contextual learning,” i.e., learning “directly related to the life experiences or functional contexts” (p. 2) of the learner, is grounded in constructivist learning theory and is frequently manifested as “distributed cognition,” where “individuals often engage in collaborative learning activities and draw on resources beyond themselves in their learning” (p. 2).

Examples of “social interaction/negotiation” or “distributed cognition” to arrive at “meaning” could include agent-to-farmer and farmer-to-farmer exchanges, both fundamental extension venues common in the United States. However, unlike the U.S. land grant university model, in the Soviet Union there was a systematic “disconnect” between research institutes, academies, and universities (Fortescue, 2000; Segal, 1997) or what Fortescue described as a “divorce between research and teaching” (p. 228). Regarding the extension of research findings, i.e., transmitting “theory-to-practice” in former communist countries, Brent and Adams (1999) concluded that often “technology transfer was achieved by [and limited to] instructions to agronomists and zoo-engineers on large state farms, by [research] center staff” (p. 1). So, due to previous organizational design—collective farms (kolkhozes)/state farms (sovkhozes) and the concomitant lack of private land ownership and of “private” or independent farmers—the Extension (advisory) professional-agricultural producer relationship, for the purpose of “extending” knowledge and diffusing innovations (Rogers, 1995), is not one with recent historical precedence in Russia.

However, the “Agricultural Knowledge and Information Systems for Rural Development (AKIS/RD)” “knowledge triangle” (Figure 1) (Food and Agricultural Organization, 2000, p. 1) developed and proffered by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and the World Bank, identifies key stakeholders, and their relationships to one another, who could be a part of the proposed agricultural extension system. The AKIS/RD system links rural people and institutions to promote mutual learning and generate, share and utilize agriculture-related technology, knowledge and information. The system integrates farmers, agricultural educators, researchers and extensionists to harness knowledge and information from various sources for better farming and improved livelihoods. (p. 1)

![Figure 1. “Knowledge Triangle” - Agricultural Knowledge and Information Systems for Rural Development (AKIS/RD) (Food and Agricultural Organization, 2000).](image-url)

So, if local conditions are taken into account (Christiansen, 2000; Ellerman, 2000; Sanchez de Puerta, 1994), if collegial partnerships are created (e.g., “twinning,” see Ellerman), if
programs are participatory and guided by client-centered needs (Christiansen; Ellerman; Imel, 2000), if education and training opportunities are experiential (Miller, 1999; Imel), and if sufficient resources are provided to create and sustain the needed human and non-human capital (Shinn & Smith, 1999), what are the core problem areas, enabling strategies, organizational/personnel units, and anticipated outcomes, if a “land grant” extension system is developed, implemented, and sustained in the Oryol Oblast of the Russian Federation?

**Components, Strategies, and Outcomes for the Proposed Extension System Model**

Many of the problems facing rural areas in Russia are structural in nature (Gambold-Miller, 2000; Jones et al., 2000). The structural components of the agricultural system developed under communism need to be redesigned to meet the needs of a market economy (Findley & Price, 1994; Jones et al., 2000; Smith, 1990). Moreover, a significant number of problems facing agricultural producers in Russia are due to a lack of access to information on a local, national, and international basis. Finally, of the numerous problems facing Russian agricultural producers, many exist because there is a dearth of educational programs designed to assist them in acquiring the skills needed to compete in the new market economy. To address these problems an Extension Center will be created at Oryol State Agrarian University, and Extension Offices will be formed in three rayons (counties) of the Oryol Oblast. Project duration is expected to be five years. Each rayon office will have a staff of two or more members. Direct lines of communication will be maintained between the Extension Center and the rayon-level offices (Food and Agricultural Organization, 2000).

Professionals from each country will be combined to create "counterpart" teams (Ellerman, 2000; Christiansen, 2000); teams will work together in a complementary fashion. Team members will come from the various partner organizations, but may also be from outside of these organizations (farmers, agribusiness persons, etc.). The usual size of a team will be six members—three Russians and three Americans. One person from each country will serve as a team co-leader; the two co-leaders will manage the duties of the team. By working together, team members will combine their respective expertise to address the transition problems facing Russian agricultural producers. Teams will evaluate specific problems and then recommend and develop programs to solve those problems (Christiansen, 2000). To assist in this process, it is anticipated that project members from both countries will observe local agricultural conditions in Russia and in the U.S. There will be an administrative team to assist in development of, to oversee, and to evaluate the project.

A priority of the model system will be issues of agricultural production: farm decision-making, farm business and financial management, farm marketing, technology and production management. (Agricultural processing, the development of communities, programming for families, and youth development may be included as well.) For an extension system to be successful, it must meet the needs of its clients. So, an essential component of the project will be the clients themselves. This includes farmers, agribusinesses, and other potential users of the extension system. The clients and users will have an integral part in developing, directing, and monitoring the extension system. For example, "Farmer Clubs" will be created to provide a framework for receiving information and education from the Extension Offices, to provide client feedback on the quality of extension programming, and to recommend future program needs (Van Crowder, 1996b).
The administrative counterpart team will oversee the project’s overall implementation, including program delivery systems, extension program delivery, and extension evaluation. Project members from Russian partner organizations will be designated as "Extension Specialists." The specialists will receive training from their counterpart team members related to the educational programs that the team will develop and implement. They will then deliver these programs to their farmer clients.

Structurally, a new communications system will be created so that information will flow to, from, within, and among rural areas (Food and Agricultural Organization, 2000), for agricultural producers and others to use to improve agricultural production and the lives of rural residents. An educational system will be in place through which agricultural producers will receive technology and skills needed to develop viable business enterprises. Farmers will be organized (Van Crowder, 1996b) to share information and provide a united voice when requesting educational programs from the Extension system. Also, specialists and staff members of the Extension Center and agents at the Extension Offices will acquire and use appropriate communications and educational skills when working with clients.

Outcomes from information exchange will include market identification so that producers will be knowledgeable about local, regional, national, and international markets for their products. In addition, agricultural producers will have access to market information and be better prepared to make informed marketing decisions that will increase the potential for profits (Brent & Adams, 1999). An exchange of local information will enable producers to have access to information on assets for sale and services available. Moreover, an exchange of information among farmers will allow them to interact with one another and learn about superior farming practices from their peers (Van Crowder et al., 1999).

Acquisition of modern knowledge and skills will be another important result of the project. For example, producers will learn record keeping procedures needed to make profitable decisions in the new market economy and financial management skills required to fully utilize and repay borrowed capital. They will also acquire the business and decision making skills needed to compete internationally. Further, extension clients will have access to new technology and the production management skills needed to use it effectively. Finally, owners of individual agricultural plots (gardens) will increase the amount and quality of food they produce (Scribunova, 2000) and improve their food preservation and storage practices.

**Conclusions and Implications**

Undeniably, Russia is an enormous country; it stretches across 11 time zones, encompasses one-twelfth of the earth’s landmass, and shares borders with 14 other nations (Nunn & Stulberg, 2000). Administratively, it has 89 components, including “21 ethnically defined republics and 68 administrative regions” (Nunn & Stulberg, p. 47). This paper explored selected philosophical/conceptual precepts that support a proposal to develop and implement an agricultural extension system in one of these regions—the Oryol Oblast. Three core problem areas to be addressed by the proposed model were identified: structural, information exchange, and skill development. Proposed organizational/personnel units, project strategies, and anticipated outcomes were also described.
Assuming the resources are marshaled to implement this proposal, an extension “model” would be “put into play,” tested, evaluated, and refined, with the aim of solving some of the agricultural problems now being encountered in Russia. Optimistically, the areas of identified concern would be resolved and the socio-economic condition of agricultural producers, rural communities, and the Oryol Oblast would improve. And, these changes would be economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and culturally acceptable. However, the proposed model’s chance for success and degree of transferability to comparable settings remains an open question. Moreover, whether the model succeeds or fails, unforeseen implications may arise, not the least of which could be any number of “unintended consequences” (Christiansen, 2000) that frequently accompany a change of this magnitude. Therefore, Ellerman’s (2000) admonition for “crossing the river by groping for the stepping stones” (p. 234) or “incremental” approach to development is an appropriate model to follow, and should be heeded by all project participants.

**Educational Importance**

Russia will continue to find it increasingly difficult to become a “great” democratic nation without building the infrastructure required to support a functional and responsive market economy (Jones et al., 2000). A fundamental component of this economy is a productive and sustainable agricultural and natural resource sector. Concomitantly, “the task facing Russian universities is to preserve the best of the past, while developing in pace with the rapidly changing environment,” and simultaneously “address[ing] the authentic needs of the participants” (International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX), 1997, p. 1). Central to this objective will be meeting the present and future educational needs of those “participants” who provide the human capital (Shinn & Smith, 1999; Van Crowder, 1996a) for Russia’s food, fiber, and natural resource system. A model for “taking the university to the people” may be a pragmatic and reliable solution. If successful, the Extension model developed and implemented by this proposal could be converted to a permanent system, expanded to other Russian Oblasts, and eventually established as a federal system (Rivera, 2000).

**References**


