Commentary

Communication for Rural Development: Challenge to Diffuse Development Information on Non-agricultural Rural Needs

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Revision of paper prepared for the 9th United Nations Roundtable on Communication for Development
6 – 9 September 2004
FAO Rome, Italy

Abstract

The challenge in this paper is to the international community and development organizations to consider the establishment of systems for diffusing development information on non-agricultural rural needs. I argue that at the same time as there is a need for agricultural knowledge and information systems for rural development (AKIS/RD), there is also an increasingly obvious need for RKIS/RD, or (non-agricultural) rural knowledge and information systems for rural development. AKIS/RD is intended to set forth a shared vision for an integrated approach to agricultural education, research and extension. [See the FAO/World Bank (2000) document “AKIS/RD: Strategic vision and guiding principles” for a full description of the system’s priorities and program.] As part of a RKIS/RD I suggest that community RKIS/RD centers employing communication extension and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) specialists could play a major role in organizing and developing rural program messages and services. Leeuwis (2004) recently informed the “extension” community that Wageningen University has changed the name of its Extension Department to Communications and Innovation, emphasizing in part the social learning role of extension.

Keywords: Communication, Agricultural Extension, Livelihoods, Innovations, Agricultural Knowledge Systems
Introduction

This paper is not about the important contribution of communication support services and technologies employed in agricultural education, research and extension and related agricultural knowledge support systems. Rather, it calls for a parallel or separate system of coordinated rural knowledge and information networks aimed at diffusing development information on non-agricultural subjects, i.e., subjects other than those generally covered by agricultural education, research and extension.

Agricultural services, though sometimes inefficient and even ineffective in some countries are nonetheless in most cases established and functioning, and increasingly pluralistic alliances for extension are being developed. However, except for international communication efforts [FAO is a leader in seeking to connect extension, research, and farmers more closely—through programs such as AgroWeb, VERCON, FarmNet, and the FAO/DFID/ODI joint study on “livelihoods approaches to information and communication in support of rural poverty elimination and food security” (www.odi.org.uk).] and business development services already launched in some countries, non-agricultural services to the rural sector are generally lacking [Publications on promoting rural non-farm employment also draw attention to traditional supply-led project approaches that tend to “emphasize production without due consideration to growth prospects, to what the market really wants, and to what buyers are prepared to pay” (Wandschneider & Davis 2003, p. 7).]. There is a growing awareness that “equating rural areas with agriculture in much development thinking is, and probably always was, false” (Bezemer & Lerman, 2003, p. 2). The approach many development agencies have used in the past incorporating agriculture and rural development under a single office of “ARD” was a pragmatic recognition that these are often closely related but not synonymous.

Extension communication for non-agricultural rural development is needed to promote micro-enterprise development, employment generation, rural community coalitions, and generally address social issues (such as health, nutrition and the environment). In the poorest nations, such as Niger, current employment activities among the poor tend to be limited to crafts, street trade and service occupations (Möller, 1998). In a study of rural livelihoods in Armenia, Bezemer and Lerman (2003) argue that while poverty alleviation programs should first of all include households’ access to resources for food production, such programs should secondly provide “support to local NGOs, credit unions, producer organizations, water use associations, churches and other groups [that] may have positive effects on the income generating capacity of their members,” (p. 14) and thirdly generate sources of wage employment, such as commerce, services and industry. More to the point, Escobar, Reardon and Berdegué (2002) propose employment strategies that support local markets, business advisory services, credit access, and the development of viable rural economic organizations (such as cooperatives and community-based organizations) and innovative and flexible institutional coalitions. To advance these diverse strategies requires accompanying informational and knowledge development services.

Rural household income is often independent of agriculture. Farmers are relying less on their farm income in economically emerging countries such as Ireland (Phelan, Frawley, & Wallace, 2002), but also in developing countries. Labor-intensive non-farm growth appears to have
been central to development in East and South East Asia (IFAD 2001). Haggblade, Hazell and Reardon (2002) note that non-agricultural sources of income are 30% in developing Asia, 40% in rural households in Africa, and 40% in Latin America. Their conclusion: “a prosperous rural nonfarm economy can contribute to both aggregate economic growth and improved welfare of the rural poor” (Haggblade, Hazell, & Reardon, 2002, p. vii).

Present Pathways Out of Poverty

Emphasis in the rural sector is strong on agriculture but less committed to rural needs in general. Yet rural development encompasses much more than agriculture, as numerous authors have argued in examining the livelihoods of rural individuals and communities (see AgREN and Neuchâtel papers on sustainable livelihoods). There are in fact various pathways out of poverty for people in rural areas. De Janvry and Sadoulet (2002) cite pathways other than the agricultural path, namely:

1. The multiple-activity path. Agriculture is often a part-time endeavor for farmers who are frequently involved in multiple activities. The household’s off-farm activities are usually undertaken to generate liquidity for farm expenditures.

2. The assistance path. This path applies to the structural poor caught in poverty traps who need permanent income transfers to reach the poverty line, and to households in transitory poverty who need access to safety nets to avoid decapitalization of productive assets and irreversible adjustments to shocks. (De Janvry & Sadoulet, 2002, p. 7)

3. The exit path. The exit strategy has been the dominant path in reducing rural poverty in Latin America. Rural flight and migration are major trends. Remissions by migrants in Latin America have been estimated at several billion US dollars per annum (J. Berdegué, statement made at FAO seminar on Territorial Rural Development May, 2003). The Economist (June 26-July 2, 2004, p. 40) claims that US$13 billion dollars were remitted in 2003 to Mexico’s economy alone.

Another pathway out of poverty, not cited by de Janvry and Sadoulet, is the micro-enterprise path. The micro-enterprise path differs from the multiple-activity path in that it covers rural people who own or manage small businesses, some of which of course relate to agriculture, such as, food and merchandise stores, processing services, storage facilities, etc., as pointed out above (Haggblade, Hazell, & Reardon, 2002). Often enough, people thus employed are better off than those entirely dedicated to agricultural development. The United National Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) works to reduce poverty in the least developed countries through innovative approaches in both local governance and micro-finance initiatives. Other efforts in this domain are sorely needed.

The above-mentioned pathways out of poverty are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Identifying which path offers the greatest promise is important for designing differentiated rural development interventions that can best help poor households escape poverty. Agriculture and natural resources, as Carney (1998) points out, “might provide the basis for their [rural people’s] survival but it may well be that the best prospects for significant livelihood improvement lie outside the natural
resources sector in the generation of off-farm income” (p. 8).

Whatever path rural people choose to improve their well-being and to escape poverty, they will be forced to innovate and adopt changes to their livelihood systems. New ideas, methods, inputs, and linkages are needed not only to enhance productivity and improve competitiveness, but also to undertake wholly new activities that demand improved access to knowledge and information. Micro-enterprise development and rural public employment (i.e., through labor-intensive rural public works projects) are valuable approaches to rural development (Ravallion, 1990; Echeverría, 1998). There are also new challenges due to population increases, health issues, environmental and natural resource management pressures, and stricter market requirements that require rural peoples to have more access to knowledge and information.

**Strategies for Non-Farm Rural Development**

Strategies for advancing non-farm rural development require support by information and knowledge-building systems. Rural knowledge and information systems for rural development (RKIS/RD) are needed and could be built on existing networks [for example, with the assistance of Tacis, such centers already exist in Mongolia (J. G. Richardson, personal e-mail, July 12, 2004)] by becoming part of local, regional and national centers working with relevant agencies and organizations. Managed well, such systems would seek to promote the public good in rural areas by providing information to assist rural people in confronting their multi-sectoral needs and prepare rural people to pursue pathways out of poverty other than, or in addition to, the pathway provided by agriculture. As for governance, these RKIS/RD systems would perhaps best be constituted as independent authorities with respect to content and range of programs because of the need for specialized services and flexible approaches for the varied clientele.

One type of independent authority might be formed as part of community centers. Such community RKIS/RD centers would require professional extension and communications staff possessing or able to work with other specialists with skills and knowledge needed for the specific programs in which they work. Advances in technology make it possible for rural development community RKIS/RD service centers to meet the multi-sectoral needs of rural people in a cost-effective manner.

De-linking from agriculture, RKIS/RD systems might at first have difficulty finding, or establishing, an institutional “home” and in linking their services to relevant public, private, and community programs. This is likely to be the case since rural development tasks range broadly and would cover diverse topics, such as information and assistance for job skills preparation, micro-enterprise development, nonformal literacy education, family planning, nutrition, health, waste management, environmental conservation, and other rural, non-agricultural areas.

Certainly, it cannot be assumed that agricultural extension specialists would be capable of assuming responsibility for the variety of specialized rural development knowledge and information topics. Although FAO has promoted extension agents working on population programs and HIV/AIDS, the success of these programs is still unclear. Recently FAO/SDRE (2003) proposed that governments consider the establishment of communications policies that—while supporting agricultural extension for rural development—would also recognize the need for broader-based rural services aimed at diffusing non-
agricultural information and advice to rural people.

The Challenge

The challenge in promoting communications support for rural development inevitably lies in ensuring the sustainability of the systems established, especially their financial sustainability (WSIS, 2003). Few governments have yet proven willing and able to provide adequate funding for critical agricultural extension services, and non-agricultural communications programs may present an even less compelling claim on public resources. For this reason RKIS/RD systems will need to quickly prove their worth and incorporate as soon as possible user financing or co-financing for services.

I suggest three goals for RKIS/RD. First is to organize networks of rural knowledge and information centers for rural development that would respond to observed and expressed rural development needs – in short, an interactive system of a participatory nature, based on local demands as well as observed problems would be the goal. At the local level of course the system might find that there is strong interest in both agricultural and non-agricultural issues, and would shape its programs accordingly as with a telecenter or local radio station that includes all types of information.

Second is to develop appropriate ICT programs, which continually seek funds to install and maintain new information and communication technologies, especially computers with Internet access. Technological communication advances hold great promise for the future, but in most cases, radio would likely be the main ICT – “the one to watch” (http://www.comunica.org/1-2-watch/). Whatever the medium, the message should possess interactive features and provide actionable feedback mechanisms.

The third goal is to establish mechanisms for linkages with public and private sector agencies and organizations, institutes and centers. RKIS/RD systems will need to be in constant connection with its end-users, as well as with appropriate government ministries, institutes and educational bodies, and with private entities—especially non-governmental organizations that provide the kinds of services broadcast by locally accessible ICTs.

Conceptual Framework

What would constitute a full-fledged agricultural and rural development knowledge and information system? Figure 1 depicts two knowledge and information services, AKIS/RD and RKIS/RD. Eventually in some countries specific subject-areas might develop their own unique services, such as health has done already in various countries.
In some countries, unique services might eventually develop for specific subject areas. Venezuela is an example of a country that has moved from a strictly agricultural information system to one for broader rural development concerns due to local demands and interests. With respect to the United States, McDowell (Rivera & Alex, 2004) argues strongly for diverse content of extension programs. Ultimately, one might expect an umbrella of rural services to enhance the quality of rural life.

Serving the Rural Needs of the Rural Sector’s Under-Served

Communication for rural development has an important role and an unusual opportunity to respond to the needs of rural people pursuing the various pathways out of poverty. In organizing RKIS/RD systems, communication extension specialists could draw on relevant information resources and also direct interested clientele to resources that might provide further information, training, instruction or other assistance. In New York, for example, an information line (311) has been initiated that anybody with a problem, interest or concern can call and be directed to the appropriate resource for information. While this may not yet be possible in developing countries, it suggests what can be done by way of providing practical information and channeling users to appropriate services.

Inventing the future of the rural sector demands new thinking about the role
of communication in rural development. The next information revolution, according to Drucker (2004) will ask, “What is the meaning of information, and what is its purpose?” To respond must inevitably lead to a redefinition of the tasks to be done with the help of information, and with it, to redefining the institutions that do these tasks. The concept of RKIS/RD provides a framework that promises to incorporate multi-institutional alliances and stimulate practical actions aimed at fostering the realization of rural aspirations. The challenge then is to the international community and its development organizations, including governments, the private sector, and international organizations, to formulate actionable plans that promote a new approach to communication for rural development.

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Gary Alex, Subramaniam Janakiram, and John G. Richardson for reading and commenting on this paper.

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