Self Examination of the Regional Advisory Council of the National Agricultural Research Institute of Uruguay

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Abstract

The National Agricultural Research Institute (INIA) is a public, agricultural research institution located in Uruguay. Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) were created in 1990 as a participatory and collaborative mechanism to involve stakeholders in the planning and prioritization of the agricultural research agenda. This study was conducted to assess council members’ perception about their selection process, representation, linkages with farmer organization, major barriers for appropriate functioning, areas of responsibilities, and relevance of the councils.

Findings indicate that the RAC are relevant mechanisms in guiding research and in providing linkages between research staff and stakeholders. Although almost half (46%) of the members were selected by INIA, there was a genuine representation of the major farmer and agricultural organizations at the councils. Lack of prior knowledge of RAC meeting purposes, lack of timely communication, and extended length of council members’ services were reported as major procedural barriers. Respondents also indicated as important barriers for a better performance the low turnover of council members and involvement of young people.

Keywords: Advisory councils, participation, needs assessment, stakeholders, commodity groups

Introduction

This study examined the factors and the relationships that affect the performance of the Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) at the La Estanzuela Research Station of the National Agricultural Research Institute (INIA) of Uruguay. RACs are considered as important instrument to assess agricultural demands and as a customer linkage by national agricultural research organizations.

Assessment, evaluation, and prioritization of need of the clientele are the primary objectives for demand-driven agricultural research models (Allegri, 1999). The major challenge for the agricultural research organizations is to develop accurate methodologies to collects needs from their clientele and update these needs periodically. Moreover, generally resources are limited; therefore those needs also should be prioritized.

INIA is the main applied agricultural research institution in the country, created in 1989 over the existing base of the previous public agricultural research institution. One of the major changes in this new organization was the mandate to create Regional Advisory Councils, which serve, as instruments for need assessments and customer linkages. Allegri (1999) stated that, “Regional Advisory Councils at each Experiment Station provide an important forum for regular exchange of views and close contacts between farmers and INIA staff. They are the places where actual exchanges and participation occur” (p. 115).

No studies have been made to assess the performance of the councils, yet there appears to be several limitations in their performance. Therefore, it has been felt that a study on the contribution of the RACs would be helpful to INIA and to strengthen the instrument.
The objectives addressed by this research are: a) to identify the perceptions of Regional Advisory Council members regarding the selection process of members and their contributions to INIA with respect to research needs assessment, b) to identify major barriers affecting the functioning of the RACs, c) to develop recommendations to improve the operation and performance of the RACs of La Estanzuela research station.

Theoretical Framework

Overview of Uruguay

Uruguay is one of the smallest countries in South America (176,215 Km²). In comparison with the United States, its area is about the size of the state of Florida. The total population of Uruguay is 3,400,000 (INE, 2002), 90.8% is urban and 9.2% is rural. The general literacy rate is 96.9% (rural 93.8%) (Presidencia de la República del Uruguay, 2002).

The economy of Uruguay depends on its agricultural sector. This sector has contributed an average of 9% to the gross national product in the last 10 years. Uruguay has traditionally been an exporter of agricultural products; agricultural production in Uruguay accounts for about 60% of exports revenues, and more than 90% of the food consumed by its population (OPYPA, 2002).

The National Agricultural Research Institute (INIA)

INIA is a relatively new national research institution oriented by a clientele demand model. In 1989, the Congress approved a government proposal based on ideas of some researchers, farmer organizations, professional associations and the scientific community.

The main objectives of this new institution are, a) to promote and execute applied agricultural research activities in order to contribute to sustainable development of the agricultural sector, and b) to articulate an effective transfer of technology generated through the technical assistance and extension organizations belonging to the public or private system. According to the actual research-technology transfer-extension system in Uruguay, INIA is responsible for 90% of the agricultural research (Allegri, 1999).

With INIA’s creation, farmers were involved formally, for the first time, in the management of the INIA organization through two representatives appointed by farmer organizations to the INIA Board. In addition, the RACs were created as broad-based vehicles for gaining additional farmer involvement. The INIA’s Law creation also determines a farm tax (0.4%) to support the research operation, representing about 41% of the total budget of INIA. The total basic budget is derived from this tax, and similar amount is matched by Government funds (Delpiazzo, 1996).

The Regional Advisory Councils

RACs are composed of representatives of public and private institutions linked with the more significant agricultural activities developed in the region of the each research station. The major areas of responsibilities are to identify technological problems, research priority setting, and the identification of possible educational activities. RAC members are not remunerated by INIA. Permanent members could reach 15 in number in each RAC.

The Board of INIA, understanding that the Regional Advisory Councils do not have sufficient members base to provide a broad-based opinion from the clientele, required the creation of commodity groups or Working Groups (WGs). There is no limitation to the number of WGs associated with each research station, nor in the number of participants. According to Albicette (2000), 26 WGs are actually operative due to some changes occurring according to the increment in the relative importance of some goods and/or the closing or merging of some of them. All members working at the RAC and the WGs were included in this study.

Problem Statement

Profound and permanent global changes are affecting the characteristics and the variability of problems. Market globalization and market protection increase the complexity of those problems and challenge farmers to obtain new technology in order to solve technological problems and to become efficient in the art of food production.

Agricultural research institutions are increasingly affected by global changes and the complexity of the external context, which increases the interdependence of economic sectors, higher technological requirements, and environmental and sustainable issues (Allegri, 1999).
Participation and involvement requires the implementation of tools and skills to drive and internalize the resulting inputs. RACs suffer from low motivation, participation and lack of trust (Albicette, 2000; Allegri, 1999; Restaino, 1998). Besides, researchers feel that the feedback and inputs from RACs are feeble, and are affected by current problems. Johnson (1998) examines the experience of a stakeholder advisory group’s attempt to guide a land grant’s research priorities. This author states that the failure of a broad-based, statewide advisory group raises serious concerns for proponents of stakeholder involvement in research priority making. Hoefner (1998) argues that there is little published on stakeholder advisory processes and, therefore, little is known about which methods are useful and which are not.

The objectives addressed by this research are: a) to identify the perceptions of INIA La Estanzuela research station RACs members regarding the selection process of members and their contributions to INIA with respect to research needs, b) to identify major barriers affecting the functioning of the RACs, c) to develop recommendations to improve the operation and performance of the Regional Advisory Councils of INIA La Estanzuela research station.

Methodology

This study was conducted at La Estanzuela research station of the National Agricultural Research Institute (INIA) of Uruguay between June and September 2002. This research has the format of a case study, and utilized qualitative and quantitative methods to obtain a more complete picture in order to understand the complexity of internal and external human relationships under the framework of the organization.

All participants of Regional Advisory Councils (RAC) and Work Groups (WG) listed in the database of INIA La Estanzuela since December 1998 were included in this study. According to this, 127 council members were identified as the target population.

Survey questions were developed taking into consideration the suggestions proposed by INIA. After a careful and participative process a survey questionnaire was built including 34 questions in 6 sections as follow: a) membership and member’s selection, b) members’ representation, c) operational characteristics of meetings, d) meetings procedures, e) major barriers for functioning, and f) personal information. Pre- and cover letters were developed to establish the first contact with survey participants and to introduce the necessary information of the study, respectively. The pre-letters were sent by public or private mail (depending on the best choice considering the participant address) on June 20, 2002 (10 days before mailing the survey questionnaire). The survey packets were assembled including the cover letter, the survey questionnaire, and a self-addressed prepaid return envelope. Survey packets were mailed using both a private and a public mail company from Colonia City (Uruguay) on July 3, 2002. A confidentiality statement, in agreement with the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRIHS) of Michigan State University, was included assuring survey participants’ privacy protection.

Completed questionnaires were carefully checked upon return. By the closing date, August 15 2002, 81 usable questionnaires were received from the RAC/WG members (64% response rate).

Interviews were conducted as part of the qualitative data collection. A total of 6 interviews were conducted to RAC/WG council members. The notes were analyzed, clustered into common topics and reported together with the open-ended questions over the same topics as were asked in the survey questionnaires.

Data analysis was done using a continuous and interactive process from the beginning of the research study was followed to collect and analyze qualitative data (INIA documents, council meeting minutes, interviews, and open-ended questions included at the survey questionnaires). Quantitative data were coded, entered and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

Results

Demographic information of RAC members’ indicates that the average age of members (mean) was 48 years ($SD = 9$ years). Almost all of council members are male (96.3%). One-fourth of the council members (24.7%) were farmers, about one-fifth (19.8%) were farm advisors, and about 26% were “professionals working for an institution” as his/her major occupation. Four out of five (81.5%) have more than 13 years of education,
representing a bachelor level or university degree. Almost one out of ten (9%) indicated high school education, and the same number (9.8%) indicated less than 10 years of formal education.

Council member's living location (Urban, Suburban or Rural) is an important characteristic in order to understand how available some services could be for members. Three out of five (58%) came from an "urban" living location and Montevideo the capital of Uruguay. The "rural" living location (member that lives on a farm) was indicated by one-fourth of the members.

Council members could participate as Regional Advisory Council member (RAC), Working Group member (WG), or participate in both. Results shows that 1.3% indicated that they were RAC members, about 34% indicated WG membership position, and one out of ten (10%) mentioned participation in both councils as WG member and RAC representative. However, a significant percentage of respondents (32.5%) indicated that there were "not sure" about what his/her membership is. Similarly, about one out five respondents (22.5%) indicated that they were no longer participating in any council (neither RAC, nor WG). From those members responding that they are no longer participating or not sure about his/her status, about 8% mentioned that they lost interest in continued participation. Similarly, almost 8% mentioned they found some kind of conflict with other activities, 5% indicated that they found the system complex, and about 79% mentioned other reasons, of which the most frequent (22 out of 38) was the fact that they had not received new invitations to participate.

Almost 29% of respondents started their participation in 1990, the year when the councils were established by INIA, and one-half (50%) of the members have been working for at least 5 years in the RAC/WG.

Selection of council members is an important first-step to the functioning and representation of a participatory process. Findings show that INIA is directly responsible for the selection of about half (46%) of RAC/WG members. Similarly, two-fifths (40%) of the INIA LA Estanzuela RAC/WG members were designated to participate by majors farmers organizations operating in the country. Fewer respondents (2.5%) expressed that they were self involved by personal interest, and one out of ten (10%) were invited by others council members. Participants were asked to offer suggestions about how members should be selected in the future. Members felt that future council members should have a wide experience in the field for what they are expected to represent. Moreover, actual council members indicated that selection should be done from a wide spectrum, including independent members, members representing regional organizations, national organizations, and others farmers and/or agricultural organizations. Similarly, members pointed out the following values as remarkable and necessary characteristics for any council member: innovative, positive, vision, leadership, and motivation. The quotation below indicates the spirit of what participants indicated as desirable: "Select people motivated, innovative with positive attitude and directly linked with the production... with mud on the shoes."

Regarding members' representation status (linkage with farmers organization) almost four-fifths (80%) of the members represent an organization or a group of farmers. More than 60% members represent some agricultural or major farmer organization, and about two out of ten members (19%) indicate they are independent members.

Besides identifying the real representation that each member has at the councils, members were asked to indicate what perception they have about the overall representation of the major stakeholders groups. Respondents were asked to indicate their perceptions on a five point Likert-type scale (1=None, 2=Poor, 3=Fair, 4=Good, 5=Very Good). The values for each statement were averaged to determine a value for each statement based on the overall opinion of the RAC/WG members. Perception of council members about farmers’ representation is fair (M = 2.82, SD = .976). Their perception about University representation was poor (M = 2.44, SD = 1.089). Similarly, members indicated a poor (M = 2.56, SD = .979) perception for the agri-industry representation and for the agri-business representation (M = 2.59, SD = 1.023) at the councils. University and agri-business representation were the statements where members expressed major dispersion in their opinion indicated by a high standard deviation. “Organization representation” at the councils was rated higher (M = 3.17, SD = .828). There was no significant difference in perception of
representation at the RAC/WG according to their membership status.

Analysis of the members’ opinions reveals that meetings are very bureaucratic with a wide and extensive program, and consequently lack available time for discussion and interaction. Previous information was indicated as very poor or non-existent; therefore meetings show lack of preparation from members resulting in uninformed members.

Methodological aspects of the meetings were also indicated as responsible for poor meetings. Members indicated that the methodology used regularly lacks opportunity to interact with INIA’s researchers. It was pointed out that meeting times are not for discussion, but mainly to inform about what INIA researchers are doing. Finally, members indicated as an additional weakness the domination that old and experienced council members exert over the rest of the members.

Major Perceived Barriers

Members rated with a mean of 2.68 (SD = 1.016) in a one to five Likert scale (1=Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, and 5= Strongly agree) their opinion about received “adequate guidelines about the RAC and WG councils. When asked about if they received adequate information prior to the meeting, a mean of 2.60 (SD = .990) was founded according to their opinion.

Qualitative data regarding the major barriers showed that 11 statements out of 26 were related to the utility and the importance given to council members’ opinion by INIA. Council members felt that INIA shared information about closed or approved research programs. Lack of feedback from INIA regarding council suggestions, recommendation or possible implementation of council opinions seem to support the previous idea about the importance that INIA is given to this systems to RAC/WG members.

Another important group of opinions is related to the economy in which Uruguay, and in particular the agricultural sector, is living since the end of year 2000. Members indicated that the recession does not allow them to see the technological needs of the future. The third most important issue indicated is related to the economic cost that members have to pay to participate. Members indicated that participation at the councils is not remunerated by INIA. As a consequence, members have a direct cost of travel and expenses in order to attend the meeting and a more important indirect cost is the loss of the day in their personal activities.

Finally, a miscellaneous group of minor comments were related to: a) members’ low level of commitment, b) membership renewal renovation, c) regulation of members participation, and d) lack of coordination between major farmers organizations.

Responsibilities of the RAC Councils

Participants were asked to answer a set of statements regarding the relevance of the RAC for a selected given group of major responsibilities (Scale: 1=Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, and 5= Strongly agree). To prioritize research programs (M = 4.08), farmer needs identification (M = 3.87), to maintain strong linkages with the major farmer organizations (M = 3.74), to identify regional educational activities (M = 3.46), and to give advice about operative INIA’s budget” (M = 3.40), were identified by participants as the most important responsibilities for these institutions.

Conclusions

Leholm, Hamm, Suvedi, Gray, & Poston, (1999) and Leholm, Suvedi, & Vlasin, (1998) have indicated that establishing the linkage between research, extension, and stakeholders has been a considerable challenge. Many research stations have been criticized for not including formally stakeholders’ opinions. This is especially true in many developing countries. In this sense, the system established by INIA represents a good example of both points: a) developing an instrument in an innovative system that allows farmers and other stakeholders to participate and collaborate in the decision-making process of the institution, and b) creating an instrument of linkage for the major agricultural actors working in the agricultural sector of Uruguay.

RAC members indicated a substantial relevance of this instrument for identifying technological needs and educational activities, prioritizing research and extension programs, and as using a linkage tool with stakeholders.

Findings showed that major barriers for an efficient functioning were lack of guidelines, poor definition and communication of objective/purpose of council meetings, low council members’ renovation, were identified as
the major limitations for the councils’ performance. Although almost half (46%) of the members were selected by INIA, there was a genuine representation of the major farmer and agricultural organizations at the councils. According to Mainzer (1958), it is very important for the life and accuracy of the advisory council to have a good balance represented by geographical locations, age, gender, actor’s major role, and commodity. Lacy (1996) and Johnson (1998) indicate the importance of having a broad-based composition and appropriate membership as a key factor for building successful advisory councils.

Council members also indicated that meetings are very broad in their programs, that many reports are presented and that there is not enough time for discussion. In addition, council members complained that they receive low feedback from INIA regarding their opinions and participation. The conducting of “open-agenda” meetings appears to be important in order to ascertain new topics and to give the opportunity to RAC members to freely discuss problems or issues that would otherwise be missed or be outside of the agenda. The socio-demographic information of RAC council members shows low participation of young people, and an extended length of service of council members at the RAC and WG. These findings are in agreement with the major issues affecting advisory councils as reported by Johnson (1998) in a similar study conducted at the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station of Michigan State University.

A significant percentage of respondents (32.5%) indicated that they were “not sure” about his/her membership. This illustrates a problem in the follow up procedure or communication process between INIA and the council members. It is important to remark that many of the problems reported in this study were identified as common problems by other researchers for other advisory councils, and represent mostly organizational problems, rather than structural problems. As Axinn & Axinn (1997) pointed out, participation and collaboration does not occur without cost; that cost includes the investment of time, energy, and appropriate communication, “including long hours of patient listening” (p. 93).

INIA, and the Regional Advisory Councils instrumented by INIA are remarkable examples of participation, collaboration, and integration with stakeholders, and could be extended to others situations around the world. This study has identified some key elements to improve the methodology.

References


