The following statement from *The State of Food and Agriculture 2000* (FAO, 2000) sets the context and rationale for a timely FAO publication on extension’s continuing and important role in national and global development and the structural transformations needed for this role to be optimized.

Reducing poverty and food insecurity is not simply a question of enhancing agricultural productivity and production or generating more income. Institutions are the structuring features that command access of people to assets, to voice and to power over their lives, and that regulate competing claims to limited resources… admittedly, Extension as an institution is only one component in agricultural and rural development processes, and only one vehicle for fostering change in agricultural and rural development. However, Extension’s high economic rates of return indicate its potential to bring about change (Birkehaeuser, Evenson & Feder, 1988)… and, while the importance of knowledge and the rapidity of its transfer and exchange in the modern world are increasingly recognized as central to trade and development in high-income and low-income countries (Drucker, 1998; Zijp, 1994), …some countries have yet to consider the value of making knowledge available and reform and revitalize extension institutions and extension institutional arrangements. The pressures of the new economy may soon induce these countries to re-examine their extension institutions and their extension institutional arrangements with a view to reforming and revitalizing them.

The author introduces different definitions of Extension: (a) an information-delivery function in various sectors of society, namely education, agriculture, rural development, health, and industry, (b) a knowledge system in the agricultural sector focused on production performance, overall agricultural development, and/or adult education/community development, and (c) an expanded concept of agricultural and rural extension encompassing non-agricultural activities such as rural micro-enterprise development, farmers’ associations, and marketing.

Reinforcing the universally-held view of a world in a new paradigm of rapid technological, economic, and political changes the author suggests that these forces have created market-driven reforms and an agri-business orientation influencing the funding and delivery of agricultural and rural extension in high-income, middle-income, and low-income countries. These changes have had and continue to have an impact on the way public sector agricultural extension has been conceived and practiced as well as raised important policy questions: Who will pay for such services as agricultural and rural extension? Who will deliver the services? Who is to be served? How will they be served? and, for what purpose?

In responding to this new paradigm and answering these questions, the author states that countries worldwide have adopted a variety of market-oriented and/or non-market-oriented institutional reforms in their extension systems. Market reforms have come about as a result of the government’s aim of privatizing the management of agricultural and rural extension systems, while the goal of non-market reforms is to relieve government of the responsibility of funding and managing extension.

Four types of market reforms are described and some country examples provided,
shown here in parentheses: (a) revision of public sector extension via downsizing and some cost recovery (Canada, Israel, USA), (b) institutional pluralism in which the delivery of extension services is contracted out to non-profit non-governmental organizations or for-profit companies, including consultancy firms and farmers’ cooperatives (Chile, Estonia, Hungary, Venezuela, South Korea, Taiwan), (c) cost recovery or fee-based services to farmers (OECD countries), and (d) total privatization or commercialization wherein both the funding and delivery of extension services are shifted entirely, or largely, to the private sector (Netherlands, New Zealand, England, Wales).

Two kinds of non market reforms have occurred: (a) decentralization of decision-making and authority to lower tiers of government (Colombia, Indonesia, Mexico, Philippines, Uganda), and (b) transferring or delegating the responsibility for extension to non-governmental organizations, or removing government responsibility for extension entirely (Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru). Thus, the author maintains, an extensive menu of options exists for governments to consider in any agricultural and rural extension reform.

Reform initiatives envisaged by the author are an application of the principles enumerated in the FAO/World Bank document on Strategic Vision and Guiding Principles (2000) for promoting Agricultural Knowledge and Information Systems for Rural Development. Principles such as pluralism, subsidiarity, and cost recovery relate to policy reform strategies, while stakeholder participation in decision making, human development and training, and others are associated with program management and development. The reform initiatives call for: (a) pluralism of extension providers, involving coordinated partnerships with non-profit non-governmental organizations, (b) partnerships involving farmers and farmers’ organizations, and other private sector extension providers, (c) cost recovery options, including those negotiated directly between farmers and extension technicians, (d) decentralization to lower tiers of government, and (e) subsidiarity at the grassroots level.

To reach FAO’s goals of promoting food security and alleviating poverty in low-income countries, the author stresses the importance of stakeholder participation, extension and farmer training programs, and farmer group promotion in agricultural and rural extension systems, and choosing one or more market and/or non-market reform strategies suited to specific country contexts.

The book reminds readers that profound changes are taking place in the world and that traditional public sector extension is out of step with a new global paradigm and unable to meet the challenges that developing countries face in promoting food security and alleviating poverty. It proposes that market and non-market institutional reform experiences and strategies offer options from which developing countries can choose as they engage in national development.

The book makes a contribution to the theory and practice of agricultural and rural extension. The ideas about institutional restructuring and reform should be of interest to policy makers, planners, administrators, managers, and practitioners in developed and developing countries as well as donor agencies that shape developmental strategies as they work with these countries. Academic types and students will also find well over 100 current reference citations to use in their scholarship.

References


