Extension Reform: the Challenges Ahead

William M. Rivera  
wr@umd.edu  
University of Maryland, College Park  
3119 Jull Hall, University of Maryland  
College Park, MD 20742  
301-405-1253 (office)  
301-314-9343 (fax)  
301-445-4980 (home)

Gary Alex  
Consultant, USAID  
Galex@usaid.gov

Abstract
This article draws on the workshop and the case-study findings produced under the aegis of the 2002 Extension Workshop hosted by the World Bank, USAID and the Neuchatel Initiative. We highlight three general observations, summarize twelve main findings, and discuss a number of future challenges to extension and rural development. We note in particular that changes in funding, management, and delivery of extension services reflect a new vision of extension as being the ultimate responsibility of the client (the farmer) based on a set of new creative partnerships among government, the private sector, and civil society for service provision, and that the current stage of extension’s transformation is from innovation to execution.
Introduction

The role of the public sector in agriculture and rural development continues to undergo change, renewal, and experimentation. The 2002 Extension Workshop hosted by the World Bank, USAID and the Neuchatel Initiative (World Bank 2002) concludes that reforms in public sector extension systems and services are likely to be ubiquitous, ongoing, and probably a permanent feature of the sub-sector’s institutional and programmatic development.

Case studies on extension reform for rural development were written for, and following, the workshop. They confirm the workshop’s findings. Compiled and edited by the authors of this article, the cases now constitute a volume of 44 studies organized into five distinct, but related, sections, viz: (1) extension system decentralization, (2) privatization of extension services, (3) demand-driven approaches to agricultural extension, (4) revitalization of extension within public sector services, and (5) national strategy and reform process. The full text of the volume can be found online at: http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/ardext.nsf/11ByDocName/PublicationsExtensionReformforRuralDevelopment.

This article draws on the workshop and the case-study findings. We highlight three general observations, summarize twelve main findings, and discuss a number of future challenges to extension and rural development. We note in particular that changes in funding, management, and delivery of extension services reflect a new vision of extension as being the ultimate responsibility of the client (the farmer) based on a set of new creative partnerships among government, the private sector, and civil society for service provision, and that the current stage of extension’s transformation is from innovation to execution.

Intimately linked with this transformation is a change in the nature of agricultural research and the structure of the agricultural sector. The commercialization of agricultural research and technology continues to have a profound impact on the public agricultural technology transfer system and hastens its need to incorporate private sector entities into a more inclusive, institutional pluralistic extension system. As a result, the private sector has become a major player in the public sector’s strategy for agriculture and rural development.

Thus, a new array of extension providers characterizes the field, and underscores the complex nature of coordinating and managing these activities. In other words, it is no longer realistic to view extension as technical activities carried out by one or more organizations, but as a complex of long-term, multi-activity endeavors implemented by networks of country institutions in multiple locations whose objectives and goals derive from indigenous policy choices. All of these endeavors revolve around the farmer—or more broadly around the rural population—providing a menu of options for innovation, information, and investment.

This view of extension programs as long-term actions implemented by a network of institutions implies that not only have public sector responsibilities not diminished with the advancement of multiple providers, but that they have grown. New realities require policy and institutional changes relating to the allocation of responsibilities and resources among providers, the coordination of the components of the system, and accountability of these different parts.
General Observations

Notable throughout the case studies is that the changes affecting extension are symptomatic of wider forces at work in society. Broad trends are affecting 21st-century development of the agricultural sector. Three general observations are enumerated below which suggest a convergence of views on extension development. Gleaned from both the workshop and the case studies, they highlight major changes in perception and practice emerging in agricultural extension reform. They also underline the importance of complementarity, and the need for synergistic, policy and institutional approaches to the pluralistic complex of extension actors.

1. Extension needs to be—and in many cases is—more broadly conceived than has traditionally been the case. This new outlook requires government to undertake broader plans for designing and implementing extension services. While the case studies do not necessarily show how this can best be accomplished, many do note the need for a broader extension and information services agenda; and experience in this direction is accumulating.

Agricultural and rural development are often mentioned together, as are the terms agricultural and rural extension. “Agricultural extension” is often used interchangeably with the term “rural extension” and vice versa. Rural development includes but nonetheless expands beyond the confines of agriculture. Stated another way, rural development involves and requires developments other than agriculture.

Broadly conceived, extension services now fall into three categories. First are the “home economics extension” services that target farm women (principally) with information on family issues of nutrition, health, education, and welfare. These have traditionally been a part of extension mandates, but are often neglected and warrant increased attention. The second set of extension services -- related to the agricultural production core agenda -- include marketing, environmental conservation, and farmer organization development. These are currently receiving much more attention, though extension programs have not always fully learned how to deliver such services effectively.

The third set of services relate to rural development in general, including off-farm employment opportunities and general adult education. Being more varied and less closely linked to agriculture, it is more difficult to find an institutional “home” for these services and to link them into an overall “rural extension” program. Rural development tasks associated with rural extension would likely include micro-enterprise development, nonformal literacy education, family planning, nutrition, health and other rural, non-agricultural areas. It would be easy to state simply that these tasks must be assigned to either a separate or integrated extension staff. Certainly, it cannot be assumed that specialists in agriculture will overnight become specialized in these other, equally demanding, practices. Elsewhere (FAO 2003) it has been proposed that governments consider the establishment of communications policies that -- while supporting agricultural extension for rural development -- also recognize the need for a broader “rural extension” service aimed at diffusing non-agricultural information and advice to rural people.
2. Private sector involvement in extension delivery is essential in most cases, although there is as well a continuing need for government involvement especially regarding pro-poor services. But questions of how to apportion responsibility for funding, delivery, management and other concerns are either country specific or at best partially answered, by the case studies.

There is an absolute need for knowledge in a fast-paced, rapidly changing world, and all available resources must be employed to compete in the 21st century. The private sector can play an increasingly important role in rural knowledge systems, but total privatization is not feasible, even for commercial agriculture. The appropriate mix of public and private roles can best be determined through piloting and learning from experience. Government must be realistic about the limits of fully private extension (a caution also for donors). Nonetheless, including the private sector in extension systems is vital, and two strategies — subsidizing farmers to contract with the private sector and contracting with the private sector — are already employed in enabling the private sector to provide extension services. Since commercial firms provide many services directly, opportunities for public-private partnerships or public support for selected services from private firms is well worth exploring. In short, the public sector holds the key to policy reform directives requiring new or revised public policy vision, i.e., determinations to institute major structural and fiscal reform measures, including the involvement of the private sector. Only the public sector, i.e., national governments with the concerted help of their sub-governments, can assume these responsibilities.

3. Participation and demand-driven extension approaches are generally extolled in the case studies, though several note the problems related to the cost implications and management demands of such approaches. But the various aspects of decentralization that may be involved are not always fully treated.

Participatory development is essential because it strengthens civil society and the economy by empowering groups, communities and organizations to negotiate with institutions and bureaucracies, thus influencing public policy and providing a check on the power of government. It also tends to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of development programs. A disadvantage is that participatory activities tend to be time-consuming and require strong interpersonal skills to conduct.

The needs and demands of farmers, especially food-deficit producers and communities, need to be strengthened through a wide variety of institutional interventions. If the poor are to benefit from agricultural extension, extension reform must promote local programmes within the framework of a national integrated food security strategy that helps the poor enter society’s mainstream. This is a moral and social obligation but also in the economic self-interest of government and a support to national development, while contributing to international progress. The ultimate goal is to attain that point where farmers take responsibility for programmes and thereby create demand-driven development.
Case Study Findings

While the 44 case studies highlight definite lessons of value to those considering extension reform, there is still need for a fair degree of caution. While the reform initiatives have amassed substantial experience, most are still ‘islands of excellence’ with little experience as part of a permanent national program. Questions remain as to how far public extension can go in broadening its mandate from agricultural technology to broader rural development issues. Quality control systems are weak, and many cases illustrate how dependant extension systems remain on “projects”, largely donor-financed projects. For instance, while some cases (e.g., Honduras and Nepal) have made the project a useful management tool within the extension system, reliance of the overall system on project financing saps system sustainability. There is much in the case studies that augurs well for extension reform, but cautionary notes are in order. In general, the case studies support the following strategies and actions.

1. **View extension within a wider rural development agenda**

   The emerging view of extension is not that of a service or system, but of a knowledge and information support function for rural people. Because rural knowledge and information needs are so diverse, there are benefits from having a range of providers to deliver advice, technology innovations, and facilitation services. In many countries, however, agriculture and agricultural extension will remain the prime concern. The United States case study is one of several arguing for introducing a rural development agenda into the extension system to bring about changes in rural community processes and address non-farm needs.

2. **Define an extension policy for a pluralistic system**

   The design of an extension policy begins with an inventory of the actors (i.e., who provides what to whom) and an assessment of the quality of the services rendered, before deciding on reform. Government must then identify the over-all objectives for public sector involvement in extension and define the role and responsibilities expected of various service providers, and of public funding. While it is important to have a strategy for a national extension system, this requires a country-led vision and political support independent of donor agendas, but in line with country-driven processes such as Poverty Reduction Special Programs and the New Economic Partnership for African Development. Bangladesh, for example, has adopted a New Agricultural Extension Policy (1995-2010), whose goal is to partner with all extension providers – government agencies, NGOs, and trade organizations – to optimize the use of available resources and competencies of these different bodies to meet the diverse needs of farmers.

3. **Make long-term commitments**

   New approaches will take many years to be fully institutionalized. Long-term commitments must be adopted within a widely shared vision and strategy at the various levels — international (as in the workshop), national, regional, and community. Denmark’s extension system evolved over more than 100 years; Trinidad and Tobago is still changing after more than ten years of reform; and Uganda’s extension development plan covers 25 years. Decentralization reforms requiring...
new capacities and necessitate a fairly long term planning horizon. The private sector must also change its time frame if it is to successfully play its new role in extension reform.

4. Develop a stakeholder coordinating mechanism

It is important to establish some type of coordinating body for the various participants in extension to provide a common framework in which all actors can operate. But coordination should not be so strict that it discourages competition and innovation. At a minimum, policies and mechanisms need to harmonize behavior and strategies, such as minimum levels for co-financing, prioritization, and area selection. Estonia and Bangladesh have extensive coordination systems for agricultural information services.

5. Build capacity of RPOs, the public sector, and service providers

Capacity building at all levels is critical, and funding for capacity building and institutional strengthening is a *sine qua non* for near-term and future development. But training, like everything else, must have clear objectives related to program achievement, and it must become more hands-on, involving participants in every aspect of the training. This requires program development that begins with assessment of employee or farmer needs, not merely training for training’s sake. Venezuela has introduced extension service reforms that highlight training as a major part of their program for contracting and decentralizing extension services.

6. Be realistic about the limits of fully private extension

The private sector will play an increasingly important role in rural knowledge systems, but total privatization is seldom feasible, even for commercial agriculture. The appropriate mix of public and private roles can only be determined through piloting and learning from experience. In general, the cases underscore three important government tasks in implementing extension privatization policies: (1) to establish and manage the appropriate economic environment for extension privatization, (2) to establish and manage effective privatization processes and procedures, and (3) to develop adequate private sector management capability to ensure successful private sector extension operations. The cases provide illustrations of successful, and not so successful, initiatives aimed at promoting private sector involvement in extension.

When developing private sector reform initiatives, the most apt slogan is, as the Pakistan case study puts it, *caveat emptor*. Contracting for extension administration and delivery is common in many case studies. In Honduras administration of a hillside project for small farmers involves contracting out to a Costa Rican organization, CATIE, which then supervises sub-contracts with private companies that work directly with farmers.

7. Focus public financing on the poor

Given the World Food Summit and subsequent manifestos and promises by countries worldwide, poverty reduction must be the focus of public funding -- whether provided by public employees or contracted out. In fact, given the emphasis on poverty reduction and the increasing knowledge intensity of rural income-generating activities operating in a globalizing economy,
the role of public funding is likely to increase. Still, extension systems must tap new sources of public funding, given that the bulk of financing available for rural development now surpasses public agencies charged with agriculture, forestry, and environment. Uganda’s decentralized extension reforms face significant challenges, not the least of which is dealing with AIDS, as well as poverty issues. Vietnam is an example where extension and policy for general economic development has exacerbated problems by pushing poor people off traditional lands.

8. **Introduce some cost recovery**

There is greater scope for cost-sharing and fee-for-service programs than is usually acknowledged. Reforms can encourage the valuing of information/knowledge services and fee-for-service mechanisms can foster gradual development of a market for knowledge services. While more popular in developed than developing countries, private market-oriented services are the objective of many reforms. Two experiences in Africa—Mali’s cotton extension program Niger’s market-based irrigation program for smallholder farmers—illustrate the strengths of a commercial approach. Denmark, Uruguay, Portugal, South Africa also reflect the strengths of market-oriented extension approaches. Other developing countries, such as Egypt, have even opted to charge fees for certain participatory approaches. In Estonia and Brandenburg, Germany, farmers pay upwards of 70 percent for extension services. Cost sharing by farmer organisations is an important feature of reform in West Africa.

9. **Decentralize administration of public funds**

Extension services are increasingly a part of the decentralization and devolution agenda that engages local government units and grass roots organizations. This agenda facilitates access to broader rural development financing — other rural development and fiscal transfer programs, local government financing, and user funding. However, investment is usually needed to enhance local government capacity to successfully decentralize extension programs.

In general, decentralized, demand-driven and participatory programs tend to be more democratic in design and more successful in implementation. Involving producer organizations in extension activities is an obvious means of engaging producers in programs that coincide with their own goals. In China, the central government’s delegation of authority to the provincial, prefecture and county levels has been instrumental to the success of public sector reform. In India, decentralization initiatives are largely oriented to promoting user participation in local extension activities. Ghana transferred management and technical functions from the central extension administration to regional offices in the 1990’s, and is an example of “deconcentration” or “incomplete” decentralization reform. This last example and that of Trinidad and Tobago highlight the difficulties of decentralizing public extension programs.

10. **Provide appropriate research support**

Access to timely information and continuous updating of the knowledge and skills of field level extension staff, both public and private, are of the highest importance. The strong consensus of the Washington workshop was that formal research programs are important but only one source of such innovation and information for extension programs, since extension’s agenda is broader
than technology transfer. An example of an indigenous agricultural research initiative with an
extension component has begun in Latin America. Local Agricultural Research Committees
(known by the Spanish acronym, CIAL) carry out experiments in rural areas on behalf of their
client groups. CIALs foster rural innovation by sharing the knowledge, experience and benefits
that comes from experimentation while simultaneously sharing the inherent risks and costs, and
are considered a complement to Farmer Field Schools (FFS).

11. Develop a strong system for M&E from the beginning

Extension providers – whether public, private or civic society non-governmental organizations --
need systems to assess extension outcomes and to feed this information back to policy and
coordination units. In Uganda farmers are involved in the award of contracts for extension
services and for monitoring and evaluating performance. Evaluations have played an important
role in the development of extension in Chile, although a major problem cited was the lack of a
centralized system of monitoring and evaluation to facilitate control of quality of services
provided in different regions and to reduce potential political interference. A good example of
M&E is the Technical Implementing Unit of the Ecuador program, which measures the
performance of the operators and the groups of beneficiaries and assesses progress towards
achieving the Technology Transfer component of the program goals. Venezuela highlights the
need to assess the effects of and linkages with broader political, economic and institutional
variables on program design, implementation and evaluation. This is suggestive of the need to
coordinate the mutual interests of the agricultural research, extension and higher education
systems into a “knowledge system triangle”.

12. Experiment with different extension approaches to strengthen reforms

Overall, the cases suggest that experimentation is essential, that a mentality to experiment with
extension approaches contributes to finding the right reform for the right situation. Situations are
specific, and situational analyses and needs assessments are key to clear thinking about what
reform measures might best be instituted. However, the trap of discovering something that
works in one place and concluding that it will work in all places is a constant threat to critical
thinking. While experience across the various case studies shows that there is some convergence
on principles, nevertheless each context is different. Meanwhile, new approaches are
proliferating. Kenya and West Africa have successfully used grants for the adult education,
problem-solving approach known as Farmer Field Schools (FFS), while the
Philippines/Indonesia and Egypt draw attention to the high costs associated with FFS. The
changing economic climate and increased specialization and differentiation among farmers in
West Africa has promoted ongoing experiments in providing management advice aimed at
easing the integration of small-scale family farms into an open market economy.

The Challenges Ahead

Extension is expanding its scope of purpose, widening its institutional inclusiveness, and shifting
greater authority to clientele and stakeholders. In addition to the strategies and actions
highlighted above, governments face a number of ongoing, emerging, and capacity-related
challenges. The extent to which these challenges are adequately met will depend on the
pressures of globalization, the state of a country’s socio-economics, and the political positions of individual governments, as well as the strength of its extension providers. These challenges will also inevitably be affected by the increasing privatization of research and extension and the industrialization of agriculture (Wolf 1998).

**Ongoing Policy Challenges**

Public sector involvement in the delivery of extension services has diminished, but central governments in low- and middle-income as well as some higher-income countries continue to fund extension-related services, albeit more often delivered by private sector entities. There is increasing concern for both agricultural development and broad-based, other-than-agriculture entrepreneurial development in rural areas (Alex et al. 2002). Extension systems are being called upon to address a number of broad-based problems: food security, a clean environment, food quality, social equity, and sustainable agriculture,

**New and Emerging Challenges**

New and emerging priorities promise to further shape extension in the future. High quality public sector agricultural extension services will continually be incorporating new messages into programs for producers, targeting those public goods issues that are not being covered by the private sector. Some have already been mentioned: product quality enhancement and food safety, organizational development for collective action, addressing environmental problems, resource management, impartial evaluation of new products and services, and validating and localizing new technology. However, new clients, approaches, and issues are already emerging and are likely to become more important with time.

*The private sector.* The private sector is an asset to the public sector extension, but also it is itself a client of extension. As the world rushes toward extension reforms, and especially privatization, food and agricultural businesses should have cause for concern, since private sector companies continually utilize the expertise of national government, including extension expertise. In developed countries, private sector company representatives often call upon research and extension agents to present materials on new agricultural developments. Research and technology-transfer linkages between the public and the private sector have been shown to be important in all countries.

*Other extension clients.* New extension clients are coming onto the scene. Extension's audience in developed countries, such as the United States, is changing away from agricultural producers (Kalaitzandonakes and Bullock 1998). Land Grant Universities are moving away from their traditional farmer clientele and gradually toward less traditional clients such as agribusiness decisionmakers, intermediaries and consultants, integrators, government bureaucrats, and regulators. Family issues and non-farm employment will require new approaches and increased resources.

*Urban agriculture.* A trend toward urban extension reflects the world's rapid urbanization. In Latin America, for instance, urbanization (74% in 1998) will reach 83 percent of the population by the year 2020 (Sanchez-Griñan 1998). This process is already affecting
socioeconomic and demographic changes that in turn are affecting food and nutrition. The same process is apparent in Asia and Africa, as well as in North America and Western Europe. There is substantial urban and peri-urban agriculture, and while this will not be the only issue for urban extension, it is becoming important in countries such as China. Food security, employability of youth in the food industry, environmentally sound practices by small urban businesses, as well as other food and agriculturally related programs, are likely to demand the attention of governments that have dismantled extension programs.

**Global markets and diversification.** Diversification to new high-value crops and non-traditional products is becoming a common strategy for increasing agricultural small farmer incomes. Globalization offers opportunities to enter lucrative markets for high-value horticultural, livestock, and specialty products. These are not without risk, and extension and information services must help producers increase productivity of new products, enhance quality, and introduce new risk management strategies. Competitive pressure from global markets puts a premium on efficient production and marketing, while market demands require high quality products. The “super-marketization” of food products from developing countries places new demands on extension and information systems to advise and support producers and market intermediaries.

**System Management and Leadership Challenges**

**Management.** Government adoption of a reform agenda for extension has critical implications for extension management. Management will need to (1) re-prioritize agricultural extension and information services as part of a national multi-sectoral integrated food security network; (2) plan and budget for pluralizing and strengthening agricultural extension/communication systems by allocating funds for institutional and management re-organization (including organizational development training, integrated monitoring and evaluation systems), and human resource development at all levels; and (3) review and respond to the training needs of those agencies and organizations willing to cooperate in responding more keenly to the food security challenge. A national policy reform agenda will necessarily involve extension management in establishing alliances with all sectors in an effort to develop pluralistic programs for food security and income generation among the rural poor.

**Leadership.** Organizations work the way they do because of the way people work in the organizations, and often enough the way they work is a reflection of their leadership (Heaver 1982). Leaders must show personal commitment to the organization’s vision and provide conceptual clarification as to the direction of the organization – where are we going and why! To be truly effective, leadership involves all leaders -- not only executive leaders, but also networkers (front-line workers, in-house consultants, trainers, and professional staff who spread ideas throughout and outside the organization) and local line leaders (branch managers, project team leaders, and other front-line performers). All have essential roles in bringing about development (Senge 1990).

**Capacity enhancement.** Reform of extension necessarily entails capacity building, in management negotiations and the establishment of national and district work plans and budgets in line with a new, pluralistic extension strategy, as well as with producers and communities. Pluralistic communication systems will be needed to operate in this larger arena. Capacity building and institutional strengthening is needed to widen the pool of qualified service providers and to
ensure strong links with, and the modernization of, the various components of the formal and non-formal agricultural education system. Although costly at first, capacity building at all levels and for all providers is critical.

Conclusion

Extension reform is in flux, but moving from innovation to execution. Like other historically considered public goods, it is increasingly being decentralized and privatized in different approaches and to different degrees. The immediate challenge facing governments is to reform extension in ways that increase client-oriented services and at the same time respond to continually changing social goals and economic pressures.

For those governments that have not undertaken extension reform, the challenges are to establish a strategic vision; build commitment within the public sector -- not only in ministries of agriculture but also in ministries of finance as well as with stakeholders throughout the system; identify local change managers; and maintain realistic expectations of what can be accomplished in given periods of time.

Reform requires analysis of current performance of extension activities so as to determine the system’s strengths and weaknesses, and is the first step toward establishing a strategic vision of the reform measures to be taken. Reform must be politically desirable, feasible and sustainable over time. Key stakeholders must be convinced that the reform is really needed and that the changes planned are desirable and feasible. In most cases, management “champions” as well as local champions of the reform are needed to promote the process, including providing leadership to the development of a strategic vision and the building of agency and local commitment. Certainly, the reform process will succeed only under favorable conditions that include widespread acceptance by officials and other stakeholders, a process that generally takes time to develop. In this latter regard, organizational reform will likely require participatory consensus building established via workshops and consultations, as well as the enlistment of local change agents to lead the effort and develop ownership among stakeholders.

For those governments already engaged in the process of reform, the task ahead demands further attention to the several findings and challenges already listed and discussed in this compilation of cases studies. An expanded vision of extension means developing services in a pluralistic partnership that responds to the needs of both agricultural and rural development. Governments have an especially important responsibility for tackling the problems of gender inequality, food insecurity and lack of income generation in rural sectors.

As the impetus toward extension system reform continues, international leaders and national policymakers responsible for directing extension are likely to find themselves called upon to review and reconsider extension’s role in a host of issues: the development of rural economies, the advancement of social equity and the protection of the environment, as well as in the production of agricultural goods. While agricultural development will continue to occupy a leading place in extension’s emerging pluralistic, demand-driven policy agenda, new challenges also promise a more inclusive view of extension’s clientele and tasks in the future.
References


