

CREATING A POLICY ENVIRONMENT FOR PRO-POOR AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION: THE WHO? WHAT? AND HOW?

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Agricultural extension has much to offer the rural poor, providing that they are perceived not merely as producers, but also consumers and labourers, and that appropriate wider policies are in place. However, agricultural extension policy in many countries over recent decades has been exclusively production-focused, institutionally monolithic, centrally directed, and organised on the premise that public sector extension structures can effectively reach down to village level. Partly in reaction to this, neoliberal voices have recently urged 'reform' in the sense of wide-scale privatisation of extension and removal of the state 'subsidy' that it implies. The study reported here challenges both approaches. Appropriate future policies will avoid past extremes of state-dominated or (hoped for) private sector provision. Instead, they will focus on identifying appropriate public and private roles and partnerships between them. A powerful policy driver will be to reduce the risk of 'durable disorder' to which remote areas are especially susceptible.

Policy conclusions

- Pro-poor agricultural extension policy will:
 - create and support opportunity by identifying where the poor can benefit from the market, as producers, labourers and consumers;
 - enhance security and reduce vulnerability by designing strategies and priorities that avoid or reduce risk;
 - enable empowerment by helping the poor to develop negotiating capacity in relation to market actors and extension providers.
- Specific options depend on economic, social and cultural contexts, in particular: degree of integration into markets; levels of public sector resourcing; and government's vision of future options for weakly integrated areas.
- A changed role for public sector extension (facilitating and regulatory in well integrated areas, direct involvement via public-private partnerships in weakly integrated areas) is part of this policy refocusing.
- But new policies towards extension are unlikely to succeed unless supported by some reorientation of agriculture, rural development and, increasingly, urban development policy.
- At the broadest level, processes underpinning the new architecture of aid, such as the preparation of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, can support extension in three ways:
 - by eliciting perspectives of the poor which are useable in extension design;
 - by fostering coherence among extension, agricultural and rural development policy, and between donors and governments; and
 - by placing extension policy within a realistic analysis of the changing social, political and economic context of rural development, especially regarding the challenges of marginal areas.

Who is the target group for pro-poor agricultural extension?

Poverty has fallen only slowly in the last decade, with around 1.2 billion people globally living on under \$1 a day. Poverty is predominantly rural, and the majority of the rural poor live in areas weakly integrated into markets. Most of the poor are to be found in S. Asia, where a substantial portion are landless – and the question of what extension might offer the landless is a particular challenge. But poverty is about more than just income: it is multi-dimensional, embracing vulnerability and lack of voice. The poor have assets on which they can draw and which they can build up, and they use these to pursue multiple livelihood strategies and outcomes, or, in some cases, to diversify by locating family members in different places. The poor generally have limited entitlements, commonly do not have secure rights to those they do have, and have inadequate information, knowledge and power to claim them. It may appear especially paradoxical to ask what extension has to offer the landless, but many of these have small backyard enterprises. In any case, from the viewpoint of policy towards rural development, agriculture and extension, it is crucially important to recognise that the poor are at the same time *producers, consumers and labourers*. Extension can benefit *consumers* by contributing to more regular supplies of lower cost, higher quality food, even if from large-scale farming. This lies largely outside the scope of this paper, but the *labour* effects of agricultural and extension policy are of central concern.

The livelihoods of the poor, and the role of the state in enhancing them, are influenced by the types of market situation they face. Increasingly, such influences come from international markets, as globalisation begins to bite. Poor *producers* face high transaction costs, due to: limited information and weak infrastructure to access such markets; new quality standards which may be unattainable; and growing instability as major purchasers, such as supermarkets, shift bulk purchases from one location to another in response to short-term market fluctuations. International markets will remain distorted until subsidies and other controls in OECD countries are removed. Developing country governments need to exercise whatever exemptions and discretions are available in their favour, but – for as long as their views are weakly represented in international forums – there is a danger that they will become more disadvantaged by global trends.

In so far as food reaching *national* markets through stronger world trade is cheaper than that produced domestically, the effects will be positive on the poor as *consumers* – particularly on the urban poor – but negative on producers.

What is pro-poor agricultural extension and why is it needed?

Historically, extension has fallen into three broad camps: that funded and provided by the private sector; that funded (and generally delivered) by the public sector; and that operating on a farmer-to-farmer basis, often with the support

of NGOs. The first of these has predominantly been linked to commercial crops grown in well integrated areas and so is not likely to be of direct relevance to low-income producers (though it may benefit the poor as consumers or labourers); the second has generally been characterised by top-down delivery modes of operation, often linked with subsidy schemes of various kinds, and increasingly faces shortages of funds and problems in retaining government staff in difficult locations. It also tends to be characterised by emphasis on returns per unit of land to the neglect of the labour economy, advocating technologies which are generally too high-risk to be taken up widely by the poor. The final approach, though often relevant to low-income producers, tends to be limited in scope and difficult to expand in the absence of local support organisations such as NGOs.

There is a need to relate priorities and strategies for agricultural extension to an understanding of the social context and the economy in poorly integrated, often geographically remote areas, where the majority of rural poor are located. The spatial aspects of poverty, including changing rural-urban relations, marginalisation of inaccessible hinterlands and varying impacts of globalisation on local markets, have created new challenges and opportunities for pro-poor extension. Unsurprisingly, if agricultural extension here is to be relevant to the needs of the poor, it will have twin objectives:

- pro-poor growth; and
- vulnerability reduction.

The relative emphasis on these will vary according to the opportunities and challenges that face the poor in different geographical areas. Strategies emphasising pro-poor growth will be most effective in the relatively well integrated, commercial areas. Vulnerability reduction is in many cases a priority objective for marginal areas, but even in these there is likely to be some potential for pro-poor growth.

Policies towards agriculture and extension have up to now focused almost exclusively on promoting technologies geared towards increased productivity of land. This policy can still be relevant, even in weakly integrated areas, but needs to be supplemented by one aiming to increase employment, but also, as far as possible, raise returns to labour, and to iron out seasonal fluctuations in each.

In weakly integrated areas, extension is less about delivering technologies, and more about supporting poor people's capability to cope with vulnerability and to choose among and draw on potential opportunities, and so strengthening their 'voice'.

How to deliver pro-poor agricultural extension?

At root, pro-poor extension has to be grounded in the state's clear and locally-relevant view of its own role. For well integrated areas, this may approach the neoliberal ideal of facilitating and regulating the activities of private sector extension agents, reducing market imperfections as far as possible, and funding the provision of public goods-type investments and services (for delivery either by private or public sectors) in areas such as health, safety and the environment. Nor should it be too difficult in these areas to introduce private-type performance and management practices into the public sector, including charges for services, and performance assessment by clients and an element of payment by results. Technologies of most relevance to the poor will be those offering most employment opportunities at adequate rates of return, but the trick will be in ensuring that these also generate products having viable market prospects.

For weakly integrated areas, the correction of market imperfections will require massive resourcing. In the past,

this has been one factor prompting their widespread neglect of such areas, and it is here that government must be clear about the vision underpinning policy formulation. At the most fundamental level, outmigration from such areas might constitute an acceptable vision, but only if reasonable livelihood prospects can be generated elsewhere, and if the volume and impacts of outmigration are closely monitored. 'Outmigration through neglect' rarely constitutes an adequate strategy. At the level of rural development policy, visions need to be developed jointly between central and local governments:

- for instance, where particular areas are biophysically suited to particular production activities (such as livestock or tree crops) but to little else, livelihoods dependent on these need to be assured through careful visioning which (at the cost of slightly higher consumer prices) resists precipitate handing over these to well integrated areas which have many more options. This is not to argue for enduring protection of weakly integrated areas, but for consistent overall development policy, with strong regional (i.e. here, provincial) dimensions which adapt gradually rather than abruptly to changing markets;
- in a different dimension, any decentralisation of the financing or provision of services needs to be carefully monitored: in principle, local government is more directly in contact with people's needs and opportunities than is central government, and so should be able to respond to these more readily. In practice, many local politicians pin their fortunes more to high-profile infrastructure projects or to urban services than to the unspectacular task of ensuring adequate service provision in rural areas.

Even if the privatisation of extension in well integrated areas allows some switching of resources to the more difficult areas, rationing and sequencing of public investment will be necessary. In most cases, investment to redress transport and communication deficits will be a high priority. However, the development of an agile, competitive private sector will be at best a long-term proposition in most areas, and this will require direct engagement by the public sector in funding and delivering services, including extension. In those (few) areas where the density of private commercial, NGO or community-based organisations is high, this might best be done in partnership with them. Direct public sector engagement in these ways may attract the opprobrium of neo-liberal purists given the 'subsidy' that it implies. Nevertheless, governments must insist on their rights to act as service providers where there is no alternative – after all, the cost of such subsidy will be lower than the human and social costs of 'durable disorder' into which neglected areas are prone to fall, and, once entered, this undesirable condition resists reversal. 'Subsidy' in this context is therefore as much a matter of politics as economics.

But there can be no case for continuing old-style centrally-directed, formulaic approaches to extension, which restrict its role to technology transfer. These have demonstrated inadequate grasp of the social, economic and technical contexts influencing how poor people adopt technical change, or of problems posed by non-availability of inputs or markets, so that uptake of the technologies on offer has been limited. Furthermore, the management of public sector extension staff at village level poses immense difficulty: local-level accountability is near-impossible to achieve, and high proportions of posts in difficult areas remain vacant as extensionists seek transfer to settings offering more facilities for themselves and their families. One solution to this problem pursued in Uganda is for public funds to support private individuals who set themselves up as local level small business advisers. This remains to be evaluated, but if successful will have the

added merits of facilitating livelihood diversification and strengthening local business skills.

There is growing awareness of the role that local towns can play in situations where it has proven impossible to fill village-level extension worker vacancies, and where the options for public/private partnership at village level are limited. These offer some prospect for locating specialist advisers in 'one-stop shops', supported by (publicly available) internet access and other information communication technologies, linking with private sector agents (business development, input supply, marketing and processing), and adequately backed-up by agricultural research. Considerable shifts in mindset will be needed for extension specialists to:

- liaise effectively among themselves;
- liaise effectively with traders and processors, so that the advice they give is based on sound market prospects;
- provide advice based on local demands, and options consistent with these, and not on some centrally-determined agenda;
- create appropriate teams of adaptive researchers and extensionists to travel out to villages periodically for purposes of diagnosis, training, on-farm trials and demonstrations responding to local demand.

However, if the locus of extension is to shift in some measure towards local towns, much will have to be done to strengthen the 'demand' side of extension, and to ensure especially that the voices of the poor are heard. At one level this will require the construction of local roads and investment support for local transport; at another it will require commitment to participatory consultation by officials and to the prevention of elite domination, and at another, new 'community development'-type efforts involving community groups and NGOs to identify 'para-extensionists' who will travel to district towns to articulate local requirements, bringing back advice but also possibly acting as commission agents for input supply and output sales.

Funding conditions will influence the character of the public administration and its capacity to reach into weakly integrated areas, but there are many other influences, often

deeply rooted in local political and administrative cultures, so that starting points and trajectories in relation to new opportunities of these kinds will differ.

Examples include the (possibly declining) tradition of state provision in transitional economies such as Vietnam, the deeply paternalistic culture of state provision in parts of South Asia, and the move towards political, financial and administrative decentralisation in many parts of Latin America. The Plan for the Modernisation of Agriculture in Uganda contains many innovative provisions, including increased voice of the poor in the design of interventions, administrative decentralisation, and efforts to make officials downwardly accountable to the users of services. Similarly, some Latin American countries (e.g. Colombia, Bolivia) have pioneered the provision of services (including extension) by municipalities, officials being accountable to locally-elected representatives. In Vietnam, local officials have gone beyond central directives in developing support to poor producers. By contrast, and despite some experimentation, the nature of services to be delivered remains centrally-determined in much of South Asia, and officials are accountable only upwards within line departments.

Options for governments and donors

Options relating to the scope and form of pro-poor agricultural extension cannot be viewed in isolation from wider policy options in agriculture and rural development.

Many of these are specific to the economic, social and cultural context, in particular to market conditions (i.e. whether farming areas are weakly or strongly integrated into markets), to resource availability in the public sector, and to the extent to which governments are oriented towards poverty reduction (Box 1).

Other policy options are more generic, including the need to:

- promote the privatisation of extension in well integrated areas, switching public resources to more remote areas;
- test a range of pluralistic approaches in difficult areas, involving combinations of public/private funding and delivery;

Box 1 Options for supporting pro-poor extension in different contexts

		Market conditions	
		Strongly integrated areas	Weakly integrated areas
<i>Government adequately resourced and responsive to needs of poor</i>	i) move towards fully privatised model of extension, limiting public involvement to facilitating and regulatory functions, promoting labour absorption where possible, and switching public resources to poorly integrated areas ii) State regulation and/or funding needed for public goods and addressing market failure iii) finance gaps in advisory services, particularly in making shifts from extension on production to production-context, and service agency start-ups; links to commercialisation and processing structures iv) finance start-ups in niche enterprises, emerging sectors, capturing higher value links in commodity chains	a) substantial public funding generally justified b) promote public/private (commercial and non-profit) partnerships in, e.g. niche products, or in adding extension to private input supply c) promote ICTs to reduce information gaps d) aim to raise labour productivity and so release some labour for out-migration e) enhance relevance of advice to production context f) aim to reduce vulnerability and broaden safety nets (e.g. watershed management, also crop insurance; pensions) g) coordinate planning at national and local levels on rural futures, e.g. to allow remote areas to link into commodity chains in ways reflecting their competitive advantage, e.g. for niche products h) make target areas accessible by new infrastructure to ensure poor farmers can take advantage of new opportunities i) strengthen district towns as a locus of provision of agriculture services, and people's capacity to make demands on these j) keep the focus of extension broad, to embrace the wider production and livelihood contexts	
<i>Government adequately resourced but unresponsive to needs of poor</i>	Government policy should move towards (i) and (ii) above, but likely to be characterised by top-down service provision and by tension between unresponsive centre and more progressive local government		Government policy should move towards (b) – (j), but top-down service provision likely to dominate and be characterised by gaps, irrelevancies and non-sustainability in remote areas. Likely to be very limited work in partnership with other types of organisation.
<i>Government poorly resourced</i>	Responsive governments will aim to move towards (i) – (ii) and (b) – (j), but will have to rely on partnership or 'intermediate user' arrangements. Less responsive governments will impose a <i>de facto</i> triage. If poorly managed, this may lead to 'durable disorder' as alienation and chronic violence take hold in the hinterlands.		

- de-emphasise the (land) productivity enhancement objectives which have dominated agricultural and extension policy hitherto, giving increased emphasis to labour productivity, employment generation and vulnerability reduction, including reduction of the impact of seasonality on incomes;
- support the development of district or provincial towns as nodal points at the interface between government, markets and rural people. Such support includes the provision of basic utilities (especially electricity), but also support for the establishment of input supply, processing and marketing facilities, the provision of technical information and training courses and information and communication technologies (ICTs) with internet access. To focus on small-town development offers wider prospects of cross-sectoral integration in government and donor strategies – especially between rural and urban strategies;
- strengthen people's demands on the facilities newly created in district or provincial towns. This may be limited to a narrowly extension-focused frame, but may more appropriately be supported more generally within the context of revived interest in the World Bank and elsewhere in 'community development'-type approaches;
- in areas threatened by HIV/AIDS, promote strategies sensitive to the changing composition of the labour force and to increasing levels of vulnerability. This must be done within a realistic assessment of shrinking human resource capacities, whereby 'para-extensionists' may be the only extension agents available in many rural areas. Donors will generally wish to support governments in these efforts by, for instance:

- action at home and in the international arena to address northern protectionism;
- efforts to strengthen developing country negotiating capacity in agriculture-relevant trade and regulation
- support to negotiations on regional free trade, transaction costs, cross-border trade and tariffs, addressing hindrances to private investment;
- efforts to leverage cost-sharing and partnerships on an international basis in order to gain for the poor a greater share of the benefits of technical change in agriculture;
- ground-testing of innovative approaches in (b) – (j) (Box 1) and support to government in assessing them;
- assistance to governments for stronger fiscal management and participatory planning of support to the agricultural sector, via e.g. SWAPs and/or PRSPs;
- promotion of higher value links in commodity chains, and assistance in addressing information/skill needs of associated agents;
- support for major infrastructure projects, including transport and communication;
- support for capacity building among levels of government and other agencies (particularly producer and trading organisations), and for acquisition of functional literacy and numeracy among poor people, especially in the more remote areas.

Where government is adequately resourced but unresponsive to the needs of poor people, donor support could additionally include:

- capacity building, development of appropriate models, and other support for moves towards (i) and (ii) and (b) – (j) as outlined in Box 1, including support for producer and trading organisations and other civil society organisations to make demands on the state;
- some aid conditionality to help in moving governments in these directions;
- support for moves towards decentralisation and capacity building of local governments where responsiveness to poor may be greater;

- in cases of extreme reluctance, it may be necessary to pilot alternative approaches which bypass or rely only minimally on the state apparatus.

Where government is poorly resourced, donors may additionally provide budgetary support, and/or promote a move towards decentralised initiatives. With the less responsive governments, they may pursue elements of the capacity building and other support outlined immediately above, and/or support outmigration. In decentralised contexts, cooperation with local government in poorer areas can support the 'visioning' of rural development. Donors can also contribute to risk mitigation by seeking synergy between, e.g. social funds or rehabilitation programmes and ongoing development programming.

Conclusions

The context of agricultural extension described here is more complex than in earlier perceptions, but also more realistic. Agricultural extension *has* a role to play in addressing poverty; for it to do so effectively, it must:

- address poverty from a livelihoods perspective within a wider, poverty-focused policy environment;
- contribute to enhanced 'voice' among the poor;
- seize opportunistically on possibilities for enhancing incomes or reducing vulnerability, based on sharper alertness to new opportunities.

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Acknowledgements

The authors are indebted to DFID and Sida who co-funded this study in the context of the Neuchâtel Initiative. John Farrington and Elizabeth Cromwell are Research Fellows at ODI, Ian Christoplos is an independent consultant, Andrew Kidd is Livelihoods Advisor to DFID and Malin Beckman is Lecturer at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences.

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ISSN: 1356-9228

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