

## **Network Paper 61: REFORMING AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION IN BANGLADESH: BLENDING GREATER PARTICIPATION AND SUSTAINABILITY WITH INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING**

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The limited effectiveness of the Training and Visit (T&V) system of extension in sustaining agricultural growth, combined with concerns about sustainability and pressures towards greater participation by farmers and the private sector, have stimulated major reconsideration of extension strategies in Bangladesh. New approaches have been launched in the past few years, most notably through the Agricultural Support Services Project (ASSP) supported by the World Bank. Drawing on the experiences of ASSP since its inception in 1991, a National Task Force charged with defining a new policy for extension is now completing its work. This paper endeavours to synthesise field experiences since the inception of the T&V in 1978-79 through to the initial years of ASSP, in order to contribute to current efforts by the Bangladesh government and its partners to improve the effectiveness of agricultural development programmes.

The paper first offers a conceptual framework for assessing the coherence, performance and sustainability of extension strategies. Subsequent sections review the changes in agricultural production and productivity in the past two decades; improvements have clearly taken place, but the evidence of the contribution of extension is mainly circumstantial. The spread of irrigation and changes in the availability of inputs appear to be the most important in explaining the expansion of rice production in particular.

The rise and fall of T&V is then examined with particular reference to the differences between the theory and the actual practice. T&V contributed to the establishment of a national system of extension based on farmer and extension agent training; regular contact between extension and research staff; and standardised messages based on recommendations from research. The T&V approach exhibited a reasonable degree of coherence and performance. Further, the theory of T&V contains elements of the current strategy, such as linkages to research, but these failed to operate as expected in many instances.

In practice, T&V was overly dependent on routinely disseminated messages and generally failed to take farmers' constraints and priorities into account. Research-extension links remained weak with inadequate identification by research and extension staff of farmers' problems; and researchers' reluctance to see those problems as a basis for research prioritisation. A serious deficiency of T&V was its failure to consider the importance and possible roles for the private sector, notably NGOs which were rapidly expanding in number and their involvement in rural development activities during the same period.

T&V is most frequently faulted for its lack of sustainability. The massive expansion of extension staff which was aided and abetted in no small measure by the World Bank was fully consistent with the view of state leadership in agricultural development which prevailed at that time. The demise of T&V may be traceable at least as much to the fact that this view has changed as to the shortcomings of T&V itself. The government together with donors is no longer willing or able to continue to support the extension service at current levels.

The final section of the paper examines the major features of the new extension strategy which include: (i) decentralisation (deconcentration) of authority from the centre to the districts and thanas within the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE); (ii) the use of groups rather than CFs in communications with farming communities; (iii) greater efforts to assess farmers' needs and tailor messages to their priorities for a wider range of commodities and subjects; (iv) strengthening linkages with public and private organisations concerned with research, inputs and marketing as well as extension; and (v) a sharper focus on poor and disadvantaged groups, including women. These reforms are pursued concurrently with efforts to reduce costs. The paper discusses problems and progress to date in each of these areas.

The paper concludes that although these reforms are steps in the right direction, the strategy appears to be based upon unrealistic assumptions regarding the willingness and ability of different organisations to make changes and work together. Whilst policy statements are replete with the rhetoric of cooperation between government and non-government agencies, the state's practical

experience so far in either of these areas remains limited. Movement towards more cooperation remains largely donor-driven, with few examples as yet where either side has actively sought the other toward this end.

The initial expressions of the new strategy through ASSP are focused primarily upon changes in the extension activities of DAE and encompass a number of features that were part of the theory of T&V, but failed in practice. It is not clear that ASSP offers significantly better prospects for improving performance in several of the key areas, including research-extension linkages. The continuing difficulties in efforts to rejuvenate the national research system seriously reduces the potential contribution from the single most important source of new technologies.

Improved performance requires a combination of appropriate levels of skill and divisions of responsibilities. Experience to date suggests a major gap between skill requirements and current capacities for all actors, but especially for DAE. As decision-making is centralised, district-level staff will require a much wider range of skills, both technical and interactive. Extension staff must be able to diagnose the problems and opportunities faced by farmers; develop appropriate messages; and work collaboratively with village groups and other private sector organisations.

DAE is currently emphasising deconcentration with more authority for district staff in the planning and implementation of extension programmes. However, accountability may be adversely affected in the process. While staff are enjoined to take farmers' needs into account and to involve NGOs and others in extension plans and programmes, the extent to which field staff are actually accountable to clients at the local level appears to be mainly a matter of their own choosing. Further, as the degree of diversity in district extension activities grows, the ability of the centre to monitor and understand what is happening will diminish and with it the level of effective accountability within DAE.

The sustainability of new extension approaches is especially problematic at this stage of the process. A major feature of ASSP involves the actual reduction in the costs of the public extension services, primarily through staff reductions. Efforts to achieve savings for government quickly through divestment of functions and staff reductions could prove counter-productive in relation to the objectives of the new strategy. Although expanded involvement of private sector agencies, including NGOs and private commercial firms, could reduce the scope and cost of public sector programmes eventually, the process of successfully reaching that point is likely to require additional inputs of skill and resources.

It is not clear whether the new strategy will facilitate stronger demand from rural communities and what roles groups and NGOs will play in these processes. Nor is it clear whether the system as a whole will facilitate institutional pluralism in the generation and dissemination of new technologies. Most of the initial set of activities are primarily aimed at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of government-led development programmes, rather than fundamentally altering the status quo. NGOs are regarded by some as an additional complication being thrust upon government agencies by donors. Aside from assistance with homestead gardens and certain cash crops, there is no clear vision of the roles of NGOs and private commercial firms in providing research and extension services for farmers.

Particular attention needs to be given in the early stages to gaining an understanding of the comparative advantages of government agencies, NGOs, commercial firms, groups and farm families; and an appreciation that their roles are likely to vary between districts, commodities and population groups. The new extension strategy is revolutionary and will require time to take root. ASSP can assist by developing and testing approaches on a limited basis. However, the transformation of government services and the development of new partnerships nationwide will require more time than is available through ASSP. A key question is whether the parties involved will have the necessary flexibility, patience, will and resources to give the new approach a reasonable chance of success.