

Scientific advancement of extension revisited

This paper is published as:

Mulder, M. (2012). Scientific Advancement of Extension Revisited. *Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension*, 18, 1, pp. 1-5.

As you may remember, my editorial of the 2011-04 issue of the *Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension* had the challenging title ‘Does extension yield new scientific knowledge?’ My argument was that there is no new scientific progress in the field of extension. I wrote this short piece in the light of the upcoming name change of the journal. I acknowledged that there is progress in practice in the field of extension, advisory or outreach services. Take for instance AFAAS, the African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services. This Forum has ‘... the mandate to implement the Agricultural Advisory Services aspects of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) - an African-owned and Africa-led initiative through which interventions to transform agriculture are coordinated.’ (<http://www.afaas-africa.org/about-programme/>; accessed 22-08-211). One of the pillars of the forum is addressing agricultural research, technology dissemination and adoption. The FARA, which is the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa is leading this Pillar. AFAAS falls under FARA, but is an autonomous forum with its own governance. The main objective of the forum is to develop an advisory service while ensuring that the activities within the CAADP pillar on research and extension is linked to the actual needs of farmers in Africa. AFAAS wants to empower national stakeholders in the field of agricultural advisory services, to build partnerships at different levels and to develop a sustainable African organisation for agricultural advisory services. The forum does not want to install a traditional extension service; apart from farmer competence development, the forum wants to be active in fields like poverty and gender, natural resources management, climate change, environmental sustainability, and market-oriented agricultural services. The AFAAS is registered as a legal entity in Uganda, and its secretariat which is based in Kampala, is supported by the European Union. The forum is managed on behalf of the Board which consists of representatives of East, West, Southern, North and Central African countries.

Or take the recently created Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS), of which the secretariat is based in Lindau, Switzerland. GFRAS is striving for the same goals as AFAAS, to enhance the capacity, networking and impact of – in this case - rural development services, which are fundamentally broader than agricultural services. This may seem trivial, but in a Tempus-project, coordinated by JAEE editorial advisory board member Chris Garforth of Reading University, on the Western Balkans Rural Development Network, in which a Master program at university and a series of courses of non-formal rural development organisations are being developed, this appeared to be a fundamental issue. Rural development may encompass agriculture and promote multi-sectoral development in case the economic outlook for farming is not promising. GFRAS is created based on a series of events called the Neuchâtel initiative. This initiative started in the middle of the nineties of the last century, and at that time it still was aimed at agricultural extension. It comprised of an informal group of extension experts who were working for Sub-Saharan African countries and convened in Neuchâtel in 1995 in a meeting which was hosted by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. In this meeting experts from various countries and organisations were present, such as from ‘Austria, Denmark (Danida), France (MAE), Germany (GTZ), the Netherlands (DGIS), Sweden (Sida), Switzerland (SDC), UK (DFID)

and the USA (USAID), as well as representatives of the FAO, the IFAD, the European Commission (EC/DGVIII), the CTA (Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation) and the World Bank', as can be read on the website of GFRAS (<http://www.g-fras.org/en/>). GFRAS is an open network organisations without formal members. There is a Steering Committee, with members from AFAAS (the African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services), APIRAS (the Asia-pacific Island Group Rural Advisory Services Network), DAAS (the Danish Agricultural Advisory Service), FAO (the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations), GDR (Glemminge Development Research), GFRAR (the Global Forum on Agricultural Research), the Latin-American Network for Rural Extension, SDC (the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, which represents donor organisations, Agridea (the Swiss Association for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Areas), and the World Bank. The chair of the Committee is Dr. Silim Nahdy of the National Agricultural Advisory Services of Uganda (source: GFRAS website).

These above mentioned and other initiatives are being reviewed by the Agricultural Extension and Advisory Services Worldwide study, which is initiated by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), and funded by USAID, in close collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture, IICA (source: <http://www.worldwide-extension.org/home>). The Worldwide Extension Study is a kind of descriptive mapping study, which provides information on the human and financial resources of agricultural extension and advisory systems worldwide, the extension service providers in each country, primary target groups of these extension service providers, resources allocation for key extension and advisory service functions, information and communication technology resources and capacity of the providers, and the role farmers play in setting priorities and assessing performance of extension. There is an elaborate questionnaire which is accessible online by which service providers are being asked to answer a series of questions and to upload the completed questionnaire for data processing and analysis. The results of the study will be essential for understanding the current position of agricultural extension and advisory services worldwide.

As is clear from these two examples only, there are a lot of institutions working in the field of extension and these institutions implement a broad range of programs and projects.

Before sending the 2011-04 Editorial to the publisher, I sent the piece to a couple of colleagues in the field, amongst who was Andrea Bohn, from GFRAS. She agreed with the argument that there is not so much scientific advancement, but that a lot is happening in practice. She contended that regional platforms like AFAAS are a necessary, but maybe not sufficient, prerequisite for progress in extension as it redefines its role in the 21st century. But her question was if these regional forums, although they bring together diversity and breadth of experience, may not be diverse enough, because most participants come from public organisations and universities, and only a few from NGOs. She also wondered whether ways can be found to lively engage through virtual connections, which is indeed a problem in my opinion, not alone because of the present state of communication technology in many developing countries, but also because of the over-commitment of many professionals in these networks, who simply do not have the time to maintain large numbers of relations in virtual networks. Her final concern was whether real outside the box thinking and innovation will happen in these forums.

Burton Swanson, director of the Agricultural Extension and Advisory Services Worldwide study and of the MEAS –project (Modernizing Extension and Advisory Services; www.meas-extension.org which is supported by USAID) reacted to the piece as well. He agreed with the argument and stated that he is aware that not much has happened in the field of extension in the recent past. He attributes that to the fact that donors and governments reduced funding for extension systems in the early and mid 1990s. He stated that there are now serious concerns about maintaining national food security and improving rural livelihoods worldwide and that this has resulted in renewed interest in strengthening and/or developing more innovative extension systems. He pointed at the importance of regional organisations like AFAAS, the International Society of Extension Education (ISEE) (which holds/held an interesting conference in Delhi in November 2011, the Asian-Pacific Association of Agricultural Education and the Environment (APEAEN) (which holds/eld a conference during the same time in Thailand; see: <http://www.apeaen-net.org/web/>), the Association of International Agricultural and Extension Education (AIAEE, which held a conference in July 2011 in Namibia; see <http://www.aiaee.org/>), and the European Seminar on Extension Education (ESEE), which had its last bi-annual meeting in August 2011 in Helsinki.

Swanson observes serious concerns about how national food security can be sustained while improving rural livelihoods. Extension and advisory services needs to reconcile those two goals. He distinguishes ‘product innovations’ and ‘process innovations’ in extension. He notes that, as a result of the T&V model that was introduced in most Sub-Saharan African and Asian countries, most field extension workers still focus on disseminating ‘product innovations’. However, to improve rural livelihoods, he thinks much more attention must be given to ‘process innovations’ that will help increase household income, especially among rural women. A complication is that extension systems differ substantially across countries, and he believes that it is important to find ways of making these pluralistic extension systems more effective.

Swanson knows this complexity by experience as he has helped (through a major World Bank project) in reorganizing extension in China (making the system decentralized and market-driven) and in finding a new, successful way of financing their system during the early nineties of the last century. He informed me about the fact that China still has the largest extension system in the world, with about 640,000 extension staff. Not an insignificant number. He said that given the economic growth of China and its changing consumption patterns, farmers still need advisory services, especially in getting organized into producer groups and getting linked to markets. He added that there are about 140,000 of these groups in China. Based on his experience he was asked to help planning the reorganization (bottom-up, farmer- and market-driven) and financing of the Indian extension system through two World Bank projects (NATP and UP-DASP) that ran from 1998-2004. He reiterated:

‘... but we must recognize that ever country is different and we must come up with innovative ways of strengthening these pluralistic extension systems in each country’.

He adds that ICT will play a key role in this process during the 21st century, and concluded by concurring that we must come up with innovative ways of transforming and modernizing extension systems in different countries. In his opinion this is essential for improving the livelihoods of the rural poor (especially rural women) and allowing their children to get educated to take non-farm jobs. He expressed to me his hope that what is learned through AFAAS and the other regional extension conferences can be shared worldwide through the Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension and regional professional extension

conferences, including their journals and proceedings. Regarding the JAEE I welcome accounts of activities and progress reports very much.

Based on recent work in Bangladesh, Liberia and Rwanda, Swanson observed that both private sector firms and international NGOs are becoming very entrepreneurial, and that they are actively competing for donor funded projects that focus on the provision of extension services or that have an extension component. Apart from the good service these organisations are delivering, the big concern is the sustainability of the effects which is inherent to the project-based financing structure of the development programs involved. Regularly, projects last between three and five years, and after these projects there is no follow-up. On the other hand, when governments understand the value added of extension, they are more likely to invest in it.

Coming back to the main point of my previous Editorial, Swanson finalised his reaction with, ‘in short, don’t give up on extension, but let’s try to identify and share innovative ways of strengthening extension systems in different countries’. My reaction to this is: sure, the JAEE will not give up on extension, *because finding innovative ways of strengthening diverse extension systems in different countries is crucial for the combined goal of achieving national food security and rural poverty alleviation, which essentially is a practical but at the same time academic challenge.*

Since there is a lot of activity going on in agricultural extension and rural advisory services, and progress is being made, the easiest conclusion would be that the ball is with extension scientists to make progress. But that conclusion is too easy because extension as a field of study has changed dramatically over the years. University chairs have not been continued when professors retired, and younger academics went in diverse directions. The number of full professors in extension in Europe is decimated to a handful. So the future of this important work is in the hands of more specialized successors in communication, innovation, competence development, knowledge brokerage, social learning, social media, international chain development, entrepreneurship and regional learning, to name a few. To connect with the work of the scholars in these ground-breaking specializations will probably be the way forward for the JAEE.