

## GOOD PRACTICES IN EXTENSION MANAGEMENT FOR CENTRAL AMERICA

J. Preissing<sup>1</sup> and E. Morrás Dimas<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

In order to demonstrate successful experiences and strategies for advisory services that can serve as guidance in the development, strengthening and implementation of extension systems in Central America, the Research and Extension Branch (OEKR) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Rome in collaboration with the FAO Sub-Regional Office for Central America (SLM) coordinated a study on 'Good Extension Practices in Extension Management for Central America', covering: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama. The focus of these case-studies was on systems, approaches, institutional capacity-building and sustainability issues, not field-level extension practices. The results describe best practices in

extension management and approaches and offer tentative recommendations. A validation workshop with international and national extension leaders was held in June 2011 to present and discuss the results and to reach conclusions about the new roles of, and demands on, extension. The main issues which emerged from the workshop were: (i) the effectiveness of the actions of the extension services begins with a demand orientation; and (ii) the capacity to build alliances and work jointly with different actors being key to achieving relevance, impact and sustainability of the desired objectives. The study recommends that the status of the extension systems in the region be re-evaluated, and that extension be expanded beyond the transfer of technologies to capacity-development and institutional reform. It also

proposes that extension should consider comprehensive approaches based on the reality of rural livelihoods, using medium to long-term processes that can adapt to new needs. Finally, it was stressed that some Central American countries are ready to reform and renew their extension

1 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 328 Manuel Almenara, Miraflores, 18 Lima, Peru.

2 Office of Knowledge Exchange, Research and Extension, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Viale delle Terme di Caracalla, 00153, Rome, Italy.

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systems, as shown by the Central American Agricultural Policy (2008–2017) that recommends an urgent strengthening of the technical capacities of institutions for small and medium-scale producers and linkages among Central American agricultural innovation systems.

**KEY WORDS:** *ALLIANCE, DEMAND-ORIENTATION, CAPACITY-DEVELOPMENT, INSTITUTIONAL REFORM*

## INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

From the 1990s, economic and institutional reforms promoted by the ‘Washington Consensus’ led the countries of Latin America and in particular those in Central America into an economic liberalisation process and structural adjustments. The decline of public administration functions resulted in a reduction or elimination of State services for technical assistance and technology transfer for medium and small-scale producers. Economic openness increased promotion of export agriculture at the expense of agricultural development for the domestic market, and particularly at the expense of agricultural development focused on meeting the food security of thousands of rural households.

In the current development agenda, there is renewed interest in strengthening extension systems focused on small-scale producers, and in strengthening institutional capacities for the provision of advisory services. Evidence of this is the

L’Aquila Joint Statement on World Food Security, which emphasises the importance of agricultural extension services, as well as the renewed donor interest in agricultural advisory services. This interest has been also shown by the Central American Agricultural Policy (2008–2017), which recommends urgent strengthening of the technical capacities of institutions for small and medium-scale producers and linkages among Central American agricultural innovation systems. In addition, during the first Latin American Intercontinental Meeting of the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS, Viña del Mar, Chile, November 2010), the need to seek guidance and extension models that can contribute to improving skills and capabilities among the most vulnerable was highlighted.

In Central America, there have been very successful extension experiences from public and private programmes, but the factors that determine the success or failure of these interventions have not been properly identified. In general, there is no clear idea of the policy and legal framework that defines the roles and responsibilities of national extension systems. The type of analysis reported in this paper facilitates the collection and validation of the experiences that contribute to improving the lives of small-scale producers and provides information to justify committing specific support to such initiatives.

The overall objective of this study was to document and analyse good practices on extension systems and methodologies in six

Central American countries (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama). Its aim was to learn about their experiences, to analyse and interpret them critically, and to draw lessons to improve and adapt the practice. This proposal responds to the needs of the Central American governments that have started to reassume national roles or improve extension services, and require strengthening of their extension training plans focused on food security and small-scale producers. Another objective of this study is to contribute to the dialogue about new ways to implement extension services and systems globally.

This study was carried out with a practical focus to disseminate successful experiences in the region where extension and technical advisory services have played a key role and not to provide a socio-economic analysis or impact evaluation of the practices described. The intention is to provide inputs, ideas and new approaches for a heterogeneous audience composed of all the actors who are part of an agricultural and rural innovation system.

In this study, the terms ‘extension systems’ and ‘services’ are understood as the following.

- *Extension service* – extension-specific activity performed or offered by an organisation. This service can be linked to a national system, but this link is not mandatory.
- *Extension system* – a related and organised set of



organisations, professionals and rural families that interact to achieve a strengthening of the competencies in their production, economic and socio-environmental areas. Non-formal education processes that can combine technology transfer or assistance are commonly used.

Six country studies were conducted, each focused on three good extension management practices or approaches used in ongoing or completed projects (i.e., independent of this study). These examples were described and analysed. In addition and in order to validate the country studies, a regional workshop was held in Guatemala City to exchange and discuss experiences and to share the results among more than 60 participants from diverse extension backgrounds (extension agents, farmer representatives, government, academia, civil society, international cooperation). As part of FAO's promotion of partnerships and networks at all levels, the results of this study were shared in a keynote presentation at the second meeting of the Latin American and Caribbean rural extension services, which was held in September 2011 in Managua, Nicaragua.

## **MATERIALS, METHODS AND DATA SOURCES**

The study was requested from the Central American countries through the FAO Sub-Regional Office for Central America (SLM), which sought the support of the Research and Extension branch

(OEKR) to promote and discuss in more detail the issue of extension in the region. This request led to the idea of carrying out a regional study using different experiences from six countries (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama), including a regional workshop to share and validate the results. There was a belief that, in spite of the lack of support or in some cases because of the lack of support, extension systems and services had innovated since the early 1990s, and that these experiences would prove useful as countries and donors renewed their interests in investing in extension.

A case-study methodology was used, based on a project concept note which provided unifying themes, scopes of work and deliverables. Essentially, there was one consultant per country, and the consultant in Guatemala also acted as the overall project co-ordinator. Thus, with the support of FAO officials, a standard format for the development of national studies was prepared, which was distributed to each national consultant working with national counterparts. Within this theoretical framework (i.e., the case-study methodology), a definition of the concept of good extension practice was established, as well the minimum content of the country case-studies.

The different experiences in the study were subject to a selection process in line with key extension management and leadership topics: financing mechanisms, capacity-development,

**A good extension practice** was defined as a mechanism, method, process or strategy that allows extension functions (technology transfer, development of human and social capital) to be more effective or efficient. It also contributes to the introduction of innovations to improve the skills of the communities served (productive, organisational, administrative, managerial, marketing and others skill) and it supports the achievement of greater efficiency in the management of rural livelihoods and natural resources.

gender, decentralisation, markets, natural resource management and climate change, research and extension linkages, nutrition and health, communication for development, and participatory approaches.

The country studies were conducted through field visits to sites, interviews with key stakeholders, and reviews of secondary data (documents related to the experience in question). The last phase of the study was a regional workshop, where the national study results were discussed, validated and shared.

During the whole process one strategy was used to highlight different experiences and initiatives arising at national level. For example, in the case of Guatemala, this study emphasised the willingness of the Ministry of Agriculture to strengthen and



institutionalise the national agricultural extension system. In the case of countries such as Costa Rica and Panama with very different rural scenarios from Guatemala, experiences describing different extension approaches more linked to market and income-generating activities were chosen.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The strengthening and improvement of technical advisory services focused on small-scale producers is becoming increasingly important worldwide, including in Central America. However, due to issues such as globalisation, the information technology revolution, climate change, liberalisation and privatisation of markets, it is necessary to consider the challenges that agricultural extension has to address for the medium and long-term.

The results were analysed using a capacity-development framework where the enabling environment (policies), organisational dimensions, and individual capacities are three levels of capacities considered in analysing the best practices for extension management and approaches (Figure 1). 'Capacity' is defined as the ability of people, organisations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully. 'Capacity development' is the process of unleashing, strengthening and maintaining of such capacity (<http://www.fao.org/capacitydevelopment/en/>).

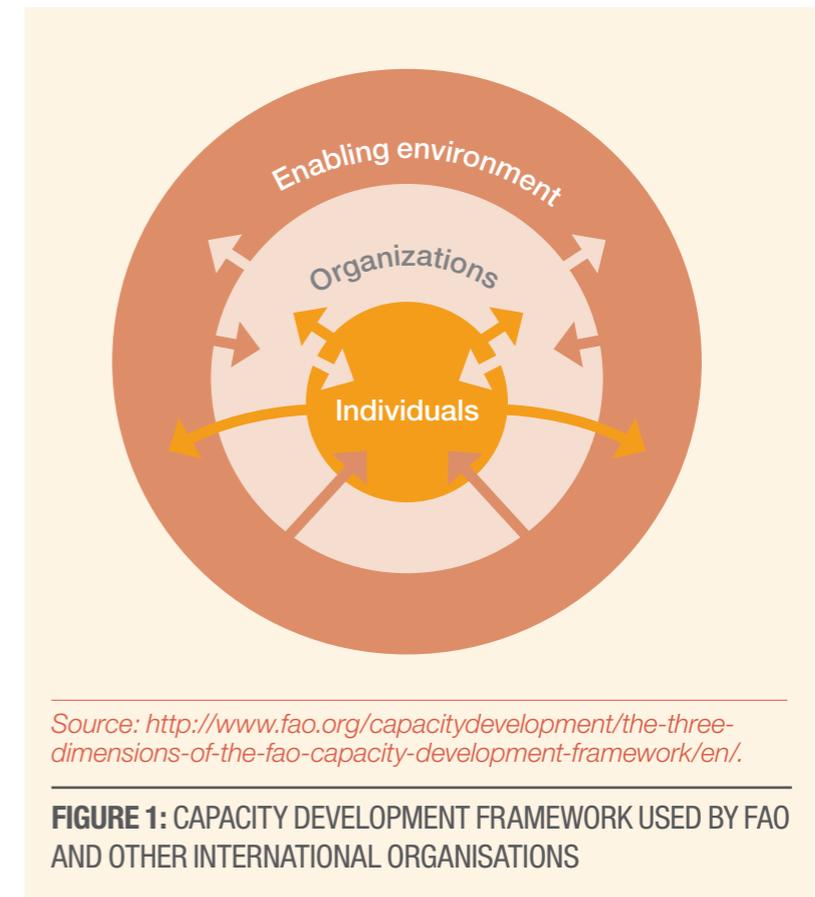
Based on the case-studies, the following results are presented on good practices.

### At the enabling environment level

- A multidimensional approach seeking participation of all the actors in the agriculture innovation system was important to the success of these cases. This was clear from the case in the Sustainable Rural Development Project of Areas of Ecological Fragility in the Trifinio Region (*Proyecto de Desarrollo Rural Sostenible en Zonas de Fragilidad Ecológica de la Región del Trifinio, PRODERT*) programme with a territorial development focus in the Belén Gualcho municipality in western Honduras.
- When systems can methodically include knowledge-creation and knowledge-sharing components, then greater impact is possible and more learning occurs, in a virtuous cycle of learning, such as in the case of Guatemala where the University of San Carlos (and its students) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature partnered with local communities in watershed management.
- At a system-wide level, Panama invested heavily in its extension staff, producing 68 master's level extension agents. This was an outstanding example of addressing human capacity through a new policy of extension nationwide.

### At the organisational level

- A demand-driven approach promotes greater participation and, in turn, increases the credibility of the extension provider. In the experience from



- the Hillside agriculture market-oriented programme (MERCASEL), El Salvador, a diagnostic from the community was followed by a strategic community plan, and an extension work-plan was developed to respond to the community's priorities.
- Constructing alliances and improved networks among key actors was an important strategy, such as in the case of Costa Rica where the extension service worked with the cattle rearers' association, individual producers and input



suppliers to address the most pressing issues in their value chain in Hojanca, where previously the cattle-rearers had no interest in partnering with extension because the extension plans did not meet their needs.

- In seeking partnerships, there should not be just a win-win partnership, but also a plus-plus, where the benefits are additive. This was visible in Panama where Nestlé, PROMEGA (university outreach programme) and the producers came together to achieve higher quality production with more affordable and timely inputs in dairy production.
- Many programmes that eventually proved to be successful took from the medium to long-term to be realised, as for most work in human and social capital development. An outstanding example came from Costa Rica, where 75% of the leaders of the water management co-operative (irrigation and potable water) COOPEBRISAS was comprised of members of the former 4-S youth club from the area, which was sponsored by the national extension service. Many of their skills were honed over 20 years of community work.
- Both an evidence of success, but also an ongoing need, was the ability to properly measure the impact of extension. In cases where it was possible to demonstrate success, the interviewees in the case-studies reported more support and better programming. The new GFRAS guide (Christoplos *et al.*, 2012) in Spanish

was awaited with anticipation.

- New extension methods and capacity-development training are needed to ensure that outreach is successful for women and vulnerable groups. In the case of Darien, Panama, extension was successful in reaching indigenous women through language training, cultural support and sensitivity of the staff over a 10-year period.

#### **At the individual level**

- Extension agents are playing a role as innovation brokers. This was evident in the Honduran example with *Café de Marcala*, where the extension service was asked to provide technical assistance and to help form alliances between producers, processors and the final market for their coffee with a protected designation of origin.
- Extension agents in El Salvador have learned and used new skills to help develop a more demand-driven extension delivery system. In *'Invertir la Mirada'*, producers contract for services from extension agents using a contract that spells out the deliverables.
- The case in Guatemala – where rural promoters are being extensively used for outreach at the community level in *San Marcos* and *Huehuetenango* Departments – has demonstrated the value of rural promoters, but with the concurrent need for strong technical and organisational support by extension agents. In order for extension agents to play this role

throughout Central America, they need a clearer mandate to focus on this work through policies and more capacity-building.

While human capital has been traditionally considered the most valuable asset for extension, historically it has not been optimised through higher pre-service education (and practical skills) requirements, in-service training, or through adequate coaching, management and leadership. Today's emphasis on integrated and multidisciplinary actions needed for rural development, food security and innovation means that producers must learn many new things; but this also means new requirements for the extension agents to act as 'innovation brokers'.

In the past, extension was understood as an intermediate role between science and practice; today this vision should be expanded, with intermediate functions such as reconciliation between different actors (organisations, disciplines and donors) and the transmission of knowledge and information (articulation of supply and demand), mediation and facilitation of learning and vision (Leeuwis, 2004).

Only a few in-depth studies have analysed the impact that new demands and challenges have on advisory services. Extension should be prepared to adapt to social changes by integrating new individual and institutional capacities. This study has highlighted the fact that there is no unique solution for all problems, but extension requires a



transition from a good/best practices approach to one of good/adapted practices.

## **CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **For extension in Central America**

- There is a need to extend the mandate of extension beyond technology transfer; a need for reform and institutional strengthening, capacity-building; and evaluation and investment promotion.

### **For the design and implementation of extension systems**

- Extension effectiveness increases with greater client participation in decision-making.
- Organisation, partnership-development, co-ordination of actors and advocacy increase sustainability, scale and impact of extension practices.
- Achievement of wider impact and concrete changes in the lives of the people who are supported by extension services, requires medium to long-term processes and activities with measurable indicators which are focused on efficiency, adaptation and evolution.

### **From the outputs of the Second Latin American and Caribbean rural extension services meeting and in line with the results of this study**

- Traditional extension services, based on the promotion of agricultural production technology

must move towards rural advisory services that integrate different aspects such as farmer organisations, business management, added value, market integration and capacity-building.

- It is necessary to educate both public and private-sector actors on the need to link applied research, training and advisory services.
- There is a need to promote debate of the construction of innovation systems that reconcile the needs of the rural advisory component of research and training in rural areas. A policy framework is needed to promote development with a decentralised territorial approach, with emphasis on the promotion of family farming.
- Regarding good extension practices, the quality and quantity of experiences that exist in Latin America was recognised, along with the value of this type of study that promotes their dissemination and validation.
- In order to facilitate a new role for extension agents, a key element is to strengthen organisational processes that enable individuals and institutes to acquire the skills to lead development processes. An example is the case of *Café de Marcala*, Honduras, where the training and technical assistance was focused not only on new production, marketing and negotiation techniques for the producers, but also on creating a strong community awareness base and to support this initiative in the region.

### **For the study**

- It was noted that the case-studies to a large extent captured the range of Central American experiences, touching on themes of food and nutrition security, market orientation, programmes targeting women, natural resource management, education and training extension, and alliances and pluralistic systems. But for future similar studies it is necessary to focus on successful extension as opposed to successful rural development, which may (or may not) have been engineered through successful extension.
- Rural development processes are always more complex than extension interventions. The point was raised that in describing the cases the extension agents were not in fact ‘supermen’ who know it all or can do everything, but rather those who are able to recognise and analyse the challenges and negotiate a solution – definitely not experts in all technical issues.
- The role of research institutes and processes in the process of generating and sharing knowledge has not been sufficiently covered in this study. The FAO Research and Extension branch recognises the importance of agricultural research as an integral part of a process of agricultural innovation. Future studies should examine the research and innovation linkages.



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