

Reshaping Rural Extension

Learning for Sustainability (LforS)

An Integrative and Learning-Based Advisory Approach for Rural Extension with Small-Scale Farmers



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About CTA

The Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) was established in 1983 under the Lomé Convention between the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) Group of States and the European Union Member States. Since 2000, it has operated within the framework of the ACP-EU Cotonou Agreement. CTA's tasks are to develop and provide products and services that improve access to information for agricultural and rural development, and to strengthen the capacity of ACP countries to acquire, process, produce and disseminate information in this area.

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Preface

What is new in the world of rural development? Today the world is more globally interlinked, and necessary local adaptations are more complicated. Simple messages and the adoption of stand-alone technical innovations are becoming less important in development work. Actors –the most important of whom in terms of numbers are small-scale farmers – must understand their situation themselves and find appropriate responses to complex and partly new challenges. Joint learning and systems thinking, rather than following expert advice, are becoming increasingly important.

But in the midst of all the reforming, reshaping and modernizing of support systems for agricultural and rural development, we should not forget what was valid in the past, nor should we change and thereby worsen what is still worth maintaining. Finding the right balance between renewal and conservation is a lifelong task, involving constant and everlasting struggle between generations but also among donors, development agencies and academics.

After a dark period of "training and visit", promoted by the World Bank with billions of dollars in loans and donations, extension science has had some trouble recovering, especially in Europe, the USA, Canada and Australia. India and some of its neighbouring states appear to be the new centres of extension science. On the one hand, it is wonderful that former developing countries have reached maturity in this field of knowledge management. On the other hand, it is a pity that the countries which developed the theories, approaches and methods of advisory work and applied them so successfully to their own development seem to have given up nowadays.

When I worked with friends on the 3rd edition of the *Handbook on Rural Extension* we also asked Stephan Rist and Ernst Gabathuler from the Center for Development and Environment in Bern to contribute. This enabled me to learn how they built on previous experience and concepts to elaborate what they call the LforS approach to extension with small-scale farmers, which is now represented in several contributions throughout our second volume. As this was one approach among others, and as it was scattered according to its different aspects, I encouraged Ernst Gabathuler to document it further and more comprehensively in a book of his own. That is how this wonderful book got started.

By contrast with other new publications, the authors build on more than 30 years of successful work in joint development of extension and advisory systems for small-scale farmers in many developing countries, as well as more recent experience in countries in transition. They have trained innumerable rural advisors in this approach and its methods. Accordingly, they really know what they are writing about. I particularly admire how they have found a balance between old and new. They have managed to avoid the fashionable attitude that everything was done wrongly until now but that we now know how to do things better.

Our world is undergoing rapid change, which poses a challenge not only for small-scale farmers but also for development institutions and extension and advisory services. We must all learn how to remain efficient, and not only to cope with solving problems but to do this in a sustainable manner. Ultimately, no one can solve the problems of others in the long run. Hence learning – and learning together – is the only way forward. But this is not really a new insight; it is part of ancient wisdom that is sometimes forgotten or ignored.

The authors of this book not only provide wonderful orientation and guidance for the advisory profession, they help to restore Europe to a place among the relevant players in moving extension science forward.

Volker Hoffmann



Volker Hoffmann (*1947)

After studying agricultural economics at Hohenheim University, Volker Hoffmann earned a PhD in Social Sciences and has devoted his academic life to applied social science in the fields of agriculture, food, and rural development. In approximately 20 years as an assistant to Prof. Hartmuth Albrecht, and another two decades as a Professor on his own, he shaped what is now known as the “Hohenheim school of agricultural extension” and established a special and successful programme of teaching social science to students of agriculture and food science from all over the world.

Together with his colleagues Hermann Boland and Uwe Jens Nagel, he edits the “Communication and Extension” book series, which now contains more than one hundred titles.

Acknowledgements

In the course of our work we have had the opportunity to work together with many men and women engaged in farming, project personnel, and governmental and non-governmental organisations in Africa and Asia. We have exchanged knowledge, points of view and experience, developed visions, discussed and tested ideas, and thought about how promising findings could be implemented together with local populations. We were rarely able to find optimal solutions to problems on the first try. Solutions usually emerged and grew from different experiences, and frequently from mistakes. We are grateful to everyone with whom we had the privilege of carrying out these stimulating tasks, especially to the women and men in the rural communities where we were given the opportunity to share and learn together at the grassroots level.

The approach described in this book is based on various types of experience we have gained in different projects and mandates over the course of time. Many of these were funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). We would like to take this opportunity to express our thanks to SDC for the financial support that made publication of this book possible.

We received support in the writing of this publication in the form of valuable comments and suggestions from Ernst Bolliger of Agridea, Prof. Dr. Hans Hurni, Dr. T. Kohler and PD Dr. Stephan Rist, all of the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), University of Bern, and from Prof. Dr. Volker Hoffmann, Department of Agricultural Communication and Extension, University of Hohenheim, to whom we are also very grateful.

Summary

The present publication offers concrete suggestions for implementing an integrative and learning-oriented approach to agricultural extension with the goal of fostering sustainable development in rural regions. Many of the approaches, methods and tools presented here were developed in cooperation with projects and organisations, above all in Africa and Asia.

In the first part, we address the development of conditions, current issues and trends that are having a determining influence on extension activity today. On this basis, we attempt to outline new challenges faced by extension and the adaptations that will have to be made.

In the second part, we highlight several important aspects of extension and offer basic reflections on the goals, criteria for success and form of a contemporary approach to extension.

In the third part, Learning for Sustainability (LforS) is presented as an example of a learning-oriented and integrative approach to extension. First the structure and the spatial and temporal organisation of the approach are explained. This is followed by a presentation of selected methods and tools that are appropriate to the LforS approach.

In the fourth part we focus on four important aspects: organisational development, the qualifications that extensionists must have, training and further education of extensionists, and the development of methods and tools that play a key role in the development of a learning-oriented approach to extension.

Over 2.6 billion people worldwide earn their livelihood from agriculture, most of them on a total of more than 600 million small-scale farms. Most people in rural areas earn a significant share of their livelihood from smallholder agriculture, a high proportion of which is subsistence farming. Where rural development is concerned, the problems faced by this population group must be given particular attention.

Smallholder agriculture is frequently characterised by low labour productivity. Smallholder families, particularly in economically and ecologically marginal regions can only partly meet their basic needs from agricultural income. Reproductive activities (protection of natural resources, education, health, etc.) are neglected in the interest of ensuring survival, and young people are forced to migrate to find work. Only a small minority of smallholder farms have access to extension services and to training and further education. This situation leads to entrapment in poverty for many families and puts achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) at risk.

Economic, social and ecological conditions have also changed significantly for smallholder farmers in recent decades. Due to a lack of information and of education, they are barely able to adapt production to new conditions and to take advantage of existing potentials and new opportunities.

A rigorous focus on goals and short-term pressure for success on the part of donors and governmental organisations contribute to a situation in which extension organisations are increasingly limiting themselves to transfer of allegedly productive technologies and methods. As a result, the beneficiaries of extension services often do not receive the in-depth understanding of background problems and interrelated factors that would be necessary for creative use of new knowledge, potentials and opportunities. This can lead to disastrous dependencies on other actors rooted in ignorance.

Recent developments (such as the food and financial crises, globalization of markets, climate change) along with growing doubt that development cooperation can achieve its aims are forcing development organisations, governments in recipient countries, projects, NGOs and extension organisations to rethink the content of their programmes and their methodological and didactic approaches. The "Learning for Sustainability" extension approach described in the present publication offers sug-

gestions for making necessary adaptations of extension, training and further education in order to benefit smallholder families. It is grounded in the belief that the current problems of smallholders, as well as achievement of the MDGs, can only be dealt with by a broad initiative for training and further education that will benefit small-scale farms. As an integrative approach to extension, LforS combines social learning processes based on in-depth understanding of problems, giving clients the capacity to act independently in ways that allow them to implement advice from extensionists efficiently.

This approach is based on three fundamental components that provide the foundation for extension activities: stakeholder dialogue, knowledge management, and organizational development. Awareness raising and capacity building, social mobilization, and monitoring and evaluation are additional building blocks.

Experience has continually shown that extension advice which focuses on the interests of individual actor groups rarely achieves its expected broad impact and sustainability. Given this problematic situation, the LforS extension approach proposes stakeholder dialogue as an alternative to the usual top-down and bottom-up approaches.

The LforS approach constitutes a permanent platform for information, discussion and negotiation, with the following principles and overall goals:

- All concerned actors are included in dialogue and in extension activities
- Information and opinions are regularly exchanged between concerned stakeholders
- Connections between existing problems, available potentials and new opportunities are made transparent
- Common points of view and solutions to problems are developed together with stakeholders
- The solutions devised are tested for medium-and long-term impacts so that significant risks can be reduced.

Linked with stakeholder dialogue is a greater need for information and training that must be met at different levels. In order to also deal with and communicate about complex themes in understandable and efficient ways, the LforS approach employs specially developed learning methods and tools such as multi- and transdisciplinary learning groups, experience-oriented social learning processes, and special learning resources such as simulation games that condense experience gained in long-term developments.

Potential extension themes are crystallized from stakeholder dialogue and awareness raising activities. The themes to be addressed must be balanced in two respects. First, they must be formulated in a way that relates to all social groups. The necessary investment of effort to implement an extension theme must not be so great as

to engender de facto exclusion of farms with scarce resources. Second, productive, income-generating themes and reproductive, risk-reducing themes must balance each other so that production potential is maintained in the long term while the living conditions of families and local communities are simultaneously improved.

But in-depth knowledge of problems, potentials and opportunities and a fair choice of extension themes negotiated among different stakeholder groups is no guarantee of implementation. Economically disadvantaged smallholder farmers with scarce resources are precisely the people who shy away from taking additional risks. The smaller the subjectively perceived or objectively existing risks and the more proactively they are discussed with clients, the greater the chances that extension themes will be implemented. The LforS approach shows potential in this respect, for instance by using Participatory Technology Development (PTD) to reduce risks by strengthening cooperation between the beneficiaries of extension or organising revolving funds.

On the other hand, 'soft' incentives such as trust between extension services and their clients, an attractive extension approach, and stimulating learning methods can encourage smallholder farmers to cooperate with extension services and to implement extension themes. As a successful method of social mobilisation, LforS suggests organising contests between communities to implement extension themes.

Participatory monitoring plays an especially important role within the LforS approach. In addition to programme control, it is useful as an extraordinarily valuable learning situation. Extension themes that have been implemented are thus jointly evaluated quantitatively and qualitatively, together with the beneficiaries of extension. This makes it possible to identify favourable results and to use mistakes as an opportunity for further learning, provided that evaluation is carried out with the necessary detachment and in a positive atmosphere.

The LforS approach sees extension service as an honest broker that is in a position to gain the trust of different stakeholder groups and act in concert with them. In order to assume this role, extension services must be organised on an independent financial and administrative basis. In addition, they require interdisciplinary teams that can meet different special needs through a demand-driven approach while simultaneously combining competence in management and policy as well as in extension and training methods. In order to be able to respond to the demands of clients and the conditions of donor support and also limit financial risk, there must be an effort to develop smaller, locally or regionally anchored extension teams with good knowledge of local conditions and a circle of associated freelance experts who can be called upon when the need arises.

An extension service that aims to provide its clients with competent support must invest in the training and further education of its personnel. Its activities must reflect the latest social, economic and ecological developments as well as familiarity with new technologies and methods, which need to be examined in the light of compat-

ibility with local conditions. Not least of all, extensionists must regularly update their knowledge of extension methodology and didactics, and their knowledge of how to organise and moderate learning and negotiation processes.

We are aware that the LforS extension approach outlined here is an idealised example that makes very high professional and personal demands on extensionists and also requires considerably greater effort than a sectoral approach, particularly with regard to training. This poses a challenge to donors and governmental organisations to consider whether they wish to invest their resources in achieving short-term success or in results that can be sustained over the long term.

