

Swiss Dialogue on Agricultural Advisory Services (Extension):

Report on the Results of an Expert Meeting

23 April 2010, Swiss College of Agriculture (SHL), Zollikofen

Approaches in Advisory Services in the Context of Agricultural Innovation Systems

Background

In response to an initiative of the Global Programme on Food Security (GPFS) at the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) 26 experts of Swiss research and development organisations met in Zollikofen to discuss new approaches and experiences in the provision of agricultural extension and advisory services. All participants have been engaged, in one way or another, in the design, support and delivery of agricultural extension and advisory services in developing countries. They were affiliated to public development agencies, research and training institutions, universities, private companies and non-governmental organizations (see list of participants in Annex 1). Together these organizations represent a very considerable share of the Swiss support to agricultural extension in developing countries with a substantial leverage to reach millions of small poor farmers in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Exchange, working groups and discussions

Participants were invited to illustrate their approaches and exemplify their experiences in agricultural extension by means of posters, photos, flipcharts, and meta cards in a marketplace arrangement. Each organization had a stand and could introduce its approach in a short announcement after which participants could walk from stand to stand for further clarification and discussions. Copies of the stands are included in Annex 3. As the posters in the market place did not specifically address methods of advisory service delivery but provided only general ideas about approaches and goals, participants limited themselves to identifying common principles.

Towards pluralistic extension systems. Overall participants seemed to have acknowledged pluralism in the delivery of extension services. Some of the extension approaches presented take in consideration explicitly the existence of multiple actors. Some of the organizations present at the meeting were engaged in matchmaking, meaning they did not only conduct extension work in the field but they tried to put farmers groups in contact with buyers, government and other development agencies and foster the exchange of information and joint learning among them. However, there are also situations where groups of farmers in remote areas would eventually not have any access to advisory services while farmer in more central regions engaged in cash crop production count with more opportunities to become accessed by extension services. Participants also found that agricultural extension and advisory services have become more demand-driven, participatory and market-oriented. However, the participation of many non-traditional players from the private and NGO sector in agricultural extension within an innovation system's context challenges traditional views on who should be doing what. It also provides opportunities for new alliances and collaborations.

Common grounds for collaboration. Further, in four parallel working groups participants identified common grounds in executing extension programs and discussed opportunities for collaboration among participating organizations. Complementarities were seen at technical level (different field of

expertise), in geography (focusing on different areas) and regarding the level of intervention. Common features among the extension approaches of the presented organizations were demand- and market-orientation, involvement of diverse actors in partnerships, networking, support of farmer promoters and brokers as well as cost sharing. Organizations rather seem to tailor their approaches to agricultural extension and advisory services to context than follow predefined organizational blueprints. However there are crosscutting values such as: enhancing the sustainability of agriculture and focusing on improved household and family farm livelihoods all marking a certain “swissness” of interventions.

Compatible agendas. Participants also discussed differences between the approach of NGOs teaming up with SDC on one hand and the private sector approach on the other. It appeared that profit orientation of firms must not stand in the way of poverty reduction efforts, rather they can be compatible in situations where the private sector reaches out to farmers as part of a growing group of users of agricultural inputs or as part of a potentially large group of suppliers primary agricultural produce.

New opportunities and public goods. Participants agreed that there is a revitalized interest in international development and with it a renewed attention for agricultural extension systems and advisory services. In this context the question was raised if farmers generate public or private goods. From a Swiss point of view that emphasizes the “multifunctionality of agriculture” farmers also contribute to public goods generation such as the management of landscapes and biodiversity for which reason subsidies are justified. However, from a farmer’s point of view, farms produce private goods which enable them to generate income.

Need to partner. Finally there was agreement among the participants that neither the public nor the private sector alone will be able to cater the necessary support to agricultural advisory service to the millions of small scale farmers in developing countries as it would be necessary. There are situations where the private sector can provide adequate advisory services in an efficient manner, and others where it is best catered by the public sector and the development community. There are also situations where they can do it jointly benefiting from complementary capacities and resources.

Main Results

- While participants learned about the main players in the Swiss landscape of international agricultural extension and advisory services they also were able to appreciate the various approaches undertaken and about experiences in implementation of the various organizations engaged in it.
- However, the discussions also made it evident that organizations are not familiar with each other’s rationale and working mode. Further dialogue will be needed to enhance mutual understanding in view of building bridges and more efficiently learn from each other.
- Participants concluded that extension and rural advisory services have become more complex and “pluralistic” over the last decades, as the number of actors and their diversity has increased. This implies that the existing models and approaches of providing support to extension and advisory services need to be adjusted while actors need to realize what others are doing and seeking partnerships in areas of common interest. The state may need to take a

stronger role in assuring that these multiple actors stick to certain rules and work towards the set development goals.

- The meeting could mark the initiation of a process of creative exchange of experiences among Swiss organizations with regard to fostering agricultural advisory services in developing countries. It could also mark a first step in a process of reaching a common understanding among Swiss institutions on parameters for a successful delivery of extension and advisory services in agricultural development and innovation. In addition, the meeting constituted a platform where common interest among organizations could be identified, however, to develop potential areas of collaboration further meetings and interaction is required.

Further steps of action

There was consensus that the meeting was a useful first step in the process of building collaborative arrangements among Swiss organizations in the field of extension and advisory services. Further in-depth discussions on best practices and best-fit solutions in extension would be instrumental to reaching convergence among the main Swiss organizations engaged in this topic and develop a certain “Swissness” in their approach. This would require also the engagement of additional Swiss organizations in the private and non-government sector. Options for follow-up and subsequent actions in the future include:

- Participants agreed to meet again towards the end of the year. The meeting could be held in Vevey; the Nestlé representative kindly suggested to host the meeting at its headquarters and invited participants. However, a clear agenda would need to be developed in order to be able to focus discussions on critical issues and practical questions such as how to deal with incentives, what does pluralism means for extension implementers, and how to provide extension service that fosters sustainable development.
- The results of the meeting could be presented at the World Food Day (October 16, 2010) on which SDC and FOAG organize a dialogue on the topic of agricultural extension and advisory services (see Dialogue on Agriculture and Food Security www.world-food-dialogue.ch).
- Future activities of the group of participants may also seek convergence with SDC’s Agricultural and Rural Development Network, which has set rural advisory services as one of its main topics.