



Agriculture + Food Security Network Brief No 2

10 challenges faced by Swiss actors in Rural Advisory Services projects

Summary compiled by Yonas Mekonen, GPFS/SDC, January 2012.

Based on the study "Capitalisation of experiences in Rural Innovation and Advisory Services" written by M. Fischler, N. Weigel and P. Schmidt (HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, December 2011).

Introduction

Agricultural extension services have a positive influence on rural livelihoods. Swiss development cooperation and its partners have been supporting Rural Advisory Services (RAS) projects for decades. After the cumulative effect of the food, fuel and financial crises, agriculture and RAS are back on the agenda. This has been reaffirmed during the recent international conference on innovations in extension and advisory services held in Kenya in mid-November 2011¹. This brief summarizes the challenges faced by SDC and its partner institutions in their initiatives focusing on RAS. It draws from a capitalisation of experiences based on 10 project case studies and 15 in depth interviews with stakeholders from RAS projects and Swiss organisations engaged in RAS. The study, an updated overview of what SDC and its partner institutions have achieved in RAS, was commissioned by the Agriculture and Food Security (A+FS) Network of SDC to HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation.

A total number of 22 Swiss actors - including NGOs, the private sector and research - are actively promoting RAS. In 2010, out of the total SDC Agriculture and rural development portfolio of 136 million CHF - equivalent to about 130 A+RD projects - an estimated 40 million CHF or 29% is used for RAS (Figure 1). The geographical distribution of ARD projects shows a major focus on Africa and Asia (Figure 2).

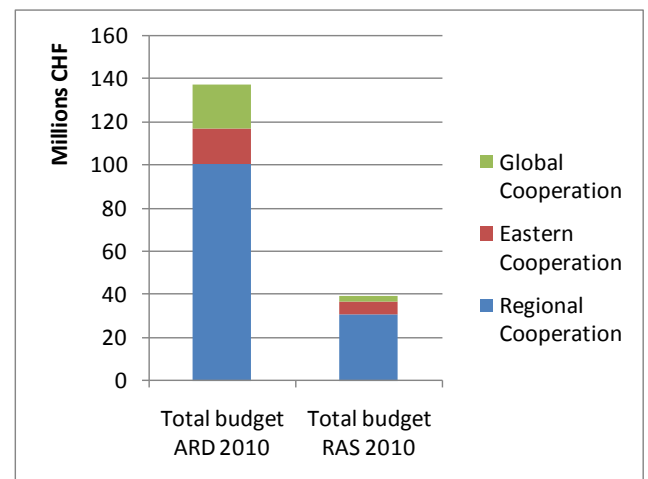


Figure 1: Total ARD and RAS budget according to type of cooperation (SDC, 2010)

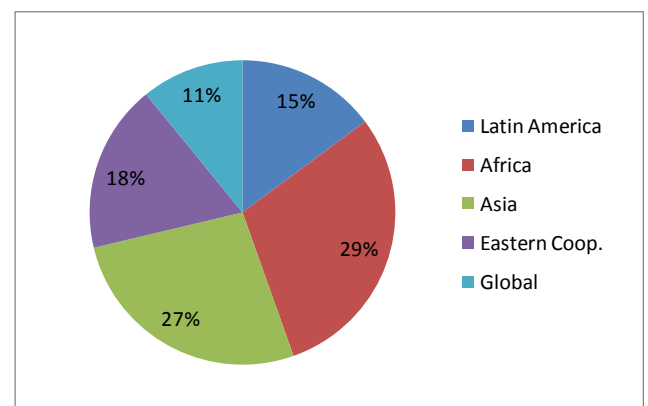


Figure 2: Geographical distribution of ARD projects (SDC, 2010)

¹ <http://extensionconference2011.cta.int/>

SECO promotes various initiatives focusing on the promotion of sustainable organic and fair trade products with an overall annual budget of about 6 million CHF. In 2010, the budget for RAS of Swiss NGOs and other actors is estimated at 70 million CHF for over 260 ARD projects. The geographical distribution is similar to that of SDC, with the exception of a smaller share of projects in Eastern Europe/CIS states.

Innovations and main trends in Swiss sponsored RAS projects

A shift took place from the “linear” public research-extension-farmer model (e.g. Train & Visit model promoted by the World Bank) towards a decentralized and pluralistic service provision based on new models of RAS institutions and financing schemes. A pluralistic service provision system is one in which more than one service provider is involved in the provision of RAS. The varieties of service providers that have emerged in recent years include public-private partnerships and outsourcing to the private sector as well as non-governmental organizations.

10 challenges in applied RAS approaches

The analysis of the 10 case studies revealed the following main challenges that have to be taken into account:

Challenge 1: ICT in RAS

The introduction of new ICT related communication tools allows farmers to get quick access to relevant information and services. Cash/credit through phone or the trend from one-way communication (radio, TV) towards two-way communication (text messages, hot-lines) are two examples. It is important that farmers get affordable access to these new tools and capacity-building about their effective use. Open questions are: Who covers the development costs? What works, what not? What is sustainable?

Challenge 2: Reaching the poor and marginalized with appropriate RAS....

... remains a major challenge. Most projects indicated that despite efforts undertaken it was seldom possible to reach these target groups as

planned. The search for successful approaches to overcome this constraint is still on. Some experiences show that recruiting and training local service providers increases the likelihood of reaching the poor and marginalized.

Challenge 3: Targeting women in RAS

Despite many efforts, the challenge to equally reach men and women with RAS, in a way that both benefit from them, remains. There are many cases where RAS reached women effectively but they did not get an equal share of the benefits (e.g. higher income). Furthermore, women are still underrepresented in RAS systems. (See also the forthcoming ARD-SDC issue paper “Targeting women in Rural Advisory Services”).

Challenge 4: Sustainability of Local Service Provision (LSP) schemes

LSP schemes are often seen as a way to fill gaps left behind by public RAS and to complement other existing RAS. Many LSP schemes have been successfully introduced with project support and then face some difficulties to persist after the support ends. LSP schemes must be designed from the beginning with sustainability in mind, which includes organisational strengthening and continuous capacity building by backup institutions.

Challenge 5: Market oriented RAS

The change from more production oriented RAS towards market oriented RAS requires a change in content and in the competences of service providers. RAS staff providing market oriented RAS need to have a business mind set and different skills (e.g. deep understanding of functioning of value chains and market systems). This in turn calls for substantial backing from training and knowledge institutions, the private sector and the government for continuous capacity building of service providers.

Challenge 6: Independency and quality of advice in embedded services

Embedded services are often linked to commercial interests and can lead to lack of “objective advice” (i.e. RAS biased towards maximising sales of inputs). In addition, service providers need appropriate training enabling them to provide quality advice beyond simple selling and giving indications of how to use inputs.

Challenge 7: Scaling-up

When scaling-up, a trade-off between scale and quality occurs. Many pilot interventions are implemented by projects but fail to be scaled up because of inadequate tailoring to local conditions (e.g. loss of intensity and proximity).

In Laos, for example, up-scaling of RAS through a Village Extension System (VES) failed because of wrong assumptions about social interactions. High intensity of interactions is needed to create relationships based on trust. This implies less coverage. When scaling up there is a risk of losing closeness of observation.

Challenge 8: Institution building for RAS

Institution building for RAS is difficult and requires firm commitment and support from all actors involved. New institutional arrangements are needed for provision of pluralistic RAS. Particular attention needs to be given to institutions providing backup to RAS (content, methods, and organisational support).

Challenge 9: The search of new mixed models for funding RAS

Even if private sector financing of RAS is likely to increase in the future the public sector must maintain financing RAS for themes of public interest, and for geographical zones and groups not attractive for private sector RAS. New models of financial flows including results-based payment systems, public sector financing private RAS providers and cost contribution by farmers show promising results but need to be further developed and adapted to specific contexts.

Challenge 10: Local management of funds for RAS

Funding mechanisms for RAS in the public interest through the lowest administrative unit (e.g. through Community Development Funds) requires high capacity and above all legitimacy often not found with local authorities. Efforts for capacity-building are very high. Without a proper democratic system the accountability question often remains unsolved.



Advising cotton farmers on pest management, Organic Fair-trade Cotton Project, Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, Burkina Faso