



# EXTENSIONNET

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## The challenges facing agricultural extension - and a new opportunity

Story by Gershon Feder

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It's not normally ExtensionNet policy to publish a front page story written by a non-APEN member, but this article summarises many of the problems and opportunities facing contemporary extension very well. If you are new to extension, this may be one of the best introductions to the world of extension you can get.

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The world has nearly 1 million agricultural extension personnel. More than 90 per cent of them are in developing countries. Development agencies have poured US\$10 billion into public extension programmes over the past five decades. Yet a study published in 2001 by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation found that extension services across the developing world are "failing" and "moribund", in "disarray or barely functioning at all".

### Why? And what can be done about it?

Extension systems suffer many administrative and design deficiencies and challenges. They typically aim to reach huge numbers of farm families scattered over large, complex landscapes. Forced to ration their attention, agents often focus on larger, better-endowed and more innovative farmers who can provide payment in kind and are likely to exhibit more progress. Other farmers are disinclined or unable to follow the example of these contact farmers, so little farmer-to-farmer extension ensues.

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# The challenges facing agricultural extension (cont'd from p1)

Extension does not happen in a vacuum. Its effectiveness depends on the broader policy environment that governs credit, input supplies, prices and markets - crucial factors beyond the control of extension systems. Similarly, extension systems rely on knowledge supplied by an agricultural research establishment that often gives little weight to their opinions and priorities. That extension and public research organisations often compete for budgets - with extensionists disadvantaged by their lower status - is not conducive to two-way feedback or effective extension.

## Low accountability

Accountability in extension work is often a black hole. Attributing impact is difficult because many other factors affect agriculture in complex ways. This undermines extension staff's incentive to reach out to farmers or even to update their own skills and knowledge. Staff not held accountable for the quality of their extension work may shirk on quantity as well. They may be assigned activities that are unrelated to knowledge transfer but easy to measure, such as collecting statistics, administering loan paperwork, distributing government-provided inputs or performing regulatory duties. Higher-level extension managers are monitored mainly in terms of budget spent, staffing levels and other bureaucratic indicators. Accountability to farmers - the only people who can easily observe the quality and effectiveness of extension services - is typically nonexistent.

The difficulty of attributing impact weakens political support, leading to small budgets and fiscal unsustainability. Extension investments do not offer politicians and senior officials the kind of political payoffs that can be earned from other public outlays that have visible impacts, such as the double cropping made possible by an irrigation investment or the reduction in transport cost following construction of a bridge or road.

Ironically, the same difficulty of assessing impact may explain why international development agencies continue to support extension activities, which are bureaucratically straightforward and therefore attractive from their point of view. While the completed projects are hard to prove successful, they are equally hard to brand as failures.

## Cross purposes

The result is tension between domestic policymakers reluctant to invest heavily in extension and development agencies that enthusiastically promote such investments. External funding minimizes the need for immediate tradeoffs between extension and more politically rewarding undertakings, but it simply postpones the day of reckoning. Once external funding ends, the lack of domestic political support resurfaces, and extension budgets drop again.

To address the weaknesses inherent in the public extension systems, several novel extension modalities have emerged in the past three decades. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses. Ambitious and highly structured training-and-visit programmes promoted by the World Bank during 1975-95 proved financially unsustainable once the bank ceased funding them. Farmer field schools are similarly expensive and difficult to sustain on a large scale. Fiscally sustainable fee-for-service and privatised extension pose undesirable social outcomes. Less commercial farmers - the poor, women and farmers with small or marginal plots - value the information less, purchase fewer extension services and so fall further behind their more prosperous neighbours.

The decentralisation trend of the 1980s and 1990s in Latin America and then Africa was intended to improve accountability by moving services closer to the people who use them. However, it also created greater potential for political interference, even the hijacking of extension staff for political campaigning. Decentralisation also weakens economies of scale in updating staff skills and attenuates research-extension links. Problems of financial sustainability are merely transferred to the local level.

## Cost-effective innovation

The latest innovation in extension services is information and communication technology. ICT improves cost effectiveness by reaching large numbers at a relatively low cost, thereby alleviating the problem of weak political commitment and the resulting fiscal unsustainability. Its centralised nature makes adapting and revising the curriculum easier, reduces dependence on the skills of field

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Statistics, paperwork, budgets, staffing ... when is there time for real accountability?

workers, and facilitates better links between researchers and farmers.

Of course, many challenges remain. ICT does nothing to lessen dependence on the broader policy environment, facilitate attribution of impact or improve accountability. The need for face-to-face interactions is reduced but certainly not eliminated, and the importance of feedback mechanisms remains as strong as ever. ICT suffers the additional constraint of farmers' limited access to modern media.

SOURCE for this article: [www.new-agri.co.uk/05-2/perspect.html](http://www.new-agri.co.uk/05-2/perspect.html)

Addressing these remaining challenges - or at least some of them - requires researchers, extensionists and donors to review together the experiences of extension innovators who have applied ICT. Is the cost of infrastructure sustainable? Can the innovators demonstrate improved impact? What do farmers say? And finally, how can the application of more imagination bring a better return on extension investments than has been achieved in the past?

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### ExtensionNet Comment

There is probably not a lot that is brand new in this argument, and some experienced extension professionals will have seen the logic before. What is interesting is that a) the World Bank at least takes extension seriously, b) extension is globally challenged by the accountability/evaluation bogey, and c) extension officers are not in danger of extinction. Who knew there were 1 million of us around the world? Astonishing!

## Keeping in touch with extension developments – a group process

Alison Medhurst and Emily Tee

Department of Primary Industries, Knoxfield Centre

As a busy extension professional do you find it difficult to keep up with the latest in extension research? A group of staff at Victoria's Department of Primary Industries Knoxfield office identified this was an issue for them and established a monthly article review group.

Convenor (and APEN Melbourne Cluster committee member) Alison Medhurst said, "The purpose of the group is firstly to extend our knowledge around current events in the world of extension and to provide a source of encouragement to read journal papers on a more regular basis".

Each month one group member chooses a paper, distributes it to the group and then leads a discussion on the paper at the meeting. The group has brought together staff from extension, communications, landscape science and social research which allows us to gain different perspectives on how we approach practice change in our work.

Another aim of the group is to encourage group members to write papers of their own.

"Many members felt they didn't have the experience or time to do this themselves, so the group forms an informal review panel and a friendly place in which to workshop papers before submitting them to journals", said Emily Tee, another group member (also part of the APEN Melbourne Cluster committee). "In particular, the group is aiming to have a range of papers submitted to the 2006 APEN

International Conference".

Although the group hasn't been going very long (since November last year) we have had a great response and an interesting range of articles to read. Staff have commented on how, after reading some of the papers, they realise their own work is definitely worth publishing and that they are keen to have a go!



Members of the DPI Knoxfield Article Review Group discussing a journal paper. (L-R) Alison Medhurst, Robin Segrave, Emily Tee, Natalia Tostovrsnik, Bernadette Swanson. (Yes we do have male members of the group but they were all absent the day the photo was taken!)

# Leadership in extension

## Nurturing young leaders

### Regional workshops, focus groups and national conference 2005

Tim Tabart

Rural Development Services Pty Ltd, Hobart

APEN is addressing a general lack of support for young extension /field/ advisory/ education officers by organising a regional series of leadership workshops and focus groups in April and May 2005. This will be followed by a national forum in June to develop policies for addressing the issues identified.

This program has been inspired by the 2003 APEN National Forum in Hobart, and APEN's Policy Workshop in Sydney in late 2004. Both these events identified three major realities:

1. the critical importance of extension to the future of rural industries and to the management of Australia's natural resources
2. the large number of young people entering the extension profession in both production and natural resource management arenas
3. the lack of support for young people in extension – in terms of job security, professional development, information, expertise, resources, mentoring and networks.

#### APEN partners with RDS

APEN has partnered with Rural Development Services, a Tasmanian rural consultancy, to leverage sponsorship from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF). It was initially intended to facilitate five focus groups and a national workshop.

The original concept has been expanded to now incorporate five three-day leadership workshops for young extension professionals.

The "Leadership in extension: nurturing young leaders" workshops will be run in five States in April and May 2005 to bring young extensionists directly into the wealth of networks, information, resources, people and opportunities available for those facilitating change in rural Australia. They are intended for anyone 35 and under in roles such as field officer, trainers, Landcare and natural resource management facilitators, consultants, farm advisers and industry development officers.

The workshops focus on self-awareness and sharing between participants, with invited guests used to inspire, inform and motivate. By the end of the workshop, participants will have

- a broader understanding of extension,
- a better understanding of their own direction and abilities,
- identified opportunities for professional development;
- improved networking and communication skills;
- inspiration and a clear plan for their own future.

#### Workshop design

The workshops will be facilitated by Amabel Fulton and/or Tim Tabart of Rural Development Services, using a leadership training program originally developed for primary producers and adapted to meet the needs of extension providers.

Half a day of each workshop will be dedicated to a focus group "Pathways for young extension professionals". Employers, funding bodies, extension specialists and extension users are being invited to join the focus group to identify issues facing young people in extension and possible strategies for addressing these issues.

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The leadership program "has been inspired by the 2003 APEN National Forum in Hobart"

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Amabel Fulton working with small group. Hobart 2003

