



EXTENSIONNET

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The challenges facing agricultural extension - and a new opportunity

Story by Gershon Feder

Rural Development Research Manager, Development Research Group, World Bank

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

Accountability to farmers - the only people who can easily observe the quality and effectiveness of extension services - is typically nonexistent.



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

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"

Amabel Fulton working with small group. Hobart 2003



Leadership in extension ... cont'd

workshops will join in a forum "Leading the future - nurturing young people in extension" to build on the findings from the series of regional workshops to develop policies for addressing issues facing young people in extension.

You're invited to participate

APEN invites:

Young people in extension - providers and users of extension in rural industries and/or in natural resource management under 35 years of age - to:

- take part in our professional development workshops "Leadership in extension: nurturing young leaders" and develop a strategy for your own professional development;
- to join your regional focus group "Pathways for young extension professionals"; and to participate in the national forum "Leading the future - nurturing young people in extension".

Employers of young extensionists and

funding bodies are invited to:

- support your young staff in attending;
- sponsor the national search conference and/or your regional event;
- to join your regional focus group "Pathways for young extension professionals"; and/or to participate in the national search conference.

The five leadership workshops are being held across Australia as follows:

- Toowoomba, Qld
26 to 29 April 2005
- Naracoorte, SA
9 to 12 May 2005
- Albury-Wodonga, NSW/Vic
16 to 19 May 2005
- Busselton, WA
23 to 26 May 2005
- Launceston, Tas
Focus group: 20 April 2005
Workshop: 7 to 10 November 2005



Focus groups will explore the needs of young people facilitating change in rural Australia



Forum participants

The national "Leading the Future" forum will be held in Melbourne 15-16 June 2005.

Limited places are available for the workshops and early bird registration closes three weeks before each one.

For more information and registration details please visit the APEN website www.apen.org.au

under the "News and info" section. 

Leadership in Extension Workshop Program

Day 1

6.00	Registration
6.30	Dinner
7.30	Welcome & Introductions

Day 2

8.30	Leadership—the bottom line
11.00	Personality profiles
1.30	Extension—self examination
3.30	Networking skills
7.00	Dinner—with VIP guests

Day 3

8.30	Reflections on Day 2
9.00	Field trip
11.30	Leadership—what is it?
1.30	Pathways for young extension professionals focus group
4.00	Personal action plans
7.00	Dinner with invited panel members

Day 4

8.30	Reflections on Day 3
9.00	Developing personal professional development (PD) plan
11.00	Present personal PD plan
12.00	Evaluation and feedback
12.30	Lunch and conclusion

Diffusion of innovations

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Extension online

Journal of extension (www.joe.org) has a new feature, or at least one that I hadn't noticed before: a discussion forum. The forum centres around the "op ed" or thought pieces that now lead every issue of the journal. There are already some comments submitted for discussion, so have a read or make your own opinions known to the online extension world. Could be a good opportunity to generate some international dialogue and dilute the sometimes US-centric focus of this excellent online journal.

The current edition of JOE features stories about:

- the need for visionary leadership in extension, along with an defined set of standards for excellence and a vision unconstrained by extension's past successes and failures
- an attempt by Washington State University to apply extension principles to developing international trade (irony noted)



- how to get scientists to unhitch themselves from their professional obligations as "experts" and engage in collaborative efforts to address natural resource issues and become "key players".

New Agriculturist (www.new-agri.co.uk), from which we borrowed our front page story for this edition of ExtensionNet, is a thought provoking site with an international scope. Check it out for global agricultural news, articles and features, country and industry profiles. There's also an extensive back catalogue that features articles guaranteed to generate some thinking.

Extension database online



APEN's Jeff Coutts: prime mover in researching and compiling the extension database

Just posted on the Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building's website is a database of extension projects implemented around Australia. This database has been developed as part of one CVCB's major projects, a national review of extension and education across Australia.

The database lists almost 50 projects from all around Australia and all agricultural industries. Natural resource management projects and information projects are also listed. You can link to detailed reports that describe factors such as how and why projects were developed, learning outcomes, philosophy and approach, evaluation and issues identified.

It is an excellent resource for developing a project or if you are looking for ways to evaluate extension projects. You can search the database by project name, model or industry. The address is www.rirdc.gov.au/capacitybuilding/index.html.

APEN connection

The extension database has been largely researched and compiled by long time APEN member and regional co-ordinator in Queensland, Dr Jeff Coutts. In a future edition of ExtensionNet there'll be a more detailed account of the database and some of the background information that paints a comprehensive picture of where extension is at in Australia in 2005.

As a taster, did you know that - based on full time equivalents (FTEs) - there are more than 4000 extension positions in Australia? If all extension officers are counted, including non-FTE officers, that number may increase by as much as 2000. Of the 4000 or so FTE extension officers, more than 2700 are engaged in the public or public/community sectors.

That's a huge trove of experience to draw on! It's APEN's job to try to bring that expertise together and share it with others.

Diffusion of innovations

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Survival tools: 140 years of work

At a recent CRRI-Q course attended by Australian and international extension officers, one of the exercises involved jotting the two or three best pieces of advice for surviving the rigours of extension and keeping the smile curving up the right way.

The ideas were scratched onto a piece of paper and tossed into a hat and mixed up. Then participants randomly drew someone else's advice from the hat and read it out, offering how the advice was relevant to their own work and how could be used practically. It's a simple workshop exercise that any extension officer could use to keep things moving and energise the group.

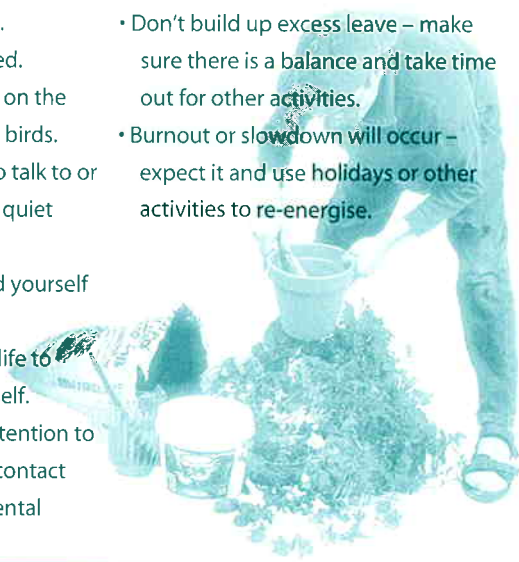
Anyway, once the list was compiled, it seemed too good a resource to keep it to ourselves. So here, at no cost, is some of the best advice we could gather from about 140 years worth of extension.

Out of respect to the contributors, these suggestions are reported verbatim. Points of view expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of APEN or ExtensionNet.

How to survive extension

- Work in pairs or teams – debrief, support. Spend more time with colleagues discussing what I do well – and what I could do differently.
- Use positive language – talk it up. If you sound reluctant “only doing this because I've been told” – you're going to have a much harder time.
- Take time to smell the roses, listen to the birds, count the worms, plant some new plants ...
- Reinvent self – continuous learning and application – new challenges.
- “My job is only a job”. I very clearly delineate my paid job from my personal life.
- Perfecting myself – benefit them, not for myself. Self development, playing basketball, hiking, running a marathon – possibly with my clients – I enjoy it.

- To survive a change agent should be: patient, open-minded, ready for risk.
- Actively listen to other people. Give yourself time to be understood. Do not stick to your own ideas thoughts because you can learn a lot from others. Because people are different, their attitude/behaviour must be taken into consideration all the time.
- Be optimistic – sometimes it seems nothing changed, but be confident in yourself. For sure, you've had to put some influence on your clients and it takes time for them to make certain changes.
- Be willing to share wholeheartedly and try to stand in your clients' perspective and take their consideration.
- Stopped working very long days and made sure I had time to garden 2 or 3 times a week.
- Take a Friday and Monday off work (so you have 4 consecutive days), Go away from where you live and work – and garden
- Swim up and down the local pool for as long as you can, concentrating on nothing other than the back line on the bottom.
- Took note of my personality type, accepted myself as I am. Worked on my weaknesses and capitalised on my strengths.
- Negotiating skills: be open minded.
- Drive to a high point somewhere on the coast where you can see the sea birds. Count the coal ships, not have to talk to or listen to anyone else and have a quiet time.
- Cynicism is contagious; if you find yourself catching it get help quick.
- Balance your work life and social life to allow for personal time for yourself.
- Seek balance between/among attention to work, relationships with family, contact with nature and physical and mental activity.
- Predicting and evaluation skills.
- Have a hobby to work on the weekend to soothe for week's pressures at work.
- Don't take peoples reaction as a personal attack on you but as their reaction to a difficult situation.
- Learn to be tough and thick skinned.
- Establish mutual respect with the people you are working with.
- Establish rapport with the key influencers within the community.
- Respect the culture within the particular community.
- Take time to socialise with clients and don't worry about it “eating into work time”.
- If the going is becoming really tough, and you are directly confronted by clients, cool down, take time to think before answering. The other person may be right. Who knows.
- Always present facts.
- Do not be an emotional person. You will make mistakes.
- No matter what task/project you are assigned, work out how you can make it interesting and exciting for you.
- Talk with someone else – debrief.
- Don't build up excess leave – make sure there is a balance and take time out for other activities.
- Burnout or slowdown will occur – expect it and use holidays or other activities to re-energise.



Your APEN - your network

APEN International Conference Update

News from the Conference Convenors

Conference theme: Practice change for sustainable communities: Exploring footprints, pathways and possibilities



APEN 2006 International Conference Convenor, Jessica Connor

Conference dates firm

Hold on to your hats and mark the dates of the 6th to the 8th of March 2006 in your diary. APEN is gearing up for its 3rd International Conference, which will be held in the picturesque town of Beechworth, Victoria.

Melbourne Cluster members, including Jo Vigliaturo, Janine Dridan, Gavin Brock, Cynthia Mahoney, Alison Medhurst, Emily Tee, Jessica Connor and Robin Segrave from the Department of Primary Industries and Ruth Beilin from the University of Melbourne, have been working hard to get the conference committee up and running.

The Melbourne Cluster of APEN is convening the conference in partnership with other organisations including the Department of Primary Industries, the Department of Sustainability and Environment, Community Gardens, World Vision, the University of Melbourne, Monash University, Trust for Nature, Participative Technologies and the Australasia Facilitators' Network.

All of these organisations are represented on a dynamic and experienced committee.

The committee is excited to announce that the Department of Primary Industries Catchment and Agriculture Services (CAS) has agreed to be the gold sponsor. Melbourne Cluster President Jo Vigliaturo is certainly happy about that: "The support from DPI has been fantastic," she says. As part of the DPI sponsorship, Jessica Connor from APEN has been appointed part time as a project officer to support the conference.

Strong themes emerging from the group include community, pushing the edge, integrity, sustainability and integration. These are the values the conference committee has identified as priorities for the planning and conduct of the conference. The theme, close to being locked in, is looking towards what is possible in extension, the pathways extension can take, practice change and realities for sustainable communities.

We will keep you posted on these high-energy discussions. The 'virtual reference group' will soon be in action so for those who have not registered interest in this, please notify jessica.connor@dpi.vic.gov.au if you are interested.

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Kevin Balm facilitating the theme process with the committee