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## Developing a policy framework for extension systems

### Purpose

This brief focuses on three questions:

- 'What are the benefits of developing a policy framework for agricultural and rural extension systems?'
- What are the role and priorities of extension systems and how should they be developed?
- What support measures should be put in place to ensure that extension is delivered effectively in the region?

### Key messages

Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) face many challenges in delivering effective extension services to communities. Geography and limited infrastructure severely constrain the ability of extension officers to reach isolated communities such as those in the highlands of Papua New Guinea or communities in outer islands where transport services can be costly and irregular.

In the face of declining resources, national extension services need to review their priorities and modes of delivery. A policy framework that provides the national extension service and other actors with strategic direction can help to ensure that resources are targeted to where they are needed most in line with client needs and national priorities; that extension staff receive the appropriate training to carry out their duties; and that scarce resources are used more effectively through partnerships with NGOs and the private sector and use of information and communication technologies where appropriate. Monitoring and evaluating performance based on stakeholder feedback is also crucial to ensuring that extension staff skills remain up to date and relevant to client needs.

### What is rural and agricultural extension and how does it add value to other approaches?

Agricultural and rural extension is one of the key policy instruments available to governments to bring about positive change in agriculture and rural communities.

*Extension is the process of working with rural and farming communities to build on their knowledge and skills and thus improve their economic, social and environmental well-being.*

**Extension services:** provide technical skills, management approaches and information needed to support people in making **voluntary changes**. Such changes may include working together proactively with individuals and groups to overcome problems; taking advantage of opportunities that arise; and bringing different stakeholders together to address areas of common concern or opportunity. Extension can also create awareness of regulation and incentives available and develop capacity to better comply with legislation or access incentives.



### Changing times

Increasing pressure on government budgets, increased environmental and social concerns, the emergence of new communication technologies and the strengthening of the private sector have changed the way governments approach rural and agricultural extension.

Global trends in agricultural and rural extension show:

- increasing involvement of the private sector and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in providing extension services;
- greater focus on participatory capacity building approaches;
- a switch from public extension that provides direct technical assistance to individuals, to a stronger emphasis on facilitation and in bringing stakeholders along the value chain together;
- increasing emphasis on developing capacity to improve the management of natural resources and to help communities adapt to climate variability and change; and
- increasing use of new technologies including mobile phones and text messaging services, social networking, and other internet technologies.

### Policy recommendations:

- Review the existing policy framework for the national extension service, to ensure that it clearly defines appropriate roles and priorities, at national, regional and agricultural industry level.
- Undertake a participative stakeholder audit to see where government extension services are most needed, and to identify opportunities for collaboration with NGOs and/or the private sector.
- Conduct a skills audit of extension staff to ensure that skills match the extension approaches required and provide training where gaps are found or new skills needed.
- Ensure that external funding sources are aligned to national extension priorities.
- Support extension staff through training and progression schemes by linking rewards to desired skills and outcomes.
- Implement a monitoring and evaluation framework for national extension services to ensure that they are meeting the needs of clients and can be adapted where changes are needed.



### The need for an extension policy

In the Pacific, national extension services have been criticised for a perceived lack of effectiveness in producing outcomes; a continued focus on traditional technical assistance to larger farming enterprises at the expense of smaller farms, women, youth and the broader value chain; and piecemeal promotion of participatory approaches and new information and communication technologies.

National extension services must demonstrate that they are adding value to other service providers and meeting the needs of their clients. The absence of clear policy frameworks has resulted in services which lack a clear understanding of what their core functions should be, how they should allocate scarce resources, what training extension officers require to carry out their role effectively, and how they can work better with other partners, including the private sector, and with new technologies to improve their services.

#### Common issues facing Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) identified at the 2nd Pacific Extension Summit 2009:

1. Resource constraints – alternative models need to be created, taking into account the activities of NGOs and the private sector, and the need to work better with them.
2. Geographical constraints necessitate building capacity in isolated communities and making better use of new communication technologies, especially in PICTs with many outer islands, and in Papua New Guinea.
3. Diversification – because the same approach will not work everywhere, there is a need to use different extension approaches, with associated skills training for extension staff, based on the target group, their needs and location.
4. Information flows – innovative ways must be found to provide stakeholders with the knowledge they need to develop in appropriate ways, in formats that best suit their needs.
5. Youth – this population group represents a huge potential resource if the energy of young people can be harnessed. Linked to this is the need to transform the image of farming as a profession.

### Defining the role of a national extension service

Agriculture is of vital importance to most PICTs and makes significant contributions to employment, income and foreign exchange earnings. In Melanesia up to 80% of the population is involved in agriculture and forestry on a subsistence or commercial basis.

Farmers need technical assistance, access to new technologies and capacity building to improve their economic, social and environmental well being. Where commercial opportunities exist, the private sector is engaged in providing farmers with technical assistance, inputs and access to credit. However, the market fails to provide essential services needed for social (e.g. poverty alleviation, food security) or environmental gains. Many NGOs are involved in trying to address this ‘market failure’ and may already be providing an effective service to some parts of the farming community. Governments need to work with them rather than duplicate the service. The use of partnerships and training of NGO staff and farmers to assist/provide extension should be encouraged to address low farmer-extension officer ratios.

Policy makers need to define the role of the national extension service by taking stock of the different organisations working in agricultural and rural development (by geographical area, industry and issue), assessing their effectiveness (based on client feedback), identifying current gaps and opportunities for collaboration, and sharing resources and future priorities for the sector. Involving stakeholders in this process from the outset will assist in developing ownership and effective on-going collaboration.

### Defining the priorities of the national extension service

Clearly defined priorities are essential for structuring, resourcing and training the extension service and for monitoring and evaluating its performance. Because the focus may change over time, the extension service needs to be flexible enough to adapt to these changes in priorities, for example, in the face of natural disasters, when a new industry is introduced, or as the private sector or NGOs develop their services.

Farmers (men and women, old and young) need to have an effective voice in determining national research and extension priorities. They could participate through a centrally managed survey, regular meetings or workshops or through farmer advisory groups. Governments and stakeholders should discuss the importance of different rural development outcomes and ensure extension services can best meet these priorities.

### Example of a priority setting tool that can be used with stakeholders to determine priorities for the extension service

Potential policy priorities for agricultural and rural extension services [Specify: national/regional/ agricultural industry focus]	Priority rating 1 = low; 10 = high
<b>Poverty alleviation</b> – working with NGOs to provide information and facilitative support to individuals and communities, so that they can break out of the poverty cycle and develop new enterprises.	
<b>Reaching vulnerable groups</b> – providing targeted support for building capacity in women, youth or disadvantaged groups to enable them to better thrive within the broader community.	
<b>Maximising productivity and economic benefits</b> – providing technical and business information and support to farms and rural business to allow them to maximise output and efficiency, and thus returns.	
<b>Ensuring biosecurity</b> – raising awareness of the need for biosecurity, regulations and guidelines and how people can protect the nation and its industries and environment.	
<b>Protecting the environment</b> – ensuring that people have the awareness, knowledge and motivation to minimise environmental damage and protect biodiversity.	
<b>Adapting to climate change</b> – working with communities and industries to understand ways to better manage climate variability and put in place means of addressing and adapting to longer term climate change.	
<b>Developing value chains</b> – working with stakeholders from across the value chain, including farmers, agribusiness, NGOs, and processing and marketing organisations to ensure maximum efficiencies and benefits to each sector and the broader community.	

### Review extension approaches and skill requirements

Extension approaches and extension officer capacities should be reviewed to ensure they align with the policy priorities identified, and meet the needs of different stakeholders. A few examples are given below of the different skill sets extension officers may need in different contexts.

Where markets are well-developed, the role of the extension officer may be confined to putting farmers in touch with local buyers and suppliers. In this context being able to network with different stakeholders along the value chain may be the most important skill requirement.

Building the capacity of vulnerable groups requires a much stronger emphasis on personal visits, and extension officers need to be able to use participatory approaches to assist target groups in analysing their constraints and identifying solutions. Where training and participatory research are identified as key priorities, officers need skills in adult learning techniques, and in establishing trials and demonstration plots and analysing results.

Having staff with dedicated information skills (such as preparing publications, using different media technologies and establishing and monitoring helpdesks) can be useful in disseminating information in a cost-effective way to many users.

### Supporting and resourcing the policy framework

#### Extension staff management

The welfare and motivation of extension staff are central to an effective national extension service. Extension officers need clear roles and objectives with appropriate career development opportunities to do their job effectively. Adequate training and resources are vital. When officers are scattered widely, methods must be found to provide interaction, feedback and support, for example, through mobile phone and internet technologies.

#### Resources

National extension services are funded in a variety of ways: as part of the government budget for agricultural and rural development; through industry levies (for example, where farmers or marketers pay a set fee to government each time they sell their produce); through donor funding; or through ‘user pay’ schemes (where farmers pay for specific services/products provided by extension officers).

It is important to ensure that funding is aligned to the priorities for the national extension service and that external priorities do not take extension officers away from their agreed roles.

*User pays may be useful when governments provide breeding or seed stock, feed or fertilisers to farmers, or when governments are trying to encourage the private sector to grow by developing a market for paid agricultural advisory services to larger commercial farms. User pays can be counter-productive to working effectively with farmers and other stakeholders, however, and may prevent the most vulnerable from accessing extension services that could improve their well-being.*

#### Monitoring and evaluating impact

Monitoring how well the extension service is delivering is crucial to measuring success and identifying any changes required. Such assessment should include an appropriate channel for farmer feedback on services and advice received.