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The New Extensionist: Core Competencies for Individuals



The brief calls for the reform of curricula and learning materials. It urges decision makers to better balance the training of extension professionals between technical and functional competencies. It promotes the idea of the “extension professional,” and the need for professional associations where extension professionals can exchange experiences and gain new knowledge.

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Introduction, Background, and Target Audience

The GFRAS “New Extensionist” position paper has attracted much attention to the new roles and capacities needed by extension and advisory services at different levels in order to effectively manage agricultural innovation processes. The New Extensionist document has led to a series of activities and the creation of the GFRAS Consortium for Extension Education and Training.

The New Extensionist calls for capacity to be strengthened in extension and advisory services at the individual, organisational, and system levels. This brief is targeted at decision makers in

training institutions such as colleges and universities, and to extension and education managers, to advocate for a set of core competencies for the individual extension professional.

The brief calls for the reform of curricula and learning materials. It urges decision makers to better balance the training of extension professionals between *technical* and *functional* competencies. It promotes the idea of the “extension professional,” and the need for professional associations where extension professionals can exchange experiences and gain new knowledge. Through this brief we aim to influence the direction of pre-service education and training for new staff, and the strengthening the competencies of existing staff (in-service training).



The “New Extensionist” Learning Kit

Following an meeting of education experts, GFRAS started to develop an introductory module to the New Extensionist. This is the first part of a “learning kit” targeted at field staff, managers, and lecturers. The aim of the kit is to produce or equip an extension professional who can effectively interact and work with all the different actors within the agricultural innovation system with an ultimate aim of benefiting producers and related actors. While the contents of the learning kit will be primarily aimed at self-directed learners, it is also suitable for use in face-to-face settings. The materials can also be downloaded and used for face-to-face and blended learning (a combination of self-directed and face-to-face learning). The learning kit can help to top up the knowledge of existing professionals, but also be taken up by learning institutions for foundational course material for certificates or degrees.

The kit uses the Kolb learning process (Kolb and Fry 1975; Fry and Kolb 1979). It provides users with information and clear instructions on how to go about their own learning by reading, reflecting on their own experience, drawing conclusions, and identifying applications as defined by the Experiential Learning Cycle Approach. This learning approach is based on experiential learning theory (Kolb & Fry 1975)

and is participatory by design. It is a learner-centred approach involving active experience followed by a process of reviewing, reflecting, and applying what has been learned through the experience.

The learners targeted in the New Extensionist Learning Kit include a wide range of people, such as

- Current and incoming students in agriculture and extension
- Animal and crop science degree holders who are employed as extensionists but have no training in extension
- Extension professionals in the field who would like to upgrade their skills or gain new knowledge
- Others who would like to increase their competencies in the offered modules

Approach: How did we get to the Core Competencies?

The New Extensionist “core competencies” were developed in part based on the New Extensionist position paper. The position paper used a participatory process that included discussions, debates, a survey, and regional priority setting to come to the final product.

Following the publication of the New Extensionist, the GFRAS Consortium

collected existing curricula and conducted an analysis of the competencies that the curricula focused on. The Consortium then partnered with the Association for International Agricultural Extension Education (AIAEE) Professional Development Group to conduct surveys and hold webinars to discuss the core competencies needed in extension today.

In late 2014 a small group of extension education experts from the GFRAS Consortium met to examine the New Extensionist position paper and decide

how to produce learning materials out of it (Box 1). These materials would be mainly for self-directed learning (but can be used for blended learning as well). The group used the New Extensionist position paper and a list of core competencies developed by the Consortium and the AIAEE as noted above. The experts then agreed on a listing of core competencies that the New Extensionist professional should have. The participants then grouped individual competencies into the equivalent of modules. These are shown in Table 1.



New Extensionist Learning Kit Modules and Competencies Required

| Module Title | Competencies Required: Extension Professional Should be Able to... | Module Contents |
|---|---|--|
| 1. Introduction to the new extensionist | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define the framework of agricultural innovation systems and position himself or herself within the innovation system Define his or her new roles and new capacities that are required for the new extensionist | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> New extensionist framework Agricultural innovation systems concept Implications of these concepts for roles of extension and advisory services within the innovation system |
| 2. Changing role of extension in innovation and development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain the role of extension in innovation and development Give an overview of approaches and tools Select appropriate approaches and tools for a given context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extension history, paradigms, methods, approaches, tools, principles, systems Role of extension in innovation and development Extension as a profession and science |
| 3. Extension programme management | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct extension programme planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation Use different types of problem solving techniques Build strategic partnerships, network, and manage stakeholders Pluralism in extension and the need for and methods of coordination and linkages | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extension programme planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and learning (project cycle) Theory of change concept and different tools to use How to use reflective learning, problem solving, and critical thinking Coordination challenges Research methods, data gathering, documentation, reporting |

| Module Title | Competencies Required: Extension Professional Should be Able to... | Module Contents |
|--|---|--|
| 4. Professional ethics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Apply values and good principles such as honesty, respect, accountability inclusion, transparency, integrity ● Recognise extension as a science and extension as a profession | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Why ethics is part of the extension profession ● Core values of the national strategies and organisational culture ● Basic knowledge of professionally-accepted standards, values guiding principles such as honesty, respect, accountability, inclusion, reliability, transparency, integrity |
| 5. Adult learning and behaviour change | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Practice adult learning design and implement adult learning programmes ● Initiate and support social networks for agricultural innovation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adult learning, psychology and behavioural change, learning needs assessment, training design, instructional techniques, training evaluation, participatory and collective learning, group learning, personal mastery |
| 6. Communication for innovation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Communicate with all stakeholders in the agricultural innovation system ● Manage knowledge effectively ● Identify and use appropriate ICTs ● Identify cultural and gender implications in communication and innovation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Why communication is critical for innovation ● Different communication models and modes ● Self-awareness ● Principles and methods of knowledge management, learning and sharing ● Overall understanding of information and communication technologies (ICTs), when and how they are appropriate ● Ability to speak publicly and present ideas ● Ability to write for specific purposes and audiences; ability to document processes, structure reports and presentations effectively |

| Module Title | Competencies Required: Extension Professional Should be Able to... | Module Contents |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| 7. Facilitation for development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Vision and organise demands ● Build local organisational capacities ● Broker and build linkages with actors in the innovation system | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Why facilitation is necessary for development ● Principles of facilitation ● Facilitation techniques ● Group dynamics ● Coaching individuals and groups ● Innovation platforms and why and how they should be used |
| 8. Community mobilisation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conduct livelihoods assets assessment ● Use problem solving and decision making approaches ● Explain leadership principles and leadership development ● Explain implications of culture and diversity, including gender and youth ● Mobilise resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Livelihoods assets assessment ● Managing with problem solving and decision making approaches ● Leadership principles and leadership development ● Culture and diversity, including gender and youth ● Resource mobilisation |
| 9. Farmer institutional development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explain or define theory, models, and types of groups and organisations ● Manage group dynamics ● Explain how the policy environment and "rules of the game" influence organisations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Management and leadership ● Group decision-making processes ● Participatory approaches ● Theory, models, and types of groups and organisations ● Group dynamics, management and leadership, group decision-making processes ● How the policy environment and "rules of the game" influence organisations |

| Module Title | Competencies Required: Extension Professional Should be Able to... | Module Contents |
|---|---|--|
| 10. Value chain extension | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Explain basic concepts and tools for value chain approaches ● Link farmers to market (input and output markets) ● Analyse consumer preferences ● Respond to standards certification and regulatory systems | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Why extension should deal with value chains and why farmers should be linked to value chains ● Basic concepts and tools in value chains and markets and how to analyse this ● Value chain intermediary types and roles ● Collective action for enhanced market access ● Standards and certification ● Gender in the value chain |
| 11. Agricultural entrepreneurship | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Analyse business opportunities and conduct market analysis ● Promote farm entrepreneurship | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Why is entrepreneurship important and how is it related to the new extensionist? ● Agricultural business plans ● Agricultural economics ● Entrepreneurship concepts and how to stimulate this in clientele |
| 12. Gender and youth issues in agricultural extension and rural development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Appreciate gender differences through the following questions: who does what, with what, how and why? ● Use gender-sensitive approaches ● Engage and retain rural youth | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Key concepts of gender, gender roles and gender-sensitive approaches. ● Why gender and youth matter in extension and rural development and agricultural extension ● Approaches to addressing gender and youth in extension and how to engage and retain youth in extension and agriculture |
| 13. Adaptation to change | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enhance adaptive capacities of communities to different types of risks and uncertainties related to climate change, markets and disasters ● Analyse tools for adaptation options ● Deal with risks, change, and uncertainties | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Concepts and theory behind adaptation and climate change ● Tools and approaches to support farmers and enhance community capacity to adapt to risk and change in climate, markets, and disasters; and farmer coping strategies |



What are the Core Competencies?

We define *competence* as the sufficiency of knowledge and skills that enable a person to act in a wide variety of situations. Competence is the ability to do something efficiently and effectively (i.e. successfully). The core competencies are those identified by the GFRAS Consortium as critical for extension agents throughout the world.

Table 1 shows the learning kit modules and competencies required under each. While some of these modules are being offered at various universities and education centres (see the GFRAS Directory of Education and Training), in many cases they need to be more widely available and reformed according to the New Extensionist thinking. These modules can become part of additional training and up-skilling for extension professionals (for example through a post-graduate course – see next section).

Facilitating the Core Competencies: Recommendations for Educators and Managers

1. Better balance training of extension professionals between technical and functional competencies

There have been numerous debates in equipping extension staff with regard to need for a “generalist” or a “specialist” and “hard” (technical) versus “soft” (functional) skills (Davis et al. 2010). The GFRAS Consortium suggests that we should rather promote the idea of an “extension specialist,” with recognition of the importance of the deep knowledge and theory that makes up this profile. Extension agents have a set of competencies that are special and separate from other disciplines. However, at the moment, most of their training is focused on the technical rather than the functional aspects. Practical level field experience is also missing in their training (Davis et al. 2007).

As extension staff need to work closely with farmers and other actors in the AIS, there is a need for both functional and technical capacities. As a result, GFRAS focuses on the functional competencies agreed to be an extension professional, recognising that the technical skills are adequately catered for during their training. Ultimately, it is about finding the right balance between the technical and func-

Sasakawa Africa Fund for Extension Education (SAFE): Topping up Skills

Sasakawa Africa Association, founded to promote use of improved technologies and methods, quickly realised the pivotal role of frontline extension workers and the need to strengthen extension personnel. Thus SAFE was founded with the aim of strengthening capacity of frontline extension workers, in partnership with Winrock International.

This is done through a unique partnership programme between universities or colleges in Africa and the employers of frontline extension workers. The programme is demand-driven (training institutions develop programmes responsive to employer needs) and practice-oriented. Typically employers select extension staff who are already working and grant them salaried study leave. The universities provide competent teachers and facilitate field supervision. Two months are devoted to extension needs assessment and eight to action research under ‘Supervised Enterprise Projects’.

The programme has learned the following: Employers can influence universities; universities can respond to well-articulated needs; field experience can enrich teaching and learning; and mid-career professionals represent an unexploited group of learner. The programme is now in nine countries, 19 universities, and two colleges.



tional skills, and ensuring that extension professionals receive practical and on-the-job training as well as in the classroom.

Different competencies are best gained in different way. Thus educators must consider the best mechanisms for learning. As detailed in Mutimba et al. (2010), one must consider the strengths and weaknesses of alternate delivery mechanisms. These include full-time, part-time, distance learning, on-the-job training, and short courses.

2. Foster the discipline through professionalisation and professional society membership

What does it mean to be in a profession? A profession is an occupation or vocation, as opposed to a job where one

just fulfils set functions. Characteristics of a profession include a common body of knowledge, a system for controlling admission, certain rules of conduct, procedures for discipline, and a public and legal authority (Koch et al. 2013).

Most extension staff work within a system that does not adequately recognise their job as a profession nor provide sufficient motivation and incentives for career development. There are several ways to address this. The first is the need for professional associations where the extension professional can participate for peer exchange and professional development. Examples of these professional bodies include the Association for International Agricultural Extension Education (AIAEE), South African Society for Agricultural Extension (SASAE), the



Australasia Pacific Extension Network (APEN), and the Ethiopia Society for Rural Development & Agricultural Extension (ESRDAE).

Secondly, extension professionals need to have a career path with appropriate incentives and motivation. In some countries there is recognition of extension as a profession or a discipline. For instance, in South Africa, the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) together with the SASAE requested the South African Council for Natural Scientific Professions (SACNASP) to recognise extension as a profession and a field of practice, under The Natural Scientific Professions Act, 2003 (Act No 27 of 2003).

3.Reform curricula to strengthen existing competencies and improve pre-service training of staff

There are several ways to improve the core competencies of extension staff. The first is to “top up” existing competencies through short courses and

other types of in service training. The advent of massive open online courses (MOOCs) and other online learning materials makes this easier for staff already employed. However, professionals already on the job need to be able to take the time to top up their skills and gain new knowledge. Thus they need the support of management to do so (Box 2). Beyond this, incentives of various types help. These include recognition of staff who have completed certain courses, awards, certificates, salary raises, and promotions.

Based on the current situation in Africa and other parts of the world, perhaps the best solution is to offer a post-graduate diploma in extension, much as one can receive a Graduate Certificate in Education in some countries. There are many people working in extension with a background in crop or animal science, but don’t have the requisite functional competencies as laid out in Table 1. Thus training institutions should consider this as one key mechanism.

4.Go beyond training and include practical experience and continuous learning

Results of an electronic discussion on Capacity Development for Extension and Advisory Service Providers in South Asia, led by Agricultural Extension in South Asia (AESAs), noted that trainings (including workshops, seminars, and

conferences) in most cases only help build awareness and do not necessarily aid in analytical and decision making capacities. Apart from awareness creation, capacity development should include, exposure visits, documentation of good practices, networking, dissemination of relevant information, and programmes for self-paced learning. Some competencies cannot be learned in the classroom and must be experienced through internships, practicums, and on-the-job training (learning by doing).

Secondly, the pre-service courses that staff take in order to become an exten-

sionist (e.g. college or university training) need reform in many cases. This means that the basic coursework and the skills and competencies being taught in training institutions need to be reviewed, and in many cases, revised and updated. This must be based on needs assessments in the various countries. More practical components must be built in. There must also be a clear link between the training and the employers, as shown in Box 2. We recognize that curricula reform takes a long time. However, in many cases it is something that is necessary and the journey should begin.





Summary

The brief calls for managers and decision makers to embrace the concept of the “new extensionist” and to take steps to ensure that extension professionals are equipped for their job. This includes recognising extension as a profession and ensuring that staff are linked to societies to allow for professional development. It means having a better balance between technical and functional skills. Finally, it implies the need to revisit and where necessary revise curricula and training materials based on felt needs.

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