

“Best-fit Revisited”: Operationalising the framework to assess performance and impact of pluralistic extension systems

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Introduction and Purpose

Extension and advisory services (EAS) have evolved, with reforms including privatization and decentralization. Many scholars now view EAS in a pluralistic form, since they are constituted by providers from public and non-public sectors embedded within an agricultural innovation system. Service providers can complement or compete by providing divergent technical or organisational advice to rural actors, depending on their objectives. However, up to now, the most of evaluations have occurred at project or programme level to justify the investment of donors and governments.

There is a lack of evaluation clearly linking performance and impact undertaken at national level. The objective of this paper is to discuss frameworks and methods that can help to assess pluralistic extension system and to draw out lessons for future investment at this more global level.

Conceptual Framework

We address this gap based on the “best-fit” framework (Birner et al. 2009) with the goal to analyse extension systems and EAS for national context. This framework integrates insights from different disciplines in social sciences. It takes into account contextual factors affecting EAS and establishes causal relationships between the EAS characteristics, EAS performance, farm household performance, and impacts. Such a framework is a relevant starting point because it is based on a holistic perspective with an impact pathway orientation. However, it raises questions, and improvements are needed to effectively carry out EAS evaluations.

First, there is a need to better analyse public policies that orient service providers’ actions and the power relationships among actors explaining the diversity of governance structures and the geographical expansion of EAS.

Pluralistic extension systems may operate with possible confrontation, co-existence, or synergies between them at the national and local level. This thinking highlights the crucial importance of better taking into account the diversity and orientation of advisory service.

Second, the analysis of the performance of each category of service provider must be carried out by understanding the complex interactions between different components (governance mechanisms that orient service providers’ operation, the complexity of funding mechanisms, capacities and managerial style of service provider staff, the methods to provide advice). The combination of these components is specific for each service provider and explains the functioning of each of them, including the question of how they contribute to the integration of new knowledge in the system, from both practice and science.

Third, there is a need to improve the analysis of the links between provision of advice, changes in farmers' perception, skills they acquired through learning processes, and the changes in their agricultural, managerial and social practices. This implies the need to deal with the diversity of theories and concepts available for describing these causal pathways of advisory services.

Fourth, the framework could be improved by further detailing the impacts on both participants and non-participants in advisory activities. The spill-over and diffusion process of EAS needs to be addressed.

Conclusions and Implications

Based on this analysis we propose an operational framework and methodological tools to carry out rigorous assessments of complex national extension systems. Such holistic assessment is useful to help decision makers, both policy makers and service provider managers, to improve performance of the extension system (effectiveness, efficiency, equity, and sustainability) by understanding which mechanisms influence which extension system under which circumstances/conditions.

Reference :

Birner, R., Davis, K.E., Pender, J. Nkonya, E., Anandajayasekeram, P., Ekboir, J., Mbabu, A., Spielman, D.J., Horna, D., Benin, S. & Cohen, M. (2009) From best practice to best fit: a framework for designing and analyzing pluralistic agricultural advisory services worldwide. *Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension*, 15(4): 341-55.