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Communication Needs of Development Practitioners in the Field: Government Extension Workers

By

Teresa H Stuart
PANEL DISCUSSION

COMMUNICATION NEEDS OF DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS IN THE FIELD: GOVERNMENT EXTENSION WORKERS*

Teresa H. Stuart**

1.0 Introduction

Government extension workers in the Philippines provide the frontline services delivery at the regional, provincial, municipal and barangay (village) levels for service-oriented government departments such as the Departments of Agriculture; Environment and Natural Resources; Health; Social Welfare; and others.

This paper focuses only on government extension works in the agriculture sector covering the Department of Agriculture (DA), Department of Environment and National Resources (DENR), and the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), and their communication needs and how these are being addressed through the National Integrated Applied Communication Program, (NIACP) a joint undertaking of the Department of Agriculture’s Agricultural Training Institute (formerly Bureau of Agricultural Extension) and the Philippine Council for Agriculture, Forestry and Natural Resources Research and Development (PCARRD) through its Applied Communication Division (ACD).

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2.0 Background of the Agricultural Extension Mandate

The Philippines is a predominantly agricultural country with 55 percent of its labor force engaged in agriculture. Its agricultural exports contribute about 60 percent to total exports and 33 percent to GNP.

The requirements of the agricultural extension service among 5.2 million farm families spread throughout the 7,107 islands is quite enormous. There are 13 geopolitical regions in the country, 77 provinces, 60 cities, 1,558 municipalities and more than 42,000 villages or barangays.

About 14,000 barangay-level extension workers, or agricultural production technologists (APTs) are employed in the Department of Agriculture. This means one extension worker or APT serves from 100 to 200 farm families, with assistance from about 20 farmer-contact leaders. In addition, about 6,000 extension managers are fielded in the provincial and municipal levels.

Farm areas are classified by ecological development zone: coastal areas (1.39 M hectares), irrigated lowland (1.25 M hectares), rainfed areas (4.781 M hectares), upland areas (6.775 M hectares), hillylands (3.331 M hectares) and problem soils (.22 M hectare).

Agricultural extension is a potent machinery by which the government reaches out to the small farmers, landless agricultural laborers and their families. The average landholding is 1.5 hectares. As stated in the DA’s extension philosophy, the agricultural extension service is:

"a continuing non-formal education process designed for and with farm families to develop farming systems of profitable production mixes calculated to increase and sustain productivity and income. These should in turn enable them to attain quality nutrition and generate savings for reinvestments in complementary livelihood projects."

The mandate of the extension service is to provide extension, communication and training support to programmes geared toward the following strategies; 1) bottom-up planning process, 2) farming systems approach, 3) human resources development, 4) institutional development, 5) linkages and interagency service complementation.
The goals of the extension service are stated as:

"to improve farm income and profitability, ensure food security, nutrition and ecological balance."

Indeed, the task of the agricultural extension worker is enormous, particularly when considered in the light of his communication role vis-a-vis his farming clientele, his co-workers in the extension system, the technology generators in the research system and his colleagues and superiors in the Department.

3.0 Extension Methodology and Communication Responsibilities of the Extension Worker

3.1 Bottom-up planning process

This process requires that the extension workers:

3.1.1 Conducts comprehensive environmental analysis. This involves identifying local problems and issues that are meant to determine opportunities for service.

3.1.2 Considers the values of the people in the community to determine their priorities.

3.1.3 Makes an inventory of human and natural resources to determine local capabilities.

3.1.4 Matches opportunities for service, priorities and capabilities to develop a plan that is Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound, or SMART.

3.2 Farming Systems Approach

The extension worker and the farmer require the following information to decide on appropriate technology /information needs in the farming enterprise:

3.2.1 The soil type, soil pH, organic matter content, water-holding capacity, fertility (N-P-K) including nutrient deficiency, agro-climatic and agro-ecological conditions and other bio-physical characteristics. These types of pre-production technology information will serve as guide for farm management decisions on the most profitable production mixes on what, when, where, how much, why and how to raise crops, livestock, fish and other farm enterprises.
3.2.2 Available and usable technology for the selected combination of crops, livestock and fish in a given production cycle/season.

3.2.3 How to prepare a farm plan and budget that is oriented to appropriate production programming based on effective market demand.

3.2.4 Sources of available credit and simplified procedures for availment.

3.2.5 Cycles of pest and disease outbreaks for cost-effective prevention and control using the Integrated Pest management (IPM) approach.

3.2.6 Marketing information particularly supply, demand and price trends of commodities in the production mixes to guide production programming, postharvest, processing and marketing activities.

3.2.7 Facilities for farm level postharvest storage, processing and preservation to avoid market gluts, add value to processed products and stabilize prices.

3.2.8 Active community-based organization of farmers for collective inputs and outputs marketing, postharvest operations and processing.

3.2.9 Sources of needed technology/information in usable communication formats/materials.

3.2.10 Accessible education and training centers for consultation meetings, seminars, workshops to enable extensionists and farmers to easily obtain updated/relevant information, and develop appropriate skills on cost reducing technologies, farm enterprise management, and related concerns.

3.3 Human Resources Development

The HRD approach is addressed by the DA Agricultural Training Institute to provide non-formal, continuing education for DA personnel in the regional, provincial and municipal levels as well as for farm families. The ATI operates 6 National training centers, 12 regional training centers and 77 farmers’ training centers. Training courses are designed and conducted in response to location-specific information/skills development needs of researchers, extensionists and farmer clientele.
The development of community resources and a management system for self reliance is set back by a lack of relevant knowledge, appropriate and adequate skills and desirable attitude towards work among both the farmer-client system and the frontline as well as middle level extension system.

Not only a continuing non-formal education and training on production, postproduction and marketing information are necessary but accompanying organizational communication strategies as well. These internal organizational communication strategies should be well conceived, systematic, regular and sustained by management. Contents of such communication may include policies, programs, procedures, activities, new resources, opportunities, values, morale boosters, motivators, etc. that engender organizational pride, team spirit, unity and commitment.

3.4 Institutional Development

The organization, training and development of community-based organizations through participative planning, programming, budgeting and implementation are necessary towards the efficient management of community resources. This implies the need for extension workers to undergo training on organization building. For the agriculture department itself, institutional development through HRD strategies mentioned in the previous section, would lead to a positive organizational climate, coordination/cooperation toward unity of purpose and direction, innovativeness, commitment to the job, and good working relations.

3.5 Linkages and Interagency Service Complementation

In order to have realistic and workable linkages and inter (as well as intra) agency complementation, agricultural development workers at all levels must commonly agree and understand shared responsibilities, resources and commitments. This sharing must be based on agency mandates through proper agreements and mutual respect (DA, 1987).

4.0 The DA-PCARRD Research-Extension Linkage

Research and extension serve as tools for agricultural development. While research is geared towards technology development, extension serves as the machinery for technology transfer and utilization.
As far as research in agriculture and natural resources is concerned, the Philippines has a strong central planning, coordinating and monitoring council in PCARRD. Since it was established in 1972, it has dramatically eliminated the erstwhile fragmented, undirected and duplicatory system of research. It has effectively directed agricultural research towards national and regional development priorities by establishing a network of R & D centres and consortia in the 13 regions of the country.

PCARRD’s R & D mandate covers the whole technology development continuum, that is, from technology generation, to technology dissemination. It recognizes the central role that communication plays in hastening the dissemination and use of research information by its various clientele.

Working on this rationale, PCARRD designed and implemented a communication program by which the functioning national R & D system can, despite limited resources and budget, actively assist the agricultural extension system in accelerating the transfer and utilization of agricultural technologies from the research institutions to the farms.

For this reason, the DA and PCARRD forged an interagency collaborative tie-up that serves the communication needs of extension workers and farmers. The signing of a memorandum of agreement between PCARRD and DA in 1986 led to the launching of the National Integrated Applied Communication Program (NIACP). This signaled the active interfacing of research and extension and paved the way for more dynamic research utilization (Bautista and Lastimosa, 1987).

The NIACP was designed to: 1) institutionalize the research-extension interface by operationalizing the activities of the regional applied communication office in providing the communication support to the extension system. 2) pool scant communication resources in the regions through interagency sharing 3) provide a mechanism for ensuring the multi-directional flow of research information among the research system, extension system and the farmers, and 4) mobilize various applied communication units in the appropriate packaging of research information for specific audiences.

4.1 The program operationalizes the interface between research and extension by:

4.1.1 Serving as enabling mechanism and reinforcement to the extension workers more in the following ways:

4.1.1.1 At the national and regional levels, it retrieves and matches technical information with extension and farmer needs in preparation for technology transfer.
4.1.1.2 It packages these technical information into prototype forms/media/materials that are pretested to ensure that they are understandable, usable and in the language of extensionists and/or farmer-producers.

4.1.1.3 It mass-produces, broadcasts and/or distributes these materials to the extension workers and other identified audiences.

4.1.1.4 It evaluates communication effects on audiences terms of improved knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) and to a limited extent, adoption and its impact.

4.1.2 Establishing permanent linkages with communication/information offices within the R & D network and, in some cases, with NGOs and local organizations;

4.1.3 Providing communication skills and technical communication training for communication staff to enable them to plan, implement and evaluate viable multimedia communication strategies in support of agricultural extension workers;

In every region, a Regional Applied Communication Office (RACO) Coordinator leads a Regional Integrated Applied Communication Task Force (RIACTF) in executing these functions. These regional task forces identify appropriate technologies generated by research centres; design; field test; translate; package the appropriate technologies in consultation with identified cooperating subject matter specialists, extension workers and/or farmers; evaluate and identify with the extension system farmer-preferred communication channels, approaches, techniques and formats; set up feedback mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating impact of technology among the users/adopters. At PCARRD the ACD helps these task forces package the technological information, validates the packages with experts and develops these into prototypes. The DA mass produces and distributes these to the extension system for their use and for further dissemination to the farmers.

4.2 The RACOs in the 13 regions have six common activities that are primarily focused at providing the necessary interface between the research and extension systems. The RACOs' main task is to plan communication and research strategies in coordination with these two systems, translate research results, package these into appropriate forms, match technologies from research with farmers' needs in cooperation with the extension system. The six communication activities of the RACOs are:

4.2.1 Publications preparation and production
4.2.2 Instructional materials development
4.2.3 Scientific literature service
4.2.4 Mass media linkages
4.2.5 Communication research and action projects
4.2.6 Communication training

5.0 Communication Problems in the Agricultural Extension System

Despite existing linkages and working arrangements in the national and regional agriculture R & D system, problems in the research and extension systems still persist. In a January 1990 report of a study team that looked into the problems and issues of the Philippine agricultural extension service, the following extension-communication problems were identified.

5.1 There is a perceived lack of focus of extension activities, or inadequate communication from top and middle management on the long range vision and direction of the agriculture sector.

5.2 The field extension personnel receive inadequate and unclear signals from different organizational levels leading to confusion, inefficiencies and low morale.

5.3. The majority of field extension personnel are not systematically informed of any mechanism by which research results generated outside the DA are systematically packaged into extension messages/materials to help them in their dissemination activities to rural farm families.

5.4 Lack of coordination and feedback mechanism between the research and extension efforts within the DA’s attached agencies/government corporations and technical bureaus.

5.5 There is a perceived absence of a participatory system in the research and extension linkage resulting in the impression that research programs are not responsive to client needs.

5.6 There is a perception that extension personnel lack a thorough grounding on extension-communication approaches and methods, poor skills in problem analysis and program management; lack of clear accountability; absence of career paths and incentive systems; poor technical backstopping and low morale.
References


