Understanding extension

The concept and practice of extension are the central themes of this guide. However, before beginning to look at the many different aspects of extension practice in later chapters, the meaning of the term extension needs to be examined. Rural extension is now a common activity in most countries of the world, and it is a basic element in programmes and projects formulated to bring about change in rural areas. Extension services are similarly a common feature of the administrative structure of rural areas and these services have the responsibility, in partnership with the farmers, of directing programmes and projects for change.

The concept of extension

Extension is a term which is open to a wide variety of interpretations. Each extension agent probably has his own understanding of what extension is. This understanding will be based on past experience and the particular type of extension service in which the agent is working. In other words, there is no single definition of extension which is universally accepted or which is applicable to all situations. Furthermore, extension is a dynamic concept in the sense that the interpretation of it is always changing. Extension, therefore, is not a term which can be precisely defined, but one which describes a continual and changing process in rural areas.

The term extension may be examined by looking at a number of statements that have been written about it.

- Extension is an informal educational process directed toward the rural population. This process offers advice and information to help them solve their problems. Extension also aims to increase the efficiency of the family farm, increase production and generally increase the standard of living of the farm family.
- The objective of extension is to change farmers' outlook toward their difficulties. Extension is concerned not just with physical and economic achievements but also with the development of the rural people themselves. Extension agents, therefore, discuss matters with the rural people, help them to gain a clearer insight into their problems and also to decide how to overcome these problems.
- Extension is a process of working with rural people in order to improve their livelihoods. This involves helping farmers to improve the productivity of their agriculture and also developing their abilities to direct their own future development.

The above statements are presented to illustrate the range of interpretations that can be found about extension. They do, however, contain a number of common points. They all stress that extension is a process which occurs over a period of time, and not a single, one-time activity. They also all underline extension as an educational process which works with rural people, supports them and prepares them to confront their problems more successfully.
If statements such as those above are examined more carefully, and if the current ideas and practice of extension are considered, four main elements can be identified within the process of extension: knowledge and skills, technical advice and information, farmers' organization, and motivation and self-confidence.

**Knowledge and skills**

Although farmers already have a lot of knowledge about their environment and their farming system, extension can bring them other knowledge and information which they do not have. For example, knowledge about the cause of the damage to a particular crop, the general principles of pest control, or the ways in which manure and compost are broken down to provide plant nutrients are all areas of knowledge that the agent can usefully bring to farmers.

The application of such knowledge often means that the farmer has to acquire new skills of various kinds: for example, technical skills to operate unfamiliar equipment, organizational skills to manage a group project, the skill to assess the economic aspects of technical advice given, or farm management skills for keeping records and allocating the use of farm resources and equipment.

The transfer of knowledge and skills to farmers and their families is an important extension activity and the extension agent must prepare himself thoroughly. He must find out which skills or areas of knowledge are lacking among the farmers in his area, and then arrange suitable learning experiences through which the farmers can acquire them.

**Technical advice and information**

Extension also provides advice and information to assist farmers in making decisions and generally enable them to take action. This can be information about prices and markets, for example, or about the availability of credit and inputs. The technical advice will probably apply more directly to the production activities of the family farm and to the action needed to improve or sustain this production. Much of this technical advice will be based upon the findings of agricultural research. In many instances, however, farmers are also sources of valuable advice and information for other farmers, and agents should always try to establish a farmer-to-farmer link.

**Farmers' organization**

As well as knowledge, information and technical advice, farmers also need some form of organization, both to represent their interests and to give them a means for taking collective action. Extension, therefore, should be concerned with helping to set up, structure and develop organizations of local farmers. This should be a joint venture and any such organization should only be set up in consultation with the farmers. In the future, these organizations will make it easier for extension services to work with local farmers, and will also serve as a channel for disseminating information and knowledge.
Motivation and self-confidence

One of the main constraints to development that many farmers face is isolation, and a feeling that there is little they can do to change their lives. Some farmers will have spent all their lives struggling in difficult circumstances to provide for their families with little support or encouragement. It is important for extension to work closely with farmers, helping them to take the initiative and generally encouraging them to become involved in extension activities. Equally important is to convince farmers that they can do things for themselves, that they can make decisions and that they have the ability to break out of their poverty.

The above are the four fundamental elements of the extension process. It is not suggested that all extension activities must contain each of these elements, nor that some are more important than others. Clearly, the extension approach will be determined by the particular circumstances. However, an overall extension service should be based on these elements and should seek to promote them within the rural areas. Sometimes the local farmers' problems will demand prompt information and advice; on other occasions, more patient work of organization and motivation may be required. An extension service must be able to respond to these different demands.

Principles of extension

Extension activities are widespread throughout the developing world and most governments have set up formally structured extension services to implement extension programmes and projects. The practice of extension is supported by budget, offices, personnel and other resources. Before examining extension in detail in later chapters, however, it will be useful to consider the principles which should guide it.

Extension works with people, not for them

Extension works with rural people. Only the people themselves can make decisions about the way they will farm or live and an extension agent does not try to take these decisions for them. Rural people can and do make wise decisions about their problems if they are given full information including possible alternative solutions. By making decisions, people gain self-confidence. Extension, therefore, presents facts, helps people to solve problems and encourages farmers to make decisions. People have more confidence in programmes and decisions which they have made themselves than in those which are imposed upon them.

Extension is accountable to its clients

Extension services and agents have two sets of masters. On the one hand, they are accountable to their senior officers and to the government departments that determine rural development policies. Agents are expected to follow official policies and guidelines in their work.

On the other hand, extension is the servant of the rural people and it has the responsibility to fulfil the needs of the people in its area. This means that the rural poor should have a say in
deciding how effective extension actually is. One measure of effectiveness is to see how well policies and plans have been carried out. An equally important measure is the extent to which incomes and living standards of the rural people have increased as a result of extension work.

Extension programmes, therefore, are based on people's needs, as well as on technical and national economic needs. The extension agent's task is to bring these needs together. For example, an important part of government policy may be to increase the amount of food grown and sold in the country. By choosing to encourage the mass of small farmers to increase their output by improving their farming methods, national needs and farmers' needs can be satisfied together.

**Extension is a two-way link**

Extension is not a one-way process in which the extension agent transfers knowledge and ideas to farmers and their families. Such advice, which is often based upon the findings of agricultural and other research stations, is certainly important but the flow of information from farmers to extension and research workers is equally important. Extension should be ready to receive farmers' ideas, suggestions or advice, as well as to give them. This two-way flow of ideas can occur at different stages.

*When the problem is being defined.* Being in regular contact with the farmers, the extension agent can help research workers to understand the farming problems of the area and the limitations under which farmers have to work. It is even better if the agent can bring researchers into direct contact with farmers in order to ensure that research recommendations are relevant to farmers' needs.

*Extension links farmers with research*

*When recommendations are being tested in the field.* A new farm practice or crop variety might produce good results at a research station but not do so well on a farmer's field. Trials on farmers' fields are an opportunity to test research recommendations and provide feedback for research staff.

*When farmers put recommendations into practice.* Sometimes farmers discover problems with a recommendation which the research station failed to note. With the feedback the recommendations can be adjusted accordingly.

The two-way link between research, extension and the farmer is fundamental to sound extension practice and should be a basic principle of extension activity.

**Extension cooperates with other rural development organizations**

Within rural areas, extension services and agents should work closely with the other organizations that provide essential services to farmers and their families. Extension is only one aspect of the many economic, social and political activities that seek to produce change for the better in rural society. Extension, therefore, must be prepared to collaborate with all other such
organizations, both government and non-government, and to take them into account when preparing to implement extension policies. The kinds of organizations with which extension services should cooperate include:

**Political institutions** and local political leaders whose active local support will help the extension agent, who may thereby be brought into closer touch with local farmers.

**Support organizations** such as those which supply agricultural or other inputs, credit facilities or marketing services. Such inputs must be available in sufficient quantity, in the right place and at the right time if they are to be of any use.

**Health services**, so that the extension agent is kept aware of local health problems, particularly nutritional levels. Agricultural development and nutrition are closely related and the agent must keep closely in touch with health programmes and projects and adapt his programme to conform to local health requirements.

**Local schools**, so that the agent can have early access to the farmers of the future, and begin to equip them with the knowledge and skills required for farming.

**Community development**, whose objectives will be very similar to the educational work of extension. Extension agents often work very closely with community development workers to break down local social and cultural barriers to change, and to encourage community action programmes.

It is essential that the extension agent in the field know what his colleagues in other services and government departments are doing, and that they understand what he is doing. Close cooperation not only avoids duplication but provides opportunities for integrated farm programmes.

**Extension works with different target groups**

Extension recognizes that not all farmers in any one area will have the same problems. Some will have more land than others and will be keen to try out new ideas. Others, with fewer resources, will probably be more cautious. Extension cannot offer a single "package" of advice, suitable to all farmers. Different groups need to be identified and the agent will have to develop programmes appropriate to each group.

In the past, much extension effort was concentrated on the progressive farmer who was expected to spread new ideas to others. It has been seen, however, that this does not always work, because progressive farmers often have different problems. They have more land, more education and are usually more involved in the marketing of their produce.

Extension must, therefore, be aware of the existence of different farming groups and plan its programmes accordingly. The smallest and poorest farmers will need particular attention, as they may lack the basic resources needed to become involved in extension activities. The point to stress, therefore, is the existence of farmer groups with different resources and skills in any one community, and the need for extension to respond to these groups accordingly.

**Extension and education**
It has been seen that the extension agent’s task is an educational one. Farmers and their families need to learn new skills, knowledge and practices in order to improve their farming and other productive activities. As they do so, they develop new attitudes toward farming and the new practices, and to extension itself; this in turn influences their future behaviour. Extension agents, however, must also be prepared to learn from farmers about the way they farm, and keep themselves up to date with relevant developments in agricultural knowledge. In this educational work of extension, the agent should be aware of a number of principles of learning.

**The educator must also be a learner**

Education is not a process of filling empty minds with knowledge. Farmers already have a lot of knowledge about their environment and about their farming system; they would not be able to survive if they did not. Extension must build on the knowledge that already exists.

An extension agent, therefore, needs to learn as well as to teach. He must learn what farmers already know about agriculture: for example, how they describe and explain things that happen on their farms and what they know already about improved farming methods.

**Learning requires motivation**

No one can compel another person to learn. There has to be a desire to learn. Adults find it more difficult than children to grasp new ideas and information. Also, unlike a schoolteacher, the extension agent does not have a captive audience. Farmers can choose not to learn and they can choose not to listen to extension agents.

People do not learn unless they feel that the learning will result in their being able to satisfy a need or want. Food and drink are needs that are essential for life, together with the starting and raising of a family and the search for safe living conditions, which provide protection and shelter from danger and discomfort for the family.

In addition to needs, people have wants or desires. These are less intense than needs, but still important. People desire approval and praise from their family and friends; they want prestige in their society and to be well thought of by their neighbours. These desires become more apparent once basic needs have been satisfied. Farmers and their families who are wellfed and have good homes still strive for improvement. They want to produce more and the extension agent, by helping them to improve farming methods, can use this legitimate ambition to help them to improve the productivity of their farms. A farmer who is motivated to learn is likely to do so more rapidly and completely than a farmer who lacks motivation. This is a very important principle for the extension agent to remember.

**Dialogue and practice are important for learning**

An extension agent tells a group of farmers how to thin their crops in order to improve yields. He then goes away, thinking that the farmers have learned the new skill. A few weeks later, he returns to find that none of the farmers have thinned their crops and that they have only a very vague idea of what he told them.
The extension agent should not be surprised. Farmers do not learn very much from a straightforward talk and most of what they do hear they soon forget. But if they are given the chance to ask questions, to put the new information into their own words and to discuss it with the extension agent, much more will be learned and remembered. Furthermore, when a new practical skill is being taught, the farmers must have a chance to practice it. The extension agent can then correct any initial mistakes, and the farmer will gain the confidence to use the new skill.

Learning and adoption occur in stages

Different types of learning are involved in extension. Before a group of farmers can decide to try out a new practice, they must first learn of its existence. They may then have to learn some new skills. Five stages can be identified in the process of accepting new ideas.

Awareness. A farmer learns of the existence of the idea but knows little about it.
Interest. The farmer develops interest in the idea and seeks more information about it, from either a friend or the extension agent.
Evaluation. How the idea affects the farmer must now be considered. How will it be of benefit? What are the difficulties or disadvantages of this new idea? The farmer may seek further information or go to a demonstration or meeting, and then decide whether or not to try out the new idea.
Trial. Very often, farmers decide to try the idea on a small scale. For example, they may decide to put manure or fertilizer on a small part of one field and compare the result with the rest of the field. To do this they seek advice on how and when to apply fertilizer or manure.
Adoption. If the farmers are convinced by the trial, they accept the idea fully and it becomes part of their customary way of farming.

Similar stages are involved with individual farmers, farmers' groups, or whole communities. In groups and communities the process is more complex and may take much longer. The extension agent uses a range of extension methods to bring the right kind of information and support to each stage of the process. He must arrange learning experiences that will lead people from one stage to the next. In a community forestry programme, he begins by encouraging people to recognize that there is a problem of declining numbers of trees and that this could be overcome by the community planting and looking after a wood-lot. Interest can then be increased by a visit to another village that has already planted a wood-lot. During the evaluation stage, a lot of discussion will go on in the village. The extension worker can provide detailed information about the costs and returns, and answer questions and doubts. When a decision is taken to do something he can then arrange skill training sessions.

Farmers differ in their speed of learning and adoption

The process by which a new idea spreads among people in an area is known as diffusion. Not all farmers will accept a new idea at the same time. In any rural community, the readiness to accept new ideas and put them into practice varies from farmer to farmer depending on each farmer's previous experience with new ideas, the personality of the farmer and the amount of land and other resources available. Thus we can identify different categories of farmers in terms of their abilities to adopt new ideas.
Innovators. Innovators are farmers who are eager to accept new ideas. Usually there are only a few people in this class in a farming community. They are often farmers who, having spent some years outside the village, feel that they can make their own decisions without worrying about the opinions of others. In villages, innovators are often looked on with suspicion and jealousy. Yet they are important to the success of an extension programme since they can be persuaded to try new methods and thereby create awareness of them in the community. However, the extension agent should exercise tact and caution, and avoid overpraising innovators in public or spending too much time with them. This could result in rejection of the idea by the rest of the community because of jealousy and suspicion of the innovator's motives in adopting new methods.

Early adopters. Farmers who are more cautious and want to see the idea tried and proved under local conditions are known as early adopters. They express early interest but must first be convinced of the direct benefit of the idea by result demonstration. Usually this group of farmers includes local leaders and others who are respected in the community.

The majority. If the rest of the farmers adopt a new idea, they will do so more slowly and perhaps less completely. Many farmers will lack the resources to adopt the new idea at all, while others may only do so slowly and with caution. The majority who can and do adopt the idea are likely to be more influenced by the opinions of local leaders and neighbours than by the extension agent or the demonstrations he arranges.

Types of extension

There is no one universal type of extension but a variety of activities and approaches which can be called extension. It has already been stated that since agriculture is the basis of a rural economy, agricultural extension is the most common type of extension to be found in rural areas. But the areas of knowledge and new ideas that farmers and their families require are not restricted to agriculture. There are other aspects of family life in which new knowledge and practices can lead to improvement. Extension is any activity that works with farmers and their families in order to improve the economic and social conditions of their lives and to develop their ability to take responsibility for their own future development. This extension, however, can take different forms and it would be useful to review the two principal ones.

Agricultural extension

There are probably more extension agents involved in agricultural activities than in any other aspect of rural life. Given the importance of agriculture and the need to produce food both for the farm family and for the nation as a whole, this emphasis upon agricultural extension is understandable. Some agricultural extension services are based upon a single crop, while others adopt more of a "whole farm" approach. The choice is very much dependent upon the local agricultural system and the national crop requirements. In regions where cash crops such as cotton, cocoa or sugar grow, the single crop extension approach is more common.

An agricultural extension service offers technical advice on agriculture to farmers, and also supplies them with the necessary inputs and services to support their agricultural production. It provides information to farmers and passes to the farmers new ideas developed by agricultural
research stations. Agricultural extension programmes cover a broad area including improved crop varieties, better livestock control, improved water management, and the control of weeds, pests or plant diseases. Where appropriate, agricultural extension may also help to build up local farmers’ groups and organizations so that they can benefit from extension programmes. Agricultural extension, therefore, provides the indispensable elements that farmers need to improve their agricultural productivity.

**Non-agricultural extension**

In the absence of a collective term to cover the other types of extension, it is convenient to refer to them all as non-agricultural extension. This term includes all activities and efforts not directly related to agriculture or livestock production, but which are important to the farm families. Home economics, family health and nutrition, population education and community development are all non-agricultural extension activities.

**Rural extension covers many aspects of rural life**

When talking of extension and extension agents, therefore, all activities of the above type are included. These activities also involve the basic elements and principles of extension outlined earlier in this chapter, such as knowledge, learning and practice. Home economists and community development workers, therefore, are extension agents who deal with farm families in the same way as agricultural extension agents. The only difference is their areas of concern.

In fact, it is becoming increasingly common to talk of rural extension as a collective term which brings together all agricultural and non-agricultural extension activities. The feature common to both types of extension is that they work with families in rural areas and deal with problems in a rural environment. Their different programmes and approaches have a common aim, which is the improvement of the lives of the rural people, and they are both guided by common principles and ideals.

This guide, therefore, is a guide to rural extension and is relevant to both agricultural and non-agricultural extension agents. Given the predominance of agriculture in the rural economy, however, there will be some emphasis on agricultural extension within the guide. The understanding of extension, the methods used by extension agents, the planning processes involved and the qualities and skills required by agents are factors relevant to all forms of rural extension. The content and subject-matter may be different, but the same general principles apply in both types of extension.