

International trends in the context of extension services of relevance to Vietnam

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Synergy between local institutions and formal extension structures

When I was asked to prepare this paper I first asked myself what Vietnam has to learn from the current international debate on the future of extension. When I thought about this I concluded that the key issue in considering the applicability of different advice on extension is how new approaches may support or detract from institutional sustainability. This requires a fresh look at who does what in helping farmers with their information needs. If we have learnt one lesson over the years in experimenting with new types of extension services, it is that robust, financially sound and relevant services must be anchored in a working relationship among a variety of actors in rural development. Developing extension services requires a fresh look at all the institutions which are involved in technological change. One cannot look at extension without looking at the broader issue of the many ways that farmers obtain information and test new technologies. In this paper I will present my views of where current trends in supporting new forms of sustainable extension co-operation may be of relevance to Vietnam. Equally important, I will point out where some of these new ideas may not be appropriate the Vietnamese context.

I will start by discussing one approach to looking at extension which I feel is not appropriate to Vietnam. Most international discussion of rural development assumes that local/informal institutions must be based in civil society, and that these non-governmental institutions must put pressure on extension (i.e., the government) to provide better services. It is assumed that government service providers will inevitably perform poorly if non-governmental institutions, such as farmer organisations, do not force extension to respond to their needs. While I would agree with the suggestions that farmer demands are necessary to keep extension functioning effectively, I am not sure that this can only be accomplished through purely non-governmental institutions. The dichotomy between civil society and governmental services is not relevant in Vietnam because virtually all local structures (even informal ones) are intermingled with local governmental authorities. Village management groups, credit societies and farmer interest groups are usually lead by village authorities. The clear separation between state and civil society, which many extension experts take for granted, can rarely be found in Vietnamese villages. Some of my colleagues would say that effective extension is impossible in Vietnam since civil society is too weak to control the extension system, I disagree. Extension can function well without clearly delineated separation between state and civil society. There is a need, however, to start from a different conceptual framework.

To find examples of effective, demand-driven extension relevant to Vietnam, we must look at how local farmers co-operate with authorities -- a process referred to as co-production -- which results in new services that are stronger than what could be accomplished by either the community or the government alone¹. There is a small but growing body of research which acknowledges that pressure from civil society on a weak and under-resourced service institution only results in frustration from both parties. Extension alone cannot meet all the demands. Sustainable extension is dependent on finding a mix of community and government efforts. There are some things that the extension service should do, some things that farmer organisations should do, and some things that each household should do. We should not use PRA to develop seasonal calendars for planting of tree seedlings or application of fertilisers if the objective is only to pressure extension to arrange delivery of these inputs. They usually do not have the capacity! This, unfortunately, is what often happens. Everyone blames the extension service and the problems do not get solved.

Instead of merely pressuring extension, the other option is for extension to encourage co-production i.e., together finding solutions to technological problems in the village. From my observations, this is how extension services function in Vietnam when they function best. One study of why government financed irrigation systems have been managed so effectively in Taiwan, while they have failed in so many other countries attributes success to finding complementary and cooperative relationships between user groups and governmental services.² A major factor in creating an enabling environment for this co-production has been the high level of flexibility given to field staff in working with farmers to jointly solve problems, especially when problems emerge unexpectedly. All extension experience has shown that it is impossible to plan at national or provincial levels exactly what seeds are appropriate and when they should be made available. Governmental Directives and regulations always have to be adapted at local levels.³ This can only be done at district and village levels, which is where co-production is strongest. Extension has a major task in helping this process.

The next question is how to support and encourage co-production. It has been realised that focusing on "progressive farmers", as most extension structures did in the past (and many in Vietnam still do today), does not lead to significant diffusion of new technologies. The progressive farmers usually do not spread technologies to all their neighbours. Virtually all extension advice today suggests that we must abandon the method of first choosing progressive farmers, then helping them to manage demonstration plots (so-called "models"), and finally expecting that other farmers will learn from their examples.

What do we do instead? It is impossible for extension agents to meet face-to-face with the vast majority of farmers. A central feature of international discussions on extension today is the hope that local organisations will take the lead in reviving extension from its current poor levels of performance. In order to ensure a broader and more equitable distribution of extension services there must be a local organisation to structure and support the diffusion process, particularly among poor and isolated farmers.

In many cases these groups are formed around specific interests, as has happened in many parts of Vietnam. These farmer interest groups share many tasks that the extension agency would otherwise have to do alone. They help organise meetings, roles in technological diffusion often points to the fact that we often start with unrealistic hopes. Village organisations are very difficult to maintain. There are many costs involved which must be covered by local resources if the organisation is to be sustainable. The biggest real cost is the time that the farmers themselves must invest in attending many meetings and managing the organisation. This expense has very often been ignored by development planners. But it is not ignored by the farmers! They will only contribute to meeting these costs in time and money if the organisation is addressing their own perceived needs. There is a need to look beyond the rhetoric about what "we" think farmer organisations should be doing, to consider the empirical evidence about what these farmer groups are actually choosing to do. It is the farmers' own goals and vision for the organisation which will determine if their group will locate sources of inputs, investigate market opportunities, etc. This is the essence of co-production. The role of extension is to complement, rather than lead the process of experimenting with new technologies in the village. It is important that extension managers realise that their agency should only play a supporting role with these groups. Extension should be aware of the range of farmer problems in introducing a new technology, but it should not try to solve them all.

Despite many notable successes, the evidence of local organisations taking on strong become an effective partner to extension.

FARMER ORGANISATIONS: CAN THEY REALLY SUPPORT EXTENSION?

The challenges to increasing the role of local organisations - in extension can be summarised as follows⁴

- Farmer organisations often do not put high priority on development of new technologies. They are usually more interested in credit, marketing and input supply.
- Outside support is important in helping these organisations to strengthen links to research and extension, but this assistance will be ineffective if improving access to new technologies is not a central objective of the organisations themselves.
- Poor and isolated farmers may lack the time or may live too far away from the village centre to participate in farmer organisations. They may not trust that their very special concerns will be reflected in the organisation's priorities. Farmer organisations usually cannot "force" research and extension to respond to their needs. If the extension structure is already busy with other activities, farmer demands will be ignored.

Solutions to these problems can be found in the following areas:

- The technological needs of the various members of farmer organisations must be prioritised, with clear specific attention paid to the needs of poor farmers.
- Farmer organisations co-operate better with extension if they have some technological capacity within the organisation, i.e., if someone in the organisation has basic formal training in agriculture and can thereby better articulate members' needs to research and extension.
- Serious attention must be given to developing a resource base and financial management structure within the organisations. Only if the organisation can mobilise some of its own funds will it be able to establish strong links with institutions outside the village. These funds must be well managed if the members of the organisation are to retain their trust.
- State agricultural services must generally provide an enabling environment for farmer organisations by seeing them as respected partners in the management of technological change. Farmer organisations

cannot be seen as mere recipients of government support.

DEMAND-DRIVEN EXTENSION, SUPPLY-DRIVEN EXTENSION AND PLURALISM

The relationship between local institutions and formal extension structures in Vietnam is framed by how the system deals with both demands from the village and the "supply" agenda whereby inputs are promoted and supplied through a variety of programmes from central levels (governmental and donor financed).

Most current extension advice recommends that far more attention to be paid to building the influence of the demand side. My own vision, and that of many of my colleagues here in Vietnam, is that we must direct our efforts at strengthening the demand aspects of the extension system in Vietnam. Though this is vital, at the same time we must not ignore the fact that the various "supply" agendas are still of indirect, but central importance to mobilising local co-production. Credit and input supply are probably the most important incentives for bringing extension into playing a key role in rural development. Information alone is often not enough. For farmers to be willing to invest their time in attending meetings, organising interest groups and other activities, they will demand to get more out of their investment than just information. This is especially true for poor farmers, who sometimes feel that without credit or preferential access to inputs they will not be able to try the new technologies being discussed. Extension information provides an important added benefit, but it will usually be most effective if provided together with a discussion of how to mobilise the capital for investing in technological change.

The supply of resources may help stimulate farmer demands. When control of revolving credit is managed by local organisations, this may be a catalyst to fresh thinking about what technologies they should invest in. When farmers meet to decide how they are going to effectively use capital, they may then realise that to protect their investment they need to know more about livestock diseases, plant protection or other factors. In the Vietnamese extension system the use of credit, particularly when paired with village organisations to manage it, is clearly important in stimulating the demand for new technological knowledge.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND IN VIETNAMESE EXTENSION

The supply agendas and the demand agendas are in particularly sharp contrast in the mountain areas. The government (sometimes with donor support) is injecting large amounts of resources (Programmes 327, 06, etc.), at the same time as NGOs and other outside support is being given to stimulating the demand side. In between are some of the weakest, poorest extension structures in the country. It is they who must sort this out. It is not easy. Village organisations may be willing to co-operate with extension in seeing to it that their demands are addressed, but they may not trust the extension service if it is perceived as being only interested in implementing the "supply agenda". If everyone assumes that extension only promotes a specific kind of seed, nobody is going to waste their time asking them for a more appropriate variety. This is a very complex but very important issue in Vietnamese extension. We need to try to understand better how the staff of extension services are making sense of the different pressures in their day-to-day work. It is the field staff who must keep both the farmers and their supervisors satisfied. This is not an easy task. This issue requires much more analysis if we are to find effective and sustainable extension systems.

In light of the importance of the "supply agenda" in Vietnamese rural development, a very important issue for extension is how to share responsibilities for credit, input supply and similar tasks. In many cases institutions other than the formal extension service should take a leading role in working directly with farmers. Pluralism is currently a very popular concept in extension discussions. It is usually related to the need to acknowledge and support the involvement of the private sector and NGOs in extension and rural development. A better realisation of the role of the private sector is vital for deciding what the extension service should do, and what should be left to others. However, particularly in Vietnam, it is equally important to raise attention to the current and potential roles of other governmental, quasi-non-governmental (mass organisations), and parastatal (material supply, VACVINA) institutions in providing extension advice. The changes underway in the structure of co-operatives will open other new channels as well.

We must get away from the tendency to act as if the public extension service is the farmers' only source of information. Extension is happening all the time, in a variety of institutional contexts. Once we acknowledge pluralism, we can then think realistically about who can best manage different extension tasks. Hard choices need to be made about what the very small extension centres in Vietnam should take responsibility for and what should be left to others. Pluralism means accepting that the extension agency is not the only institution

providing extension services! There are many people in different roles (mass organisation staff, paravets, shopkeepers, former co-operative officials) who help farmers with technological information. All of these people are already "extension agents". We must identify who can do a good job and support them rather than replace them. This might mean using the extension service to improve the level of knowledge of the material supply staff. Extension staff could perhaps give training in vegetable production to village health workers who are already discussing nutrition with their neighbours. Many former co-operative officials are still actively involved in input supply and marketing. They may also be a resource in a pluralistic extension system. Extension staff may themselves be trained by private sector input suppliers in how to use their products, or by village leaders who have developed strong community organisation skills in their work with NGOs. Pluralistic extension can build on existing capacities, trust and synergy in the village. At the same time it can reduce duplication. Both extensionists and farmers will not have to go to as many meetings.

Exchange of experience within Vietnam is vital for understanding the implications of pluralism. The north can learn much from how extension in the south has developed ways to include resources from the rapidly growing private sector in their work. The south can learn from the north where there is much more experience in working with NGOs and where there is perhaps more openness to finding new types of extension co-operation structures after the introduction of the new directive on co-operatives.

The weakest link in Vietnamese extension (and in many other countries as well) is where it meets the farmers face-to-face. There are simply too few people at village and commune levels. This problem cannot be sustainably solved by simply hiring more extension agents. Particularly in isolated areas such as the mountains or the small canals of the Mekong Delta, the system needs people who can meet face-to-face with farmers at village level, but these individuals do not necessarily need to be staff of the extension department. We need to identify where the farmers are already getting their information, and use existing extension staff (primarily at district level) to strengthen, rather than replace, these channels. In one province I visited there were no extension staff below district level, but there were 92 shops of the Material Supply Company selling fertiliser and pesticide. These shopkeepers could play a major role in extension, but were not involved in extension planning. Pluralism means that there is a need to look constructively at the legitimate current and potential roles of the different rural development actors who are already at work in assisting farmers with their technological problems.

THE PLATFORM APPROACH

The platform approach is a term used to focus attention on the need for ways to discuss and manage agricultural change in a pluralistic environment.⁵ It is an increasingly popular approach for supporting co-production. The platform approach differs from earlier extension structures in that it does not assume that the extension service is solely, or even primarily responsible for delivering new technologies to farmers. Extension should instead use a variety of techniques (training courses, PRA, farmer field schools) to bring together the different actors involved in the introduction and testing of new technologies. When they engage in these forums they have an opportunity to discuss the implications of a potential change. Irrigation authorities may need to be involved to consider the implications for new water management. Private sector input suppliers may need to help farmers to obtain inputs. There may be conflicts between providing water for agriculture versus water for human consumption. Women may have different priorities for what is to be grown than men. Poor farmers may need to adapt technologies in a different manner than their wealthy neighbours. Issues such as these need to be discussed by all these different stakeholders. In these meetings, extension cannot provide all the answers. It can, however, look for ways to more effectively bring people together to discuss what needs to be done.

PRA group formation is an important tool for extension agents to establish platforms for talking about how villagers, local authorities, input suppliers and others can co-operate. It is a way for the community to articulate demands to the extension service. In Vietnam, PRA is unfortunately often primarily related to obtaining access to project inputs. The question of "How do we spend the money?" tends to dominate discussions. This is naturally not very sustainable. PRA plans must not be reduced to mere plans for the delivery of supplies. The challenge is to use the PRA to establish flexible co-production around new challenges. The most important underlying element in a PRA is if a high level of trust has emerged in the process. If farmers believe that they are benefiting from better relations with agricultural services, the project funds will not be the only reason for participation. Incentives may be phased out sooner and the high costs of PRA can be reduced faster. If the leaders of village groups are gaining respect in the community, they will be much more willing to work for little or no pay. Presently PRA-based extension structures are not seen as being viable without donor funding. The test will be to see if extension can eventually save money by turning over responsibilities to village organisations.

SUSTAINABILITY: FINANCIAL AND OTHERWISE

How can we motivate and assist a broad variety of people to perform extension tasks in a sustainable manner? What aspects of the system must be "sustainable", and which may only need to be performed for a limited period of time? These questions need to be framed within a frank realisation about how Vietnamese extension is structured. Virtually all core funding for extension currently goes to salaries. There is very little left for activities. For the extension agency to "do something" they must access temporary project and programme resources, from central government, donors or NGOs. This is not an ideal structure, but, like it or not, Vietnamese extension is essentially reliant on the temporary availability of subsidised supplies of material, credit or human resources. Though many subsidies are likely to be phased out in the long-term, they are central to the real world that extension services operate in today. We must find ways to work within a system where large resource injections are followed by periods when the system must operate with meagre local resources. This is especially true in the mountain areas, where a strong dependency on subsidies and other temporary funding sources exists, and where provincial finances are very limited.

Some governments finance a large degree of extension field activities through governmental campaigns and programmes, such as is done in Vietnam through programmes like 06 or 327. In many countries the central government does not finance government field activities at all. Extension services are left entirely reliant on either finding donors or getting support from the farmers themselves if they are to get out of their offices. There is great concern in the international debate, particularly from donors, about extension agencies basically existing only to implement short-term projects. Evidence shows that externally funded extension projects almost always create a dependency on outside support. When project funding ends, activities collapse. In many instances, governments even stop paying recurrent costs, such as salaries and transport. This is why many donors have become so frustrated that they have given up funding extension. Among those donors who still hope that things can be improved, there is a desire to shift to strengthening the core structure - the human resources - and moving away from project format injections of resources into tree, planting or other specific production projects. There are, however, few proven ways to build human resource capacity when money for actual activities is extremely limited. In order to understand how to make extension more sustainable we desperately need more research and analysis of how extension operates after project support ends, as it is here where we can discover how the extension agents themselves are meeting this challenge.

Many new extension approaches work well for a time, either due to the availability of resources or due to pressing farmer problems (supply or demand pressures). All activities do not need to be sustainable. Many farmer groups form to solve a problem (or spend a subsidy) and then dissolve. Others will keep a rotating credit system functioning for years. It is important to find and use flexible, pluralistic and efficient platform approaches to bring together different actors for these activities, even if some of these coalitions will not last. If the costs of PRA can be brought down sufficiently, this method can become an effective tool, even if the community planning structures only survive for a year or two.

Studies have shown that extension effectiveness can be related to clever, energetic and flexible managers who can mobilise fast to solve problems, or to take advantage of supply incentives. Good managers are those who instinctively organise platforms, crossing administrative boundaries to bring together farmers, extension staff, mass organisations and others together to jointly find local solutions. In Vietnam it is clear that the strong extension managers are those who act in this way, while weak ones just wait for instructions from central levels. How can we encourage and support the good managers and improve the performance of the weaker ones?

This is related to the question of how incentives can be found for mobilising pluralistic extension? If staff from the Women's Union or the Material Supply Company are to engage in extension, these individuals will have to work with a different agency from that which pays their salaries. Making this work is a challenge. One solution is more use of short-term performance contracts. Individuals with subject matter competence in a given field can be hired temporarily to do training and other extension duties when a problem arises or when resources are available. A strong tendency in all forms of public administration is to experiment with methods common in the private sector by paying people to perform specific duties during specific period of time. In some countries (e.g., Chile⁶) the entire extension system is contracted to implementing organisations, primarily local NGOs and private service agencies. The government sets priorities and then pays these agencies to perform the work. VACVINA's role in extension, being almost entirely dependent on short-term funding resources, can be seen as a first attempt to apply a similar approach in Vietnam.

PERFORMANCE CONTRACTS AND EXTENSION

A growing theme in new approaches to managing public bureaucracies in general, and extension in particular, has been to organise activities on the basis of specific fixed term performance contracts. In these systems, different organisations (e.g., NGOs, the Farmers' Association, VACVINA, or even the extension centre itself) compete for a contract to run a given extension activity, such as a set of IPM courses, or a programme of on-farm trials. The agency that can show the best record of performance gets the funding. In many instances this competitive structure has greatly improved extension performance. Similar arrangements have also been tried within some government agencies. Directors are hired on short-term contracts with clear performance targets. If they fail to perform, they are fired.

Managing performance contracts is not easy. The officials who are designing, monitoring and following up on the contracts need to be very highly skilled. There also has to be a number of agencies ready to compete for the contracts. This is usually not the case in Vietnam at present. The private sector is still too weak, especially in the mountain provinces. Experience has shown that if performance contracts are not well designed, closely monitored and subject to genuine competition, they result in activities which only reach the wealthy, lowland, nearby farmers. This is particularly true when contracts emphasise quantitative targets (number of demonstration plots, number of farmers using the new technologies, etc.), as it is always easier to work with wealthy farmers than poor ones. This is why so many extension services choose farmers with land, labour and capital to manage on-farm demonstrations (models). The 'difficult' cases, such as ethnic minority communities in the mountains, will lose out if the contract is designed so that working with them is less "profitable". Contracting often works against "inclusive governance", the need to ensure that the state does not forget its poorest citizens in the process of administrative streamlining.

A new approach which is currently very much discussed is to provide financial resources directly to poor communities, with which they can contract the services they need most. In some cases in Vietnam, co-operatives are already contracting extension services to run courses for them. Building on this approach, the government would no longer subsidise the extension service itself, but instead give the poor communities the same opportunities to "buy" extension services that wealthy villages already have from their own resources. This concept is interesting, but as yet unproven, and may be unrealistic if there is very little choice of technological services available.

Incentives for better performance are not necessarily just financial. It is important to consider the range of factors which influence how hard field staff are willing to work, and if they are willing to make the extra effort to reach isolated communities and poor farmers. It has been found that a very important incentive for many actors in extension, including local leaders and others, is the respect they gain from the community. There are various non-financial ways which have been found to develop and motivate people working with extension by helping them obtain an esteemed place in the community. These methods include providing awards for good performance, publicising successful extension initiatives and generally acknowledging that the field staff are the most important part of the extension system. We often blame these people when things go wrong. We must look much more for ways to show our appreciation and respect when field staff succeed in their very difficult jobs.

One very important lesson that has been learnt in how to develop staff self-respect is to establish transparent recruitment procedures based on merit. If the villagers see that many people compete for jobs as extension agents, and that the person hired has been chosen based on their professional merits, this automatically increases the status of the field personnel. Similarly, if staff are publicly fired for poor performance when villagers complain, this is a way of showing that the extension system is answerable to the community. These procedures have proven some of the most effective practical means of moving from rhetoric to reality in demand-driven extension.⁷

COST RECOVERY FOR EXTENSION SERVICES

The, international trends in extension financing are clearly toward reduced flow of resources from the central government. The hope is that local cost recovery will fill the gap. In some cases there are reasons for optimism, as it has been found that even very poor farmers have shown willingness to pay for services that they perceive to be valuable.

In many cases extension cost recovery is handled in combination with payment for other services. Farmers in Vietnam have been paying "fees" for extension for many years as part of their contribution to the costs of co-operatives. Many provincial and district extension centres finance salaries from the profits they make by

selling inputs. When the extension agency sells inputs, the cost of extension advice is in reality included in the price of the inputs. Village veterinary services have functioned similarly. Staff cover their travel costs when visiting villages by taking payment for vaccinations. The private sector is often very efficient at indirectly charging for extension advice. One very successful example of private sector extension for very poor farmers has been the spread of straw mushrooms in the Mekong Delta. Farmers pay for the extension advice they receive as part of a package including credit and inputs. In many of these cases the collection of fees, service charges and loan repayments is also an opportunity to talk with farmers about how things are going with the new technology. It contributes to the relationship between extension and farmers.

Often when extension openly demands payment of fees, farmers who had been used to only paying for "hidden" extension cost recovery do not accept the new systems. Farmers are also often more ready to pay for livestock service, since the loss of a cow or a pig may result in a major and sudden household crisis, whereas a reduced yield due to inappropriate fertiliser application is less visible and pressing.

Experience with local cost recovery in extension is very mixed. In many cases farmer groups that begin raising their own funds to pay for extension services gradually exclude poor farmers as members. Sometimes the extension service becomes dependent on promotion of high external input technologies for covering recurrent costs. They may then ignore low-external-input technologies, which may be most appropriate to poor farmers. All agricultural service departments in Vietnam are clearly aware of the bias of the private sector input suppliers in promoting their own products, but few have reflected on the similar dangers in their own organisations.

Finally, the obvious comment must be made that farmers will only pay for a service if they trust the quality of the service. In some places former co-operative officials are still being paid by farmers to provide extension services. In other places the farmers would never accept this as they do not believe that these officials are really helping them. All forms of fee-based extension are entirely reliant on the farmers feeling that the service is valuable to them. The issue of cost recovery cannot be analysed without an understanding of how farmers really feel about the services they are receiving.

Trust is required for local financing and other forms of sustainability. Farmers will finance their own agenda. They will continue to invest their time in attending meetings if they feel that they are talking with people they trust to help them farm the way they want to farm. They will not finance the agenda of the central government. Some governmental programmes are inevitably top-down. We must look at this realistically. Opium eradication, for example, is unlikely to inspire farmers to contribute their own resources. Extension must combine top-down agendas, which will never become independent of government funding, with bottom-up programmes which build on trust. This will not be easy.

DEFINING CORE EXTENSION TASKS IN A COMPLEX ENVIRONMENT

It has generally been acknowledged that extension agencies have been burdened by far too many responsibilities. The call for pluralism has been partly motivated by a search for ways to reduce the weight of so many tasks on such a small weak bureaucracy, while still ensuring that the tasks remaining are relevant to farmers' needs.

This issue is not only of importance for extension. Government agencies in general have been burdened with too many duties inherited from too many different projects. Donors bear a major responsibility for this as they have often been primarily concerned with trying to build up the capacity of a single agency to manage "their" projects. Development agencies are starting to realise that they must constrain themselves to building around the limited capacities and core roles of a local service institution, while identifying roles for other actors who are not under the direct control of the project.

National institutions are often guilty of the same negative tendency. The "project holder" often tries to keep project resources to itself. If a project is called "extension", the extension service may try to build up to implement all the functions, including credit. If it is called "credit", the Women's Union may be called upon to do everything, including extension. It is natural that a project planner may want a clear picture of who does what in a project, and co-ordination of various agencies is harder than building up a single unit.

Sustainability based on pluralism requires a more patient approach. Co-ordination must be developed through many planning meetings and village discussions. This is why the platform approach to extension is so important.

BUILDING ON EXTENSION CAPACITIES

The World Bank's State of the World Report⁸ this year contains some interesting advice for how governments may start looking at the necessary and appropriate core functions and the capacities of existing institutions. The World Bank suggests first defining and focusing on the essential core functions of the government service (examples of what the World Bank suggests as core functions include regulatory functions, environmental protection, and services for the most vulnerable populations). In defining these roles, realism is vital regarding what the agency is actually capable of accomplishing. Based on a clear understanding of these functions, the capacity to perform these functions should then be increased. Only once the agency is effectively performing these core functions should consideration be given to possible expanded roles.

Pressures to implement projects and programmes works against the patience required for this approach. Extension agencies are very often burdened with tasks which are neither sustainable nor related to their core functions due to the need for "somebody" to take care of a project implementation task. We "break" the extension service in our rush to "fix" the project. The solutions for this negative tendency must be found in first seeing projects in a broader perspective, and second, by accepting that pluralism must be the basis of agricultural services, even if this inevitably weakens the power of managers to control project implementation.

The core tasks of extension may also vary at different levels. In Vietnam, provincial staff spend most of their time administering resources from different funding sources and providing training of trainers. They coordinate inputs from governmental programmes, NGOs and other donors, and also provide subject matter training to staff at other levels. They need skills to perform these tasks better. The district staff have most of their contacts with village leaders and the mass organisations. They are responsible for organising platforms for village level planning. This requires a different set of skills. There is a great potential for increasing the effectiveness of investments in training and other capacity building initiatives by more clearly linking types of investments to the core activities of different extension levels.

The underlying paradox in all attempts at focusing on core functions is that international experience has pointed to two seemingly contradictory directions. First, it has been found that extension agencies work best if focused on a limited number of tasks. Simple extension activities function better than complex ones. At the same time, it has been found that extension usually chooses the wrong tasks in the complex and rapidly changing farming world if it does not look at the entire farming enterprise. These two realisations may be best applied if the extension service has a strong and open dialogue with all the relevant actors in rural development, but at the same time resists the temptation (and occasional donor pressures) to solve all the problems themselves. Farmer organisations may be the best way for farmers themselves to explore how a specific new technology fits into the overall farming system. Extension needs to learn along with the farmers about the complexity of the farming system, not so that they can plan or manage the process, but rather to see where their limited but vital input can be best applied.

It is through a clearer focus on the issue of how extension can learn together with farmers that we can find ways to shift from the current tendency to see projects as mere temporary extra injections of resources, to instead using them as an opportunity to learn about the which of the different methods and structures can be integrated into existing structures. One thing that we are finally starting to learn in the international extension debate is that new extension models will never (and should never) be adopted outright. They are opportunities to consider new ways of dealing with one grand old problem: farmer needs will always be greater than extension resources. Too often this problem has caused extension to avoid farmer demands. This is not how we should react. We must instead find ways to keep extension focused on the demands of farmers, while being more realistic and creative about dealing with the capacities of the extension organisation.

Notes

¹For examples see E. Ostrom.1996, 'Crossing the great divide: Co-production, synergy and development', World Development, 24/6, and J. Tendler, 1996, Good Government in the Tropics, John Hopkins Press, Baltimore.

²W.F. Lam 1996, 'Institutional design of public agencies and co-production: A study of irrigation associations in Taiwan', World Development, 24/6.

³G. Cao & L. Zhang, 1997, 'Innovative forest management by the local community in Dogda village, Yunnan Province', *Forest, Trees and People Newsletter*, 34.

⁴These recommendations are loosely based on the conclusions of a study by Diana Carney, 1996, 'Formal farmers' organisations in the agricultural technology system: Current roles and future challenges', *ODI Natural Resource Perspectives*, 14.

⁵See N. Röling, 1994, 'Communication support for sustainable natural resource management', *IDS Bulletin*, 25/2.

⁶J.A. Berdegue & C. Marchant, 1997, *Technology Transfer Service for Small Scale Farmers in Chile*, Red Instemacional de Metodologia de Investigacion de Sistemas de Produccion.

⁷J. Tendler, 1996, *Good Government in the Tropics*, John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, and World Bank, 1997, *The State in a Changing World: World Development Report 1997*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. University Press, Oxford.

⁸World Bank, 1997, *The State in a Changing World: World Development Report 1997*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.