

Change in knowledge systems and extension services: role of new actors

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Setting the Workshop Objectives

Knowledge systems and extension have been permanent topics of discussion in European and other international meetings on Farming Systems Research and Extension. In each Symposium a variable number of extension-related papers have been presented, with different foci, addressing either theoretical or applied issues, most times analysing critically conventional views, policies and methodologies, and proposing changes in the conceptual basis of extension, as well as alternative ways of working in the field.

This Workshop of the 8th European IFSA Symposium is about extension approaches and strategies in this new and challenging time we are all facing, a time for “rethinking” and “reinventing” extension, using Leeuwis’ words (2004).

The following main questions were proposed for analysis: (1) what are the changes in know-how production, exchange and use, considering the multiple and often complex relationships between scientists, extension agents and rural actors? (2) How are the new conditions of globalisation, climate change, energy stress and reduced public impact affecting the structure, missions and delivery of extension services? (3) Who are the players in the field and what are their orientations and approaches?

Looking at Previous Debates

The first European Convention on Farming Systems Research and Extension was held in Edinburgh in October 1993, just after the “shift in emphasis of the European Union agricultural policy from production to the restriction of surpluses, and increasing emphasis on environmental and social protection” (Dent and McGregor, 1994: xvii). It was a time of intense debate around the farmer-first paradigm, the involvement of user groups, and the work with NGOs. As Jiggins wrote in the published book, “Rural and Farming Systems’ Analysis”:

“There has been in recent years an explosion of interests in methods for working with farmers and other members of rural communities in order to develop agricultural technology and production systems together. We have moved from somehow formal and rigid FSR/IE method paradigm toward a still expanding, highly creative, rich and innovative portfolio of participatory methods which engage scientist, extensionist and farmer in joint analysis of problems and opportunities, design of experiments, experimental activity and the evaluation and sharing of results, both in the field and on the research station” (Jiggins, 1994: xiv) .

In the following symposia, until 2004, extension subjects were debated in several workshops, particularly in the ones on “Systems Thinking in Agricultural Education Training” (1996, 2000) and “Learning Processes in Research and Extension” (1998, 2000, 2002 and 2004). In 2006, a specific Extension Workshop was organized under the title “Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems in Transition”. The papers looked at privatised innovation systems, the changing roles of research, extension and education in stimulating innovation, and the lessons from experimentation with new approaches and methodologies (von der Heiden *et al.*, 2006: 296). The changing nature and configurations of the agricultural knowledge and innovation systems (AKIS), the privatisation of innovation support services, stakeholder networks and partnerships, collective action, participatory, knowledge development, social construction of knowledge and social learning were among the major topics debated.

In parallel to this, the “Learning Processes” Workshop took on “learning as process and practice, and its facilitation as a professional role to help meet the new demands” (Sriskandarajah *et al.*, 2006: 27). In it, participatory approaches, stakeholder participation, communicative/collaborative/social learning, learning platforms and networks, and the roles of action researchers constituted the dominant matters of attention.

The Contributions to the Workshop

The Workshop benefited from contributions from many authors, reflecting research work conducted in 19 countries, most of them in Europe (North, South and East). This research involved a variety of methods, with a strong emphasis on case studies, and different conceptual backgrounds. Two papers resulted from European level studies, both funded by the EU INTERREG IIIC Programme.

In general terms the papers and posters address two major complementary issues, most times in combination: (1) the present development and extension context (social, economic, institutional and political), mostly characterised by transformation and crisis; and (2) the search for new configurations and alternative extension and rural development strategies, approaches and methods.

With respect to context analysis, particular importance is put to such aspects as: the development of a global economy and the scenario of stronger competitiveness; the emergence of new organizations, sometimes representing new stakeholders; the development of a network society; the construction of different governance mechanisms; the growing importance of lifelong learning in the knowledge society; the more complex institutional scene; the new societal demands concerning agriculture and rural areas (new “contract” between agriculture and society); the rural renewal movement (linked to multifunctionality and sustainable agriculture); and the paradigm shift from “modernisation” to an integrated model of rural development, combining endogenous and exogenous drivers and involving multi-level, multi-actor and multi-facetted processes.

Concerning the new configurations of extension and particularly its structures, missions and delivery of services, as well as the interplay between the different actors, the contributions are also quite diverse. However, three major (interrelated) topics emerge as centres of attention of most authors: (1) the philosophical foundations of extension work; (2) the privatisation of extension and innovation systems; and (3) the involvement of stakeholders and construction of knowledge partnerships and networks.

Philosophical foundations of and policy issues in extension work

This is indeed a matter of concern in many papers, for instance those by Alexopoulos *et al.*, Nettle and Paine, Knierim or Compagnone *et al.*, which reflect about the objectives of extension work, the roles and challenges for the extension organisations and profession, the changing conceptualisation of farmers (from beneficiaries to users to clients) and their roles, and the influences of development ideology and policies in extension delivery. If some authors develop a rationale for extension practice based on a social learning perspective (Christensen *et al.*; Giare *et al.*), others confront the different types of action logics that are represented by extension work or they present elements of a framework for an ethical collective action, based on respect, mutual obligation and responsibility and fairness.

Privatisation of extension and innovation systems

Various papers contribute to this debate, all of them analysing specific country or region experiences, and a specific one comparing the situation in two countries in different continents. The focuses of attention are quite different, but all show interest in analysing the tensions and impacts created by privatized systems. Klerkx and Leeuwis take an innovation systems perspective and present results of a study on different models of “demand-driven” research planning. Other papers analyse the farmers’ willingness to pay for extension (Alexopoulos *et al.*), the threats posed by privatization (Fabusoro *et al.*), farmers’ reactions to privatised systems (Knierim *et al.*), and the effects of privatization on the use of collective action approaches for the production of knowledge (Labarthe and Moumouni).

The involvement of stakeholders and construction of knowledge partnerships and networks

This broad topic constituted the dominant focus of the majority of the papers and posters. Most authors present results of experiences with alternative extension approaches and methods, reflecting about their foundations, presenting procedures and tools, and questioning the challenges to their adoption in different contexts. For example, Cristóvão *et al.* refer to several lessons from the work with “Study Circles” and “Communities of Practice” as collaborative learning instruments. Choisis *et al.* as well as Kaboré *et al.*, refer to the experience with multidisciplinary or multi stakeholder knowledge partnerships for innovation, stressing the importance of team building and the benefits or conflicts arising from it. From a rather more systemic point of view Vermeire *et al.* point to the importance of integrating endogenous and exogenous drivers for succeeding with rural renewal- and assuming that the network society has a major shaping impact on knowledge systems, Wieling and Vrolijk present tools for networkers and the idea of a “Free Actors in Networks Approach”.

Finally, a few of the contributions analyse the possibilities of creating sustainable agricultural and rural development by reaching out to elected non farmer target groups and launching tailored and context based education (Schockemoehle, Van Gelder *et al.*; Mar Cho *et al.*)

Focusing the Debate

The papers and posters, although having in general a diverse nature, all, somehow, have a common rationale. Most authors argue that the world has changed (and continues to change) quite drastically. Some aspects are underlined, such as the role of the State, the importance of the market, deregulation and privatization, the agricultural crisis, or the new and complex rural development scene.

In agricultural and rural development terms, at least in Europe, it is important to underline the growing complexity of both problems and solutions, given the trend and/or pressure to diversify the rural economies, to articulate activities (at farm and various spatial levels), to use and manage local resources adequately, to improve food quality and security, to innovate in different domains, to control technologies’ use and impact, and to involve a plurality of actors. These issues are reflected in most Workshop papers.

All of the above-referred changes are said to have implications for and impose restrictions and challenges on extension. All papers and posters contribute to this debate, by raising and discussing issues such as: the profile of agriculture and rural development professionals and extension agents; the configuration of extension and innovation systems; the kinds of learning experiences to organize and offer; the types of approaches, methodologies and techniques to use; and the epistemological shifts to promote. The experiences described, in different countries, point in the direction of partnership models, collective action, participatory methodologies, and the development of interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and systemic thinking.

In this Symposium, and particularly in this Workshop, we are in an ideal situation to look deeper into these ideas and the cases presented in each paper and poster. It is a time to share experiences, propose new concepts and theoretical perspectives, important conditions to formulate new research questions, build knowledge, and expand the capacity to learn and act.

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