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How to be a good rural extensionist. Reflections and contributions of Argentine practitioners

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ABSTRACT

Quality rural extension is of utmost importance for generating food security and sustainable rural development. In this paper, Argentine rural extensionists' point of view on how to be a good practitioner is described, as well as compared to good practices proposed by scholars and international development organizations. Forty rural extensionists from the Northeastern Argentine provinces were interviewed (29 men, 11 women). Interviews were recorded and transcribed, texts were categorized and contents analyzed. Scholars and extensionists, despite agreeing to most of the same principles, frame their recommendations for good extension practices in different ways. The former's recommendations tend to be supported by multiple case studies and focused on best practices on the level of extension projects or policies, while the latter's tend to draw upon their own experience and develop proposals more concerned with interpersonal interactions and with overcoming practical problems in real (and not ideal) settings.

Best extension practices depend on environmental, institutional, political and cultural contexts, this implying there is no best extension practice in general. Training extensionists in interpersonal skills and in social sciences is key for reaching good extension results. Horizontal communication between farmers and extensionists, negotiation over best technologies, and helping farmers reflect on their productive practices are extension strategies with great potential.

1. Introduction

Quality rural extension is of utmost importance for generating food security and sustainable rural development. During recent years, international institutions such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS) have highlighted the importance of quality rural extension services (e.g. Acunzo et al., 2014; Ortiz et al., 2011a; Qamar, 2011; Sulaiman and Davis, 2012). Nonetheless, the contents of quality rural extension work are not commonly addressed in academic literature. With regards to the topic, Nederlof et al. (2008) argue that quality is a subjective perception, thus implying that its evaluation depends on the subjects' point of view. In an analysis of factors that express quality, Birner et al. (2006) describe the quality of rural extension as:

> (1) The accuracy and relevance of the contents of the advice, (2) the timeliness and reach of the advice […], (3) the quality of the partnerships established and the feedback effects created, (4) the efficiency of service delivery, and other economic performance indicators (p. 30)

Indirectly, different authors and international development organizations have also presented general guidelines and critical factors for reaching desirable extension results. In this context, the concept of 'best practice' has been widely used in the literature in English dedicated to studying the subject. However, this notion seems highly problematic, given it assumes there is a specific practice that is the best, without considering the context wherein it has to be applied (Aguirre, 2012; Ortiz et al., 2011a). 'Methodologies are appropriate for certain purposes, but less so for others. There is […] no one method that works as a "magic bullet" for all farmers in all contexts' (Christoplos et al., 2012,

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35). Instead, the idea of 'good practices' seems preferable, given it assumes there is no one best practice, but a pool of potentially useful alternatives that are specific to a particular situation and context.

Another argument that supports the idea of good practices against that of best practice does so by acknowledging the existence of different extension aims and models. Towards the middle of the 20th century, rural extension consolidated as a practice focused on the transfer of technology (Rogers, 1962). In this context, high rates of adoption of technologies could be considered as being an indicator of quality rural extension. However, over the years, many authors have criticized this approach. Placing particular focus on the interaction between advisors and farmers, Freire (1973) argued for the need to establish a horizontal, constructivist relationship between both, aiming to develop farmers' critical thinking and capacity to integrate local and expert knowledge. In this context, the quality of rural extension cannot be tied to adoption rates or even to practices aimed at the transfer of technologies. Later, Chambers (1983) argued the need for 'putting the last first', that is, putting peasants and farmers (and not rural extensionists or agricultural technologies) first, thus paving the way for participatory approaches. In this vein, the degree to which farmers are taken into account when policy is developed and implemented could be considered a quality standard.

The same argument could be made when considering more recent extension approaches that broaden the scope of analysis and the actors involved. In this line, innovations systems approach analyzes innovation in terms of the interaction between a diversity of social players and institutions pertaining to different subsystems, not only to rural areas (Klerkx et al., 2012a). Therefore, what is defined as quality rural extension will depend on the particular extension approach in question, and in this case would depend on the extensionist's capacity for facilitating and brokering knowledge dynamics among these actors (Klerkx et al., 2012b). Thus, there could never be a best practice in general, because it will always depend on the contextual characteristics and specificities of the territory, as well as on the extension approach that is framing the interventions.

Having acknowledged the existence of a multiplicity of context-dependent, good extension practices, the most relevant guidelines and critical factors, proposed by academic and institutional literature, for increasing the quality and impact of rural extension will be briefly discussed.

1.1. Practitioners with high levels of education and knowledge

There is a growing agreement that quality rural extension requires practitioners with high levels of education and capacities in several relevant areas (Aguirre, 2012; Preissing et al., 2014; Sulaiman and Davis, 2012). It has been argued that human resources constitute a key bottleneck for an effective rural advisory service (GFRAS, 2010). Interestingly, authors highlight that a university based, technical education does not provide enough tools for extension practice, given it requires not only knowledge and/or capabilities in technical areas, but also in social processes such as empowering farmers to deal with uncertainties, critical thinking (GFRAS, 2010), participatory methodologies, planning and evaluation (Ortiz, 2009), leadership, and community development (Swanson, 2008), among others. In this context, continued education courses for graduates (Preissing et al., 2014) and in-service training (Swanson, 2008), as well as unconventional approaches to practical learning (Sulaiman and Davis, 2012; Landini et al., 2013) emerge as highly valuable strategies.

1.2. Interdisciplinary approach

During the last few decades, the complexity of rural extension has increased enormously, from simply transferring technologies to the facilitation of processes at interpersonal, group, institutional and territorial levels (Méndez, 2006). Thus, no individual practitioner is capable of mastering the long list of hard and soft capacities required by their position (Landini, 2013a; Sulaiman and Davis, 2012) as well as adopting a complex, holistic approach (Bifani, 2001). In any case, even though there is a solid agreement for the need for working in an interdisciplinary manner in extension teams and not as individual extensionists (Ortiz et al., 2011a), the great majority of extensionists are still technical practitioners and the framing of the problems tends to be productive (Landini and Bianqui, 2014).

1.3. To adopt a participatory and demand-driven approach

One of the most important transformations that have taken place in rural extension over the last decades is the adoption of a demand-driven, participatory approach (Trigo et al., 2013). Nowadays, we consider that rural extension has to be structured by demand and not by supply (GFRAS, 2010; Qamar, 2011). Interestingly, farmers' participation in the identification of problems and in the design of projects increases the probability of reaching good extension results (Bifani, 2001; Ortiz et al., 2011b), given they are more likely to be framed in terms of their rationale (Landini et al., 2009). In this context, the strengthening of farmers' organizations constitutes a pre-requisite for a demand-driven approach, so as they can act as extensionists' counterparts (Aguirre, 2012). Nonetheless, when addressing these topics, academic literature seems to consider participatory and demand-driven approaches as being synonymous when they in fact are not. In a demand-driven approach, extension services work with what farmers require or ask for, or aim at addressing their most important perceived problems (Ortiz, 2009). However, real participation goes beyond letting farmers decide what problems are going to be addressed, and additionally entails influencing the framing of these problems, the project's design and the evaluation of the results.

1.4. Addressing gender issues

Traditionally, rural extension has tended to address mainly male farmers. However, nowadays, it is clear that women play a key role in agri-food systems (GFRAS, 2010) and that extension services have to address gender equity in order to generate sustainable impacts (Ortiz, 2009; Ortiz et al., 2011b). Many extension institutions and NGOs have implemented initiatives directed only at female farmers (Qamar, 2011; Preissing et al., 2014) as a way of empowering them. Despite the fact that this is a valuable strategy, it has to be acknowledged that a gender-based approach is not only addressing women in agriculture, but also developing and implementing interventions that take into account how they are going to influence male and female farmers differently.

1.5. Articulating research and extension from an innovation systems approach

In the context of a diffusionist approach (Rogers, 1962) the relationship among researchers, extensionists and farmers was conceived as being top–down. Thus, researchers were expected to develop innovations, extensionists to transfer them and farmers to adopt them. However, nowadays, scholars acknowledge innovation processes must not follow a traditional, top–down approach, but instead a more horizontal and systemic one (Leeuwis, 2004),