

Changing information flows

Editorial

Access to information is one of the most valuable resources in agricultural development. Today, the demand for agricultural information is stronger than ever. The increased market integration that is experienced by even the most remote farming communities greatly increases the pace of change. Events and developments far away from home have profound effects on the livelihoods of farmers. Information is needed:

- to exploit opportunities in time – like the many emerging niche markets for organic products;
- to raise awareness about the potential negative impacts of current choices, e.g. embarking on the use of genetically modified crops when more and more markets don't want them
- to get to know about the experiences of other farmers in order to search for better opportunities and sustainable solutions, like the System of Rice Intensification that is improving the livelihood for many rice farmers



Today, the demand for agricultural information is stronger than ever.
Photo: Bert Lof

The last decade has seen tremendous changes in information provision to farmers, resulting from policy changes, financial crises and revolutions in information and communication technology (ICT). In this issue we attempt to explore these changes and what they mean to small-scale farmers in rural communities in the South.

Public funded extension in crisis

Agricultural development has long been seen as a pre-requisite for economic development in the society at large and thus it made sense for governments to invest significantly in agricultural extension systems. Public funded agricultural extension was a corner stone in development policies all over the world.

In developing countries the 1970s saw the fastest growth in national extension systems – often they grew close to ten

percent per year. However, in the 1980s the annual growth rate slowed down to a few percent and over the last decade stagnation or even dismantling of extension systems has been on the agenda. Farrington (p.6) provides more insight into the history of public extension.

The decreasing public support for agricultural extension is the result of many factors, among them:

- severe and repeated financial crises in most developing countries;
- a shift in preference for private enterprises over government intervention that is reflected in structural adjustment programmes imposed by international donors but also by national governments – it is believed that private companies are more efficient than the public sector in providing services;
- dissatisfaction with the perceived lack of impact by agricultural extension.

Today national extension systems are in dire straits with resources being cut to a minimum. Many extension workers have been laid off or have left for opportunities elsewhere and the ones who remain often lack the basics for their work like transport and access to information. Staff morale is often low due to the inability to perform their task well combined with continuous criticism from outsiders who often do not understand the impossible working conditions of the extension staff.

Exploring new ways to deliver information

For a long time nobody questioned the existence of public funded extension systems, so the focus was on efficiency within the extension system instead of alternatives. But the crisis in public extension services has led to a search for solutions and alternatives. No universal prescription to the “problem” of extension has emerged. Instead a pluralistic system is envisioned with many players selling extension services, including NGOs, private companies and extension departments. (Farrington, p.6) The thinking is that it will force every extension provider to maximise efficiency and to provide relevant extension.

The Uganda National Farmers Federation (p.11) is an example of such a partnership for agricultural extension. It is a young successful farmer organisation trying to provide extension services on a cost-recovery basis by building alliances with private companies and other actors.

There is much talk about the shared interests among the different actors in agricultural development, but very little about the conflicts. Will these new partnerships promote only high-input farming because the participating private companies can earn money on selling the inputs? Or will they promote self-sufficiency and low-input alternatives that may be in the interest of many farmers but undermine the private companies? Only time will tell, but it is important to be aware that these old conflicts do not disappear just because the different actors take on a shared identity.

Another trend is the attempt to shift the workload from public paid extension to farmers who have to do their own research and farmer-to-farmer extension. This can be empowering and can stimulate endogenous development, but too often the costs are not considered. It is important to remember that many farmers suffer under labour constraints that will limit their possibilities of running their own research and extension system and it does not solve the problem of getting required information from outside.

The current trends point towards the development of a dual system in which the farmers who can pay are served well whilst the poor farmers are left “empowered” to do whatever they want but with resources to do nothing. The many new unconventional partnerships between private, public and civil society will make it much more difficult to see what is really going on.

What can modern ICTs offer?

And it is in this context that information and communication technologies are seen as being able to change the landscape of rural information exchange. Most of the experience as of now relates to information delivery in the developed countries, which has been revolutionised over the last two decades through the widespread adoption of computers and Internet connection. Here, it is now common to have a computer at work and at least one at home.

The Internet spreads faster than almost any previous technology. It took radio almost forty years to reach an audience of 50 million and for the Internet just four. The amount of information available on the Internet is tremendous and growing fast. Many international and national organisations make almost all their publications available on the Internet. Publishing to the Internet is easy, quick and almost free. Advocacy organisations like ETC have been able to gain the benefits of ICTs as is seen in the interview with Pat Mooney on p.26.

Most information on the Internet is available at no cost so the user "just" has to find a way to get connected. This is easy and cheap in developed countries due to the well-developed infrastructure; not so in many developing countries. Computer equipment is expensive and reliable power supply and telephone connections are not readily available. When the computers break down, spare parts and qualified technicians are difficult to come by. There is also the problem of "computer literacy". Computers are much more difficult to use than other technologies like radio, telephone, and fax, for which special training is required.

Thus it would be over-optimistic to think that everybody will soon have access to the Internet. There are plenty of limitations and obstacles to be overcome as pointed out by Morrow on p.9. However, there are some encouraging success stories like that of the village information centres in Pondicherry, India (p.28) and the Internet Radio project in Kothmale, Sri Lanka (p.25) Both these experiences have been used to develop larger, global initiatives for improving Internet access in rural communities.

Using all available means

Yet, for many farming communities in the South, modern ICTs are still a technology of the future. Therefore, it is important not to forget the "old" technologies and to use all available means in

reaching people with the information they require.

Radio is one such technology, which has penetrated deep into otherwise inaccessible rural areas. Rural radio has a long and fine track record but is often overlooked because of all the attention paid to the Internet. Developing Countries Farm Radio, for example, broadcasts to nearly 100 countries in Latin America, the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa. (p.20). Its success has been in building a network of broadcasters, radio stations and training organisations, which has been able to keep pace with the changing times and provide their audiences with globally-relevant information in a locally-adapted form. The case of Tadjik Radio (p.16) is quite different. This article shows that it is not only technical obstacles that need to be overcome to facilitate the access of information; an attitude of participation and openness is also required.

Getting information to where it is most needed often requires creative partnerships. The "In the field" project on p.22 is a partnership between researchers of NRI, funders, people in the communities and broadcasters from BBC World Service. The series, broadcast twice in 2001 and 2002, has been immensely popular and has led to new partnerships: with schools in developing educational material and with local radio stations for re-broadcasting in local languages. The radio series was accompanied with a booklet, web site and a set of audiocassettes, thus combining media to get the best impact.

For some rural communities, like the one mentioned on the back page, a printed magazine is still the only shred of information they have access to. In places with no power supply, no computers and telephones, magazines or newspapers can still be read and passed around to others - information used and shared. And even in not so remote places, magazines have an important role to play as demonstrated by the "Ground Up" magazine of PELUM in Zimbabwe (p.13). It is popularising ecological land management approaches, influencing policy makers to take note of them, providing a forum for critical analysis of the approaches, encouraging research and giving a southern perspective to development.

The message is clear - use all the means available, both the new and the old, to change information flows and thus enable rural communities to access, share and exchange experiences in sustainable agriculture.

