

4th GFRAS Annual Meeting**THE ROLE OF PRIVATE SECTOR AND PRODUCER ORGANISATIONS
IN RURAL ADVISORY SERVICES**

Berlin, Germany, 24-26 September 2013



Extension and advisory services (EAS) are clearly back on the global agenda. The 4th GFRAS Annual Meeting that concluded recently at Berlin, clearly revealed the interest and enthusiasm of all those involved in EAS provision in strengthening its contribution. The meeting discussed the need for strengthening pluralism in service delivery by involving the private sector and enhancing the capacities of producer organizations so that farmers receive a wide range of support to deal with the new challenges. The meeting also emphasized the need for curricula reforms and sharing good practices in EAS provision. Dr Rasheed Sulaiman V, Director, Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy (CRISP) reflects on his participation in this meeting here.

CONTEXT**4th GFRAS Annual Meeting**

The Annual Meeting is the central GFRAS (Box 1) event for experience exchange and serves as its main platform for discussing strategic directions. These meetings usually have a thematic component related to a contemporary issue in extension and a functional component related to networking and learning. Role of private sector and producer organizations in Rural Advisory Services was the theme for this year's Annual Meeting.

Box 1: GFRAS?

GFRAS (Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services) is the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (www.g-fras.org). Its mission is to provide advocacy and leadership on pluralistic, demand-driven rural and agricultural advisory services within the global development agenda. GFRAS provides a forum to bring together and promote interaction and learning among the diverse stakeholders involved in RAS. It allows RAS providers and other organizations with an interest in RAS to have a voice, to engage in dialogue, and to promote a supportive environment for investment in RAS. GFRAS supports studies and evidence on effective RAS approaches and policies. It also strengthens the capacity of RAS practitioners through networking. GFRAS began operations in 2010. Over the past 4 years it has expanded in terms of its reach and functions. Regional Networks of RAS currently exist in almost every region of the world.

WHAT I LEARNT**1. Private Sector and Producer Organisations do play an important role in EAS,
but public investments are still critical**

EAS provision is already pluralistic in most countries. Private sector and producer organizations do play an important role in advisory provision and organizing other support and services that are critical for farming. The key note presentation by Regina Birner (University of Hohenheim, Germany) and the panel discussion by participants from the private sector and producer

organizations that followed her keynote address clearly illustrated their contributions in EAS provision. The share fair at the annual meeting showcased the wide range of approaches used for EAS provision in different settings world-wide. It also undoubtedly revealed the importance of strengthening co-ordination of pluralistic extension systems and developing capacities for collaboration. Small-scale farmers are often not effectively served by the private sector and producer organizations, and public financing is often needed to ensure equity in service provision. Public investments are also required for enhancing the capacities of various providers.



2. Lack of public investments in EAS provision is an important concern even in developed countries

In the federal state of Brandenburg in Germany, farmer associations and the private advisory company LAB GmbH together finance and organize advisory services. (Since 2002, there has been no direct or indirect support for advisory services from the Government here). Farmers who are part of the farmer association are generally happy with the quality of advisory service provision. The two farmers we visited as part of the field visit operate large holdings (more than 500 ha), grow a range of crops (wheat, barley, corn, rye, potato and grasses), have large stock of cows/bulls (150-250) and operate biogas plants to produce electricity which is sold. However several farmers in this state are not part of these farmer associations. Many of them have limited resources (such as small family farms) and therefore do not receive any advisory support. The advisors also lack adequate opportunities for continued professional up gradation of their capacities. There is an increasing concern on the need for public funding to widen the reach of advisory services and capacity development of advisors.



3. Capacities of producer organizations to contribute to EAS needs strengthening

Producer organizations are critical for promoting demand-led extension and their capacities need to be enhanced to help them play this role. A lot more needs to be done to make farmer organizations more inclusive (greater participation of small farms and catering to their interests).

However lack of mobilization and facilitation skills among EAS providers currently constrain farmer organizational development. Quite often small farmers and their organizations need long term handholding support to evolve as viable producer organizations. They also need capacities related to mobilization, facilitation and business management skills.

4. Advisors and Extension Agents should have a combination of skills. But often these are in short supply

Ideally, individual advisors should have a combination of technical and functional skills as articulated in the GFRAS position paper-The New Extensionist (<http://www.g-fras.org/en/knowledge/gfras-publications/file/126-the-new-extensionist-position-paper>). But often these are in short supply. Capacity development of several thousand EAS staff, already in service, especially in functional skills such as facilitation, mobilization, brokering, negotiating, networking, partnership development, etc. is a major challenge everywhere. One of the farmer whom we met during field visit in Brandenburg told us that farmers look for the following qualities in an advisor which include : *sound technical know-how, project preparation skills and good understanding of changing political, financial, policy related and regulatory environments*. Lack of well- trained consultants having these capacities is an important concern.

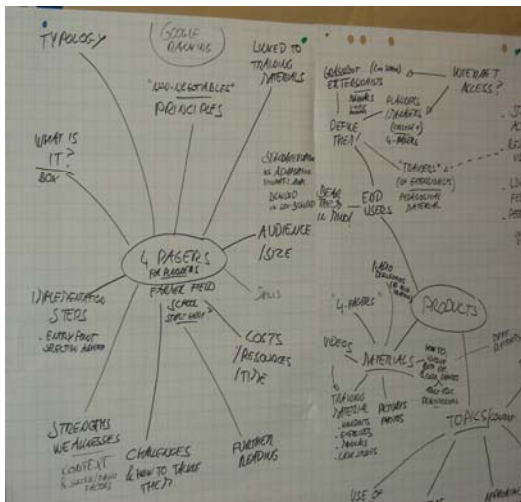


5. Reforms in extension curricula are long overdue and this would need user consultation and involvement

There has been a shared concern on the quality of extension curricula followed in universities and staff training centres. A side event to discuss these issues was jointly organized by the University Consortium on Extension and Advisory Services (<http://www.g-fras.org/en/activities/consortium-on-education-and-training.html>) and the MEAS (<http://www.meas-extension.org/>) programme. This was intended to take forward the commitment and enthusiasm of academia in universities and other training institutions (and also researchers in the field of extension) who are keen to create a new generation of EAS staff with the required competencies (as articulated in the New Extensionist position paper). The meeting discussed the challenges in reforming the curricula, especially the huge inertia of the faculty; the importance of user consultations (especially the potential employers) and participatory curriculum development; linking with the private sector to introduce new courses (for which core competencies are not available currently such as certification and standards); and strengthening research in EAS (beyond programme evaluation).



6. Extension practitioners are keen to learn about good practices in extension, but these are often not available in the desired format



GIZ (German International Cooperation), the main host of this annual meeting together with GFRAS organized a side event to exchange ideas for a practice-oriented knowledge platform on good practices in agricultural extension. This meeting highlighted the need for developing *practice oriented* 4 page-documents in “how-to” format, for use by those working at the grassroots level. The discussions highlighted the range of good practice platforms available currently on several topics (including www.betterevaluation.org) from which we could learn on how to address this issue. A Technical Advisory Committee was formed to take this initiative forward. The plan is to finally develop a platform that

would serve as a “one-stop shop” for extension practitioners and managers. I hope this will potentially emerge as an important knowledge platform on extension in the coming years.

7. Networks are important and there is a lot to learn from practice

Eelke Wielinga’s (LINK Consult, The Netherlands) presentation - What makes networks work? – helped me to reflect on the quality of networks which I am a part of. The presentation highlighted the importance of “free actors” and how “warm” networks evolve into “cold” organizations if we fail to recognize and maintain the “energy” within the networks. (To know more about networks, click this link: http://www.toolsfornetworkers.nl/wp/?page_id=157). These concepts came handy during the workgroup discussions on strengthening the regional and sub-regional networks of GFRAS and development of work plans for 2104.

The South Asia group (AESAs) decided to expand its virtual network through social media, strengthen its knowledge portal (www.aesa-gfras.net), organize its first face-to-face meeting and raise resources to address the priorities that emerge from the meeting scheduled in January 2014. The Asian participants met to discuss ways of strengthening APIRAS (Asia Pacific Rural Advisory Services) Network and its proposed work plan for 2014. I hope to see more action at the APIRAS level in the coming months.

FINAL IMPRESSIONS



- I am really amazed at the interest and enthusiasm of the large number of practitioners, managers, policy makers, researchers and donors involved in EAS who participated in this meeting and their strong conviction in the transformative power of EAS provision. I often fail to see this “energy” and passion for EAS elsewhere.
- I also learnt a lot on how to organize meetings of this scale - especially innovative ways of ensuring adequate interaction and knowledge exchange among the participants through several breakout groups and plenary sessions. The field visits were carefully chosen so as to perfectly align with the technical theme of the seminar. All these gave lots of new insights on EAS provision in Germany and also the nature of German Agriculture.
- I am glad that I am part of the GFRAS network and happy at the modest progress made by AESA during the past nine months (which was shared at the annual meeting). I personally wish to see more participants from South Asia in these types of meetings. AESA has several miles to go and some of the learning from experiences of other networks that were shared in this meeting would definitely come handy in future.

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