

5th GFRAS Annual Meeting RAS Policies – Evidence and Practice 23-25 September 2014, Buenos Aires, Argentina



The fifth GFRAS Annual Meeting held recently discussed the importance of evidence based policies for extension & rural advisory services. 150 participants from different regions of the world representing extension research, academia, practice and policy participated in this meeting. Dr Mahesh Chander reflects on his participation at this event here.

THE CONTEXT

The GFRAS has been organizing its annual meetings around some major themes on Rural Advisory Services (RAS) every year in different continents. The 5th annual meeting on “RAS Policies-Evidence and Practice” held at Buenos Aires this year was hosted by the National Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA), Argentina and the Latin American Network for Rural Extension Services (RELASER). The meeting was organized to:

- Understand purposes, contents, and effects of RAS policies and policy influencing
- Raise the awareness of evidence for policy influencing and
- Strengthen RAS fora to engage in partnerships

INAUGURAL SESSION

Mr Carlos Casamiquela, the Hon’ble Minister of Agriculture, Argentina was the Chief Guest. He spoke on important issues having implications for agricultural development especially in Argentina, while recognizing the role of EAS in agricultural development. The inaugural function was followed up by a brief presentation of the meeting objectives & agenda and introduction of participants.



TECHNICAL SESSIONS

Though right policies are important for the growth of any sector, policies related to extension and advisory services are few. Based on the 2011 Nairobi Extension Conference, GFRAS and its regional/sub-regional networks have started discussing the importance of RAS policies. However, exchange & learning on evidence-based RAS policies and ways of influencing the policy processes are needed to develop enabling policies for RAS. The keynote by Mr David Spielman, Senior Research Fellow, IFPRI argued for the importance of generating evidence to influence RAS policies. Krishan J Bheenick, Senior Programme Coordinator, Technical Centre for Agriculture & Rural Cooperation (CTA) also highlighted the role of RAS policies and policy influencing processes in speeding up agricultural development. Both of them pointed out to the gaps in agricultural policies focusing on RAS and the importance of evidence to influence policy. These presentations were followed by a Panel Discussion on RAS policies that illustrated experiences with generating evidence and influencing policies. The panel comprised of experts from IFPRI, IFAD, CTA, MEAS & CaFAN.



The sessions that followed have several interesting presentations on experience with RAS policies in different countries. For instance, Andreas Oswald from SASKAWA African Association and Maria Lujan from Paraguay spoke about their experiences wherein they organized visits of policy makers to their project sites. They were of the opinion that the policy makers don't need big documents but a crisp note plus field visits to see and get convinced for which we have to show them the evidence, what happens when we do something in certain way! This session was moderated by Ernst Bolliger from AGRIDEA. He made it far more interesting by asking the participants to share their experiences on policy influencing as stories that answer at least one of the following questions:

- How can evidence on RAS & RAS policies be used and packaged to attract and influence policy makers?
- What are the success factors and obstacles for processes to influence RAS policies?
- What are the roles & responsibilities of different actors and who are the best allies for successful policy influencing?
- Why policy influencing should be based on evidence?

There were two most interesting stories (cases). The first one was about how the Rwanda Agricultural Board in collaboration with Belgian Development Agency, successfully influenced agricultural extension policy in its favor especially with respect to promoting Farmer Field Schools. The second one was about the genesis of Plant Protection Law in Benin and how the Government of Benin was assisted in formulating/drafting the law. All cases clearly revealed the importance of need based action, the role of communicating the need for policy change, sharing experiences of impact through field visits and facilitating the policy development process.

Another interesting presentation by Florian Moder, GIZ, India focused on how the Climate Change Knowledge Network is supporting National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture of the Ministry of Agriculture (Government of India). The presentation focused on how the different stakeholders at the national, state and district levels use the climate change knowledge network in selected districts of Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Orissa.

NETWORKING SESSION



Another important objective of the GFRAS meeting is to strengthen regional networking and discuss ways to strengthen regional networks through partnerships with other regional networks, policymakers, financial partners, and other partners in the innovation system. Each regional/sub-regional network shared their experiences with these types of

partnerships and what different interventions they are making in the region.

SIDE EVENTS

Several side events were organized before, during and after the Annual Meeting. The side events were on Role of Producer Organizations in RAS; Role of ICTs in Enhancing the Capacity of Extension and Advisory Services; , Global Good Practices Initiative; the Tropical Agriculture Platform Capacity Development; RAS for Family Farming; GFRAS consortium on Extension Education and Training, Policy Compendium Validation & Policy Working Group Follow Up. Some of the regional networks such as APIRAS (Asia Pacific Islands Rural Advisory Services) also held their meetings too during the side events.



The side event on RAS for family farming highlighted the importance of varied advisory approach for different categories of family farmers who differ in terms of holding size, nature of crops and level of

entrepreneurship. The discussions led to recommendations on how to better tailor RAS for family farms considering their huge diversity; improve their access to RAS, the issue of improving market access for family farms and how to consider gender in RAS for family farms.



The side event on RAS and Producer Organisations reviewed the work on this theme since the last GFRAS meeting and discussed the results of the regional consultations on this theme. The event also discussed how POs can strengthen the demand on RAS and how POs could deliver RAS among their member producers.

The side event on ICTs for capacity enhancement of extension and advisory services, explored the current status, opportunities, evidences, and experiences of using ICTs as enablers of capacity development in agricultural extension and advisory services. The participants deliberated on the role of web portals, digital videos, knowledge networks, digital repositories, mobile applications, social media and open access initiatives for capacity development. The emerging concepts like Learning Object Repositories (LOR), Open Distance Learning (ODL), Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other e-learning mechanisms were also discussed.

FIELD TRIPS

As part of the Annual Meeting, four field trips were organized and I joined field trip 2, which was about how INTA is linking research and extension. The interaction with the officials and farmers indicated that in Argentina, INTA is responsible for both research and extension. We found that INTA was fairly well decentralised having extension agents with diverse profiles, multi-disciplinary teams addressing complex issues and it partners with other organizations in the public, private, NGO sector. We ended the day with a typical Argentinean *asado* BBQ.



SHARE FAIR

The participants shared and discussed their projects and field experiences during the share fair. It helped in exploring new ongoing initiatives by different agencies and how GFRAS and its regional/sub-regional networks progressed since the last meeting.

MY IMPRESSIONS

Time Management: All sessions including the inaugural programme finished well within the scheduled time. No time was wasted in long speeches and praising every dignitary on the dais, which is very common in South Asian countries.

Side Events and Share Fair: Both these provided a lot of opportunities to discuss selected themes in small groups and helped in obtaining more detailed information on ongoing interventions. These also helped in networking with several others who are working on similar themes or having similar interests.

Participants and their levels of participation: The organizers had set limit of 150 participants, considering the logistics and possibility of managing the sessions effectively. The selection procedure for papers to be presented in technical sessions was apparently very strict, which could be understood from the fact that only two papers per session were allowed. The participants were so engaged and actively involved in discussions in all the sessions. (Back home, we hardly have any upper limit of participants nor we have a proper paper screening process and most of the participants are seen outside the meeting halls while the sessions are on).

FINAL WORDS

This Annual Meeting was an important step in the evolution of GFRAS and it provided the participants an opportunity to discuss GFRAS strategic directions and functioning. I am sure like me, all others who also participated in this meeting would have found this meeting professionally very enriching. I feel it is important to draw lessons from such international meetings to improve the situation back home.

Dr Mahesh Chander is Head, Division of Extension Education, Indian Veterinary Research Institute, Izatnagar, Uttar Pradesh, India. He can be contacted at drmahesh.chander@gmail.com.