

Assessment of appropriateness of the various Neuchâtel Initiatives Frameworks for the evaluation of extension programmes/services and donor harmonization processes¹

Introduction

The assessment was carried out in the context of the First Annual Review of the Joint Extension Projects that took place in Kenya from December 3 to 14, 2007 involving 6 projects and a team of (16 !) experts.

The statements below refer to the following six frameworks/guides elaborated by the Neuchâtel Group:

1. Common Framework on Agricultural Extension (1999)
2. Guide for Monitoring, Evaluation and Joint Analyses of Pluralistic Extension Support (2000)
3. Common Framework on Financing Agricultural and Rural Extension (2002)
4. Common Framework for Supporting Pro-Poor Extension (2003)
5. Demand Driven Agricultural Advisory Services (2006)
6. Common Framework on Market-Oriented Agricultural Advisory Services (2008)

1. Common Framework on Agricultural Extension (1999)

The first framework elaborated in 1999 provides a still relevant conceptual platform, the basic principles and respective arguments to justify new approaches and necessary changes in extension service provision. However the 6 essential principles for agricultural extension should be revised and updated. Formulations such as “A sound agricultural policy is indispensable” (principle 1), “Market demand creates an impetus for new relationships to the private sector” (principle 4) and “There are new perspectives for public funding and private actors in extension” (principle 5) sound rather unspecific, taking into account the actual state of knowledge. The main contents of this initial framework are developed further and in more detail in the 5 frameworks published since then. While frameworks 2-6 provide more specific material that can be applied in evaluations and harmonization processes, this first framework is perceived mainly as an introductory text to the subject.

2. Guide for Monitoring, Evaluation and Joint Analyses of Pluralistic Extension Support

The 6 chapters of this text contain a large number of relevant guiding questions and a checklist (policy framework issues to consider...) appropriate to be considered in a

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comprehensive evaluation of extension programmes/services and orient donor harmonisation processes. However some restrictions of its use can be observed:

- The guiding questions formulated in this publication reflect like a mirror principles considered by the donors organized in the Neuchâtel Group. Unless these principles are not formulated and published, agreed upon as such and implemented by the cooperation partners and projects in the respective country, their use and application in an evaluation would be somehow unfair and misleading.
- Responding to all questions in a meaningful way is possible, but only under certain conditions. The guide as a whole is considered more useful for analytical and monitoring purposes (including studies) that provide a sufficient timeframe and involve few persons as “evaluators” that are very familiar with the principles.
- In the situation similar to the First Joint Review Mission in Kenya, with a number of 16 participants from rather different institutional and conceptual backgrounds and an extremely dense timetable to fulfil their specific TOR, the applicability of this guide in detail is strongly restricted. Under these conditions evaluators should focus first on questions in chapters 1 (The policy environment), 5 (Public finances and private sector actors) and 6 (Decentralization and pluralism) that provide information on the political framework.

3. Common Framework on Financing Agricultural and Rural Extension (2002)

This very useful framework deals in the necessary technical depth with the key issue of financing and financing mechanisms of extension, an area of high actual relevance also in Kenya and closely related to sustainability. It stresses the importance of and relations between service benefits and cost-sharing. It also calls for investing in capacity building of extension service suppliers. In cases as the Joint Review Mission in Kenya and similar evaluations the framework is quite helpful as a benchmark for assessing the encountered situation and its state of conceptual advancement in aspects related to commercialization, financing and cost-sharing of services. Its theoretical contributions are of high value, but it remains unclear to what extent this important knowledge has been transferred to and “interiorized” already by the relevant professionals and decision makers.

4. Common Framework for Supporting Pro-Poor Extension (2003)

This framework is written in a more descriptive style that is not very appropriate to serve as a tool for (rapid) assessments of extension projects and donor harmonization projects in cases comparable to the Joint Review Mission in Kenya. However, on pages 4-6 it mentions a series of key questions related to important aspects such as the degree of integration of the poor into the market, the voice of the poor in their interaction with the government, private sector and civil society and the viability of rural livelihoods. It would be of great help if projects prepare beforehand and thus dispose of specific written information that relate to this framework and the actual state of support to pro-poor extension, as the relevant information usually is not (easily) available during short-term evaluations. The six possibilities mentioned on page 17 of increasing voice and empowerment of the poor and their organisations are of great relevance and should be highlighted. The concept of shifting the perspective from agricultural production to livelihood extension and respective recommendations lined out on pages 21 and 22 are fully supported. They provide a good

basis for discussion and are useful to prevent frequent conceptual shortcomings in ongoing projects.

In general terms this framework could be revised in terms of structure and design and streamlined in order to provide a more specific tool for project evaluation and donor harmonization processes.

5. Demand Driven Agricultural Advisory Services (2006)

Due to its systemic approach, 'new' (up-to-date) technical contents, a concrete language, good examples of actual relevance, an adequate design and last not least a well structured summary this framework proved to be specifically useful as a benchmark in the context of the Joint Annual Review in Kenya. The booklet provides existing and desired standards, indicators for success and enhancing factors for development of agricultural advisory services standards.

It also adds important new elements to the existing frameworks such as the term 'Agricultural Advisory Services', perspective of service markets, the relations between supply and demand, service quality assurance and evaluation, dialogue and negotiations about prices and required content, 'Indicators of success', user payment and higher education curricula that match with the demands at field level. All these elements are considered very appropriate and highly relevant for the assessment of extension projects and donor harmonization processes.

6. Common Framework on Market-Oriented Agricultural Advisory Services (2008)

This just recently published and pro-poor oriented framework introduces the important value chain approach to advisory services and thus is of special relevance to the situation encountered during the Kenya Review Mission and future needs as envisaged by the Review Team. Another important contribution of high relevance observed under Kenyan conditions refers to the chapter 'Mitigating risks of market orientation' (pages 17 and 18). It also points out possible gender impacts as well as goal conflicts with food security. A series of examples from around the world are very helpful to orient readers on existing potentials and risk. Unfortunately just like all other frameworks the text does not (yet?) contain a list of references and links available.

On the other hand the booklet also contains a number of statements of more academic nature that are less specific, have been tackled already in former frameworks and cannot be related directly to assessments and evaluations.

Conclusions

- The 6 frameworks published so far constitute a voluminous (158 pages) and complex material with different structures. A number of contents are overlapping. Four of the six frameworks do not count with a summary. The detailed knowledge of their contents among the community of experts is considered to be restricted. These facts complicate their use as a combined guideline in short-term evaluations and review missions.

- In the case of the Kenya Review Mission frameworks 3 and 5 were specifically useful as benchmarks for the assessment of the extension projects and respective harmonization process.
- A summarized guideline that a) combines all frameworks and b) contains a catalogue of criteria and checklists that could serve as toolkit for evaluating extension projects and processes is missing.
- The degree to what local experts have been exposed to and are really familiar with the frameworks and their content in general and in detail is not known. It is assumed that the respective knowledge is rather scattered. However local experts might be familiar with many particular concepts and facts presented in the various frameworks.
- It remains doubtful to what extent national decision-makers are familiar with in depth and fully support the principles and concepts outlined in the frameworks.
- In short-term missions with a larger number of participants there is often not enough time, opportunity and sometimes willingness to discuss and evaluate systematically the concepts and criteria referred to in the frameworks in the desired detail.

Recommendations

- Make sure all further publications contain a summary, references and links.
- It is recommended that projects prepare beforehand and thus dispose of specific written information that relate to framework 4, the actual state of support to pro-poor extension, as the relevant information usually is not (easily) available during short-term evaluations.
- It is very worthwhile to summarize the frameworks and transform them into one compact guide that can be used for the assessment and harmonization of extension projects. This guide should contain guiding questions, checklists, examples and other instruments that can be used in detailed analyses, rapid appraisals and auto-evaluations.
- Develop strategies and a set of concrete measure to strengthen the ownership of Neuchâtel Frameworks and concepts by national partners on all levels.
- Systematic training of local experts in the vision, concepts and experiences in extension/advisory services as described and outlined by the Neuchâtel Group in its different frameworks is considered essential for building the needed capacities and ensure ownership on national and local levels. The Neuchâtel Group could provide a (short) set of respective training modules.
- Auto-evaluations at regular intervals (e.g. 2 years) based on one revised and summarized framework version would constitute a good way of assuring the quality of extension projects. They would also root the respective knowledge and thus enhance the ownership of the frameworks among national experts and decision-makers.

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