THE PARTNERSHIP APPROACH FOR EXTENSION

Abstract. It is widely acknowledged that extension or advisory services play a crucial role in agricultural and rural development. But how could such a service be organised in a sustainable manner when the Government has insufficient funds and farmers are not ready to pay for advice? In this contribution I propose some ideas, based on my experiences in the Philippines, and many years of work in various positions within the agricultural knowledge and innovation system in The Netherlands and Europe.

The key idea is that a centre, providing advisory services to farmers, should have other sources of income than the government budget only. It could generate income from a training and demonstration farm, and services to commercial partners who have an interest in supporting the centre. The technicians working at the centre should develop expertise that is really worthwhile for its partners. But just as important is the role of such a centre as a trustworthy “Free Actor” in the network of stakeholders in the area. Let us call it “The Partnership Approach for Extension”.

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Introduction. It has been the experience in so many extension offices, operating as government structures in weak economies: the extension agents receive their modest salary, but sit there behind their desks, without proper means of transport for visiting farmers, or for travelling to update their knowledge. No wonder they spend their time in the grey economy wherever they find clients and business partners that value their know-how.

Many efforts have been done by foreign assisted projects to upgrade the technical level of the extension agents, to provide materials, computers and means for transport. But after the project funds have dried up, the brighter technicians look for better jobs, and those with less chances stay behind, as ornaments in the office buildings. The standard public extension service has a poor business model, as long as farmers are not able or not willing to pay for advice.

In this regard a study on how partnerships are receiving much attention presently when it comes to development and innovations in agriculture is to particular importance.

Literature review and the problem statement. Would privatisation of such government extension services be better? This debate is going on for many years already, but practically all countries in formerly communist Europe maintained their public services until present [Knierim et al. 2015]. Only few countries have fully privatised systems, and where this is the case, like in The Netherlands, it is hard for advisors to survive in the knowledge market where
lots of competitors are active, and little space is left for keeping updated or to engage in risky innovative adventures [Klerkx, Hall and Leeuwis 2009].

"To privatise or not to privatise?": this is not the only question at stake here [Wielinga 2008]. Ideas about what such services should entail have changed. Extension is more than repackaging messages from researchers and delivering them at the doorstep of farmers. There is a growing recognition for the interactive aspect of innovations and the role of intermediate actors [Wielinga 2001, 2009, 2009; Koutsouris 2014] or knowledge brokers [Klerkx 2008; Klerkx, Hall and Leeuwis 2009].

Partnership has become the name of the game. For example, in 2014 the European Commission has launched the European Innovation Partnership programme (EIP), based on the idea that relevant innovations emerge from interaction between stakeholders, rather than from Transfer of Technology. [Oost 2012].

How could partnership be given shape under conditions where farmers are not ready to pay for support and governments have limited means to upgrade their extension services? In this article I explore some possibilities, based on previous experiences [Wielinga 2015].

**Research results.**

**Features of a working business model for extension.**

When extension activities are combined with a farm, the farm operations generate additional income for the centre. This combination offers a range of opportunities:

- Demonstration: Farmers can come and see how new technologies work out. This is more inspiring than advisors who only suggest that such practices are better.
- Training: The farm facilities are useful for providing hands-on training. Short training courses can be attractive for farmers, as well as for advisors and farm technicians in larger enterprises. This could be funded for example from the budget for education or rural development of local authorities. Some specialised courses might also be interesting enough for commercial farms to be offered for a fee.
- Applied research: Most often scientific knowledge needs to be adapted to local circumstances. Farmers might be experimenting too, or use practices which appear valuable although not commonly recognised as valid techniques. The farm facilities are useful for trials at farm scale.
- Development of various technology options: The conditions for farming are not the same for every farmer. Some have more opportunities than others. A farm for demonstration, training and applied research offers the possibility to show different farming models, attuned to the most important target groups in the area.
- Meeting place for professional farmer’s networks: A centre with such a multi-purpose farm and knowledgeable staff becomes a natural focus point where entrepreneurs in a certain sector like to come together, and build networks.
- Exhibition place: The centre is also interesting for other players in the supply chain, who wish to expose their products like machinery, feeds, seeds, products for plant protection, and other farm supplies.
- Innovations: New practices and solutions do not always come from research. Often they emerge from interaction between stakeholders who share an ambition for solving a problem or making use of new opportunities. Such
innovation networks can be stimulated by providing skilful facilitation. The facilitator should have a position that is accepted by the network partners.

Technicians from a knowledge centre as envisioned here could take such a role, since they have no other interests than assisting farmers.

Farming enterprises in a certain sector benefit from good relationships between the major partners in the value chain, combined with guidance from the knowledge institutions (research and education). Such partnerships require an intermediate actor which is appreciated by its partners, and able to do what is needed to make the partnership flourish. I call this the position of the “Free Actor” [Wielinga 2001, 2008].

The centre will only acquire such a position if the technical quality of the technicians, the facilities and the management is good. This is to be achieved through specialisation in a certain branch of activity, like for example poultry production, biological horticulture or agro-tourism. After a period of investment in training, improved facilities and building the initial network, such a centre can sustain with a basic budget from public authorities and the income generated by the farm, the training courses and the accommodations for meeting and exhibitions.

**ITCPH in the Philippines: an example with 30 years of experience.**

In June 2015, the International Training Centre on Pig Husbandry (ITCPH) in Lipa City, The Philippines, celebrated its 30est anniversary. At the high of this event, more than 150 guests from all over the country were present, including the vice-minister of agriculture and captains of the swine industry. “Success through partnership” was the slogan of the celebration.

For me this was a most rewarding event. I was invited as a special guest, 22 years after I left the centre as the last Dutch consultant for the development project that had put it on its feet. When I arrived there, three years earlier, the present centre director, dr Ruth Miclat, had just been appointed as a young and unexperienced veterinarian. A good number of the crew I worked with so long ago was still working at the centre, and many other former colleagues had come back to join the party. It was also good to see that recently new young and enthusiastic technicians had been appointed, proud to start working at this centre with its excellent reputation. The centre had expanded its activities and developed a range of new approaches, such as an on-line course in pig keeping.

A few years ago Ruth sent me an e-mail, informing me that ITCPH had won the award for the best government agency in the country, with a ceremony at the presidential palace with the president herself. What more can you dream of as a development worker? Success is the result of the efforts of many, but it feels good having been part of this history.

ITCPH is part of the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) under the Department of Agriculture (DA). ATI has training centres all over the country, providing support to public extension agents under the responsibility of regional authorities. ITCPH is the only specialised centre, with focus on pig husbandry. Recently, also some other activities have been added such as the production of chickens, goats and horticulture, merely to demonstrate integrated farming systems. The staff consists of around 40 persons, out of which 12 instructors.

**A strange duck in the pond.** The training centre started as a Dutch initiative. In The Netherlands, hands-on training facilities for agricultural schools and colleges are concentrated in specialised centres for hands-on training (IPC’s): one for horticulture, one for dairy farming and one for pig and poultry production. Students in agriculture from all over the country spend several
weeks in these centres for practical training in farm facilities that are typical for commercial family farms in The Netherlands.

These training facilities are interesting for international technicians as well. In many developing countries such practical education is lacking. Over the years the international courses of Barneveld College (nowadays part of IPC), the practical training centre for pig and poultry production, attracted many participants from all over the world.

In the 80ies of the last century, the idea came up to organise such courses in the region: this would be cheaper, and more adapted to the regional conditions for farming. Barneveld College started outreach courses in Colombia, Indonesia and, in 1985, in The Philippines. International courses in pig husbandry were offered for the entire Asian region, from India to Fiji. Dutch scholarships for practical training, that otherwise would be spent in The Netherlands, were now available to receive participants in The Philippines.

In this country, such a centre did not fit into the existing structure. During the first five years, the Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI), the leading institute in research for the animal production sector, was the Philippine partner in the project. Selected researchers were sent to Barneveld in The Netherlands to be trained as instructors, and the first international courses were offered. However, there was a lot of struggle over the poor facilities and uncertainty for the staff. Only at the end of the first five years a good location was found for constructing a new centre. A second phase appeared to be necessary to give the centre a solid basis. However, the Dutch Ministry of Development Cooperation lingered to decide. BAI did not want to cooperate any longer, and staff that were willing to stay with ITCPH had to give up its permanent position as a government worker. Only five of the trained technical staff took the risk.

A breakthrough was reached when ATI offered to take over the responsibility from BAI, with permanent positions for the staff. When I arrived in 1990 as Chief Technical Adviser, the buildings had just been finished, and most of the staff was newly recruited, very young and insecure. Those from the first crew who had taken the risk, however, were highly motivated, including my counterpart, the centre director who had taken the lead in the second phase of the project. With this lady, dr Mary-Ann Sayoc, I developed an excellent relationship.

But also within ATI the international centre was a strange duck, much larger than the other centres, and thus also receiving a larger budget. This did not feel comfortable at the start. Apart from the international course, we offered national courses for extension agents, agricultural teachers and farm technicians. Furthermore, the centre started to offer assistance to the regional ATI centres for creating training and demonstration farm facilities. These “outreach centres” for which the centre trained the technicians, helped to improve the relationships between ITCPH and the other ATI centres.

Managing a farm as a business in a government centre. Running a farm as a Government centre was a major challenge. Following the rules for bookkeeping, any positive balance should be returned to the national treasury, while the budget for the next year usually was disbursed in April of May, with considerable cuts on what was requested. By that time the animals would have been dead, if we had not found another solution. We operated a revolving fund on a bank account of the foreign assisted project. For this account I was responsible as a foreigner, but I mandated my Philippine colleagues to use it for all farm operations, as well as for commercial courses we developed over time. It
became a by-pass for many necessary transactions that were difficult in the normal bureaucracy. Since we could set the rules for this revolving fund, we were not only able to buy feeds and sell animals, but also to build up a reserve for calamities and to create a providence fund for staff that ran into financial troubles for reasons beyond their control. This strengthened the feeling of being part of the ITCPH family: a very important feature in the Philippine culture. The Philippine staff appeared to manage the fund seriously and skilfully: they understood very well that if something would go wrong with this fund, the future of the centre would be at stake.

This procedure worked very well, but when the project ended, there was no legal way to turn over the revolving fund in Philippine hands. Since I had full confidence in my counterpart and her staff, we decided to keep the revolving fund running as it did, even though I was back in The Netherlands and did not bear any responsibility for the project anymore. This situation took one year. Then, there was a celebration for the opening of the additional buildings for which the construction had started during my stay. Many important people had been invited, and also the minister of agriculture came. He used to be a businessman. I flew back to The Philippines to join the party.

During the farm tour the minister could not believe his eyes. “Is this really a government centre?” he asked. “This is not possible”. “You are right”, we told him. “And we have to tell you a little secret. What we do is actually illegal. And if you want this centre to continue like this, you should allow a foundation.” ITCPH got its foundation for the duration of 15 years. By the time this agreement ended, the law had changed which made it possible for government agencies to operate with revolving funds.

**Becoming a nucleus for networks.** Next to technical excellence, team building and sound financial management, we gave priority to building good relationships with partners who would find it interesting enough to keep on supporting the centre after the Dutch assistance had ended. My counterpart appeared to be an excellent networker. We offered assistance to the regional ATI centres, and we made contacts with NGO's assisting small farmers. These NGO workers were quite effective in community development, getting local people organised, but then they ran into the problem of how to generate more income. For doing so, appropriate technical knowledge was required, which ITCPH could offer.

Although the Dutch assistance was aimed for poverty alleviation, we also made contacts with the commercial sector, where pig farms usually were much bigger than the usual family farms in The Netherlands. These entrepreneurs were interested in good trainings for their farm technicians, and in technology for artificial insemination. ITCPH was offering this.

One could worry about the future orientation of ITCPH: would it leave the small farmers behind and orient itself to the far more profitable commercial enterprises, as soon as the Dutch had left? We organised a two-day conference, where commercial entrepreneurs and representatives of NGO’s could meet. To my surprise, the conference ended in a general recognition of shared interests. The commercial sector would benefit from an expertise centre helping small farmers to produce in a more efficient and healthy way. Prevalence of contagious diseases like hog fever and foot and mouth disease inhibited exports of pig meat, and could only be eradicated if small farmers would improve hygiene. Years later the country did reach the status of being disease free indeed. Furthermore, small farmers were good clients of commercial farms for buying young piglets for
fattening, whereas the large farms concentrated on breeding and multiplication. Third, there was a shortage of corn at Luzon, the Northern island of The Philippines. Corn is a major feed ingredient. As long as small farmers were wasting too much feed through inefficient feeding practices, the price of feed would remain high for all.

Soon after the Dutch assistance had ended, the Philippine hog raisers associations asked ITCPH to host the national boar testing station, which was previously located at a university. They considered the management of ITCPH more reliable. Also companies for farm supplies, such as veterinary products, feeds and equipment found their way to expose products. One of the activities during the celebration last summer was a ground breaking ceremony with Cargill, a worldwide multinational, investing in an applied research facility at ITCPH to explore optimal feeding systems for smallholder conditions.

Sadly, in those years the policy of the Dutch development cooperation moved away from agriculture, especially livestock production, and a few years after I left, the support for the international courses came to an end. But ITCPH had found other ways to sustain without foreign support.

Five years after my return to The Netherlands I headed a team of Dutch experts, and negotiated with authorities in China and Vietnam about the creation of three practical training centres: one near Beijing for pig husbandry, one for horticulture under glass near Shanghai, and one for pigs and poultry in Binh Thang, near Ho Chi Minh City. The Dutch minister of agriculture had led a trade mission to these two countries, and he was advised to give away a present for improving the relationship. The authorities in both countries were most interested in technology transfer: not at the academic level, but hands-on. After my return from The Philippines I had resumed my position as officer at the ministry of agriculture in the Netherlands, and so I was asked to lead the mission. The projects were modelled after ITCPH, and all ran for five years, after which the centres continued independently from foreign assistance.

Inspiration for Eastern Europe? What lessons can be learned from the Philippine experience? Definitely, circumstances are not the same. Furthermore, the creation of ITCPH was a considerable investment, with eight years of foreign assistance including two resident Dutch experts. Nevertheless, some relevant elements can be taken along while designing new approaches for extension in partnership for Ukraine.

- When advisory services can be combined with activities that generate income, the extension centres can deliver quality without being fully dependent from public funds. A farm for demonstrations, hands-on training and applied research can be a source of additional income.

- Such a farm is a strong stimulus for the technical staff to apply up-to-date knowledge, and to adapt it to the local circumstances.

- Showing different options for farms with more and with less resources, makes the centre attractive for different target groups, and reminds the advisors of the fact that there is usually no one-size-fits-all technology which is good for all farmers.

- When such a centre is capable of attracting the attention from the most important players in a certain field of interest, it can develop a role as facilitator for networks of farmers who collaborate in finding new solutions for challenges in the area. The farm and the facilities for training can become a natural place to meet.
Such a meeting place is also interesting for other players in the value chain, such as companies in farm supplies, willing to support the centre.

Probably there are many ways to put this approach into practice. There might already be experimental farms or agricultural schools with farm facilities that offer a good basis to start. Possibly former state farms can be converted. It requires creativity and the involvement of local stakeholders to find solutions that fit into the local conditions.

At least the following conditions are crucial for the success of such centres:
- The financial management should be based on a revolving fund, allowing to run the farm as a business, independently from the public budgeting procedures.
- The focus of the centre must be sufficiently specialised to build up valuable expertise.
- Apart from technical expertise, the staff should also have good communication skills for building and maintaining network relationships.
- The activities should not only focus on small family farms, but also on issues that interest commercial enterprises. The challenge is to find ways to engage both target groups in joint activities with a shared interest.

**Conclusions.** The first step for implementing the approach of extension in partnership is to create space for experiments. Find partners who are interested, and willing to support it. Also find organisations that might be doing it partly already. The best would be to initiate a programme with four to six pilots, that can learn together about the best way to implement and adjust the approach in Ukraine conditions.

Partnerships are receiving much attention presently when it comes to development and innovations in agriculture. The focus of the Dutch Development Cooperation has shifted from supporting NGO’s in community development towards stimulating cooperation between enterprises, knowledge institutions and NGO’s for creating working business models. Approaches for stimulating networks for innovation are seen as promising for bridging the gap between research and practice in agriculture. As an example, in 2014 the European Union has launched the EIP (European Innovation Partnership) programme, supporting initiatives from ‘Operational Groups’ including farmers, advisors, researchers and other stakeholders.

The underlying assumption is that sound technical knowledge alone is not enough to stimulate development at farm level. Farmers and other stakeholders should be involved in the creation of solutions that are fit for them. This has consequences for the role of experts. Their technical knowledge is still important, but not just to show the way, but for becoming a trustworthy partner who knows how to design the search and learn process from which new and appropriate solutions will emerge.

In this wide perspective, experiments at small scale could be an interesting contribution.

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