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Commentary

## **How Will Extension Contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals? A Global Strategy and Operational Plan**

Kristin Davis

International Food Policy Research Institute/Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services

### **Abstract**

*Extension remains a critical institution for supporting rural livelihoods and the Sustainable Development Goals. The Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS) recently launched a ten-year strategic framework and five-year operational plan, both aligned to the Sustainable Development Goals. The strategy was developed using a series of online and face-to-face consultations within the Forum, with expert feedback at various stages. Using both an agricultural innovation systems and a capacity development framework, the strategy outlines strategic fields of action at three levels – individual, organizational, and system. The strategic fields of action include advocacy and support for increased investment in extension; professionalization; and knowledge generation and exchange. Activities in each strategic field will strengthen capacities at the three levels. For each strategic field, there are expected high-level strategic outcomes (changes in behavior) to which GFRAS will contribute. The strategy is accompanied by a five-year operational plan, which guides the GFRAS community on how to implement the strategic framework. Though these documents, GFRAS can effectively support the international extension community to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals.*

**Key Words:** extension, advisory services, sustainable development goals, strategy

## Introduction

Extension remains a critical institution to meet the new Sustainable Development Goals and ensure productive and fulfilling lives for farmers and other rural dwellers. The Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS) has become a globally-recognized body advocating for and supporting extension since its inception in 2010. The GFRAS is mainly composed of regional-level networks, national forums, and universities and other organizations working in extension.

The GFRAS had an initial strategic plan for the years 2010-2015. However, it is useful to revisit and revise organizational strategies on a periodic basis and in response to changing circumstances. The new strategy is timely because the Millennium Development Goals expired in 2015. In 2012 at the Rio+20 event, United Nations member states agreed to develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs provide 17 goals and 169 indicators to frame and measure the global development agenda over the next 15 years. They focus on eradication of poverty while sustainably using natural resources and addressing issues of gender equality and empowerment (United Nations, 2015). The Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services believes that extension has a critical role to play in all of these areas. Thus in line with this agenda, GFRAS has produced a ten-year strategic framework for the period 2016-2025.

The strategy is accompanied by a five-year operational plan. This is a medium-term document that guides the GFRAS community on how to implement the strategic framework. The operational plan provides a robust framework to accomplish and measure the organizational goals identified in the GFRAS strategic framework (Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services, 2016).

## Theoretical Framework

Agriculture is critical to the lives of over half a billion rural people, and extension and advisory services are one of the main institutions who support these people with advice and other services. However, extension faces many challenges to supporting rural people to improve their lives. As a result, scholars have advocated for strengthening the capacities of extension at the individual, organizational, and system level to ensure relevant, efficient, effective, and sustainable services (Davis & Sulaiman, 2014).

Agricultural innovation systems are the set of inter-related actors who contribute to agricultural innovation processes. The innovation systems also include the interactions between these actors and the institutions (rules of the game) that govern their interactions (Spielman, 2005).

Using an agricultural innovation systems approach rather than the outdated linear approach to development has major implications for extension's role and capacities. In addition to traditional functions such as promoting technologies, giving demonstrations, and teaching farmers, in an innovation systems perspective, extension agents must facilitate interactions with market actors and manage innovation platforms (among other roles) (Davis & Sulaiman, 2014). New roles mean new capacities (skills and abilities to perform their job).

The *new extensionist* document lays out the roles, capacities, and strategies needed for extension to effectively fulfill its role in agricultural innovation systems (Davis and Sulaiman, 2014). Using a conceptual framework developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization (2010), the new extensionist calls for strengthening capacities at the individual, organizational, and system levels. The new GFRAS strategy is rooted in the same conceptual framework

of agricultural innovation systems and capacity development at these three levels.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The GFRAS Strategic Framework 2016-2025 is targeted at the GFRAS community, which includes regional networks, thematic working groups, funders, members, and individual affiliates. The document presents the framework through which GFRAS aims to fulfill its vision and mission for the period. It explains why GFRAS was created, why a new strategy is needed, what the forum wants to achieve, and how this will be done (Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services, 2015).

GFRAS seeks to create impact at the farmer level through its regional networks and country forums. The new strategic framework, accompanied by a five-year operational plan, will allow the forum to plan and measure change, learning, and progress in extension and advisory services reform over the next ten years.

### **Methods**

The GFRAS steering committee wanted the regional networks and other members and affiliates to have a strong voice in and ownership of the strategy, rather than to lead a process that was biased toward the GFRAS secretariat or the forum's donors. Thus the strategic framework was produced through a series of demand assessments within the GFRAS network, electronic consultations, feedback rounds, discussions by the GFRAS steering committee, and expert input. The GFRAS used a balanced scorecard approach, a strategy tool that analyzes four areas of an organization: the customer perspective, the financial perspective, the learning and growth perspective, and the business process perspective (Kaplan & Norton, 1993).

The operational plan was developed from perspectives of key stakeholders and

subject matter experts who used an online survey developed in Qualtrics, an online survey tool that was reviewed by a panel of experts (Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services, 2016).

The GFRAS secretariat identified potential respondents, who were contacted using the Tailored Design Method (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). Out of 35 individuals were invited to respond, 21 completed the survey and 11 completed a partial response, for a 91.4% response rate (Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services, 2016). Survey data were analyzed using SPSS and Microsoft Excel.

### **Results**

The strategy discussions with the GFRAS community on where it should focus in the next 10 years led to three strategic fields of action. Each of these strategic focuses action at the three levels of capacity development: Individual, organizational, and system level. They are

- a) Advocacy and support for an enabling policy environment and appropriate investment in rural advisory services (RAS; also called extension services);
- b) Professionalisation of rural advisory services; and
- c) Facilitation and enhancement of effective and continuous knowledge generation and exchange.

Extension needs policy advocacy to support its work. Having an explicit policy on extension helps to create an enabling environment that allows extension actors to work more effectively. In addition, extension organizations and individuals need to be able to advocate for increased funding and support from governments and donors. Finally, there is a need for increased investment in extension services.

Extension services have long been under-resourced and face problems of

motivation and incentives. Extension is often seen as an unsuitable or non-viable career choice. Professionalization of the services will address several issues simultaneously: Improving the image of extension, attracting more people into the profession, and making extension services more impactful.

Many extension agents work in rural areas with very little opportunity for peer exchange and continued learning. Similarly, most extension institutions do not have many opportunities for exchange of ideas and knowledge through regular meetings or platforms with which to share knowledge. Evidence is also lacking as to the real impact

of many types of extension approaches. Thus GFRAS will work to foster opportunities to exchange knowledge, in addition to creating and sharing knowledge through research, meetings, and online exchange platforms.

Within the 10-year strategic framework, the five-year operational plan provides a framework and steps to meet the six higher-level organizational goals identified in the framework using specific indicators (see Table 1). Through these goals GFRAS hopes to strengthen extension and thus contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals.

Table 1  
*GFRAS Organizational Goals and Indicators*

<b>Goal</b>	<b>Indicators</b>
1. Increased recognition of RAS in policies and investments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RAS is newly integrated in three global or regional rural development programmes or frameworks by 2020</li> <li>• Monetary investments in GFRAS have increased by 10% by 2020</li> </ul>
2. Strengthened RAS performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least five regional networks report professionalization capacity has increased by 25% between 2016 and 2020</li> <li>• At least two regions report offering an improved training and education standard for RAS providers based on the philosophy of the new extensionist by 2020</li> </ul>
3. Enhanced learning in RAS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least five regional networks report knowledge management capacity has increased by 25% between 2016 and 2020</li> <li>• RAS providers and clientele have at least one opportunity per year to share information, knowledge and experience in at least three regions by 2020</li> </ul>
4. Strengthened enabling environment for RAS to use their potential and effectively fulfil their roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three global policymakers or institutions recognize the importance of RAS furthering agricultural innovation systems by 2020</li> <li>• At least four regional or country level institutions or key people (development agencies, ministries, policymakers, donors, investors, and program managers) openly recognize the need for more professionalization of RAS by 2020</li> </ul>
5. Functionally strengthened regional networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least five regional networks report organizational efficiency and effectiveness has improved by 25% between 2016 and 2020</li> <li>• At least five regional networks have increased the density and strength of their internal and external connections by 2020</li> </ul>
6. Appropriate and comprehensive human resources developed in RAS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least four regional or country level institutions or key people (development agencies, ministries, policymakers, donors, investors, and program managers) recognize RAS professionals' skills related to furthering agricultural innovation systems have increased by 2020</li> <li>• At least three regional networks report increasing their ability to improve human resource development of RAS professionals by 2020</li> </ul>

*Note.* From *GFRAS five-year operational plan 2016-2020* by Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services, 2016, Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services. Reprinted with permission of the author.

### Conclusions

What does this mean for extension professionals and for the Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education (AIAEE) in particular? As per the AIAEE constitution, the AIAEE is an organization dedicated to developing new programs in agricultural and extension education and improving or strengthening existing programs and institutions of education to have a positive impact on development efforts worldwide. The AIAEE shall work toward improving the understanding of agricultural and extension education in different international settings among public and professional groups concerned with development. The AIAEE shall maintain liaison and working relationships with such groups and institutions and shall provide a medium for the exchange of ideas and information relating to programs of international agricultural and extension education. (Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education, 2014, para. 1)

The GFRAS strategy and operational plan lay out key areas for research and practice in the next 10 years in which the association is well-placed to engage in line with the constitution. As an association committed to strengthening and improving international extension programs and institutions, AIAEE professionals can contribute to this global work of knowledge generation through their projects and research. AIAEE can help improve the understanding of extension systems around the world. As an association of global

extension experts, AIAEE members can contribute to designing and evaluating more effective systems. Members with skills in human resource development can contribute to the on-going learning activities and those with advocacy skills to the policy work. Those with good knowledge of monitoring and evaluation can contribute to monitoring and measuring the operational plan. Finally, the association can provide a medium for discussion and debate on the extension contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals through the annual conference and the journal.

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