Using an Integrative Approach to Working with Small-Scale Farmers

James R. Lindner
Texas A&M University
Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, & Communications
MS 2116
College Station, TX 77845-2116
(979) 458-2701
(979) 458-2698
E-mail: j-lindner@tamu.edu

M'Randa R. Sandlin
Texas A&M University
Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, & Communications
MS 2116
College Station, TX 77845-2116
(979) 458-2304
(979) 458-2698
E-mail: mranda.sandlin@agnet.tamu.edu

Gabathuler, E., Bachmann, F., & Kläy, A. (2011). *Reshaping Rural Extension: Learning for Sustainability—An Integrative and Learning-Based Advisory Approach for Rural Extension with Small-Scale Farmers*. Weikersheim, Germany: Margraf Publishers. 100 pages. $29.00 (USD).

Overview

The authors present an argument for reshaping rural extension based on their programming and research experiences in Africa and Asia. The book is composed of four major sections: (a) Extension confronts new opportunities and challenges, (b) The fundamentals of agricultural extension, (c) Learning for Sustainability (LforS) — A learning-oriented integrative extension approach, and (d) Developing and managing an integrative learning-oriented extension approach. In the first section, the authors highlight the need to take smallholder farmers into account when addressing Millennium Development goals. This section, further, provides recommendations for extension and advisory services working with smallholder farmers. They make the case for extension and advisory service to use integrative approaches when working with this population. The second section provides a short background on extension and advisory services and concludes that "the more successful… agricultural extension is in adapting its activities and methods to the prevailing economic, social and ecological environment, the greater will be its chances of success" (p. 13). The third section introduces their integrated model, Learning for Sustainability. This model has seven components: stakeholder dialogue, organizational development, knowledge management, awareness raising, capacity building, social mobilisation for implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. The authors use case studies to document how the model has been used. The fourth section focuses on key elements necessary for an extension or advisory service to be effective in addressing its clientele's needs. The authors' overall approach to this book was to provide key insights into reshaping rural extension, based on their collective experiences. The book is not a prescriptive formula for bringing about their recommended changes; rather it establishes parameters (approaches, methods, and tools) from which extension and advisory services may consider changes. The authors note that the approach they present is an "idealized example" (p. XI) of what could be.

Evaluation

Gabathuler, Bachmann, and Kläy have produced a well-written, well-organized book that is a beneficial read for those interested in successful project design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation at the grassroots level. They have created a descriptive model for extension that focuses on Learning for Sustainability (LforS). The authors successfully introduce their model by fully addressing its expectations and nuances at every interaction point. The LforS learning-based extension approach shows three fundamental components (knowledge management, organizational development, and stakeholder dialogue) as the basis for this model. Through the four-part sequence of (a) awareness raising, (b) capacity building, (c) social mobilization, and (d) monitoring and evaluation activities, extension goals can be implemented. The authors have used this approach with varying degrees of success in both developed and developing countries around the world, including India, Kyrgyzstan, Madagascar, Mali, Mongolia, Morocco, Mozambique, Rwanda, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Thailand, and Turkmenistan.

Holistic involvement from the beginning to the end of the process is a strength of the LforS model. As the three fundamental components are implemented along the sequence, stakeholder and beneficiary involvement is required at every level, from individual farm to region. Another strength of the LforS model is the importance that is placed on the development and managing of such a model. The book's fourth section addresses this topic, discussing the development of extension methods and general organization and the selecting and training of qualified extensionists.

Two case studies add to the overall understanding of the model-flow and the potential impact of the model's usage. The Madagascar case study showed how the LforS extension approach was successful in addressing afforestation, and the case study of the formation of water user groups in Mongolia demonstrates organizational development and the ensuing negotiations that must take place to establish rules and responsibilities in agricultural extension.

Weaknesses of the Learning for Sustainability model are its similarity in principle and action to both the Participatory Rural Appraisal and Participatory Learning and Action models and its lack of historical documentation. Participatory Rural Appraisal and Participatory Learning and Action models have been in use for years and, like LforS, focus on beneficiary involvement in the identification of the problems, creation of the solutions, and long-term management and evaluation methods.

Recommendation

While the book is a bit pricey for its length, persons interested in development projects of all types, and extension efforts in general, will find this book a useful reference guide. Although somewhat idealistic, the Learning for Sustainability model demonstrates the importance of beneficiary buy-in and organizational cooperation at all levels to achieve successful project implementation. While the book includes an extensive list of recommended readings and web resources at the end of the book, citations are not provided within the text itself. We believe the case studies were the stars of the book and wanted to read more. It would have been useful to have an extended appendix with LforS tools available to the reader to implement and test.