



Photo: Silvia Voser

EMPOWER FARMERS – BUILD CAPACITY OF SERVICE PROVIDERS

Helvetas' experience with agricultural extension on three continents

Three continents, 18 countries, 70 projects: In almost every Helvetas project in the working area Natural Resources Management, agricultural advisory services play a role. Farmers, their families and organisations are supported to attain food security, to manage their resources sustainably or to process and market their products profitably, with the ultimate aim of livelihood improvement. The diversity of contexts and in particular the differing degrees of market integration of disadvantaged male and female farmers, led Helvetas to promote a wide set of approaches and methods. However, certain principles and challenges remain universal.

INTRODUCTION

This issue sheet provides an overview about Helvetas' approach to agricultural advisory services. Cases from different countries and situations illustrate Helvetas' experiences with **pluralistic, decentralised, participatory** and **market oriented** advisory services and conclude with a set of tangible outputs and qualitative insights.

PLURALISTIC

Agricultural extension is back on the agenda. The recent food crisis and the noticeable effects of climate change on the rural poor in developing countries prompted policy makers and donors to re-assess the importance of agricultural advisory services. More than ever there is a consensus that only a truly pluralistic advisory system can respond to the challenges of the time. "Pluralistic" means in this context complementary roles of the state, civil society and the private sector with the aim of contributing to the empowerment of farming families to become independent decision makers, to eradicate poverty (MDG 1) and to assure ecological sustainability (MDG 7). The role of the state varies considerably:

While in communist countries such as Laos and Vietnam the state remains a prominent provider of agricultural services there are other situations where the state is virtually absent, e.g. in a situation of failed states such as Haiti or Afghanistan. Following a Human Rights Based Approach Helvetas intervenes on the side of the rights holders by strengthening rural stakeholders to demand services. It also builds capacity of the duty bearers in order to further their service delivery.

A pluralistic agricultural extension system has another dimension too. On the basis of a profound analysis of the agricultural knowledge system the interfaces between extension and research on the one hand and between extension and agricultural education on the other hand need specific attention and intervention. The example of the Laos Extension for Agriculture Project illustrates this.

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Extensionist and researchers in dialogue with farmers in Laos (left picture).
Extension/training event with community forest management group in Bhutan (right picture).
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Example: Laos Extension for Agriculture Project

In collaboration with the National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service and on behalf of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Helvetas has supported the national extension system in Laos since 2001. The Laos Extension for Agriculture Project (LEAP): (<http://www.laoex.org/index.htm>) has been instrumental in linking the country's research system to the country-wide extension service. Using elaborated extension tools, e.g. the tool box for extensionists (<http://www.laoex.org/Docs/Tools-book-Engl.pdf>) LEAP is also engaged in linking practice with agricultural education at college and university levels. In addition, the project is pioneering the use of information technologies for extension such as SMS based information services and web-based exchange platforms and document repositories.

DECENTRALISED

In many Helvetas partner countries democratisation and decentralisation are progressing. Helvetas furthers decentralised extension through such things as support to participatory local planning, village development funds or even public administration reform. In Bhutan, which is in the process of moving from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy the forest user groups form nuclei for building up a democracy.

Example: Participatory Forest Management Project, Bhutan

The demand from farmers groups to get the right to jointly manage and use a piece of forest around their settlements is growing exponentially. Since 2002 Helvetas, on behalf of SDC, provides technical assistance to the Government of Bhutan to promote community forestry, e.g. through capacity building, developing manuals, drafting policies etc. By the end of 2009 already 170 farmers groups manage their own community forests. These farmers are empowered to take their own decisions and each group serves as a laboratory for democracy. Read more in "Making good local governance grow" at:

http://www.helvetas.ch/wEnglish/competencies/documented_experiences/Making_Good_Local_Governance_Grow.pdf



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Increasingly public funds for financing pro-poor agricultural extension are channelled through local government structures. The transition from central budget allocation to decentralised financing of agricultural advice is a challenging process. The case of Kyrgyzstan is exemplary in this context.

Example:

Kyrgyz-Swiss Agricultural Project, Kyrgyzstan

Since 1999, with technical support from Helvetas, Kyrgyzstan established a new, semi-autonomous Rural Advisory Service (RAS). RAS, which operates in the whole country, is locally organised and controlled by farmers. The public funding, which stems from the Government of Kyrgyzstan, the World Bank and SDC was channelled in a new public management approach to the service providing RAS system. See also „You pay for what you get“ at: http://www.helvetas.org/global/pdf/english/Professional_competences/Documented_experiences/Civil_Society_and_the_State/You_pay_for_what_you_get_Publ_4.pdf . Since 2008 a process has been initiated to route public funds through local government structures and release them based on farmers demand.

In the situation of failed states the challenge is much bigger: There Helvetas builds on local initiatives (Haiti) and invests in the strengthening of local bodies (Community Development Councils and District Development Assemblies in Afghanistan).

PARTICIPATORY

Nowadays it is common sense that true participation of the primary stakeholders – farmers and their organisations – is a prerequisite for advisory services to have an impact. Participation starts from a “right to say” and ends at full “ownership” with regard to extension contents, methods and financing. Besides a conducive environment and principles of participation there is a wide set of tested methods that further participation. Just to name some of them: farmer field schools, farmer-to-farmer extension, participatory innovation development, participatory learning and action, participatory market chain approach. Helvetas has gained in depth experience in applying these methods in different cultural contexts. The common thread across the methods is promotion of the idea of farmers being the most important experts.

Example:

Sustainable Soil Management Project, Nepal

In the mid-hills of Nepal decreasing soil fertility is a major concern. Financed by SDC and the British Department for International Development (DFID) Helvetas implements the Sustainable Soil Management Project in collaboration with 70 local partner institutions. Besides participatory research activities, a low cost farmer-to-farmer extension system has been introduced at local level whereby ‘Experienced Leader Farmers’ provide technical advice to farmer groups. This demand-led local extension reaches more than 12’000 farmers per year. For a description of the farmer-to-farmer diffusion concept see for example:

http://cdewocat.unibe.ch/wocatQA/SummaryApproach.php?selected_id=117

MARKET ORIENTED

No doubt today a large majority of rural poor are in need of cash income. Therefore advisory services are more and more challenged to link small-holder producers with markets. Helvetas applies two main approaches that often act in tandem, namely local market development and export oriented organic and fair trade value chains. In both approaches a demand (“Clients first!”) and a stringent business orientation are essential.

Therefore, in the case of market oriented advisory services the private sector is usually closely involved, either as an actor in a value chain (transport, processing, marketing) or as a service provider (e.g. business development services).

Example:

“Acción”, Local Market Development in Guatemala

Guatemala has a longstanding tradition of producing fruits and vegetables as well as honey for local and regional markets. Enhancing agricultural production to improve the livelihood of small farmers is a government priority. In collaboration with – and with funding from – the Ministry of Economy Helvetas’ project Acción is running a competitive fund to promote rural entrepreneurship through the value chain approach (production, processing and marketing). The aim is to resolve bottlenecks and scale up the activities of small rural civil society or private sector organisations that have the will to improve productivity and competitiveness. A feasibility study is conducted for each proposal including Rapid Market Appraisals.

See also:

http://www.helvetas.ch/global/pdf/english/Professional_competences/Documented_experiences/resources/Clients_First_lowres.pdf
Management capacities are improved through specialised hands-on training courses and technical training offers are arranged through a variety of local specialised civil society, research or private sector service providers. With this approach Acción reached 4’600 rural families in 2009 alone.

Example:

Organic and fair-trade cotton from West-Africa

With financial support from the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, the Dutch Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation, the European Union and several other donor agencies, Helvetas is supporting organic cotton projects in Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Benin. Farmer organisations are charged with the provision of agricultural extension, which is usually combined with an internal control system to assure compliance with quality standards. Costs for extension and certification are covered from the premium margins for organic and fair-trade products. A recent rigorous impact study proves the increased financial return for thousands of organic cotton farmers in Burkina Faso. Helvetas' Organic and Fairtrade Competence Centre co-published in 2010 the "Organic Business Guide", which contains a separate chapter about extension in organic commodities (see <http://www.organicandfair.org/> for the above mentioned publications).



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Monitoring organic cotton production in West Africa

ADVISORY SERVICES: KEY OUTPUTS

- In 2009, Helvetas supported 73 agricultural projects in 18 countries in Africa, Asia and Central America.
- In 2009, 307'571 persons directly involved in agriculture, forestry, or livestock farming have been advised and/or trained in the frame of Helvetas supported projects.
- In 2009, 141'266 persons involved in agricultural value chains supported by Helvetas were able to make an additional income.
- Farmers – women and men – who were advised and trained in organic and fair-trade projects in Central Asia and West Africa gained an additional income of 30% compared to conventional farmers.

CONCLUSIONS

Farmers first: Even though this slogan was coined more than 20 years ago, it still holds true: Helvetas' vision with regard to agricultural extension is that farmers in remote areas are able to make deliberate choices as experts and in exchange with each other. Only in this way are they able to adapt to changing contexts, for example to power constellations, markets and global warming.

Partnership approach: Helvetas' primary approach is to link agricultural producers to existing or emerging service providers. To ensure institutional sustainability, Helvetas will only deliver such services itself in exceptional circumstances (for example when there are no functional local government, reliable civil society organizations or private service providers).

Capacity building: In order to strengthen these service providers, Helvetas supports them through capacity-building (training, curriculum development, development of suitable extension methods and tools, exchange for learning, marketing, etc.) as well as organisational and institutional development.