

## The Neuchâtel Meeting 2000

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**In July 1995 the first “Informal Consultation on International Support for Agricultural Extension Systems in Sub-saharan Africa” took place in Neuchâtel (Switzerland). Ever since the group met again once a year: Rome (1996), Ghana (1997), Mali (1998), Uppsala (1999) and again in Neuchâtel in November 2000. What is it that motivates representatives of donor agencies and universities of 10 European countries and the World Bank to participate in an engaged workshop on efficient and effective agricultural extension and it’s financing?**

### **The informal approach, an unconventional procedure...**

Perfectly conscious, that opinions on extension issues may diverge (see beliefs), the Neuchâtel Initiative (NI) chose to meet as an informal group. This may be surprising as one could think that a more formal group would have more influence, especially on the enforcement of the NI principles and views within the various agencies.

However, it seems that a lesser degree of direct influence is largely compensated by the high motivation of all NI members. They are engaged in a continuous, intensive, highly professional and very open debate. Moreover, the informality of the group allows everybody to contribute freely, without being bound by donors’ official policies. NI members represent agencies of great diversity such as different European government- and private agencies, universities, FAO and the World Bank.

There is no doubt that donor co-ordination in extension work and it’s financing is a common concern to all members. And even though all participants had to convince their superiors of the importance to meet again it is surprising that 22 highly motivated people from all over Europe and USA came to Neuchâtel in

### **A set of varying beliefs:**

- Formal groups are more professional and powerful!
- Informal groups are powerful in letting filter ideas into institutions.
- The free adoption of ideas may be slow but it is the most efficient way to develop ownership!

2000. After a very interesting and intensive exchange on extension and its financing, they agreed to work on together for at least one more year.

In fact, the very secret of success maybe the informal character of the group?

### **What has happened so far**

The discussion about a joint vision of extension started in 1995. There was a growing concern about the low quality and inefficiency of large-scale public extension services financed with donor money. At the same time local governments reduced or even suspended their agricultural extension services in the context of liberalization and privatisation. African farmers and African countries pay a heavy price for loss in efficiency of development assistance by not having adequate access to information, technology and other services they badly need.

A group of donors including the World Bank therefore suggested an informal gathering of donors to address the problem of support for agricultural extension systems in Africa.

Besides the exchange during the meetings and as a result of the discussions the informal group elaborated and published two booklets:

1. Common framework on Agricultural Extension (1999, french and english) and
2. Guide for Monitoring, Evaluation and a Joint Analysis of Pluralistic Extension Support (2000, english).<sup>1</sup>

New questions of high relevance were added and studied. In the 1999 action plan a mandate had been given to SDC/LBL, Ministry of Foreign Affairs France (MAE-F) and GTZ to study the various aspects of financing extension and to DfID and Sida to explore the link between extension and poverty reduction.

### **NI meeting 2000**

Both working groups presented drafts of their findings. The Swiss/French/German group outlined three complementary products, related to the financing of extension:

- Principles of Financing Extension
- Concepts and Mechanisms for sustainable financing of extension
- Operational Guide to the financing of rural extension

The British/Swedish group presented their work on

- Extension, Poverty and Vulnerability.

Moreover a FAO study showed that the HIV/AIDS epidemic is no longer just a health issue but has become a real challenge to development, and finally ISG (International Support Group & CTA (Centre for Agriculture and Rural Cooperation) explained their first experiences in Africa with the involvement and possibilities of internet use for a Linked Local Learning.

The presentations permitted to appreciate the present results and to analyse, plan and coordinate future proceedings in extension work and its financing, including as well the question of poverty, sustainability, empowerment and ownership.

### **The objectives of the NI group**

The group being informal at every meeting the objective has to be restated and agreed upon. So far it seems that the three objectives mentioned below represent a common understanding.

1. Develop a common vision among donors
2. Foster innovation in extension work
3. Achieve impact

Three questions were picked out to be discussed in groups:

1. Should extension work with the poorest?
2. Fields of joint work, what and how?
3. How to go on with the drafts of the studies

Of course opinions (and sometimes beliefs) differ among NI members. Shall the poorest be included in an extension service or excluded because they will never be able to pay for the service (sustainability)? What other options are there in case they are dropped? Must/can agricultural extension be combined with rural development services? Whoever is dealing with agricultural extension knows about the pertinence of the questions mentioned. The NI group hasn't found the answers yet but it is very serious about finding them.

### **Concrete results of the meeting**

An action plan for 2001 has been established and it has been agreed that three new products should be ready by the annual meeting 2001. The three publications will deal with:

- Common framework on financing extension
- Tools and background needed to apply the common framework (decision making guide, case studies, models, etc.)
- Principles about extension and poverty

The NI meeting 2000 has thus again proven that the informal approach is able to produce efficient work. Experience also shows that the collaborating institutions do adopt ideas more easily if they can freely choose doing so. Both facts are a solid motivation for the core group to tackle the tasks waiting for them.

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<sup>1</sup> Both publications can be ordered at LBL.

## Development of ownership

Even though after the conclusion of the event many questions remain unanswered, the interesting thing about NI is that members are engaged in a common learning process and that experiences and new understandings are continuously shared and put to discussion. A core group prepares detailed field and literature studies. It meets regularly in varying composition, organises joint evaluations and elaborates new proposals. These proposals are then discussed, commented and completed by all members of NI. This active involvement in the process is the reason of a high identification and motivation of all participants.

## Background

There is broad consensus among development partners that agricultural extension systems play a major role in the economic and social development of Africa. Debate continues however, about how these systems should operate. The controversy involves institutional, conceptual, and financial issues. Unstable political environments, changes in public investment policies, and other factors put pressure on agricultural extension systems. It is therefore important that the partners involved develop a common vision of how to deal with inevitable changes which affect extension.

Within the donor community, different approaches to agricultural extension have led to some confrontation in the past. The T&V system advocated by the World Bank and adopted by around 30 African countries has been criticised by other donors who have nevertheless failed to propose equally well-developed alternatives. It is widely recognised that the confrontation among donors negatively affects the field operations of most agencies. African farmers and African countries pay a price for loss in efficiency of development assistance by not having adequate access to information, technology and other services they badly need.

A group of donors including the World Bank therefore suggested an informal conference of donors to address the problem of support for agricultural extension systems in Africa. Swiss Development Co-operation volunteered to organise and host the meeting. It took place in Neuchâtel. This first informal meeting then led to several other events and finally adopted the name of Neuchâtel Initiative.

The most salient characteristic of the initiative is the fact that it maintained its strictly informal set-up. It will continue its activities as long as there are people interested and willing to join forces and ideas for the improvement of agricultural extension.

## Abbreviations and acronyms

CTA	Centre for Agriculture and Rural Cooperation
DfID	Department for International Development, U.K.
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GTZ	Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (Germany)
ISG	International Support Group
LBL	Landwirtschaftliche Beratungszentrale Lindau (Swiss Centre for Agricultural Extension and Rural Development)
MAE(-F)	Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (France)
NI	Neuchâtel Initiative
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
Sida	Swedish Agency for International Development