

# Analysing a Regional Extension Service in Azerbaijan

by Sonja Kessler

**This article is an excerpt from the diploma thesis of Sonja Kessler at the Department of Rural Sociology of the Technical University of Munich in Germany. It analyses a private village-based extension service established by a GTZ project in Azerbaijan, in particular the degree to which it is known and used by the farmers of the area, and its prospects for financial survival once there is no donor support any more.**

## Background of the study and methods used

The starting point for the study presented in this article was the interest of the GTZ project „*Support of Private Initiatives in Agriculture*“ in Azerbaijan. It wanted to know to what extent the rural population utilises a regional extension service that had been established with the help of the project.

The objectives of the study were:

- to understand the degree of familiarity and acceptance of the service among the local farmers,
- the topics covered by the extension agents at present,
- and to judge the financial sustainability of the extension service.

The *Guide for Monitoring, Evaluation and Joint Analysis of Pluralistic Extension Support*<sup>1</sup> was used as a basis for the analysis. It suggests to consider the following six key aspects:

1. Elements of prevailing agricultural sector policy
2. Balance between transfer of technology, facilitation and advisory work
3. Producers and their organisations

4. Marketing opportunities and support
5. Public sector investment
6. Decentralisation of the organisation and management of extension and pluralism in financing and delivering of extension as well as inter-organisational relationships

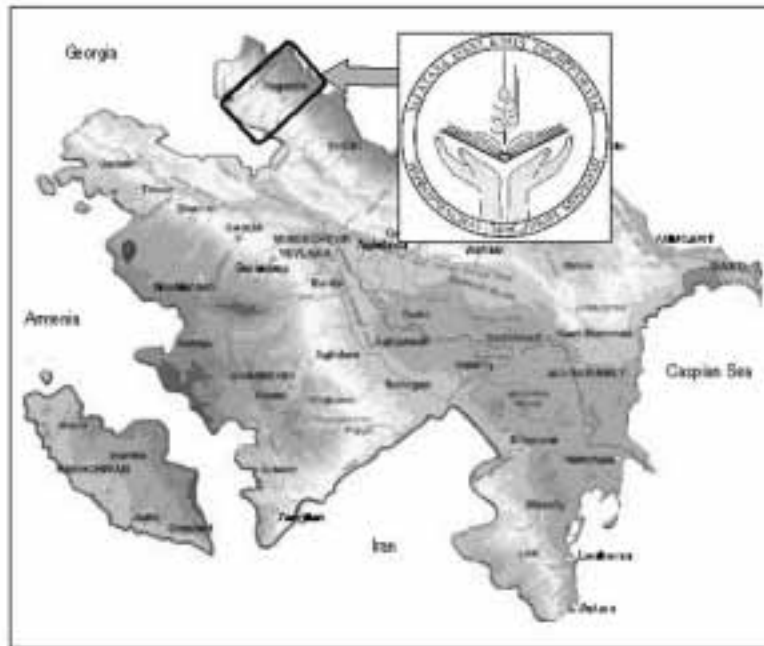
Structured interviews with 8 groups of about 25 farmers, village extension agents, employees of the private Information and Extension Centre Zaqatala, the district agricultural administration, agricultural research and education and the ministry of agriculture contributed to analyse the situation. In addition, 40 farmers in eight villages have been interviewed individually with the help of a formal questionnaire.

## Environment for agricultural services in the former Soviet Union

At present there is a considerable gap in knowledge regarding practical and methodological approaches to the organisation of agricultural service systems in countries in transition. Theory-based strategies for institution building are largely lacking so far. Thus, experiences from other countries have to be transferred according to the principle of „trial and error“. One soon notices that there are many difficulties with organising agricultural services in an environment of considerable institutional deficiencies. The land of the former large state and cooperative farms has only recently been distributed among the people (if it has been distributed at all). Most people who cultivate land now are not rooted farmers and not yet used to self-supporting management. This situation is calling for extension and education. Two main problems of extension services in the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) are a) the insufficient qualification of local experts for the tasks of modern extension and b) the financing of extension services by rather poor countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Neuchâtel Group (Ian Christoplos and Andrew Kidd), 2000: Guide for Monitoring, Evaluation and Joint Analysis of Pluralistic Extension Support. The publication can be ordered at LBL.



Azerbaijan, project region Zaqatala and logo of the private Information and Extension Centre, modified; Source: <http://www.azerweb.com>

### The situation in Azerbaijan

In Azerbaijan, unlike in most other countries of the former Soviet Union, land reforms have taken place to privatise agricultural land and farm assets. With the laws „On agrarian reforms“ and „On land reform“ which began in 1996, a legal basis for the privatisation and liquidation of the state and collective farms was created. Formally the dissolving of the kolkhozes has been completed. But the process of settling and land distribution is still under way. The high degree of corruption Azerbaijan has in common with many other countries in transition, is limiting the functioning of government and civil society. Together with the still oversized bureaucratic apparatus inherited from Soviet times this is to a certain extent diminishing the perspectives of reforms.

The focus of interest is Zaqatala district in north western Azerbaijan at the southern border of the Caucasian mountains, the GTZ project region where a large part of my investigation took place.

In this area climatic and soil conditions would generally provide an excellent economic base for agriculture (tobacco, hazelnut, orchards, grains, livestock farming), if it were not for weaknesses such as remoteness, dispersed population, a lack of experience in smallholder farming as well as in managing irrigation.

84'000 people of the district's population had claims to receive 0.2 to 0.5 ha land (per capita in family); approximately 23'000 family farms have grown out of this.

### Activities of the GTZ project

The overall objective of the project Support of Private Initiatives in Agriculture is to improve the conditions for a more efficient running of the newly established family farms. The regional extension service for farmers described in this article, is only one of its multiple measures to support the transition from kolkhozes and sovkhoses to free-enterprise relations.

In August 1998 the concept for a comprehensive extension service for the technical issues of agricultural production was worked out and extension for farmers on winter wheat production was initiated.

For this purpose extension groups consisting of three to four former kolkhoz specialists were formed in 26 village administrative units of the region. The village administrations provided each group with two ha of land as experimental field and for demonstration purposes.

In order to draw attention of decision makers at the macro-level to the problems of the regions, and to

ensure frequent contacts the project manager insisted on placing his office in the ministry of agriculture. In October 1998 the support of high Azerbaijan administrative staff could be gained to evaluate the work of the extension groups in Zaqatala and they gave a lecture to extension staff on possibilities of improvement. The situation of the small family farms and the seriousness of their problems are often not clear at the higher levels of the administration.

The initial idea was that the extension groups elect representatives from among the groups. These representatives were intended to represent and look after the groups and establish contact to other sources of information and exchange. Instead, the private Information and Extension Centre in Zaqatala formed itself out of the former agricultural administration, which was dissolved overnight by decree in December 1998. The five employees of the Centre have the task of guiding and looking after the extension groups. The project tried to back up the Centre in finding its own role by a workshop concerning the objectives and various other steps. It organises a monthly gathering of all village extensionists in its meeting room, offers rooms for GTZ seminars, monitors the village extension groups' work and shows groups of interested people the organisation of agricultural extension in Zaqatala district. Yet, the Centre is not able to work as independently as required. It is still rather far from integrating the potential customers interested in extension into the design of the extension program.



A group of farmers and extension agents.

Besides there are expectations of the Centre's staff towards the project concerning the further development of extension, for which actually more initiative of their own would be required (and for which they were already given suggestions and support). The factors

which receive most attention in the monitoring by the specialists of the Centre are not the ones which are decisive for the quality of extension work in the end.

In July/August 1999 80 extensionists from 26 villages were trained in methods of communication and extension in one week courses. This training was deepened with some 25 extension agents in a second and third seminar (March 2000 and May 2001). Some of them turned out to be the right persons for further qualifying their colleagues in extension methodologies; thus 14 of them attended an additional „train the trainer“ course. A first phase of this mutual qualification was carried out in May 2000. Additionally, 25 extension agents obtained training in economic analysis of family farms.

Crop production is the main theme of extension at present. Given the importance of sheep, cattle and poultry keeping, little professional support is offered in these topics. During the workshop Communication for Extension Purposes it was observed that the extensionists still argue too much in separate activities instead of considering the whole farming system and its possible development paths. And during the group discussions some farmers mentioned they could not implement the proposals of the extensionists because they lack money. In such cases the extensionists rather resignate than start looking for feasible alternatives. The extension groups are free to design their work as they want, yet, they have a limited range of topics as well as methods to offer. Group extension events prepared in advance are very rare.

The following overview of the current contents of extension, mentioned by the farmers in the group discussions, illustrates that extension in its present stage is largely technical advice and little facilitation.

- **Cattle/poultry:** treatment of poultry and cattle diseases and parasites, difficult calving, vaccination, feeding, cattle breeding, cow fertility
- **Land technology:** mechanisation, technical procedures (e.g. sowing), land preparation
- **Cropping practices in general:** time of planting, harvesting, ploughing and weeding; how to weed, what to do with the crops; seed rates (wheat, barley, corn, sunflower, alfalfa)
  - Crop rotation
  - Wheat and barley: where to get seed; seed from the extension plot; which variety to grow; undersowing of alfalfa in wheat; advice on seed testing



Front view of a house in a village.

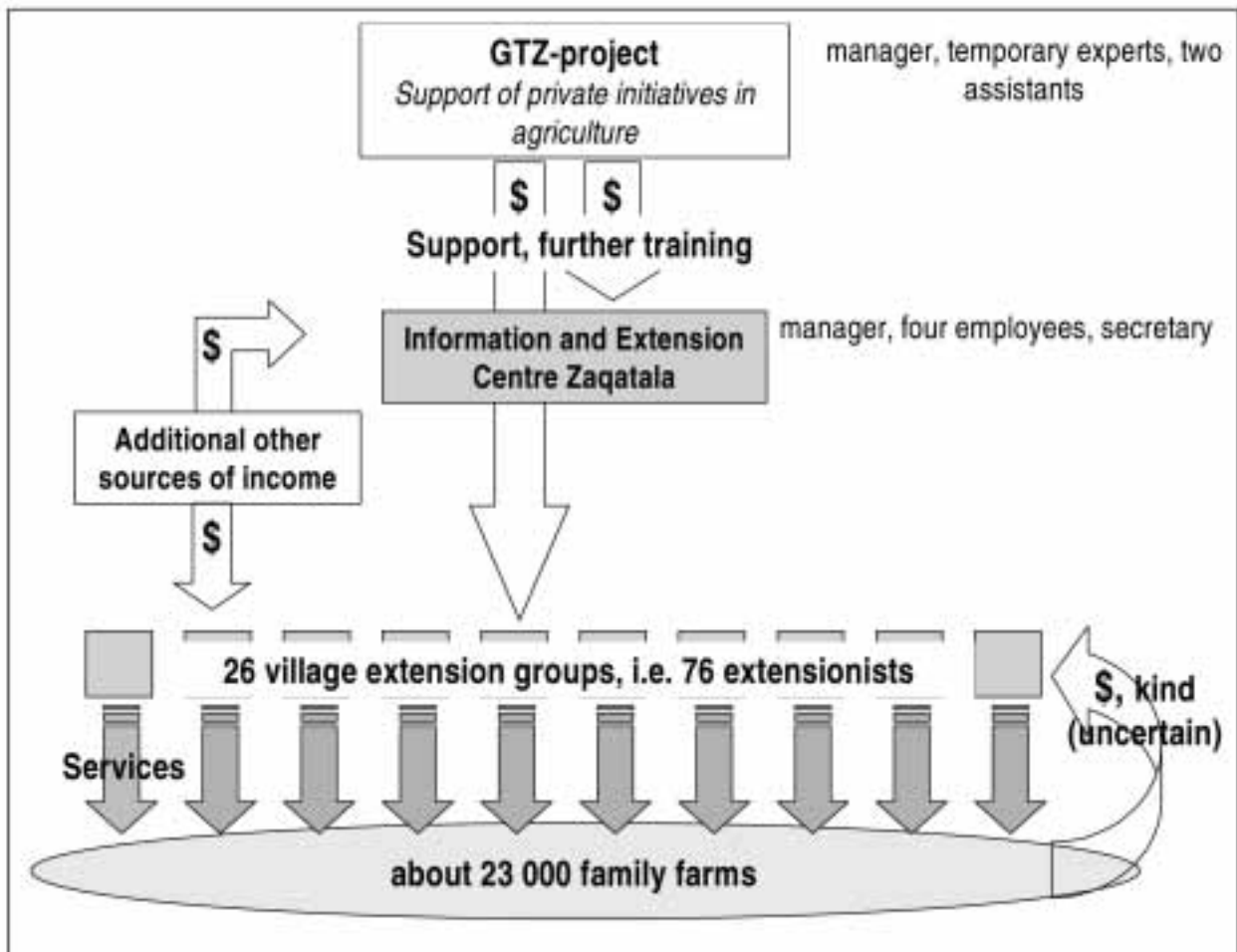
- Fodder: silage making; how to grow and make hay
- Other crops: rotten spots in the tobacco fields; rotten seedlings in the tobacco greenhouse; potato variety and harvesting; local potato seed; herb and tomato growing; care of hazelnut gardens; help to get a contract with the tea factory (only one farmer, 0.5 ha)
- **Fertilisers and chemicals:** how to use fertiliser and herbicides for the various crops; chemical application
- **Soil:** which crops and seeds for which soil conditions („Is the soil good enough for growing wheat?“)
- **Economics:** profitability; is it worth to harvest or not; business plans; economic advice in dealing with a lack of workers.

### **Financing mechanisms**

Until today extension is supported both technically and financially by GTZ. Each extensionist receives a monthly salary of 100'000 Manat (approximately 23 US\$) from the project. Their work is intended to be a part time job. The Centre receives 3'666'667 Manat each month (about 840 US\$).

It is unclear how the service will be financed in the long term as the flow of money from the project is going to cease this year. Farmers' contributions and fees may become an important element of the Information and Extension Centre's income, but they are unlikely to be sufficient for long-term operations.

Almost everyone interviewed during the survey kept on repeating that the farmers could neither afford nor were willing to pay for the services rendered. It was claimed that the farmers are still influenced by the Soviet system; they expect everything to be free of charge, including extension work. But indeed there



Overall view of players and flows of funds and services.

are already some farmers paying for services in kind after harvest. The barter trade relationship between farmers and extensionists works for example in the following way: people ask the extension agent for advice which results in a harvest of at least 30 quintals of wheat per ha; the extensionist will get in autumn whatever amount of wheat has been harvested exceeding this quantity.

The village extension agents have additional sources of income. For example, some of them are earning money by distributing fertiliser from the processing plant among farmers, by connecting farmers with customers or by showing farmers how to grade tobacco sorts for the tobacco counters. This may be a first step towards financial sustainability. But this issue could hardly be discussed during the investigation as most of the farmers and extensionists denied the existence of any flow of funds from farmers to extensionists.

The Muslim tradition of not asking for money for help in advance, but taking just what the person that has been helped is willing and able to give, increased the difficulty to discuss the financing mechanisms openly. Another issue is the extension staff's unwillingness to disclose other sources of income as long as the project is still on the spot and is regarded as the authority responsible for the financing of extension work that should be maintained as long as possible.

Unless the state does not undertake steps to support agricultural extension services in future, the users will have to bear the full costs of the services. The results of the survey have been used to calculate how much users would have to pay if the costs directly related to extension were divided among them. The table below shows the results of these calculations.

Village	No. of farm households	% of farmers using extension	→ number of farmers using extension	a) with present monthly salary	b) with the aimed for monthly salary of 450'000 manat in manat per user and month	c) including a fee of 52'740 man./ month and extensionist for the Centre, and 115'769 man. income/ month and extensionist from the experimental plots
Usungasmalar	210	10	21	9524 (ca. 2.10 \$)	42'857 (ca. 10 \$)	36'854 (ca. 8.50 \$)
Jenkijan	500	16	79	3797	17 089	14'695 (ca. 3.50 \$)
Usuntala	223	53	118	2543	11 444	9'841 (ca. 2.20 \$)
Köjam	1302	12	158	1904	8569	7'369 (ca. 1.70 \$)
Jar	1292	24	310	967	4354	3'744 (ca. 1 \$)
Mukhakh	1932	20	386	776	3494	3'004 (ca. 0.70 \$)
Mocul	691	23	162	616	2771	2'383 (ca. 0.50 \$)
Aliabad	2990	58	1722	174 (ca. 0.05 \$)	784 (ca. 0.20 \$)	674 (ca. 0.15 \$)

Calculation a) is the simplest, just considering the present salaries of the village extension agents, while calculation b) and c) are more realistic. Calculation b) takes into account that the extensionists are aiming at an approximately fourfold higher income from their extension work in future. Calculation c) finally considers not only this increased income but also the costs for running the Information and Extension Centre, as well as the earnings the extension agents receive from their experimental plots.

#### View of the extension group in Jenkijan on its future

„So far we didn't think about the financing of our work when the project is going to end ... 50% of the extensionists are going to leave this job then. The same will happen in the Centre.“

These projections vary from ca. 8.50 US\$ per farmer and month in the village coming off worst (Usungasmalar, calculation c) to ca. 0.15 \$ per farmer and month in the village with the highest percentage of extension users, Aliabad. The latter figure appears to be a rather unrealistic projection as the three extension agents from Aliabad are unlikely to be able to serve such a high number of clients in the long run. 8.50 \$ is definitely too much for a smallholder to pay. In the village following the above mentioned, Jenkijan, only 3.50 \$ per user and month would have to be paid, a sum which – depending on the effectiveness of the

service – seems manageable (equivalent to the cost of five loafs of bread).

#### Insights and suggestions for the future

Institutional deficits in the macro-economic, legal and policy environment of agriculture demand a clearer formulation of the objectives of official intergovernmental co-operation concerning this region (the macro-level has to be reached more efficiently). In the next phase the project Support of Private Initiatives in Agriculture intends to leave the micro-level of the district, and rather dedicate its efforts to consultation on policy at the macro-level. It is not clear there, yet, that state support for agricultural extension is necessary as farmers' means are not sufficient for financing an optimal level of operation of comprehensive regional extension services. Besides, many of the services provided by the Information and Extension Centre Zaqatala have public good character for which it is impossible to charge farmers. An open discussion about fees has to be initiated on all levels.

Furthermore, restructuring of agricultural research is needed. It is not equipped to provide new findings to extension agencies nor is it able to foster innovations for agricultural development. Support for agricultural extension by the research system could be improved if the public sector would invest in a more efficient research system no longer hierarchically passing down research findings which are not responding to the

needs of farmers. The public sector currently only supports reconditioning of agricultural research and agricultural extension within the frame of a World Bank project for agricultural development and rural credit. So far this initiative does not have the capacity for an enabling and regulating role in agricultural extension but it is undertaking promising first steps.

An uneven distribution of power and opportunities in the villages could be observed. It derives at least partly from former positions in the communist regime - sometimes an obstacle for the farmers to make use of extension as the extension agents are the leading personnel of the former large farms.

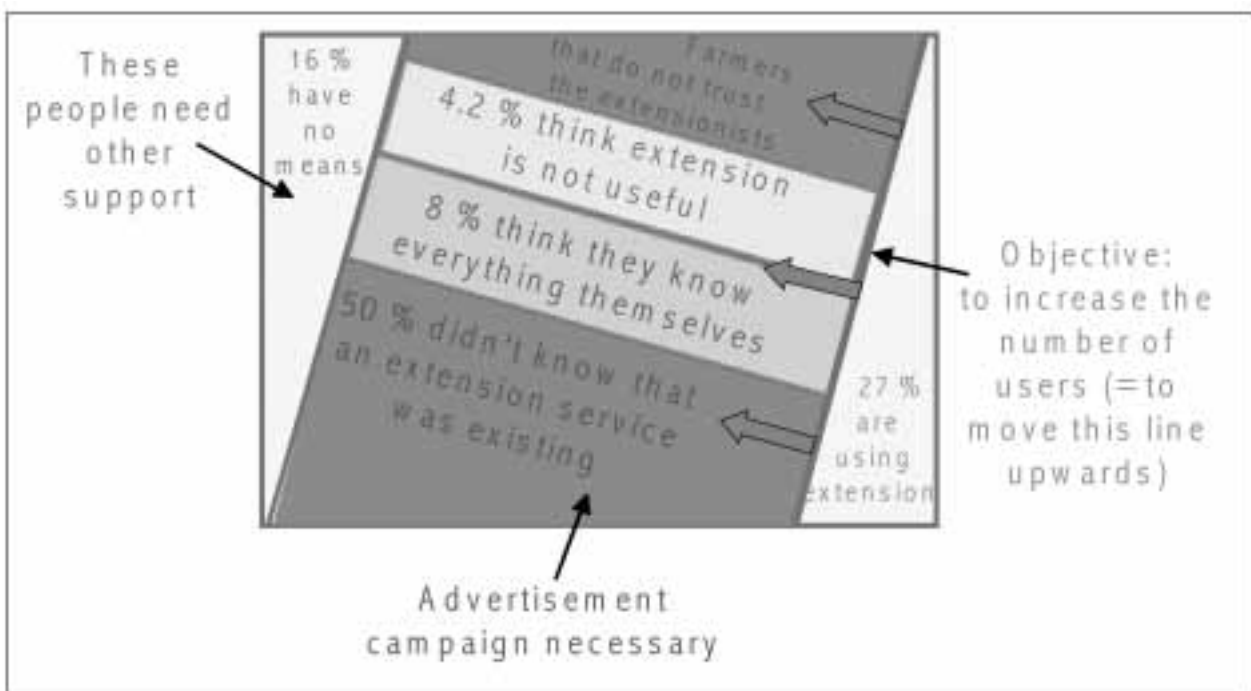
27 % of 263 interviewed farmers declared they had been using the services of the village extension groups. But 50 % of the persons interviewed did not know that the extension groups do exist. This relatively high degree of unawareness suggests to carry out an advertisement campaign in the villages of the district, to get the majority of villagers acquainted with the village extension groups.

All 59 non-users of extension who knew that there was an extension group in their village were interviewed about their reasons for rejection. Three possible answers were offered and multiple answers were possible. 72 % of them told that they do not have the means to farm their land, 36 % think they know everything

themselves and for 19 % the advice of the extension group does not seem helpful.

Even though half of the extension users declare that their income has been rising since they became independent farmers, a main problem of both, farmers and extension agents, is, that they do not know where to sell the agricultural products once they have managed to increase production. This is due to the fact that input and output markets are weak and nothing is done to promote inter-regional trade by the government. There are no structures providing information about the development of markets and prices, which would be very important. Irrigation and markets are important points, which cannot be covered by the extensionists so far and call for competent back up. This is a task for the district agricultural administration and higher levels.

Accountability mechanisms of the extension agents towards the producers and mechanisms for regular mutual exchange are lacking. Producer organisations representing farmers are unfortunately still missing. They would be important to give farmers a voice and to make them accepted partners in negotiation. Besides, they are a prerequisite for reversing the flow of funds, i.e. not to finance the extensionists directly by the project, but hand out the money to producers who then buy services from the extensionists, so that they become clients in control.



Percentages of extension users and various categories of non-users.

A consistent quality regulation system for the extension staff would be necessary. The extensionists have to learn to consider the development options for the farms and broaden their point of view when confronted with farmers' questions and difficulties. The monitoring and evaluation system for the extension staff in Zaqatala has to be improved to support these requirements and facilitate joint learning. Importance should be put on accompanying village extension agents on their field visits to allow assessment of their performance. A fixed format for the reports of the village extension agents for the Information and Extension Centre has to be introduced (which should distinguish the various week days and require a comparison of planned and actually realised activities).

**What a good extension agent is, according to the village extension groups in Zaqatala**

- People should trust and accept an extensionist. He has to be known in the village.
- He must be a very good farmer himself, that people can adopt something from him.
- He should have a good education, and skills, be experienced and be a good specialist.
- He needs profound knowledge on many topics.
- He should be able to influence the people.
- He must be skilled in communicating with people.
- He has to like his work.

Furthermore the technical qualification of the extension staff has to be improved and their range of methodological options for passing knowledge on has to be broadened, e.g. how to design and prepare group extension events in advance. The Information and Extension Centre should subscribe to suitable specialised literature and make this available to the village extension agents. In addition, selected extension staff should attend trainings that are being offered by international organisations in the capital Baku in accordance with their situation and tasks. The aim of the latter two measures is to show the extension staff ways of further qualifying themselves without support by GTZ. Backing the qualitative improvement aimed at, quality regulation of extension staff by a professional body with transparent procedures and criteria has to be introduced as soon as possible. This body requires the authority to dismiss staff who does not fulfil certain standards after a first warning, staff of the Information and Extension Centre as well as village extension agents.

A clear distinction between regulatory and advisory functions of the village extension agents could not be realised entirely in Zaqatala. Persons holding a public function should not be admitted as extensionists. The reasons for proceeding like this have to be comprehensibly explained to all persons concerned.

Inter-organisational relationships (from policy makers at national level down to local extension staff on district level) should be strengthened to improve the agricultural extension system. The Information and Extension Centre in Zaqatala has to intensify the exchange with other projects in agricultural extension. More joint action, co-ordination and flow of information among the actors involved in extension and agricultural development on district level is needed.

Civil society in general still has to become by far more active, and public participation has to increase so that one can speak of real political decentralisation. An open discussion which actor is best able to perform specific functions and provide particular services has to begin.

The education of students has to be improved to become attractive and to equip the students for the actual situation. The equipment of agricultural colleges does not meet today's requirements at all. Besides the agricultural university should introduce courses concerned with agricultural extension.

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