

# From “Best Practice” to “Best Fit”

## A framework for designing and analyzing pluralistic agricultural advisory services

by Regina Birner<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Agricultural advisory services play an important role in supporting the use of the agricultural sector as an engine of pro-poor growth and enabling small farmers to meet new challenges, such as accessing export markets, adopting environmentally sustainable production techniques, and coping with HIV/AIDS and other health challenges that affect agriculture. After years of neglect, there is now renewed interest in agricultural advisory services in many countries. The issue of how best to provide and finance advisory services remains controversial, however. The questions under debate include:

- What should be the roles of the public sector, private sector, and civil society?
- How can we ensure that agricultural advisory services are demand-driven and meet the diverse information needs of farmers?
- How can advisory services be made efficient and financially sustainable?
- How can we ensure that female farmers, the poor, and other marginalized groups have access to agricultural advisory services?

Past experiences clearly show that importing standardized models of extension to a new context is not a promising strategy, even when the imported models are viewed as “best practice.” What is important is to build capacity among policy planners and extension managers to identify modes of providing and financing extension that best fit the specific conditions and development priorities of their country.

This article provides an overview of pluralistic agricultural advisory services and presents an analytical framework that can help policy planners and extension managers to identify best fit options for financing and providing these services. The framework focuses on (a) the design elements of a system of advisory services – that is, governance structures, capacity and management, and advisory methods; (b) performance measurement and quality management in the provision of agricultural advisory services; and (c) impact assessment with regard to multiple goals as well as assessment of the costs and benefits associated with different ways of providing and financing agricultural advisory services. The framework provides a tool for the design, analysis, and evaluation of agricultural advisory services that acknowledges that these services form part of a wider agricultural knowledge and innovation system.

### Defining pluralistic agricultural advisory services

There are many definitions, philosophies, and approaches to agricultural extension or advisory services, and views have changed over time. While extension traditionally implied training and dissemination of messages about specific technologies, more recently it has expanded to include assisting farmers to form

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groups, dealing with marketing of agricultural products, and partnering with a broad range of service providers, such as credit institutions. The term “agricultural advisory services,” adopted in this article, reflects this broader definition and encompasses the set of institutions that support and facilitate people engaged in agricultural production to solve problems and obtain information, skills, and technologies to improve their livelihoods and well-being. Advisory services also implies a service orientation and a move away from top-down models of technology transfer.

Taking the definition a step further, “pluralistic advisory services” specifies the variety of service providers that have emerged in recent years, including public-private partnerships and outsourcing to the private sector and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The benefits of *pluralistic* advisory services are their ability to overcome constraints, such as shortages in funding, staffing, and expertise, and to provide the necessary flexibility to tailor services to the needs of specific subsectors or regions (see Figure 1, a matrix that classifies pluralistic agricultural advisory services according to their governance structures).

### Agricultural advisory services within the context of agricultural knowledge and innovation systems

To understand the contribution of agricultural advisory services to agricultural development, it is essential to consider these services as part of the wider systems in which knowledge and innovations are generated, disseminated, and utilized in the agricultural sector. Specifically, the concept of an “agricultural knowledge and information system for rural development” implies the integration of agricultural research, agricultural extension, and agricultural education. The concept of the “agricultural innovation system,” on the other hand, implies a wider range of organizations and stakeholders involved in agricultural innovations along agricultural value chains. The analytical framework presented in this brief positions agricultural advisory services within the perspective of a wider knowledge and innovation system.

**Figure 1 Matrix of Options for Providing and Financing Pluralistic Agricultural Advisory Services**

Provider of the service	Source of finance for the service				
	Public sector	Farmers	Private companies	Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)	Farmer-based organizations (FBOs)
Public sector	Public-sector extension services with different degrees	Public-sector extension agents with farmers paying fees	Public-sector extension agents hired by private companies	Public-sector extension agents hired by NGOs	Public-sector extension agents hired by FBOs
Private companies	Publicly funded contracts or subsidies to private service providers	Private service providers hired and paid for by farmers	Information provided with sale of inputs	Private service providers hired and paid for by NGOs	Private service providers hired and paid for by FBOs
Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)	Publicly funded contracts or subsidies to NGO providers	Extension agents hired by NGOs, with farmers paying fees		Extension agents hired by NGOs as a free service to farmers	
Farmer-based organizations (FBOs)	Publicly funded contracts or subsidies to FBO providers	Extension agents hired by FBOs, with farmers paying fees		Extension agents hired by NGOs and paid for by FBOs	Extension agents hired by FBOs as a free service to farmers

Sources: Adapted from W. M. Rivera, “Agricultural extension in transition worldwide: Structural financial and managerial reform strategies,” *Public Administration and Development* (1996, Vol. 16: 151–161) and J. Anderson and G. Feder, “Agricultural extension: Good intentions and hard realities,” *World Bank Research Observer* (2004, Vol. 19, No. 1: 41–60).

## The framework

The framework presented in this article is intended to serve two main purposes. First, it can assist in the design and reform of agricultural advisory services by defining the systems in which policy decisions are made and identifying the “frame conditions” (that is, “best fit” options, described further below) to be taken into account when making these decisions; further, it can assist in the design of monitoring and evaluation systems for agricultural advisory services. Second, the framework can provide a common analytical framework, thereby accommodating multidisciplinary approaches and facilitating comparability of findings across different projects. This ability to both draw on different fields and compare results among disparate studies should create synergies and improve the understanding of the role and operation of advisory services, thereby generating information in support of reform. The framework can be applied to the analysis of advisory services at national and subnational levels, as well as being used for cross-country comparisons (Figure 2).

When designing agricultural advisory services, policymakers and extension workers must decide on the characteristics that will determine the design of the system – that is, its governance structures, capacity, management, and organization, and the advisory techniques to be used. The design and analysis of *governance structures* (Figure 2, Point G) involves the roles of the public and private sectors and civil society in financing and providing advisory services (Figure 1). Other important aspects of governance include the level of decentralization and the linkages and partnerships among agents in the innovation system, especially agricultural research and education organizations.

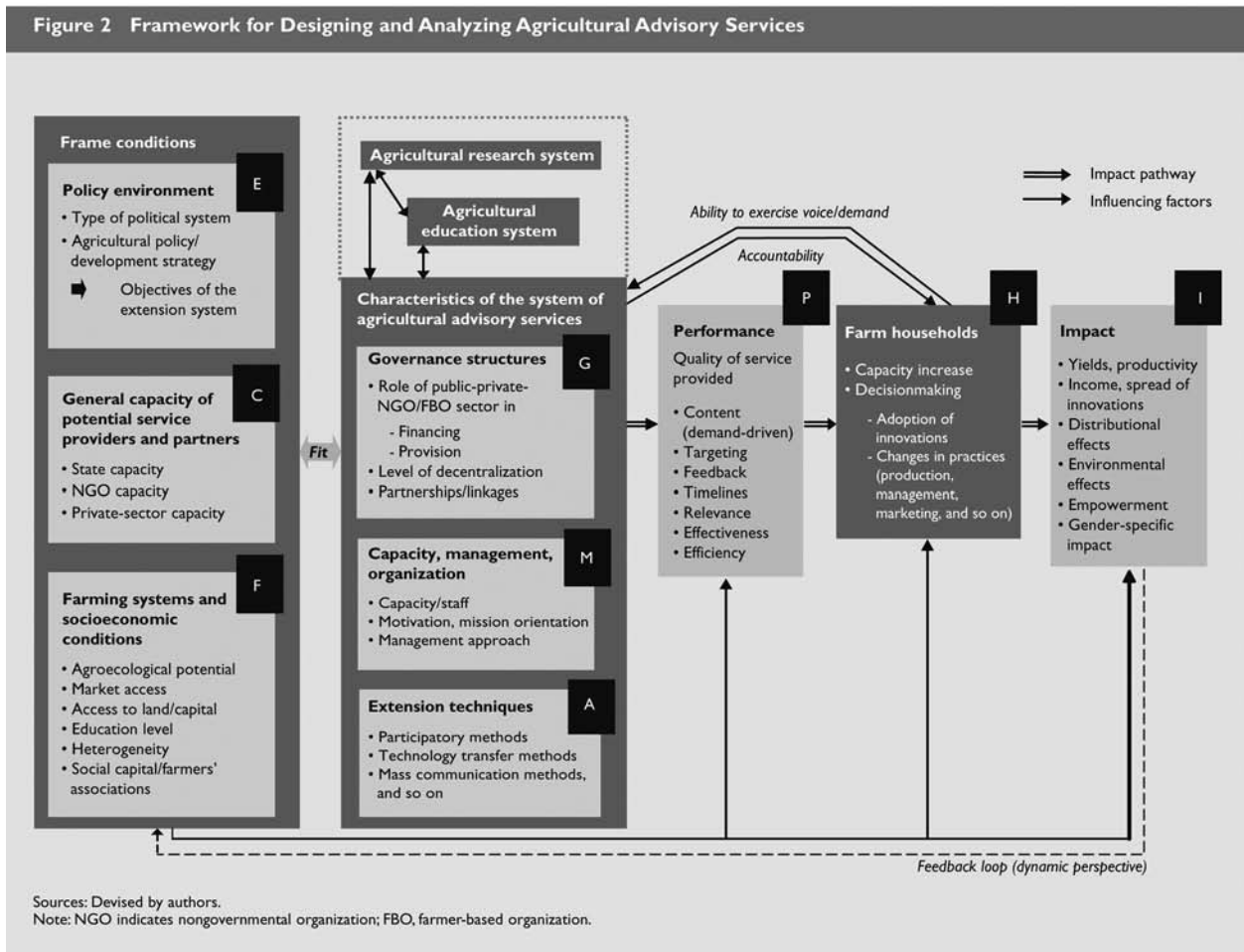
The *capacity, management, and organization* variables (Figure 2, Point M) refer to the capacity for the provision of advisory services, and the way in which those services are managed within the respective governance structures. Capacity refers to the numbers, training levels, skills, attitudes, and aspirations of the members of the advisory service, as well as their incentives, mission orientation, professional ethics, and organizational culture. Point M also refers to the management procedures applied, such as monitoring and evaluation

and performance management systems. Point A refers to *advisory or extension techniques* used by the extension agents in their interactions with farmers. These include techniques based on visits to individuals or groups, agricultural production demonstrations short-term training, and the use of different media, such as radio and the Internet.

By distinguishing among the various factors influencing agricultural advisory services – governance structures; capacity, management, and organization; and advisory techniques – the framework “disentangles” these complex systems, extricating relevant factors for analysis. This scheme should make it possible to identify and resolve the factors contributing to impact, or lack thereof. Past studies often left the causes of lack of impact unclear – that is, whether the advisory techniques used were inappropriate to the objectives of the program or the local context, whether the extension agents had insufficient training, whether the system was ill-managed or too centralized, and so on.

## Factors that influence best fit

To identify best fit options for providing and financing agricultural advisory services, the factors that influence the comparative advantages and disadvantages of different options need to be considered. These factors are referred to as frame conditions in Figure 2. *The policy environment* (Figure 2, Point E) for agricultural advisory services is an important frame condition. In particular, a country’s political priorities and its agricultural development strategy have far-reaching implications for the appropriateness of different models for providing and financing agricultural advisory services. The proportion of the budget that a government allocates to the agricultural sector in general determines the scope for publicly funded extension. In addition, priorities within the agricultural sector play an important role, too. For example, a development strategy that focuses on highvalue agriculture will require a different model of agricultural extension than a strategy focusing on the promotion of foodstaple crops and food security. Likewise, the appropriateness of a mode of providing and financing advisory services will be influenced by the challenges to be addressed, including nutrition, health and environmental challenges, and



the relative priority that governments and other providers place on economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. In a given country, the above factors interact to determine the (explicit and implicit) objectives as well as the ultimate beneficiaries of the extension system.

The *farming systems and socioeconomic conditions* (Figure 2, Point F) under which advisory services are provided also constitute important frame conditions. In defining farming systems, relevant variables include the agroecological potential; the types of crops and livestock that are or could be produced; the level of market integration that can be achieved; and farm household access to land, capital, and other inputs. From the socioeconomic standpoint, important aspects include the heterogeneity of the rural population in terms of assets, ethnicity, education, and other factors, as well as the level and type of social organization

– in particular the existence of farmers’ organizations and the possibilities for creating and fostering such organizations. In addition, socially determined gender roles influence the strategies that need to be applied if female farmers are to be reached. Likewise, the prevalence of social hierarchies and social exclusion influence the strategies required to reach disadvantaged groups.

The *capacity of potential service providers* (Point C) is also an important frame condition, especially in determining appropriate governance structures. For example, if the country under consideration has an effective public administration system but weak private and NGO sectors, the public sector may have a comparative advantage in providing services. In practice, the extent to which the private sector chooses to play a role in agricultural extension services depends largely on the associated economic opportunities. Past

experiences with outsourcing indicate that it often takes time for NGOs and private-sector companies with the ability to provide professional advisory services to emerge.

The design of the most appropriate system for providing and financing agricultural advisory services under a particular set of frame conditions is arrived at via a learning process. Learning can be supported by national and regional networks, in which planners, managers, and practitioners involved in agricultural advisory services exchange their experiences and reflect on solutions. Research can support the learning process by analyzing past experiences of agricultural extension reform around the world. Analysis of the performance, impact, and costs and benefits of different models plays an important role in identifying appropriate systems and promoting institutional learning. Points P, H, and I in Figure 2 correspond to an impact chain analysis. Examples of indicators of performance (Point P) are the quality and content of the advice, the ability to reach women and other disadvantaged groups, and the efficiency of service provision. In practice, it is useful to identify appropriate performance indicators in consultation with stakeholders and clients. Point I in Figure 2 refers to the impact of agricultural advisory services with regard to their original policy objectives. As the framework shows, the impact ultimately depends on the decisions made by farm households and clients and on other factors that need to be controlled for in the analysis. The framework can be applied as a feedback loop, whereby the determined extension impacts modify the frame conditions (as indicated by the arrow from Point I back to the frame conditions), thereby providing information about how systems evolve over time.

## **Concluding remarks**

The framework described in this article should prove useful in policy planning and research. In particular, it will help countries to identify approaches to providing and financing agricultural advisory services that fit their specific conditions and priorities. Hence, practitioners and researchers are encouraged to adapt and further develop the framework to fit their needs.