



Opening the agricultural extension 'black box': farmer experiences in the context of agrarian change

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Abstract

Agricultural extension is prominent within numerous international discourses, the means of influencing farmer behaviours in order to respond to societal challenges such as Sustainable Development or Climate Change. Agricultural extension is 'black boxed', meaning that its history, critiques, and recent evolutions are disregarded. Farmers' experiences are needed in order to understand how global processes can and might connect with farmer decision making. Drawing on more than 400 quantitative surveys and 300 qualitative interviews with cassava farmers in Northwest Cambodia, farmers are shown to be rational and sophisticated, employing a low-input, low-cost, risk-averse model of decision making. As opposed to formal extension, as assumed within 'black boxed' versions of extension, informal relations dominate farmer behaviours – neighbourly and familial relations are shown to constitute agricultural extension as experienced. Farmers' relations stretch through social networks that span extensive time and space. Positively, these informal relations help farmers inform themselves, raise their own awareness of agricultural technologies, and assess the potential effectiveness of alternatives. Negatively, the myopia of their relations, results in widespread vulnerability to economic and environmental variability. The low-cost, low-input, low-risk model appears to 'raise the floor' while also 'limiting the ceiling' of farmers livelihoods. The relational analysis of agricultural extension as experiences informs development of a theory of change labelled 'grasp', helping to conceptualise the webs of nested relations that constrain behaviour and explaining the fundamental disconnection between informal extension and extension as black boxed.

Current Stage

This publication is presently with reviewers.

Policy Relevance

The piece addresses many of the underlying assumptions that shape agricultural extension, especially the central assumption with the Climate Change and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) discourses, which is that smallholder farmers, if supported, can help respond to globally-significant and expert-chosen challenges. The paper demonstrates that poor

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smallholder farmers have no access to 'formal' extension services, instead relying on informal social relations. Through interviews with cassava farmers from Northwest Cambodia, the article highlights the social networks and relationships that smallholders rely upon for awareness of new technologies, problem identification, and responses to challenges. The data shows that more than 95% of the 400 participating households rely on their neighbours for information and support – many responding that they have no contact with 'trusted experts or extensionists'.

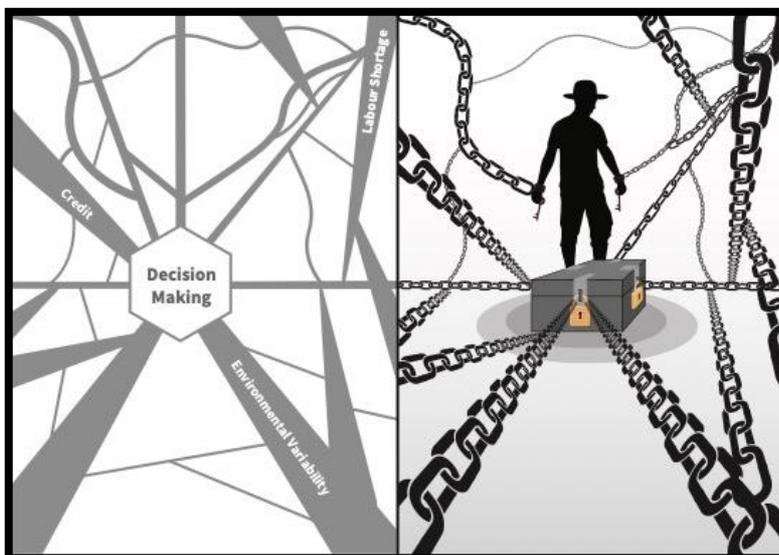


Figure 1: Conceptualising farmer decision making using relational thinking 'mirrored' with reality of farmers struggling to operationalise knowledge in the context of constraints.

The findings demonstrate the isolation of farmers and the limited support that they receive from the formal agricultural sector. This raises a critically important question: how can actors within the agricultural sector conceptualise and operationalise support for smallholder farmers if they are disconnected from the system? More positively, the data demonstrate that farmers do circulate information, practices, and solutions through their networks, suggesting that 'solutions' that help farmers might quickly circulate through farmer-to-farmer relations.

Conceptually, the data demonstrate a need for development of a Theory of Change (ToC) that recognises farmer perceptions and practices. The 'GRASP model' is proposed as a way of conceptualising the co-productive relations between knowledge-practice, and in order to refuse any framing or understanding that separates extensionists from their active and influential influence over the global forces that shape farmers decision making.

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