

The Politics of Extension: Rural development practice and the resistance to change.

Authors

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Abstract

This paper revisits the critique of professional practice in rural development in which it is argued that development professionals are inevitably agents of power within the complex political landscapes of international aid and development (McKinnon 2007, 2011). Responding to the repeated failures of rural development programs, and the lack of success in agricultural extension efforts to prompt change in farming practices, development professionals have for decades sought solutions – the ‘magic bullet’ that would ensure the success of development programs and secure better lives and livelihoods for farming communities. McKinnon (2011) identified that professionals working in northern Thailand throughout the 1980s and 1990s turned to farmer-led and participatory development approaches to provide an alternative to rural development programs that were based on politically driven priorities. Participatory approaches provided a means to base interventions around the needs and priorities identified by farmers themselves, and offered opportunities for rural communities to gain a voice in the decisions that affected their futures. These alternative approaches challenged the more traditional focus on technical interventions and technology transfer as the central purpose of extension activities.

Twenty years on from McKinnon’s study, little has changed. Technology transfer remains the norm for agricultural extension, while rural development programs are seldom farmer-led. This situations remains despite the strong shift to farmer-led and participatory approaches advocated by professionals at that time, and further supported by a wealth of empirical evidence from across the Global South, and critical scholarship that has gained global recognition (such as (Escobar 2018; Ferguson 2015; Harcourt and Escobar 2002; Li 2007). As noted by Cook, Satizabul and Curnow (2021), extension continues to focus on a ‘de-humanised’ form of assistant in which “extensionists add technologies while excluding the socio-political.” This constitutes a technical ‘rendering’ of extension, making invisible the complex social and political landscape in which rural development inevitably occurs. How is this rendering continuing to occur in professional practice despite so many decades of critical debate from within the ranks of professionals themselves and the organisations they work for?

This paper draws on 33 interviews with international experts in rural development and agricultural extension to explore what has changed and has not changed in the politics of rural development practice over the last twenty years. Are development professionals caught in a ‘ground-hog day’ of repetitive engagement with the same issues and problems, or has the industry responded to the critiques of the 80s and 90s? Have professionals understandings of the definition and purpose of agricultural extension and rural development shifted over time? What are the significant challenges to contemporary professional practice in rural development compared to the past?

Current stage

Data analysis of 33 expert interview conducted as part of Activity 1 is ongoing, with writing scheduled to begin in July 2023. Paper to be submitted for review Q4 2023.

Emerging findings

Agricultural extension continues to be understood to be acting in service of the modernisation of agricultural production and maximisation of output. Different professionals bring very different perspectives to what the impacts of this are, depending on their own ideological commitments and background. For some, extension is about helping farmers improve production by supporting them in adoption of new technologies, using such strategies and providing demonstration plots, and providing training so that farmers “*can adapt and learn a new technology*” (Interviewee 2). This requires a focus on the suitability of technologies:

“need to identify and then try to introduce the technology would be possible for them. And we have learned that some technologies introduced by extensionists, but just doing for a while and then disappear, they see what I can say that it's not suitable for them” (Interviewee 2).

Professionals with critical social science perspectives tend to be highly critical of what agricultural extension is achieving, and see it contributing to problems of the marginalisation and dispossession of smallholders:

“So one of the ways in which yeah, agricultural extends, I guess, has been practiced here is like, in a way that is almost working towards a long term process of intensification towards large farms and the displacement of smallholder farmers, which is something that's been a major feature of rural life in Cambodia for the last 20 years.” (Interviewee 33)

While the politics of aid and development funding have shifted, it is still a deeply politicised landscape and the drivers of funding allocation continue to follow the leading political concerns of the day rather than being attuned to the needs and concerns of smallholder farmers:

“... when you get these huge, these huge, new canals of the sort that we've seen in recent years, actually, they're benefiting a very small number of people. And it's leading to, you know, those leading to a kind of an acceleration of that, that process of, of kind of dispossession of smallholder farmers and landlessness. But also the kind of accumulation and concentration of land in those areas, which are best served by canals. ... when we talk about irrigation and kind of climate change adaptation ... there are some assumptions about how these investments are made, and who benefits which are not necessarily accurate. We talk about irrigation as something all smallholders need. ... - like, 'oh, we need to help smallholders adapt to climate change'. And that's one of the reasons that these things get a lot of funding, but in reality, it's not necessarily doing that.” (Interviewee 33)

For some professionals who recognise the politics of development practice, the barriers to supporting farmers and implementing farmer-led processes remain much the same as they were in the 80s and 90s. Like the advocates of participatory practice of that era, contemporary professional feel they have little choice but to work within the ‘cracks’ of the dominant systems in order to be advocates for the community members who they seek to benefit:

“this is like guerrilla warfare. We are fighting, not fighting a war, but we are, yeah, we are using the principles of guerrilla warfare. Don't take your battles in the open. Stupid, little guy, you know, we cannot, we will not survive long. So we have to work in the underground of providing good examples and give our field perspective. 'So interesting with your field perspective' people tell us. But then it's a struggle. It's really a struggle” (Interviewee 3)

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