

Innovations in rural extension

Review by Robert Chambers

Van Mele P, Salahuddin A, and Magor NP, eds. 2005. *Innovations in Rural Extension: case studies from Bangladesh*. CABI Publishing, CAB International, Wallingford, UK, and Cambridge, Mass., USA.



This inspiring book

shows how far some have come from the early days of technology transfer.

For here

are presented illustration after illustration of a participatory and pluralist paradigm so different that it seems odd to apply the same label—extension—to both the earlier monolithic mindsets and monocultures of methodology, and the contrasting rich panoply of approaches described here.

Poverty Elimination Through Rice Research Assistance (PETRRA) was a 5-year (1999-2004) project funded by the U.K. Department for International Development. The project was managed by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in close collaboration with the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI). Its philosophy and practice were learning by doing. During its life, it approved, managed, and supported 45 subprojects—on pro-poor policy (6), technologies (19), and uptake and extension (20). It is these latter that provide the experience and material for the book. This was an exercise that set out to learn by conducting research on a variety of approaches to extension itself.

This is a far cry from older orientations. The first major section, on gender, gives long overdue prominence to women in South Asian agriculture. The book stands on its head the old linear or pipeline paradigm in which research innovates and passes on innovations to extension for promotion and spread. In the place of such old mindsets and methods are a range of practices and approaches that stress listening,

learning, negotiating, and facilitating, as well as training of facilitators.

We have here accounts of experiences and comparisons among a rich variety of extension approaches. Innovations include integrated rice-duck farming and various aspects of seed systems—building a rice seed network, a value-chain approach for aromatic rice, and much more. These are but some manifestations of the diversity and originality that flowered with this project.

PETRRA was pathbreaking. For many, it will be the final synthesis that is most striking. There, the editors confront and discuss the issues of extension, complexity, and poverty; of creativity and flexibility; and of motivation. They point to the professional pride and personal satisfaction of having worked through a problem with farmers as a major motivation for researchers and extensionists.

Perhaps the most important section, which could have the biggest impact, concerns donors and flexibility, projects, service providers, and potential champions. Lessons and warnings are laid

out. Among these, one that stands out is the incompatibility of logframe approaches with conditions of uncertainty and the fostering of creativity. This book should be required reading for all who fund agricultural research and extension.

Paradigmatically, *Innovations in Rural Extension* has opened up as never before the need and potential for methodological pluralism. It shows such a wide range of complementary choices of what to do, and it compares their costs and effectiveness. For too long, agricultural extension has been in the doldrums, and agriculture a diminished priority among aid agencies.

The big practical question now is whether normal extension services, without special project support, can adopt or adapt some of PETRRA's rich repertoire of approaches. At least those aid agencies that wish to help poor farmers will now know that so much can be achieved with vision and appropriate continuity of support, facilitation, leadership, and staff. May PETRRA and this book inspire many others to follow and do likewise.

And, if any donor agency is looking for a cost-effective investment, it would be hard to do better than to provide the means to make this book cheap and accessible, and to send a great many copies with a covering letter to those concerned with agricultural research and extension policy and practice around the world. *✍*

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