

POLICY BRIEF

Developing a policy framework for agricultural extension systems in Tunisia



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Summary

In the face of declining natural resources linked to overutilization, population growth, and climate change, Tunisian national extension services need to review their priorities and reform their modes of service delivery. New extension approaches need to emerge locally, based on experimentation, learning, and adaptation to prevailing as well as evolving conditions. The discussions and interactions with key stakeholders involved in the extension information chain suggests that extension staff should receive appropriate training to carry out their duties. They also reveal that scarce resources can be used more effectively through partnerships with the private sector and use of information and communication technologies where appropriate. Finally, it is critical to note that monitoring and evaluating performance of extension service delivery based on stakeholder feedback is also crucial in ensuring that extension staff skills remain relevant to extension services end-user's needs.

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Introduction

In the face of declining resources, the Tunisian national extension services need to review their priorities and modes of delivery. A policy framework that provides the national extension service, and other actors, with strategic direction will contribute to ensuring that resources are directed to where they are needed most, in line with farmers' needs and national priorities.

It is within this context that this framework is developed to ensure that: extension staff receive the appropriate training to carry out their duties; scarce resources are used more effectively through partnerships with development organizations and the private sector; and there is use and transfer of information and communication technologies to improve farmers' capacity where appropriate.

Objectives

This framework will:

- Identify and characterize main benefits of developing a new development policy framework for an efficient agricultural extension system delivery in Tunisia.
- Delineate and identify the national priorities and roles of extension systems and how they should be established.
- Identify and indicate what accompanying measures should be implemented to guarantee that extension service is delivered effectively to farmers.

The emerging paradigm – changing times

Increasing pressure on government budgets, increased environmental and social concerns, the emergence of new communication technologies, and the strengthening of the private sector have changed the way governments approach rural and agricultural extension services globally. In general, global trends in agricultural and rural extension show:

- An increasing involvement of the private sector, non-governmental, and development organizations in providing extension services.
- A greater focus on participatory capacity building approaches.
- A switch from public extension that provides direct technical assistance to individuals, to a stronger emphasis on facilitation and in bringing together stakeholders along the value chain.

- An increasing emphasis on developing capacity to improve the management and governance of natural resources and to help communities adapt to climate variability and change.
- An increasing use of new, available, and affordable technologies including mobile phones and text messaging services, social networking, and other internet technologies to improve communication.

The need for an extension policy

During the past several decades, Tunisian agricultural extension services have been criticized for a perceived lack of effectiveness in service delivery. They have maintained their focus on traditional technical assistance towards larger farming enterprises at the expense of smaller farms, women, youth, and the broader value chain. The absence of clear policy frameworks has resulted in services that lack core-function objectives, ineffective allocation of scarce resources, and inadequate training for extension officers that also fails to prepare them to work better with other partners. National extension services must demonstrate that they are adding value to other service providers and meeting the needs of their clients. Cooperation needs to be well defined, and include how to effectively work with various stakeholders and use new technologies to improve service delivery from extension agents and partners.

Defining the role of a national extension service

The Tunisian Agricultural Extension System (TAES) has been in existence for decades and is elaborate in its contents and coverage. It covers a wide range of functions, regions and activities, using high quantities of both written and audiovisual extension material to convey messages to farmers. While elaborate in its administrative structure, the TAES is nevertheless elementary in its conceptual nature and has a number of limitations that are inherent to the nature of the agricultural activities themselves. These limitations include lack of information by smallholder farmers on rainfall requirement, marketing channel functioning and power, and the scattered nature of farms across different climatic regions and the limited size of these farms. Dealing with these factors is critical for farmers; as such, factors negatively affect the profitability and the economic viability of agricultural activities. Consequently, the demand for extension services by farmers is limited, localized and restrained, resulting in extension service delivery being ineffective in bringing efficient support to farmers.

Agricultural extension systems in Tunisia: an appraisal

The reviewed status of the extension organizations in Tunisia revealed a number of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that can be re-positioned to better focus effective extension services delivery. In addition, the review highlighted possible approaches to overcoming threats and to making these organizations more service-delivery oriented. Therefore, efforts should be directed towards an extension organization/system that would be sustainable and responsive to the demands and conditions of farmers, and their economic productive capacities.

Defining National Agriculture Extension Services Priority (NAESP)

Policy makers should define the role of the national extension service by taking stock of the different organizations working in agricultural and rural development (by geographical area, structure, and issue); assessing their effectiveness on service delivery (based on client/farmer feedback); identifying current gaps and opportunities for collaboration; and sharing resources and future priorities for the sector. Involving stakeholders (research, development, NGOs, farmers' organizations, etc.) in this process from the outset will assist in developing ownership and effective ongoing collaboration. Thus, agricultural extension service is one of the key instruments available to governments to bring about positive change in agricultural and rural communities. To be effective, priorities for extension services are:

- Organizational regulations
- Strategic investments and compulsory partnerships
- Community mobilizing towards proactive participation
- Adaptation of delivery model approaches
- Strengthening social capital in rural communities.

Towards a new agricultural extensions model

1. **New needs vs new skills:** Constituting a core group of specialists at the local level with non-traditional extension skills such as: market development; institutional development; post-harvest strategies; enterprise development; and agribusiness management.
2. **Sources of innovation in extension:** Moving from generating innovation at the central/national level to local level through local experimentation and evolved partnerships.
3. **Capacity development of staff and extension system:** A change of dimension from focusing on training to a "learning by doing" approach is needed. Staff could be given the platform to embark on programs that seek to address and empower the livelihood needs of farmers.
4. **Organizational, management review, planning, and implementation strategy:** Reviewing the existing extension system and studying how to increase the ratio of highly qualified field staff to farmers is critical. It is also necessary to create new incentive structures for farmers and partnerships that provide more administrative and financial freedom at the smallholder level.
5. **Better-informed policy approach and process:** Resources should be used for systematic institutional analyses of promising extension innovations so that generalizable principles can be drawn and new strategies suitably informed.
6. **Sustaining the innovation model:** Moving from transfer of technology to innovation systems (through agriculture for development – A4D innovation platforms).

Supporting and resourcing the policy framework

The operationalizing of this suggested new policy framework would need adoption of a number of strategies: resource mobilization, staff management, and a monitoring and evaluation system:

1. **Resource mobilization:** In general, the national extension services are funded by the government budget for agricultural and rural development. Thus, to sustain the suggested framework and keep it operational and effective, it is important to ensure that funding is aligned to national extension service priorities and that external priorities do not take extension officers away from their agreed-upon roles.
2. **Extension staff management:** The inspiration and motivation of extension staff is central to an effective national extension service. Extension officers need clear roles, missions, and objectives with appropriate career development opportunities to do their jobs effectively. Adequate, continuous training and resource availability are vital to keep extension staff motivated. When officers are scattered widely, methods must be found to maintain interaction, feedback, and support.
3. **Monitoring and evaluation impact:** To support the suggested policy framework and identify any potential future changes required, the establishment of a

monitoring system on the effectiveness of extension services is essential. Therefore, such a system should consider feedback from end users (farmers) on facilities and assistance received.

Conclusions

- Agricultural extension work in Tunisia has been in existence for many decades. There is a significant institutional network already established, in which public investment was made in the past, which could be made more operational today.
- The accumulated experience from the interaction with key stakeholders will be beneficial for private promoters who want to set up extension projects, which could be diversified and extended to include other services.
- For the most part, extension service delivery and implementation has been exogenous to targeted farmers. It is only now, with pressure to liberalize the economy, that there is an increased awareness that the private sector should play a more significant and active role.
- Private extension services provided by service and input stakeholders have been partial to promoting commercial products and equipment, rather than being about bringing pertinent technical change in the agricultural sector.

Policy recommendations

- Review existing policy framework for national extension services, to ensure that it clearly defines appropriate roles and priorities, at the local, regional, and national levels.
- Carry out a participative stakeholder diagnosis to see where government extension services are most needed, sustained, and relevant.
- Identify opportunities for collaboration with the private sector. Given the large proportion of smallholder farming in Tunisia, stressing the need for and incentivizing farmers' spontaneous and free motivation for alternative forms of collective work can be a justified public investment.
- Conduct a skills appraisal of extension staff to ensure that skills match the extension approaches required and provide training where gaps are found, or where new skills are needed.
- Ensure that external funding sources are aligned to national extension priorities and needs. Credit facilitation can help many farmers acquire means that could help them better resist, and compete with, market power in agricultural markets.

- Establish a monitoring and evaluation framework system for national extension services to ensure that they meet the needs of end users (farmers), and to ensure that the framework can be adapted to everyday changes.

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