Adapting Agricultural Extension to Peacebuilding: Report of a Workshop by the National Academy of Engineering and the United States Institute of Peace: Roundtable on Technology, Science, and Peacebuilding

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Introduction

Societies have sought to improve the outputs of their agricultural producers for thousands of years. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, efforts to convey agricultural knowledge to farmers became known as extension services, a term adopted from programs at Oxford and Cambridge designed to extend the knowledge generated at universities to surrounding communities. Traditionally, extension services have emphasized a top-down model of technology transfer that encourages and teaches producers to use crop and livestock varieties and agricultural practices that will increase food production. More recently, extension services have moved toward a facilitation model, in which extension agents work with producers to identify their needs and the best sources of expertise to help meet those needs.

Extension services can have a profound effect on the practices of agricultural producers and the agricultural productivity of nations. Many of these
services are widely disseminated and closely integrated into local communities, giving them a scope and influence not matched by more centralized programs. These features suggest that extension activities can contribute to peacebuilding in countries beset by conflict, albeit with organizational modifications and enhanced capacity in order for agents to engage in such activities effectively. Through the provision of agricultural and potentially peacebuilding information, extension agents can also strengthen the reputation and credibility of the government.

On May 1, 2012, the Roundtable on Science, Technology, and Peacebuilding held a workshop in Washington, DC, to explore whether and how extension activities could serve peacebuilding purposes. The Roundtable is a partnership between the National Academy of Engineering (NAE) and the US Institute of Peace (USIP). It consists of senior executives and experts from leading governmental organizations, universities, corporations, and non-governmental organizations, was established in 2011 to make a measurable and positive impact on conflict management, peacebuilding, and security capabilities. Its principal goals are:

1. to accelerate the application of science and technology to the process of peacebuilding and stabilization;
2. to promote systematic, high-level communication between peacebuilding and technical organizations on the problems faced and the technical capabilities required for successful peacebuilding; and
3. to collaborate in applying new science and technology to the most pressing challenges for local and international peacebuilders working in conflict zones.

At a December 2011 meeting, the Roundtable agreed on a portfolio of high-impact peacebuilding activities in the following areas:

1. adapting agricultural extension to peacebuilding;
2. using data sharing to improve coordination in peacebuilding;
3. sensing emerging conflicts; and
4. harnessing systems methods for delivery of peacebuilding services.

Subcommittees are developing action plans for these areas; the May 1, 2012, workshop was the first in a series that will address the four topics. The Roundtable is committed to using these workshop activities as a basis for peacebuilding action in the field. Consequently, the long-term goal of each
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study area is to demonstrate a viable technical solution in a successful field trial.

Ann Bartuska, Deputy Under Secretary at the US Department of Agriculture and a co-chair of the Roundtable, explained during her introductory remarks that agricultural extension was chosen as the subject of the first meeting because of its focus on community-level change, which is a particular point of emphasis for the Roundtable.

The workshop and this summary are intended to (1) help policymakers think through the issues associated with the use of extension systems to stabilize rural societies after periods of war and (2) help managers of extension projects in postconflict environments design activities that promote peace.

THE WORKSHOP

Organization

Pamela Aall, Senior Vice President at USIP, Provost of USIP’s Academy for International Conflict Management and Peacebuilding, and co-chair of the Roundtable, laid out the organization of the workshop. In the morning, two panel discussions featured speakers who explored the intersection of extension services and peacebuilding. The first panel looked at conflict in rural settings (Chapter 2), and the second examined the role of extension services in fragile societies (Chapter 3).

In the afternoon, the workshop participants divided into three groups to discuss specific aspects of extension services and peacebuilding. One group investigated changes in the skills of extension officers that could enable them to serve more effectively as peacebuilders (Chapter 4). The second looked at the corresponding changes required in the organization of extension services (Chapter 5). The third considered the technological infrastructure needed for extension officers to integrate peacebuilding into their activities (Chapter 6). The final session of the workshop featured reports from these groups and a summary of the workshop deliberations (Chapter 7).

Goal of the Workshop

The formal goal of the workshop was “to identify what peacebuilding activities could be delivered as components of existing extension services and what organizational modifications and new capabilities would be required to
do so effectively.” Or, as Aall put it, to answer two questions: Should extension services be used for peacebuilding purposes? If so, how should this be done?

Sheldon Himelfarb, Director of USIP’s Center of Innovation: Science, Technology, and Peacebuilding, pointed out that peacebuilding activities can occur on a continuum of involvement and activism. At one end of the spectrum is a “do no harm” principle: activities must not exacerbate a conflict. Thus extension personnel are sensitive to the nature of the conflict and strive, through fairness and evenhandedness, not to make the conflict worse. At the other end of the spectrum is direct involvement in the driving forces behind a conflict—extension personnel may be active mediators in a conflict and work with opposing groups to reduce tensions. Between these two extremes, a wide range of activities may lend themselves to peacebuilding in a variety of contexts.

DISCUSSION THEMES

Several broad themes emerged during the workshop discussions. They are presented here not as consensus conclusions of the participants but rather as indicators of major issues that need to be examined when considering the possible roles of extension agents in peacebuilding.

How Can and Should Extension Personnel Contribute to Peacebuilding?

The broad role of extension agents, who act more as facilitators than as problem solvers, is to help agricultural producers gain access to knowledge, resources, and services that will increase their productivity and well-being. They can help build both social and agricultural capital in postconflict settings, and can help government agencies or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) identify community needs for either development or security.

Extension agents may help manage conflict in rural communities in many ways. They can act as honest brokers between groups, providing guidance and information to assist in resolution of the conflict. They can organize producer associations or advise managers of shared resources to be inclusive and transparent in order to avoid exacerbating conflicts. By reducing conflict-related disruptions, they can enhance agricultural productivity and thus alleviate the material need that can drive conflict. Finally, their active presence in rural communities may enhance government credibility and encourage hope for a better future.
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The roles of extension agents in both agriculture and peacebuilding vary greatly depending on the circumstances. In peacebuilding, the local causes of conflict define the issues an extension agent may confront in the same way that local agricultural issues determine the most useful forms of extension services. Conflict issues in which agents may have a role include land disputes, disputes between herders and pastoralists, and reintegration of former combatants and displaced people in communities. Training in conflict analysis was identified as a necessity for peacebuilding work.

Extension agents already have a full slate of responsibilities, and adding peacebuilding activities could easily be overwhelming. A role in peacebuilding therefore needs to be integrative and not additive. However, agents should already be engaging in activities that both directly and indirectly can serve peacebuilding purposes. They should act as brokers of information and access to information among groups and between groups and the government. (Unfortunately, however, extension agents often lack the skills and resources to function as brokers.) They provide services that both increase agricultural productivity and enhance the economic security of agricultural producers and can serve as peacebuilders through these and other extension activities.

In postconflict environments, extension agents must be highly conscious of the possibility of their exacerbating tensions in the communities they serve by directing extension services and support in ways that exclude groups on the basis of race, ethnic identity, class, gender, or education.

Finally, in rural communities, much agricultural work is done by women. Therefore, extension systems designed to support both agriculture and peacebuilding would show greater promise if programming specifically engaged rural women.

How Should Extension Agents Be Selected, Trained, and Motivated?

Extension agents need a very wide range of skills to do their jobs well, from technical knowledge to a variety of social skills. Peacebuilding adds to this list an ability to analyze conflicts. Extension personnel need to understand the drivers of conflict and the likely consequences of their actions.

To be effective, extension agents need to be respected, trusted, and accepted by their clientele, regardless of their level of education or group affiliation. To that end, their advice needs to be objective, useful, and non-partisan. Furthermore, they need credible sources of information, continuously updated skills, and trustworthy partners. Extension personnel also gain
legitimacy by working with people who are trusted in the community. If extension personnel are motivated only by a paycheck or having a government job, their legitimacy will be questioned.

In some cases, extension agents may be more likely to gain trust if they are from a local area and are provided with training. However, the effectiveness of such agents may be compromised if they are part of an elite or associated with a particular side or agenda in a conflict.

What Institutional Changes Are Needed to Support a Peacebuilding Role for Extension Agents?

Extension services typically operate in ministries of agriculture, and changes in ministry organization may support peacebuilding as part of extension activities. For example, ministries and extension services may become explicitly involved in conflict analysis, especially when conflicts affect or are affected by agriculture. Or a ministry and its extension officers may become involved in the reintegration of former combatants or regions of countries into the broader society.

In many countries, the extension capacity of ministries of agriculture has been severely limited by long-term underinvestment in staffing, training, and programming. This problem has been compounded by an approach to extension that tends to be centralized and top-down. In these cases, much greater decentralization, with a capacity to support local grassroots extension activities, has occurred through the activities of NGOs. In peacebuilding efforts to address communities’ expressed needs, such bottom-up approaches may have the desirable effect of improving both agricultural productivity and social stability.

Although extension systems have become pluralistic in nature, with services provided not only by government but also NGOs and private organizations, from a conflict perspective it is important for extension activities to build government technical capacity and political credibility. Similarly, although sustainability is often likelier when support comes from multiple sources—public, private, governmental, or nongovernmental—government support is specifically necessary. And importantly, to be effective in their work, extension agents need to have the necessary support, resources, and tools, including appropriate salaries, incentives, operating budgets, training, and evaluation programs.

In the United States, academic institutions involved with agricultural extension have a curriculum tightly linked to agricultural research, but this is
often not the case in developing countries generally and postconflict societies in particular. Universities can be an excellent source of training for extension personnel, but weak links with universities in developing countries detract from training and access to science-based information generated through sound and appropriate research.

How Can Technology Support a Role for Extension Agents in Peacebuilding?

Information and computer technology (ICT), the technological area most likely to have an immediate impact on peacebuilding, is rapidly becoming cheaper and more powerful. Advances in ICT have significant and growing potential to improve agent access to information and expertise for use in both agricultural extension and peacebuilding.

The technologies need to be trusted and the information provided valid. More specifically, ICT should be inexpensive and easy to use, support long-term capacity to improve both agricultural productivity and social stability, and broaden access to information for all groups in agricultural communities. In addition, the technologies need to be neutral in their application and usable among groups without much formal education.

It is particularly helpful to encourage and support communities in determining how best to use technology to solve problems and meet needs, including in ways perhaps not originally envisioned. For example, in addition to conveying information between farmers and extension agents, cell phones can register images and are therefore useful when documented evidence is required.

Enabling an extension agent to provide information in response to a farmer’s question quickly builds trust in the individual agent and enhances the credibility of the larger extension system. Cell phones are often the best way to deliver information easily and inexpensively.