

# Reflecting on practice

For a very long time, rural extension in Latin America, and probably in most developing countries, has followed a transfer of technology (ToT) approach, aiming at transferring modern, input-based technologies from experts to farmers. This approach, also termed “diffusionism”, assumes that true knowledge lies solely in the hands of so-called experts, while farmers are perceived as ignorant, traditional and “resistant to change”. In spite of its evident failures, the ToT model still shapes extension programmes and projects. Together with farmers and extension agents, our work in Paraguay tried to change the resulting practices in the field.

Fernando Landini and Vanina Bianqui

**T**he ToT approach has been heavily criticised by many scholars and practitioners, as putting small-scale farmers and poor rural producers in the role of passive participants who are expected to adopt externally-generated technologies.

One of the leading critics was the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Back in the 1960s and 1970s he came to prominence after proposing to redefine rural extension as a process of communication among equals aimed at finding solutions to the problems found in rural areas. Sadly, many years later, and in the same countries where he worked and had a strong influence, we still see that the attitudes and practices of rural extensionists are shaped by a diffusionist mindset. This poses a big challenge to making extension practices more participatory and dialogue-based.

**A training proposal** Hoping to strengthen the Paraguayan public rural extension system, the Agricultural Extension Directorate of the Ministry of Agriculture and Husbandry, together with the NGO Action Against Hunger (ACF International), proposed a diagnosis of the problems faced by the public extension system, focusing specifically on the Caazapá Department. This area was chosen for different reasons: it has the highest poverty levels in the country, and family farmers make up the highest percentage of the population. They usually grow *mandioca* (or cassava) and maize, and in some cases sesame and cotton. Their soils are poor, and their farm sizes far smaller than the national average.

After interviewing many of the family farmers, and talking to rural extensionists and institutional authorities, we found a high degree of consensus about

the main difficulties. They all seemed to agree that the main problem was the model that defined all extension activities, and the pre-eminence given to the ToT approach. At the same time, the different stakeholders interviewed almost universally envisaged an alternative participatory approach to extension that would better respond to the needs of small-scale farmers, and a more practical training approach for working with them. ACF asked us to develop a training proposal that would help the Caazapá extensionists re-shape their practices and that could serve as a general example for the rest of the country.

We asked rural extensionists from three different Paraguayan departments about their training interests and their preferred pedagogical methodologies. We also asked about the most common concrete problems in the field. These preliminary inputs were complemented by more than 150 responses to a national survey. After building the preliminary guidelines for a training proposal, we organised a meeting with the rural extensionists in Caazapá to share our findings and analyse and adjust our training proposal.

The training took place between May and December 2011 in the city of Caazapá with a group of approximately 30 extensionists. It consisted of eight modules, one per month, each lasting two days. The training included information on rural extension methodologies; popular education; the importance of participatory processes; the difference between Western and peasant and indigenous worldviews; group processes and co-operatives; the role of gender issues in rural extension; pedagogy; power issues and the relationship between extensionists and farmers; and the process of adoption of technologies. Because of the severe decline in the fertility of the local soils, one of the modules looked at this issue in detail and at the importance of an agro-ecological production system – though paying special attention so that this would not become another “package” that needed to be “transferred” to all farmers, and focused instead on considering and building on local knowledge.

Aiming not only to increase rural extensionists’ conceptual or theoretical knowledge, but to fundamentally reorganise their way of doing rural extension, we included training contents as part of a reflexive, critical process which stemmed from the practical problems faced in the field. This was the first part of the methodology. The experiences of all participants and the material we had prepared were combined so as to generate potential solutions, which were expressed in concrete and practical terms. Finally, there was a participatory evaluation of the training at the end of each module to help us all prepare for the next session. At this juncture, we discussed the content of the next module, encouraging participants to let us know about the practical problems that they wanted to address. These comments were then shared with



**Interviewees and hosts in San Juan Nepomuceno, department of Caazapá, Paraguay.** Photos: Eduardo Godoy (ACF) / Zulema Barilari / Fernando Landini

the trainers for the next module, helping them prepare for their session. Additionally, each module started with a session on the implementation of the proposals arising from previous sessions, in order to address any issues that could have emerged and to refresh the ideas generated.

A key element of the training workshops was to employ a facilitator (a psychologist by training) for the whole process, with special responsibility for maintaining the participatory character of the trainings. This was a very important factor given that many trainers, despite being experts in their fields, were not able to facilitate truly participative interactions. The facilitator also catalysed the collective process of reflection on practice, which included pointing out or highlighting how the extensionists’ beliefs or attitudes were supporting a hierarchical, ToT approach to rural extension. For instance, during the first module, when describing

some of the practical problems they regularly found in the field, participants consistently described small-scale farmers as “traditional” and “resistant to innovations”, implying that these factors were the reason for farmers not adopting what was offered to them. The facilitator played a key role in drawing extensionists’ attention to their focus on what farmers did or didn’t do, while neglecting their own role and the appropriateness of their proposals.

**Implementation** Running this process was not altogether easy. At first, the participants found it difficult to play an active role during the workshop sessions. It also proved difficult to develop concrete ways to implement the proposals that emerged, and even harder to put these mechanisms into practice. Nonetheless, all participants agreed that the course was worthwhile as it helped them see their work through different eyes, and led them to change their way of doing rural extension. They were able to closely examine how they related to farmers, which helped them understand why their work sometimes didn’t achieve the results they hoped for.

The workshops proved useful in reshaping extensionists’ practices. Having gone through the whole process, participants now see their work more as a dialogical, horizontal, participatory and flexible activity. Several months after the trainings, we asked the participants’ opinions about the training process. The most valued aspects were the opportunity to discuss issues together (the participatory, collective approach) and the clear, practical implications of the proposal. Interestingly, the early modules generated some anxiety as the participants saw how their existing attitudes (which they perceived as negative) shaped their practices, but did not have any alternative model to rely on. Fortunately, over time, the course helped

them develop a different approach. As one of the participants said, “*the idea we previously had was that the extensionist had to provide everything, all solutions. But in the course we learned that it’s different... an education process can only occur with the total participation of the families, the people that are being supported.*”

**Developing things further** These positive results motivated the Agricultural Extension Directorate to try to implement a similar process in other parts of the country, but these ideas were unfortunately cut short with the arrival of a new national government. However, working groups within the *Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Agropecuaria* in neighbouring Argentina have requested a similar training process. This is encouraging: although we feel the approach cannot be applied directly in a different context, our experience may be of use for others. An important point here, once again, is that this is not a model that should be replicated absolutely in a new setting, but an approach to build together, on the basis of the extensionists’ experience and practice, their needs and the challenges they face. What we have seen is the advantage of starting from their problems, using a participatory and not hierarchical approach to teaching, and incorporating a reflexive and critical processes guided by facilitators.

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**“Education can only occur with the total participation of the families, the people that are being supported”**

Photos: Fernando Landini

