Five Skill Sets to Develop the Capacity of Women Farmers to Demand and Use Extension Information.

1. THE CONCEPT

Women smallholders in developing countries produce an estimated 70 percent of food from semi-subsistence farms, own 1% of land and receive 5-7 percent of extension services. Including women as a minimum number of beneficiaries in extension services will not redress gender inequities in access to reliable to information because women farmers' needs are so different ffrom the neds of men farmers. Men and women often grow different crops, have different responsibilities in production and marketing, apply different cultivation technologies, and have different objectives for using their produce. Moreover, women play different roles along the marketing chain, as producers, consumers, traders, laborers and retailers of agricultural supplies and their needs for extsnion information are not uniform. The hypothesis of this note is that meeting women smallholders diverse needs for agricultural information requires extension services to establish an on-farm, participatory adaptive research service that generates recommendations developed with and validated by women in all these different capacities. This Solution will harness the proven power of women's self-help groups as a foundation for woman-centered agricultural extension.

2. RATIONALE AND EVIDENCE THE PROJECT CAN BE SUCCESSFUL

The principles and practice of participatory extension are well known. Research shows there are broad spill-overs from using participatory approaches with women's groups that include developing members'self-esteem, solidarity, managerial and leadership skills.[1] Participatory extension approaches such as farmer field schools and farmer research committees have been successfully implemented on a large scale in Africa, Asia and Latin America but never with an explicit woman-centered focus or with the goal of reaching poor women farmers in large numbers. This brief proposes an approach to do just this.

In participatory extension, extension agents act as facilitators, assisting farmers to develop skills in problem analysis, problem solving, and management. Farmers set the agenda, test technologies under their own conditions, formulate conclusions and make recommendations to each other, This is essential for women farmners because their traditional crops and practices are typically neglected and overlooked by research as well as extension, and when they grow the same crops asn men do, the constraints they face are usually quite distinct. Skill building must be a feature of any extension initiative that

[1] Braun, A, Thiele, G. & Fernández, M. (2000). Farmer field schools and local agricultural research committees: Complementary platforms for integrated decision-making in sustainable agriculture. ODI Agricultural Research and Extension Network Paper No. 105. London:ODI. http://www.odi.org.uk/agren/papers/agrenpaper_105.pdf.

aims to benefit poor women because typically, even when poor women access extension information, they lack the "action resources" to translate information into good choices and actions. Skills are one component of the action resources that women farmers must aquire for extension information to have any real impact on their welfare .

Skill building is best done with poor women in self-help groups. In Andra Pradesh for example, small group organization and self management within rural communities, with a particular focus on women has successfully organized over 8 million poor women in approximately 700,000 self-help groups that have proved a powerful engine for getting information and services to this numerous but marginal sector of the rural population..

A recent study of self-help groups in three continents found that all groups studied were proactively seeking to aquire five basic skill sets, even in the absence of any assistance from outsiders. The five skill sets were: group organization skills; financial skills; marketing skills; experimentation skills and sustainable production.[2] Skill development designed for women farmers is seldom included in extension programs but when it is, a remarkable increase in women's participation in extension programs can be achieved: for example, women-centered extension in the Gambia that includes skill development achieved a dramatic increase of women participants from 5 percent to over 60 percent in under five years.

The proposed approach to participatory extension will identify rural women in need of extension all along the marketing chain from farm to kitchen, and work with them through women's self help groups where these already exist, and will form new ones where more are needed. Participatory adaptive technology testing and farmer-to-farmer extension will be combined with development of the five skill sets.

3. EXPECTED BENEFITS OF THE PROJECT INCLUDING COMMENTS ON SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALE

Benefits:

The proposed program is expected to:

(a) improve the relevance and credibility of extension information for poor women farmers by testing alternatives with groups under local conditions
(b) increase women's farmers'participation in and access to extension services from a low base (typically around 5 percent) to at least 55 percent of women
(c) increase the application of extension information by poor women
(d) improve five key skill sets that women farmers need to be able to use extension information
(e) contribute to higher productivity and incomes for women farmers in Africa.

[2] CRS, 2007. *The organization and development of farmer groups for agroenterprise: conclusions from a CRS and RII-CIAT Study Tour in Asia, Africa and Latin America.* Catholic Relief Services & RII-CIAT Agroenterprise Study Tour Group Working Paper, Catholic Relief Services, Baltimore.

Scale:
This program will work on a pilot scale initially in two countries but will work from the outset with at least 5,000 women's self-help groups in each country. Starting at significant scale is important for a definitive demonstration of the principle of focussing the service on women farmers.

Sustainability;
Willingness to pay for information and extension services even among the very poor is a proven principle and it is reasonable to expect to self-help groups to eventually cover about 20% of costs in this way. The program will aim to institutionalize women-centered participatory extension with public sector agencies. Participatory extension programs are being implemented in several countries on the basis of competitive funds through which part of the state (federal) budget for extension is asssigned to farmer organizations (e.g. Kenya, Bolivia). For example, the Kenyan national Agricultural Research Institute (KARI), makes grants to farmer groups for testing technologies, exchange visits to other farmers who have already adopted the technology, visits by KARI staff, and other costs of observing, learning, and adopting technologies. KARI maintains a small network of farmer research committees around its experiemnt stattions to conduct participatory technology testing. Smaller grants are given preference over larger ones to expand the number of beneficiaries. The average grant is about US$3,000. The initiative is now working with 178 community-based groups cover 11,835 farm families. One women's group in this program multiplied members' assets four times in 18 months.

4. HOW THE PROJECT WILL TARGET THE NEEDS AND BE OF SPECIFIC BENEFIT TO WOMEN SMALLHOLDERS

The program will work with womens'self-help groups on a large scale. Woman-centered, particpatory extension will add vaue to self-help group activities, which in most cases start with internal savings and loans and then graduate to looking for ways to invest savings. The participatory extension approach, which will include skill development, will include a training module that assists groups to use participatory approaches to evaluate alternative productive investments and marketing alternatives. For an example from this author's experience see: **World Bank AgInvestment Sourcebook**
http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTARD/EXTAGISOU/0,,contentMDK:20929135~menuPK:2756724~pagePK:64168445~piPK:64168309~theSitePK:2502781,00.html

A regional training-of-trainers program on the approach will be conducted for NGO and public sector development and/or extension professionals. Training will be supplied in a variety of modes, including in-country short courses and e-learning by accredited University or other suitable extension training institutions. Trainers will obtain a credential enabling them to teach the course and draw on continued mentoring and advice from the program.The program will include experienced advisers in gender, participatory extension and adaptive on-farm testing who will support and mentor trainers.

Organizations invited to submit for an RPF should have the following strengths and experience, singly or in parnership: gender-sensitive programming; participatory adaptive

research and extension, women's self-help groups; skill formation for low-levels of literacy; training of trainers, mentoring. By the end of the three year pilot, two regional networks of experienced trainers will have been prepared and will be in place to scale out the approach to additional countries.

5. PROJECTED COSTS OF THE PROJECT

An indicative budget is US $2 million per year for a pilot in two countries involving 8-10,000 women farmers and the preparation of approximately 1000 trainers and 5,000 development professionals trained , over a total of three years.

6. MEASURES OF SUCCESS

The program will include a participatory monitoring and evaluation component

(a) Women farmers in self-help groups participate in adaptive testing and develop extension information that other women framers find relevant and apply
(b) The number of women participating in extension services in the pilot areas increased from a low base (typically around 5%) to at least 55% of women farmers
(c) Women farmers'self –help groups are willing generate some means to pay a small prportion of the costs of the service
(d) Trainers are able to market the training course in women-centered particpatory extension to meet an expanding demand

7. RISKS [Please articulate the risks that could inhibit the success of the project.

(a) Participating institutions claim that increasing gender quotas –increasing the number of women who receive the (male-oriented) supply of existing extension information --are a substitute for generating demand-driven content through participatory extension with women farmers
(b) Bad (or worst) participatory practice is used – if those reponsible are not trained in techniques of authentic participation, then participatory extension will be counter-productive