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Launching a New Flagship on Education for Rural People: An Initiative Agricultural and Extension Educators Can Get Behind¹

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Abstract

Rural people have often been referred to as a “neglected majority” in development processes. Over 70 percent of the world’s poor live in rural areas where illiteracy is 2 – 3 times higher than in urban areas and where rural people have relatively poorer access to schools and other educational services. Sustainable development cannot be achieved unless rural people are part of the solution and education is key to preparing them for active participation in this process. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the U.N. Educational, Social and Cultural Organization recently introduced an important new rural education initiative entitled Education for Rural People. Education for Rural People goes beyond education about agriculture. It is based on the assumption that educational programs in rural areas need to include a variety of life skills appropriate for success in rural areas. This commentary introduces this new initiative to the journal’s readership.

Keywords: Rural Education, Life Skills, Poor, Rural Development, Millennium Development Goals

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Introduction

Recently, several United Nations agencies combined forces to introduce an important new education initiative. The purpose of this commentary is to bring this initiative to the attention of members of the Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education. As you will see, this initiative is central to our interests and clearly related to our collective expertise. In short, it is an initiative agricultural and extension educators can (and should) get behind.

Education for Rural People is the title of the new initiative (referred to as a “flagship” program) recently announced by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The Director General from both organizations launched the Flagship Program on Education for Rural People at the World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, on September 3, 2002. (FAO, September 2002)

Background

At the United Nations Millennium Summit held in September 2000, world leaders committed themselves to 8 Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by 2015. The goals are to:

1. halve extreme poverty and hunger;
2. achieve universal primary education;
3. empower women and promote equality between women and men;
4. reduce under-five mortality by two-thirds;
5. reduce maternal mortality by three-quarters;
6. reverse the spread of diseases, especially HIV/AIDS and malaria;
7. ensure environmental sustainability; and,
8. create a global partnership for development, with targets for trade, aid, and debt relief. (United Nations, 2002)

Among agriculturalists, perhaps the best-known Millennium Development Goal is the first goal that aims to halve the number of poor and malnourished people by 2015. For agricultural and extension educators, an equally important (and inextricably linked) Millennium Development Goal is the second goal of achieving universal primary education or “education for all”. The second goal has its origins in the Education For All Declaration and

Plan of Action led by UNESCO in Jomtien, Thailand (1990) and the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal in 2000 (FAO, September 2002).

Realizing that the achievement of Education For All could only be done through concerted efforts of cooperating agencies, a set of inter-agency flagship programs was launched after the Dakar World Education Forum. Within the Education For All goal area there are flagship programs dealing with:

- early childhood development
- literacy education
- girls education
- education in emergency situations
- school health
- aids, schools and health
- teachers and quality of education
- education and disability
- education for rural people

Some Education For All flagship programs are, quite naturally, led by UNESCO, while others are led by other UN agencies in cooperation with UNESCO. The last flagship, Education for Rural People, is led by FAO and supported by UNESCO.

What is Education for Rural People?

Education for Rural People (ERP) is a worldwide call to action focusing on education for rural-based children, youth, and adults through formal and nonformal education. ERP aims to improve rural people’s access to quality education. ERP is dedicated to bringing about transformation of rural communities through capacity building of rural people. The ERP flagship objectives are:

- building awareness on the importance of education for rural people as a crucial step toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals of eradicating poverty and hunger and achieving universal access to education;
- overcoming the urban/rural education gap;
- increasing access to basic education for rural people;
- improving quality of basic education in rural areas; and,
- fostering national capacity to plan and implement basic education plans to address learning needs of rural people. (FAO, August 2002)

The ERP flagship uses the following approaches to help nations develop plans for ERP:

- policy formation through informed dialogue;
- participatory processes to involve multiple stakeholders;
- planning for decentralization of educational services, multi-sectoral approaches to rural development, and opportunities for donor support; and,
- educational management (including the positioning of educational institutions as agents of social change).

Why Focus on Rural Education?

One could reasonably ask: With the global trend toward urbanization, why focus on rural education? In considering this it is worth noting that:

1. over 70 percent of the world's poor live in rural areas;
2. the majority of the world's 880 million illiterate youth and adults live in rural areas where illiteracy is 2–3 times higher than in urban areas;
3. rural people have relatively poorer access to schools and other educational services, health services, transportation, technology and markets (FAO, September 2002; Gasperini, 2000); and,
4. the quality of education is poorer in rural areas (Gasperini, 2000).

A review conducted for the World Bank examined 18 studies that measure the relationship in low-income countries between farmers' education and their agricultural efficiency (as measured by crop production). The review concluded that level of education of farmers was related to level of their farm productivity, with 4 years of education contributing, on average, an 8.7 percent productivity gain over those with no formal education. The review also found that the effect of education is even greater (13 percent increase in productivity) where complementary inputs, such as fertilizer, new seeds or farm machinery, are available (Carnoy, 1992).

Rural people have often been referred to as a "neglected majority" in development processes. Sustainable development cannot be achieved unless rural people are fully engaged in the design and implementation of programs aimed at

improving rural livelihoods. Until programs fully address the needs of rural people, this sector will continue to be a drag on any national and international efforts to reduce poverty and to alleviate hunger.

How Does ERP Expand Traditional Agricultural and Extension Education Approaches?

The "agriculture-only model of rural development" proved inadequate in addressing poverty reduction, rural development and sustainable natural resources management (Gasperini, 2000, citing "The World Bank, Policy and Institutional Reform for Sustainable Rural Development: Putting the Pieces in Place," WBI, Training Course, 2000). In the past, development planners pursued strategies based on a set of logical assumptions that, although an oversimplification, could be distilled as follows for the sake of brevity: because developing countries are largely rural and because agriculture is the primary enterprise in many rural areas, then investments in agricultural development should produce economic development that will benefit agricultural producers and will generate benefits that will accrue to the rural sector in general. During the past decade, this string of logic has been re-examined in light of disappointing results from agriculture-only approaches to rural development. Broader concepts of rural development have been given serious consideration. Rural development programs based on these concepts address a range of needs including food and agriculture, rural employment, health, infrastructure, and education.

Relevance of educational programs in rural areas is an important area for improvement. Technical agriculture schools, once viewed as a corner stone of rural development, suffer from a number of obstacles and challenges. They have evolved to the point that they are:

1. too narrowly focused on physical and biological processes and largely ignore social change processes;
2. separated from the larger education system (often run by a ministry of agriculture instead of a ministry of education);
3. lacking in relevance to local needs; and,
4. increasingly divorced from the needs of the labor market and stakeholders. (Acker, 1999; Crowder, Lindley, Breuning, and Doron, 1998)

Taking into account the above points along with the trend toward increasing diversification in rural labor markets, national governments and donors began to rethink their strategies on improving rural livelihoods. As donors and policy makers examined the fundamental origins of rural poverty, they concluded that in order to deal with poverty and hunger, one must attack the root causes including (and especially) the lack of education. They concluded that education of rural dwellers is an essential prerequisite for reducing hunger and poverty (Gasperini and Maguire, 2002).

The ERP strategy goes beyond education about agriculture. It is based on the assumption that educational programs in rural areas need to expand to include a variety of life skills appropriate for rural areas. For example, in areas ravaged by HIV/AIDS, education about basic health coupled with food production under conditions of labor scarcity may be the highest priority for rural people. Or, in cases where very high rates of urban migration have been observed, education on agro-based value added processing and marketing may help to make living in rural areas an attractive and viable option.

ERP is not a replacement for agricultural and extension education; rather, it is a natural complement that expands the focus while building on the lessons learned by agricultural and extension educators. It also offers a rare window of opportunity in which there is heightened awareness of the importance of education in rural and agricultural development processes.

As evidence of the growing commitment of leaders from across the world to the ERP agenda one can look to some logical and exciting alliances. For example,

1. FAO and UNESCO joining forces on the ERP flagship program;
2. Ministries of Agriculture and Ministries of Education working to develop synergies in rural area programming; and,
3. rural primary schools linking with extension staff and non-governmental organizations to deliver programs of greater relevance to the food, health and economic needs of rural people.

What Should We Do?

First, to remain on the cutting edge of our field, agricultural and extension educators need to stay abreast of the latest trends in Education for Rural People. Agricultural and extension educators will benefit from the results of a joint study conducted by FAO and UNESCO. Results are presented in a new book entitled Education for Rural Development: Towards New Policy Responses (2002). This book presents a global review of trends, innovative ideas, and success stories in rural education. It deals with basic, vocational, adult and higher education. To learn how to order a copy, please contact the International Institute for Educational Planning Publications Unit at: information@iiep.unesco.org

Second, FAO and UNESCO invite all relevant institutions to join in a new Partnership on Education for Rural People. Please visit this web site to learn how your institution can become a member:

http://www.fao.org/sd/2002/kn0801a_en.htm

As a partner, you can support the ERP flagship by contributing your expertise at national and international ERP meetings, orienting your research to support this area, helping to exchange best practices with other professionals in the field, and sharing these practices with your students and in-service trainees.

The authors recently participated in workshops on ERP in Bangkok (November, 2002) and in Rome (December, 2002). These workshops served as a reminder that, while FAO and UNESCO can lead this flagship, implementation will depend on a vast array of institutions working in tandem. Please join the Partnership on Education for Rural People and join the worldwide struggle to help rural people feed and educate themselves.

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