What role can agricultural extension and advisory services play in realizing gender equality and improved nutrition?

The Nutrition Working Group of the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS), of which FAO is a member, invites you to reflect on the role that agricultural extension and advisory services (AEAS) can play in contributing to reducing gender inequalities and improving nutrition. Gender equality and nutrition are quite intertwined, and there is compelling evidence that gender inequalities significantly undermine food security and nutrition objectives.

Integrated approaches connecting the design and delivery of programs across disciplines and sectors are instrumental to address such challenges, with their importance having recently been highlighted by the UN Decade of Action for Nutrition. It is in such context that agricultural extension and advisory services (AEAS) have been identified as being able to play a significant role in the push for increased gender equality and improved nutrition.

Agricultural extension and advisory services (AEAS) refers to any organization in the public or private sectors (e.g. NGOs, farmer organizations, private firms etc.) that facilitates farmers’ and other rural actors’ access to knowledge, information and technologies, and their interactions with other actors; and assists them to develop their own technical, organizational and management skills and practices, so as to improve their livelihoods and well-being.

Over the past few decades the role of AEAS has changed substantially, shifting away from a production oriented, technology transfer model to a greater emphasis on broader development objectives such as improving rural livelihoods through a demand-led, participatory and market-oriented approach. It is in the context of this paradigm shift that a potential role for AEAS in promoting gender equality and supporting nutrition interventions has emerged.

Experience suggests that AEAS can play a role in promoting nutrition outcomes, enhancing the food and nutritional security of household members, and ensuring sustainable food systems that promote healthy diets. Whether supported by the public, private, or non-profit sector, AEAS are often seen as a potential channel for influencing the production and consumption
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decisions of farming households so that they grow, sell, and eat more nutritious and diversified foods and time-saving technologies to alleviate drudgery.

At the same time, addressing gender constraints and unequal access to services and technology is essential for AEAS to effectively contribute to improved diets and nutrition. The INGENAES project, funded by USAID to assist countries in building more robust, gender-responsive, and nutrition-sensitive extension and advisory services, has begun to address these gaps by supporting the adoption of policies that recognize gender equality and nutrition security as AEAS objectives, training AEAS institutions, and disseminating accessible materials for field-level staff. In Liberia, for instance, INGENAES is collaborating with the University of Cuttington and the Ministry of Agriculture to survey AEAS clients to better understand barriers to gender equitable services, and ensure that high-level policy is translated into action at the field level that meets the needs of both men and women farmers.

Concrete experiences and success factors, including approaches, methodologies and tools that work to enhance women’s and men’s equitable access to AEAS as well as nutrition results have however not yet been identified conclusively and examples of successful cases are still sparse.

Given the above, the objective of this online discussion is to collect experiences, methodologies, and lessons learned around gender-sensitive and nutrition-enhancing AEAS practices from all over the world.

We invite you to join the conversation by reflecting on the following questions:

1. To what extent do you think should AEAS be involved in broader development, going beyond providing and facilitating access to knowledge, information and technologies?
2. What specific challenges have you encountered that hinder AEAS from addressing gender inequalities and promoting nutrition?
3. Do you know any examples of AEAS successfully addressing gender inequalities and supporting improved nutrition outcomes? What factors, including specific approaches and tools, led to success?
4. What do you think the role and main activities should be of a global forum such as the GFRAS Nutrition Working Group in helping AEAS to become more gender-sensitive and able to contribute to improved nutrition?

The results of this discussion will inform the work of the newly-formed GFRAS Nutrition Working Group, which provides resources and effective coordination opportunities for practitioners and policy makers. We hope that through enabling a broad participation of experts in this exchange, we can stimulate the uptake of innovative gender-sensitive and nutrition-enhancing AEAS practices.

Forum participants will become part of the broad community of the GFRAS Nutrition Working Group. They will receive updates about the Working Group’s activities and also have the opportunity to contribute to future initiatives.

Thank you and we look forward to a fruitful discussion!

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2 Christoplos, I. 2010. Mobilizing the potential of rural and agricultural extension. FAO. Rome.