



Professionalism in Rural Advisory Services



This brief summarises the results and recommendations of a scoping study that examined the current levels of professionalism in the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS) regional networks. The aim was to provide evidence that would guide the future activities and tools offered by GFRAS as well as to promote inter-regional learning and information exchange.

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S.E. Terblanche

Background

Businesses and other institutions around the world are increasingly using the term 'professionalism' to describe their level of service provision. While some professions, for example medicine and engineering, have been well known and recognised through standard qualifications for many years, others – such as rural advisory services (RAS) – have only recently begun to aspire to a high level of professionalism.

In 2016, GFRAS initiated a scoping study to examine the current levels of professionalism in its 11 regional networks. The aim was to provide evidence that would guide the activities and tools offered by GFRAS as well as to promote inter-regional learning and information exchange with a specific focus on training, talent and career development, performance incentives, certification and registration, mentoring and standards.

Methodology

The methodology included a literature study to identify examples of professional RAS from around the world and to assess how they are structured, how they operate (including bylaws and membership classes) and the competencies they require in order to recognise their staff as professional extension agents. GFRAS

also developed a questionnaire and distributed it to the regional networks to identify the key stakeholders in RAS and gain their input. The questionnaire assessed respondents' perceptions on current levels of professionalism in their own RAS, the advantages and disadvantages of professionalism, and what they regarded as essential professional skills. They were also asked to rate the competencies included in the *GFRAS New Extensionist Learning Kit*.

A total of 54 people (37 male and 17 female) from 29 countries responded to the survey. Participants were drawn from academic institutions (30%), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (30%), government extension and advisory services (22%), research institutions (11%) and GFRAS regional network staff (7%). Their roles included lecturer, advisor, researcher and manager.

Examples of professional RAS

Saskatchewan Institute of Agrologists (Canada): This is an organisation of university-trained professionals that protects the public by ensuring its members are qualified and competent to provide advice on agriculture and related areas. In Saskatchewan, the profession of agrology is regulated by provincial legislation (Agrologist Act,



1994). This gives the Institute authority to make regular and administrative bylaws concerning membership, code of ethics, meetings, continuing professional development, standards of practice and discipline.

European Forum for Agricultural and Rural Advisory Services (EUFRAS): This has established the Certificate for European Consultants in Rural Areas (CECRA). The aim is to improve the professional skills of consultants in the areas of scientific methodology, communication and dealing with people. The certificate has two compulsory modules and applicants must complete at least three of 13 elective modules. Those applying for the certificate must have: a) completed a degree course or vocational training; b) two years of professional experience in rural advice; c) confirmation that they have completed the required modules; d) attended an event in another country

and completed a visit to an advisory organisation in another country; and e) completed a final thesis (case study including self-reflection).

South African Council for Natural Scientific Professions: Following a study initiated by the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, it was decided that extension advisers in South Africa will become registered with the Council, according to the Natural Scientific Professions Act 2003. As per Schedule 1 of the Act, nobody may practise in any of the 23 listed fields unless they are registered in a category of the schedule. The latest fields of practice were published under Notice 36 (2014) by the Minister of Science and Technology.

National Association of Extension Program and Staff Development Professionals (USA): This is an organised forum that convenes

professionals who are actively engaged in, or who have a strong commitment to, programme and staff development within the Cooperative Extension System. There are three categories of membership (active, life and student) and bylaws covering membership, officers and committees, governance, elections and strategic partnerships.

Extent of professionalism in RAS

The survey results revealed that respondents from 37 countries consider their RAS to be professional. Thirty of these countries are within EUFRAS. Fifteen countries are considered to be in the process of becoming professional, and 20 are interested in becoming more professional (see table). The countries that are considered to have professional RAS generally have a specific legal body or structure responsible for establishing and upholding professional standards, e.g. the National Institute of Agricultural

Technology is the legal body in Argentina. Respondents interested in becoming more professional indicated the availability of a body or structure that could oversee the professionalism process, e.g. the NGO Sustainable Alternatives for Development in Cameroon.

Respondents from countries having professional RAS as well as those from countries in the process of becoming more professional indicated the bylaws applicable to their own situations. Both groups considered 'field of practice' and 'continuous professional development' to be the most applicable bylaws.

In most countries with professional RAS, the minimum qualification to be registered as a professional agricultural advisor is a degree in agriculture. Some countries also ask for a Master's degree. Respondents from non-professional RAS recommended that a diploma, degree and/or post-graduate degree should to be required for professional registration.

Extent of professionalism in RAS globally

Professional	In the process of becoming professional	Interested in becoming more professional
Argentina, Australia, Ireland, Philippines, South Africa, Switzerland, USA + 30 additional countries within EUFRAS	Benin, Cook Islands, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Samoa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago	Benin, Cameroon, Cook Islands, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Fiji, Ghana, India, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Samoa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda

Characteristics, advantages and disadvantages of professional RAS

According to the study respondents, the five most important characteristics of a professional person are:

- personal characteristics, e.g. trustworthy, respectful, committed, accountable
- extension science competencies, e.g. education and research, social/cultural behaviour and adaption to change, leadership skills and conflict management
- technical competencies, e.g. qualifications in agriculture
- adhere to a code of ethics/moral standards
- undertake continuous professional development.

Respondents listed the main advantages of professionalism as: a) set high standards to improve performance and deliver a relevant service (54%); and b) job satisfaction, including pride, recognition, practising without fear/interference, remuneration/reward, support from colleagues, etc. (46%).

They described the main disadvantages of professionalism as: a) disconnected from reality, i.e. work environment becomes discouraging, administrative burden, inability to practise with

confidence (34%); b) effect on the work environment, i.e. eliminate small enterprises, more oriented towards large producers, mistrust (46%); and c) high cost for beneficiaries (20%).

Essential professional skills or competencies

When asked about the essential competencies needed in order to be recognised as a professional in RAS, respondents listed the top three as communication, technical skills, and social/cultural aspects and human behaviour.

Respondents rated the significance of the 13 competencies/modules of the GFRAS *New Extensionist Learning Kit* as follows:

- Absolutely essential: communication for innovation; extension approaches and tools; adult learning and behaviour change; and facilitation for development.
- Essential: agricultural entrepreneurship; extension programme management; professional ethics; gender issues in agricultural extension and rural development; adaption to change; value chain extension; and introduction to the New Extensionist.
- Somewhat essential: community development; and farmer institutional development.

The GFRAS *New Extensionist Learning Kit* modules

1. Introduction to the New Extensionist
2. Extension approaches and tools
3. Agricultural extension programme management
4. Professional ethics
5. Adult learning for behavioural change
6. Basic knowledge management and extension
7. Introduction to facilitation for development
8. Community mobilisation
9. Farmer organisational development
10. The role of extension in value chains
11. Agricultural entrepreneurship
12. Gender in extension and advisory services
13. Risk management and adaptation in extension and advisory services.

See <http://nelk.g-fras.org>

Conclusions and recommendations

The study indicated that agricultural extension and rural advisory services need to attain a professional status on a level with that of other agricultural disciplines. The required qualifications for professional registration are at least a diploma or degree in agriculture and, in some countries, a Master's degree. Importantly, almost two-thirds of respondents (61%) indicated that they would like to obtain support and guidance with the process of enhancing professionalism in their countries. GFRAS focuses on several 'strategic fields' in pursuit of its mission and vision. Strategic field 2 relates to professionalism in RAS and the scoping study was conducted under this strategy. The majority of the respondents indicated that there is a body or structure available in their country that can take the lead, while GFRAS has its own regional networks that could manage the process.

The recommendations for GFRAS are as follows:

1. GFRAS should investigate the possibility of developing a model or process to support countries and regional networks work towards establishing professionalism in their extension and rural advisory services.
2. This process could include a two- to three-day workshop for extension

- advisers and other stakeholders involved in extension and advisory services.
3. GFRAS will need to secure funding for the development and implementation of the model and process at country or regional level.
 4. The first aim of the model/process should be to determine the current extension landscape in a country. The assessment should include the following aspects:
 - Which institution will manage the process of establishing professionalism in the extension advisory services?
 - Has a legal body been established as a result of a government Act?
 - Who are the service providers (government, private sector, other)?
 - What qualifications are available via agricultural training institutions? Is agricultural extension available as a science discipline?
 - What qualifications are needed for a person to be registered as a professional extension adviser? Can the *New Extensionist Learning Kit* be used in the curriculum towards gaining a qualification in extension?
 - What are the possible levels of registration?
 - Is there a code of ethics and are there any bylaws, specifically covering the need for continuing professional development?
 - Who are the beneficiaries (especially farmers)?
 - What specific tasks need to be accomplished (according to government Acts)?



For further reading

New Extensionist Learning Kit, available at nelk.g-fras.org

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Contact:

Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS)
 c/o Agridea
 Jordils 1
 1001 Lausanne, Switzerland
 Telephone: +41 (0)52 354 97 64
 Fax: +41 (0)52 354 97 97
info@g-fras.org
www.g-fras.org



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