WHAT IS A COUNTRY FORUM (CF)?

One of the ways to network pluralistic agricultural extension and rural advisory services (RAS) providers and stakeholders is the formation of a country forum (CF). The country forum, a virtual organization of RAS providers and stakeholders in the fields of agriculture, forestry, and natural resources (AFNR), serves as a platform for the discussion and articulation of the stakeholders’ agenda, issues, and concerns in rural advisory services and agricultural innovation systems. Stakeholders in a CF shall aim for a shared, common agenda for pluralistic, effective, and efficient rural advisory services towards the empowerment of smallholder farmers.

The conceptual and structural development of the CF started in Africa. Part of the development of the African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (AFAAS) was the establishment of country fora. The role of AFAAS was to “facilitate the CFs in the various countries in aligning their [agricultural advisory services] strategies and programmes with the AFAAS Strategic Plan.”

THE ROLE OF CF IN RURAL ADVISORY SERVICES

The country forum serves as a platform both for the country’s RAS stakeholders and international (regional and sub-regional) networks.

In the country level, the CF brings together national and local government agencies delivering rural advisory services, civic and non-government organizations, farmers, and other stakeholders involved in agriculture in an aim to harmonize the delivery of RAS in the country. Through this, stakeholders lay down their current and future efforts in their RAS initiatives and thrusts, discuss the issues and problems they face in the delivery of RAS, sort out possible redundancies and duplication of work, and set the future of RAS in the country.

At the same time, the country forum serves as “the building blocks of the regional networks” and “an entry point for regional and international initiatives in improving rural advisory services and rural livelihood in general.”

CF AND “THE NEW EXTENSIONIST”

The formation of a country forum can take off from the “New Extensionist,” a new perspective on the delivery of agricultural and rural advisory services being forwarded by the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS). The “New Extensionist” posits that there is a need to strengthen the capacities of not just individual RAS practitioners, but also institutions, organizations, and networks involved in the delivery of RAS.

The “New Extensionist” further argues that capacities shall be developed in the individual, organizational, and system
levels. In the individual level, RAS practitioners should have the appropriate technical and social expertise. In the organizational level, aspects that should be addressed include organizational management and structure, processes, financial and human resources, and necessary infrastructure. There should also be an enabling policy environment in order for RAS to be provided with efficiency and good results. Areas that should be taken into consideration include sound economic, financial, and political policies, clear policy framework, literacy, infrastructure, and training.

Because the CF is a platform for congregating agricultural extension practitioners, providers, and stakeholders, the virtues of the “New Extensionist” can be integrated, articulated, and put forward in the CF.

POTENTIAL CF PLATFORMS AND PARTNER-STAKEHOLDERS IN THE PHILIPPINES

There are six potential partner-stakeholders in the formation of a country forum in the Philippines, namely: the Agriculture and Fisheries Extension Network, Agricultural Training Institute, Philippine Extension and Advisory Services Network, agriculture and fisheries councils in the national and local levels, state universities and colleges, and nongovernment organizations.

Agriculture and Fisheries Extension Networks

The Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act (AFMA) stipulates that the Philippine Department of Agriculture (DA) and other related agencies “shall formulate a National Extension System for Agriculture and Fisheries” (NESA). The NESA shall have three components comprising the national government, local governments, and the private sector, respectively.

The National Agricultural and Fisheries Extension Network (AFEN) is a network of agencies delivering agricultural extension services. It is composed of attached agencies and government-owned and -controlled corporations (GOCCs) of the Philippine Department of Agriculture (DA) providing extension services and other government agencies outside DA with extension services that are under the Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act (AFMA). State universities and colleges, local government units, and the private sector are also represented in the network.

Aside from the national AFEN, regional AFENs have also been established, composed of the respective regional offices of the DA and other relevant national government agencies, SUCs, LGUs, and the private sector.

Agricultural Training Institute

The Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) is the national apex agency for agriculture of the Department of Agriculture (DA) in order to orchestrate the agriculture and fisheries extension system for a unified and efficient delivery of extension system” in the Philippines. As the apex agency, ATI is the lead agency in the development of a national extension agenda, implementation of national extension programs, and the implementation of a national system for institutional development of agencies providing extension services.

As part of its functions, and in accordance with the AFMA, ATI has developed the National Extension Agenda and Programs (NEAP). The latest agenda, NEAP 2017-2022, has six thematic programs, namely:

- Enhancing access to AFE knowledge products and services;
- Strengthening competitiveness and capacities of the AF sector;
- Expanding partnerships in advancing excellence in AFE delivery;
- Scaling-up AFE innovations;
- Strengthening AFE stakeholders’ capacity in climate change adaptation and risk management; and
- Improving enabling environment and quality of governance.

ATI serves as the focal agency and secretariat of the AFEN.

Philippine Extension and Advisory Services Network

The Philippine Extension and Advisory Services Network (PhilEASNet) is a professional organization of agricultural extension and rural advisory services practitioners. PhilEASNet traces its roots from the Philippine Extension Network (PEN), established on 2 March 2001. PhilEASNet “serves as a partner advocate in creating avenues for the continuing development of a cadre of morally responsible, competent, dedicated and self-directed experts in the pursuit of advancing theory and practice of extension.” The organization aims to “enhance competency and promote ethical standards among professionals engaged in the practice, research, instruction, and policy advocacy on extension.” PhilEASNet is also involved in policy advocacy, having a crucial role in the proposed Agriculture and Fisheries Extension Bill in the House of Representatives.

OTHER POTENTIAL STAKEHOLDERS

State universities and colleges, regional and provincial agriculture and fishery councils, the Philippine Council for Agriculture and Fisheries, relevant national government agencies (NGAs), nongovernment organizations, and the private sector shall also be included in the formation of the Philippine country forum.

Then Philippine Council for Agriculture and Fisheries (PCAF), an agency under the Department of Agriculture (DA), is mandated to “establish a nationwide network of agricultural and fisheries councils to serve as the forum for consultative and continuing discussions within agriculture and fisheries sectors.” The National Agriculture and Fisheries Council (NAFC), national sectoral committees, and the Agriculture and Fisheries Councils in the regions, provinces, cities, and municipalities comprise the advisory bodies under PCAF.

State universities and colleges also have a role in agricultural extension. Section 90 of the AFMA stipulates that SUCs “shall primarily focus on the improvement of the capability of the LGU extension service” through the following:

- Degree and non-degree training programs;
- Technical assistance;
- Extension program management; and
- Monitoring and evaluation of LGU extension projects; and
- Information support services through the tri-media and electronics.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), and the Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic, and Natural Resources Research and Development (PCARRD), and other relevant agencies providing services in the agriculture, fisheries, and natural resources sectors shall also be roped in the country forum. Nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and stakeholders in the private sector involved in agriculture and rural advisory services can also take part in the country forum.

HOW THEY SHALL WORK TOGETHER

Figure 1 shows how the components of the country forum can work together. All components, namely the AFEN, PhilEASNet, SUCs, PMC, RAPCs, and IFPCs, and NGOs should interact with each other both by themselves and through the country forum. This is to allow maximum participation of all parties towards a shared, common agenda for rural advisory services, with CF as the primary platform.

CONCLUSION

With multiple providers and stakeholders in rural advisory services in the Philippines having a variety of functions, roles, issues and concerns, a platform shall be established where they should be able to converge and develop a shared agenda for rural advisory services. The conception and development of a country forum will enable these stakeholders to interact, exchange information, knowledge, and best practices, and harmonize their expertise and services towards supporting and empowering smallholder farmers in the country.
REFERENCES

5. Sulaiman & Davis, ibid.
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For comments and suggestions regarding this policy brief, contact

ASIA-PACIFIC ISLANDS RURAL ADVISORY SERVICES NETWORK

c/o University of the Philippines Los Baños College of Public Affairs and Development
Domingo Lantican Avenue, College 4031 Laguna, Philippines
Phone: (+63-49) 536-0319
Email: apirasnet2017@gmail.com
Web: www.apiras.net/ http://www.saas.apiras.net
Facebook and Twitter: @APIRASnetwork