

Report: Trip to Guatemala on behalf of MEAS program to attend Second National Workshop on Agricultural Extension in Guatemala (April 7-8 2011, Hotel Ramada Conquistador, Guatemala City).

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Itinerary

- April 6 - Arrive Guatemala City.
- April 7-8 - Attend conference.
- April 8 afternoon - tour Escuela Nacional Central de Agricultura, Villa Nueva, with Director Julio Catalán; meet with faculty.
- April 9 – meet with Licenciada Cristina Bailey, Universidad Rafael Landívar, Guatemala City, to discuss URL’s Virtual Education program.

The following information is taken from documents provided by MAGA and from interviews with individuals April 7-9. An additional source of information for ICT capacity in Guatemala is Dr. Charles MacVean, formerly of the Universidad del Valle and Universidad Rafael Landívar, Guatemala, presently Dean, School of Sciences, Saint Francis University, Loretto, PA.

Background

The Guatemalan extension service in the form of DIGESA was active in the 1970s but began to be dismantled in the 1980s and by the early 1990s had ceased to function. In 2008, the Guatemalan government initiated efforts to reestablish a national agricultural extension service as a component of the department of agriculture, MAGA (Ministerio de Agricultura, Ganadería y Alimentación). The formal initiation of the extension service (Sistema Nacional de Extensión Agrícola – SNEA) was in April 2010, when projects became established in the field.

The program is run by Ing. Agr. Pedro Rosado, who is the Sub-Director of Rural Extension for MAGA. On a national level, SNEA consists of the National Council, the Technical Committee and the National Coordination for the Extension System. On a departmental level, agricultural extension system programs are delivered through MAGA’s Departmental Coordination for Agricultural Extension, Agricultural Extension Agents, and Local Extension Promoters. The agricultural extension service is active in 19 of Guatemala’s 22 departments, in a total of 92 municipalities. MAGA estimates that 50% of the country’s municipalities have extension “coverage.” MAGA has received support for extension projects from the Food and Agriculture Organization, the Japanese Agency for International Cooperation, and other international agencies such as Cooperación Andaluza and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

There are three kinds of extension agent in the Guatemalan agricultural extension service: the agricultural extension agent (extensionista agrícola), the educator for the home (educadora para el hogar), and the youth promoter (promotor juvenil). There are presently 96 of each type of agent in the country. Agricultural extension agents promote projects related to food security and resource conservation. Home educators are female agents who work with low resource rural women and girls on aspects of food security, nutrition, and health. Youth promoters work with young people in rural communities on projects related to agriculture, citizenship, and self-esteem. Extension agents work with local promoters, members of the community who presently serve as volunteers.

MAGA distinguishes between two groups of growers according to their vulnerability to food security issues: growers who need assistance producing enough food to maintain their families, and growers who produce a surplus that is sold commercially. Rural households that are near or below subsistence level – usually families with little or no land - are the priority for Guatemala’s agricultural extension programs. These programs focus on “patio” level production of home gardens and small animal husbandry in order to raise families above a subsistence level. Subsistence level growers are encouraged through extension programs to diversify their crops beyond production of maize, and instructed in aspects of horticulture such as the production of organic fertilizers. In addition to technical training, they receive orientation in organizing on a community level, how to make best use of inputs and how to market produce. Growers who produce and sell the surplus that they produce participate in a separate set of programs designed to enhance food security and vitalize the rural economy.

Second National Extension Workshop

From April 7-8 2011 the second national extension workshop was held in Guatemala City. It was entitled “Strengthening the National Agricultural Extension System” (II Taller Nacional “Fortalecimiento del Sistema Nacional de Extensión Agrícola”). The meeting was sponsored by the FAO. It included presentations by Agriculture Minister Juan Alfonso de León, Ing. Pedro Rosado and other members of MAGA, as well as representatives of FAO, and the indigenous campesino leader Felipe Tomas Mux of FUNDAMARCOS. In addition, Dr. Ramiro Ortiz, an extension expert based in Nicaragua, gave a presentation and participated in discussions. Lic. Mario Chamalé and Ing. Mike Estrada, both of PESA Guatemala, coordinated the speakers and sessions. PESA is the FAO’s food security program in Central America.

The purpose of the national extension workshop meeting was both to present the extent to which the extension service had fulfilled the objectives formulated at the first meeting (April 2010) and to formulate new objectives. On the afternoon of April 7 participants broke up into discussion groups according to sector in order to establish recommendations for the future. The groups were 1) women and youth, 2) private sector, 3) indigenous and campesino sector, 4) international cooperation sector, 5) political institution sector, and 6) academic sector. A representative from each group gave a 15 minute presentation on the morning of Friday April 8 to summarize the conclusions of their group. I gave the summary presentation on behalf of the International Cooperation group, and was able to describe the MEAS program to those attending the workshop (around 150 people). Overall conclusions and objectives for 2012 were presented to Agriculture Minister de León in the final session. These conclusions and objectives will be published and shared with the workshop participants in the near future.

Extension Priorities

I had the opportunity to speak with Mario Chamalé during the session on international collaboration on the afternoon of April 7 and with Pedro Rosado at the end of the day on the 7th. Both were enthusiastic about collaborating with MEAS. Both stated that SNEA needed assistance with organizational management and the development and implementation of long-term strategy. Rosado and Chamalé stressed that the majority of extension agents are young men and women with considerable enthusiasm but very little management or technical experience. Rosado emphasized that the extension agents need training in the technical aspects of their jobs as well as orientation in managing programs.

It should be kept in mind that much of the experience and expertise needed to train extension agents in technical aspects of agricultural extension and rural development probably already exist in Guatemala.

Many individuals have received training and gained experience over the years with a range of government, non-government and international organizations in practical aspects of food security and rural development, such as the production of family gardens, production of organic fertilizer, basic nutrition, and the construction of latrines. It is unclear how many of these individuals are currently working with SNEA. It would be useful to have a roster of the individuals in Guatemala who have experience in different aspects of rural development.

Pedro Rosado emphasized that the primary requests for assistance by members of rural communities are not always related directly to agriculture. The primary needs expressed were often for access to clean water, latrines, and roads. Assistance with soil conservation is another priority. This is presumably related to deforestation that stems from reliance on forests as a source of fuel.

The Role of Guatemalan Universities and Agricultural Colleges

During presentations by sector on the morning of April 8, a number of working groups stressed the need to strengthen the involvement of the universities in the extension system. Guatemalan universities are involved in extension projects, but do not have a formal role in the extension service. There are at least three areas where the universities and agricultural colleges could contribute to the development of a national extension service.

1) In collaboration with MAGA, the Escuela Nacional Central de Agricultura (ENCA) and the Agronomy faculty at the Universidad San Carlos (USAC) could offer training programs to extension agents that combine hands-on training with orientation in program management and social science aspects of working with rural communities. The ENCA has the land, facilities and expertise to offer training in aspects of horticulture, animal husbandry, and nutrition. The ENCA currently has projects on production of fertilizer and compost, including worm compost and the production of composting toilets. In addition, the ENCA is working on sericulture and the production of natural dyes. The ENCA would be an excellent site to train extension agents and expose them to the entrepreneurial skills necessary to develop programs in sites with limited resources. Extension agents attending the workshop expressed the need for training that lasts “months not days.”

2) Guatemalan universities and agricultural colleges could contribute to the institutionalization of the extension service by developing curricula designed to train extension and rural development professionals. For example, it might be possible to offer a bachelor’s degree in extension, and a Master’s degree in rural development.

3) In addition to offering degrees in extension and rural development, agricultural universities could develop training modules for extension agents to be delivered via Internet or on CD. Modules would be practical in nature, outlining for example how to establish a family garden or build a wood-conserving stove. In addition, training modules could be developed that provide extension agents with examples of appropriate field activities to educate members of communities with limited education and whose primary language is not Spanish. These training modules would be based on the experience-and-observation activities typical of Farmer Field Schools. In addition to the ENCA and USAC, other Guatemalan universities could be involved. The Universidad Rafael Landívar has campuses around the country that have the capacity to deliver educational programs via the Internet, including a strong Virtual Education Program and the capacity to develop material in indigenous languages. The Universidad del Valle has a campus in Sololá that is a center of training and workshops for local indigenous communities. The Escuelas de Formación Agrícola (EFAs) and Ministry of Defense

agricultural colleges could also participate in the development of extension personnel and the delivery of extension programs.

The MEAS program could assist with each of the objectives outlined above: 1) working with the ENCA and other agricultural schools to develop a training program for extension agents; 2) helping Guatemalan universities develop curricula for degree programs in extension and rural development; and 3) working with extension and education professionals in Guatemala to develop training modules on topics related to food security and natural resource conservation for the rural poor. *By working with agricultural universities and schools, MEAS could help institutionalize a national extension service in Guatemala, in part by strengthening its identity as something separate from a potentially politicized department of agriculture. (This is not to say that the ENCA and other educational institutions are immune from political interference.)*

ICT

Internet service and cell phone coverage are available in much of the country. Prices for example for a Blackberry are extremely low by US standards if purchased with a plan. Tomas Silvestre, the Regional Director for ICTA (the Guatemalan agricultural research service – Instituto de Ciencia y Tecnología Agrícolas) in Quetzaltenango, talked to me about his interest in using ICT to encourage participation in extension projects in villages near Quetzaltenango. There may be opportunities for MEAS to assist on this level, but ICT as a means for enhancing extension programs in Guatemala is not a priority.

Challenges

When asked to identify obstacles to implementing a successful extension service in Guatemala, participants in the workshop articulated three areas of concern.

1. There are impediments of a bureaucratic nature within MAGA that can lead to untimely delays in the execution of projects.
2. There is a high turn-over of personnel in MAGA that undermines the continuity of projects and results in a loss of expertise from the agency. (Having said that, I ran into two agronomists at the workshop whom I worked with in 1998 when they were with ICTA, and a third whom I worked with in 2003 when he was with ICTA. Each presently has a supervisory position in extension with MAGA.)
3. Of greatest concern is the fact that it is an election year, and there is no guarantee that the next administration will attach importance or provide funds to maintain a national extension service. The current administration (Álvaro Colom) is the first to support extension in many years.

Conclusions

There are plenty of opportunities for the universities and agencies associated with the MEAS consortium to collaborate with the Guatemalan extension service and Guatemalan agricultural schools in the development of training, curricula, and programs. MEAS could assist with improving the organizational design of SNEA. I was not able to speak with anyone from the USAID mission in Guatemala during my trip. Additional effort should be made to communicate with the USAID mission in Guatemala to determine what their priorities are in the area of agricultural extension for the country, and how MEAS might contribute.

Contact information for individuals involved in extension in Guatemala

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