

Enabling change in rural and regional Australia:

The role of extension in achieving sustainable and productive futures

A discussion document produced by the
State Extension Leaders Network

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Purpose of this Discussion Document

The purpose of this discussion document is to establish a common understanding of extension nationally in order to assist in creating world-class, competitive primary industries and in achieving sustainable natural resource management.

State Extension Leaders Network

The State Extension Leaders Network is a gathering of Government extension leaders and influencers from each State and Territory of Australia. SELN strives to provide leadership and strategic direction in the development of State and National extension service delivery.

In the short term, SELN aims to connect with rural and regional stakeholders across Australia to:

- clarify the purpose and role of the extension policy instrument, both in its own right and within policy instrument mixes;
- instigate efforts to improve communication, cooperation and collaboration across extension service providers;
- encourage key stakeholders to reassess the role of extension policy and extension services, and;
- progress the development of a national coordinated approach for extension.

SELN further sees that its role in progressing these initiatives is to instigate and facilitate interactions with State and Territory Governments, Industry Bodies, Research and Development Corporations, the Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building, rural industries and the Ministerial Advisory Committees for primary industries and natural resources. SELN also works with the Australasia-Pacific Extension Network (APEN), a professional association for extension practitioners.

SELN Membership

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1. Policy instruments available to pave the way to sustainability and productivity

Extension is the process of enabling change in individuals, communities and industries involved in the primary industry sector and with natural resource management.



As a process of bringing about change, extension is a strategic policy instrument for enabling profitable primary industry value chains and sustainable natural resource management (NRM) across Australia. Extension is useful in its own right, but also has a vital role to play in conjunction with other policy instruments for achieving desired objectives.

Extension may well be a necessary precondition for the effectiveness of many instruments. In times of discontinuous change, it is important to continually review the use of policy instruments and their combinations to facilitate effective change in urban, regional and rural communities.

A sustainable productive future is heavily reliant on improved community capacity building, new ways of interaction, and more efficient use of resources. The pressures on the primary industries sector to implement profitable production systems continue to increase.

Urban demands on Australian landscapes are escalating. While many social and economic indicators are improving for most Australians, there is substantial evidence of declining social, economic and natural capital in rural areas.

Our resource management practices must change if we are to achieve sustainable landscapes, livelihoods, and lifestyles. The needed changes will not take place on their own. Intervention is required to facilitate and shape the practice changes required to achieve the desired onground outcomes.

A range of strategies (policy instruments) can be developed and implemented to influence and accelerate these changes.

The selection of effective policy instruments and the appropriate mix of instruments are crucial for achieving desired outcomes. There is a real opportunity to recognise and use extension in conjunction with other policy instruments to optimise their inherent potential to meet desired outcomes.

Extension differs from PR and marketing in that it uses a wider range of methods, has a different theoretical base, and responds to stakeholders' needs at all stages of the adoption process (i.e. not just awareness-raising). It differs from education and training by facilitating the social interactions critical for progressing learning and negotiation through to practice change.

Suasion is one of the methods used by extension, but extension often shows that new technologies or practices are in the potential adopters' best interests. Extension and capacity building are highly interconnected, with capacity building being an important component of extension activities.



Policy instrument: a method or mechanism used by government, government agencies as well as other institutions including business to achieve a desired effect.

2. Extension has a new meaning

Extension is the process of enabling change in individuals, communities and industries involved with primary industries and natural resource management (NRM). Extension is concerned with building capacity for change through improved communication and information flow between industry, agency and community stakeholders. Extension seeks outcomes of capacity building and resilience in individuals and communities. Extension contributes to protecting, maintaining and enhancing the landscapes, livelihoods and lifestyles of all Australians.



Extension is a significant activity across Australia in both the public and private sectors, and involves thousands of extension practitioners who reach out to all landholders and community members. Extension seeks both public good and private good outcomes. The service delivery base has transformed over the last two decades becoming more diverse with private industry playing an increased role.

The achievement of public benefit outcomes is the responsibility of government. Therefore, public extension service delivery largely targets the sustainability aspects of production and NRM. While the Commonwealth and State Governments have remained significant players, industry programs, regional NRM bodies, and private practitioners have taken an increased role in working with individual producers and natural resource managers:

- Private benefits such as increased profitability and competitive industries are increasingly targeted by private sector providers;
- Private sector extension providers are also available to deliver public sector programs under contract;
- Not-for-profit organizations, such as Greening Australia and regional NRM bodies, are increasingly undertaking extension services, and;
- Public sector agencies are also providing some services on a competitive basis with private deliverers.

It is clear that as the relationship between society and natural resources has broadened to focus on issues of sustainability, and as knowledge of the ways to influence people has increased, we need to rethink and adapt our ideas about the role and meaning of 'extension'.

Policy instruments for supporting change

1. Regulation, Enforcement and Compliance	<p>Statutes, laws and regulations provide institutional guidelines and specify agency responsibilities for enforcing minimum standards, prohibiting certain practices and regulating resource use in policy areas such as landuse planning, vegetation management, water allocation and development control. Enforcement and compliance of regulatory frameworks facilitate changed practices. A major risk is that ‘command and control’ approaches limit effectiveness in achieving more than minimum standards.</p>
2. Direct Investment	<p>Sometimes when specific onground outcomes are desired, the most effective mechanism is direct investment – to employ a contractor to deliver a specified outcome.</p>
3. Covenants and MoUs	<p>Voluntary but official agreements and contracts for performance of a particular activity can support change processes. Examples include conservation agreements tied to property title.</p>
4. Common Law, Duty of Care, Stewardship	<p>Common Law refers to a system of law based on custom and general social principles that are embodied in centuries of legal case history judgements. Common Law recognises social norms, community values and rights as key enablers of effective and sustainable practice. Within Common Law there are notions of a Duty of Care that each person has to ensure that they do not create harm. Potentially this Duty of Care extends to the environment.</p>
5. Formal Agreements	<p>There are a variety of formal mechanisms that can be used between governments and other entities to facilitate action. Governments can commission regional NRM bodies, local government and/or NGOs to provide certain services or deliver certain outcomes.</p>
6. Research and Development	<p>R&D increases the stock of knowledge through basic and applied research. The implementation and adoption of R&D outcomes contributes to practice change and the achievement of sustainable and productive outcomes.</p>
7. Monitoring, Evaluation, Benchmarking and Adaptive Management	<p>All policy implementation needs monitoring and evaluation. While many NRM goals are specified, without monitoring progress towards these goals cannot be established. In many cases, especially with NRM issues, the baseline state of the issue being considered is unknown. Evaluation of methods used to create change is necessary to enable fine-tuning of the instruments through adaptive management.</p>
8. Assessment Procedures	<p>Structured assessment procedures enable change. Procedures such as environmental impact assessment (EIA), social impact assessment (SIA), health impact assessment (HIA), strategic environmental assessment (SEA), lifecycle assessment (LCA), triple bottom line accounting (TBL) and sustainability assessment all have goals of improving environmental and social outcomes. By providing information about sources of harm, and opportunities for improvement, these procedures actively assist in bringing about sustainable development.</p>
9. Self-Regulation	<p>Codes of practice, codes of ethics, professional standards are approaches that encourage stakeholders to change their own practices in order to meet commonly accepted standards of practice. The process of development of these codes, and awareness of them, leads to practice change.</p>
10. Quality Assurance processes, EMS and Ecolabelling	<p>Encouragement of the implementation of Quality Assurance processes (such as Environmental Management Systems and Farm Management Systems) creates change because it encourages continuous improvement, reflexive practice, monitoring and benchmarking against world’s best practice. Ecolabelling is a market-based mechanism where the establishment of an ecolabel potentially provides competitive advantage to products produced under this label and compliance is created via the competitive advantage that exists. Ecolabelling is in effect a code of conduct that mandates the quality assurance of environmentally sound practices.</p>

11. Public Relations, Marketing and Advertising	The achievement of change can sometimes be facilitated by a public relations or marketing campaign utilising advertising. Awareness of an issue or of practical solutions is sometimes all that is required for change to occur.
12. Formal Education and Training	Public, targeted formal education and training programs enable instruction at a specified kind or level. The aim is to use education and training to improve knowledge and develop skills in a specific area as a means to enabling practice change and onground improvements.
13. Suasion	Suasion refers to appeal to the right thing to do. It refers to campaigns that urge action because of what ought to be done, what is socially or morally desirable.
14. Extension	Extension is the process of enabling change in individuals, communities and industries involved in the primary industry sector and with natural resource management. While extension seeks to improve communication and information flow between industry, agency and community stakeholders, it is primarily concerned with building capacity for change.
15. Participatory Approaches	Solving complex, unstructured problems requires inclusive institutions and participatory processes of mediation, negotiation, dispute resolution and other deliberative mechanisms with community and industry stakeholders. Participatory approaches contribute to collective ownership of an issue and to a willingness to take action and to change practice.
16. Market-based Mechanisms	Market-based mechanisms include a range of methods for encouraging change usually involving the assignment of property rights to goods that are not normally traded through a market.
17. Economic Incentives	Economic incentives refer to a range of financial inducements that attempt to change behaviour through monetary reward or penalty including: taxes on bad practices, use charges, tax deductions and/or rebates/credits, rate relief, subsidies and co-funding arrangements, and penalties for poor practice.
18. Conditionalities	Conditionalities refers to the conditions that can be imposed on a business in conjunction with the granting of a licence to operate. This may include stipulations on emission levels, offset compensation (such as vegetation regeneration in one area to compensate for clearing in another location), and/or performance bonds.
19. Institutional Arrangements	Responsive institutional environments are necessary for enabling other instruments, policies and management. The capacity of institutions to change is essential for improving inter-organisational outcomes.
20. Change other policies	Actions to influence and/or distort policies or statutory objects can induce change processes. Examples include: ineffective subsidies; conflicting policies; misplaced statutory objects.
21. Reasoned Inaction	<i>Doing nothing</i> is also an instrument for influencing change. Non-response is valid where justified by due consideration, eg. allowing market forces to prevail.

3. Methods of extension

Various definitions of 'extension' have been developed over the years, with each being a product of its time. Extension necessarily is a continuously evolving system of practice and theory. Extension models have shifted from methods of technology transfer of expert knowledge, to processes that support the co-creation of knowledge and the empowerment of stakeholders.

Current extension projects utilise a range of methods:

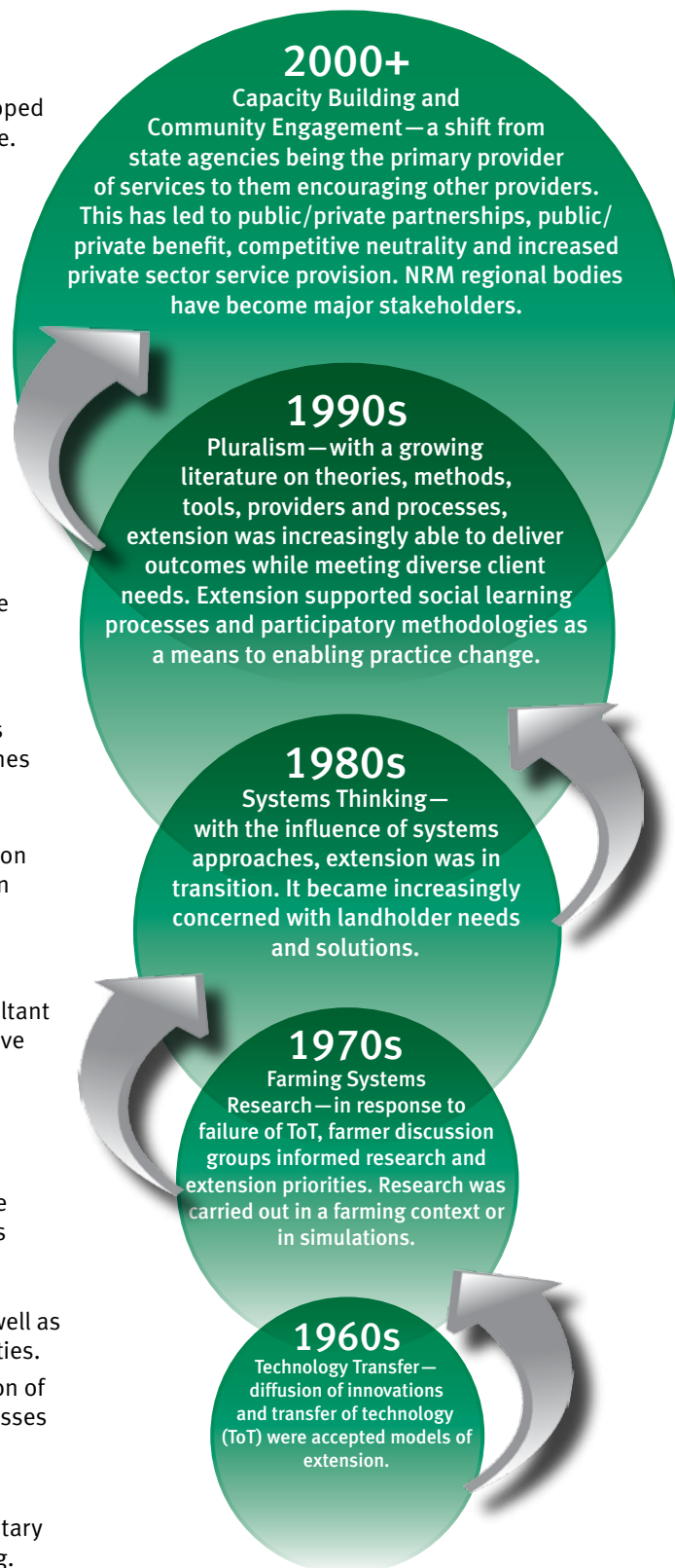
- Group Facilitation/Empowerment is the process of providing support for rural, regional and urban stakeholders to define problems and opportunities, and to seek avenues to address them.
- Programmed Learning recognises the knowledge already held by participants and encourages experiential learning as they engage with new information in a learning event.
- Participatory Technology Development supports participation and multiple stakeholder approaches for development of technologies.
- Information Development and Access supports decision-making processes through the provision of appropriate information at different stages in the decision making process in forms that suit individual needs.
- Individual Consultant/Mentor involves effective learning relationships between client and consultant to improve the skill base of the client, and to solve immediate practical problems.

In addition to these accepted approaches, further methods are developing:

- Multi-stakeholder Negotiation supports collective decision-making in complex multiparty situations (eg. in public good issues) using facilitation approaches that build on the enthusiasm of participants, target creativity and innovation as well as enabling effective participation of interested parties.
- Institutional Development supports the facilitation of network building, learning and negotiation processes within and amongst institutional stakeholders, programs and networks.

These different extension methods are complementary and all are necessary for effective capacity building. Extension is not just a matter of decisions about what is the best method, but rather what is the appropriate mix of methods to best achieve a particular purpose. The ability of these methods to achieve effective outcomes needs to be continually reassessed, improved and reinforced.

Although there is much extension activity being undertaken in Australia, capacities within the extension system are limited, and support for professional development is lacking. Extension practitioners require professional development support.



4. Extension adds value to investment

All policy instruments have a role to play in achieving desired outcomes efficiently and effectively. Extension is a crucial contributor to investments in rural, regional and urban development, providing a bridge between science, policy and community stakeholders to facilitate changed practice. Historically, 'agricultural extension' raised the awareness and in many cases transferred technologies and science from research institutions to rural clients.

Agricultural extension targeted the adoption of new technologies to achieve improved production efficiencies and rural development outcomes. More recently, the focus of extension has widened to include the challenges faced by all communities, including urban dwellers, land managers and primary producers as well as those faced by the very organisations that seek outcomes through investing in service delivery. This wider focus is essential for facilitating change in regional systems as well as addressing single issues.

Separating agricultural and other forms of extension in operation across Australia from other policy instruments is problematic. Extension projects cannot be considered in isolation from other interventions occurring in a community, industry or issue. Extension has been regarded for centuries as a policy instrument in its own right, however recent developments demonstrate that extension provides an integrator, facilitator and support function for other policy instruments.

The achievement of positive return on investment for each policy instrument depends on effective communication and information flow, and on the coordination and integration of associated intervention mechanisms. Further effort is needed to clarify extension's integrator function and other emergent roles that add value to investment in sustainable and productive rural and regional futures.



5. A coordinated approach is needed

The development of a coordinated extension approach to better organise and gain value from public and private extension services is essential. This coordinated approach is needed to underpin cross-sector and political dialogue leading to improved professional development, coordination, and extension policy in Regional, Industry, State and Australia-wide service delivery systems.

The focus of extension has moved from its original agricultural and rural development mandate to include environmental and other concerns of the wider society. A broad range of stakeholders are making increasingly competing claims on rural communities, natural resources, the rights of land managers, and on production systems.

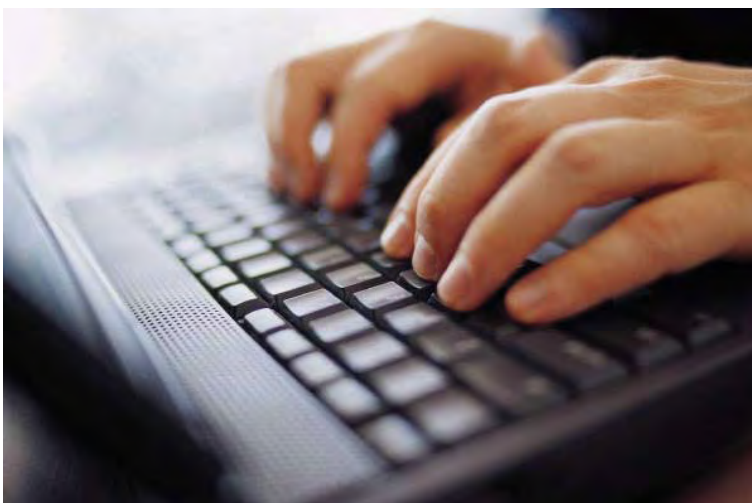
Extension needs to be considered as an effective policy instrument in its own right and in combination with other instruments. Ongoing commitment to funding the professional development of extension practitioners is necessary to provide the needed capacities for achieving institutional and policy developments as well as on-ground change.

6. Concluding comments

The achievement of effective and sustainable outcomes in primary industry value chains and improved natural resource management practices in Australia requires understanding that:

- Extension is a useful policy instrument.
- Extension can be used in its own right and in conjunction with other policy instruments.
- The meaning of extension has changed from problem-based technology transfer to the process of enabling change in individuals, communities and industries involved in the primary industry sector and with natural resource management.

Extension is most valuable for achieving effective outcomes when used alongside and in combination with other policy instruments. Establishing a common understanding of extension in Australia will assist the many stakeholders influencing the creation of world-class, competitive primary industries and the achievement of sustainable natural resource management.



Key Extension Resources

- The Australasia-Pacific Extension Network: www.apen.org.au/
- The Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building: www.rirdc.gov.au/capacitybuilding/
- National Extension/Education Project Database: www.couttsjr.com.au/pd/
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Glossary

Capacity building: involves externally and internally initiated processes designed to help individuals and groups appreciate and manage their changing circumstances by increasing access to skills and resources.

Community engagement: the process by which the target group actively participates in planning, development, implementation, decision-making and evaluation.

Extension: the process of enabling change in individuals, communities and industries involved in primary industries and natural resource management.

Market failure: refers to situations when the free market does not result in an optimal outcome, or when a desired outcome can not be provided by the market, as is often the case with public goods. Market failure is often regarded as a justification for government intervention.

Natural resource management (NRM): refers both to the management of natural resources, and also to the issues themselves. NRM includes a broad range of issues that affect primary production and habitat protection, including salinity and declining water quality and quantity; pest, weed and feral animal issues; and land degradation.

Participation: the process of actively involving stakeholders in the development and delivery of projects and programs.

Policy instrument: a method or mechanism used by government and government agencies as well as other institutions including business to achieve a desired effect.

Public benefit: refers to the advantages of an activity or practice that are created for the community as a whole, even if there is also a private benefit. Thus, when a farmer plants a highly profitable tree crop in place of grain crops, they may generate both private benefits (greater commercial returns) and public environmental benefits.

Target group: a subset of the community that has been identified as the intended beneficiary of the project or program.



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