

DYNAMICS IN AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION PROGRAMME PLANNING, MONITORING AND EVALUATION



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CHAPTER SIX

PRIORITY SETTING IN AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION PROGRAMME PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Extension programme planning consists of determining solutions to an unsatisfactory situation by identifying the results that will best address identified problems and needs, and the actions and resources required to achieve those results. It is the foundation of good performance management and accountability. Planning can also be seen as a process of choosing from the different courses of action available and of prioritising the steps to take in order to change a particular situation for the better (Harder, 2010). Usually, time and resources (material, financial, human) are limited. These two limitations have a direct consequence on an organisation's ability to improve or resolve a problematic situation (Forest and Mulcahy, 1976). This is why planning is so crucial, because most extension organisations have limited capacity for programme implementation. Frequently, planning is considered a difficult exercise, complicated and inaccessible – a matter reserved for specialised technicians with specific qualifications. But, in reality, we plan all the time in our daily lives: who has never had to move house or organise a party or a trip? In these and many other aspect of lives, we have to plan what we want to do and with whom, which steps to follow and what we need to get things done.

Priority setting is a process the extension professionals must continually use to set and reset the day- to - day and programme priorities. Yet, many times one finds self working on low - priority goals or on activities unrelated to high- priority concerns. Sometimes one might be aware of business with non -priority items; but routinely pressured by others to "set the priorities. These moments of frustration seem to be occurring more often. Increasing pressures by

many people, and the growing complexity of problems and society make the extension professional's priority setting more difficult. This chapter is intended for extension personnel who wish to deal with these problems and who wish to independently study and think about how a systematic process of setting priorities relates to their extension jobs.

This chapter stresses priority setting as a personal commitment made by professional extension workers. Though extension workers cooperate with clientele in developing programmes and relate activities, many extension personnel do not implement programmes unless they see them as their own personal priorities. Though many things influence and pressure extension personnel, only an individual can decide whether a goal or activity is of high priority and do something about it. This chapter discusses priority setting in the context of programme planning and development. This doesn't mean priority setting and programme developments are synonymous. They are not. But the priority- setting process may register the most impact in a programme development situation and the ideas are transferable to many short- range situations. Furthermore, once a person has set programme priorities, those priorities, plus the process s/he has mastered, influence the more immediate and day- to - day priorities.

EXTENSION PROGRAMMES

Before getting into the planning process, it is helpful to define an Extension programme. Although one might think that everyone in extension understands the term programme, it is often used in different ways. Sometimes people use it to reference activities such as field days, demonstrations, or presentations. From a programme development and evaluation perspective, however, it has a different and specific meaning. A programme refers to a comprehensive set of activities that includes an educational component that is intended to bring about a sequence of outcomes among targeted clients (Harder, 2010). A programme is a set of coordinated projects implemented to meet specific objectives within defined time, cost and performance

parameters. Programmes aimed at achieving a common goal are grouped under a common entity (country plan, operation, etc.). A project is a set of coordinated activities implemented to meet specific objectives within defined time, cost and performance parameters (Forest and Mulcahy, 1976). Projects aimed at achieving a common goal form a programme. An extension programme is defined as a comprehensive set of activities that are intended to bring about a sequence of outcomes among targeted clients. In the context of planning, it is important to consider the entire programme, not just isolated activities or workshops. This exercise will lead to programmes in which all the activities work together to achieve an overarching goal or goals. One way of doing this is to start with a clear mental image of the outcomes that you intend to derive from your programme. An extension programme is a written statement which contains the following four elements (Rennekamp, 1999):

- **Objectives** which the agent expects to achieve in the area within a specified period of time. This will often be for a year, to enable the agent to review the programme at the start of each farming year.
- **Means** of achieving these objectives.
- **Resources** that are needed to fulfill the programme.
- **Work plan** indicating the schedule of extension activities that will lead to the fulfillment of the programme objectives.

An extension programme with clearly defined objectives is helpful to local farmers, the agent himself, his senior extension officers and other rural development agencies. For the farmers, it shows both what they can expect from the extension service and how effective the agent is. For the agent, the programme provides a firm basis for planning extension activities on a monthly and weekly basis and for anticipating well in advance what resources will be needed. Senior extension officers can use programmes to assess agents' performance, to offer advice for improvement and to justify requests for additional staff, equipments and funds. Furthermore, the programme helps other agencies to coordinate their activities with what the agent is doing. However, programmes can only be used in these ways if they are

written and made available to all concerned. A written programme is also useful when staff changes bring a new agent into the area. The new agent can use the programme to carry on from where his predecessor finished, thereby ensuring continuity of activities.

EXTENSION PROGRAMME PLANNING

The methods and skills that an extension agent uses in extension work with farmers and their families stressed that all extension activity requires careful planning, if it is to be effective. No extension activity is planned in isolation; every demonstration, public meeting or film show is part of an overall extension programme through which an extension agent and farmers work toward the agricultural development of their area. A plan (e.g. for a geographical area or for a technical area) is the highest level of operational planning. It groups several programmes (and their respective projects, activities, etc.) with a view to achieving part of an organisation's strategic objectives. All organisations involved in agricultural development have their own procedures for planning, which can vary considerably. In particular, they can differ in the extent to which plans are made at national or local level. When considering the planning of extension programmes, two different forms can be distinguished (Jessica *et al.*, 1998) as follows:

Planning from bottom: Farmers with their extension agents, make plans for developing local agriculture on the basis of local needs and potentials, and then make requests for specific assistance from national and State authorities.

Planning from above: The agent is simply expected to implement plans made at national level. The agent may, for example, be given a target number of hectares to be planted with improved seeds, or a specified number of farmers' groups to set up. Successful extension programmes should include both of the planning approaches. National policies and programmes provide a framework within which the agent plans local programmes, and they establish priorities, which must be followed. If a national priority is to increase production of arable

food crops rather than livestock products, the agent will give these crops a high priority in his own programme. National programmes could also make funds and inputs available for particular kinds of activity, which will influence the agent in planning local decisions. But agricultural improvement comes from the willing action of farmers as they try to increase their own output and living standards. Local needs, therefore, provide the motivation for agricultural development, and must be taken into account in the planning of local extension programmes. Even in cases where the agent's freedom of decision is limited by national policy and directives, one must still prepare a programme that will enable him/her to fulfill these directives within area of jurisdiction.

LEVELS OF PLANNING

Although, almost anything can be planned, the ways in which to make plans and implement them are not always the same. Different levels of planning have to be established according to the aims of the planning process. Distinction is always being made between "strategic" and "operational" planning (Rennekamp, 1999). Both are integral parts of the overall process of setting priorities and targets for extension organisations.

a) Strategic planning

Strategic planning is the process of deciding where an organisation wants to get to and why, then choosing from the different courses of action available to ensure the best chance of getting there. It helps an organisation to define a clear way forward in response to emerging opportunities and challenges, while maintaining coherence and long-term sustainability. It usually covers the long term (roughly a minimum of three or four years, up to ten years). It guides the overall direction of an organisation by defining its vision and mission and the goals or strategic objectives necessary to achieve them. The strategic objectives should be linked to prioritised sectors of intervention based on the capacities of the organisation and other stakeholders and should include a time -frame and outline evaluation mechanisms.

Strategic planning also includes choosing and designing a framework which sets out the best courses of action to achieve the stated objectives. A "strategic plan" is the document resulting from this process. One of the key functions of the strategic plan is to guide and influence the development of more detailed planning at the operational level. Therefore, a strategic plan is a key reference for project/programme managers when designing, implementing and evaluating a project/programme.

b) Operational planning

Operational planning is the process of determining how the objectives spelt out in the strategic plan will be achieved "on the ground". This is done by working through a series of steps, identifying or refining more detailed objectives at each level, linked to the objectives in the strategic plan. These objectives can then be grouped and organised into "plans", "programmes" and "projects". Operational planning usually covers the short term (between several months and three years). In order to translate strategic objectives into practical results, the required actions need to be planned (in a work plan), along with their costs (in a budget), how the work will be funded (in a resource mobilisation plan) and who will carry out the work. The relationship between strategic and operational planning is also a cyclical process, with the experience from operational planning being used to inform strategic planning, and strategic planning then informing the general direction of operational planning. Operational plans are often made up of several "programmes", which are in turn made up of several "projects". Projects and programmes consist of several activities, which are the smallest elements for which plan can be made.

Whether one is a new or experienced extension agent, the ability to plan a strong extension programme is critical to success in **agricultural extension**. There are several scenarios in which one may **be required to plan** a new programme or refine an existing one. One may be a new agent who has been asked to carry on the work of a predecessor, presumably refining this work in the process. One may

be an experienced agent who has decided that it is time to step back and re-think programmes. One may be an agent who is responsible for new programming due to advisory committee input, personnel changes, a new grant, or new priorities in your area. In all of these scenarios, thoughtful planning will help you achieve your desired results.

STAGES IN PROGRAMME PLANNING

Whatever particular procedures for programme planning are laid down by the extension organisation, five distinct stages can be identified (Rennekamp, 1999).

1. **Analysis** of the present situation.
2. **Setting** objectives for the extension programme.
3. **Developing** the programme by identifying what needs to be done to achieve the objectives, and then prepare a work plan.
4. **Implementing** the programme by putting the work plan into effect.
5. **Evaluating** the programme and its achievements as a basis for planning future programmes.

This will then lead to a review of the situation and the planning of a new programme, which should build on the achievements and learn from the failures of the previous one. The different stages of extension programme planning are interrelated and the planning does not always proceed neatly from one stage to another. However, it is useful for the agent to think of programme planning as involving these five activities, each of which will be considered in more detail, as each can be broken down into smaller steps.

1. Situational Analysis

A "situational analysis" done at the local or the statewide level should be carried out in a manner that builds a better understanding of the context or situation for all stakeholders in a community. The community may be a geographic unit or it may be a statewide community of interest, such as, the dairy industry. The objective is to build a foundation for good decision making on programme priorities and the use of limited resources on a local or statewide

basis. Our programmatic needs are better served if the community served feels that they have been meaningfully involved in:

- Gathering the data
- Analysing and interpreting the data
- Identifying community needs and assets
- Selecting critical community needs and concerns
- Communicating the results

Greater involvement leads to a greater sense of ownership of the process. Greater ownership leads to a stronger commitment to the priorities that are identified in the priority setting process. Before an extension programme can be drawn up, the existing situation must first be analysed. Farming problems and their causes must be understood and the natural, human and other resources of the area identified. This stage involves three activities as follows:

(a) **Collecting facts:** There is a good deal of information that the agent will need about the people in the area, their farming systems, natural resources and the facilities available for local development. The agent will need information in order to have a good understanding of the situation with which he is dealing, for example, on social structure and local culture, farming systems, education and literacy levels, size of farms, local channels of communication, transport facilities, local credit systems, marketing, health and nutrition levels, and crops and livestock. These facts can be collected from a variety of sources. Reports of soil classification and land-use surveys, farm management studies, social surveys and previous programmes can provide a lot of useful background information. If the agent keeps good records of the farms in his area, he will have at his fingertips much of the information he needs. He can also obtain a lot of his information from farmers and local leaders. At public meetings, in group discussions and in contact with individual farmers, the agent should listen, ask questions and gradually build up a fuller understanding of the social, agricultural and economic features of the area. Detailed social and economic surveys require complex questionnaires and statistical analysis, and are best left to professional researchers. But simple questionnaires can be used in this fact-finding

exercise and it is helpful if the extension organisation provides a standard list of questions or facts as a guide to the agent. One way in which farmers can be brought into the planning process at this early stage is for them to do some of the fact-finding themselves, using simple check-lists and questionnaires, for example, to catalogue natural resources in the area.

(b) Analysing facts: Facts do not speak for themselves. It is necessary to ask why things happen in the way they do. If farmers report that yields have declined in recent years, the agent must look for other information that would suggest an explanation. Is it because of low rainfall, declining soil fertility, or poor seed? The agent must also separate fact from opinion and guesswork. He may obtain conflicting information from two different sources, and must judge which is the more reliable.

(c) Identifying problems and potentials: It should now be possible to decide what the main problems facing farmers in the area are, and what potentials there are for agricultural improvement. This is where the agent's technical knowledge becomes important. Farmers may know what their problems are, but the agent can bring his own perception of local problems based on a more scientific understanding of farming. He will be able to explain problems more fully and relate them to processes which farmers may not realise in any way connected. Because of his training and experience, he will also have more suggestions to make about how the resources of the area could be used more productively.

Throughout the situation analysis, the agent should avoid either, relying totally on his own expertise when interpreting facts and identifying problems, or leaving it entirely up to farmers to define local needs and possibilities for change. It should be a joint effort, with agents and farmers bringing their own experience and knowledge together to reach a full understanding. If farmers are not fully involved in these activities, the agent runs the risk of

misinterpreting facts, wasting time in analysis and, almost certainly, of failing to gain the full support of farmers for the programme. It should be noted that a full situation analysis is not needed every year. This is because, the basic facts about the area and the people will, in most situations, not change very much from year to year. However, the agent should review basic information each year and decide which parts of it need to be updated.

2. **Setting objectives**

Once the existing situation has been analysed, decisions can be made about the changes that should be brought about through an extension programme. The key questions are how will local problems be solved and how will local potentials be developed. Solutions will require clear and realistic objectives which should be set in three stages.

(a) Finding solutions

In looking for solutions to local problems, the agent should distinguish between technical solutions, involving improved inputs or simple changes in husbandry practice, and solutions which involve institutional changes, such as improved credit and marketing systems. Solutions involving institutional changes may require action by other agencies and at higher levels. While the agent should certainly suggest such solutions to those responsible, there may be little that can be done locally in isolation. The sources of ideas for developing an area's potential include:

- the agent's own technical knowledge;
- farmers and agents from other areas who have tackled similar problems successfully;
- applied research which tests new ideas under farm conditions;
- national priorities and directives; and
- projects which make funds available for particular activities.

(b) Selecting solutions

When selecting from among the range of solutions and possible improvements, agent and farmers should ensure that proposed solutions are:

1. **Acceptable** to farmers in the area.
2. **Technically** sound and tested by research and experience elsewhere.
3. **Consistent** with national policy, and with the local activities of other agencies.
4. **Feasible** within the time and with the resources available to farmers and the extension service.
5. **Within** the scope of the agent's ability and job description.

The agent may find that some problems will have no feasible or acceptable solution that can be implemented locally within the period of the extension programme. They may require legislation, action at other levels and by other agencies, or more research. The agent should lessen the effect of such problems where possible and act as a channel for putting forward the case for changes to those who have the power to make them.

(c) Stating objectives

It should now be possible to state what the objectives of the extension programme are to be. But, because his time and resources may be limited, the agent must decide which objectives have a higher priority than others. In doing so, he should consider national priorities and the size and distribution of the benefits that will arise from a given input of time and resources. Wherever possible, objectives should be expressed in terms of amounts and numbers, rather than general statements. "Establish two groups of dairy farmers who will share new equipment and market their produce jointly" and "Increase the acreage of improved rice varieties from 60 to 120 acres" are more useful objectives than "Improve dairy farming techniques" or "Increase the use of improved rice seed". They give the agent firm targets to work toward, and a standard against which the effectiveness of the programme can be judged at the end of the year. The objectives

for an annual extension programme will state what should have been achieved by the end of the programme. These statements can be broken down into intermediate steps to be taken during the year in order to achieve the programme objectives. Again, the agent will have to make choices, selecting the most appropriate steps from several possibilities. As the agent breaks down each programme objective into specific steps, he will in effect be preparing a schedule of extension activities for the programme period. He will decide what knowledge and skills the farmers will need; what additional technical information will be required from specialists and research workers; what extension methods should be used; and what resources and support he will need from his own and other agencies.

Developing the programme

The agent should develop an extension programme into a schedule of field-level activities. When the planning is completed for other programme objectives, the agent can compile all the plans into an overall annual work plan. The extension agent may find that he cannot possibly do everything that all the individual plans require, so some of the lower priority objectives may have to be dropped, or scaled down. The annual work plan does not specify what the agent will be doing on each day during the year, but it should indicate when each extension activity will begin and end, and what resources will be needed for each.

1. Implementing the programme

To implement the programme, the agent carries out the activities specified in the work plan. The agent's detailed monthly and weekly plans will take account of progress and problems encountered in previous months. For example, the timing of some activities may have to be changed, or additional method demonstrations may be planned if more farmers than expected want to take part. An extension programme should be flexible enough to allow the agent to respond to circumstances in this way.

5. Evaluating the programme

The agent will be constantly reviewing and evaluating his progress during the year. At the end of the year, a more thorough evaluation should be carried out in which the agent identifies how fully each objective has been achieved, and the reasons for any lack of progress. This evaluation, together with an up-dated situation analysis, provides the basis for planning the next year's programme.

EXTENSION PROGRAMME PRIORITY SETTING

While clientele groups have many needs, resources are often quite limited. Priority Setting is the process of involving clients and stakeholders in determining which needs are most important. Documentation of stakeholder-determined priorities is often a requirement of grant applications, to ensure that funded projects address important community needs. There are many processes, formal and informal, for documenting clientele/ stakeholder priorities. Methods include surveys, group exercises, and focus groups.

Determining programme priorities is one of the most critical aspects of working in agricultural extension. It is no secret that many needs exist in local communities, and there is no shortage of demand for extension's services. An agent can quickly become overwhelmed with requests for programmes and can become overextended by attempting to do more than what is feasible with the resources available (Rennekamp, 1999). Fortunately, it is possible to be systematic about which needs are addressed by educational programmes and which are best left alone. This section provides some ideas for prioritizing needs.

Programme priority setting builds on the foundation created by the situational analysis. A situation analysis that involved community stakeholders and is "owned" by the community serves as a basis for making decisions on programme priorities. Programme priorities need to be established with an understanding of the resources that are available to help achieve the required outcomes and impact.

Resources may be local, statewide, national or even international. The availability of resources or lack of resources may be a major factor in selecting extension programme priorities. In some cases, a major concern at the any level may need to be addressed even though resources are not available. Under those circumstances, the programme priority setting process needs to publicly acknowledge the limited resources.

WHAT IS PRIORITY SETTING?

An Extension concept of priority setting is: A dynamic process of deciding what goals or actions are most important now, and a commitment of self and resources to that decision (Rennekamp, 1999). Let's examine each part of the above statement. "A dynamic priority setting in Extension is a complex professional process" and responsibility. It's a continuous process of subjective and interrelated decisions, a flexibility to respond to problems as they arise and before they arise. Priorities must be set in every phase of programme development including: identifying target audiences, delineating needs, specifying goals, determining needed actions and following through with them, and even selecting the very small tasks to be done daily or weekly to accomplish goals. The priorities of extension and our client groups may determine the money and other resources available to us. In turn, our programme priorities affect the extension system and the people we serve. Based on our resources, limitations, and alternatives, we decide what we're going to wear in the morning, what to eat for breakfast, what TV channel to watch, what to do for fun on the weekend, what to do for a living, and how to vote. The main factors in a thoughtful decision are the same, whether the question to be decided is trivial or very important. A decision first involves possibilities or alternatives, for without alternatives there can be no choice.

Questions for Priority Setting

What are the top priorities among the various concerns and needs that were identified during the situational analysis?

1. What do we know about these priorities?
2. Which of these top priorities match with extension's mission and mandates?
3. Are resources available and/or accessible for addressing these priorities?
4. Is someone else, another group or agency, better equipped to deal with this priority than extension?
5. Who else is already working on this priority? What role or contribution might extension have? Who might we partner with?

PRIORITY SETTING - WHY?

There are many reasons to set priorities. Some are important to the clientele groups and larger society we serve; some are important for us to do our jobs well. These reasons fall into five categories (Forest and Mulcahy, 1976):

1. Priority setting is important to meet the changing needs and roles of our audiences

The world is changing at a faster pace than ever before. People change, their roles in life change, their needs and problems change. Problems are becoming more complex and interrelated as time goes by. People are better educated and demand more of extension service today than they did in the past- both in quality and quantity. New laws and regulations on the environment, population distribution, pesticides, etc. demands educational as well as legal input. The interrelatedness of problems and institutions creates more challenges for Extension professionals than in the past. No longer are our programmes strictly rural oriented. The farm population has changed and shifted. Much of it has moved to the cities and towns. Farms are getting bigger and more specialized. The need for better farm production on less land is greater now than ever before, and the farmer's needs are more complex. People in big cities and small towns need help with their specific problems -- and the problems are growing daily. If Extension is a problem - solving institution, and if Extension agents are indeed change agents, we must help people

respond not only to present needs and crises, but also to problems of the future: How to deal with new technologies? What constitutes a healthy human being? How can we help people prepare for the changes the future will demand? But Extension resources are limited. We can't be all things to all people, even though the demands are great. Setting priorities and sticking to them is the only way to apply glue to a problem instead of a watery paste that spreads itself thin over many projects - and wears off in a short time. Extension priorities and our program priorities must not merely follow the trends of society. We must be in the advance guard of future problems, to prevent them before they occur or to help people meet them when they're inevitable. We must be flexible enough to respond to people's needs, but firm enough to stick with priorities and reach defined goals.

2. Priority setting helps us prevent future crisis

President Kennedy once said he asked experts to advise him "not what should I do, but what will happen if I do?" We must take the consequences of our actions into account as we set priorities so we can make judgments about what we do in the present. What will happen if I do or don't do something? Doing something, for instance, may be the cause of a future crisis. What we envision as a cure may end up being worse than the disease. Phosphates brought us whiter wash loads, but with them came lake pollution. The dangers of DDT may be worse than the bugs it was supposed to destroy. On the other hand, a crisis may occur if we don't do something. If a riverside community doesn't build a dike or institute flood plain zoning, massive property and crop damage will surely result in a flood year. Or what will happen to productive farmlands if zoning and restrictions aren't instituted near urban areas? Seeing the effect of past actions on our present lives will help us look ahead to see the effect of our present actions on the future. Trying to see the future consequences of our present actions is an important part of setting priorities so that we can either prevent a crisis or avoid causing one. It will help us weigh risks and reduce uncertainty about the probability

of future consequences occurring and thus make more rational decisions. We must also look ahead to the future needs of people and plan action now to meet those needs. For instance, if we know that advanced technology and increased population will bring more unemployment, what can we do about it now? We also need to plan time for emerging, "time-is-right" concerns. For instance, a fuel shortage causes people to be more urgently concerned about energy conservation or seeking new sources of energy. Can we plan our time to allow for educational efforts in conjunction with people's concern over the future?

3. Priority setting helps our credibility and accountability

We set priorities to get concrete results on important problems. These results will be noticed by those who demand and be accountable for our programmes: Extension administration, legislatures, the county board, our clientele, and our community. More and more, people external to Extension are holding us accountable for programme results they see as important. They ask: What are you doing? What do you have to show for the resources we've invested? What difference have you made in the lives of people you work with and for? Are your activities worth the money or grants provided to support them? Our credibility increases when we show results and measure up to what we've said our priorities are. If others help us set priorities and are aware of them, they can see how we meet those priorities. They'll see how we apply our resources to problems and "put our money where our mouth is." Successful activities build credibility, trust, and cooperation. Our credibility will be high only if we actually carry out actions other people can see, to meet goals they recognise as important.

4. Priority setting helps make our Extension jobs easier

If we commit ourselves, and use our commitments to guide our activities, it will be easier for us to know what to do and when to do it. First, we must commit ourselves to setting some priorities and then to carrying out a few selected priority programmes. Having a priority

set and seeing it as critically important helps us make time to carry it out. If a choice is congruent with our own values and what we determine is important, commitment to the priority decision will come easily. Setting priorities helps the person burdened with too many tasks break those tasks down by importance and get the most important things done first. It helps those locked into traditional activities, by habit or demand, become more open to new and changing priority problems. We can plan our programs more realistically and develop plans of work that tell what actually needs to be done to reach priority goals, and what actions we've designed to meet those goals. Our jobs become easier if others are aware of our priorities and adjust their expectations accordingly. We must discover the priorities of others, use them to decide ours, and communicate ours to them if we expect their involvement and help.

5. Priority setting helps us allocate resources, and coordinate our programmes with others

Setting priorities on the most critical needs and problems, and then setting priorities on our activities, allows us more efficient use of our limited resources. If we set priorities, back-up help, money, time, and cooperation with other agencies or the organisation will be better coordinated and more likely to be available when we need them. Knowing the priorities of Extension and other personnel, and letting them know our priorities will help coordinate area, and statewide programmes to deal with problems of most urgency. We're not setting priorities by ourselves. For instance, in light of predicted food shortages and high prices, an agricultural agent can plan programs to improve livestock production; a community development agent can concentrate on land use planning to save precious farm acreage; a home agent might design a programme on low-cost nutrition; and a horticulture specialist could help people use home gardens as a supplement to store-bought food. All can work together on education for actions to relieve one acute community problem with dire future consequences. Such coordination in planning priority programs for an entire community, or even for an entire state, will help reach all

segments of the population who need help, despite a limited amount of time, staff, and other resources. One agent or specialist cannot do this alone.

Setting priorities as individuals and as an organisation helps us aim our limited resources at the most critical problems. By so doing, we'll increase our impact, be more efficient and more credible, reach more people, and help prevent crises, enjoy our work more, minimise risk and uncertainty, plan more realistically, keep our work up to date with changing needs, and use our resources more wisely. These are reasons why we need to set priorities.

COMMUNICATING PROGRAMME PRIORITIES

Identifying needs is the first thing one usually thinks of when beginning to plan an extension programme. We know that if we develop a programme based on own idea, one person's suggestion or data from a national study without first determining the needs of local audience, there is a good chance the programme will not be relevant, well attended or easy to justify to decision makers. For decades, the concept of needs assessment has served the purpose.

Programme priorities should be communicated broadly and shared with all stakeholders, collaborators and constituents. Community needs that have been identified, but are not addressed by extension programme priorities, should be communicated to other appropriate groups, agencies and organisations within the community. Communicating broadly helps to build involvement and ownership. While we often think about communicating after an event to broadcast the results, it is also advantageous to communicate early in order to explain and build commitment to the process. Consider various ways one might communicate with key stake-holders and the population to encourage participation in the priority setting and to gain visibility for the extension effort. News releases have multiple benefits. Jessica, *et al.* (1998) reported that they:

- create awareness that extension undertakes a comprehensive planning effort e.g. every four years
- show that extension is interested in local issues and concerns
- enhance extension's visibility
- motivate people to participate
- stimulate local interest and participation in addressing county concerns
- kindle new partnerships and working relationships

Think about the various people and organisations that might be interested in hearing about the results of the situational analysis and of course of the priority setting. These might include:

- State and local public agencies
- Nonprofit agencies and organisations
- For-profit agencies or businesses
- Civic groups and service organisations
- Agribusinesses
- Local legislators

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