

## Why is an Evidence-based RAS Policy Environment Needed and How Can it be Influenced?

### A summary of the 5<sup>th</sup> GFRAS Annual Meeting

#### Introduction and Background

At the 5<sup>th</sup> GFRAS Annual Meeting, held in Buenos Aires from 23 to 25 September 2014, a total of 156 participants from 44 countries discussed several topics and issues related to policies on rural advisory services (RAS). The full report can be downloaded at <http://www.gfras.org/en/events/gfras-events/annual-meeting-2014-argentina.html>. This summary will focus on major conclusions of participants regarding the relevance of an evidence-based RAS policy environment, how RAS policies should look, and how they can be influenced.

#### Definitions

The word policy in this article is defined according to the GFRAS Annual Meeting Report (2014) as “a course, principle, rule, statement of intent, or framework to guide actions, practices, or decisions and achieve rational outcomes”. Evidence is used for “facts, figures, and knowledge which are collected through a systematic process”.

#### Relevance of an Evidence-Based RAS Policy Environment

A supportive enabling environment is critical for the development, sustainability, and effectiveness of RAS. The policy environment plays a crucial role as it guides actions of RAS providers, defines principles of interaction, communication, and collaboration. It harmonises efforts between different actors, creates incentives for RAS provision and RAS financing, and influences the organisational, educational, and infrastructural environment in which RAS actors operate. However, many countries worldwide face severe challenges when it comes to RAS policies, which are mainly based on two core issues:

- Most countries do not have RAS policies. Mentions of RAS in other policies – for example development or agricultural policies - are often fragmented and rarely aligned to commonly and comprehensively support rural actors and sustainable rural development.
- Even if there are policies related to RAS, there is often a two-fold gap between the policies and the realities in the field. On the one hand, policies are often disconnected from the real challenges and issues that rural actors face. On the other hand, due to a lack of ownership and/or information, involved and/or affected RAS stakeholders often do not even know, comply with, adapt, or internalise the policies.

Evidence is key to address these issues, as it

- can fill the gap between the facts on the ground and ideologies of a few
- helps to ensure that policies are systematic, rational, and serve a common interest
- renders policies more rigorous and systematic
- improves the assessment of the effective policy impact (through improved monitoring and evaluation opportunities) and can therewith render decisions and choices on policies more informed and legitimate.

## How Should Policies for RAS Look to be Effective and Useful for RAS Providers and RAS Clientele?

RAS policies can come in very different forms. It is important to recognise that sometimes, a RAS standalone policy might not be as effective as a coherent inclusion of RAS in other existing policies, for example agricultural or development policies. Regardless of its form, there are some common features that render RAS related policies more effective.

- Anchorage of the RAS policy or RAS related policy in local, national, and/or regional government systems ensures a certain legitimacy and thus increases its scope of influence. It also renders the policy complementary with other policies and coherent with local, national, regional, and international development strategies.
- RAS (related) policies need to address all concerned stakeholders within the agricultural innovation system and have to consider and find overlaying guidance aspects that accommodate the various values, needs, and aims of all different actors.
- RAS (related) policies need to embrace ecological, economic, social, cultural, and political aspects of the agricultural innovation system. This presents a challenge in various regions, where the paradigm shift of RAS from technology transfer to complex advisory services is still underway. It is thus compulsory that the context with its particularities and characteristics is prominently reflected in a policy. "Copy-paste" policies are not possible, they need to be endogenous for people to comply with them.
- RAS (related) policies should not be the result of striving for power or personal grandstanding. This should not only be respected by policy makers, but also by those trying to influence policies: Statements and evidence for RAS policies should be free from ideology and shall not serve personal agendas of a few.
- RAS (related) policies have most impact if they are elaborated in participatory processes, which creates ownership among a wide stakeholder base from the beginning on.

### Influence of RAS Policy

In order to create ownership and therewith make a RAS or RAS related policy effective and sustainable, it is important that RAS providers and clientele from the field participate in all steps of the policy making processes, from the elaboration of first thoughts, on to the drafting of the policy, its implementation, evaluation, and eventual adaption. Many countries and stakeholders involved in RAS face challenges when trying to influence policy. But there are some strategies which can provide remedy to these challenges.

- First of all, it is important to recognise that policy influencing can happen at each stage of the policy making process and should consist of a continued effort.
- Ensuring a regular presence in the whole policy process and with various partners across ministries and across sectors increases visibility and therewith influence of RAS actors. This requires always being ready to communicate your evidence-based message (see also Figure 1 below).
- Being organised and using one voice, based on one advocacy strategy, helps increasing credibility and avoids a duplication or even a contradiction of efforts. A first step for RAS actors therefore should be to become organised.
- Sometimes it may be worthwhile to take risks and engage with actors who are not among usual allies.
- To gain support and recognition, the content of the intended message needs to be easy, understandable, rational, and embedded in a wider context that shows policy makers that RAS is relevant to their other concerns and topics of interest.
- Evidence is a crucial factor that can help influence policy. However, evidence as such not necessarily and directly render a policy more comprehensive, fair, or inclusive. It needs to be strategically and rely on a strong and distinct line of argument, clearly showing the

link to the respective policy in which it is used. It needs to be gathered following common research guidelines and be of the best quality, accuracy, and objectivity possible.

- Your evidence-packed message need to be well-communicated in order for policy makers to take it into consideration. For this, several issues need to be considered:



Figure 1: Issues to consider when communicating evidence to policy makers

### External Factors that Influence Policy Making Processes

Despite all efforts, there are several external factors that play an important role in the efforts to influence policy. They need to be accepted and efforts in the policy making process shall embrace them. They include, amongst others, the political economy (Party politics and periods of governance), political and economic stability, national capacities in the policy formulation process, control and management mechanisms of funding and other financial resources, recognition of and experience with participatory processes in a society (vs. top down approaches), and existing information and knowledge management.

*\*Summary written by Natalie Ernst, GFRAS Programme Officer, May 2015*