

Strengthening the capacity of RAS actors for advocacy and dialogue on policy reform and action

By **Sithembile Mwamakamba**, Programme Manager, Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN); **Hlamalami Ngwenya**, Consultant, Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS); and **Natalie Ernst**, Programme Manager, GFRAS; August 2016.

Purpose and target audience of the article

This article explores possibilities for strengthening the capacity of rural advisory services (RAS) actors to become involved in advocacy and dialogue on policy reform and action. RAS actors include individuals and organisations in the agricultural innovation systems that play a role in RAS and/or need to be included in RAS policy dialogue processes. These include governments, research/education institutions, farmers' organisations, civil society organisations, the private sector, donors, input suppliers and agro-dealers. The article is based on practical experiences from the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN) and the Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS).

The role of an enabling policy environment for RAS

RAS play an important role in helping rural people deal with existing and new challenges and improving rural livelihoods worldwide. However, in most parts of the world, significant changes over the past few decades (including decentralisation and under-resourcing) have resulted in a pluralistic landscape for RAS, with providers who are not only challenged by a new structural environment and new tasks and roles, but also have to deal with new demands and needs from their clientele. In order to adapt and deliver effective services under these conditions, RAS need an enabling environment that ensures fair competition, offers a level playing field, enables capacity strengthening and

facilitates collaboration amongst RAS providers and with other actors from the agricultural innovation system (Sulaiman and Davis, 2012). The policy environment plays a particular role in creating such an environment since it can guide the actions of RAS providers and define the principles of interaction, communication and collaboration. In addition, supportive RAS policies can harmonise the efforts of different actors, create incentives for RAS provision and financing, and positively influence the organisational, educational and infrastructural environment in which RAS actors operate (Ernst, 2015).

Yet despite the clear need for an enabling policy environment, many countries do not have coherent and clear RAS policies. While standalone RAS policies are rare, evidence reveals that even passing mention of RAS in development or agricultural policies is limited, fragmented and rarely adequate to commonly and comprehensively support rural actors and sustainable rural development. In countries where RAS policies do exist, they are often outdated, resulting in a gap between the policies and the complex realities faced by rural actors. Moreover, due to a lack of ownership and information about the policies, RAS stakeholders often do not even know about them, let alone comply with, adapt or internalise them (Ernst, 2015).

Advocacy and dialogue for policy reform and action

For this article, we use the Maetz and Balié (2008) definition of a policy process as a continuum of formulation, implementation, evaluation and adjustment of measures,

courses, principles, rules, statements of intent or frameworks to guide actions, practices, or decisions and achieve rational outcomes.

Policy advocacy – or dialogue, which we use interchangeably in this article – is any effort to influence policies by providing information and credible, well-packaged evidence, engaging with decision-makers, demonstrating the benefits of policy change and other activities that encourage the adoption of the desired change. Advocacy raises awareness about issues and the need to change policies to address them. It can be linked to a particular national situation or to an important international or global issue. Policy advocacy cannot be limited to providing technical or analytical inputs but should follow a strategic design and consider human factors, such as communication, participation, ownership, timing and capacity building.

Successful advocacy and dialogue needs continuous and long-term engagement at all levels. It demands an in-depth knowledge of contents, actors and structures and requires compromise and strategic timing. Advocacy needs to start with an understanding of the policy process and the political realities that decision-makers face at all levels. As Shepherd (2013) states, governments should make an effort to be more open in acknowledging their constraints or lack of capacity. But unless people that wish to influence policies meet them halfway, the conversation might degenerate to mutual incomprehension. “Simply shouting louder does no more than burn credibility and alienate those that advocacy is intended to influence” (Shepherd, 2013).

How policy advocacy happens

FANRPAN, a key policy partner of GFRAS over the years, has championed food, agriculture and natural resources policy issues in Africa and beyond (www.fanrpan.org). FANRPAN has developed a model that RAS actors can use to strengthen their advocacy work. The model, which focuses on the message, the messengers and the platforms for advocacy, is described below.

Defining the message

To influence a policy process, the first thing you need be clear about is the key message: the most important thing for your audience to know. People that are engaged in policy processes usually have neither the time nor the capacity

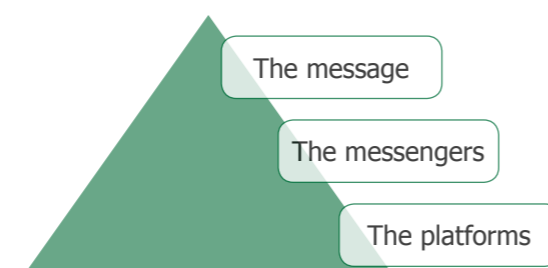
Box 1

What does advocacy for RAS policy reform and action include?

- promoting representation and participation of RAS stakeholders in agricultural and development discourses at national, regional and global levels
- generating, making available and effectively packaging the evidence needed to enhance policy development processes
- providing space and platforms for inclusive policy dialogues on advisory services and guiding actors to develop more appropriate evidence-based policies
- strengthening capacities of regional and national RAS networks and fora to better contribute to policy-making processes and building alliances and partnerships for a collective and coherent voice
- calling for the professionalisation of RAS, with basic minimum standards that guide the conduct of extension personnel, thus increasing the credibility and quality of service provision
- calling for increased investment in RAS services delivery.

to grasp and/or read complex discourses. The message should thus be concise and easy to explain, understand and remember, and you should be able to communicate it in different forms and contexts (e.g. policy briefs, casual conversations, workshops, interviews, etc.).

The packaging of the message depends on the audience but the message should be consistent, whether it is used in oral communication, presentations, strategic documents, news releases or other modes of communication. The message may also be distilled into a pithy campaign slogan. You will need key talking points, stories and examples that support your key message. These may change based on the needs and interests of the audience.



Examples of messages

“An enabling policy environment is crucial to the effectiveness of rural advisory services” (FANRPAN)

“Rural advisory services are fundamental to supporting people to deal with existing and new challenges, and to improve the livelihoods of rural people worldwide” (GFRAS)

Equipping the messengers

The messengers are just as important as the message. Messengers need to have an intrinsic motivation and commitment to the message, otherwise it will be difficult for them to deliver it in an effective and credible way. Ensuring that they have the relevant information and evidence as well as appropriate communication tools is very critical. Capacity development in communication might be required in some cases. Messengers also need a basic understanding of the interests and priorities of the people they are communicating with and should be able to adapt and package the message as necessary. Experience shows that messengers who are well-known, respected and expert in RAS issues are likely to be more influential. However, the type, level, background and capacities needed by the messenger always depend on context and it should never be forgotten that a message can be communicated in many different ways. Sometimes, a visit to a farmer’s field (where the reality on the ground is the message and the farmer the messenger) can be as effective as a lengthy talk at a dinner. Thus it is important to reflect on how best to equip the messenger depending on the context.

Examples of messengers

Messengers for GFRAS can be any individuals or organisations that work in GFRAS strategic fields and/or try to influence their environment using GFRAS content and statements. They include the GFRAS Steering Committee (as a whole or its members individually), GFRAS working groups (as a whole or members individually), GFRAS regional networks and country fora (as a whole or members individually), GFRAS strategic partners and others. In the context of FANRPAN, the messengers include trained youth champions, high-level policy champions and elders (former government officials such as permanent secretaries or prime ministers), and women farmer advocates.

Creating engagement platforms

The messengers can only be effective if there are platforms for engagement. We define platforms very loosely as opportunities for actors to engage. These can occur at every stage of a policy process, and can range from very informal encounters (casual talk at a dinner or networking event) to formal, strategic communications (e.g. an official letter to a ministry or formal presentation to an important audience). Organisations can help to create and stimulate such opportunities, mainly by enabling contacts between people, organising encounters and meetings, and/or sharing information.

Examples of platforms

The efforts of GFRAS to support engagement platforms reflect its mission to provide advocacy and leadership on pluralistic, demand-driven RAS within the global development agenda. GFRAS creates such platforms at the global, regional and national levels through meetings, workshops, peer-to-peer exchanges and policy dialogues. It also facilitates contacts between different actors and people. The GFRAS Annual Meeting is the flagship event in the calendar and particularly aims to fulfil this purpose.

FANRPAN’s engagement platforms range from private meetings and joint community projects to formal policy dialogues. Some typical examples of FANRPAN’s engagement are listed below:

- national advocacy platforms – multi-stakeholder policy dialogues, community theatre, parliamentary engagements and farmer field days
- regional platforms – the African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services (AFAAS) extension week, regional harmonization of policies with regional economic communities such as the Southern African Development Community, African Union Summits and pan-African parliamentary engagements
- global platforms – the GFRAS Annual Meeting; United Nations engagements e.g. the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Committee on World Food Security, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the FAO Ministers of Agriculture; the World Economic Forum; the World Bank Food Security Forum; and the Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development.

Convening policy dialogues

While policy development requires long-term engagement at different levels by different actors, policy dialogues can be specific milestones along the way.

Policy dialogues go by many names, including roundtables, issue workshops, specialised committee meetings, commission meetings, regulatory negotiations and stakeholder meetings. Regardless of the name, all policy dialogues bring diverse interest groups to the table with the purpose of focusing on a regulatory, policy or planning issue of common interest and formulating practical solutions to the issue. Policy dialogues may involve either a single stakeholder group or multiple stakeholders, depending on the nature of the issue and the

convener. Organisations can play a crucial role in convening policy dialogues, especially if the target participants perceive them as neutral in their issue of concern.

Key questions to consider when planning a policy dialogue:

- What is the purpose and content of the policy dialogue (e.g. to discuss an existing policy or regulation, to review or elaborate a new policy, to bring everyone onto the same page about an issue and plan the next steps)?
- What are the expected outputs and outcomes?
- Who should participate?
- What should participants know and be aware of before the meeting? What documents should be shared with them?
- Who will facilitate and keep the dialogue on track?

- When and where should the event be held?
- How should the programme be structured to create the most stimulating and trustful environment?
- What are the logistical and financial implications and operational tasks needed? Who can ensure these tasks are completed?
- How will note- and minute-taking be organised (and by whom)? How, with whom, when and where will an eventual report be shared?
- How can the facilitators be best prepared to ensure smooth running of the dialogue?
- Is each facilitator clear about who is present and why, the different interests and issues, and the role played by each participant?
- How can we ensure we get commitment for further action from the participants?
- How do we follow up the event and put the recommendations into action?

The outputs of policy dialogues may include proceedings and resolutions, policy recommendations, stakeholder commitments and case studies of success stories, and these can be used to facilitate the transfer of best practices, agenda setting and the coordination of next steps. As important as these events are for visibility, networking and communicating messages, one should not imagine that a single event can change an entire policy environment. The dialogue has to be seen as part of a larger process and, as such, it has to be properly embedded, prepared and followed up by complementary, long-term engagements.

Key things to remember about advocacy

- Policy advocacy is the essential step to ensure that RAS issues enter the policy domain.
- For policy advocacy to be successful, it is critical to identify and reach out to the right political decision-makers at the most opportune moment. The timing and packaging of messages is crucial to maximising opportunities for policy reform.
- The communication of policy messages must be targeted carefully to different stakeholders. One size does not fit all.
- Policy advocacy should be a long-term, iterative process that enables messages to be incorporated in policy processes when appropriate.

Examples of policy dialogues

The FANRPAN policy dialogues bring together multiple stakeholders and discuss a range of issues around food, agriculture and natural resources. They invite high-level individuals (state presidents and ministers) to interact with ordinary citizens.

Year	FANRPAN regional policy dialogue theme	Host country
2015	Creating an enabling environment for scaling up climate-smart agriculture: The road to Paris	Zambia
2014	Policy for climate-smart agriculture: Family farming in Africa	Madagascar
2013	Climate-smart agriculture	Lesotho
2011	Advocating for the active engagement of youth in the agricultural value chain	Swaziland
2010	Livestock and fisheries policies for food security and trade in a changing climate	Namibia

(for more visit www.farnpan.org).

GFRAS is testing several policy engagement models with its regional networks. In 2015 it worked with AFAAS to test three-tier model that include:

1. Policy review (preceded by a study): Discuss the existing policy situation and identify actors, challenges and opportunities in the policy environment.
2. Policy advocacy training: Equip messengers with the knowledge and skills they need to talk effectively with decision-makers.
3. Dialogue with policy or decision-makers: Have a proper discussion on the issues identified in part 1.

With the Latin American network Red Latinoamericana de Servicios de Extensión Rural (RELASER), GFRAS is testing a cascade-approach to raise awareness of its New Extensionist concept. First, discussions are held and challenges and opportunities identified and addressed. These feed into a regional event and result in recommendations at the regional and national levels on how to strengthen the policy environment. The process is accompanied by advocacy training and backstopped by the RELASER secretariat.

Box 2

GFRAS policy-related activities

Advocacy and support for enabling policy environments and promoting appropriate investment in RAS is one of the major strategic fields for GFRAS. In 2011, at the International Conference on Innovations in Extension and Advisory Services in Nairobi, policy was recognised as a significant factor for influencing the environment in which RAS providers act. The consequent Nairobi Declaration affirmed the need for the participatory and coordinated development of clear extension policies, including quality assurance mechanisms. As a result, the GFRAS Policy Working Group was established and started its activities. Among other things, it aims to harmonise activities within policy-making for extension and advisory services. See <http://www.g-fras.org/en/community/working-groups/policy-for-extension-and-ras.html> for more information.

The Fifth GFRAS Annual Meeting in 2014 focused on policy. There, RAS actors echoed the need for stronger capacity to advocate for more supportive enabling environments for the development, sustainability and effectiveness of RAS. In 2015, GFRAS commissioned a study to provide an update on the status of agricultural extension and RAS policies in Africa and their alignment with the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) framework. This built on the RAS policy review study done in 2011 (Oladele, 2011). In parallel, GFRAS works very closely with Modernizing Extension and Advisory Services (MEAS) on the extension and RAS policy review process worldwide (<http://www.meas-extension.org/meas-offers/best-practice/policy>), as well as with other networks, such as RELASER, to further regional policy dialogues. The GFRAS Policy Compendium aims to fill the gap between the RAS policy environment and RAS efforts in the field.

References

Ernst, N. (2015). *Why is an evidence-based RAS policy environment needed and how can it be influenced? A summary of the 5th GFRAS Annual Meeting*. GFRAS: Lindau, Switzerland. Available at <http://www.g-fras.org/en/policy-templates/category/?download=333:why-is-an-evidence-based-ras-policy-environment-needed-and-how-can-it-be-influenced>.

Maetz, M. and Balié, J. (2008) *Influencing policy processes: Lessons from experience. Policy Assistance Series 4*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO): Rome, Italy.

Oladele, O.I (2011) *Agricultural Extension Policy: The Missing link in Innovations ins Extension and Advisory Services*. A study commissioned by GFRAS: Agricultural Extension Policy: the Missing Link in Innovations in Extension and Advisory Services

Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS)
c/o Agridea, Jordils 1, 1001 Lausanne, Switzerland
Phone +41 (0)52 354 97 64, Fax +41 (0)52 354 97 97
info@g-fras.org, www.g-fras.org

This article was produced by GFRAS and FANRPAN with financial support from GFAR as contribution to the outcomes of GFAR.

All work by Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License

