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EXTENSION AND ADVISORY SERVICES: SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER CRISES

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ABSTRACT

Extension and Advisory Services (EAS) providers are important partners for communities to prepare for, respond to, and recover from shocks such as natural disasters and human, plant, and animal disease and pest outbreaks. EAS providers work long-term in communities to equip people with knowledge, skills, and technical resources to improve their livelihoods. EAS are provided by various actors including governments, nongovernmental organizations, private sector entities, higher education institutions, and other organizations. EAS often serve in bridging roles connecting resources from numerous actors operating in communities and are valuable conduits of information during shocks.

EAS are seen as key partners in helping communities rebuild and strengthen food systems after the initial shock, given their long-term work horizons. There are numerous examples of EAS responding to crises around the world, such as HIV/AIDS, Ebola, Avian Influenza, malaria, and, more recently during the current COVID-19 pandemic. During COVID-19, EAS have undertaken an unprecedented shift to virtual and distanced programming as daily life has been disrupted through restrictions on movement and gatherings. EAS agents have been challenged to modify program delivery and remain effective in serving their clientele while navigating this new landscape. In this essay we explore examples of EAS supporting communities before, during, and after crises, and discuss implications for future EAS work, including considerations of lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic response.

INTRODUCTION

Extension and Advisory Services (EAS) play an important role in equipping people and communities with knowledge and technical resources to improve their lives and livelihoods. EAS empower people, promote economic growth, foster beneficial communication, require and promote collaboration, and work to reduce poverty.¹ As such, EAS are well-positioned to help communities experiencing a crisis as they have supported responses to many crises in the past, such as natural disasters and epidemics like HIV/AIDS, Ebola, Avian Influenza, malaria, and, more recently during the COVID-19 pandemic.²

EAS are key partners in preparing communities for shocks such as human, animal, or plant disease or pest outbreaks; in response as these shocks unfold; and in recovery, building resilience in communities and food systems after crises. The challenging and ambitious nature of EAS efforts requires long-term commitment by EAS providers to the people and communities they serve, and EAS often remain after the initial shock or disaster.^{3,4} In this essay we explore examples of EAS supporting communities before, during, and after crises, and discuss implications for future EAS work.

PREPARATION

EAS prepare communities for negative events as they serve as a bridge between information sources and the stakeholders with which they engage. While no one uniform EAS model exists, it is this bridging role that has enabled EAS to offer value in communities by providing clientele with the information, skills, and strategies to enhance their economic and social futures. As fundamentally relational institutions, EAS often serve as connectors and communication conduits between the many actors operating in communities.

Rural advisory services, also called extension, are all the different activities that provide the information and services needed and demanded by farmers and other actors in rural settings to assist them in developing their own technical, organisational, and management skills and practices so as to improve their livelihoods and wellbeing. Ian Christoplos, 2010⁵

The Cooperative Extension System (CES) in the United States is a partnership between the United States Department of Agriculture, the Land-Grant University System, and state and local governments. This partnership connects resources in higher education to communities and builds on long-term relationships county-level Extension personnel create in their localities.⁶ This tripartite government-led model is relatively unique in the US; however, other actors also provide services. Globally as well, EAS are provided by nongovernmental organizations, governments, private sector entities, through higher education institutions, and other means.⁷

A central principle of the US CES is the value of cooperation not only in terms of financial investment shared by federal, state, and local governments, but also organizational and programmatic cooperation within and across state Extension systems. For example, the Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN) was formed following the 1993 Missouri and Mississippi river floods in the central United States. The network allows states in the midst of crisis to access resources and expertise they might otherwise not have access to in the moment. EDEN helps communities prepare for shocks through education, training, and research to better equip communities before crises arise.⁸

RESPONSE

In times of crisis, EAS use their long-standing relationships in communities to assess immediate needs and relay relevant information to others involved in the response. EAS can educate communities about the current outbreak and advise on immediate precautions, complete rapid assessments of damage or incidence and communicate that to relevant agencies, and identify and address market and supply chain disruptions in collaboration with others. EAS undertake these activities while being sensitive to social issues such as the disproportionate impact on

vulnerable populations such as women and children. Given their access to field-level data and trusted relationships, EAS are often relied upon by governments to provide objective information used in informing government response.⁹

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted economic and social systems across the planet. The pandemic is unique in how quickly the governmental response around the world forced changes in all aspects of society through limiting in-person activities. Food and economic systems, education, and healthcare, to name a few, were changed virtually overnight as governments sought to limit transmission. EAS were immediately forced to change how they functioned as organizations, including how they continued to provide services to clientele.

The US CES quickly adapted to offering programming virtually, served as a connector and resource aggregator for clientele, and worked with local and state partners to provide services and resources for vulnerable populations. Specifically, eXtension [impact.extension.org], a platform for sharing resources with CES professionals, aggregated information from the World Health Organization and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, guidance on the impact of COVID-19-related legislation, as well as materials provided by CES and universities from throughout the United States. Topics of benefit to the general public and information sharing how the various systems responded to the pandemic from an organizational perspective were included.¹⁰

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs in China created a cloud-based extension information portal used for digital engagement and access to experts by farmers and dissemination of relevant market- and production- related guidance. While much has been made of new communication solutions and the switch to virtual programming, in countries throughout Africa, existing media channels such as farm radio continue to serve as important conduits to reach communities with current, relevant information during disasters, including the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹

RECOVERY

Previous shocks have offered examples of how EAS is valued for helping communities recover and build resilience for future events. Extension agents play an important role in understanding the impacts of pandemics. In Sierra Leone, extension agents and farmers reported that the Ebola outbreak led to losses in productivity and reduced output, which affected food availability, reduced incomes, and affected household financial security.¹² During the Ebola outbreak in Liberia, food insecurity increased as buying habits, food production efforts, and marketing channels were disrupted by government restrictions and fear-induced changes in habits. The corresponding impacts on food systems and food availability compounded existing problems in the country. Following the crisis, investment in agricultural extension was requested to enhance food security.¹³ The World Bank viewed EAS as a complement to improved seed and access to technology, as key to increasing food security through improving farmer livelihoods, and invested in programs to support farmers through these channels in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea.¹⁴

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The role of technology and the unprecedented switch to virtual engagement in all aspects of life during the COVID-19 pandemic warrants further discussion. In Virginia, CES virtual events such as blueberry field days and volunteer development trainings drew far larger participation than the same events had in previous years when delivered in person. The ability of EAS to switch course rapidly depends on agents' willingness and ability to adapt to new methods of service provision, including use of technology platforms, and extension professionals report greater comfort in adopting methods shared by their peers.¹⁵ The impact of changes to extension program delivery methods and platforms, the effects of those changes on organizational response, and longer term effects on organizational functioning will require further evaluation to better inform future responses.

Shocks affect economies and communities differently, and therefore the response of EAS will have different impacts on recovery. Further, the relative strength of each EAS will affect its ability to respond effectively. Extension systems can be affected in the short run through direct impacts and disruptions for extension

professionals, through diversion or deployment in response to crises, and these disruptions affect the clientele who normally would benefit from their expertise. Long term, extension systems can be threatened by lack of investment to rebuild systems. This disinvestment can spill over and affect related organizations and providers.¹⁶

EAS provide critical resources to people and communities. Continued investment in EAS will be required to ensure they are resourced and available to continue important work and respond in extraordinary situations. EAS should continue to evaluate the quality and impact of programming and explore ways technology can further their reach and support improved livelihoods.

ENDNOTES

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