Abstract

This study explores the policy element of public sector agricultural extension. It was contended that this policy element lacked an adequate framework. Without such a framework, there was a risk that major policy-or operational-issues would be neglected in policy formulation. The study was designed to propose an improved framework for thinking about, and acting upon, the policy element of agricultural extension. The notion of extension policy was seen as lacking clarity due to a number of surrounding issues. Differences in definitions of extension were considered to be a major cause of the confusion about extension policy. These definitions or paradigms ranged from a persuasive, technology focus, to a facilitative, human development model. If individuals viewed extension from such different perspectives, then, meaningful discourse about extension policy would be extremely difficult to achieve. Other issues presented as confusing the notion of extension policy included the on-going debate about the legitimate role of extension, the meaning of formal policy itself, and the disagreement about what should comprise the content of such formal policy. Finally, the process of developing a formal extension policy, its implementation, and its impact, was also considered to add confusion to the development of an extension policy framework. Despite this confusion, however, the term being used in practice, and extension policy was being socially constructed. The meaning of extension policy that the development of an improved theoretical framework was sought. It was contended that an understanding of the meaning and role of formal policy could best be explored by looking at a situation where such policy was in the process of being developed, formulated, and implemented. For this reason, the development of a formal extension policy in Queensland, Australia, provided a very useful case study. For the first time in its 100 year history, the Queensland Department of Primary Industries had initiated a comprehensive Extension Policy Review. As a result of this review, a formal Extension Strategy Statement was written, endorsed by government, and is currently being implemented. It was the discourse and action surrounding this process that provided the research environment. A grounded theory approach was used to enter this ‘messy’ world of appreciated knowledge. Pre-determined categories which provided an initial basis for collating and analysing the data were the Hierarchy of Extension Objectives, an Agricultural Knowledge and Information System perspective, and the dimension of Power. The initial phase of the study focused on the 1990 QDPI Extension Policy Review. Research centred around the triggers for such a review, its process, content, and the reaction to its outcome. Because of the link between the events in Queensland and what was happening in other states and countries in the area of extension policy, the surrounding ‘paper’ debate was also examined. Interviews and textual analysis provided the basis of data collection during this phase. The second phase explored the development, and early implementation, of the Extension Strategy Statement. In this phase, data was collected through participant observation, as well as through the record of institutional history found in office or internal memoranda. The analysis suggested that the initiation of a formal extension policy in Queensland was primarily a means of pre-empting an anticipated imposition of ‘inappropriate’ changes to the extension function, which included an expected reduction in public resources for extension. The discourse surrounding extension policy firmly centred on this issue of resources, and also on other conditions required for extension to fulfil an overt public function. It was the strategic renegotiation of this public function that underpinned the claims of these resources. A formal policy appeared to provide the sought after public sector credibility required to provide the extension function, and hence the provision of resources to permit extension to operate and develop. It also provided a mechanism to realign extension with changing societal trends and expectations. The formal policy, however, was found wanting in achieving commitment and substantive change at the interface between extension officers and their clients. Prescriptive elements of policy, in particular, were suggested as being inappropriate at this formal level. The formal policy triangle was therefore proposed as a framework for thinking about the content of extension policy. This triangle comprised the elements of reason, enabling conditions, and constraining conditions. The societal reason for maintaining a public extension function was contrasted with the alternative, flawed rationale for extension in achieving predetermined, physically measurable objectives. Enabling conditions were described as the resources, structures, and processes to permit extension to develop and fulfill its negotiated reason. Constraining conditions were those that provided limitations on the extension function. These included resource issues as well as political and societal imperatives. The study concluded, however, that the content and implementation of extension policy could not be divorced from the process of policy development. It appeared that extension policy was being negotiated at two levels - the strategic and collective. At the strategic level, senior managers were manoeuvring to ensure the continued legitimacy of the public sector extension function and hence ensure its continued role, support and resources. At the collective level, however, extension officers, their managers, and stakeholders were attempting to work through the problem situation that they were confronted with - the challenge to the traditional relationships. Concerned to a direction or change at this level was considered to be the plan for a strategic change to be enacted. It was in the discontinuities evident between the strategic and collective levels where problems with content and its implementation appeared to result. These discontinuities centred around the lack of continuing and effective feedback loops between the two levels. It was therefore proposed that formal extension policy should be viewed within the context of the negotiation of change at the collective level. Formal policy could provide an impetus and focus for that change, and introduce strategic issues into the collective discourse. It could also capture resources to enable new steps to be taken. However, formal policy should be seen as an integral step in the total extension policy process rather than the dominating component, or end result, of an extension policy development process. Extension is being increasingly asked to become involved in complex community issues that demand collective action. It was argued that if extension is to have the capacity to impact in these areas, it must first demonstrate that its own guiding policy is grounded in a collective process.

Comments

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