

Private Sector Extension Service Provision: The Case of the National Federation of Coffee Growers in Colombia

The Success Story of a MEAS Evaluation Activity

August 2015

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The coffee sector plays an important role in Colombian agriculture. It represents about 17% of the agricultural output and is the primary source of income for about 2.2 million rural residents. Recent developments in the domestic and global coffee markets are posing new challenges, which require careful reassessment of the extension services. The coffee market is becoming increasingly differentiated, particularly with the rise of specialty coffees and designation of organic, sustainably produced or fair trade coffees. Advancement in information technologies are offering new possibilities in the provision of extension services. Climate change is affecting growing conditions and, in the future, will determine the geographic locations of coffee production. Furthermore, the continuous reduction in government support to agriculture – including coffee – makes it critical to allocate scarce resources efficiently.

Given these challenges, the Modernizing Extension and Advisory Services project (MEAS) entered into an agreement with the National Federation of Coffee Growers in Colombia (FNC) in the later part of 2012 until the summer of 2013 to conduct an in-depth evaluation of their extension service. In preparation, the MEAS team investigated global



Benjamin Mueller (center) stands with FNC extension staff

best practices and key lessons from international public and private models of coffee extension.

This meant considering public models for coffee extension in major coffee exporting countries in East Africa, Central America, Latin America, and Asia to identify emerging trends and best practices. The MEAS team concluded that some of the more innovative coffee extension services are being led by private (not-for-profit and for-profit) organizations. Because these privately-led models are new and most information is not publicly available, the research team conducted confidential interviews with twenty organizations in more than 16 countries comprised of private companies, non-governmental organizations, research institutes, and consultants who provide cutting-edge coffee extension services.

What were the important factors from this experience with FNC that combined made the MEAS relationship with FNC a success story?

- The request for MEAS to evaluate the FNC was demand-driven. The Technical Director of the FNC approached the MEAS leadership team and requested that an evaluation be done of their extension service. The FNC had considerable buy-in for the project, which financed all the in-country travel and expenses for the MEAS research team.
- Leading the MEAS assessment of the FNC was Benjamin Mueller, a retired University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign extension specialist with strong ties to the Colombian coffee sector. The MEAS consortium partnered with Cornell University on the project, working with Dr. Miguel Gomez, an Associate Professor from Cornell and native of Colombia who conducted a global research project focusing on private sector organizations providing extension services with coffee and cacao producers in 16 countries.
- The UIUC/Cornell team used a mixed research approach: the team did a qualitative analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats – a SWOT analysis – in the field with 300 FNC coffee growers and nearly 60 of its 1,000 extension agents. An international best practices survey of coffee growers of 20 organizations, which provide extension programs to coffee and cacao growers in over 16 countries, complemented the field assessment of the FNC Extension.
- The MEAS evaluation of FNC combined with the survey of international best practices of public and private extension services for coffee is enriching to the MEAS body of work because of the public/private partnership model used by FNC where a strong private sector organization has been built with substantial financial and policy support from the Colombian government and in particular the Ministry of Agriculture.
- The report contained important recommendations that were grounded in the decentralized responses of small holders from diverse backgrounds and geographic areas. Some of these recommendations were adopted by the FNC administration to create organizational behavior changes. FNC's central administration recognized the value of strengthening its networks of social capital with the growers and the extension field staff.
- The report was not created and then filed as a document in the FNC central office. A series of workshops were implemented using the FNC communications technology to involve all of their field offices. Face-to-face workshops were held with members of the Colombian government and the private sector members of the National Coffee Commission. Other sector organizations such as the Federation of African Palm growers attended a workshop and became interested in completing a MEAS evaluation for their sector.
- Beyond training workshops, an integrated dissemination strategy was implemented using mass media television and radio, press articles, and newsletter articles to get the word out to the over

500,000 FNC small holder producers, and the 1,000+ FNC extension field agents. MEAS and FNC provided a presentation to the Bogota mission of USAID where a new project for coffee expansion was discussed based on the MEAS recommendations. Multiple media presentations were archived on the MEAS website. A peer reviewed journal article is in the process of completion.

- The central administration of FNC made the point that the MEAS approach was much more useful for their organization than the standard consulting firm procedure of creating a document and not providing any dialogue around its findings and recommendations or training into how to adopt new organizational practices.
- Carlos Uribe, Technical Manager for the central administration of the FNC claimed that, "The MEAS approach was much more useful for their the FNC than the standard consulting firm procedure has been, whereby consultants create a document without entering into a dialogue with the FNC to discuss its findings and recommendations. The MEAS approach consists of implementing training workshops with our FNC administration and extension staff, training them on how to adopt new organizational practices."

However, the case remains that public/private partnerships contain important elements that often contribute to successful extension programs. Support of the government for small holders, including access to credit for expansion of production is an important building block for small holders' development.

Public/Private partnerships often attract the private sector and partners among international non-governmental organizations who may provide access to value

chain marketing niches, increased technical assistance, and support for the adoption of new technologies.

Finally, smallholders need strong community-based organizations to prosper. The FNC public/private model includes an organizational arm of community-based agro-cooperatives that support the growers with their production needs, but more importantly provide a business development and social organizational model that is a critical foundation for sustainable development.

NOTE: Colombia is not a Feed the Future country and FNC is a much larger and resource-laden organization than is typical of the types of extension services that are part of the Feed the Future countries where MEAS has focused its efforts.



FNC extension staff and Mueller have a discussion before conducting farmer surveys

