

A current view from Taiwan's extensionists for future professional development

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Introduction

Agriculture in Taiwan is at an important crossroads in its development. With limited arable land, vulnerability to shifting climatic events, and a shrinking agricultural workforce, Taiwan is grappling with complex problems in the agricultural sector that must be addressed (Food and Fertilizer Technology Center for the Asian and Pacific Region [FFTC-APR], 2020; Lee et al., 2020). As Taiwan wrestles with the need for change in its agricultural milieu, extension professionals find themselves facing the same complexity. Taiwan's extension system has proven invaluable in propelling its agricultural development from labor-intensive, small-scale farming to a modern, digitalized agriculture that maximizes efficiency (Burmeister et al., 2001; Hong, 1970; Wang, 1979; Yueh et al., 2013). As Taiwanese agriculture is facing the future and responding to challenges, Taiwan's extension system will need to do the same to remain effective in its ability to work with producers and communities to solve problems in agriculture and rural development (Lee et al., 2020).

Despite Taiwan's sweeping transformation of the agricultural sector, agricultural research and extension stations have struggled to keep up with the changes (Wang & Chen, 2004). While attempts have been made to spur innovation in Taiwan's extension system (Tseng & Chen, n.d.), the broader impacts of extension are not widely known and researched. Furthermore, a qualitative approach regarding Taiwan's extension has not been undertaken to make future implications for professional development. Hence, this drives the purpose of this study to address the current condition of the agricultural extension system in Taiwan. Considering these conditions, the urgency of understanding the needs of Taiwan's agricultural extension system is conspicuous and indispensable. This study attempts to answer the following research questions: 1) What are the extension workers' challenges? 2) What are the extension workers' opportunities? 3) How do extension workers describe the future of extension?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study is strategic planning (George et al., 2019). As extension systems around the world grapple with reforming their work to enhance their effectiveness in addressing future challenges (Blum et al. 2020), the need to understand how frontline extension professionals view the current and future trends in extension will be critically important (Donaldson et al. 2022). George wrote that the formality of the strategic planning processes is pivotal to improving organizational performance. The strategic planning process includes internal and external analyses, as well as the formulation of strategies, plans, and goals. However, extension education has been reported to have inadequate extension professionals to improve the extension system's overall performance (Wang & Chen, 2004; Wu et al., 2011). The framing of this study is expected to provide future insights for proceeding toward an effective extension system. Collectively, these suggested that the understanding of current and future trends in extension will play an important role in propagating agriculture.

Methodology

To explore how extension workers overcome challenges and enhance their competence through professional development, a narrative qualitative approach is undertaken. A semi-structured interview was conducted to collect data from the interview with the consent of each participant.

The target population for this research includes extension professionals that work at universities, research extension stations, and agriculture research institutes. To be part of this research, participants must meet the following requirements (1) age must be over 18 years old, (2) work as extensionists or professors, and (3) be willing to share their thoughts and perspectives. The interviews were conducted virtually through a conferencing service Google Meet. The data collection was collected from September to October 2022 using snowball sampling. A total of 12 extensionists participated in this study including 10 men and 2 women. The interview questions were examined by face validity and were originally in English. The interview questions were then translated into participants' native language to investigate their perceptions of working in the extension realm. The interview was recorded after obtaining participants' consent for later transcription and translation purposes. These procedures will be repeated after the qualitative data has met the criterion to analyze the data. Our interview process includes three following procedures: introduction, narrative, and conclusion. Pattern coding were used to analyze data to ensure trustworthiness. We also imbued rigor into the study by embedding within the qualitative standards of quality: (1) credibility, (2) confirmability, (3) dependability, and (4) transferability (Houghton et al., 2013).

Findings

We identified a total of 12 extensionists to participate in our study including 10 men and 2 women. Participants' years of extension experience ranged from 1.5 ~ 34 years and most of them worked at farmer's association. By answering to the first research question, the majority of participants expressed the challenge to communicate and build trust with the farmers, as well as limited funding resources to meet the rapid change in the environment. This challenge has overcome by attending educational training courses from the institutions or universities. The second research question were identified by allowing extensionists' to attend educational training to improve their professional skills to cope with overarching circumstances. It is suggested that the government carry out marketing training courses for extension workers to strengthen their ability and propagate accurate agricultural information. On the other hand, connections with people from the fields, professionals, public and private sectors provide the opportunity to implement resource integration. The third research question was found that funding resources and educational training must keep up with changing environment to provide opportunities for future farmers and extensionists. It is suggested that more studies can draw attention to how extensionists carried out extension works through their role of leadership. We can conclude that extensionists perceive the importance of professional development through the investigation of the study.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Overall, extension professionals' perception regarding future did not vary from different organizations that they worked in. Previous research findings pinpointed that research extension stations heavily rely on innovative research instead of outreach activities (Wang & Chen, 2004). Notably, our research results presented a different viewpoint, demonstrating that extension institutions have shifted their focus to educational training for professional development. Furthermore, extension professionals have recognized the importance of effective communication and sustainable agricultural practices. This study supports the need for developing training opportunities to address and establish novel extension professional programs to provide innovative approaches. Potential strategies and policies can be proposed for future studies to highlight key areas for intervention.

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