



**Seeds for a Future**  
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**What is an Agricultural  
Extension Program?**

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# What is an Agricultural Extension Program?

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Seeds for a Future provides Agricultural Extension services to various communities and municipalities in rural Guatemala. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defines Agricultural Extension in the following ways:

- *Agricultural Extension is an informal educational process directed toward the rural population. This process offers advice and information to help them solve their problems. An Extension also aims to increase the efficiency of the family farm, increase production, and generally increase the standard of living of the farm family.*
- *An Agricultural Extension aims to change farmers' outlook on their difficulties. Extension is concerned not just with physical and economic achievements but also with the development of the rural people themselves. Extension agents, therefore, discuss matters with the rural people, helping them gain a clearer insight into their problems and deciding how to overcome them.*
- *Agricultural Extension is a process of working with rural people to improve their livelihoods. This involves helping farmers strengthen their agricultural productivity and develop their abilities to direct their own future development.*

Since our founding in 2009 and interactions with the communities we serve, we have seen ample justification for developing an Agricultural Extension program throughout rural Guatemala. Indeed, we believe that Agricultural Extension and the associated Technical Assistance are an indispensable benefit to rural communities.



Seeds for a Future Agricultural Extensionists providing hands-on education in the field.

**With our Field Team's many years of experience, we have identified several key elements that come into play in the development of such a program:**

- Family agriculture-based economy vs family income requirements.
- The abilities and skills of the Extensionist team and other training personnel.
- Basic characteristics of community members
- Potential for community transformation
- The distinct functions of an Agricultural Extension program and associated Technical Assistance

- The geographical coverage of the Program and the potential for expansion into new communities
- Taking climate change into account! Three key points come into play here, that are not often thoroughly analyzed:
  - Drought in some regions
  - Excess rainfall in others
  - Typical seasons of the year, winter and summer
- Is there a demand from the communities to provide an Agricultural Extension service?
- Who should carry out an Agricultural Extension program, the state or the private initiative? What might be outsourced?
- Why have past programs failed? How can existing models be improved?
- How well do Extension providers understand this particular ecosystem?
 

This is perhaps the most crucial question since a successful Agricultural Extension program must be derived from the conditions and needs of each community. Extension should not seek to negatively affect or alter the ecosystem.

Of course, there are many additional factors to consider.

The foundation of the Seeds for a Future Agricultural Extension program is our Casa Granja Program, which is integrated with a wide array of additional learning and mentoring features. Through careful consideration of these various elements over our years of operation, we have established an effective program that will genuinely serve the community's needs.

We've gained ample experience and knowledge during this time and continue to pursue some of the following points of inquiry.

## **1. What causes a family to drop out of the Program?**

As with any Program, some families choose to leave the group or discontinue their home garden efforts for one reason or another. Others choose to continue on their own without the support of our Program.

For those who chose to discontinue their garden altogether, all cultivation efforts were dropped, and outdoor spaces were left to grow wild. We have observed that those who leave the Program often have children who have grown up, inherited part of the house, or emigrated to the United States and Canada. For families with children abroad, remittances have allowed them to live more comfortably, whereby they no longer see the need for a home garden.

## **2. What is the best method of participant recruitment?**

Seeds for a Future takes a somewhat unconventional approach to participant recruitment. Our Program is primarily spread by word of mouth, and we work with any group or family, regardless of their household income, who expresses a genuine interest in becoming involved.

Families may notice their neighbors cultivating their own garden and, seeing their progress, reach out to our Field Team. They will then undergo a comprehensive diagnostic to determine if and how we can work together. Many participants who successfully completed the Program and developed a passion for the project have gone on to become paid Agricultural Extensionists. These Extensionists are essential members of our Field Team. They continue to develop their own skill sets and provide important peer-to-peer support.

From the start, we have been adamant that standout participants who dedicate themselves to community development and express an interest in the fundamentals of Agricultural Extension have the opportunity to join forces with the organization and assist in furthering our mission. Extensionists will often spearhead extension projects in new communities beyond Chocolá, working with other leaders in these sites to develop comparable systems of local leadership so that the Agricultural Extension program is truly community-led, no matter where it is situated.

### **3. How can we continue to learn and promote innovative approaches?**

At Seeds for a Future, we constantly seek promising new projects the community can develop. Over the years, our participants and Extensionists have developed various agricultural technologies and cultivated various entrepreneurship opportunities based on the limited resources at hand.

Many cultivate *hierbamora* and *flor amarilla*, and given their quick production rate, they can sell the excess at the market. An array of other herbs and vegetables are frequently sold in the markets. We have worked with families to improve the production of their *cacao* trees, increasing the production of chocolate. We provide families with tools and education about the slaughtering of pigs to optimize the sales of valuable cuts of meat. These are just a few examples.

By forming our Field Team of Extensionists (both male and female) from within our existing network of participating families, we can better understand precisely what the community wants and needs. Being embedded in the community, we can better understand which entrepreneurial efforts are successful and which are not and respond accordingly.

#### **Taking all of these insights into account, we draw two conclusions:**

- An Agricultural Extension Program like that developed by Seeds for a Future in Chicolá would hugely benefit rural communities across Guatemala. We have begun expansion efforts in rural municipalities, including Nebaj, Sipacate, and more.
- The presence of such non-governmental entities can provide essential education and leadership opportunities. In our experience, government councils often lack high-quality leadership (COCODES). While these councils should and often are chargers coordinating community development, local families rarely understand how they function. Their funding is often

channeled towards superficial projects rather than a community's expressed needs.

We offer advice on integrating three fundamental aspects of capital when undertaking any Agricultural Extension. These are requirements for an effective program in any rural community.

1. **Never underestimate human capital.** Value and honor people's capabilities above all else. This is the most valuable asset for any organization. Providing continuing education for Extensionists and improving internal communication are serious and important commitments. Our human capital at Seeds for a Future includes everyone that our Program has touched over the years—those who are still with us, those who were with us for a time, and all of the participants and other local actors who help in one way or another to bring about the development of these communities.
2. **Strive to improve social capital.** Social capital implies trust, collaboration and mutual support. It considers language, values, customs, food culture, and leadership. These provide a sense of belonging. In other words, communities are constituted by a shared culture and series of social interactions. Connectedness and collective care can further a community's access to essential services.
3. **Commit to valuing, protecting, and supporting environmental capital.** Environmental protection and community development go hand in hand. The potential of the population is strengthened by the vitality of the ecosystem. An ecosystem includes not just the surrounding landscape and its natural features but every house, plot, and garden. Taking care of natural resources is a long-term investment. High biodiversity, pollination, soil conservation, and water filtration directly impact household income and economic prosperity. Seeing these parts as an integrated whole allows families and communities to calculate the actual costs and benefits of gardening efforts.

These three forms of capital make progress possible.

Agricultural Extension, focused on these three points, provides communities and their inhabitants with abundant resources for sustenance and flourishing.

When working in tandem, this system of Agricultural Extension generates economic, physical, and social benefits for people and communities, not to mention enhancing their wellbeing and sense of agency. It protects valuable and endangered natural resources by creating a circular economic system—reducing, reusing, and recycling. It is an ecosystem unto itself.