Reframing Agricultural Extension through Rural Sociology

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Disillusionment

When I graduated from my undergraduate degree in agriculture, I brought with me the theory and practice of agricultural extension, my idealism, and a hunger to be of service to the Filipino people, especially to the farmers and fisherfolks who sustain the nation. These brought me to the fractured agricultural landscapes and the peripheral islandscapes of my country. It was through brief but meaningful field experiences that I encountered a profound sense of disillusionment, especially in the context of analyzing the impact of government programs on their constituents. The statistic that farmers and fisherfolks remain the poorest among the basic sectors in the Philippines (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2023) despite existing policies and programs was no longer an abstraction; rather, it materialized in my encounters as an early-career academic.

Throughout my undergraduate days, a persistent question was why “participatory development” continues to struggle to find its footing in the Philippines (Songco, 2022), echoing what preeminent Filipino rural sociologist, Dr. Gelia T. Castillo, asked back in 1983: “How participatory is participatory development?” How could such a paradigm fail to fully materialize in a society fundamentally rooted in indigenous values and concepts such as kapwa (shared inner self) and bayanihan (being a community) (Solis, 2023)? My conversations and experiences with farmers in Cavite and Laguna, on the shores of the Polillo Group of Islands in Quezon, and even in the air-conditioned government offices, provided an answer. On paper, the practice of extension delivery in the Philippines is decentralized and devolved, as per the Local Government Code of 1991, yet its governance structures remain bureaucratic. In my own observation, this is also compounded by nepotism, patronage politics, underfunded local institutions, crab mentality, and human greed, to name a few. But in the broader context of extension and development, the most

formidable challenge is the uncritical subscription to Western-centric models and paradigms that systematically invalidate local and indigenous voices.

Development is always framed through the lens of what works in the West, where the perspectives and futures envisioned by the local people are treated as an afterthought. This partly explains why farmers in Cavite reported that they received second-hand agricultural machinery, why a national rice program distributes a blanket rice variety despite diverse agroecological conditions, why regional government agencies could only service a limited number of farmer and fisherfolk "beneficiaries", and why small island barangays (smallest political unit) and municipalities continue to be underserved.

In these various contexts, the participation of the people is often tokenistic, where the local voices are captured for compliance rather than being integral to development practice. In my own fieldwork and through the shared experiences of senior colleagues and mentors, I have observed how data is routinely extracted from local communities under the guise of 'participatory development' only to serve a predetermined intervention dictated by external funding institutions.

Twin flames: Disciplines of periphery, peripheral disciplines

Indeed, formal interviews and informal discussions with community members and government officials alike laid bare a top-down system that did not favor a truly participatory and human-centered agricultural extension and rural development. Perhaps this was what pushed me to ask more questions and seek answers by pursuing graduate studies in rural sociology. To be clear, this was not my first foray into this discipline. Rural sociology was a required course for my bachelor's degree. At the time, I gave little thought to why this course was required for my major or why agricultural extension and rural studies were housed in the same academic unit. It simply seemed intuitive that understanding the social fabric that makes up our rural communities would better inform the practice of extension.

Their shared connection is rooted in Western history, emerging as twin responses to industrialization, capitalism, and urbanization. As rural sociology developed to analyze distinct rural spaces, extension grew as its applied educational counterpart. Their eventual institutionalization in the United States effectively set the idea in stone that these two applied sciences were inseparable (Hilyard, 2007; Jones & Garforth, 1997; Larson, 1965). Rural sociology studied the social structures and mechanisms of rural communities, while agricultural extension would work within those same structures and mechanisms toward development. Despite their institutionalization, I have observed that both disciplines occupy marginal spaces.

Lobao (1996) famously termed rural sociology as a sociology of the periphery that is itself peripheral. It is often dismissed within the broader discipline of sociology while struggling against a perceived theoretical vacuum. Rural sociology as practiced in my university is delimited to agrarian societies despite the country's archipelagic geography. There is also a strong preference toward positivist-oriented studies, leaving almost no room for other philosophies of knowledge to take root. This alienation is not merely epistemic but impacts its actual practice. It is an existential crisis unfolding in my own academic unit as enrollment in rural sociology is on a stark downward trajectory. In fact, last semester, I was the sole new student in the program. This decline threatens the survival of the only master's program in rural sociology in the Philippines and in Southeast Asia.

This marginalization also haunts agricultural extension to an extent. Within the fields of agriculture, there exists an implicit hierarchy that places the "hard" sciences such as crop science, animal science, soil science, and crop protection as the primary drivers of innovation. Drawing from my own experience as one of the few students in my batch who majored in agricultural extension, the discipline is often perceived as less rigorous or "important" than these technical counterparts. Many students and faculty alike from my university frequently reduce extension to a function presumed accessible to anyone with technical expertise—a pragmatism that conveniently, yet erroneously, ignores the complex social, cultural, and political dimensions defining the agricultural and rural landscape. Nowadays, there are more students who not only appreciate its relevance but also pursue agricultural extension as their major.

Nonetheless, the aforementioned belittlement is also true at the institutional level. From past conversations with agricultural extension practitioners, I recall their frustrations, disappointments, and hardships. They claim that they are overworked, underpaid, undervalued, and lack proper capacity building. There exists a major labor gap where there are far too few extension workers in the field to cater to the thousands of farmers and farmer groups in the country (Orcio, 2025).

Their operationalization in the margins uniquely positions them to bridge the gaps between theory and practice. This forced rural sociologists in the past to look beyond the classical and widely used frameworks of sociology to further understand the rural. Even now, rural sociologists heavily borrow from other disciplines such as demography and geography (Hilyard, 2007). Similarly, the practice of agricultural extension requires immersing oneself in society's peripheries, offering firsthand view of the gaps and failures of our agriculture and food systems. In this sense, being disciplines of the periphery and peripheral disciplines provides them with a critical vantage point for transformation.

A reframing

To move beyond my initial disillusionment, I have come to realize a fundamental but often overlooked aspect of being a student and practitioner of the social sciences: to question even the most fundamental tenets of our respective disciplines. Rural sociology (even sociology in general) and agricultural extension in the Philippines are yet to truly separate themselves from their Western roots. There remains an urgent, unfinished work in decolonizing these disciplines–drawing inspiration from intellectual movements such as Sikolohiyang Pilipino (Filipino psychology) and Pantayong Pananaw (From-us-for-us perspective). The former reframes psychology through Filipinos' consciousness, realities, and experiences rather than relying on Western models. The latter approaches Philippine history from local perspectives and languages. Both movements indigenized their fields: psychology moved away from rigid surveys toward culturally sensitive methods, and history consciously embraced the Filipino language to recenter narratives around native concepts (Enriquez, 1992; Moralina, 2009).

To move beyond these classical roots, the rural sociologist and agricultural extension practitioner must not divorce themselves from the communities they study and work with. For me, reframing agricultural extension through rural sociology is no longer an academic exercise; it reshapes how I teach, research, and engage. With this awakening, there is a social responsibility on my end to promote and practice extension as co-creation rather than mere dissemination. As a young academic, I reject the notion of viewing the rural and its people as sites of extraction. The work never ends when we leave these communities or when our papers get published; it begins when we actively stand alongside the people in transforming the systems that reinforce their marginality.

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