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Developing a client-oriented, agricultural advisory system in Azerbaijan

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The Republic of Azerbaijan, formerly part of the Soviet Union, is in the process of rebuilding and restructuring its agricultural sector in order to strengthen self-sustained production and consumption. One avenue being pursued is the privatization of former state and cooperative farms. The civil service advocates investment in modern farm technology with little consideration for the training of farmers or the development of advisory services. This creates a serious obstacle to agricultural development, as only a minority of the new landowners have practical farming experience. In order to address this policy gap, two German bilateral organizations are supporting the establishment of decentralized information, training and advisory services that keep situation-specificity, system flexibility, financial sustainability and accountability to the forefront.

Développer un système de vulgarisation agricole centré sur les clients en Azerbaïdjan

La République d'Azerbaïdjan, autrefois partie de l'URSS, est en train de reconstruire et restructurer son secteur agricole afin de renforcer l'autosuffisance de la production et d'accroître la consommation. Une des voies entreprises est la privatisation des anciennes fermes et coopératives agricoles d'État. L'administration publique encourage l'investissement dans les technologies agricoles de pointe sans pour autant se préoccuper de la formation des exploitants ou du développement des services consultatifs. Cela freine sérieusement le développement de l'agriculture étant donné que seule une minorité des nouveaux propriétaires fonciers peut se prévaloir de l'expérience pratique nécessaire. Afin de combler les lacunes de cette politique, deux organisations bilatérales allemandes soutiennent la mise en place de services décentralisés d'information, de formation et de conseils tout en tenant particulièrement compte de la spécificité des situations, et en privilégiant la flexibilité, la durabilité et la viabilité financière du système.

Elaboración de un sistema de asesoramiento agrícola orientado a los clientes en Azerbaiján

La República de Azerbaiján, que antes formaba parte de la Unión Soviética, está reconstruyendo y reestructurando su sector agrícola para aumentar la producción y el consumo autónomos. Un camino que se está siguiendo es la privatización de las ex fincas cooperativas y estatales. La administración pública fomenta las inversiones en tecnología agrícola moderna, prestando escasa atención a la capacitación de los agricultores o la organización de servicios de asesoramiento. Esto constituye un serio obstáculo para el desarrollo agrícola, puesto que sólo hay una minoría de nuevos propietarios de tierras con experiencia agrícola práctica. A fin de hacer frente a este vacío normativo, dos organizaciones bilaterales alemanas están prestando apoyo al establecimiento

de servicios de información, capacitación y asesoramiento descentralizados, teniendo presentes sobre todo la especificidad de las situaciones, la flexibilidad de los sistemas, la sostenibilidad financiera y la rendición de cuentas.

The Republic of Azerbaijan, which has been independent since 1991, is in the process of transition from command-state to market economy. This coastal, oil-rich country located in the Caucasian region is inhabited by 7.5 million people. It covers a land area of 86 600 km² and comprises a variety of agro-ecological zones. Western governments, the European Union (EU), the World Bank, FAO, humanitarian agencies and private and for-profit organizations are assisting the Government of Azerbaijan in the development of rural areas, not only to ease food insecurity, but also to counterbalance the booming oil industry which is dominated by foreign enterprises and international interests. Agricultural and rural development may reverse the migration from rural regions to urban centres where unemployment rates are growing and civil unrest is anticipated. Despite this support, the transition proceeds slowly (Sampath and Janakiram, 1996). Far-reaching legislative changes are necessary to enhance agricultural reform. The agricultural sector in Azerbaijan shares many transition problems with other countries in the Caucasian region (Beeler, 1999; Poussard, 1999). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, previous markets and financial sources have dried up, infrastructure has broken down and productivity has declined. Moreover, the loss of the province of Nagorny-Karabagh to neighbouring Armenia has reduced national wheat, tobacco, cotton, vegetables and livestock husbandry production by about 15 percent. Azerbaijan currently depends on imports for its food security. Since 1997, the authors have been involved in long-, medium- and short-term assignments to assist the agrarian reform process for agricultural development and to improve the living conditions of internally displaced persons, refugees and local farmers. Alongside their extension activities, a key component of the authors' work in Azerbaijan has been the establishment of information and advisory centres and the training of extension staff at all levels. This article contains information collected by the authors during their assignments and from the literature on the subject.

The need for advisory and information services in Azerbaijan

Under the former Soviet system, agricultural production was organized in large, heavily mechanized state and cooperative farms (983 *kolchoz* and 820 *sovchoz*) complemented by private, small-scale, non-mechanized production for home consumption. The large farms were specialized according to specific products or units. Input supplies and marketing activities were organized externally, and important managerial decisions on farming strategies were taken off-farm.

After independence, Azerbaijan inherited a diversified agrarian sector and a large, educated workforce (Sampath and Janakiram, 1996). The country's diverse geographic and agroclimatic conditions offer favourable natural growing conditions for agriculture, when irrigation is available. Approximately 4.3 million ha of wheat, barley and alfalfa are currently cropped, mainly for home consumption and livestock rearing. Cotton, vegetables, fruit, grapes, tobacco and other labour-intensive crops are grown as cash crops for marketing. Agricultural output fell by 50 percent between 1992 and 1994, by which date the overall contribution of agriculture to exports had declined to 10 percent. Agricultural production increased in the second half of the 1990s, but has not yet returned to its 1980s levels (Tables 1 and 2). Dissatisfaction with the current situation is the major driving force to re-establishment of agricultural capacity. One promising avenue is the development of a private agricultural sector. In the first Azeri Land Reform Law of August 1996, part of the state and cooperative land was privatized. Only the state and cooperative farms received any share of collective assets, land, equipment, livestock and capital. By 1999, 2.8 million people had received 1.1 million ha, about 70 percent of the total area that was planned to be privatized. The average size of a private farming enterprise is between 1 and 5 ha. Immediately after privatization, the new landowners followed their accustomed production patterns, until they realized that they were achieving unexpectedly low returns and that there is a pressing need for costly mechanized equipment. In addition, most landowners face a number of problems such as scarcity of land, highly eroded and saline soils and limited access to credit and farm inputs (improved seeds,

fertilizers and pesticides). Other constraints include insufficient supply of appropriate farm equipment, limited access to markets and a lack of customer purchasing power.

**TABLE 1
CHANGES IN THE AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION STRUCTURE OF AZERBAIJAN,
1980-1997**

Product	Planted area ('000 ha)			Yield (tonnes/ha)			Production ('000 tonnes)		
	1980	1997	1997 as % of 1980 planted areas	1980	1997	1997 as % of 1980 yields	1980	1997	1997 as % of 1980 yields
Wheat	490.6	647.7	132.0	2.32	1.74	75.1	1 136.5	1 127.1	99.2
Cotton	249.6	205.3	82.3	3.54	0.61	17.2	883.4	124.6	14.1
Tobacco	17.2	7.9	45.9	3.32	1.91	57.5	57.0	15.1	26.5
Potatoes	19.7	27.0	137.0	8.70	8.27	95.1	172.1	223.4	129.8
Vegetables	38.8	27.2	70.1	21.24	18.21	85.7	824.2	495.4	60.1
Fruits	141.3	88.3	62.5	1.97	3.74	189.8	278.1	330.9	118.9
Grapes	263.0	66.3	25.2	5.63	2.22	29.4	1 481.3	145.3	9.8
Tea	10.3	7.3	70.8	2.11	0.21	9.9	21.8	1.6	7.3

Source: Ministry of Agriculture.

**TABLE 2
CHANGES IN THE ANIMAL PRODUCTION STRUCTURE OF AZERBAIJAN, 1980-1997**

Product	1980	1997	1997 as % of 1980 yields
Meat ('000 tonnes)	227.1	160.0	70.5
Milk ('000 tonnes)	796.1	881.5	110.7
Wool ('000 tonnes)	10.7	9.6	89.7
Eggs (millions)	721.2	492.4	68.2
Cattle ('000s)	1 806.2	1 843.5	102.1
Cows and buffaloes ('000s)	675.8	861.6	127.5
Sheep and goats ('000s)	5 361.6	5 267.0	98.2
Pigs ('000s)	183.1	21.0	11.5

Source: Ministry of Agriculture.

A chronic hindrance to agricultural development is that only a minority of the new landowners possess genuine farming experience. As the majority used to work in other professions, they lack knowledge and skills in management and agriculture. At the same time, those with farming experience from the state and cooperative farms have little experience of decision-making and farm planning. To most farmers, marketing means that good-quality produce is destined for home consumption, while lower-quality produce is sold at local markets. The positive aspect of this is that farmers are proud to be independent and have quickly developed their own visions and opinions of when and how to crop and when and where to invest. Within a few years, the farming population has developed into heterogeneous groups with information, training and advisory needs tailored to their different situations.

Those organizations involved in the agricultural knowledge and information system must rise to the challenge. Yet at present, there is little in the way of a publicly organized and supported infrastructure for dealing with the new farmers' education needs. There is a World Bank-supported farm privatization and extension pilot project involving state and collective farms in six different agro-ecological regions, but this is limited in reach. Furthermore, universities and research institutes only occasionally involve themselves in outreach or extension-related activities. Indeed, current research staff have not yet adapted their ideas, objectives and approaches to the diversified demands of today's farming population. The government envisages modernizing the agricultural sector through input-intensive agriculture and use of the latest technology. National policy is also looking to develop regional and national structures where private farmers are represented. It is planned that such farmers' associations should take responsibility for supplying inputs and for handling, processing and marketing. The government foresees that agricultural experts will inform new farmers on production, land and water use. However, given the new farming population's lack of farm management knowledge, the scarce financial resources and small farm size, as well as the underdeveloped complementary services for infrastructure maintenance, this vision seems overambitious. The public administration is gradually realizing that, in the present context, its expectations are far too high.

TABLE 3 THE PRIVATE-PUBLIC MIX IN EXTENSION DELIVERY				
Service delivery				
		Public	Private non-profit	Private for-profit
Financing source	Public	Tax revenues used for direct public delivery	Public contributions used to purchase the services of non-profit advisers	General revenues used to purchase the services of private agents
	Private	User fees paid for private use of public agents	User fees paid for non-profit advisers	Private payments to private agents

Source: Adapted from Kidd *et al.* 2000

Developing a vision for training and advising farmers in Azerbaijan

The challenge of and opportunities for developing a training and advisory network in the country are enormous. International experience demonstrates that no single extension approach warrants universal use and that different forms and degrees of interaction between the public and private sectors are possible (Kidd *et al.*, 2000). Table 3 shows the wide range of arrangements between the extremes of being fully financed and delivered by the state and being delivered by the private sector (for-profit and non-profit) and paid for by users.

A great many Azerbaijanis have become private farmers, a role for which their previous work experience has given them little preparation. In general, initially they require extremely basic education and training on both the technical and management aspects of running a farm enterprise. Currently, the situation of farmers is becoming more diverse and there is a growing need for client-oriented advisory services that "help people through a systematic use of communication to solve their problems as partners both contributing their own knowledge and capabilities" (Albrecht, 1995).

Furthermore, experiences from all over the world show that it is essential to consider the following issues when planning an advisory system (Hoffmann, Kidd and Lamers, 2000; Kidd *et al.*, 2000):

- *situation specificity*: strategies and programmes must be adapted to the country conditions;
- *system flexibility*: the extension system must be dynamic;
- *financial sustainability*;
- *quality control* and accountability of the services rendered.

These basic principles of a client-centred understanding of advisory processes formed the starting point for developing an agricultural training and advisory service programme. Finding ways and means of

bringing rhetoric and reality together is the major challenge in developing a vision for agricultural training and advisory services in the specific context of Azerbaijan. The programme and lessons learned from its implementation are outlined in the rest of this article.

The programme: an alternative encoding vision

In the absence of a nationally defined agricultural training and advisory concept, two German organizations developed a vision for agricultural extension at a regional level. In order to increase the sustainability of interventions at the grassroots level, one of the key components of the programme involved support for the development of a national non-governmental organization (NGO) that would train advisers.

The large number of former agriculture specialists formed the core group of potential candidates for advisory work. However, few specialists had received any previous training in extension approaches and methods, so potential candidates were carefully screened. Creating awareness of the new activity of extension is as crucial as training and coaching on the job are. To encourage good performance, the national NGO employs screened candidates for a limited period only and focuses on training and coaching. Trainees need this period to establish good relationships with their clients and to ensure that the latter will be willing to employ them or pay them a fee later on when they are no longer contracted by the national NGO.

The strategy implemented by the NGO Diakonie Emergency Aid's programme to support the development of a cadre of private advisers is summarized in Table 4. This programme aimed at increasing the availability of competent advisers to farmers. However, as Kidd *et al.* (2000) argue, it is important that farmers be given opportunities for obtaining the advice and information they seek from the advisers most able and willing to do so ("the quality objective"). Careful selection and intensive training form a solid foundation for the realization of this prime initial objective. In addition, a decentralized, client-oriented advisory service offered by individual private agents would make advisers directly accountable to clients ("the accountability objective").

Building a firm foundation: selection, awareness and creation of extension methodology training

The task for training and advisory services is becoming increasingly complex as advisers need to know more than ever before. Selection, awareness creation and training are therefore important considerations for achieving quality. On the basis of locally developed criteria, an initial selection is made from among former agricultural experts. The criteria used include level of education, work experience (ideally broad and encompassing different functions), reputation, age (between 25 and 45 years), gender and profession (professions other than agronomist are considered). Part-time farmers are also considered, and further selection criteria are based on the number of farmers in the vicinity and the regional potential for agriculture and marketing.

The selected candidates follow a well-balanced mix of classroom exercises and field training to assess their potential. However, training focused exclusively on agrotechnical issues (as propagated by the government), is a second-best solution. Potential advisers must first learn to think and act in terms of farming systems and enterprises rather than activities (irrigation and ploughing), crops (only wheat or cotton) or livestock (only sheep, goats or cattle) as they used to. Their technical ways of thinking need to be complemented by effective communication (listening is key) and social skills (keeping the farmer and the farm family at the centre of attention). Good communication skills are essential if farmers' attitudes of dependency on external agents and (principally financial) help are to be broken (Poussard, 1999).

TABLE 4
STRATEGIC STEPS FOR MOBILIZATION OF VILLAGE-BASED FIELD STAFF

Step	What	How	Who
1	Identification and listing of candidates	Intensive discussions with key resource persons in	National NGO field and supervising staff, farmers and

		communities	local authorities
2	Recruitment of extension field staff candidates	Identification of selection criteria; CV collection and analysis; group meetings	National NGO staff with the assistance of foreign experts
3	Training of extension field staff candidates	Classroom training; field/practical training; field coaching and video; exchange of information among colleagues; selection of candidates	National NGO staff with the assistance of foreign experts; farmer/clients gradually involved
4	Mobilization	Practical work according to contracts and assignments; coaching and additional on-the-job training	National NGO staff with the assistance of foreign experts
5	Final selection	Evaluation of fieldwork	National NGO field staff; farmer/clients; extension candidates
6	Completion of training	Classroom training; field/practical training; field coaching and video; exchange of information among colleagues; certificate and registration	National NGO field staff; farmer/clients; local administration
7	Identification of new candidates	Intensive discussions with key resource persons in communities	National NGO field and supervising staff; farmers; local administration
8	Independence of extension agents	Establishment of village offices; contracts with farmers' groups	National NGO field staff (backstopping); farmer/clients; local administration

Building confidence and capability: a cycle of technical training, implementation and coaching

Following the initial training, trainers grade participants according to their understanding, participation, implementation and technical knowledge regarding agriculture. Trainees with high potential are contracted for a probation period of one to three months. During this period, experienced local coaches from supporting agencies and the local NGO ensure further training in advisory and training skills and work organization. Conducting problem analysis and elaborating appropriate extension aid materials are important aspects of "on-the-job" training. Such extension tools as a joint situation analysis using the strengths-weaknesses-aims-problems (SWAP) technique, seasonal calendars, pair-wise comparisons and other rapid and participatory rural appraisal components have been adapted to the situation in Azerbaijan. However, experience has shown that only some tools are suitable for local use. Materials for training and extension methods have been translated into Azeri and Russian to assist support advisers and their coaches.

After a period of implementation and practice of lessons learned from previous training, the following training cycle builds on knowledge gained from the coaching phase. This is followed by another coaching period leading into a further cycle of training, implementation and coaching. The iterative nature of the training process, interspersed with field-based coaching, is a key quality-enhancing element of the programme. To keep pace with rapidly changing farming systems and technical developments, advisers' technical expertise is frequently updated during training. The latest technical information on horticulture and agriculture has been compiled, adapted and translated into Azeri.

Building a clientele: on-the-job training for independence

After the probationary period, the work of potential advisers is evaluated by both support staff and the clients they have sought to serve. The best candidates receive new contracts and further training in order to respond to growing demands, such as that for organic produce. Advisers are trained to build their work on principles of self-help and the use of locally available resources. Low-external input agriculture and

indigenous knowledge obtained during previous small-scale activities for home consumption are gradually growing in importance because chemical inputs are not always available or, more often, farmers cannot afford them. Some more experienced farmers experiment with available resources and seek information and inputs - on seeds and production techniques, for example - from neighbouring regions. Consequently, advisers are familiarized with the creation of knowledge resources networks made up of knowledgeable farmers, scientists, laboratories, private companies or traders.

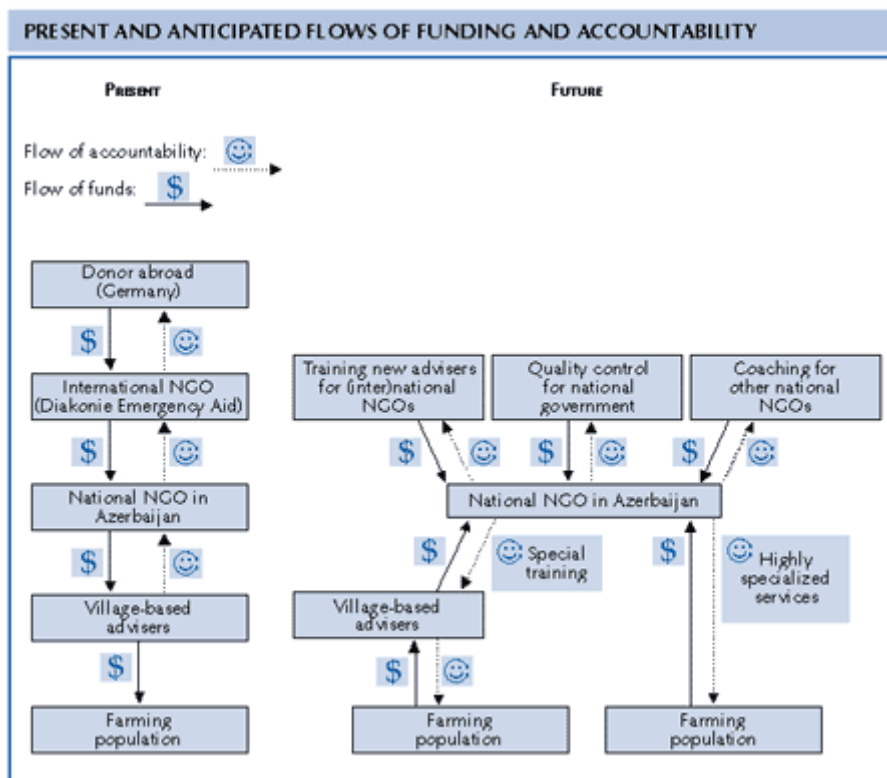
This puts advisers in a situation where they can both facilitate links among various actors in the agricultural sector and provide technical assistance. Experience has shown that a good adviser in Azerbaijan needs to do all three of the "paradigmatic" types of extension - transfer of technology, advisory work and facilitation - that Roeling and Groot (1998) suggest present competing alternatives. There is a need to move from rhetoric to reality, but this clearly needs to be done in a manner that is flexible and sensitive to the local situation that clients are faced with.

During a 12- to 18-month period of intensive training and learning-by-doing, the education of the advisers is completed and they may continue working independently. The length of the training period gives them time to convince their present clientele that they can meet expectations, and thus develop client loyalty. The national NGO plans to identify new candidates in order to restart the programme, and is looking to send new trainees to former trainees for practical on-the-job training.

Keeping the ball rolling: a future for advisers and the national NGO

Experience indicates that the implementation of any extension concept demands a legal, organizational and managerial framework (Hoffmann, Kidd and Lamers, 2000). Although there is a need for financial sustainability, cost and funding problems should not prevent training and advisory services from being available to the more vulnerable groups. On the other hand, free or heavily subsidized extension services constrain competition and are counterproductive as far as private goods are concerned.

Alternative mechanisms for financing delivery are being considered (Figure). At present, the accountability mechanisms that are available to farmers operate only indirectly through their voice in the national NGO. During the transition period, the increased availability of market accountability mechanisms further empowers farmers, increasing the support of sustainable quality assurance. For example, after completing training, village-based advisers may be reimbursed directly by their clients, who can choose another adviser when one does not perform to their satisfaction. This avoids the dilemma of reimbursing national NGOs (which are often considered to be new "parastatal" structures). While it is likely that some individual advisers will become financially independent, it is less likely that the national NGO will achieve financial sustainability by depending on direct contributions from farmers. Initial experience shows that it is more realistic to plan for additional income-generating sources for national NGOs by broadening the client base. The national NGO could sell extension aid materials to private advisers, organize demand-driven training courses for them and conduct quality control and coaching activities. They may also offer highly specialized services to farmers, such as tax consulting, assistance in the preparation of business plans and requests for credit. In the long term, government recognition of the national NGO may lead to public financial support to ensure financial sustainability.



Lessons learned

The decentralized approach described in this article has many advantages in comparison with a centralized extension structure. The independent, village-based advisers are highly flexible and aware of prevailing problems, which they also face on their own farms. In addition, transport and travel costs are minimal. The historically strong social networks in which farmers, their families and advisers are embedded are favourable framework conditions for an extension approach based on concepts of self-help, participation and the use of resources that are available locally. However, participatory extension approaches must overcome the command-control relationship that prevailed under the Soviet system. Advisory work at the grassroots level is vital and one aim must be to establish cooperation between farmers and extension agents that is characterized by mutual respect and a positive attitude (Poussard, 1999).

As most landowners are new to farming, much basic agricultural education and training is requested from the advisers. This, together with the low ratio of advisers to farmers, often makes group extension methods more appropriate than individual advisory ones, at least at the outset. Attention is paid to ensuring that new advisers do not use group meetings as an opportunity to pass on purely technical information. Advisers should support the formation of farmers' groups, where farmers or households with similar needs and problems regularly exchange information. Initial experiences with group extension methods such as group meetings, discussions, demonstrations and field days have been successful. However, these methods demand additional training and preparation, as both advisers and farmers have to get used to them. The farming population's high levels of formal education allows the use of technical information leaflets and brochures as learning support materials.

Advisory work needs long-term planning and intensive collaboration and coordination. The present support provided by international NGOs to the national NGOs and farmers is a first step. The extension interventions are in selected districts, serve a limited number of farmers, often form a component of integrated programmes, and make extensive use of short-term consultants. The success of establishing a private advisory system also depends on the support of the civil service. As elsewhere, the state should follow the principle of subsidiarity (that decision-making should be made as close as possible to local populations). It should also make collaboration between and integration of the private and public sectors (ministries, universities, research institutes) a priority (Kidd *et al.*, 2000).

The priorities of the public sector should be policy formulation and analysis, quality control and creating favourable legislative measures for farmers, traders and financiers. Farmers in poor and remote areas and

when facing difficult production conditions find it impossible to buy private advice, especially advice that will only become profitable in the long term. Government must therefore ensure that competition in the area of development and technology transfer is not to the detriment of the users with the fewest resources. The state should follow the example of other countries and provide some sort of a social safety net (Cary, 1993).

During the transition period, there is a role for international NGOs in providing assistance in organization, implementation and evaluation of extension, as well as financial support. Since privatization takes place at all levels of society, the state, donors and international lending institutions have to align extension delivery services with privatization reforms in other areas that were formerly the sole responsibility of the public administration. These include privatization of social and municipal services, such as education and health, of agribusiness and of infrastructure, such as irrigation and markets. All of these areas must become part of a broader scenario analysis and planning exercise involving all stakeholders (Kidd *et al.*, 2000).

Conclusions

Satisfying the immense need for agricultural information and advice is a challenge to all stakeholders involved in agriculture: the democratically elected government and politicians mandated by the public, intermediaries, traders, processors and farmers. Appropriate strategies need to be defined locally while taking into account situation specificity, system flexibility, financial sustainability and the accountability of the services rendered. The example of a feasible, client-oriented approach in Azerbaijan is based on the mobilization of former agricultural specialists into village-based extension staff, through selection, recruitment, training and coaching. Candidates, who also have their own farms to manage, are employed on a part-time basis (by a national NGO) and carry out contract-based assignments. After their paid training periods, they may continue on their own, becoming directly accountable to their clients. It is difficult to rebuild the agrarian sector in Azerbaijan in the absence of greater use of modern inputs, and without the education of farmers it will be almost impossible. The key to the successful establishment of any type of service to farmers is the recognition of its need by all stakeholders. Fulfilment of these key framework conditions will enable the awaited financial and technical support from abroad to be well invested.

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