

The Impact of Overseas Assignments on Individual, Organizational and Community Attitudes, Behaviors and Support for International Extension Involvement

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Abstract

This study was conducted to determine the domestic implications of the Polish-American Extension Project (PAEP). Such assessments were personal and professional impacts of the overseas experience on participants, the impact of the experience on colleagues and near-associates, as well as an estimation of the depth of awareness, support, and involvement with the overseas assignment within the home institution/organization and communities of participants. The population for the study was 70 Extension professionals from 26 states who served one or more six-month assignments. A mixed-method design was utilized with quantitative (mail survey of participants and telephone survey of secondary contacts) and qualitative methodologies (semi-structured on-site interviews) used in conjunction.

There were unanimous feelings and extremely high ratings for the impact of the experience on participants, personally and professionally. Participants and spouses noted the impact of the experience as being stressful but very positive for their families. The PAEP participants were highly motivated and interested in international activities, but had little previous international experience. The Extension roles assigned in Poland were similar to their roles in the United States. Participants felt both positive and negative pressures within their Extension organizations and high degrees of ambivalence. The Polish-American Extension Project can be considered a success in both building a client-driven, market-oriented Agricultural Advisory Service in Poland and in strengthening the international interests and competencies of personnel and clientele of the U.S. Extension system.

Some elements of the PAEP project that could have been improved to support and facilitate family involvement include assistance in locating housing, schooling, and other services; access to translators for family business needs; inclusion of family members during in-country staff meeting and activities; financial support for transportation and living expenses of family members; and access to language instruction and greater information on Polish culture, customs, and daily living conditions. International Extension programs need to encourage communication and interaction as well as facilitate the involvement of families to strengthen and extend educational possibilities. In the future, more effort needs to be placed on the establishment of mutually beneficial collaborative global partnerships. Cooperative international efforts will help foster better awareness, understanding, new information, and linkages between the United States and other countries through a spirit of camaraderie and partnership.

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

The *Polish-American Extension Project (PAEP)* began in 1989 and ended in 1995 with a primary objective of improving the structure of Polish agriculture with the goal of increasing agricultural production efficiency and improving rural quality of life (Yeutter in Bahn, 1997). The project was established as a joint educational project of the United States Department of Agriculture's Extension Service (USDA-ES) and the Polish Ministry of Agriculture and Food Economy's (MAFE) Agricultural Advisory Service. Between 1990 and 1995, more than 100 American Extension professionals representing 31 land grant universities traveled to Poland to work in this project. Over the period of the project, 70 Extension professionals representing 26 states served one or more six-month assignments as advisors. This group and their states and communities were the population for this study.

The Polish-American Extension Project was selected as the study focus for several reasons. The project itself was successful and serves as an exemplary overseas cooperative assistance program. Bahn (1997) found overwhelming success of this project in meeting its objectives in Poland in his follow-up evaluative study of program impact. The provincial-level project created a foundation for a progressive Extension system in Poland by changing the mentality of Extension workers and clientele. The project stressed agricultural economic, market and Extension education that led to positive growth in clientele through changes generated within the Polish Extension system.

Purpose of the PAEP Project

The primary objective of the Polish-American Extension Project (PAEP) was to improve the structure of Polish agriculture with a goal of increasing agricultural production efficiency and improving rural quality of life (Yeutter in Bahn, 1997). There were three focusing factors of this international assistance effort for the Polish Extension System:

- Development of Extension organizational and methodological skills to plan and implement educational programs that were client derived.
- Building understanding of economic principles and development of skills necessary for management, marketing and agribusiness development.
- Targeting of assistance to the local provincial level rather than the ministerial or national level to assure local emphasis and applicability (Bahn, 1997).

Participants of the five-year Polish-American Extension Project consisted of Extension agents and specialists from the United States who were placed in provincial-level agricultural Extension offices (ODRs) for assignments lasting six months. Although assignments were originally designated as six-month assignments, fifteen participants chose to stay on for successive six-month terms for a total duration of one year, and two participants stayed for 18 months. Team members worked collaboratively with Polish Extension counterparts in one of Poland's 49 provincial ODR offices to plan, design, develop, implement and evaluate Extension programming. A personal hands-on approach was emphasized for attaining the educational objectives of the project (Bahn, 1997; Ragland, 1995).

Public perceptions of foreign assistance

Numerous studies and surveys have been conducted in the United States to learn more about public attitudes and sentiment regarding international assistance. A number of U.S. citizens are reported to question involvement with foreign nations and people. Such an isolationist view of the world is reflected in feelings that the U.S. has enough domestic problems and situations that should be addressed, and not enough time or resources are devoted to these causes. Many contend that the resources, time and effort spent globally could be better spent at home. In actuality, the United States spends the least percent of gross national product of all highly developed countries for international development projects (Holsti, 1996).

United States farmers, like other citizens, question what they gain from international development efforts and assistance. There are many agricultural producers who feel that these efforts simply add competitive supply to the worldwide market causing further deterioration of commodity prices. Farmers also have a need to understand the ramifications of cooperative international development assistance.

Paarlberg (1991) has written about the positive effects of development for increased world trade and enhanced U.S. exports. He notes that hunger does not build commercial markets; neither does population growth by itself. It takes purchasing power to build effective markets. When poor people obtain greater income, the first thing they do is spend it to upgrade their diets. "Large numbers of hungry people without purchasing power aren't a commercial market; they're just large numbers of hungry people. The key to rapid broad-based income growth in most poor countries is success in agriculture fostered by agricultural development assistance." (Paarlberg, 1991, p. 10)

Exports generate over half of the gross national product for United States agriculture. Developing countries account for about half of all of United States agricultural exports, and this is progressing the quickest in the developing countries with the most rapid growth in per capita income (Bissell, 1991). Although most of these countries are expanding their agricultural output at a rapid rate, the demand for more and better food is outstripping their production capacity. These countries are becoming middle-class countries that can afford the luxury of being cash export markets with the United States and other developed countries. Eastern Europe and many former Soviet states are another potential market for U.S. exports.

As noted by Schumacher (1998), another advantage of cooperative development programs is the tremendous advantage it provides for agricultural research. The United States has been able to hold down agricultural production costs through research and improved technologies such as better varieties of crops. Cooperative arrangements are necessary to keep these doors open for research and development. Many crops grown in the United States, such as corn, wheat, soybeans, and others depend on foreign sources of germplasm; "germplasm from which to select desirable characteristics such as dwarf stature, resistance to insect pests and diseases, day-length insensitivity and high yield potential" (Bissell, 1991, p. 3). These germplasm resources are only available through international cooperative efforts.

Purposes/Objectives

The purpose of this evaluative study was to document the impact of overseas technical assignments on the individuals involved, and on the organizations and communities from which

they were based. The population involved in this investigation were the group of seventy extension professionals who participated in the *Polish-American Extension Project*, and their near-associates. Near-associates were defined as those who had close contact with a PAEP participant, which included county and state extension units, families, and representatives of communities/clientele.

This study was conducted to determine the domestic implications of the Polish-American Extension Project (PAEP). Specific objectives included:

- Assessment of personal, family, and professional impacts of the overseas experience on participants.
- Assessments of the impact of the experience on colleagues and near-associates as to their support for technical cooperation and, in general, U.S. foreign assistance.
- Estimation of the depth of awareness, support and involvement with the overseas assignment within the home institution/organization and communities of participants.
- Documentation of the extended involvement of participants, colleagues, community members/groups, and constituents in continuing interactions with Poland, including any social, cultural or economic endeavors that have benefited Polish colleagues or a larger cross-section of Americans.

Methods/Procedures

The population for this study was the 70 individual Extension professionals from 26 states who served one or more six-month assignments. Three different data collection procedures were used to gather details leading to a better understanding of the domestic effects of an international cooperative assistance project. These included a census-type mail survey, a set of random personal site visits and telephone interviews.

The overall design was a descriptive case study to systematically describe the domestic implications of the Polish-American Extension Project on participants, near-associates, the extension organization and local communities. A mixed-method design was utilized in which quantitative methodologies (a mail survey of participants and a telephone survey of secondary contacts) was used in conjunction with qualitative methodologies (semi-structured on-site interviews). Data analysis proceeded sequentially: the preliminary analysis of the survey data provided a foundational basis for the subsequent development of interview questions and analysis of the resulting qualitative data. The survey also provided names of secondary contacts, individuals or organizations that were linked with Polish interests during or after the PAEP assignment, who became the sample for the telephone interviews.

Survey data collection and analysis

Introductory letters were sent from the Program Specialist of USDA's Office of International Extension Programs to state level Extension administrators for the 26 states that had participants in the PAEP program. This letter served as a means of informing and gaining support for the PAEP follow-up study at a state administrative level. The actual questionnaire was sent to the 70 PAEP participants with an informing and encouraging cover letter. The 19-page questionnaire consisted of the following major sections: work and living environment; perceptions about the international experience; respondent and home Extension unit characteristics while in Poland; characteristics of the U.S. Extension unit and community while in Poland; nature of the assignment in Poland; the U.S. international Extension climate; reentry and adjustment; output and visibility; and key linkages. The results from this questionnaire have been previously reported (Place and Evans, 1999).

On-site visits

A selection of on-site interviews was planned as a means of complimenting the survey data. The on-site visits also provided access to family members and near-associates who could broaden and supplement the perceptions of participants for a more accurate assessment of impacts. Eight states (33%) were selected at random from a list of participating states, stratified by region. Thus two states per region were selected. Within the selected states a purposeful sample of participants were targeted to represent a diverse sample across states. The sampling frame (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) was established around the factors of male/female, single/multi-term assignment, program focus, and county/state staff. Geographical dispersion was also taken into account when there were opportunities to conduct on-site visits for more than one PAEP participant. Qualitative data derived from a validated structured interview guide were entered into a Microsoft Word document and categorized for subsequent content and critical incident analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The research team reviewed data an additional time for completeness and accuracy.

Telephone interviews with secondary contacts

To learn more about local linkages and impact, a thorough description was utilized. In both the mailed survey questionnaire and during the on-site interviews, participants in the PAEP were asked to identify persons or organizations in the U.S. with whom they referred or connected to Polish people or organizations. It was the desire of the evaluation team to contact a sampling of these individuals to further describe the type of linkage and its value to the participants. Few actual linkages were identified, perhaps because of the length of the questionnaire or the nature of the request demanding information not readily available. This was a disappointment to the evaluation team as they themselves were aware of linkages that were not identified. During the site visits, those participants involved were queried about linkages and often very rich, descriptive information was conveyed.

The actual list of contacts for information about linkages included only 50 names. Of these 50 referrals, 28 were available to be interviewed by phone and asked to comment on their experiences. As with the on-site interviews, a structured interview guide was used for these

telephone interviews. The data were analyzed via a Microsoft Word document for subsequent content and critical incident analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

This paper focuses on the wealth of data and information derived from the qualitative research.

Limitations of the study

As with all research relying on self-reported data, this study has its limitations. The investigators utilized steps identified by Patton (1990) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) to overcome potential sources of bias resulting from qualitative research.

1. Subjective or sampling bias of the reported findings may effect the generalizability of the research. There is a potential for “halo effect” data from near-associates who desire to provide “good” data. There may also be subjective bias on behalf of the researcher as to how the data were interpreted which may influence the findings. The team established joint awareness and sensitivity to this issue to help minimize its impact.

2. An audit trail was utilized to record every step of the research process for documentation and to enable replication of the research.

3. Triangulation was utilized between participant questionnaire findings and within states among interviewees to substantiate findings and conclusions.

4. The investigators relied on the regular help and advice of others throughout the process to validate and verify steps taken and conclusions drawn. Others included the research team, University faculty, and staff from the USDA-CSREES International Office.

Results/Findings

The following synopsis provides a summary of the findings from this evaluation study. The items noted are those that surfaced as either positive or negative aspects of the Polish-American Extension Project.

1. The technical cooperation model of development assistance operationalized in the Polish-American Extension Project (PAEP) can be considered an appropriate and dynamic model that indeed produced benefits for both Poland and the U.S.

2. The Polish-American Extension Project was successful in having strong and positive impacts on U.S. participants, families, near-associates, their Extension organizations, and their communities.

3. The 70 participants in the PAEP were mature and experienced Extension professionals from both county and campus based locations.

4. The PAEP participants were highly motivated and interested in international activities, but had little international experience.

5. The Extension county units of the PAEP participants had limited prior international exposure.

6. The Extension roles assigned in Poland were similar to their roles in the U.S.

7. Participants found it relatively easy, although challenging, to work in Poland.

8. Participants were extremely satisfied with their work in Poland.

9. Participants felt that they were successful in their work in Poland.

10. Participants were generally satisfied with the level of support received for taking the international assignment; however, they felt that their families, friends and clientele were more supportive than their Extension colleagues and the Extension organization.

11. Participants felt both positive and negative pressures within their Extension organizations and high degrees of ambivalence.

12. Participants were highly supportive of the international dimension in Extension; more highly supportive than a comparison group of county agents surveyed in 1986 (Andrews and Lambur, 1986).

13. Awareness and visibility for the international assignment was variable, more likely limited to near-associates, and dependent on self-initiation.

14. Participants and organizational colleagues were satisfied with the moderate level of interaction and communication while on assignment, but reported that communications could have been improved.

15. Although county offices accommodated very well in managing during the absence of the participant, issues of coverage or program backfill were of concern to everyone.

16. There were unanimous feelings and extremely high ratings for the impact of the experience on participants, personally and professionally. These impacts included changes in knowledge, attitudes, perspectives, and behaviors. They and their colleagues recognized significant changes in their demeanor and performance. The experience was viewed as an important time of reflection and perspective taking.

17. Participants perceived that the international experience created positive influences on their stature in the organization and community.

18. Participants were slightly disappointed in the reactions of peers and coworkers, labeling them as being indifferent.

19. Participants were disappointed in that it was not readily apparent that their experiences in Poland were taken into account in performance appraisal.

20. Participants and spouses noted the impact of the experience as being stressful but very positive for their families.

21. Participants indicated that they would consider another international assignment and would clearly want to involve their families in a future assignment.

22. Participants took extensive steps to integrate the experience into subsequent Extension programming through presentations, the sharing and development of materials, individual counseling, and creating linkages between the U.S. and Poland.

23. An amazing high level of interaction with Polish people and organizations occurred, and it continues today.

24. Over 15,000 citizens in communities throughout the U.S. benefited from increased awareness and knowledge of Poland and conditions of life and agriculture in Poland as a result of post-participation presentations.

25. Citizens and community leaders were extremely supportive of the international project and of Extension's role in it.

26. Participants established over 500 linkages between U.S. and Polish interests. These linkages were important personal experiences whereby citizens gained knowledge and appreciation for international involvements.

27. Participants in linkages reported very positive views about their interactions and about the learning value of their experiences.

28. Based on three rating scales, citizens and professionals in Extension are extremely supportive of international involvements for USDA, universities, and citizens. Only coworkers differed in having slightly lower ratings for the importance of international cooperative assistance involvements for USDA and universities.

Conclusions/Recommendations

It has been acknowledged that the PAEP has had tremendous impact upon the U.S. Extension system and the local communities from which participants were based. The following recommendations attempt to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the project and the systems involved so as to improve future projects of this nature and to strengthen the international dimension within Extension. The participants and interviewees contacted expressed these recommendations in various ways.

Structure of international technical assistance programs

The technical cooperation model, having expectations and strategies to ensure mutual benefits, is appropriate in the Extension setting and should be applied in future international projects. In fact, this model is a natural fit for Extension as the embeddedness of Extension personnel in their communities creates access for widespread educational and economic benefits.

The experience from the PAEP suggests the following strengths:

1. That the six-month assignment (with opportunities for extension) is an appropriate period of time.
2. Both participants and hosts value national recruitment within the Land Grant System that brings professionals together from diverse locations and backgrounds.
3. Orientation for both participants and family members is necessary and useful, such as was provided in Washington, DC and Warsaw, Poland.
4. The management style employed in the PAEP that encouraged autonomy and flexibility was appreciated.
5. The project benefited from strong linkages and access to the U.S. Embassy in Poland, other U.S. agencies and public and private organizations. These relationships removed barriers and mobilized resources in support of the project.
6. The continuation of positions and benefits within Extension during the assignment was essential to accessing participation.
7. The potential for this international Extension model to have a positive impact beyond the immediate participants, to U.S. coworkers and audiences is extensive.

The following could have strengthened the project and model:

1. The impact of the model in the U.S. could have been strengthened with clear expectations and guidance for communications and interactions with local communities during the assignment. Local offices could benefit from briefings or orientation about their role in supporting interactions and visibility in the community.
2. Preparations for reentry could be strengthened. Newly acquired knowledge and experiences need to be recognized and integrated into ongoing roles. Plans for sharing and dissemination should be developed with broad input from local interests.
3. Communications and logistics from USDA could be improved. The partnership

between USDA and the Land Grant System needs to be strengthened to insure adequate support for the recruitment, transition, and follow-up activities that facilitate benefits to local communities.

4. More open system-wide announcements of opportunities, greater lead time for personal and professional preparation, including the identification of backfill arrangements, more timely acknowledgment of assignments and access to travel documents and clearer understandings of shared responsibilities all could improve the transitions and ultimately the working relationships that influence a strong supportive climate for international programming.

5. Financial support that is actually available for state and local program support is critical for sustaining enthusiasm and participation.

State Extension organizations: structures and practices to support internationalization

The Land Grant System is a unique and valuable resource for International cooperation efforts and for bringing international knowledge and information back to communities in the U.S.

1. Extension personnel are embedded in communities across the landscape and thus can readily involve the public in international educational activities.

2. The PAEP experience showed that even Extension professionals with limited international experience could be successful in accomplishing project objectives in Poland and in impacting positively on their state and local organizations and publics.

3. Participants themselves gained valuable experiences that changed knowledge, attitudes, skills and perspectives, deepened appreciation for the basic values and principles of Extension work and helped individuals recognize the uniqueness of the U.S. Extension model.

4. The participation of county staff in an international project generated interest, acceptance, and enthusiasm within the Extension organization for further professional involvement in international activities. Participation in the PAEP often stimulated interest in international programs among volunteers and community members as well.

5. Participants gained increased credibility and esteem in the eyes of clientele. They became role models and resources for local communities who used their expertise and experiences to expand international awareness, appreciation, and linkages.

The experience of the PAEP project also suggests that the state and county Extension organizations were not as prepared as would be desired in supporting the smooth and effective mobilization of international assignments.

1. Greater clarity of expectations and roles was needed between USDA and State Extension organizations.

2. Institutional and organizational development for the international dimension in Extension is needed.

3. International assignments for Extension county and campus staff should be continued and increased.

4. A broad range of expertise is available in Extension that is not always used in the international arena. Opportunities should be created for professionals with expertise in family and consumer sciences, 4-H and youth work, community development, tourism, small and home based business development, and others.

5. Opportunities for in-service and professional development in the areas of international trade and development would be useful in developing the international competencies of Extension staff.

6. Clarity of mission, structure and operational procedures within Extension for international programming would improve morale and enlarge participation.

7. Factors should be built-in for performance and professional growth from international assignments.

Family involvement and support

The PAEP project made provisions so that family members could accompany participants during the assignments. The value of their participation in the PAEP project may have been underestimated or overlooked. Families served important support functions in Poland and were primary contacts to extend information and linkages to local communities.

1. Family members contributed directly to the success of the PAEP project by serving as volunteer teachers, community spokespersons, and support systems for PAEP participants.

2. Family members, because of their ties to local schools, churches, and other community organizations, served as primary conduits for the sharing of information about life in Poland and in creating linkages between Polish and U.S. interests.

Some elements of the PAEP project that could have been improved to support and facilitate family involvement include:

1. Access to language instruction and greater information on Polish culture, customs and daily living conditions.

2. Assistance in locating housing, schooling and other services.

3. Access to translators for family business needs.

4. Inclusion of family members during in-country staff meetings and activities.

5. Financial support for transportation and living expenses of family members.

Summary of Findings

The Polish-American Extension Project can be considered a success in both building a client-driven, market-oriented Agricultural Advisory Service in Poland and in strengthening the international interests and competencies of personnel and clientele of the U.S. Extension system. In an era of technical cooperation, all parties involved in technical assistance should reap benefits. For the U.S., those benefits of the PAEP included:

1. Extension staff from 26 states with new knowledge, attitudes, and perspectives that raised their status and functioning within Extension and within their communities.

2. Family members with new skills and commitments to international involvement.

3. Extension organizations with greater experience in interacting with international colleagues and in recognizing the importance of an international dimension for Extension.

4. Community members with increased enthusiasm for international interaction and increased awareness and support for an international dimension within Extension and among citizens and government agencies, in general.

The model of sending subject matter specialists and county Extension agents on international assignments that closely parallel their roles in the U.S. proved very effective. U.S.

personnel felt comfortable with their assignments and perceived that they were able to contribute to the goals of the project in Poland. They also recognized benefits to themselves, their family members and their colleagues. Participants actively integrated their Polish experiences into their work with communities and clientele upon their return. Numerous presentations, linkages, and educational communications were developed to extend the experience to the U.S. A high level of interaction with Poland has continued and at least 15,000 citizens in communities throughout the U.S. have increased their knowledge of Poland as a result. Citizens and community leaders were found to be extremely supportive of an international dimension for Extension and welcomed interactions with Polish guests and connections. Over 500 linkages between U.S. and Polish interests emerged; many with lasting impacts on those involved. Both citizens and professionals in the Extension organization reported high levels of support for international involvements for agencies such as the USDA, for universities, and for citizens.

Educational Implications

The Polish-American Extension Project provided numerous opportunities for involvement outside the actual international project. Because of the resultant extended involvement and domestic benefit, many more people were able to gain international awareness, knowledge, and understanding through this global Extension project. As a result, people obtained an international experience who may not have otherwise.

International Extension programs need to encourage communication and interaction as well as facilitate the involvement of families to strengthen and extend educational possibilities. Families served in a strong supportive way during the PAEP international assignment for participating faculty and staff. Moreover, family members returned to the U.S. with greatly increased knowledge and understanding that was extended to others. This augmented and strengthened the domestic level of awareness and understanding that was actually attained.

In the future, more effort needs to be placed on the establishment of mutually beneficial collaborative global partnerships. This occurred to some extent with the PAEP, but could have been intensified. The results of this study also found that there is support among the general public to endorse programs that are mutually beneficial.

There are numerous contextual benefits that can be derived through cooperation and collaboration among international educational providers, businesses and individuals. Cooperative international efforts will help foster better awareness, understanding, new information, and linkages between the U.S. and other countries through a spirit of camaraderie and partnership.

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The Impact of Overseas Assignments on Individual, Organizational and Community Attitudes, Behaviors and Support for International Extension Involvement

A Critique

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The focus of this study was the Polish-American Extension Project (PAEP). The authors are to be commended for their work in the area of international agriculture and the role of Extension in developing international agriculture programs. Additionally, the authors are to be commended for identifying the weaknesses and limitations of conducting studies focused on self-reported data gathering processes. The problems the authors identified all apply to this study.

There are a number of concerns regarding this paper. Many of these concerns can be addressed by answering the following questions:

1. What is the theory base for the study? What is the rationale for the study? There seemed to be a limited research basis for the study.
2. What were the specific objectives for the study? The statements provided in the purpose and objectives section appeared to be more like goals than specific objectives. It was difficult to analyze the results without specific objectives.
3. What was the purpose of explaining the written survey data collection process? Was this description really necessary?
4. How many people were involved in the on-site visits? This number was never presented. Telephone interviews numbered 28 but it was never clear the total number contacted in both situations. Did you contact both groups?
5. Could there have been more explanation of the procedures? This explanation could help interpret the data with more confidence.
6. Could the findings be presented more concisely? Why not categorize the findings by major themes?
7. What is the connection between the strengths and weaknesses of the project and the conclusions and recommendations? It is difficult to determine what this section of the paper means. What can we conclude from the study?
8. Much of the paper deals with self-praise for this project. What specific indicators, beyond general observations and statements, warrant this positive summary?

While the paper was interesting to read and the PAEP program appears to have been successful, the report about the project seems more like a general program review than a scientific investigation into the effectiveness and impact of the program. A more tightly focused study might generate data that could be used as evidence of impact. Nevertheless, the authors should continue their efforts to study international agriculture programs and projects of this nature.