

Challenges of Decentralized, Farmer-Led and Fee-For-Service Extension

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Abstract

Agricultural extension services are crucial for the rapid spread of research results to farmers and for transmitting information about farmers' needs, circumstances, and problems to researchers. In developing countries, public extension organizations are dominant. These public extension systems are often inadequately funded, have high costs, and their effectiveness is limited by many administrative and design deficiencies and challenges. Chief among these are the large scale and complexity of extension operations, the weak links between extension and research, problems of accountability, weak political commitment and support, weak management systems, severe difficulties of fiscal unsustainability, and difficulties of tracing extension impact. Disenchantment with the traditional, public extension programmes has led to the emergence of other approaches aimed at overcoming some of the weaknesses inherent in the public extension systems. This paper reviews the challenges of decentralized, farmer-led and fee-for-service extension.

Keywords: Challenges, decentralized, farmer-led, fee-for-service, extension

Introduction

Agricultural extension is an educational process with a dual goal: it brings information and technology to farmers and teaches them how to use it to improve their productivity; and it enables farmers to specify their own needs and provide feedback on the effectiveness of extension in meeting them (Saito and Weidemann, 1991). Through this two-way communication between farmer and researcher, extension services can provide effective transfer of relevant information and technology to farmers. Thus, a partnership is needed between the research system which generates technology, the extension agency which transfers technology, and the farmers who use the technology. Extension tends to be most effective when relationships among the partners encourage dynamic, open communication and feedback (Saito and Weidemann, 1991).

Investments in extension services have the potential to improve agricultural productivity and increase farmers' incomes, especially in developing economies where more than 90 percent of the world's nearly 1 million extension personnel are located. Yet the impact of extension on farm performance is varied, reflecting differences in how extension services are delivered and in the circumstances of service recipients (Anderson and Feder, 2004).

Farmers get information from many sources. Public extension is one source, but not necessarily the most efficient. Although extension can improve the productive efficiency of the agricultural sector, the virtues and limitations of

alternative mechanisms have often been considered in assessing the cost-effectiveness of delivering information (Byerlee, 1988; van den Ban, 1999).

This paper is divided into four parts. The first part is the introduction. The second part reviews agricultural extension in sub-Saharan Africa. The third part discusses the strengths and weaknesses of decentralized, farmer-led and fee-for-service extension. The fourth part contains the summary, conclusion and recommendations.

Agricultural extension in sub-Saharan Africa

In sub-Saharan Africa, agricultural extension has been largely confined to the public domain and provided through ministries of agriculture or parastatals supervised by them (Cleaver, 1993). Usually, these structures are highly centralized, with a national director in the capital city, district directors at the regional level, and field-level staff scattered throughout the country at the local level. The common criticisms of these systems are:

- (i) extension staff are poorly trained and know little more than the farmers know;
- (ii) extension staff are poorly paid and have little motivation to share whatever knowledge they do have with farmers;
- (iii) management systems are poor, so that there is little pressure on staff or their managers to seek new knowledge or to serve farmers;
- (iv) farmers are treated as ignorant recipients of information, rather than knowledgeable partners in technology transfer.
- (v) extension agents are not accountable to farmers; and
- (vi) in some cases, operating facilities, vehicles and bicycles are so rare that the few motivated and knowledgeable extension staff cannot visit farmers regularly (Cleaver, 1992; Cleaver, 1993).

The result of these defects is typically a large, inert agricultural bureaucracy which has no impact on agriculture.

In the 1960 and 1970s, extension in Africa was financed by donors largely through rural development and commodity projects, which had high failure rates (Cleaver, 1992). World Bank evaluations of its own efforts indicated that extension systems were poorly managed, and technology was often not relevant to farmers (Cleaver, 1992). Analysis by the World Bank of other donors' agricultural projects led to the same conclusion. A common problem was poor training of extension agents. Also, the technical messages communicated to farmers were often of an extremely general type; purportedly applicable over diverse agro-ecological conditions, but in fact, applicable to only a few, if any. This shortcoming was made worse by competition between the various donor-inspired extension systems, often with each delivering contradictory messages. For example, cotton companies would focus on cotton messages, rural development projects on food crops, livestock projects on livestock, often in the same places. For the most part, farmers wisely ignored the resulting "noise" (Cleaver, 1992; Cleaver, 1993).

This unhappy experience has led to several schools of thought about what to do with agricultural extension. Some of the approaches for improving the efficiency of public sector extension systems include decentralization, devolution of extension functions to farmers' associations, and fee-for-service extension.

Decentralization: This retains the public delivery and public funding characteristics of traditional centralized extension but transfers responsibility for delivery to local

governments. This approach was tried by several Latin American governments in the 1980s and 1990s and by Uganda and other African countries later (Wilson, 1991; Crowder and Anderson, 2002; Anderson and Feder, 2004). The benefits of decentralization include: (i) improved accountability by moving services closer to the people who use them; (ii) local governments (if democratically elected) are eager to receive positive feedback on services from the clientele-electorate; this is expected to improve extension agents' incentives and induce better services (iii) the costs of coordination with the activities of other agencies are also generally lower for local agencies operating in smaller geographical areas; (iv) political commitment may be stronger as well, because the clientele is closer to the political leadership; and (v) gives farmers a bigger role in designing, funding, governing, executing and evaluating extension programmes (Anderson and Feder, 2004).

However, decentralized extension services also face a multitude of problems. First, there is greater potential for political interference and the use of extension staff for other activities (such as election campaigns). Second, economies of scale in updating staff skills can be lost, and extension-research links are more difficult to organize; and third, problems of financial sustainability, rather than being resolved, may merely be transferred to the local level (Anderson and Feder, 2004). Analysis of Colombia's experience with the decentralization of extension confirms these concerns and documents a significant increase in the number of staff and thus in costs (Garfield, Guadagni and Moreau, 1996).

Farmer-led extension: Another reform is the devolution of extension functions to farmers' associations rather than to local governments, a strategy pursued in several West African countries with some notable successes. The benefits of this approach include: (i) greater impact on accountability, because the employer is even closer to the clientele; (ii) greater potential for financial sustainability, because the farmers' association that provides the public good is better able to recover costs from its members (through general membership fees, for example), although government funding is generally also provided to the associations; and (iii) as partners in management at the field level, the groups can manage field-level extension through farmer members, obtaining assistance by better-trained but fewer extension officers. The problems associated with this approach include difficulties in maintaining agent quality due to loss of economies of scale in training and more difficult linkages with research (Cleaver, 1993; Anderson and Feder, 2004).

Fee-for-service extension: This approach can help reduce the fiscal burden of public extension services, though they usually entail considerable public funding even when the provider is private. Government-funded vouchers or other public support is common (Keynan, Olin and Dinar, 1997; Dinar and Keynan, 2001). Small groups of farmers typically contract for extension services to address their specific information needs and because this solves the accountability problem, the quality of service is likely to be higher. Farmers determine the type of information that is important to them, so the impact of extension advice is likely to be high (Lindner, 1993). Defining the public good at the small group level and having the whole group share in the cost resolve the free-rider and nonrivalry problems (Anderson and Feder, 2004). Tracing extension impact is much less of a problem than in other types of extension service provision, although issues of asymmetric knowledge of the value of information and identifiability of benefits remain and raise design

challenges (Hanson and Just, 2001). Other drawbacks of fee-for-service modes of extension are: (i) loss of economies of scale in agent training, because agents will generally have to update their skills individually; and (ii) less commercial farmers--poorer farmers, women farmers, farmers with smaller or less favourable plots – for whom the value of information is lower, may purchase fewer extension services, because the price of the service will tend to be market-determined. This may have undesirable social implications and may also be an ineffective outcome if poor farmers undervalue information because they have less ability to prejudge its value (Anderson and Feder, 2004). One way around this problem is stratification of extension systems by types of clients (Sulaiman and Sadamate, 2000). Smaller-scale and poorer farmers may be served by public extension or by subsidized contracted extension services (for example, an association of small-scale farmers would receive public funds to hire extension staff) (Anderson and Feder, 2004). Commercial farmers, meanwhile, would be expected to pay a higher share of extension costs in a fee-for-service system (Wilson, 1991; Dinar and Keynan, 2001).

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations.

Extension focuses on the delivery of information inputs to farmers, enabling them to clarify their own goals and possibilities, educating them on how to make better decisions, and stimulating desirable agricultural development. The decentralized, farmer-led and fee-for-service approaches to extension reflect attempts to overcome some of the weaknesses inherent in public extension systems. The following recommendations are necessary:

1. More work needs to be done to ensure that the principles for effective extension are systematically reflected in national programmes. For example, sharing costs of extension services among national governments, local governments, farmers' associations, nongovernmental organizations, donors, and farmers make financing of extension services more sustainable and less dependent on national budgets.
2. Improving linkages among farmers, educators, researchers, extension agents and others helps improve the relevance and impact of research and extension.
3. Decentralizing resources and responsibilities for extension to local governments and communities need to be encouraged. This is because it improves responsiveness and accountability of extension agents.
4. Outsourcing extension services to private groups, NGOs and others will help improve efficiency of delivery and accountability of extension agents, especially where a choice of providers is available.
5. Farmers' groups are likely to prove important in Africa in stimulating local self-reliance, as well as serving as liaisons with the government services supporting them. In many areas, such groups already exist. Where they do not exist, they can be created, as voluntary groupings along lines of age, sex or locality.
6. Nation-wide extension systems can be created more rapidly if the lowest tier is a paraprofessional, following the model now well established in the health sphere. The extension worker should be a local farmer, elected by his or her community and partly or fully remunerated by them in cash or in kind. Educational requirements should be much lower – functional literacy would be sufficient – and initial training courses should be greatly simplified, limited perhaps to a small number of proven technologies, and to ways of organizing and working with farmers' groups.

7. Networks of paraprofessionals can be created rapidly and cheaply using the pyramid training technique that Burkina Faso used to put in place 7,000 village health agents within 5 months (Harrison, 1990). Under this system, two or three national-level trainers train 20 or so regional trainers, who each train another 20 trainers, who train 20 grassroots workers (in larger countries one more level would be needed). As local people, without the expectations that extended education brings, village extension workers would be far more committed to staying in the area.
8. Farmers should be involved more actively in selecting and testing messages and in identifying farm-level problems to be addressed by research and extension. Often, the best way to achieve this end is by making farmer groups the major point of contact with extension.
9. As farmers participate more fully in extension, it will be important that agents offer them “menus” of options rather than pre-established, homogeneous packages. For example, recommendations on maize production should involve various alternatives (including simple, low-input practices as well as more complex, high-input technologies) to meet a wide range of needs. At the same time, extension should deliver recommendations for various crops and address issues that are relevant to any crop such as agroforestry, livestock-crop interactions, water-controlled drainage, and processing and storage.
10. Most analyses suggest that improving research capacity should receive higher priority than strengthening extension, though obviously both are much in need of further support. In some countries, extension and research support have been combined under a single project. In general, the effect of this arrangement has been to focus research more sharply on farmers’ needs. The orientation can be further reinforced through research conducted in farmers’ fields with their participation.
11. An important role for public extension policy should be to facilitate the development of private provision of extension services and the gradual withdrawal of the public sector. By collaborating with private initiatives and by ceding certain functions to them, public sector extension services can free some of their resources for work with poor farmers and, on commodities and technologies that the private sector generally neglects.

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