

Strengthening the Pluralistic Agricultural Extension System: A Zimbabwean Case Study

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Executive Summary

In Zimbabwe, there are numerous agricultural extension service providers. The levels of pluralism and uncoordinated extension services at the grass-roots level are tantamount to lower outputs and confusion at the expense of the farmers. This calls for the need for coordination and collaboration to improve effectiveness, avoid duplication and wastage of scarce resources. This study sought to examine the current status of the local extension system and to develop a collaborative strategy to ensure an effective and efficient extension system. The basic research approach that was used was the Rapid Appraisal of Agricultural Knowledge Systems (RAAKS) methodology. Complementary research methodologies included qualitative research techniques such as key informant (stakeholder) interviews, as well as formal and informal discussions with selected informants.

The effectiveness and efficiency of the local agricultural extension system remains largely questionable. Agritex, which is the principal extension agency of the government, remains the largest public rural intervention agency with representatives at national, provincial, district, and village levels. However, there is little information within Agritex of how many farmers are actually reached and serviced by Agritex. The extension agency offers a blanket public good service and farmers are expected to avail themselves to the service. Large-scale commercial farmers perceive Agritex as generally not competent enough to provide advisory services to the sub-sector. Within the smallholder sector, adoption of available technologies has not reached expected levels.

Several other organisations provide agricultural services to large-scale and smallholder farmers. These include public community development and agricultural extension service providers, public research-cum-extension organizations, donor supported rural development programmes, international and private research centres, farmer associations, non-governmental organizations and bi-lateral donors, private agro-chemical input suppliers, commodity processors, and what has been conceptualized as "bat" actors. The later group of actors comprise actors that are normally used as "vehicles" for interventionist programmes or actors who act as intermediaries between interventionists and local actors.

Various organizations portray great diversity vis à vis organizational mandates, motivation for extension work, major extension approaches used, extension or community development programmes being implemented, sources of funding, sustainability of that funding, geographical areas covered, profiles of target populations or beneficiaries, outreach, mobility capacity, and effectiveness on the ground. On the other hand, several agricultural extension approaches have been tried in pre- and post-independent Zimbabwe. These include the Group Development Area approach, Master Farmer Training Schemes, the Radio Listening Group approach, the Training and Visit (T & V) system, the Farming Systems Research and Extension (FSRE) methodology, and the Commodity-Based approach. Some of these approaches have been tried and abandoned for various reasons, whilst others are still in use.

A SWOT analysis was conducted to analyze the various strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats within organizations and the agricultural extension system as a whole. In this study, a SWOT analysis was also done at category level, where analysis was focused at the categories of extension service providers. As expected, different organizations and categories of agricultural extension service providers had different strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The SWOT analysis for the pluralistic agricultural extension system also tended to be insightful. The qualifications, competence and experience of personnel have improved over the years. Understanding of community needs has improved greatly, while the empowerment of communities has witnessed an increase in the demand for services.

However, technical knowledge in a number of new enterprises, such as ostrich and crocodile farming, is quite lagging. In addition, financial support is limited for the majority of organizations and most organizations lack an integrated approach to agricultural extension despite the rhetoric over the years.

Opportunities exist in various fields. The need for interventions has grown over the years. There are still donors who are interested in funding programmes that are well designed and that demonstrate impact. Despite the threat of donor fatigue and a pull out by major donors for various socio-politico-economic factors, there are also excellent opportunities for government agencies and NGOs to establish strategic alliances (collaboration arrangements) with local private companies with a stake in various sectors. An example is a partnership between the CAMPFIRE programme and local private safari operators. In more or less the same way, the system is still threatened by various factors. From the donor environment there has been a withdrawal of investments (donor fatigue). HIV/AIDS is wiping out the gains already made, while natural disasters such as Cyclone Eline are also a threat to effective and sustainable rural development.

Formal institutional linkages and informal networks emerged as being built around particular interventions. For this reason, some linkages also tended to be departmentalized within certain organizations. Both formal institutional linkages and informal networks are characterized by joint planning, joint implementation (including field visits), division of tasks, and sharing of information and resources. Established linkages and networks have also tended to manifest themselves into other departments and common areas of interest. Another general finding was that linkages and networks were more pronounced at district and local level (operation levels) than at head-office or provincial levels. Thus, arrangements such as division of tasks, sharing of resources or joint field visits are usually made at the operational (usually at the district) level. A few formal linkages characterized relationships at the administrative (head-office) level, while informal networks were almost non-existent.

Conceptually, formal linkages differ markedly with informal networks. Formal linkages are very institutional in nature, with written and laid down goals and procedures. On the other hand, informal networks are dependent more on individual efforts at networking than organizational mandates or initiatives. The perception is that in formal linkages everything is formalized, laid down, and everyone knows their own and other people's responsibilities. Organizations are also represented on the board of other collaborating institutions or organizations. Informal linkages or networks also depend on who you know in the other organizations. These networks also tend to be determined by need, whereby an informal linkage is developed when a need arises.

Informal networks usually emerge from the partial accommodation and cooperation between and within various state agencies, non-governmental organizations, other international organizations and groups of farmers. Informal networks are characterized by the generation or development of knowledge and the exchange of information and resources through regular interaction or informal contacts between different actors. What, however, makes informal networks so different from formal institutional linkages are the initiatives and efforts by different organizations, individuals and local communities to create and maintain them. At times informal networks can be based on the objective of a reciprocal exchange of information and favours. Again, the emphasis is on a one-to-one networking effort, as opposed to the "organizational culture" that characterizes most formal linkages.

This study has, however, produced a conceptual discourse. A major finding of the study was that according to the perception of many stakeholders, there are no clear-cut lines between what one could consider as formal linkages and informal networks. Several key informants, acting as representatives of various agricultural extension service providers, pointed out that in their perception linkages and networks are viewed as a single concept in collaboration efforts. Various informal discussions with informants during interviews also revealed the existence of rather weak formal linkages between agricultural extension service providers, with established linkages being more personalized than institutional.

Although a number of formal institutional linkages and informal networks were encountered, the report highlights a few selected and exceptional examples. Noted examples include formal linkages and informal

networks around Agritex, the Gokwe Dairy Development Programme (DDP) Project, the CAMPFIRE Programme, Smallholder-Targeted Tobacco Research and Extension, the Cotton Research and Extension Programme, the Wedza Social Forestry Programme, Rural District Councils and Informal Farmer Knowledge Networks.

The local agricultural extension system is also characterized by numerous interfaces that result from a context involving a multitude of actors, different backgrounds, mandates, experiences, and the resultant differential lifeworlds, perceptions, real objectives, practices and strategies. Several factors are usually at work. These can be categorized as political, technical and organizational factors. Political factors refer to institutional politics and the interest groups, which play a role in them. An example is pressure from policy makers, foreign agencies and farmer organizations and subsequent effects on created values, rewards and sanctions which inhibit or facilitate collaboration between various actors. The technical factors are the methods and activities that are associated specifically with the development and dissemination of agricultural technology to different environments and target groups. On the other hand, organizational factors include the division of tasks, resources and authority between different organizations and individuals, and the internal management and informal dynamics of each organization and its components.

Perceptions on attributes that indicate intervention success or failure tended to be as diverse as the backgrounds of the key informants. However, the majority of informants highlighted that for a project to be regarded as a success it had to have a positive impact on the ground, evidence of ripple effects outside the project area, and be sustainable within and outside the project area. Informants highlighted the ITDG Chivi Food Security Project as a distinctive success story, while the GTZ Coordinated Agricultural and Rural Development (CARD) Programme was largely viewed as a failure. Those who had a different perspective argued that whether a project is conceived as a success or a failure, there are always lessons to be learnt from that project. This is based on the argument that whatever the results the experiences are always useful for the primary beneficiaries of that project. Thus, according to some stakeholders, there is always something positive about an intervention.

As already highlighted, several formal and informal collaboration arrangements are already in existence. What is, however, needed is the strengthening and expansion of existing linkages by bringing in more actors and injecting more funds since linkages are costly. In addition, there is also a need to establish linkages where they are non-existent. Several alternatives are considered in this report. According to some informants, effective coordination can be ensured if collaborative strategies are implemented targeted at different administrative levels, with for example, umbrella strategies at national level and more specific strategies designed to coordinate activities at the operational level (e.g. at district-level). Specific recommended collaboration strategies include the use of project coordination committees, utilizing and strengthening the coordination functions of rural district councils, establishing coordination platforms, creating a coordination function within the Agricultural Research Council and strengthening informal farmer networks. Several geographic locations were suggested as possible pilot study areas. The prominent cases include Chinyika Resettlement Scheme, the Gokwe Dairy Development Programme project, and the Mkwazine Sugar Estate Out-grower Scheme.

Lastly, the study identified several issues that can be taken up for further research. Given more time and resources, more concerted efforts could focus on the identification of additional actors that could turn out to be more significant contributors in the local extension system, but operating in different geographic regions of the country. In addition, although an attempt is made to review both successful and catastrophic interventions in this study, the researcher's feeling is that not enough justice was done in this area. There is, therefore, a need to look further at cases representing successful intervention and those that are regarded as failures.

One milestone of this study has been proposals of a number of collaboration strategies that could be used to improve coordination and linkages between various service providers. However, in practical terms, making sure that recommended strategies remain effective could be an uphill task. This calls for the need for a thorough understanding of institutional politics. This is because organizations have several,

and sometimes divergent, agendas some of which remain as hidden agendas. Several issues are also at play where intervention contexts are characterized by a multiplicity of actors. Under such settings, getting a consensus also needs a lot of muscle and initiatives. Thus a thorough understanding of institutional and organizational politics is essential if the goal of establishing effective linkages and sustainable development is to be achieved.