Listening to farmers:  
Participatory assessment of policy reform in Zambia’s agriculture sector

Background

Since 1991, radical changes have taken place in the policy and institutional environment governing the agriculture sector in Zambia. Policies of liberalization and privatization have entailed the replacement of previously state-supplied agricultural services (notably credit, inputs supply and agricultural marketing) by private sector provision. The Agricultural Sector Investment Program (ASIP), assisted by the World Bank, provides the context for continuing agricultural policy development, as well as for the integration of previously fragmented projects and programs in the sector.

ASIP is predicated upon participation in program design and implementation by the full range of stakeholders in the public, private and non-governmental sectors. As a means both of improving program implementation and of promoting the active participation of beneficiaries and other actors, ASIP has established systematic and regular feedback between policy makers and service providers, and those affected by programs, using methods such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Beneficiary Assessment (BA).

Main findings

These consultations have enabled the identification of problems faced by farmers and of trends in the gravity of these problems. Such constraints relate both to resource endowments and to service delivery. Resource constraints identified and analyzed included climatic factors, land degradation, access to land, access to labor, lack of technical skills, livestock disease, and severe shortage of animal draft.

The participatory assessments also examine local perceptions of the efficacy of agricultural infrastructure and services, including credit, input supply, agricultural marketing and extension.
Agricultural credit and marketing has become the responsibility of the private sector, and coverage in the early years of liberalization was found to be uneven and unpredictable, due to poor infrastructure, lack of capacity in the private sector, and inadequate enforcement mechanisms. Public services such as agricultural extension and animal health, on the other hand, were found to suffer from staff shortages, and lack of operating funds, transportation and equipment, and were not responding well to farmers’ needs. At least in some cases, private sector extension appeared to be performing well. The difficulties faced by farmers were exacerbated by severe drought in parts of the country.

Farmers were found to have adopted a range of strategies in their attempts to cope with the vicissitudes of transition. These include:

- reverting to subsistence crops and traditional cropping systems;
- crop diversification and the adoption of drought-resistant crops such as cotton and cassava;
- increasing reliance on non-farm sources of income such as hunting and fishing, and on casual labor;
- reducing consumption by eating less meals per day, and reliance on foodstuffs collected from the wild; and
- selling off assets such as draft animals.

**Policy implications**

The findings of these consultations have led to recommendations directed at improving the quality and equity of services received by small farmers from the public and private sectors. Farmers wanted improved infrastructure (especially roads and bridges) and the effective regulation of the private sector. They also sought more information on markets for agricultural produce, and access to more flexible and responsive credit facilities. In the area of agricultural extension and information, farmers expressed a preference for group extension methods, and for advice on subsistence crops and storage methods.

A number of means were also identified for building the capacity of the remote and economically vulnerable to participate in agricultural markets. Possible mechanisms include: the promotion of local seed production systems; micro-credit; and research and extension directed at subsistence crops and low-input agriculture.

The necessary local organizational basis for participatory extension, and for economically viable joint activities such as marketing, local-level financial services and cattle dipping, would need to be promoted through support to producer associations, service-providing NGOs, and other organizations active at the community level.

**Methodological implications**
The case for participatory assessment is particularly strong in the case of ASIP because of the diversity and complexity of the agricultural sector and the importance of ownership and participation by a diverse range of stakeholders. Participatory and qualitative assessment methods can help in understanding the complex of factors involved in rural development in a holistic way and enables the inaccessible and marginal, whose voices are frequently not heard, to have a say in program formulation. Future participatory assessment work will be focused on specific issues of concern to the management of sub-programs, such as rural finance, informal seed multiplication systems, or veterinary drug supply, and designed in conjunction with relevant sub-program staff. There is also scope for a more fruitful combination of qualitative and quantitative methods assessing agricultural performance, and in particular the social and distributional impact of policies and programs.

A fuller account of the client consultation mechanisms and findings can be found in: Paul A. Francis, John T. Milimo, Chosani A. Njovu and Stephen P.M. Tembo. 1997. Listening to Farmers: Participatory Assessment of Policy Reform in Zambia’s Agricultural Sector. Technical Paper No. 375. World Bank, Washington, D.C. For more information, please contact Paul Francis, Rm. J2-125, World Bank, 1818 H Street NW, Washington D.C. 20433. Tel. no.: (202) 4738486; e-mail address: Pfrancis@worldbank.org