Uganda: Extension, Decentralization and Village Participation

In Uganda, efforts to decentralize the management of the extension service and to launch the Village Participation in Land Development exercise have led to a number of issues, outcomes and expectations. This overview looks at what can be realistically expected from the extension service (in terms of contact with farmers), from decentralization (in terms of management improvement), and from the Village Participation exercise (in terms of grassroots empowerment).

Contact between farmers and extension staff

While it would not be desirable, nor efficient, for the extension service to contact most farmers, it seems that many people feel that extension should do exactly that. Statements such as "the majority of farmers never see an extension agent" or "most farmers do not participate in contact groups" are used as illustrations of the ineffectiveness of extension. While it is true that extension should provide the vast majority of farmers with access to appropriate know-how to improve their productivity and income, direct contact with most farmers is not the most efficient way to achieve this.

Field experience (in Uganda and elsewhere) illustrates that, in order for the vast majority of farmers to have access to new information and know-how, only a relatively small percentage of farmers have to be in direct and regular contact with the extension staff. What is "a relatively small percentage"? From experience, we learn that when about 25% to 30% of farmers are in regular and direct contact with extension, the majority of farmers will be aware of the messages being disseminated. This was confirmed in the recent Beneficiary Assessment (1997) in Uganda: "Of the 108 respondents who had reported attending a demonstration, 89 or 82.4% had given advice to other farmers on the practices learnt and of these, 67 or 75.3% reported the other farmers having adopted the advice given. Similarly, of 101 group farmers who had attended a training course, 79 or 78.2% reported giving advice to other farmers of which 63.2% had adopted (the technology)".
Thus, for an extension service to be effective in terms of contact with farmers - or, in other words, for the majority of farmers to benefit from the impact of extension - the front line staff has to be in direct and regular contact with no more than 25% to 30% of farm families. Increasing that percentage substantially would increase the costs - but much less the impact - of extension. With this in mind, one can estimate what would be an appropriate ratio of farmers/front line staff: given that one extension worker can contact daily about 20 to 30 farmers (through two to three group meetings), one staff can visit about 200 to 300 farmers regularly. Counting on the spread-out-effect, one extension staff can affect to about 1,000 farmers while being in direct contact with only 200 or 300 of them.

**Decentralization**

Recent efforts to decentralize the management of the extension service in line with the decentralization of the entire government structure has also created expectations, some of them probably realistic, others perhaps less so. There are a number of outcomes that can reasonably be expected from the decentralization exercise.

- Transfer of decision-making power on budget allocation from the national to the district level. The decision to make (or not to make) a budget allocation to extension will henceforth belong to the district council, i.e. to a group of representatives who are close to, and elected by, the rural population. Although this does not give individual farmers or groups control over their own extension worker, local district representatives will be able to decide on the nature and size of the extension service.

- Increased responsibility and accountability of district managers vis a vis the district councils. In the past, district extension managers were only accountable to the (remote) HQ in Entebbe. At the district level, there was no mechanism giving leverage to the authorities or political representatives to put pressure on the extension team. Now, through decentralization, district staff are directly accountable to the District Production Officer, and depend on the District Council for their fund allocation.

- Ensure sufficient backstopping of front line staff. To be effective, front line staff need continuous backstopping through training and technical supervision. The organization of this backstopping requires an overhead structure of supervisors and Subject Matter Specialists. The district seems to be the right entity to anchor this: it is sufficiently large to provide a critical mass of staff and has the capacity to organize the support for field staff. At the same time, it is close enough to the field to be sensitive to the local conditions.

Outcomes that cannot be expected from the decentralized management of extension are the following.

- Decentralization will not give individual farmers or groups control or decision power over the management of the extension service, or over the appointment or withdrawal of individual extension staff.
The quality of service delivery will most likely not improve automatically everywhere. The process will probably reveal the individual capacities of district managers and their teams. Those districts that performed poorly under the centralized management structure can be expected (initially) to become even less effective, while those which did well under the centralized set-up would probably take advantage of their increased responsibility and accountability to further increase their effectiveness.

Substantive decentralization of extension management will not occur overnight - it is a learning process that requires time. Even those district teams that can be expected to do well under the new system will have to understand their new responsibilities, and gain experience as they go along.

Also, there are still several issues that need to be clarified to make the decentralized management of the extension services effective.

- **Budget flow.** The budget mechanism, the flow of funds between the central and the district level and the financial management procedures still need to be clarified. Although there is agreement on some of the broad principles (such as primary responsibility for the district councils to decide on budget allocation for extension), the practical operational modes still need to be spelled out.

- **Relationship between the central and district levels.** There is agreement on the broad principle that the central level of the ministry will be responsible for policy definition, support to the implementation of field activities, and quality control. The district level will be in charge of the actual implementation. It is, however, not yet clear what these principles imply, what specifically the relationship between district and HQ will be, and how all this will be operationalized.

- **Organization at the district level.** Two key issues need to be clarified: (i) the position of a District Extension Coordinator who is full time in charge of extension, and (ii) the unified budget allocation for extension at the district level. In the absence of a full time extension manager, it would be very difficult to provide tangible results and to ensure that the service is effectively responding to farmers' demands. The absence of a unified budget allocation for extension would result in the effective creation of three different public extension services in each of the districts.

**Village Participation in Rural Development**

After the successful experiences in a number of West African countries (Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Mauritania, Guinea, Burkina Faso), a pilot operation for Village Participation in Rural Development was launched (August 1997) in three pilot districts in Uganda. The objective of the exercise is to assist village communities to take control of their environment and development through participatory analysis of the existing situation, problem identification and prioritization, elaboration of action plans, and implementation of development activities. Here too, there is a risk that too much might be expected from this effort. Already, questions have been raised about what the interface and synergies between the Village Participation exercise the ongoing extension efforts.

The West African experience and the exercise in Uganda yielded the following results.
Farmers determine the agenda of the meetings with extension. Through the participatory diagnosis exercises, farmers determine the relative importance of activities in different sectors such as agriculture, infrastructure, health, education, etc. Also the issues to be dealt with within each (sub)sector - including extension - are decided upon. This provides the extension staff with clear "terms of reference".

Organization of interface between farmers and extension. The Village Participation exercise provides a platform to the village community to discuss and agree on the most practical way to organize meetings with the extension staff: Which groups will be used? Who will participate? What should be the frequency of meetings? Where should they take place? etc.

Pressure from farmers. Probably the most important feature of the Village Participation exercise is that it provides a platform for farmers to exert pressure on political leaders and bureaucrats. Farmers are very vocal during the exercises regarding their (dis)satisfaction with a range of services. Pressure on the respective service delivery systems thus begins to build.

Way forward

Many questions remain and much needs to be clarified with regard to the Village Participation exercises. The pilot operation permits the testing, in a very practical way, of different possibilities. For example, what needs to be done to foster better collaboration between the different partners within the agricultural sector, and from other sectors? What will be the most practical mechanism to channel funds to the village communities for the implementation of their action plans? Perhaps the most urgent question is as to how grassroots organizations can be empowered to gain effective control over their front line staff. This would move extension towards becoming genuinely demand driven, both in terms of content and delivery.

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