



Communal and institutional transformation in public agricultural services in Zimbabwe – Lessons from the 90's

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COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION FOR RENEWAL IN STATE AGRICULTURAL SERVICES' PROVISION IN ZIMBABWE: LESSONS AND INSIGHTS FROM THE 90's

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1. Recognising the need for change

In hindsight, the nineties provided a range of adventures, innovations and progressive learning opportunities for all those interested in appropriate services delivery for resource-poor smallholder farmers in Zimbabwe. The background in which AGRITEX, the state department with responsibility for the provision of national technical and extension services to farmers, played a predominant role from 1980 –90 is of major interest in the context of the challenges for change in the nineties. In 1989, based on the early post-independence successes of the smallholder sector in increasing mainly maize production, AGRITEX was lauded internationally as ... *a truly professional service acknowledged as a critically important force for rural development where extension workers know their farmers, know their farms and know their problems* (Hayward, 1989). A positive price environment for agricultural produce and ready availability of inputs were also crucial factors in making the extension effort more successful.

But the well-funded Zimbabwean version of the training and visit system of the eighties was set to face a new and severe test of its relevance in the nineties. The appropriateness and costs of the agricultural production systems promoted in the eighties became increasingly remote and unaffordable as over a million resource-poor communal households tried to eke out livelihoods from marginalised and increasingly degraded lands in the poorer natural regions of the country. Those farmers comprised over 90% of the client base of the national state extension system, yet that system remained committed to extension approaches geared towards supply-driven technology transfer modes of delivery for mainly input-intensive production systems. Extension strategies continued in a paradigm that focused predominantly on technical areas and took little account of the diversity and complexity of the increasingly social needs of resource-poor rural communities. The failure of the economic structural adjustment programme also led to less employment opportunities for rural migrants in urban areas and additional pressures in communal areas.

Most extension workers were trained and socialised in the "information and teaching school" of extension and largely stuck to the old script – a package approach that dwelt on telling farmers what to do for given aspects or components of farm production. A few years into the nineties, as population increases brought increased pressures for food security in poorer rural communities, it became clear to those concerned with social dimensions of service provision that the then accepted precepts for extension needed to be revisited. Extension workers were not trained or equipped to recognise, much less cope with, the emerging, wider social needs of rural communities of poorer farmers and their problems in a very different social and economic milieu from the more straightforward smallholder commercial extension strategies pursued in the eighties. Extension competencies based on social understanding; community participation and process facilitation of change were needed to replace the rote teaching mode of interaction continued from the seventies and eighties.

2. Encountering the challenges of the 90's

The severe droughts of 1991/ 92 provided seismic shocks for Zimbabwean agriculture. The shortfalls and limited utility in farming practice of many of the conventional technical options based on input-dependent technology transfer were exposed. The adequacy of the narrowly based existing extension options were severely questioned as critical needs emerged for

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more versatile approaches and strategies for drought mitigation measures and assurance of household food security. Self-sufficiency and self-reliance were the key goals of hard-pressed communities, yet extension programmes continued to focus on the use of inputs rather than wider impacts for rural communities.

The still young state agricultural research and extension institutions at that time were locked into the inherited “generation and transfer-of technology model” of agricultural development reinforced by international (CGIAR) centres and support from the World Bank and donors. This served to consolidate traditional and reductionist approaches to specialist staff training and development that emphasised technical rather than social disciplines and, albeit unintentionally, compromised the capabilities of those institutions to recognise, engage with and respond meaningfully to the newly emergent changing needs. State agricultural institutions were quite a way from becoming open, problem-centred, learning organisations in mature partnerships with their stakeholders and clients (Connolly and Danda, 1999 ; Birmingham 1998).

The dwindling budgetary allocations for the national state extension system from the mid-nineties also called into serious question the sustainability of what has been a technically based system of extension that reaches each ward nation-wide. In addition, the concentration of farmer training virtually exclusively on production at a time when communities were experiencing a wider array of social problems in trying to secure their basic livelihoods was perceived as not being sufficiently responsive to the increasingly social complexity of the new service needs.

The crises arising both from the droughts and the declining resource base of rural communities spurred a number of adventurous and innovative pilot projects at local ward levels in Masvingo province in the early nineties. These were to lead eventually to deeper understanding and substantial learning over the decade, not merely for those directly involved, but eventually for national research and extension systems as a whole at policy, institutional and service delivery levels.

3. Field partnerships with communities to test and develop alternative approaches for farmer –centred innovation and services delivery

From 1990-95 two projects (ITDG Food Security and GTZ Conservation Tillage -- see references below) sought to explore the needs of farmers in the poorer natural regions in terms of the strategies and technologies available to them to assure food security. Central aims included:

- the emancipation and strengthening of farmers’ capabilities to articulate their priorities,
- strengthening local institutions to better respond to community needs,
- involving farmers (males and females) in participatory development of technologies and practices for soil and water conservation
- experiential and action learning to develop farmers’ self-confidence and competencies.
- informing government policies so, as they can be more responsive to the concerns and circumstances of poorer farmers.

The projects were implemented in three very arid districts of Masvingo Province in the South Eastern region of Zimbabwe. In those projects farmers were recognised as equal partners with development professionals in the search for appropriate farming systems and technologies for their ecologies and resource base.

These projects brought more purpose and commitments through better community organisation and the use of improved techniques and practices for soil and water conservation by farmers. In those partnerships farmers were recognised as the central focus for innovation & development at local levels.

4. Organisation Development at Provincial Level

In 1995, as part of the ongoing commitment to improving the overall professional performance of the organisation an **OD Pilot Programme** was approved for Masvingo Province. The programmes followed from informal surveys and analysis of managerial and work group activities in Masvingo which highlighted the need to improve individual and group performance as the primary contributions towards enhanced aggregate institutional performance and productivity at all levels throughout the province.

The major aim of the OD programme which AGRITEX embarked on in Masvingo Province was to improve staff performance and organisational health across all levels of staff for the general hand through the Extension Worker and Officer right up to the Chief Agricultural Extension Officer (CAEO). A central focus was to look at how staff operated whether as managers, specialists, administrators or workers, and explore whether the organisational culture a healthy one based on openness in attitudes and behaviour, was there a clear and widespread understanding and acceptance of responsibilities or accountabilities, and what was the quality of teamwork? At an initial workshop, representative of all staff levels, on problem identification, one of the major intra-organisational problems identified was the lack of clear description and understanding of the roles and responsibilities of various staff levels. Thus, this area became the starting point for organisational diagnosis.

One of the first activities was to undertake a comprehensive review of all job descriptions in the organisation with the full participation of all staff levels (manager / supervision specialists / subordinates). Provincial and district staff in extension management, support all delivery participated in workshops and review meetings to review their duties and responsibilities and discuss / agree updating and reviewing them. Framework on outline job descriptions were then prepared and given to staff levels to review. While it was originally thought that this exercise would take two or three months it actually was well over nine months before the revised job descriptions truly reflected the current needs.

Alongside the revision of roles and responsibilities, it was also imperative to revisit the organogram and structures as it pertained to the revised job descriptions. In the districts there was a three-tier reporting system from extension field worker to supervisor to officer to district officer. The majority of field workers felt that the position of supervisor was not an active, functional one as incumbents mainly gave orders and collected reports to pass to officers. It was decided to have both the extension supervisors and officers report directly to the District Agricultural Extension Officers.

OD Workshops were conducted with all staff in the province in 1997 to facilitate identification of, and engagement with, the major problems experienced by staff. Issues which came through for attention included the hierarchical culture of the extension department generally and the absence of mature and effective group and team dynamics in such a culture. Staff gradually gained the freedom and confidence to openly air problems, provide feedback to management and begin to tackle the challenges of working together in teams. Another issue, which came through, was the need for greater attention to client and stakeholder needs in more interactive relationships between farmers and extension staff.

Pilot exercises at ward level demonstrated the need for new competencies among field extension workers; how to be effective facilitators of participatory extension with farmers rather than teachers of technical subjects. The need to restore a renewed and invigorated social dimension to extension led to the piloting (1996/97) and eventual scaling out to provincial level of Participatory Extension Approaches (PEAs) which helped to transform the way extension workers interacted with farmers. (Hagmann et al., 1998)

5. National Level Institution – Wide Change Management Programme

Based on the promising initial impacts of the OD pilot programme and PEAs in Masvingo Province and a renewed commitment by the Ministry of Lands on Agriculture to streamlining the roles and functions of service departments and the ministry itself, a new

institutional change project – the Agricultural Services Management Project (ASMP) commenced in 1998. This was a national level, institution-wide change management project covering all divisions and departments of the Ministry.

From Masvingo Province, the Chief Agricultural Extension Officer and the GTZ Agricultural Advisor were invited to lead the field implementation / facilitation of the ASMP in AGRITEX, the former as new Deputy Director, Extension and Field Services and the latter as Advisor Facilitator to the Department on the ASMP.

The ASMP aimed to cover total AGRITEX staff complement of over 3000 in 54 districts nationally. The initial phase of cultural change involved facilitation of over 30 workshops for field, specialist and management staff. Those workshops facilitated self-exploration and discovery by staff on the problems and challenges facing them in the context of the need for:

- Stakeholder involvement and client orientation in services provision
- Facilitative approaches and competencies by field staff in interacting with farmers and local organisations in ways that develop and support farmers to become better problem solvers in their own environments
- Better leadership and facilitation skills by managers to foster team synergies, group performance and accountabilities at all levels of support and delivery of services
- Recognition, constructive engagement and co-operation with non-governmental service providers as partners in the national task of co-ordinating and providing appropriate and improved services for various categories of farmers.

6. Lessons & Insights

(i) National Policy and Strategy

In terms of the national change management programme, lessons and insights are based on outcomes from the first phase of cultural change – facilitating staff and organisational units to change mindsets so as to envision and approach their mission and tasks differently.

The second phase of substantial re-organisation of systems (including structures), processes and operating approaches has just got underway (2000). One key outcome from the pilots and change programme initiatives has been the early recognition by senior policy makers on the Ministry of the promise and merit of some approaches (e.g. OD at Provincial Level spurring demands at national level within two years and before full and enduring provincial level implementation).

A recent key decision to combine the Departments of Agricultural Research and Extension in one new department underscores the recognition by the Ministry of disadvantages and ineffectiveness of retaining functional research and extension entities within the old self-serving paradigm of technology generation separated from technology transfer and working in an outmoded linear precept of “innovation”. The pilots and OD programmes in the 90’s, which centered on farmer-centred innovation and services renewal in communal areas, showed clearly that innovation is a cyclical process with the farmer at its centre – not as someone to be talked at or experimented with. Farmers problems are the central starting point and not supply – line technical packages, which may be inappropriate to their environments and resource endowments.

(ii) Process Facilitation

- In process facilitation the following were the major lessons / insights:
- Fostering ownership of process and outcomes by the partner institutions at all levels is the most critical focus
- Facilitation of self-exploration and self-discovery vis a vis problems and challenges is essential in creating ownership and commitment to change. In doing so, staff have to be facilitated to learn more about themselves from themselves (Wheatley, 1999).
- Responsibility for process facilitation is with the Advisor / Facilitator
- The overall process is best facilitated by an internal full-time Facilitator backstopped by a process consultant

(iii) Organisational Development

Lessons here related to the salient differences emerging between OD as practised in the Northern Hemisphere and experiences in practice in Zimbabwe during the nineties. (Box 1)

BOX 1

Lessons: Organisational Development

- Without significant cultural Adaptation, Northern-Value OD is inappropriate in Africa

Northern-Value-OD	OD in Africa
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relies on external OD Consultants • Staff emancipated and articulate • Staff have sound disciplinary competencies • Performance management systems with material incentives • Satisfactory Managers who need to become better leaders / facilitators • OD mainly practised in competitive private sectors in liberalised economies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs internal facilitation by an advisor very conversant with organisational culture' • Staff socialised in dependency in cultures of hierarchy • Staff often lack disciplinary / functional competencies • Predominant absences of material incentives for performance improvement • Administrators who need to become managers before becoming leaders and facilitators • OD mainly applied to post-colonial govt. bureaucracies and strong control cultures

(iv) Role of Advisor / Facilitator

Experiences in Zimbabwe in the nineties resonate with those emerging from other countries in developing countries. The challenge to facilitate engagement by partners with agendas for substantive change in the way they organise themselves and perform in managing and delivering services is formidable, especially when the overriding need is to foster ownership and thereby enduring commitment to outcomes. “Doing things with partners which they own” proved easier when senior management were involved deeply from the start in understanding the principles of process facilitation and taking responsibility for leading and managing the change programme facilitated by the advisor / facilitator.

Critical insights gained include:

- Internal, centre-point facilitation of overall change process is required (not the detached administration of consultants by well-meaning co-ordinators)
- To inform and advise on decision making by the partner institution based on:
 - comprehensively identified options
 - fostering ownership and self-accountability
 - enhanced competencies / confidence levels
- Advisor to engage directly in competency development through coaching and counselling of management and staff
- Continually interpret and feedback on the quality of process facilitation to management in the partner institution and donors

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