Learning about developing competence to facilitate rural extension processes

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This paper analyses practical experiences in developing competence to facilitate processes of participatory community development and extension within government services in Zimbabwe and South Africa. It describes the demanding profile of extension agents who engage in process facilitation, which is a radical move away from technically based extension towards broader development of rural communities' capacities to solve problems, to innovate and to organise themselves effectively. Learning at cognitive, behavioural, attitudinal and emotional levels was enhanced to facilitate this change in individual competence. At the same time, capabilities at different levels in the extension services were strengthened through organisational development processes. The lessons learnt can be applied to many situations beyond the cases of Zimbabwe and South Africa.

Photo by: Jürgen Hagmann.

A farmer experimenter explains her experiments with vetiver grass.

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Background

Public agricultural extension organisations in many countries realised the need for participatory approaches after their potentials had been demonstrated by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Acceptance and promotion of these approaches in hierarchical government bureaucracies and operationalisation through often low-paid and low-qualified extension agents have proven to be difficult. The organisations require a transformation from top-down teaching and a narrow production orientation to people-centred and learning-oriented extension approaches (Thompson 1995). Such a shift in the way of operating requires, in turn, substantial changes in the culture and structure of the organisations. At all levels, and especially at field level, there is a need for a deliberate change in attitudes and behaviour of extension agents and a growth in capabilities to facilitate social processes. Re-orientation and transformation of technically oriented extension agents necessitates a broader framework of human resources development involving training in participatory processes.

Such a process of transformation was undertaken by the Zimbabwean Department of Agricultural, Technical and Extension Services (AGRITEX) in the Ministry of Lands and Agriculture. With support from GTZ (German Agency for Technical Cooperation), AGRITEX piloted and experimented with developing the competence of field-level extension agents in participatory extension approaches (PEA) since 1995 in Masvingo Province. This was an integral part of wider change management through an organisational development (OD) programme geared towards improving service delivery.

From 1998 onwards, based on the lessons from Zimbabwe, the PEA approach was further developed and adapted to Limpopo Province in South Africa. This paper focuses primarily on the Zimbabwean experience in developing a learning programme for process facilitation, its large-scale implementation and the lessons learnt. The emerging lessons from the South African case complement the Zimbabwean experiences, and together, they give an account of almost a decade of learning.

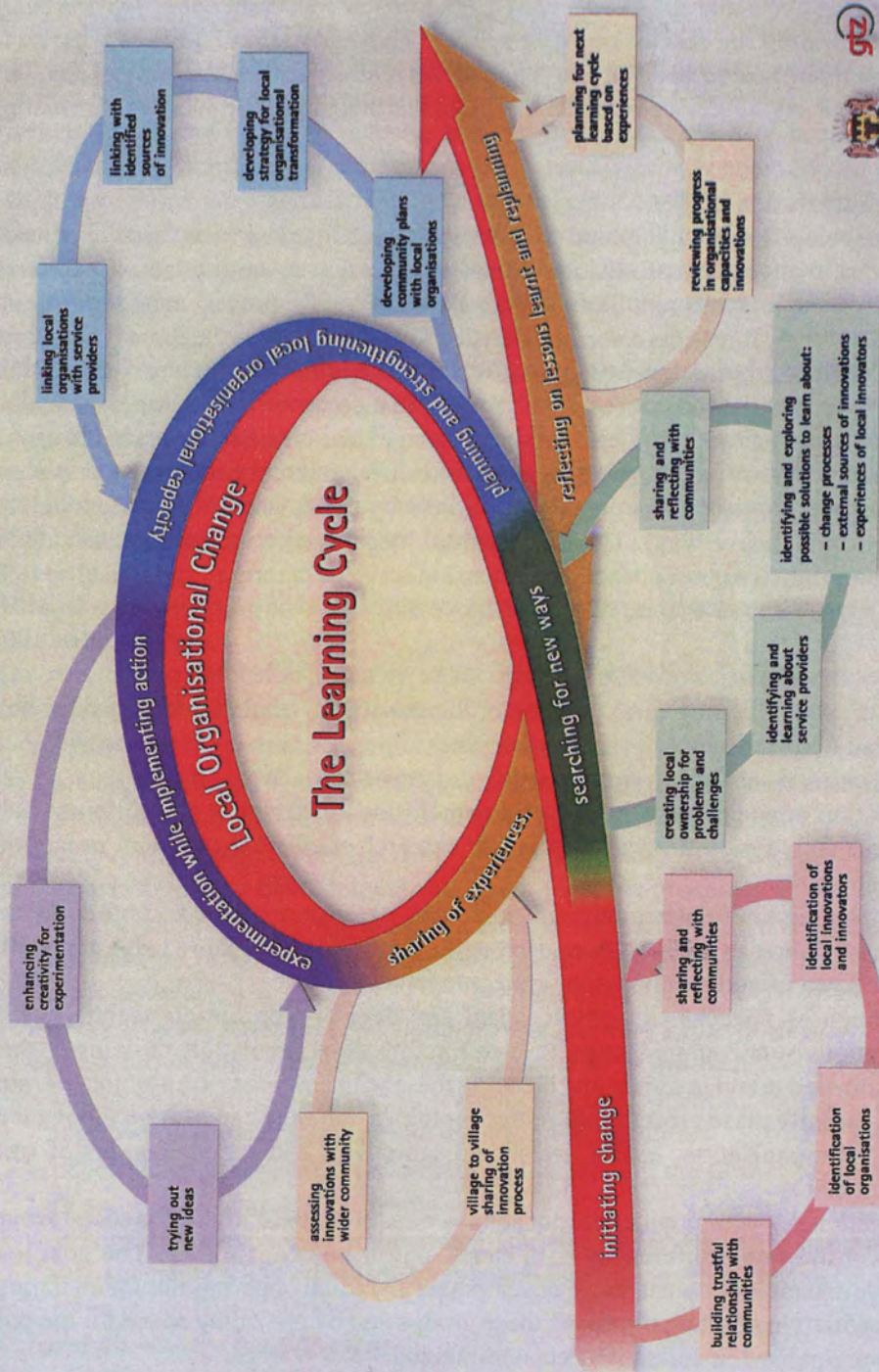## A learning-process approach in extension delivery

Based on pilot activities in research and extension between 1990 and 1995, a participatory extension approach was developed iteratively, together with farmers, researchers and extension agents in Masvingo Province. In 1995-96, with the growing interest to integrate alternative approaches to service delivery into the government extension system, these experiences were synthesised into a common framework, named "Participatory Extension Approaches"[7] (see Fig. 1), which was increasingly accepted by the public extension organisation as a mainstream approach to extension.

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[7]   The process of developing the approach, the emerging PEA framework and the experiences with this approach are published in Hagmann *et al* 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2002, Moyo 1996, and in the set of PEA training and resource materials listed in the references.

Learning Together for Renewal in Community Development:
Community Emancipation through Fostering Innovation and Local Organisational Capacity

The Learning Cycle

Local Organisational Change

planning and strengthening local organisational capacity

experimentation while implementing action

reflecting on lessons learnt and replanning

searching for new ways

sharing of experiences,

initiating change

- linking with identified sources of innovation
- developing strategy for local organisational transformation
- linking local organisations with service providers
- developing community plans with local organisations
- planning for next learning cycle based on experiences
- reviewing progress in organisational capacities and innovations
- sharing and reflecting with communities
- identifying and exploring possible solutions to learn about:
  – change processes
  – external sources of innovations
  – experiences of local innovators
- identifying and learning about service providers
- creating local ownership for problems and challenges
- enhancing creativity for experimentation
- trying out new ideas
- assessing innovations with wider community
- village to village sharing of innovation process
- sharing and reflecting with communities
- identification of local innovations and innovators
- building trustful relationship with communities
- identification of local organisations

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Figure 1: The PEA learning cycle with main process phases and related process steps

This framework was complemented by three years of experience in South Africa, which revealed that the aspect of local organisational development had to be a focus throughout all phases. An additional phase was added to the original "planning & organising phase" in the learning cycle and the field-level PEA approach was embedded into a broader frame of reforming the service delivery system. Thus, greater attention was given to linking communities to service providers and creating a well-functioning system involving a variety of service providers through facilitated platforms and coordinating fora.

Key characteristics of PEA

PEA, as developed and understood in Zimbabwe and South Africa, is an extension approach that involves a transformation in the way extension agents interact with farmers. Community-based extension, full community ownership of the process and joint learning are central to PEA. It reflects a social extension approach (versus "technical advisory" extension) that builds the foundation for effective service delivery in terms of enabling rural people to identify and critically analyse their real demand for services, to articulate it to service providers and to be better able to manage relationships with external agents in an emancipated way (accountable representation in negotiation with service providers, holding service providers accountable to community needs and helping them deliver services in an inclusive way). This fundamental "organisation of the demand side" is often lacking and, as a consequence, the extension services in form of "technical advice" can hardly be absorbed and are of limited success.

Some key characteristics of PEA are:
- focus on strengthening rural people's problem-solving, planning and management abilities both individually and collectively; this involves development of local organisational capacities and leadership (adaptive capacity)
- integration of social mobilisation of communities for planning and action in rural development, agricultural extension and research, fuelled by a social process of innovation
- equal partnership between farmers, scientists, extension agents and other service providers, who can all learn from each other, contribute their knowledge and skills, and build an effective innovation system together
- promotion of farmers' capacity to adapt and develop appropriate technologies / innovations by encouraging them to learn through experimentation, building on their own knowledge and practices and blending these with new ideas in an action-learning mode (usually these are agricultural technologies, but they can also be innovations in social organisation, health, water and sanitation, and other domains of rural development)
- recognition that communities are not homogenous but consist of various social groups with conflicts and differences in interests, power and capabilities. The goal is to achieve equitable and sustainable development and equal opportunities for all through the negotiation of interests among these groups and by providing space for the poor and marginalised in collective decision-making.

PEA integrates elements of Participatory Technology Development (PTD) as a means to generate innovations and learning through farmer experimentation, social development

approaches, experiential learning (Kolb 1984) and Training for Transformation (Hope & Timmel 1984). The PEA learning cycle and operational framework suggest a holistic and flexible strategy with process steps, into each of which a variety of extension methodologies and tools (including PRA tools) are integrated flexibly. For example, farmer-to-farmer extension or Farmer Field Schools can be part of the PEA framework. In isolation, these methodologies might address only a few farmers and even be used in a top-down manner. Within the community-based PEA framework, however, these methodologies can be more inclusive and effective because whole social entities are addressed. The fundamental difference of PEA *vis-à-vis* many other approaches is that the communities are regarded as organisational entities that need to be approached from an integrated organisational change and development perspective - similar to the facilitation of change processes in public or corporate organisations. The values and goals may differ, but the human behaviour, processes and patterns are very similar.

PEA is far more than a participatory methodology and distinctly different from PRA, which is essentially a toolbox. PEA is a comprehensive, iterative learning-process approach to rural innovation and problem-solving that enhances governance and civil society organisation in rural areas in which both farmers and extension agents / service providers accumulate knowledge and skills. Inclusiveness and community ownership of the development process are core values of PEA.

Role of extension agents: facilitators for change and innovation processes in communities

The role of the extension agent is to facilitate this process geared towards human development at local level and involves:

- *a process of community strengthening leading to good local governance*
  - social mobilisation and local organisational development to enhance community management capacities and an articulated demand for services
  - community needs identification and analysis leading to high-quality demand for services (instead of wish lists) and action-planning processes
  - a process of community self-evaluation to review critically the successes and failures so that learning can become effective and be built into community development
- *a process of collective and individual farmer learning about innovation (technical and social) to enhance the community's capacity to innovate*
  - engaging the different actors in learning and experimenting together in order to improve their understanding and management capacities
  - developing appropriate technologies and enhancing the farmer-to-farmer spread of solutions to farmers' problems
  - strengthening capacities to negotiate land use and by-laws for natural resource management (NRM). This involves social innovations that need to be negotiated often in conflict situations
- *rural knowledge management*
  - identifying knowledge about given technologies as sources of innovation
  - linking various actors who have and seek knowledge to bring together their knowledge and experience

- documenting the knowledge to record learning and make it more widely available
- preparing materials to disseminate knowledge effectively (based on the generation of knowledge).

This new role of managing and facilitating learning processes implies special skills and competencies that are far from the present technical advisory focus of extension agents and therefore need to be developed.

The challenge: developing the capabilities needed to facilitate PEA processes

Core capabilities needed

Central to PEA is the *facilitation of action research and learning*. Process facilitation, as a non-instrumental form of intervention (Röling 1996), was basic to the learning process. Building up development workers' facilitation skills was a major challenge. Our experience has shown that good facilitation skills are more important than any particular tool or learning aid and also more difficult to learn than any other skill needed in the learning process. The core of reflective facilitation (Groot & Marleveld 2000) is about asking the "right" questions at the "right" time in order to enhance people's self-reflection and self-discovery without pre-empting the responses or pushing in a preconceived direction. These questions are meant to mirror back to people the patterns and consequences of their behaviour and possible solutions in the long run and thus lead to deep self-reflection and ownership of the problems they express.

The values of ownership, participation / emancipation and social learning were crucial in facilitating the construction of new realities. Local ownership was created through basing the interventions on local organisations that assumed full responsibility. Our intervention was geared towards strengthening of local organisations through enhancing accountability, improving leadership and facilitating critical self-awareness and self-discovery of inherent local (human) values. Values had probably the greatest influence in farmers' decisions in PEA. Through good facilitation, these were revealed and led to new social norms. In summary, facilitation breaks the entrenched patterns and focuses people on critical and systemic thinking, while critically exploring ideas, visions, solutions and people's own responsibility in development.

The main challenge is guiding the facilitation process, which requires several skills and conditions:
1. **Clear vision of the process goal.** The vision of development needs to be built on values such as participation, ownership, inclusiveness, people's self-development, openness, transparency and accountability. With this vision as a "guiding light", the facilitator can handle situations flexibly and pose the "right" questions to enhance learning. The facilitator needs to be a step ahead and lead the process, but not its outcome. Often, this vision can be enhanced through exposure to successful cases that provide real and concrete examples.
2. **Empathy and the culture of inquiry.** The facilitator needs to be able to empathise with the group members so that he/she can react appropriately. Empathy goes beyond

knowledge about group dynamics; it is a skill that depends on personality and emotional intelligence (Goleman 1988). Another skill is the culture of inquiry, which is the ability to question apparently simple things and to "unpack" them down to details. Often, the real problems lie in the details, which need to be disclosed before a solution can be developed.

3. **A clear understanding of process design, steps and dynamics.** In our experience, unless the design of the process is clear, facilitators have major problems in guiding it. Particularly beginners in process facilitation need a clear operational framework as a "rail" to guide them. Such a framework defines the objectives, key questions and issues, core methodologies and partners for each process step. Only after thorough training and experience in these process steps are facilitators able to understand and implement them confidently and modify them according to their own experience, empathy and common sense. Understanding the process with its usual ups and downs also helps to reduce the frustrations often experienced when things do not go in the desired direction. After having gone through a whole process cycle, facilitators know that these are part of any non-linear learning process and they can handle these situations by putting them in context.

These are core skills and conditions required for facilitating any learning process. Facilitating learning in the field of NRM also requires knowledge about ecological principles and practices. Here, specific learning tools play a crucial role (Hagmann *et al* 1997, Hamilton 1998, Hagmann & Chuma 2002).

Practical experiences during implementation of participatory processes in pilot activities from 1990 to 1995 provided deep insight into the critical capabilities that extension agents require to facilitate such complex and dynamic learning processes in communities (see Box 1).

In South Africa, extension agents who learnt process facilitation over three years in an experiential way with intensive guidance summarised the requirements for their own staff competence in four dimensions:

1. **Vision and values for themselves and for development:** Without one's own vision and strong values in life, it is impossible to be strong and clear enough to provide orientation for others, which is a major function in PEA facilitation. The extension agents created slogans: *"If you want to change others, you first have to change yourself"* and *"If you do not manage change, change will manage you!"* Vision and values in development also imply having a strong sense of emancipative development.
2. **Self-development:** This refers to creativity and curiosity to learn, authenticity, critical self-awareness and openness, trust in people and groups, and the ability to stay in control even when insecure.
3. **Facilitation skills:** Besides facilitation techniques, these skills include the art of questioning and dealing with group dynamics, conflicts and organisational development issues.
4. **Technical and management skills:** This involves technical know-how in broader terms and certain specialist knowledge, depending on the field in which one is working. Management skills are also essential to deal with people and hierarchies in one's own organisation.

Box 1: Core capabilities needed by extension agents for PEA

- Full understanding and orientation towards a vision of participatory development processes in which human development - rather than technical development - is the ultimate goal of extension.
- Clear understanding and overview of a variety of extension approaches and methods as a pool from which ideas can be sought and combined, plus the entrepreneurial spirit to venture into different and new approaches and methods, continuously trying out and improving one's way of working.
- Deep conceptual understanding of learning-process and systems approaches as vehicles for self-development and the capacity to handle these approaches flexibly and to adapt them to situation-specific requirements (process management).
- Creativity to invent or adapt methods and tools to correspond to the requirements of the process (e.g. managing conflict).
- Excellent communication and facilitation skills based on a positive attitude towards clients and performance.
- Skills in communicating and sharing freely with others and in identifying effective linkages among people and institutions and also between technical disciplines, with the aim of "building bridges" and bringing actors together.
- Technical knowledge needed to advise farmers on topics related to solving their immediate farming problems so that they can manage their natural resources effectively and reach food security. This does not require deep specialised knowledge on certain commodity crops, but rather broad knowledge on issues such as farm management, soil and water management, basic crop production, basic animal production and new areas that are becoming more important (e.g. marketing and processing, urban agriculture). Specialised knowledge can be obtained externally, if required.
- Knowledge and understanding of management and organisation of extension, including organisational development towards an effective extension organisation (what is good management, leadership etc.) so that field agents know their rights and opportunities to claim support and to contribute to improving overall organisational performance.

This analysis revealed a much stronger focus on personality development than in Zimbabwe, and was crucial in the adaptation of the design of learning programmes.

How to get there? The foundation of PEA capability development

It is obvious that PEA demands a cadre of field agents who are professional and experienced. They need to be able to manage dynamic complexity, which is almost the opposite of the linear, mechanistic and rigid teaching schedule of the conventional extension agent. Competence development needs to stimulate and enhance the cognitive, behavioural / attitudinal and emotional levels simultaneously in order to build the capacity of individual personalities to act in a different way:

- **At cognitive level,** the major thrust is to open up minds to lateral thinking in terms of processes and systems perspectives. This shift can be facilitated by critical self-analysis and challenging one's own mind-set, and by exposure to various alternative concepts and paradigms. Creativity and mental flexibility need to be enhanced through experimentation with new ideas and social learning in action. Without a focus on creativity, people fall back into their old patterns of problem-solving, thereby creating the typical more-of-the-same situation, although the problems have new dimensions. Orientation towards a vision, development of guiding principles for interventions, conceptual and operational frameworks as mentioned above can inspire and help

people overcome their initial fear of the unknown by providing the understanding, security and confidence to engage in new ways of working.

- **At behavioural / attitudinal level,** prevailing values and social norms and expected behaviour need to be critically reviewed. For example, formal education is often valued much more than experiential, non-formal knowledge. This places farmers with their local knowledge and also the extension agents' common sense in a diminutive position. Overvaluing the external exotic inputs over the local intrinsic knowledge of communities often undermines the common sense and entrepreneurial spirit that drive development. This denial of one's own roots and knowledge creates enormous insecurity and inhibits an open dialogue. Thus facilitation of change means that social norms, values, attitudes and behaviour need to be made visible so that the extension agents can discover them through self-analysis. Such analysis should confront people with the consequences of the status quo so that alternatives can be considered and decided upon.

- **At emotional level,** confidence, self-esteem, "groundedness" and cultural identity are needed when managing complex social processes in communities, which are characterised by continuous uncertainty. The fact that *"the only thing that is sustainable is change"* requires a different way of dealing with uncertainty. Facilitators need to be secure in their own insecurity; otherwise they will be lost. A sound degree of common sense, empathy, self-awareness and self-regulation, in other words, "emotional intelligence" (Goleman 1998) and personality, helps the facilitator to "read the process", thus reducing the uncertainty and creating a reference base for decision-making. Enhancing emotional intelligence and intrinsic motivation is probably the most difficult aspect of developing competence in process facilitation, as only gradual engagement in a process and experimenting with it can achieve this. While phases of insecurity are necessary to break old patterns in any change process, it is important to start a learning situation with small steps in which success is likely. This procedure allows confidence to increase relatively quickly, while the other factors develop gradually and at the same time - with all the ups and downs typical of processes in which an emotional involvement and often a motivational drive are inherent.

The three levels are integrally linked and strongly influence each other during the learning process. It is not a matter of addressing them separately, but of being aware when and how to deal with different aspects in an iterative approach. One-off events can trigger some awareness, but rarely lead to sustained change. Experiential learning through iterative action and self-reflection based on practice in the field as well as theory has high probability of leading towards ownership and internalisation of learning focused on personal / attitudinal development. Our experience has shown that this approach of learning by doing through intervals of training and practice periods, backed by peer-learning groups and coaching, has great potential to develop these skills gradually.

Conducive organisational climate: The capabilities of individuals were developed in the wider context of organisational development, in contrast to some other experiences with participatory approaches in which the capabilities of individuals have been developed without adapting certain variables within the organisation, e.g. management styles, incentives, procedures, clarifying individual roles. Details of this process are

described by Hagmann *et al* (1998). Without an accompanying process of organisational change, PEA could risk being a one-off ephemeral project experience.

Curriculum development through action research

In the first learning phase for competence development from 1994 to 1997, the principles and conditions discussed above were put into practice in a pilot learning programme over 18 months to develop an experience-based strategy and learning curriculum for PEA competence development with a group of 23 field extension agents (see Box 2). Based on these insights, a set of materials was developed and published to support large-scale training: a guide to the PEA approach, a training guide and a video (see references).

Box 2: Iterative learning programme in PEA

The sequence of large-scale training of field staff in PEA follows the action-learning and reflection cycle that was found appropriate during the pilot phase (details of the curriculum are described in the trainer's guide):

Phase 1 constitutes the initial training in PEA over a period of two weeks. It is based in the training centre and exposes the trainees to the guiding principles, core concepts and methods of PEA. Facilitators use the PEA video and written material as well as interactive small-group exercises, role plays and case studies to expose the trainees to different aspects of the approach. Sharing of trainees' experiences and field practise in selected participatory methodologies and tools are integral components of the course. At the end of Phase 1, trainees develop action plans to be implemented with communities / groups in their working environment.

Phase 2 is a six-month period during which the trainees try out several tools and techniques of PEA in the field, based on their action plans. The extension agents are encouraged to collaborate with one another in the field. This has proved helpful in enhancing individual confidence. Coaching by trainers is available.

Phase 3 is a one-week feedback workshop, during which trainees reflect on their individual and collective experiences, highlight the actual problems they faced, e.g. in handling intra-group conflicts, in applying specific methods and tools. Trainees collectively seek ways of overcoming such problems, and their capabilities are enhanced through training in other tools. Facilitators do not just impart purely technical skills; they continuously monitor and analyse trainees' attitudes, behaviour and perceptions towards local people. Phase 3 recapitulates conceptual issues, the principles of transformation, and aspects of farmer experimentation and innovation development. It is not as highly structured as the training in Phase 1, as it responds to the trainees' further training needs. In order to provide orientation and further exposure, a field trip is made to an area where PEA has been implemented successfully. At the end of this workshop, trainees develop a second action plan for implementation in their working environment.

Phase 4 is another six-month period of field implementation of the second set of action plans, in the same mode as in Phase 2.

Phase 5 is similar to Phase 3, whereby trainees again share their field experiences and are trained further in PEA concepts and tools. While this phase constitutes the final formal PEA training workshop, learning is a continuous process.

The fact that we started with training of field-level staff before higher-level staff created an interesting dynamic, as this meant that the field staff knew more about PEA than did their superiors. In general, the effect of this "discomfort model" of training was positive: many superiors were very keen to be trained themselves, as soon as they realised that they knew less than their subordinates. The usual hierarchy of training in cascades, with all its limitations, was interrupted and probably would not have been effective for such a demanding transformation of extension. In some cases, however, we waited too long and the distance grew too big, resulting in resistance of the superiors because they felt threatened of losing face.

The five phases followed in Zimbabwe were not sufficient in the case of South Africa and so we included an additional workshop phase. The coaching and mentoring system in South Africa also had to be more intensive, because the overall competence level of extension agents was, for historical reasons, lower than in Zimbabwe. Once the process skills had improved, technical training programmes were very necessary to equip the extension agents with technical ideas and understanding to support the innovation process at farmers' level. The PEA training proved to be very demanding, especially in the early stages when trainer competencies, organisational skills and adequate resource allocation are crucial.

Going to scale: training of all staff in PEA

With a staff complement of about 300 field extension agents in Masvingo Province, it became obvious that, if one relied on one or two external facilitators, it would take a very long time to train all staff in PEA. Training of trainers within AGRITEX-Masvingo was therefore chosen as a strategy to achieve fast and wide coverage. A total of 20 trainers were trained, and each of the seven districts of Masvingo Province now has a team of in-house PEA trainers. Most were recruited from the pilot group of 23 field extension agents, and their training skills were further developed through training and coaching by outside specialists. This strategy put the practitioners in the forefront of training, with the training specialist having a coordinating role rather than that of "expert".

This large-scale programme of developing competence in PEA demanded a substantial investment in terms of resources and time. By 2001, most AGRITEX- Masvingo staff had gone through the five major phases of learning, and other provinces in Zimbabwe had started. However, on account of political interference, the programme came to a standstill in 2001. Extension agents were mainly used for non-extension functions in the newly occupied and resettled areas, and the Department was completely restructured. The political situation no longer allowed facilitation of emancipative processes, as it would have been seen as subversive.

In South Africa, a scaling-up programme through competence development started in 2001. The trainers were recruited from the first group of experienced PEA practitioners, who were prepared to become trainers themselves - coached by experienced trainers. By the time of writing in 2003, more than 150 officers are engaged in on-going learning processes. The successes in Limpopo Province triggered a great interest in two other provinces, which are now also engaging in learning programmes.

Experiences, outcomes and lessons learnt

The outcomes of the pilot group and large-scale programmes in developing competence in PEA in Zimbabwe and South Africa were analysed at farmer and field-agent levels to derive lessons with regard to learning and organisational capabilities.

Outcomes of PEA implementation at farmer level

Farmers' response to implementation of PEA by the extension agents during their learning process was encouraging. Farmers have taken on ownership and responsibility and, in some cases, even paid the expenses for their own exposure trips and field days. This indicates that the process of self-organisation and development of demand-oriented extension is well underway. In a self-evaluation, extension agents in the pilot group set themselves performance criteria that showed their high degree of competence in PEA. In the practical interaction with farmers at the beginning of PEA facilitation, the extension agents faced severe challenges in the areas of leadership, cooperation and power relations in communities, as well as in the shallow and skewed results from initial identification and analysis of local problems and needs of different groups in the communities. The "problems" and "needs" turned out to be symptoms and were strategically positioned towards potential donor contributions. Certain groups tried to influence the needs analysis in their favour. These difficulties relate to the core of PEA aims and have always existed but were not dealt with. Now, they were recognised as stumbling blocks and openly addressed.

Photo by: Jürgen Hagmann

A subgroup of women discusses the changes and impacts they see as a result of Participatory Extension Approaches.

In South Africa, a detailed impact assessment in pilot communities revealed high impact in soft/process aspects such as self-organisation, social energy etc. and hard impacts in terms of technical innovations that yielded substantial benefits at individual and community level by creating economies of scale in input and output marketing. The impacts seen during exposure visits to communities were strong enough to convince senior management of the extension department to drive the process of integrating PEA as a mainstream extension approach in Limpopo Province.

Outcomes in terms of individual and organisational transformation

With respect to the impact on the extension agents' competence to implement PEA, the results of the transformation process depended greatly on personality and were not uniform across staff. Some skills (e.g. facilitation of local organisational development, conflict resolution) proved to be difficult to master. The analytical skills, critical self-reflection, and culture of inquiry and questioning needed for facilitating PEA have developed slowly and not homogenously. Over time, these skills became stronger, but a shift from a non-questioning hierarchical culture to a liberal, self-responsible, performance-based culture probably takes more than 18 months. The same applies to developing lateral thinking and flexibility. However, it was encouraging to see the wealth of ideas generated by the trainees to solve the major problems. The attitudes of waiting to be told what to do and of inability to solve problems themselves have changed into pro-active development of solutions and mutual help to overcome problems. This indicates that the self-responsibility and problem-solving capacity of the extension agents was strengthened during the process of competence development.

Key issues emerged with regard to incentives for change, as there were no formal incentives for good PEA practitioners (e.g. better remuneration, promotion), neither within AGRITEX in Zimbabwe nor within the Limpopo Department of Agriculture. Often, the reward systems did not favour PEA at all, but focused on projects that extension agents had to implement. Nevertheless, there is great enthusiasm and commitment to the approach. In an evaluation, the pilot group in Zimbabwe defined their motivation to practise PEA as being value-based and emotional rather than driven by material incentives (see Box 3).

Another major motivating factor was linked to an increased recognition of the extension agents' work due to increased work output. They emphasised that, until recently, hardly anybody cared about their work, neither the "recipients" nor the superiors. Now that things are happening visibly, everybody becomes interested and suddenly their work is being recognised. This revealed that their work ethic is higher than anticipated *("we all want to do a good job")*. However, they need to have opportunities to show that they are able to perform and they need recognition from inside and outside the organisation. This is an incentive that does not cost anything, but requires changes in the attitudes and culture of the whole extension organisation. The initial "fire" and motivation of extension agents does not last more than one to two years. If it is not backed up with other incentives such as recognition by superiors, promotions and material incentives for performance, the PEA practitioners become frustrated and seek "greener pastures". As these individuals have developed highly sought-after competence, the best ones are quickly drawn away from the public service.

Box 3: Becoming active members of farmer-development teams as a source of energy for transformation

The responses in the evaluation by the pilot group of extension agents indicate that trying out PEA has created an intrinsic motivation based on better relationships and greater recognition of farmers' achievements. The improved relationships with farmers, now without tensions and friction, highlight how uneasy some extension agents felt when they had to impose their programme on farmers. Most of them obviously did not believe in their mission of *"educating farmers"* and had to operate in a schizophrenic environment. Farmers did not own the extension programme and, consequently, did not take active part in it. This disharmony caused work pressure and emotional stress among the extension agents. Accordingly, they perceived their workload to be higher than it is with PEA because now *"farmers carry out their own programmes with minimum assistance"*. The comment *"Shared responsibility is a relief"* points to the reduced stress. This was also expressed in other words: *"... before, we only used one brain and farmers' brains remained dormant; in PEA, we use all brains together"*. The increased ownership of the programmes by farmers was perceived as a positive change in farmers' attitude. The extension agents linked this with increased sustainability of the programme. They also emphasised that they are proud to see that farmers are more confident and self-determined. This pride reflects not only the relationship between farmers and extension agents; it also indicates that the agents themselves have gained cultural identity. The statement: *"I am now one of them"*, means that the schizophrenia has ended. Through recognising and valuing farmers' knowledge, the extension agents also value their own origin and cultural identity, as many of them are from peasant backgrounds. In this respect, the process helped them to gain strength and confidence in themselves, a fact that was reflected in the behaviour of the group in general. This personal development became one of the major incentives.

Lessons in terms of design and management of the learning process

The major success factor in competence development was the iterative nature of the learning and coaching process over 18 months, which made it possible to work within the reality and problems faced by the extension agents. The systematic follow-through of the sequence revealed a shift in the problems of extension agents with their increasing engagement in the process over time. While the five phases in competence development ended after 18 months, it was crucial to maintain back-up mechanisms for continuous, long-term learning to improve service provision (e.g. peer-learning groups and exchange fora at District level). Without a continuous learning mechanisms supported by superiors and peers, the quality of PEA implementation declined seriously over time. Thus, a quality assurance system in the form of peer coaching, competitions and performance management needs to be negotiated and implemented rigorously.

The importance of actively linking theory and practice to build the competence in process facilitation was confirmed. However, not everyone is a conceptual thinker or a flexible process manager. The appropriate mixture of structure and process in learning is one of the biggest challenges for the trainers. Provision of structural elements (e.g. stepwise procedures, tools) helps to create pathways for action but, at the same time, these structures should not become blueprints. Therefore, the mixture needs to be carefully monitored and flexibly applied. The piloting of competence development as a learning laboratory for testing, modifying and refining PEA through trial and error was crucial in the development of a high-quality learning programme. This needs to be on-going, as there is always scope to improve.

Lessons in terms of organisational capabilities for service delivery

PEA competence development was positioned within the framework of improving extension service delivery as a whole. Key factors for success in this organisational change were:

- **Allowing innovation within organisations:** Flexible development of an approach in pilot learning, as demonstrated in Zimbabwe and South Africa, needs flexible funding arrangements that allow time for experimentation and innovation before expecting any tangible results. Ideally, this can be taken on by projects that have a certain "venture capital" beyond line budgets. However, it is important that line budgets are put in place as soon as senior management has committed itself.

- **Using local pilot experiences in PEA facilitated by extension staff to convince senior management.** In both Zimbabwe and South Africa, exposure to the local-level impact convinced decision-makers of the need to scale up. Acceptance of the approach was particularly strong because it was grounded in concrete field experience of its own staff, and the know-how was within the organisation. Therefore, scaling-up became demand-driven, as senior management acknowledged the appropriateness of PEA and the need for all staff to share the same philosophy.

- **Building practitioners to become in-house trainers:** Training of trainers as in-house facilitators has been important in terms of know-how management and internalisation within the organisation. It also positively affected the organisational learning in the sense that competent practitioners - not academics - became the trainers. However, good selection of the initial learning group is crucial. To ensure a fast process of change, the group should consist of the most motivated and committed staff. In addition, the extra burden of becoming a trainer needs to be rewarded; otherwise, motivation will drop quickly.

- **Integrating competence development and organisational capacity building:** PEA competence development could be successful only because the organisational factors were dealt with through the OD programme. If problems with hierarchical organisational culture, bureaucratic procedures and management styles are not dealt with, any field-level motivation will be reduced in the long run. Therefore, a change process with OD and PEA as "delivery software" is integral in improving the performance of public-service organisations.

- **Developing high-quality competence enhances harmonisation of extension approaches:** The quality of the competence development and the comprehensive inclusive approach made PEA attractive outside of the extension organisations. Increasingly, other line ministries, NGOs and consulting firms are becoming interested in getting trained and adopting the approach. This offers a good chance to coordinate and harmonise service provision in the rural areas and thus to eliminate the often contradictory approaches (e.g. with regard to self-reliance and free handouts). This was an unintentional but important impact.

- **Building support and supervision structures and performance management for continued learning and quality improvement.** In South Africa, a specific success factor was the organisational set-up at District-level. We focused strongly on creating the support and supervision structure at this level with clear lines of reporting and accountability so that the PEA process became well embedded within the daily management of extension. This has been a major challenge that we did not pursue so strongly in Zimbabwe and that enhanced the process in South Africa.

Future challenges

The major challenge in the future is to institutionalise a continuous process of learning and optimising service-delivery approaches in the whole extension organisation and, together with other service providers, particularly in the Districts. This will be difficult if the managers in the organisation do not share the vision and philosophy of participatory and open management. Continuity is often another problem: when managers are re-deployed, and new managers not familiar with the process take over, they cannot support it. As the case of Zimbabwe has shown, sudden political turnarounds can easily derail such processes in a devastating way. In addition, PEA trainers are now attractive on the free market and gain better-paid jobs outside government organisations. This further threatens such processes if they depend too much on individuals and do not build enough competence within the organisation early in the process.

In general, the biggest challenge is to go full scale when large numbers of agents have to be trained in a short time, being aware that developing such competencies is a long process. Managers who prefer fast results and "quick-and-dirty" solutions over and above solid foundations through high-quality learning and competence development need to be fully engaged in the process, thus creating ownership on their part. At the same time, we need to explore other ways and strategies to scale up more quickly and efficiently. The learning programmes need to be focused even more on personality development, as being done in South Africa. With increasing knowledge about the factors that make such processes work, there is also scope to improve the learning system.

As soon as staff members have reached a sound level of process facilitation skills, they need to be re-focused in terms of the technical content of extension. New areas such as marketing and processing, in which extension has hardly had a stake thus far, need to be developed as technical thrusts for better service delivery. Also other issues such as farmer-paid services and pluralism in services need to be addressed. The key to making services responsive to clients in a sustainable way is to develop mechanisms for quality assurance and impact assessment by the clients. Such mechanisms need to be progressively developed by all interested groups.

Thus far, PEA competence development was carried out to re-orient existing extension agents. In future, one needs to look to the training institutions where new agents are educated. The curricula of agricultural colleges in Zimbabwe and South Africa are still largely reductionist and disciplinary, based on traditional syllabi focused on production and commodities. The primacy of extension and learning must be re-established in such centres of education - otherwise, we will live even longer with obsolete paradigms that do not include critical contemporary learning.

The professional profile required for field facilitators of PEA demands a radical turnaround from the present situation. Until now, field staff received the least attention and was the least paid, the least educated and often the least motivated. Using the analogy of a company, they would be the sales representatives who are not given a chance to succeed and who ultimately ruin the company. Now, if they are to become

true "sales reps" of their organisation, they need to be the most competent and service-oriented so that the company, or in this case the extension service organisation, can flourish and cope with the new challenges of rural service delivery. The two cases in Zimbabwe and South Africa can contribute some lessons to the "long march" towards this huge transformation.

Acknowledgements

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Learning materials on PEA
1. Learning together through participatory extension: a guide to an approach developed in Zimbabwe
2. Learning together through participatory extension: a trainer's manual
3. Learning together through participatory extension: a video on an approach developed in Zimbabwe