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Scaling-up of Participatory Approaches through Institutionalization in Government Services: the case of agricultural extension in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe

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Chapter 8 begins by describing how two agricultural extension projects in Zimbabwe switched from a conventional to a participatory approach in which elements of training for transformation (TFT) and PRA were tested. It then analyses how the approach was subsequently institutionalized in the agricultural extension service in Masvingo Province. The strategy adopted to institutionalize the participatory extension approach involved networking with other organizations, establishing common goals and launching a campaign to familiarize staff with the new procedure. The provision of ongoing training and follow-up over the medium-to-long-term was also considered crucial to facilitate the required attitudinal change.

The chapter concludes that the institutionalization of participatory approaches into hierarchically structured organizations is a highly complex intervention. In order to succeed, major changes are required in planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation procedures. Such profound changes require a process of at least five to ten years' duration as well as strong commitment by institutional staff at all levels, including donors.

Concept and approach for participatory innovation development and extension

In the Conservation Tillage for Sustainable Crop Production System project (CONTILL), adaptive on-farm trials in a farming-systems perspective were in use from 1991. Early experiences of technology development between small-holder farmers and extension staff soon revealed that the approach needed to be refined further into what would become a comprehensive methodology for participatory extension.

It proved to be unlikely that flexible, often site-specific innovations developed in the framework of the project would spread effectively if promoted through the existing approach of the agricultural extension service (AGRI-TEX). Two main limitations were identified (for more detail, see Madondo, 1992, 1993): (i) the outreach of the extension service concentrated on a 'master-farmer programme' which involved only about 10 per cent of the farming households; (ii) these farmers were being taught normative, blanket recommendations delivered in a top-down manner, a far cry from the dialogical, interactive-learning approach we wanted to introduce. Besides the question of technical innovations, it was also recognized that developments and innovations in the socio-organizational sphere had to be considered and addressed.

A participatory extension approach was developed, therefore, not as a desk-based blueprint, but as the result of a process driven by practical experience gained while working with individuals and communities (Hagmann *et al.*, 1997).

The goal of the new participatory approach is to achieve the sustainable management of natural resources and higher levels of food security in small-holder farming areas in Zimbabwe. It aims to do this by developing and spreading sustainable farming practices and enabling rural communities better to handle their problems without depending on incentives from outside. It addresses communities as a whole, as well as individual families.

Participatory innovation development and extension is based on three inter-linked concepts: dialogical communication, farmer experimentation, and the strengthening of the self-organizational capacities of rural communities. The encouragement of active participation and dialogue by all actors at the local level as partners, e.g. farmers and their institutions, extensionists and researchers, is the mainstay of the approach.

Farmer experimentation

Dialogue and farmer experimentation is being encouraged in an environment where a powerful top-down extension service has considered farmers' knowledge to be backward and of no importance for nearly three generations, and where farmers have been conditioned to accept externally developed standardized technologies (Madondo, 1995). The stimulation of local experimentation has proved to be useful in recognizing the value of traditional and indigenous forms of knowledge, and has strengthened the farmers' confidence in finding their own solutions, and choosing options appropriate to their specific ecological, economic and socio-cultural conditions and circumstances. This process aims to transform the present standard-oriented extension methodology into an output-oriented approach in which general impacts, such as the efficient conservation of soil and water rather than the adoption of one specific technique are, for example, considered indicators of success.

Strengthening capacities for self-organization at the grassroots level

Strengthening the capacities of rural communities to organize often requires improvements in communication flows at the level of village institutions, which farmers themselves have assessed as too hierarchical, weak and closed

to allow for the active participation of villagers in community activities (Hagmann, 1993). In addition, the conflict between traditional leadership structures and modern, government-introduced systems of representation has weakened local institutions and precipitated authority conflicts. Leadership training and the facilitation of dialogical communication in village workshops are elements which have shown high potential for improving cooperation, sharing knowledge and improving the participation of all gender and age groups in extension and rural development (Hagmann and Murwira, 1996).

The strengthening of local institutions, together with the increase in confidence that comes from the gain in knowledge and recognition during the experimentation process, creates an atmosphere conducive to the sharing of experiences, innovations and knowledge, and leads to effective farmer to farmer extension.

Philosophy and tools

Our experience has shown that the concept of strengthening local organizations, in particular its component of stimulating leadership and cooperation, requires more than a number of practical PRA tools to set it in motion (see, for example, Theis and Grady, 1991). A broader philosophical framework for the participatory development process was required and introduced in the form of training for transformation (TFT). This training programme was developed in Kenya in 1974 and adapted to Zimbabwean conditions by Hope and Timmel (1984). It originates in the pedagogy of Freire (1982) and is built on the notion of conscientization through participatory education, where learning is based on the experience of confronting and reflecting together on problems and issues as they occur. Teaching consists of facilitating dialogues centred on the technique of problem posing. Identifying, 'naming', to use the Freirean terminology, and reflecting on problems requires the facilitation of communication flows which allow groups to ask relevant questions and find causes and solutions for themselves, rather than receive teaching based on 'foreign' knowledge and realities.

TFT provides concrete methods and tools (e.g. codes, role plays, poems) to implement Freire's approach practically. It empowers local people to gain greater control over their circumstances by participating actively in their own development through the sharing and joint construction of ideas and knowledge. It stresses the importance of participation and cooperation as key elements in the building and strengthening of institutions which enable people to become self-reliant. It also aims to strengthen people's confidence, and includes tools to facilitate social analysis to help groups find the causes of problems (Hope and Timmel, 1984). The philosophical depth of Freire's concepts of dialogue and conscientization has made his broad approach relevant and powerful for people of different disciplines, backgrounds, status and personality. It manages to integrate and unite divergent interests under one umbrella.

The approach is of great importance in societies where rapid and disruptive socio-cultural change has weakened social structures based on traditional rules and regulations (Hagmann, 1993; Nyagumbo, 1995). In our experience, a new 'umbrella' which can replace or at least partly substitute for a greater social cohesion that existed in the past is particularly important. The human

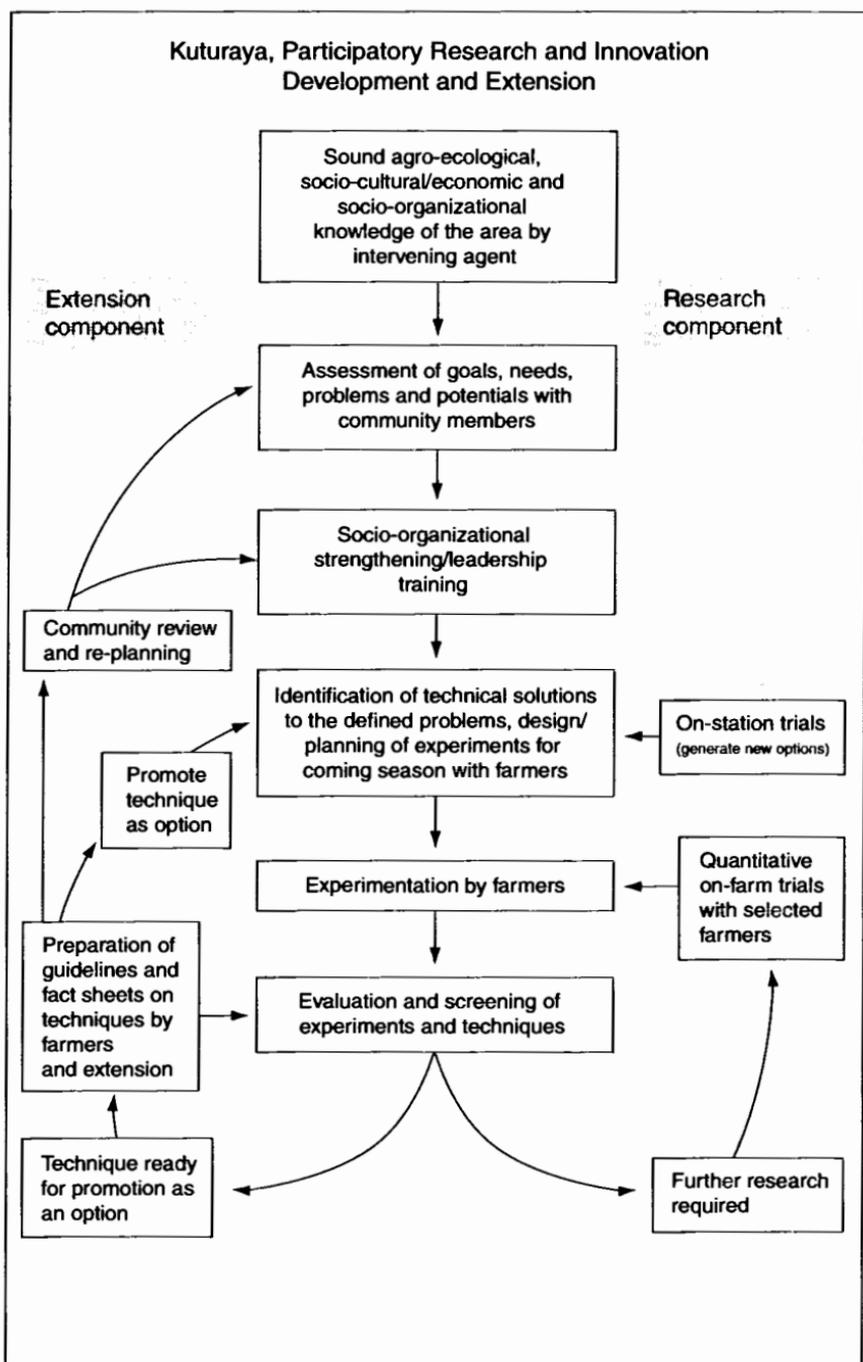


Fig. 8.1: Conceptual model for participatory research/innovation development and extension

desire for social harmony is very strong, in particular in the socio-cultural set-up within Zimbabwe, and largely determines most of the decisions taken by individuals and groups. Without providing a platform to develop a new umbrella, cooperation and leadership structures in rural communities will generally remain weak and a prey to unresolved social conflicts, which in turn adversely affect innovation development and extension.

Farmers are introduced to TFT at the beginning of the process in awareness-raising community workshops. Elements of TFT are utilized selectively and complemented by tools originating in PRA, diagnostic survey (Raintree, 1987) and goal-oriented planning (ZOPP) (GTZ, 1987), as well as by materials and aids for dialogical teaching to initiate and follow up on participatory innovation development and extension.

Figure 8.1 illustrates the concepts of participatory research, and innovation development and extension that form the core of the approach. It consists of three main components: (i) the 'process of learning and development through experimentation'; (ii) the research component and (iii) the extension component.

- *The 'learning and development through experimentation' process* The main process (centre column, Fig. 8.1) can be conceived as 'learning and development through experimentation', initiated and facilitated by extension workers. It is people-centred in that villagers analyse and define their problems, needs and potentials, and the activities they want to carry out. Outside intervention contributes methodologies to facilitate the process, raise awareness and provide inspiration through the presentation of potential technical options but people are not pushed by outsiders to carry out certain preconceived activities. It is an open-ended development process in which research and extension agencies do their best to participate in peoples' programmes and not vice versa.
- *Development of innovative techniques (research component in Fig. 8.1)* Innovation development is based on the trial-and-error principle. Farmers are encouraged to experiment with ideas and techniques emanating from their own knowledge base, on their own or in combination with outside sources. The problems identified during the needs and problems assessment form the basis for a research agenda and the experimentation process. If the specific technical processes are not fully understood, the farmers' ideas are taken to the research station for further research under controlled conditions.
- *Spreading innovative techniques (extension component in Fig. 8.1)* Spread is facilitated through the strengthening of the self-organizational capacities of rural communities and institutions. Improvements in communication structures and skills are facilitated with the help of the TFT philosophy and tools, whereby an environment is created in which people feel free to communicate and share their skills and experiences with all the members of the community. Once this level of communication flow is reached in the communities, higher levels of farmer-to-farmer sharing and extension should result. In technical terms, it is not new technologies as such that are promoted but rather that experimentation based largely on indigenous technical knowledge (ITK) is encouraged. The experiences and results of the experiments are shared between farmers and extension staff,



Fig. 8.2: The main elements of the facilitator role

and contribute to the preparation of guidelines and training materials which focus on understanding the factors which make certain techniques succeed or fail. Important tools are mid-season evaluation tours and annual community reviews where technical and socio-organizational progress is reviewed and evaluated, and adaptations to planning forecasts made.

The new role of the agricultural extension worker

At present agricultural extension workers (AEWs) in the projects see themselves as teachers. A participatory approach requires a major role shift from teacher to facilitator. This implies that the AEW is no longer the main carrier of a message or knowledge, but the one who coordinates and organizes the acquisition of knowledge from several sources. Using the TFT philosophy and tools, the AEW initiates a participatory process in communities in which the focus is on local institutional strengthening, needs' identification and prioritization. S/he assists farmers in facilitating discussions around different options, for example by organizing 'look-and-learn' visits to innovative farmers and research stations, and encourages farmers to experiment with options and ideas as they come up. The AEW also encourages farmers to hold feedback sessions for those who could not participate directly. With time, the facilitator's role will be taken over by community leaders who are in the process of being trained in facilitation skills. Figure 8.2 summarises the main elements of the facilitator's role.

Strategy for institutionalizing the participatory approach

Pilot activities were carried out by the CONTILL Project, the ITDG Food Security Project and the Community-level Planning and Development operations of the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDEP) which is supported by GTZ. These activities served as case studies which monitored the processes, impacts and reactions of both farmers and extension staff to the introduction of the new approach. The success of the three projects in terms of the development and extension of innovations (Hagmann *et al.*, 1996), improvements in the organizational capacity of the communities (Hagmann and Murwira, 1994) and the growth in the number of community-

planned and -implemented projects (Görické, 1993) provided, we felt, sufficient justification to scale up the approach. A strategy for institutionalizing the participatory approach was therefore developed for Masvingo Province. Its key elements are described below.

- *Networking* Several organizations and projects in Masvingo Province use participatory approaches in one way or another. The focuses differ, but all of them work in close collaboration with AGRITEX, the extension service, as this is the institution which is most strongly represented at field level. The sharing of experiences between projects has been extremely valuable, and we were able to cooperate closely with ITDG and IRDEP and coordinate activities designed to facilitate the institutionalization of participatory approaches in AGRITEX. The informal networking and joint lobbying has allowed us to learn from each other's experiences. We also worked on joint papers and workshops. It was crucial to build up a critical mass of people in the different organizations that could draw attention to the participatory approaches and corresponding pilot activities. At the end of 1994, after several presentations in various provincial, national and international workshops, the network was expanding as various organizations from other provinces also showed a vivid interest in adopting a more participatory style in their work.

- *Familiarization of staff of all levels*

Once the participatory approaches had gained a foothold in AGRITEX's operations, familiarization of extension staff of all levels became a priority. Besides providing reports and other relevant literature, several workshops were organized and supported by the three projects. These workshops were combined with field visits to the case-study areas in which participatory approaches were presented and experiences discussed. The field visits enabled higher-level staff to get fully involved in the process and decide to adopt the new ideas. Conversations with farmers who analysed the difference between the conventional and the participatory approach were particularly convincing. In addition to these formal activities, informal discussions based on good personal relationships, together with informal field visits, proved to be key elements in familiarizing AGRITEX officers with the participatory process and convincing them of its worth. Once high-level officers were convinced of the potential of the new approach, AGRITEX Masvingo organized a familiarization workshop for all its staff in the province in 1995.

- *Elaboration of a training and follow-up programme for extension workers*

After the familiarization of the key players, a systematic training of 30 extension workers in TFI, and participatory tools and methods drawn from PRA began. An initial two-week course attended by extension workers and farmers together was followed by a report-back workshop to the communities which had chosen the farmers as their representatives, and to AGRITEX district staff. Extension workers then chose communities in which they wanted to apply and practise their new skills. A follow-up facilitation training was also provided over one year at 3-6 monthly intervals. These follow-up workshops gave extension workers a chance to assist each other, share experiences and improve their facilitation skills continuously in day-

to-day practice. The experiences of this training process were still being documented at the time of writing. A final evaluation will reveal its effectiveness.

- *Framework for organizational development*

Based on the increased awareness for a required change within the organization, AGRITEX Masvingo recently launched an organizational-development programme, supported by GTZ/IRDEP and initiated by the Chief Agricultural Extension Officer, whose purpose was to improve 'relevant aggregate output at all levels of AGRITEX staff in Masvingo Province' (AGRITEX, 1995). As participatory extension had shown to be the most promising approach for improving the extension-delivery system, it became an integral part of the organizational-development strategy.

Lessons learnt from experience

Our experiences with institutionalization in Masvingo were based on an effort over a period of two years to integrate participatory approaches, not only in the operations of the projects in question but also in the very structures of the project's systems of organization. The full cycle, including training and follow-up programmes for extension workers, was initiated only in 1994, however, and has not yet been completed. Some of the constraints we faced in attempting to institutionalize a more participatory approach are discussed below. More details are described in Haggmann, Chuma, Murwira and Moyo (1995).

Participatory approaches showed high potential for increasing the efficiency of extension and rural development activities

The impact of the use of participatory approaches in the three projects was positive in three ways: (i) greater farmer participation was stimulated in innovation development; (ii) increased rates of adoption of technologies and innovations were recorded; and (iii) improvements were made in the capacity of communities to organize and set their own targets. In some areas, up to 80 per cent of the households were involved in developing and testing soil- and water-conservation techniques identified and promoted largely as a result of participatory research.

Implementing participatory approaches requires a change in attitudes

The case studies showed that a change in the attitudes of extension staff towards smallholder farmers is the key determinant for the success of the approach. In a hierarchically structured society, where hierarchy is based mostly on the level of formal education, it is difficult for formally educated staff to accept farmers' traditional- and experience-based knowledge systems as equal, and to learn from them. Attitudes cannot be changed only by applying certain participatory methods. That requires a philosophical framework sufficient to create conditions conducive to such a process. TFT (Hope and Timmel, 1984) is an approach that has the philosophical depth needed to frame a 'change in attitudes' in a broader context.

Ability to develop participatory skills depends on personalities

As attitudes are dependent largely on personality types, it is doubtful whether staff who have been professionally socialized and to a certain extent conditioned under colonial rule can truly reverse top-down approaches as this would force them to question most of their working life. The same applies to older farmers who have accepted a subordinate role and now identify with it. The impact chiefly depends, therefore, on the personality of each individual AEW. One cannot expect this to be uniform.

Training in participatory approaches as a continuous, medium-term process

Training courses in TFT and participatory tools were initially successful, but it was revealed that without a consistent follow-up of the process of change over a medium-term time span, the impact is low. Intensive training, support and follow-up are extremely important in order to avoid these kinds of initiatives being labelled participatory simply because participation is the talk of the day (something which has occurred with other approaches in the past). During the transition phase in particular, extension workers need strong support to overcome the insecurity and fear of losing power that often comes from giving up the teacher role.

Developing more effective staff-appraisal systems

Various levels of staff have frequently misinterpreted participatory approaches as 'AEWs pulling out', 'letting farmers do what they want', and as no longer being accountable for failures. To avoid this danger, besides proper training and follow-up, a more effective and appropriate staff-appraisal and -counselling system (including new types of performance criteria) has to be developed and made effective from the moment the participatory approach begins to be implemented. This requires a strong commitment on the part of higher-level staff to provide direction and create incentives for extension workers to sustain the participatory process. A key move has been to encourage appraisals of extension workers by farmers themselves, so increasing the accountability of extension workers towards their clients (i.e: the farmers). Farmer appraisals have since been integrated into the monitoring and evaluation system of the projects. Another important job-evaluation criterion is the AEW's performance in documenting farmer knowledge. This provides an incentive for the AEW to learn from farmers and recognize the value and importance of indigenous knowledge systems.

Developing criteria and indicators for monitoring and evaluating the impacts of participatory extension

The present M&E system is still based on quantitative indicators which measure the adoption of certain practices designed to increase and sustain production. Such indicators cannot measure the success or otherwise of participatory processes. More thinking is needed to develop qualitative indicators which better reflect the medium- to long-term impacts of working with participatory approaches. But aspects such as increases in self-reliance and

self-organization are notoriously difficult to measure, even subjectively. Experience from other comparable projects would be most welcome.

Conclusions and recommendations

- (1) The institutionalization of participatory approaches into a hierarchically structured organization is a highly complex intervention that must be considered a medium- to long-term objective. It requires a major reorientation of planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation systems for which high commitment from all staff is imperative.
- (2) Case studies or pilot activities in which participatory approaches are developed, tested and adapted are important. They serve as practical examples to familiarize and convince institutional staff and thereby influence policies from the bottom-up. Detailed monitoring of those operations should be continued in parallel with other aspects of institutionalization. Gradual rather than rapid scaling-up is recommended in order to detect pitfalls and mistakes as the process unfolds.
- (3) It is crucial to make intensive efforts to familiarize and train staff of all levels. Networking and coordination of activities with other projects also appear to be important elements in building up the critical mass needed to sustain the process.
- (4) Once there is a commitment from higher-level staff, intensive training, support and follow-up of field extension staff must have priority in the process of institutionalizing participatory approaches. Extension workers who are at the interface between farmers and the extension agency require new skills and competences if they are to switch from a teaching to a facilitating role. As staff turnover at the field level is low, intensive training at this level has a better chance of a lasting impact.
- (5) Despite the favourable conditions that exist in Masvingo Province, the effective institutionalization of participatory innovation development and extension in the agricultural extension service will require a process of at least 5 to 10 years. Continuous commitment by the institution as well as by donors during this period is considered critical to its success.
- (6) The process of organizational development is open-ended and unpredictable. The results of the process in Masvingo cannot be transferred to any other province, but the methodology and lessons learnt during the process can act as cornerstones for a process elsewhere. This will be documented in the future.