

Sustainable Extension: Not Transformation, but Renewal

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Abstract

While South African agriculture has achieved great successes, including a foundation for national food security, millions of rural South Africans experience chronic food insecurity and poverty. While agricultural policies have been formulated to address these issues, it is proposed that, unless the extension approach employed in South Africa is radically altered, the intent of these policies will not be realised.

This paper presents a “renewal model” for extension called Agriflection. The model incorporates key and essential elements of sustainable, people-centred development as enshrined in the ethos of the South African Constitution. It reflects the growing mass of evidence advocating an iterative, incremental, reflective development process based on assets, partnerships, and a genuine commitment to learning. The model both identifies the partnerships and determines the development pathway.

The aim of the paper is to evoke a serious re-think of the extension approaches employed by agricultural service providers in South Africa and to alert relevant educational institutions to the need to re-visit the assumptions, content, and methodology pertaining to their respective curricula aimed at equipping agricultural scientists and field practitioners with the skills needed to address the exigencies of South African agricultural reform. Further, the Agriflection model presents both the theoretical and practical markers needed for this action.

The paper challenges agricultural service providers and tertiary institutions to take on the sizeable, but not unrealisable task of reviewing, renewing, and implementing curricula for the training and education of new breed of extensionists called “Agriflectionists.”

Introduction

Approximately 800 million people in the developing world “do not have enough to eat.” (SOFI 1999; 2001), Of these, 180 million (22.7%) live in Sub-Saharan Africa. While worldwide there has been a decrease in these numbers, Southern Africa has seen an increase in food insecurity. In South Africa it is estimated that 26% of all rural households with people aged 7 years and older experience food insecurity (Bonti-Ankomah 2001).

By contrast, South African agriculture, unlike many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, has achieved great successes over the last century. It has a strong commercial production sector which provides a foundation for national food security and for international trade – making a significant contribution to the national economy. In no small measure, this success was due to the agricultural policies and extension approaches adopted to date in South Africa. And yet, today, notwithstanding these achievements, and notwithstanding the well-documented agricultural potential of the land, millions of South Africans living in rural areas experience chronic food insecurity and poverty.

While many reasons can be cited for the chronic food insecurity in Africa – not the least of which are civil and political unrest – in countries at peace, like South Africa, “poverty and marginalisation” are cited as the “root causes of food insecurity” (SOFI 1999). Further, while national and provincial agricultural policies level have been formulated to begin to address the issues of food insecurity and rural poverty, it is proposed here that unless the extension approach employed is radically altered, the intent of these policies will not be realised.

This paper will present an argument in support of an ‘extension’ approach which can greatly contribute to unlocking the agricultural potential of rural communities without compromising the agronomic and economic successes of the past and present approaches, and which will add value to South Africa’s policies to revitalise rural agrarian communities.

Purpose of the Paper

This paper has a two-fold purpose. The first is to evoke a serious re-think of the extension approaches employed by agricultural service providers in South Africa. The second is to alert relevant educational institutions to the need to re-visit the assumptions, content and methodology pertaining to their respective curricula aimed at equipping the present and future agricultural scientists and field practitioners with the skills needed to address the exigencies of South African agricultural reform.

What is extension?

In exploring approaches for sustainable extension and rural development, it is necessary to look very carefully at a number of aspects, not the least of which is what we mean by extension. Röling (1995) wrote that if someone asks any agricultural researcher how extension works, the likely answer will be “extension transfers the findings of agricultural research to ‘users’”. Is this extension? And if it is, does it work in all cases?

Another aspect requiring examination is the issue of priorities. Is the aim of extension poverty eradication, economic growth or wealth creation? If so, questions of distribution and equity are raised. If we are concerned with who gets that wealth, then further questions arise around strategy: Do we create wealth first and then look to distribute it? Or do we create equity in the relevant systems first to ensure equitable distribution once wealth is created? Until this context is cleared, extension operates on assumptions.

A typical sentiment of South African extensionists, stated at a recent national extension seminar is: “Farmers are the beneficiaries of extension”(Worth 2001). At that same seminar an extensionist stated that good extension means to “tell the people the right thing at the right time”. Are these the perceptions that should drive extension? Again at the same conference it was expressed that extension must consider the needs of the farmers. This suggests that extension is a needs-based service. Needs-based development leads to dependency creation, while building on assets and strengths facilitates sustainable development (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993).

The questions and issues at stake are complex, and the assumptions are many. In this complex world sits the Extension Officer who needs to make decisions and work-choices on a daily basis. He or she needs a clear framework within which to make these choices and decisions. He or she will need to be organised (and be supported in that organisation) in such a way that services rendered are relevant to farmers and communities, relevant to priorities of the State, and are flexible and able to respond to the natural dynamics of farming, communities and development.

Two general approaches to extension exist: one which is technology-centred and the other people-centred. Extensionists need to know whether the aim is to develop agriculture or people. One may assume extension seeks to develop agriculture through people. Another may assume extension seeks to develop people through agriculture. Clarity is required as to whether extension is to be technology-centred or people-centred.

It appears that the preferred model for extension in South Africa is a technology-centred approach (Bembridge 1993; Botha, Stevens & Steyn 1999; Duvel 2001; van Rooyen 2001). Technology is, however, occasionally transferred in a people-centred way, using people-centred participatory (PRA) methodologies aimed at either breaking down barriers to adopting technologies and practices or to adapt technologies and practices to local conditions, and perhaps to “empower people”(Duvell 2001). Recent publications and papers from leading South African extension specialists and extension managers indicate that answers to farming issues are technologies aimed at addressing expressed needs obtained through participatory methods (Duvell 2001; van Rooyen 2001). In many cases in South Africa, training in PRA methods themselves is lacking (Stevens & Treurnicht 2001).

By contrast, people-centred approaches focus not on technology or even empowerment, but on unlocking the power that is there in terms of assets inherent in the farming and community systems – human assets, social assets, natural assets, etc. People-centred approaches see indigenous knowledge as an asset, acknowledge farming and other relevant systems as the arena of operation, and honour existing livelihood strategies. (Moyo & Hagman 2000)

Given the proclaimed priorities of South Africa that development be people-centred (Cruse *et al* 1999), and in the spirit of the international drive for sustainable development, it would seem that, in exploring approaches for sustainable extension, careful consideration should be given to soft-system, people-centred extension.

Extension thinking is often captured in the AKIS (Agricultural Knowledge and Information Systems) model as set out in Figure 1.

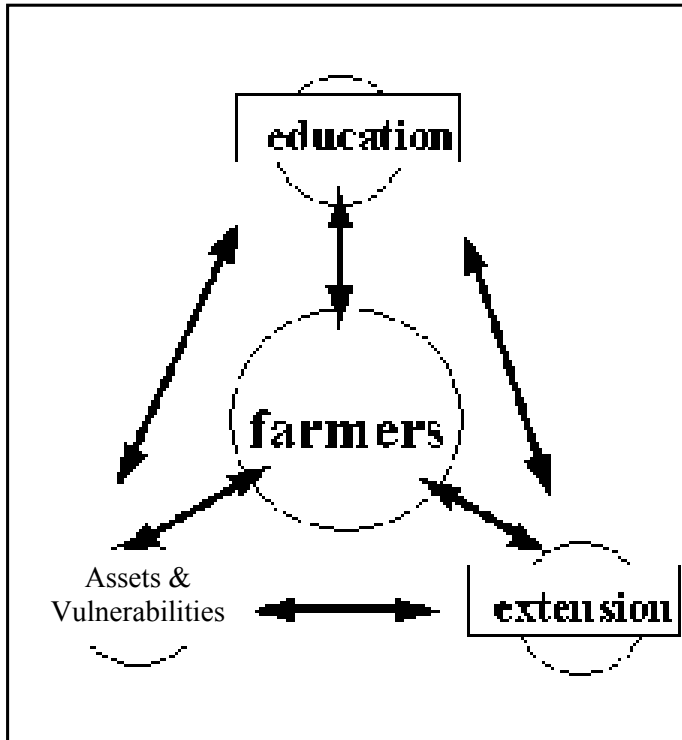


Figure 1: A basic Agricultural Knowledge and Information System (AKIS). Source: FAO & World Bank (2000)

The AKIS model traditionally demonstrates the relationship between the main roleplayers and stakeholders in the extension mix and highlights the need for strengthening institutionally the relationship among these contributors to the extension process. The AKIS model also provides a firm foundation on which to create a new understanding of ‘extension’.

In the findings of the Neuchatel Group (Neuchatel Group 1999; ODI 2000) and in the works of Scoones and Thompson (1994) we see, perhaps for the first time, the introduction into extension thinking concepts involving sustainable livelihoods addressing the complexities of household, family and community livelihood strategies.

What is proposed here is a synthesis of these concepts; a marriage so to speak, the fruit of which is something new, something more potent and more engaging of the realities of rural families – acknowledging and working within, not only their complex farming and food production systems, but also within their even more complex systems of livelihood strategies.

Working within an adaptation of the Agricultural Knowledge and Information Systems (AKIS) framework and seeking to strengthen and more fully integrate the individual elements of the triad, and then applying the principles enshrined within the Sustainable Livelihoods approach we can create a wholly new, if deceptively familiar, approach to what is traditionally called ‘extension’. This model can facilitate the fundamental shift, the renewal required to meet the rural development demands of the present century.

The Agriflection Model

Figure 2 introduces a new model termed “Agriflection”. Agriflection embodies a number of important principles raised in current development thinking. It acknowledges that development is both incremental and iterative.

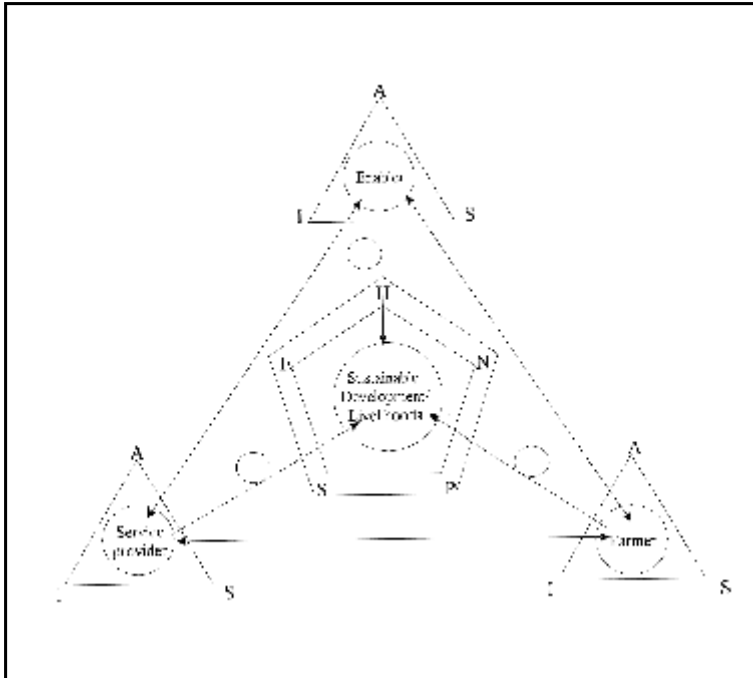


Figure The Agriflection Model Assets & vulnerabilities key: H = Human; E = Economic; S = Social; P = Physical; N = Natural

It gives recognition to the AKIS structure – albeit using modified terminology of ‘enabler’, ‘service provider’, and farmer’ which is drawn from a variation of the Sustainable Livelihoods framework. The enabler (governments, NGOs, universities, foundations, etc. which set policy and/or provide funding to processes, programmes and projects. Some enablers may also be service providers.), the service provider and the farmer become the three partners in the Agriflection process as indicated by the double-headed arrows. It is important to stress that these are equal partners.

Two dynamic elements are depicted in the Agriflection model. First is the IAS triangle encasing each partner in the Agriflection partnership. Replacing research, education and extension, Agriflection suggests a learning process of investigation, assimilation or application and sharing or service (IAS).

Essential to the Agriflection model is the ownership by all three partners of a learning and service/sharing paradigm. As with established educational models taking a learner through knowledge, understanding and skills, in the Agriflection model, knowledge is acquired through investigation, understanding through application and assimilation, and skills through sharing and service. Again it is stressed that each of the partners must be committed to the learning and service/sharing paradigm. In such a paradigm, mere transfer of technology has no place. It is not a paradigm of technology adoption, but of individual and collective investigation, application and service/sharing.

The second dynamic element in the Agriflection model is the looped arrow stemming from each partner towards the goal of sustainable development and sustainable livelihoods. The looped arrow represents the reflective nature demanded of true development – a process of creating a vision, identifying opportunities, taking some action, reflecting on outcomes and reassessing and adjusting steps toward the vision.

The pentagon in the Agriflection model is the ‘gene’ of the Sustainable Livelihoods framework. It informs the process that progress is best made through identifying assets, assessing their vulnerabilities and then taking steps either to enhance and strengthen those assets or to reduce vulnerabilities placing stress on those assets. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) confirm this approach.

This model confirms the contention of Alders *et al* (1993) that farmers are experimenters and innovators. The Agriflection model supports Shrestha (2000) that far from being passive, that farmers are active participants in change.

In summary, the proposed Agriflection model identifies the partnerships and determines the development pathway: Sharing, planning (based on assets), implementing, and reflecting. It supports the values of partnership and collaboration emphasised by AKIS and PRA. It maintains the people-centre approach dictated by both current theory and policy.

It entrenches the important function of the macro-micro link learned from experiences with the Sustainable Livelihoods approach – consciously linking the farmers, service providers and enablers in a three-way learning paradigm in such a way that IAS experience of the farmers and service providers can inform the policies of the enablers and the IAS experience of the enablers can inform the decisions of the farmers and service providers.

Perhaps most important in the Agriflection model is the commitment to learning, an essential element of ‘extension’ identified in PEA (Moyo & Hagman 2000). Inherent in this model is the assumption that all three partners – enablers, service providers and farmers – are committed to learning through a process of investigation, assimilation and sharing; be it individually in their separate actions, or collectively in their partnership engagements.

Underpinning the Agriflection model is the recognition of the validity and value of all opinions. It lends practical support to the principles that “Everyone is of equal worth” and “Social cohesion is essential for true development”; two of the five factors agreed upon by the World Faiths Development Dialogue as essential for development (WFDD 1998). This lends support to the claim that agricultural development is not about farming, but about people (Worth 1994). It reflects and gives practical expression to these same sentiments enshrined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights of South Africa.

It is submitted that the Agriflection model, if applied with all its entrenched values, will provide a sustainable model for engaging rural communities and farmers in a continual process of protecting and building on their assets not merely away from poverty and food insecurity, but toward prosperity.

Conclusions and Educational Implications

There is a need to acknowledge the efficacy and undoubted contribution the past and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the present extension approaches generally applied by South African agricultural service providers to the wealth and success of commercial agriculture in South Africa. There is also a need to rise to the exigencies of South Africa now and in the future. This will call for a new way of thinking, drawing on a new mindset, aiming at a wholly new approach to extension – breaking away from the traditions of the past; learning from them, but not necessarily building on them. This speaks not to transformation, but renewal. Not to revamping, but replacing.

The Agriflection model is submitted as just such an approach as it incorporates key and essential elements of sustainable, people-centred development enshrined in the ethos of the South African Constitution. The approach reflects the growing mass of evidence

advocating an iterative, incremental, reflective development process based on assets, partnerships and a genuine commitment to learning.

Should credence be given to the Agriflection model, then tertiary institutions will have to 'make new' their various curricula. Only in this way would it be feasible to generate new, and retrain current, agricultural service providers – be they scientists or field practitioners. The task would be sizeable, but not unrealisable. The Agriflection model presents both theoretical and practical markers for new curricula for the training and education of "Agriflectionists". Further, fora already exist within South Africa and, indeed, within the Southern African Development Community to facilitate and expedite the required process of review, renewal and implementation of relevant curricula. What remains is the will to create anew.

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