
INSTITUTIONAL LINKAGES FOR COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION AND PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT: PRINCIPLES AND THEIR ACCEPTABILITY

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Abstract

This paper makes a strong case for the necessity of community linkage structures where participatory development with the ultimate object of community empowerment, self-sufficiency and self-dependency is pursued. Important principles regarding the nature of such a structures were identified by participatory methods and the degree to which they are acceptable or supported were assessed in a countrywide survey involving about one-third of all public service extension workers in South Africa. The survey found wide scale support for the need of the proposed structures as well as for the identified principles. These include a clear differentiation between the coordinating and operational functions, and a coordination of development activities as close to the grassroots communities as possible. For coordinated and integrated development a ladder of linkage structures, extending from the local community up to district and provincial levels is recommended and it is important that partnerships be maintained and not undermined through amalgamation.

Introduction

With the paradigm shift towards more participatory extension or development approaches there has been an increasing interest in institutional linkages and structures to facilitate such participatory development. However, there is still a lot of confusion regarding the principles involved and their optimal practical implementation. This paper briefly looks into the necessity for these linkages, outlines the most important principles and looks at their acceptability and applicability in the South African context.

The Rationale

The need and purpose of an institutional linkage structure is based on several considerations, of which the most important are the following:

Partner relationship

Linkage structures, of which an example is provided in Figure 4, allow for a true partnership between development agent and community. This is based on the requirement of a true partnership between service provider(s) and communities, the most basic of which is that between the extension or development agent and the community he/she serves and which is commonly referred to as extension service area or ward. For such a partnership to be possible and effective, the partners have to interact with one another in order to establish needs, to agree on development priorities, procedures and processes through which to pursue them and to evaluate their outcome. However, the practical difficulty or impossibility of an extension worker

to interact with the large number of community members within his/her extension ward (in South Africa usually between 500 and 3000) necessitates a linkage or institutional structure in which the target community is represented and which acts as its mouthpiece. Such a linkage body provides a way of formalising and structuring this partner interaction

Framework for empowerment

The ultimate or the pinnacle of community participation is empowerment and the associated self-determination. The empowerment of communities is based on the process of creating power with others, rather than on self-empowerment (Vogt & Murrell, 1990). This occurs through participation. However, without the necessary institutional structures there cannot be alignment and that can, according to Senge (1992), only worsen the chaos and complicate the management and coordinated unfolding of the development process. It is through empowerment that commitment of the community is accomplished, but this calls for empowered, recognized and appropriate institutional structures.

For empowerment to become effective and to manifest itself, certain formal structures and clear lines of authority are essential. In this regard the coordinating development body operating as mouthpiece and representing the interests of the total community is the appropriate body to be delegated this responsibility and authority. Development projects and programs can be delegated and assigned to operational bodies (e.g. program development committees) for implementation, but they remain responsible and accountable to the central development body. In this way the ownership and primary responsibility rests with one body, and thus serves as framework for empowerment.

Extension coordination

The linkage structure, which links a community with its service provider in a partner relationship, can be easily extended to include a multitude of service providers; each entering into a similar partner relationship with the representative body of the community. If, at the time, the community, on the basis of its empowerment and ownership, dictates or prescribes the development procedures, a sound basis is created for effective coordinated development, characterized by a minimum of duplication and working at cross purposes. Such coordination is structured and more sustainable since it no longer relies on unstable and often temporary personal relations between the various service providers. This effectively means that the community is or can become empowered to such a degree, that it is able to lay down rules of coordination for the service providers.

Method

The initial phase of this study into the need and appropriate nature of community linkage structures consisted of a planning session in which representatives from all the nine provinces of the country participated. The main purpose of this participatory process was to identify the most important principles and alternatives and to develop a discussion document that captured these alternatives and would serve as basis for discussions and for recording the viewpoints of extension managers and frontline extension personnel regarding these issues.

In subsequent group interview sessions, held at various venues throughout all the nine provinces and involving 1199 (about 39.5 percent) of the country's public extension personnel, viewpoints were exchanged and debated and ultimately opportunity was given to every

participant to document his/her views or preferences in the provided semi-structured discussion document or questionnaire (Düvel, 2002)

Findings and Recommendations

Perceived need for linkage structures

The extent to which extension agents in the public sector support the idea of institutional linkage structures is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The distribution of respondents according to their opinions regarding the necessity of institutional linkage structures for a partnership interaction between agent and community.

Opinions regarding the necessity of linkage structures	N	%
Unnecessary	15	1.3
Undecided/Neutral	92	7.9
Useful	623	53.5
Essential	432	37.1

About 90 percent of the respondents are supportive of a linkage system to facilitate interaction while as many as 37.1 percent believe that without an institutional linkage structure a real partnership with full or co-responsibility on the part of the community is impossible. Only 1.3 percent of the respondents are of the opinion that a linkage structure is unnecessary. In spite of this general support, there are significant differences between the provinces, with support being appreciably stronger in those provinces where linkage structures are commonly used.

Principles and Assumptions Regarding an Effective Linkage Structure

The principles identified and supported as most important for the effective functioning of a community linkage system are the following:

(1) *Differentiation between coordinating and operational functions*

Any partnership to be functional requires the partners to interact with one another. The same applies to the service provider and the community. Yet, the only practical way for the extension agent to negotiate with his total target community is through a body or mouthpiece representing that community (namely a linkage or coordinating body). However, the more representative this coordinating or linkage body is of the community with its different interest groups and institutions, the bigger and less dynamic it becomes and the less suitable it will be for operational functions. This, as well as the motive to maximize involvement of community members in the development process, calls for a clear distinction between the coordinating body and the operational project or program committees, a view which is supported by 61 percent of all respondents.

(2) *Compromise between proximity to community and effective coordination*

If organisational linkage structures are to facilitate effective participation and ownership, it stands to reason that they should be as close to the grassroots community as possible. Unless community members regard such organisational structures as their own, they will have difficulty relating to them and effectively participating through them. This also implies that they should

primarily serve the interests and purposes of the community and not those of the development organisation(s) or agent(s).

In view of this, linkage structures beyond the ward level or the level of the service area of an extension worker, namely at the provincial, regional or even district level, are no solution, unless they have a co-ordination function, arise out of the grassroots communities, and are complementary to them. If this is not the case, they are bound to remain mere instruments of development organizations, because they are far removed from the grassroots communities who don't perceive them as representing their interests and consequently cannot associate with them.

On the other hand, if linkage structures are created for every sub-community within a ward (area serviced by an extension worker), the problem of overlapping and uncoordinated development activities increases radically. For example, in a service area (extension ward) consisting of five sub-communities or villages (see Figure 4), development activities and structures would be quintupled, thereby significantly increasing the repetition or duplication and consequently the likelihood of uncoordinated inputs. It is also not reconcilable with the serving notion of extension, and implying that it is not possible to effectively "serve more than one master". Trying to entertain more than one coordinating body per service area will inevitably lead to looser relationships, plagued with conflicts of interests, and result in a duplication of inputs and the promotion of self-centrism within sub-communities. Support for these different alternatives varies significantly, as shown by the findings in Figure 1.

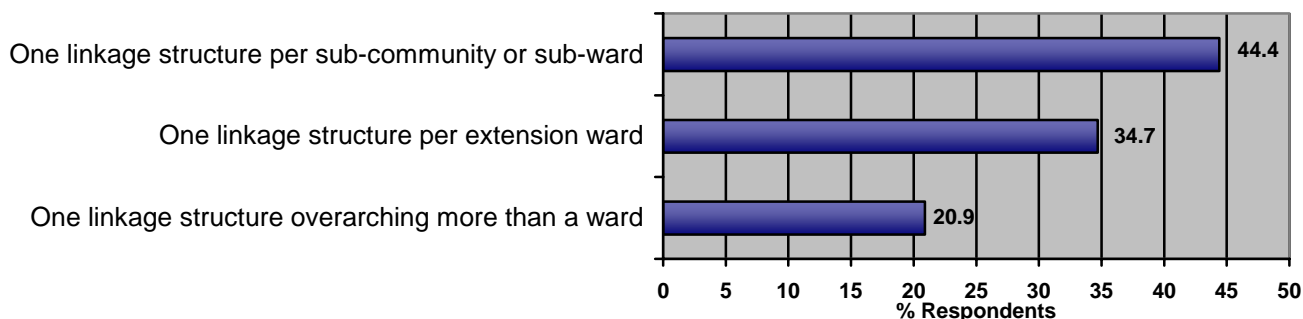


Figure 1. The percentage distribution of respondents according to their support for different alternatives regarding the number or level of linkage structures

Initially there was reasonable support for linkage structures at a sub-community or sub-ward level (44.4 percent). However, in a later assessment during the interview, which is after interaction and debate among respondents regarding the alternatives, the support for the compromise of one coordinating linkage structure per extension service area or ward increased significantly, indicating that many respondents had not given this issue or the implications much thought. This is reflected by the fact that, when comparing the sub-ward and ward, the percentage in support of a coordinating linkage structure per sub-ward decreased from 44.4 to 29.6, while support for a single linkage structure per ward increased to 61.5 percent with 7.7 percent of the respondents undecided or neutral.

(3) *Hierarchy or ladder of linkage structures*

For ultimate national coordination and integration of development it is important that the linkage structures are not isolated. They should be integrated or embedded in a hierarchy or

ladder of similar linkage structures extending from the grassroots community up to at least the provincial level. This is in agreement with Chamala & Mortiss (1990) and is widely accepted by the respondents, but, and this is clearly shown in Figure 2, there is almost an inverse linear relationship between the level and the importance.

The linkage structure at ward level is regarded to be most important, and even more important than at sub-ward level. Thereafter the importance decreases systematically up to national level.

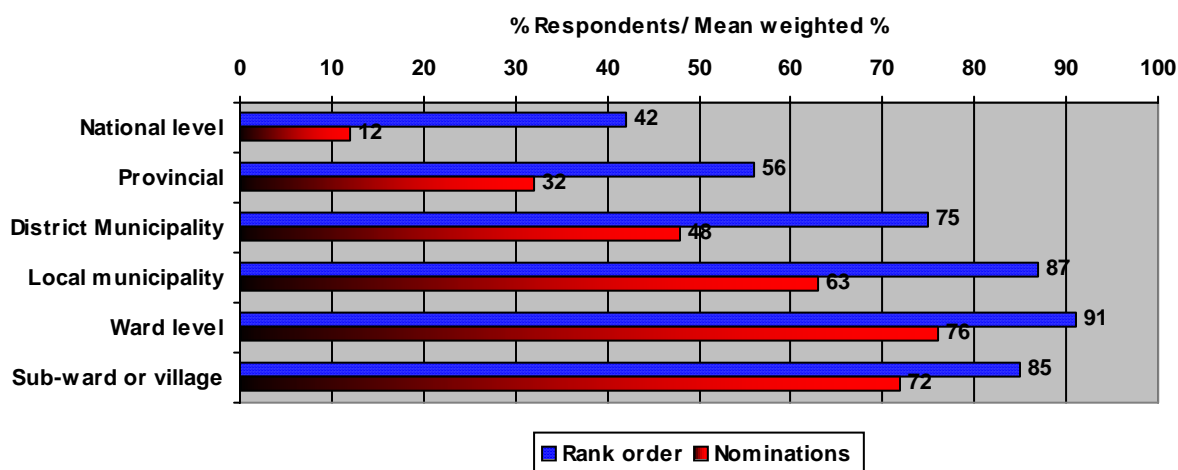


Figure 2. Respondents' perception of the appropriateness of different community levels for accommodating linkage structures expressed as percentage nominations and rank order (weighted percentage).

(4) Linkage between agriculture and other development

Often a contentious issue is whether or not the coordinating linkage structure should be responsible for all rural development issues or whether the responsibility should be limited to agriculture or even to a single commodity. Agriculture is but one of many focus areas of development and the mere emphasis of integrated development, as represented in the local development structures, makes a linkage almost obligatory. The question, therefore, is not so much whether it should occur or not, but rather at what level.

The one alternative – and probably the more ideal one – is a coordination of all types of development in a single linkage structure already at the extension ward level. This is likely to enhance the overall solidarity and cohesion of the community, but where this is not possible, the linkage will have to be pursued at a higher organizational level. However, there is not a clear majority for this viewpoint because, as Figure 3 indicates, 40 percent favour the coordination of only agricultural development issues, while the support for a linkage structure responsible for the coordination of all development issues relating to the target or service community is 44 percent. In view of the tremendous duplication and uncoordinated inputs between different ministries, a strong case can be made for the latter. In fact this is one of the major incentives behind the envisaged district and local municipality structures and their coordination of integrated development, and it only makes sense to pursue this already at the extension ward level.

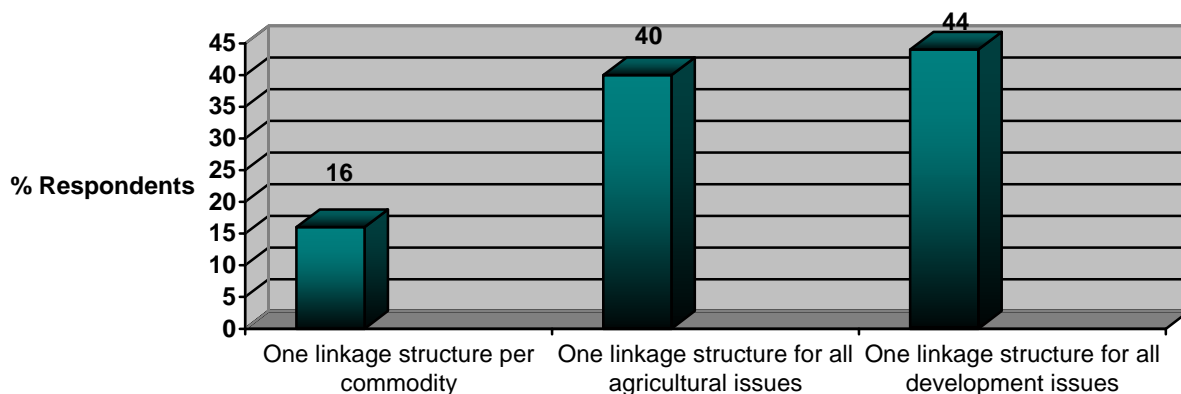


Figure 3 Percentage distribution of respondents according to their support for alternative responsibilities or the locality of coordinating linkage structures

Some of the reservation regarding the coordination of all development issues can be attributed to a certain fear of marginalization of agriculture as far as funding priorities are concerned. Where this is the case and the decision is made that the coordinating linkage structure's responsibility will be restricted to agricultural development issues, linkages with other development institutions need to be pursued and established at a more overarching level.

(5) Partnership instead of amalgamation

The interaction between extension agent and community (or the coordinating body it represents) can be that of two partners, which implies a certain independence and self-determination on the side of both partners; also the community. Another alternative is a type of amalgamation, where the service provider or extension agent becomes an integral part of the coordinating community structure. This effectively undermines the nature of a partnership in that the so-called partners amalgamate into one body, which can then – and frequently is – dominated by the service provider(s) from within. For this reason, service providers should be discouraged from becoming members of community structures, since this can potentially undermine one of the major objectives of development, namely that of empowerment and self-determination of the community.

The same principle of collaborating as partners but maintaining independency, should also apply to government ministries. However, with the introduction of Local Government in South Africa and its brief to promote integrated development through its structures at local, district and provincial levels, there has been an increasing tendency for Local Government to take over and integrate into its structures the agricultural extension responsibilities and even appointing own extension personnel. This will be worsened if the Department of Agriculture fails to protect its own independency and succumbs to increasing expectations to only be accountable to local government community structures and no longer to its own management and to the general public.

A Linkage Model

Situational variations make it near impossible to implant a standard organisational model into an operational extension area for practical implementation. It is for this reason that emphasis has been placed on principles rather than on a framework model. The model

presented in Figure 4 captures most of the principles discussed and is also intended to contribute towards an understanding of the issues discussed.

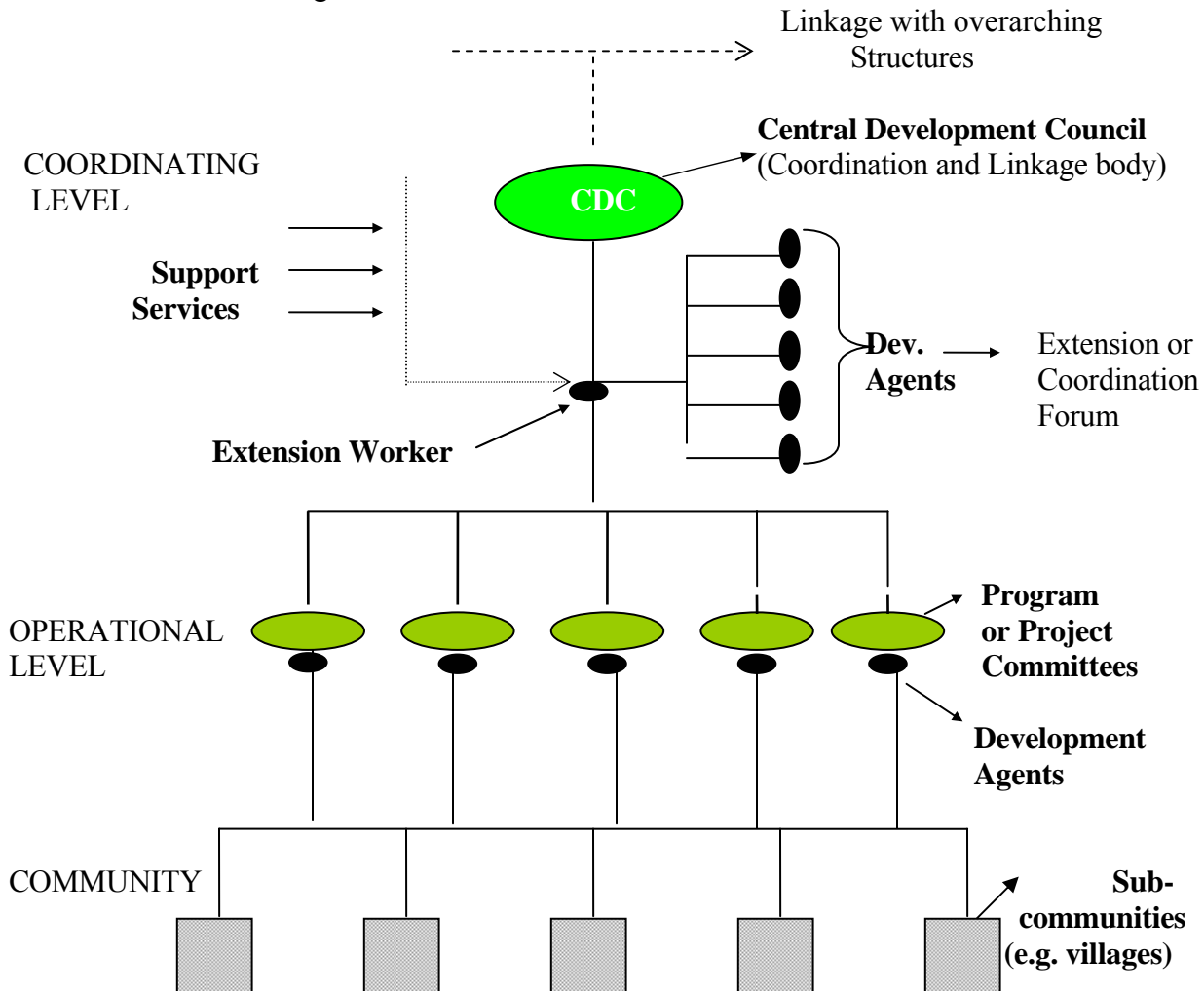


Figure 4. An institutional linkage structure for participatory development empowerment of communities and for facilitating partnerships and coordination with and between development organisations or agents.

The framework (Figure 4) highlights the major linkage body (here referred to as a central development council or CDC) coordinating as representative mouthpiece for the total target community all development projects and actions. The latter are assigned to various program or project committees (representing partnerships between development agents and community representatives) for implementation and with regular feed-back and accountability to the central development or coordinating body (CDC).

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Participatory development aimed at community empowerment, self-dependency and self-responsibility, requires an effective coordinating linkage structure.

2. For such a linkage structure to be effective, a clear differentiation should be made between the coordinating and operational functions. This means that the coordinating linkage body, representing the total target community and its interests, should be supported and supplemented by program or project committees to whom development assignments are commissioned, and who in turn have to be accountable to this central coordinating body.
3. The most appropriate coordinating level is that of the service area or ward, namely the target area or community for which the frontline extension worker is responsible. This means that the bigger the number of extension workers, or the narrower the agent/client ratio, the smaller and the closer to the target community can the linkage structure be implemented.
4. The coordinating linkage structure should, if possible, be responsible for the coordination of all and not only agricultural development issues. Where this is not possible linkages with other types of rural development have to be sought at higher levels i.e. beyond the ward level.
5. The community linkage body should link into local and district municipalities and should be embedded in a hierarchy or ladder of linkage structures to allow for overall coordinated and integrated rural development.
6. Amalgamation between service providers and communities should be resisted at all levels, since it is likely to undermine the partnership principle and the envisaged self-determination and self-sufficiency of the communities.
7. Although there appear to be certain basic principles governing linkage systems, they have to be adapted to specific situations in order to be appropriate and effective.

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