Improving Agricultural Extension Services through Faith-Based Initiatives: A Case of the Bahati Farmers Project in Kenya

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Abstract

Development-oriented religious organizations could benefit local communities by providing social services particularly in agricultural extension. U.S. President George Bush’s “faith-based initiative” policy, aimed at allowing churches, synagogues, mosques and other religious bodies in the United States to seek government funding for social services recognizes this fact. Though governments will always have responsibility for poverty alleviation, religious organizations seem most suited to working with the poor. They know these people better and are likely to be easily accepted by them when introducing improved agricultural technologies.

President Bush’s policy has relevance for all countries, especially a developing country like Kenya. The advocacy for a faith-based approach to rural development in Kenya is particularly timely in view of Kenya’s ongoing retrenchment of extension agents, her limited financial and logistical support for extension, and the high incidence of corruption in public and business sectors. This paper describes a pilot project, the Bahati African Inland Church leaders’ initiative to make extension responsive to community needs and aspirations through a Christian Life Promotion Program. The project was quite successful, indicating that religious organizations could enhance the delivery of extension services.

Introduction

Religious beliefs partly determine people’s attitudes, values and way of life and sometimes motivate them to serve humanity or give them justification to treat other human beings unfairly. This paper describes the Bahati African Inland Church leaders’ initiative aimed at enhancing/improving agricultural extension delivery services in their community by working closely with local extension service providers. Using specific examples, the paper starts by narrating how people in various parts of the world have used their religious faith (beliefs) to justify acts of injustice against other individuals and groups. Additionally, it shows how religious faith has motivated many people to fight all forms of injustice and to run and manage community-based, social and economic development programs that alleviate human suffering with special reference to Kenya.

Religious motivation to serve humanity:

Since the world began, some people, in different places, have used their religious faith to support acts of injustice against humanity. How women in Afghanistan suffered under the Taliban fundamentalist leaders as their strict interpretation of Islamic law, is a case in point. Under the Taliban rule, Afghan women had virtually no access to medical care because female doctors could not practice and male doctors were not allowed to see or touch the bodies of female patients (Bowman, 2001). Also, slavery and other forms of racial injustices further reveal the dark side of religion. In general, religious fanatics have fought, maimed, and killed people of other faiths. Examples abound, such as the wars in Sudan, Chechnya and Ireland.

Despite the gross misuse of religious faith and beliefs, history is full of good deeds that were wrought and are still being done by people of good will who are motivated mainly by their religious beliefs. For instance, Christian missionaries who currently number approximately 400,000 worldwide have written down hundreds of languages which had never been written before and introduced Western styles of education, medicine, bureaucracy, and humanitarian thought (Pettifer & Brandley, 1990).
Although there are many organizations aimed at helping the poor, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization and the United Nations Children’s Fund, however religion specifies the individual’s obligations to one’s neighbors. Religion reminds us of our responsibility to a super power and society and thus, serves as the basis for demanding individual accountability in the pursuit of peace, unity, justice, and equal access to community entitlements and use of natural resources. Dr. Martin Luther King – a religious, civil rights leader of exceptional bravery, sincerity, energy, and courageous opposition to racism and economic injustice – protested against burning human beings with napalm during the Vietnam War that left many American homes with orphans and widows (Bernstein, 2002). The war atrocities in Vietnam, he said, could not be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. Dr. King led the poor people’s campaign to end poverty and was killed in Memphis in 1968, while speaking on behalf of the livelihood and dignity of striking sanitation workers. His conviction and belief in social justice were similar to those of John Brown, who earned a death penalty for his quest for social justice. He was executed for his belief that slavery, which is based on using the lives of many people for the personal gain of a few, was inhuman and his militant attempt to liberate the slaves (Bernstein, 2002). People oppose or support sex education in schools based partly on their religious beliefs (Hinsliff, 2002). It is with this understanding that Mwangi (2002) calls upon parents, schools, mosques, and churches to take their role of educating the youth seriously.

The role of religious organizations in community development: Perhaps the most significant acknowledgment that religious organizations can potentially facilitate community-based socioeconomic development is U. S. President George Bush’s “faith-based initiative” policy, which seeks to allow churches, synagogues, mosques, and other religious bodies to seek government funding for social services. One of the rationales of the President’s policy is while governments will always have a role in poverty alleviation religious organizations are closer to their constituents and know them better. They often help the poor, the hurting, the drug addicts, the homeless, and other needy people. They are part of the solution in addressing social ills, proponents say, and should be supported to help them do their community development work even more effectively (Action by Churches Together, 2000; Dispatch, 2000; Meckler, 2001; Nzwili, 2001).

Critics of the Bush policy say that giving taxpayer dollars to religious organizations will breach the wall, established in the First Amendment, between church and state while others fear potential religious discrimination and coercion. But religious organizations say that most recipients of their community services do not belong to one religion and are rarely asked about their religious affiliation (Dispatch, 2000; Meckler, 2001).

Many Christian and Islamic organizations operating in Kenya are involved not only in spreading their faith but also in promoting socioeconomic development by working with local communities. The Christian Community Services of Mt. Kenya East (CCS), for instance, gives famine and disaster relief to the poorest of the poor in 12 administrative districts in Kenya (Action by Churches Together, 2000). These services target their help to approximately 10,000 marginalized, destitute, and exceptionally suffering people who are most unlikely to survive the effects of drought. Those targeted include pregnant/lactating mothers, malnourished children less than 5 years, the elderly poor men and women, orphans, and widows, along with the sickly poor who cannot work. CCS ensures that relief food is distributed to the needy regardless of tribe, race, creed, gender, or political inclination and helps the community to rehabilitate water points for domestic use and livestock. In addition to the CCS, the Government distributes relief food in a few areas but gives food to everyone in the district irrespective of their economic status. A large percentage of the food distributed by the government gets lost within the delivery process making the final ration too meager to sustain the really needy cases since the beneficiaries receive only about 2kg of maize per family per month (Action by Churches Together, 2000).

The Catholic Diocese of Nakuru has community-based development programs that address the needs of people who are marginalized, disadvantaged, and those with disabilities. Nationally, the Catholic Church sponsors 3,700 primary and secondary schools, as well as numerous technical schools. It founded all the major schools in the country, which, based on capacity, admit qualified
students without discrimination (Nzwili, 2001). The Salvation Army runs community-based development programs that focus on HIV/AIDS, health, and development in 17 African countries and is also involved in building school toilets in Nairobi under the Friends of Kenya Project. In its contribution to community development, the National Christian Council of Kenya (NCCK) constructs water tanks and distributes emergency relief food, medicine to cure common ailments, and agricultural seed (Maliti, 2001). It has also initiated, jointly with the International Development and Research Center (IDRC) and the Department of International Development (DFID), the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to eradicate poverty and close the information gap between developed and developing countries (Kiplangat, 2001).

Addressing poverty through agricultural extension: Kenya relies heavily on agriculture for most of her goods and services but has not been using the land optimally. Agriculture, which supports 80% of the population and contributes 25% to GDP, is limited to only 17% of the country’s productive potential (Mwangi, 2002; Mwita, 2002). With only 19.2% of arable land, Kenya is losing 15,000 ha of forest and over US $1.8 billion annually to environmental degradation due to poor land use (Mwita, 2002). Unlike Uganda and Tanzania whose GDP are currently growing at over 5%, Kenya’s GDP is growing at less than 1% while the population grows at 2.1%, implying that more Kenyans are falling below the poverty line. The economy can support less than 10 out of 1,000 Kenyans annually against the 21 babies being born (Mburu, 2002). About 54% of Kenyans are poor people who cannot afford basic food and non-food items and if their monthly income falls below US $17.70 (Ksh1239.00) in rural or US $37.80 (Ksh2648.00) in urban areas, they are said to live below the poverty line (IMF, 2000; Kweyu, 2002; Onyinge & Oyuke, 2002).

Kenya must intensify its agricultural production through increased use of improved seeds, recommended fertilizers, and better cultural practices because scarcity of arable land makes extending the farming area unfeasible (IMF, 2000). Low production by Kenya’s smallholder farmers is partly due to their limited access to farm inputs; imperfect market conditions, inappropriate produce grading and packaging; and poor handling, storage, transportation, and marketing facilities. Other causes include farmers’ lack of appropriate technical skills, lack of access to extension, and insufficient use of yield-enhancing and post-harvest technologies (Swanson, 1997).

To ensure extension projects are successful, the World Bank (1999) advises project designers to focus on areas where the impact is likely to be greatest and participants represent the local socio-economic environment. Client focus, says the World Bank (1999), may be ensured partly by working closely with farmers’ organizations. To guarantee sustainability, farmers’ organizations should be socially well organized and should have effective leaders. Good organizational leadership gives group members cohesion and a sense of common purpose. It promotes co-operation, intra-group interaction, and effective communication that enable the group to achieve its goals (Arnon, 1989; Hartford, 1971).

Purpose and Objectives
The purpose of this paper is to describe the initiative taken by leaders of the Christian Life Promotion Program (CLPP) to make extension services more responsive to community needs and aspirations by ensuring that they are efficient, timely, and sustainable. It a) describes background of the initiative, b) explains the leaders’ source of motivation for taking the initiative, c) describes the steps they took to ensure that the services are sustainable and providers’ accountable to clients, and d) discusses implications of the initiative for the future of extension in Kenya.

Church Leaders’ Initiative
Kenya has approximately 3,000,000 smallholder farms. These are farms less than 10 ha but most of them are, on average, less than two hectares and are mostly managed by women who provide 75% of farm labor (Kariuki and Kihu, 2000; Kenya Government, 1997-2001). Many religious organizations operating in Kenya are already providing social services in health, HIV/AIDS education and management, wells and water tank construction, and famine and disaster relief.

Since the performance of Kenya’s agriculture has been declining and its public-funded extension service has not been meeting farmers’ educational needs effectively (World Bank, 1999), religious organizations could
supplement government efforts of ensuring food security and poverty reduction by providing, or enhancing provision of, community-based extension delivery services. A 1994 review of the agricultural sector recommended a private sector led agricultural strategy to improve agricultural performance and reduce the number of people living below the poverty line, which currently stands at 54% of the population (Onyige & Oyuke, 2002; World Bank, 1999).

Farmers in Kenya’s Bahati Division, a high potential agricultural area of Nakuru District, are among potential beneficiaries of improved agricultural extension delivery services. These farmers grow and sell vegetables and fruits, such as potatoes, peas, onions, tomatoes, carrots, oranges, lemons, and passion fruits. They also produce and sell livestock products such as milk, broilers, eggs, pork, beef, and mutton. Because most of them lack funds for transport and cool storage of perishable horticultural and livestock products, they sell their produce to middle-traders at very low prices. The traders re-sell the products, at huge profits, to urban consumers and wholesalers in the neighboring Nakuru municipality or to exporters in Nairobi. A kilogram of passion fruits, for instance, earns farmers about US $0.35 from the middle-traders who re-sell it to exporters in Nairobi for over US $2.00. Thus selling to exporters directly would improve farmers’ incomes substantially.

Though Bahati Division is a high-potential agricultural area, it is plagued by a rapid increase in population density, high cost of living, low crop and livestock producer prices, ineffective extension delivery services, unemployment particularly among youth with few self-employment skills, and inability to generate above-subistence farm incomes. A typical family farm in the area is 1.2 ha and the average farm size is decreasing as parents divide the land to give inheritance to their children. Increasing population pressure and farmers’ failure to use what Swanson (1997) calls “precision technology,” emphasizing high production yet remaining ecologically friendly, in their farms have seriously reduced production efficiency leading to overall low yields. Although the maize (corn) production potential is 7,830 kg per ha, unsustainable land use and poor cultural practices have forced yields to decline from 4,500 kg to 1,530 kg per ha during the last ten years. Yields of other crop and livestock enterprises follow similar trends. On average, a Friesian cow produces 1,600 kg of milk per lactation of 305 days instead of the area’s potential of about 5,000 kg assuming that local pastures yield 5,000 to 7,000 kg of dry matter per cow per year. Reversing these trends requires an effective and efficient extension delivery system with widespread community support to ensure sustainability.

The relationship between religion and people’s way of life: Although individualism and consumerism are gradually overtaking traditional African generosity, hospitality, and solidarity, people in Bahati still share the religious values of peace, unity, and concern for others. Most residents of this division where Christianity—the dominant religion—influences approximately 80% of the local population to respect church leaders as peacemakers and counselors. Their high regard for church leaders implies that religious leaders could effectively mobilize community participation in development activities, since they are likely to be supported by the community members whom they lead.

The leaders’ response to socioeconomic challenges facing their community: The local African Inland Church (AIC) leaders, who are also parents, became increasingly concerned about Bahati’s low agricultural production and increasing social and economic problems. They decided to seek, from extension professionals, ways and means of reversing the trend of events. With advice from Egerton University staff and local extension providers, they conceptualized and initiated the Christian Life Promotion Program (CLPP) under which they planned to enhance the delivery of appropriate agricultural technologies from public and non-public extension providers and researchers. They also planned to share technical agricultural and nutrition information, as well as the skills and experience necessary to improve agricultural production and farmers’ income, health, and living standards. Their community-based initiative is an example of what Krippendorff (1987) calls self-referential community development. The initiative is particularly timely in view of Kenya’s on-going retrenchment of extension agents and her limited financial and logistical support for extension.

Starting from the mid-1990s, and especially from 1997 to 1999, the CLPP initiators used their church leadership positions
to legitimize their authority to mobilize the farmers to participate in agricultural extension activities. They organized a series of agricultural educational meetings inside churches, on church compounds, or on farmers’ farms during weekdays in which they invited the public irrespective of their religious affiliation. The initial meetings attracted an average of 40 men and women farmers, with a range of 26-100, and covered a wide range of technical agricultural and nutrition messages that the farmers needed to apply in their farms.

Assisted by Egerton University staff and local extension providers, the church leaders were able to convince local farmers that a good extension delivery system would empower them to control their development agenda and exploit the positive benefits of collective action. These include negotiating for lower input costs and higher farm-gate prices. They also convinced them that for a community-based extension delivery system to be sustainable it must, to a large extent, be locally funded and must involve most of the stakeholders who, in the Bahati case, include researchers, trainers, extension providers, and agricultural teachers in the surrounding schools. If local farmers waited for the government to do everything, the leaders stressed, they would lag behind in development and thus jeopardize their future livelihoods and living standards; but if they initiated and fully participated in development activities, they would attract support from public and private development agencies.

In a participatory exchange of views, the community highlighted the local problems responsible for perpetuating food insecurity and poverty in the area and resolved to support, morally and financially within their means, any action the community agreed upon to address these problems. Because the church leaders were themselves locally well known and respected farmers and they involved the community in identifying possible solutions and courses of action, the farmers supported them and jointly agreed to make extension focus on effective technical information sharing and sound planning. The community mandated the leaders to invite qualified and experienced extension service providers to help them overcome the problems that were limiting agricultural production, to improve family nutrition and health, and to create employment for their out-of-school youth.

The CLPP educational meetings focused on production and marketing of cereals, horticultural and livestock products, family nutrition, livestock feeding, pest and disease control, soil and water conservation, youth attitudes towards farming, farmer-to-farmer extension, and the role of the community in sustainable extension delivery services. Top-dressing and stalk borer controls, for instance, were poorly practiced. Farmers needed advice on fertilizer application and the correct timing and recommended chemicals for pest control in cereals. Most farmers attending the CLPP meetings knew at least one recommended corn variety (H614) but lacked adequate information on the advantages and disadvantages of different corn varieties. Other problems that the farmers cited frequently during the group meetings and individual farm visits were low availability of tractor plows and harvesters, which delayed farm operations. Farmers were also concerned with some youth’s negative attitude towards farming. Frequent reasons that youth gave for their lack of interest in farming include (a) farming is dirty, drudgery, and low in social status; (b) has low returns on investment; (c) land is inadequate; and (d) many parents take all the income their children earn from the family farms. Additionally, some youth consider themselves too educated to engage in farming. Others lack adequate skills to succeed in farming or consider farming as a punishment. Youths’ poor attitude toward farming is also due to peer pressure. To help youth succeed in farming the community suggests that they should be given (a) role models, (b) farming knowledge and skills, (c) access to farm inputs, and (d) freedom to use what they earn by working on their family farms.

However, half of all the youths, according to 90% of the farmers attending CLPP meetings, prefer farming and this proportion is increasing partly due to (a) scarcity of non-farm jobs and (b) higher income from farming than from available non-farm jobs for youth without professional skills. Additionally, (c) farming offers opportunities for the youth to make a large income at once or to earn a regular income, depending on the crop, and (d) parents who are good farmers encourage their children to try farming as a source of employment and livelihood.

Youth with access to land might increasingly choose farming due to lack of
locally available non-farm jobs, because farming pays better than other locally available jobs for youth without the required skills for the non-farm jobs available, or because, in general, the harder the farmer works the higher the earnings. Despite these advantages, youth who consider farming as dirty, toilsome, and low in status, those without access to land, and those who lack the knowledge and skills necessary for successful farming will continue to avoid farming.

The Bahati Divisional Agricultural and Livestock Extension Officer was concerned with the rise in diet-related diseases, particularly among children, due to insufficient nutrient intake and lack of protein and mineral in people’s diets. During the CLPP meetings farmers were advised (a) to include some fruits in their meals routinely, (b) to drink some milk regularly instead of selling it all, and (c) to eat a more varied and balanced diet. All the 26 families who received this message during the first meeting were followed by the local extension agents and found to have adopted some of the diet-related recommendations within a month after receiving the advice. Most husbands attended the meetings without their wives, who hold key roles in farming and cooking, but when they returned home they explained to family members the need for them to have more milk and fruits in their diets, and to use Soya as one of their protein sources. Over 50% of the farmers who attended the first three CLPP meetings (26, 40, and 60) increased their milk consumption while those who were not boiling milk before drinking started doing so as recommended. They reported eating more fruits per meal and using a more varied diet instead of a fixed staple. Solutions for nutritional problems may be relatively simple because protein sources (eggs and milk), fruits, and green vegetables are locally available. However, if nutritional knowledge is not improved and acted upon, improved earning may give community members more diet-related diseases, such as diabetes mellitus or hypertension.

Thus, by working with farmers, the Church leaders were able to bargain for lower input prices and low transport costs from suppliers, and to organize the marketing of farm produce for community members. They did this, for instance, by inviting from Nairobi, horticultural exporters, particularly of passion fruits and oranges, to come and buy the produce directly from the farmers on dates and times agreed jointly with the farmers.

**Leaders’ Source of Motivation**

Although some CLPP leaders, including their chairman, operate businesses in the neighboring Nakuru municipality, many of them are full-time farmers in Bahati Division. As religious leaders, they wanted to improve the welfare of their community by helping local extension providers to deliver advisory services that meet farmers’ expectations of being prompt, regular, and solution-oriented. Like other civil servants, the local public extension providers were poorly paid; hence many of them had little motivation, morale, and job satisfaction leaving them ineffective, less productive, and unavailable when farmers needed them most. Consequently, farmers viewed them negatively and this attitude adversely affected their work performance further, as well as the relationship between them and farmers. The leaders reportedly felt their challenge was to improve and maintain this relationship for the sake of their community’s socioeconomic development. The leaders expressed their conviction that if Bahati residents received correct technical information promptly they would apply it to improve cultural practices, livestock husbandry, and land management on their farms. This, they hoped, would enhance their families’ food security and poverty reduction. The church leaders reportedly felt that if local farmers were well organized, they could significantly contribute, for purposes of improvement, in areas where public extension providers, at the operational level, lacked adequate materials to serve them, such as transport, housing, and communication facilities.

**Facilitating circumstances:** About 80% of Bahati residents are Christians; therefore being church leaders CLPP initiators had an advantage in their community mobilization efforts. Their acceptance by the community made it easier for them to organize well-attended meetings to discuss community welfare. Many residents were willing to respect and act on their advice, particularly when they recommended an extension provider.

The leaders had good rapport with local youth and change agents, consequently their public meetings provided a suitable forum for discussing development issues that the community and change agents considered
important. Being leaders of the African Inland Church, the CLPP initiators had to explain to people of other religious groups that their initiative was meant to benefit all Bahati residents irrespective of their socioeconomic background or religious affiliation. This task was simplified by the cooperation that existed among the local Christian churches under the local chapter of the National Christian Council of Kenya (NCCK). Extension providers and Egerton University staff who were invited to CLPP meetings were well received by farmers, after being introduced by CLPP leaders.

Making Extension Sustainable and Providers Accountable to Clients

Discussions between CLPP leaders and extension providers emphasized the need to focus on a good work culture among extension providers in order to enhance extension delivery services. Such a culture, they all agreed is affected by the agents’ attitudes towards work, their accountability and transparency, commitment to duty, striving for excellence, respect for procedures and processes, self-discipline, and self-motivation. The CLPP leaders promised to do everything they can to ensure that extension providers are efficient, productive, and accountable to community members and that their advisory services are timely and responsive to community needs by supporting them with funds and other resources. This support included, for instance, subsidizing their fuel for transport while visiting farmers and assisting in providing accommodation for newly posted extension agents.

To ensure local extension agents are accountable to clients, the church leaders plan to sponsor local youth of good character who are interested in farming and community service to attend agricultural training in various institutions. These graduates would then be employed by the community and closely supervised by their leaders. The community believes that coming from the same environment and farming background would motivate these extension graduates to be accountable to their people. Since regular transfers that face public extension agents would not affect them, they would easily master the management of local farm enterprises and would link the community to local and other development agencies. Gradually, agents would learn whom to consult on behalf of the community for answers to specific questions related to the supply of farm inputs, provision of agricultural credit, pest and disease control, marketing, projects’ design, implementation, and evaluation, as well as youth and adult training.

The leaders improved extension coverage by requesting successful farmers with special skills, such as budding and grafting fruit-tree seedlings, grading fruits and vegetables, providing nutrition education and cooking special family dishes, to serve the community on a part-time basis either voluntarily or for a small fee. This was intended to give less experienced farmers prompt extension advice on request from their more experienced and familiar colleagues with whom they could discuss their problems freely and without fear. Farmer-to-farmer extension was particularly well received by women farmers. The more experienced farmers who were well regarded by their peers also shared their indigenous agricultural knowledge with their less experienced colleagues. It is important for farmers doing farmer-to-farmer extension to be given accurate technical information, through training or publications, to improve their effectiveness. These extension providers should listen carefully, answer their clients’ questions and refer them to other extension personnel or institutions where necessary, such as universities, for specialized help.

Future of Extension in Kenya

Making lasting positive change in people’s lives and on how people perceive themselves requires extension staffs that are competent and compassionate. Extension providers seeking to improve extension delivery services through community involvement often forget to consult religious leaders, thinking that they are best suited to handle spiritual matters. Leaders of religious organizations could help farmers significantly by supporting them physically, mentally, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, and socially. Because of the high regard in which farmers hold religious leaders, the leaders could collaborate with other change agents, to effectively encourage farmers to adopt recommended agricultural practices, such as correct fertilizer application, eating balanced diets to improve family health, and weeding and controlling crop pests at correct intervals.
The church leaders offered extension providers an excellent opportunity to reach more farmers in a mutually receptive environment. If this opportunity is repeated in other parts of the country, it can have desirable outcomes in Kenya’s extension delivery services. Extension providers could use local church leaders effectively to create, improve, and maintain good rapport with community members, improve their acceptance and credibility among the local people, facilitate the transfer of agricultural technologies through extension, and promote rural development.

Extension providers could respond to shrinking public funding for extension by enlisting community support in seeking funds to finance extension services and encouraging farmers to contribute towards the cost of extension through their own organizations. Like in the Bahati initiative, farmers elsewhere in Kenya could facilitate extension delivery services partly through farmer-to-farmer interaction and information sharing, and by working closely with local extension providers. Active interactions between farmers and extension agents, and among farmers themselves, minimize unidirectional flow of information and ensure that farmers are involved in agricultural development. Farmers should be seen not only as extension beneficiaries, but also as clients, sponsors, and stakeholders to whom extension providers are accountable in terms of the quality and effectiveness of the services they give them.

References


