

Hope and Despair: Extension Agents in a Young Democracy

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Abstract

The nation of South Africa during this critical transition period of economic growth and poverty alleviation provides an intriguing case study of the importance of coordination between government, civil society and the community for sustainable service delivery. The determination of extension agents to facilitate the success of the young democracy is thwarted by numerous field and institutional challenges that others observed and documented while the status quo remained. This paper provides a rare insight into a new discourse of extension as paragons of citizenship, patriotism, and nationalism. Properly approached, extension service can help unlock the service delivery cul-de-sac.

Introduction

On May 10, 1994, after almost a century of oppression South Africans inaugurated their first democratically elected president -- Nelson Mandela. In doing so, they set in motion a wave of change that was to engulf the whole country to give hope and exuberance to millions of blacks who suffered under the yoke of oppression. People expected, and justly so that peace and justice would return to a land torn apart by the violence of apartheid, that dignity would return to a people united in their struggle for freedom (Huddleston, 1992, & Deegan, 2001).

On the contrary, ten years later South Africa, like many young democracies, is a country challenged with a majority of her citizens filled with mixed feelings of hope and despair (Barbarin & Richter, 2001; Deegan, 1999, Glaser, 2000, & Marks, 2000). Among these citizens are extension agents. Extension agents, sometimes called change agents, facilitate change to millions of rural smallholder farmers residing in isolated villages (Ngomane, 2001. *In Press*). For some of these remote villages, extension agents represent the “*only face of government*” and the “*best catalysts for sustainable development*”. It is a very thin line indeed, which separates these smallholder farmers’ perceptions about extension agents, sustainable development and democracy--one may not have one without the other.

The democratic government promised better services for all people, especially to the poor and previously marginalized, with the

overall goal of rural poverty alleviation (RuPA). Poor farmers raised their expectations; comfortable in the knowledge that government will fulfill them. Like one extension agent said, “*we became their beacon of hope.*” In addition, the extension agents themselves got motivated that, unlike in the past, democracy will strengthen their capacity to meet the farmers’ expectations. These agents expected to get support services such as in-service training, improved work facilities, and access to transport (Ngomane, 2001). They expected better recognition at work and respect from the farmers.

As it turns out, service delivery is a long-term process, especially for these extension agents serving remote villages characterized with inadequate and often no basic development infrastructure. Studies have shown that extension services have made significant impact on agricultural development, leading to self-reliance and Rural Poverty Alleviation (RuPA) in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean (CTA, 1998; & Ngomane, 2000). Others have identified (Bruening & Reynar, 1996), and some have evaluated the constraints limiting extension effectiveness in promoting RuPA (Radhakrishna, 1999).

However, not many studies describe the feelings, expectations, challenges and resilience of extension agents as citizens in a democratic polity, especially in a young democracy such as South Africa. Like others, these extension agents grapple with critical issues: What does democracy mean to them as educators? Do they

feel recognized as significant role players in civil society and governance? What are their fears in bringing about change? And what is the driving force that, despite all limiting factors, continues to motivate them to strive for RuPA? This paper presents the first hand experiences of extension agents in the Northern province (now called Limpopo) of South Africa as they describe their feelings of hope and despair, opportunities and challenges in a young democracy. By presenting this paper in South Africa we hope not only to stimulate intellectual discourse on the phenomenon, but to also influence government policy on extension service delivery and sustainable rural development for poverty alleviation.

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose for the study was to understand feelings, expectations, challenges, motivations and policy recommendations of extension agents relative to the young democracy. Specifically, the paper examined the following issues:

1. How extension agents feel about the young democracy,
2. What expectations they had in service delivery,
3. What challenges they encounter en route to helping rural communities reduce poverty,
4. What motivates them to continue serving as extension agents, and
5. What needs to be done by way of policy recommendations in support of extension service delivery.

Methods and Data Sources

This study is based on field research conducted in 2001. In collecting the data, we followed a rigorous qualitative methodology of conducting interviews, individual and focus group discussions with extension agents in the Northern Province of South Africa. This qualitative research methodology was utilized to describe feelings of extension agents in a young democracy. Specifically, five focus group interviews were conducted with the extension agents. These focus groups comprised, on average, 12 participants per group. Qualitative research methodologists recommend on average 8 participants per focus group and no more than 48 participants in total for projects of a similar nature to this study (Flick, 1998; & Groeben, 1990). It is the truthfulness of the participant's

responses and how best the researchers capture participant's meaning that is crucial as opposed to generalizability of the findings. Thus the total number of extension agents in Limpopo province was not an issue for this project, of concern to us was rank and geographic representation as well as the truthfulness of participant's responses. Participants responded to five main questions about their feelings, expectations, challenges, motivations, and educational implications of civic engagement in a young democracy. The questions asked were semi-structured, interactive and narrative in design. In other words, the researchers used basic open-ended questions that served as a guideline for the interviews and focus group discussions. The precise framing of the questions depended on the composition of the group, their experiences and their orientation about the specific issue under discussion. To help you understand the nature of the questions and compilation of the data we decided to quote verbatim the questions asked as we present the results and conclusions.

Furthermore, the researchers applied subjective theory as the appropriate conceptual framework in collecting information of participants' experiences. The subjective theory recognizes the fact that the interviewees have complex knowledge about the topic under study (Flick, 1998; & Groeben, 1990). The elements of the semi-structured interview were as follows:

1. Open questions to be answered on the basis of the knowledge the interviewee has immediately at hand,
2. Theory-driven, objective-directed questions based on scientific literature and researchers' pre-suppositions,
3. Confrontational questions to critically re-examine the interviewee responses in relation to theory.

Average time spent on each interview ranged from one to two hours. The interviews were audiotape recorded and transcribed. Again sixty extension agents participated in the study representing all regions of the province. Participants represented all levels of extension service, from field extension agents to middle managers at regional and provincial levels. We also observed a policy-defining meeting in the Sekhukhune region where government policy on local government service delivery and poverty alleviation was discussed with the extension

agents. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed as evidence of data. We also took notes and followed-up some participants with telephone calls to ensure common understanding on issues raised. Literature review and personal experiences of the authors comprised other sources of data for this study. Information thus collected was organized in NUDIST/Nvivo and analyzed following emerging trends, patterns and themes.

Results and Conclusions

These research results and conclusions are presented according to the thematic areas that emerged from the analysis. In addition, direct quotes from the respondents are used as evidence of truthfulness of the data. Thus, some statements might have grammatical and syntax errors, especially from respondents who rarely use the English language in daily communication with their clients. The results are presented as follows:

Theme # 1: Feelings about democracy

Participants were asked to describe their personal feelings about and attributions to service as extension educators in a democratic polity. Emphasis here was on **how**. Participants were generally positive about democracy. “Apartheid was bad”, they said, “an *immoral thing to have happened.*” The agents acknowledged the high rate of job losses. However, these they characterized as casualties in war situation. “*We are still a young democracy, as we move along more positive things will come. I give democracy 73% success. Personally, I feel the expectation is just too high for government to undo century wrongs within less than a decade*”.

Statements such as, “*democracy gave us the right to make choices...*” were mentioned as evidence of citizenship. In addition, participants expressed attributions of pride and self-worth influenced by the general shift in paradigm from agriculture “*...the dirty profession,*” to agriculture the “*lucrative career choice, and a viable option for our youth.*” Democracy brought visibility to the rural areas and better access to information. Female agents speak in tribal court meetings (kgoro), a new cultural pattern never heard of prior to democracy. There is more equity in that “*...we now have equitable distribution of resources... including access to education for all.*” These patriotic feelings are

best captured in the words of one agent who said, “*democracy gave us the right to make choices, and that is a fundamental human right I value above all things.*”

Theme # 2: Expectations about democracy

The question asked was: “What expectations did you have from democracy relative to your personal and professional life?” Here the emphasis was on **what**. There were intergenerational differences in the way that young and old participants addressed this thematic area. They all expected change to happen; however, young extension agents felt that they adapted quickly to change and “*understood better the development orientation in the country*”. Older agents felt the pace of change was too rapid. They expressed concern about disruption of the family structure and disrespect for traditional leadership. The older generation expected to continue providing the core management leadership as they did pre-democracy.

Theme # 3: Motivation/resilient factors

The question asked was “What is it, in your personal background that motivates you to serve in your current role/position?” Again, responses were contextual based on responses to question # 2 above, with more similarities than differences. Family poverty was a common motivating factor for all the participants. As a result, expressions of altruism in phrases such as “*wanted to help others,*” “*to make a difference,*” “*being a role model,*” and “*to be exemplary*” featured throughout this theme. They all felt a sense of responsibility to others and “*wanted to plough back to the community.*” As extension agents, they are able to make these socio-economic differences. For some agents, the primary school gardening program, access to college training bursaries, and exposure gained in boarding schools influenced their choice of agricultural extension as a profession.

Theme # 4: Challenges encountered

Participants were asked to describe the challenges they encounter in their effort to deliver services within the young democracy. Responses tended to be contextual, based on geographic location and the political history of the regions. We captured these differences in two categories, namely, field level and institutional level. At field-level, the silo-

approach to service delivery where institutions and units work in isolation, while pursuing similar goals is a problem in extension. Extension agents found themselves caught in the middle of the impasse between traditional leaders and elected local councilors. In the past, traditional leaders had more authority over land in rural areas. At present it is the local councilors that have constitutional authority over development property at local government level.

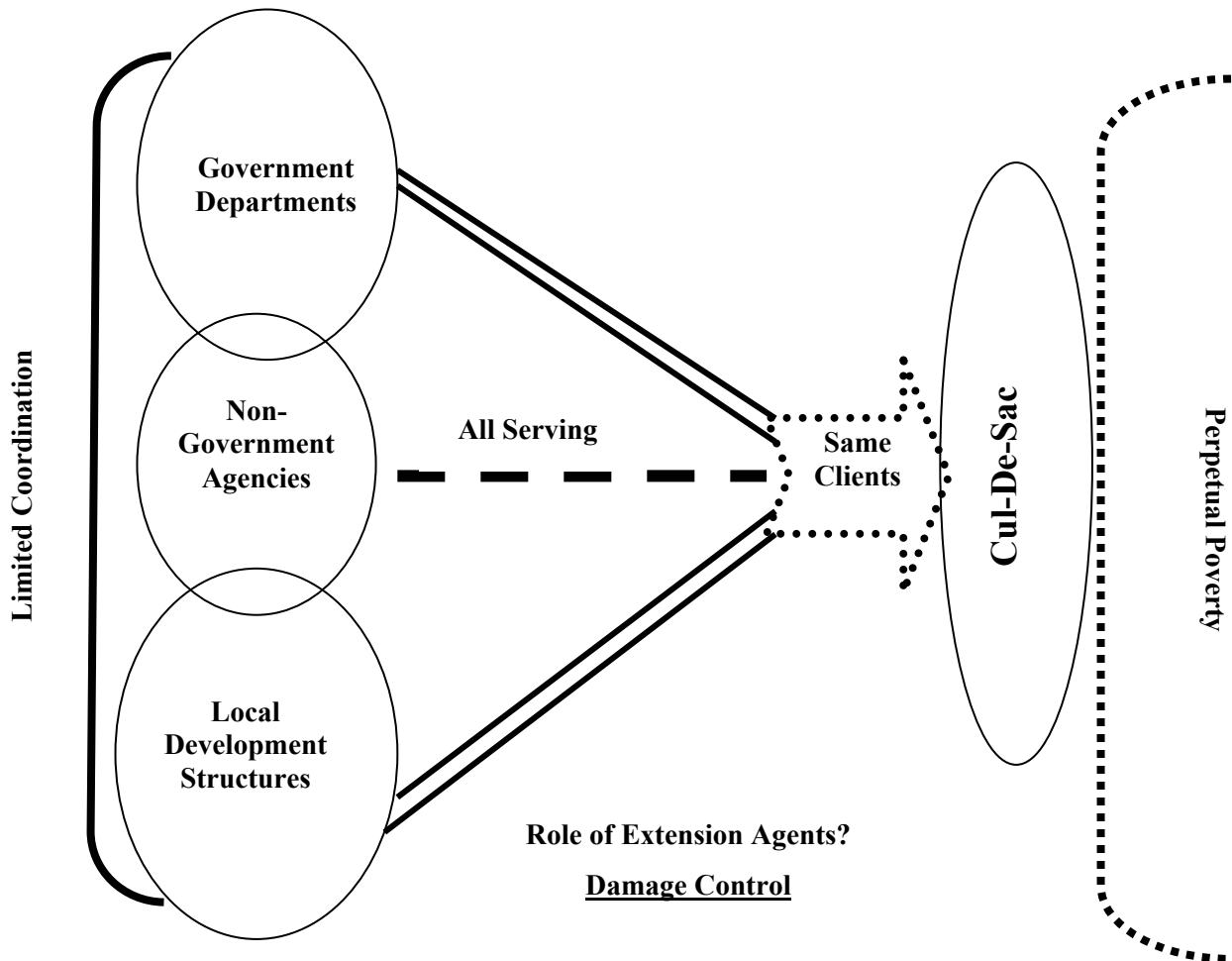
Some people are more aligned to the traditional leaders whilst others follow the democratically elected local councilors. For instance, participants from Vembe, the former independent state of Venda, where traditional leaders are regarded as special people “appointed by God to lead others for life,” felt strongly challenged by what they describe as “efforts to disempower traditional leaders in favor of what...local councilors just elected to serve for only five years?” “Remain apolitical ...” advised one policy maker, but extension agents find it difficult to facilitate change under these circumstances. For extension agents, the political conflict poses serious threat to their service delivery capacity, because they have to work within local structures of authority. If these structures are in conflict, extension agents get caught at the center. Likewise, where agents agonize over limited opportunities for self-development, self-development lends itself to the farmers through better access to alternative information sources. Oftentimes, extension agents feel incapacitated to handle the demands of farmers more informed than them.

At institutional level extension agents described their work environment as unfavorable. They expressed constant fear of retrenchment from the top managers. Ethnicity and nepotism is more obvious with racial and cultural integration. Government bureaucracy

they said “*is a major problem that hinders the pace of change...we spent more time compiling reports than actually rendering requisite services*”. Lack of transport to cover scattered villages was a main concern, especially for the female agents.

In an attempt to portray with clarity the complexity of issues underlying this theme, we use a metaphor, service delivery cul-de-sac. In brief, this means that whereas extension agents are civically committed to service, the reality of the social change environment negates their service delivery efforts, leading to a cul-de-sac (project failure). That reality could be at field-level, cultural, or even at the top with the leadership styles. Participants described challenges “*from the top*” as “*fear of retrenchment,*” “*pressure to deliver,*” “*ethnicity,*” “*lack of collaboration,*” “*nepotism,*” which negates commitment to sustainable services delivery. In essence, service delivery cul-de-sac represents an interface of hope and despair. We use this metaphor to explain the educational importance of the study to extension service delivery. As you observed, most agents use phrases such as “*fear of retrenchment,*” “*pressure to deliver,*” “*ethnicity,*” and “*nepotism*” when describing their work environment. Apparently, feelings of hope are slowly turning into feelings of despair for both the farmers and the extension agents. The root cause, they say, “*government bureaucracy, lack of collaboration amongst service providers, and political conflicts at local government level.*” Besides all these challenges, government expectation is for rapid service delivery for RuPA, which places extension service right at the center of the “service delivery cul-de-sac.” This scenario is illustrated as follows:

**Service Delivery Cul-De-Sac
Extension Agents Caught at the Center**



Policy Recommendations

The suggestions from extension agents is for an improvement in communication systems within government, setting up mechanisms for better collaboration and coordination amongst service providers (i.e., non-government organizations, public and private sector) and the rural farming communities, separating politics from extension services, recognizing traditional leaders, and provision of basic infrastructure for sustainable rural development. Addressing these issues they say, “will revitalize the hopes and aspirations of the poor and strengthen their confidence in democracy.” The rapid change process, as depicted in the service delivery superhighway will show impact on poverty alleviation. On the other hand, failure to address these issues may easily result in a service delivery superhighway that dead-ends with more rural poverty.

Extension service shall lose meaning to the rural communities.

Specific recommendations are as follows:

1. Adopting a multi-disciplinary approach to extension and service delivery.
2. Removing politics from extension.
3. Recognizing the social capital that extension agents have as patriotic citizens and assets to the community. Let them facilitate change, for they are internally motivated to do so.
4. Creating a favorable work environment; no threats, better communication, and better work facilities such as transport.
5. Strengthening the capacity of extension agents to handle the new demands.
6. Providing career guidance in schools with more emphasis on agri-business.
7. Training and employment of more female extension agents as a strategic necessity.

Educational Importance

Several lessons of significance to scholarship and to policy makers in South Africa emerge from this study. First, the realization that educators are citizens first before they are workers implies a change in approach to development programs and strategies (Boyte, & Kari, 1996, and Waltzer, 1998). **Treat extension agents as partners** in these efforts; they want change to happen not only for others, but for themselves as strategically placed citizens in governance (Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, 1998). Just think of the implications for the sense of ownership associated with patriotism. Second is the need to further **explore the notion of extension service itself, as a contextual phenomenon** within a democracy. Research should help develop and document understanding of why, for instance, a fearful work environment negates service delivery.

Third, **extension educators should make visible their achievements** to government institutions, academia, and civil society and vice-versa. All the educators want is to be exemplary, to make a difference, thus a visible reiterative process can help them show that they do make a difference, and that they are role models. Fourth, an educational lesson of import lies in the metaphor, “the service delivery cul-de-sac”. The old saying about the road to hell being paved with good intentions is a reality for the agents and the rural communities. The excellent political mandate of rapid Rural Poverty Alleviation (RuPA) is being suffocated in the “**silo-approach**” depicted by parallel lanes in the model. These are service providers working in isolation serving the same community. The outcome is what agents call “**White elephants**” or project failure, and eventually a state of **perpetual poverty**. Our last thought in concluding this paper suggests taking the superhighway in service delivery only if one is certain that the superhighway will take them to their intended destinations--fast and easy. Without this certainty the superhighway simply takes us to a dead-end--fast and easy.

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