Between Government and Market Failure: Issues, Perceptions and Policy Challenges in Reforming Public Sector Extension Services in sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

This paper analyzes ongoing efforts to reform public sector extension in sub-Saharan Africa. It is argued that the extension reform agenda must be conceptualized within the paradigm shift in international development in the 1980s from market to government failure, and its consequences for reducing government's role in service delivery. Using this broad conceptual framework, and relying on extensive literature review and qualitative data from Nigeria, the paper analyzes potential pitfalls to implementing extension privatization and decentralization in SSA. The paper contends that ongoing extension reform efforts in SSA are characterized by being overly technocratic, over-emphasizing structural issues relative to institutional culture, externally conceived rather than being homegrown, and finally failing to place the reform agenda within the context of Africa's unique political, social, cultural, historical, and institutional realities.

While noting that current public sector dominated institutional framework for the delivery of extension services in SSA is unsustainable, the author contends that ongoing reform proposals such as decentralization and privatization are unlikely to succeed unless they are grounded within Africa's unique historical, political, socio-economic, and institutional realities. It is concluded that for the foreseeable future, the public sector, in concert with other alternative delivery mechanisms such as private sector providers, and non-governmental organizations, will continue to play a role in the delivery of extension services in SSA, especially in poorly integrated areas. Finally, it is recommended that extension reform effort in SSA should shift from its current narrow focus on technology transfer toward the more integrated Agricultural Knowledge & Information System for Rural Development (AKIS/RD) approach.

Acknowledgement

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Introduction

The government versus market failure debate has been at the heart of the global political-economic divide for centuries. It has been at the core of the long-standing debate about what government should or should not do relative to the market. Hence, the global efforts to reform the public sector which started in the 1980s, including public sector extension services, must be conceptualized within this broad government versus market failure debate. In the 1980s, there was clearly a paradigm shift with government failure being regarded as the stumbling block to international development. Hence, the worldwide efforts to reform governments from the developmentalist model of the 1960s to the minimalist construction of the 1980s. It is, therefore, not a mere coincidence that the massive privatization effort in the public sector, market deregulation, and other such market-based reform initiatives started in the 1980s.

In the industrialized countries, the fall-out of this paradigm shift included public sector privatization, welfare reform, and the reinventing government programs of the 1990s. For the less developed countries, including sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) was seen as the instrument for reining in what was perceived as government's excessive control of, and mismanagement of the economy. Included in SAP were policies such as the privatization of government-run public utilities, marketing boards, removal of subsidies, and civil service reform. SAP was a sharp repudiation of Africa's post-colonial macro-economic policies which saw government as the dominant player in import-substitution industrialization, infrastructure development, and the delivery of services, including extension services.

Hence the argument is advanced in this paper that in order to understand the dynamics at work in on-going efforts to reform public sector extension in SSA, one needs to conceptualize the reform debate within the general framework of the global shift toward private sector domination, both in economic affairs and in public sector management.. This paper therefore analyzes the challenges and implications of reforming public sector extension in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) given the juxtaposition of a clearly inefficient public sector delivery mechanism and the reality of a poor infrastructure for private sector delivery.

The paper draws largely from the emerging theoretical frameworks of the New Public Management and Public entrepreneurship. It draws lessons from the vast literature emerging from over two decades of experience in reforming public sector in the less developed countries. It is hoped that lessons learned from these past efforts will be brought to bear in determining the most sustainable approaches for reforming, arguably, the most critical component of Africa's overall economic development, the agricultural sector and the institutions supporting it.

Statement of the Problem

The revitalization of the agricultural sector is vital to the overall economic development of sub-Saharan Africa. While the region has experienced massive rural-urban migration in the past few decades, the rural sector still remains a large part, if not the driving force of Africa's economies. Therefore, the stagnation, and in many instances, the decline in the agricultural sector constitutes a major source of concern for national and international development specialists. While there is a greater recognition that Africa's agricultural...
challenges must be analyzed from an integrated systems approach, the so called Agricultural Knowledge and Information System for Rural Development approach, (AKIS/RD) (Rivera, 2001), however, most analysts still tend to focus on the extension delivery component as the main cause of agricultural stagnation in the region. This explains why public sector extension tends to receive disproportionate attention in reform debate. I argue in this paper that such a narrow focus portends the risks of misdiagnosing the real problem, and consequently prescribing non-sustainable remedies. In addition to the need for a broad-based AKIS/RD approach, issues such as Africa’s unique political history and structure, global competition, and an increasingly internationalized public sector management paradigm, must be given adequate consideration in devising sustainable extension reform proposals for the region.

There is now almost a general consensus that public sector extension in SSA has failed to meet its institutional mandate of promoting technology intensification and improved agricultural productivity. Eicher (2001) for instance concluded that in SSA extension is moribund. While this conclusion may appear rather extreme, it points to the level of despondency about the prospects for revitalizing public sector extension systems in SSA. Many reasons have been adduced for this failure, including institutional rigidity and overbureaucratization, bloated staff, top-down management style, and a lack of coordination or linkage with other components of the AKIS/RD, particularly research and development (Rivera, 2000; Farrington, Christoplos, Kidd, & Beckman 2002). However, often lost in this focus on institutional structure is the reality that the majority of Africa's under-trained, under-compensated, under-supported, and over-extended village extension workers work in some of the most difficult terrains in the world, often without access to transportation and with little if any adoptable agricultural technologies to diffuse. Hence, rather than the conventional portrayal of extension workers as villains, many are in fact true heroes, doing their best on an assignment where failure was already almost the pre-determined outcome.

Given its perceived failure and an international development environment that is moving away from public sector provision of services, the debate about reforming public sector extension has dominated discussion about agricultural development in SSA. Additionally, the extension reform debate is taking place at a time when the consensus in the development community is that Africa’s post-colonial government-led development policies have led to inefficiency, corruption, and excessive bureaucratization; and when the appetite for the infusion of additional resources into the public sector has all but disappeared. This probably explains why many of the reform proposals seem to have looked beyond redeeming the current government-dominated institutional framework, and moved toward a search for alternative delivery mechanisms for extension services, preferably market-based options. However, except in few instances, most analysts debating the extension reform agenda fail to acknowledge this contextual reality of extension reform, much less frame the reform proposals within the reality of the pro-market development paradigm.

Hence, many critics have charged that while such reform strategies as decentralization, deconcentration, and pluralism, are banded around, there is little doubt that the emphasis is clearly on privatization. On the fate of the millions of poorly integrated resource-poor farmers under a privatized system, Farrington et al, (2002) noted that some governments in Latin America already adopt the triage option for what they consider ‘non-viable’ villages, abandoning these areas to a combination of subsistence production and labor emigration.
Reforming public sector extension in SSA is, to say the least, a very challenging task. While there is a general consensus that current public sector-dominated institutional framework for the delivery of extension services in SSA is no longer sustainable, there are very serious doubts about the sustainability of the market-based approach. The paper will also examine issues such as the overly technocratic tone of the reform debate, the inadequate attention being paid to the social, economic and political dimensions of the reform programs, and finally the domination of the reform agenda by outside influence.

Using a theoretical research approach, and relying on extensive literature review in the general area of public sector reform, and on qualitative data from key-informant interviews, the paper analyzes the major proposals for reforming public sector extension in SSA. It attempts to place the extension reform debate within the context of past experience in public sector reform, highlight the potential pitfalls of extension privatization and decentralization in SSA.

It is pertinent, however, to sound a note of warning about generalizing the paper to the whole SSA region. A substantial portion of the data on which the paper is based reflect perspective derived mainly from the Nigerian context. As important as Nigeria is in the African context, and despite the numerous commonalities among African countries, generalizing data across the continent must be done with caution to avoid the sin of overreach which pervades both the mass media and academia.

Method

The paper adopts a theoretical/philosophical approach. Its theoretical development relies heavily on an analysis of the large body of literature available on the general topic area of public sector reform, including privatization, decentralization, and public entrepreneurship, the so-called new public management movement. Additional contextual evidence comes from qualitative stakeholder interviews with a small but select sampling of farmers and senior government officials in southwestern Nigeria. The paper is organized along the following themes:

1. Conceptual Framework
2. The nature of the state in SSA and its implications for public sector reform.
3. The state versus market failure argument: implications for public sector extension reform
4. Conclusion, Recommendations, and Implications

Conceptual Framework

One of the major policy instruments of international development in the past two decades is the diminution of state power in economic affair and service delivery relative to that of global capital and the market. From welfare reform, extension privatization, to structural adjustment policy, to name but a few, the emphasis has clearly been on limiting the scope of government involvement in running the economy and providing services, reducing government spending, increasing the role of the private sector in service delivery, and on infusing market-based management culture into the public sector. Hence, two broad public sector extension reform themes of privatization and decentralization have emerged (Rivera,
2001). These two models are almost analogous to the market-based and non-market reform proposals for public sector extension (Smith, 1999).

The privatization model which has also been described as the export model (Pinto & Mfope, 1995) is often associated with the minimalist state perspective. Under the general rubric of the government failure theory, proponents of the privatization model argue that public ownership leads to the pursuit of objectives that detract from economic welfare maximization. They contend that the romantic view of government bureaucrats coming to the rescue of the public in the face of market failure, confuses the true relationship between economics and politics (Tullock, Brady and Seldon, 2002). Tollock, et. al. (2002) argue that government cures often cause more harm than good. Advancing a public choice theory explanation of the incentives and behavior of government officials, they argue that while government bureaucrats are supposed to work in the public interest, putting into practice the policies of government as efficiently and effectively as possible, in reality bureaucrats, as self-interest maximizers, are motivated by such factors as: "salary, prerequisites of the office, public reputation, power, patronage...and the ease of managing the bureau." (Niskanen, 1973)

Often the reform mechanism of choice by multilateral organizations, such as the World Bank, the spate of privatization schemes across the globe over the past two decades, clearly demonstrates the dominance of this pro-market, minimalist-state approach in international development. Warning about the danger of imposing public sector privatization on vulnerable LDCS, Kessler (2002) observes that the pressure of multilateral lenders can make democratic governance all but impossible. He observes that international lenders can tip the balance toward their preferred policy outcome by threatening to withhold broader resources, suspend debt relief or postpone or cancel loans, which in turn can cause other donors and creditors to withhold funds, thus deterring the flow of foreign investment.

Proponents of the non-market approach to public sector reform, including decentralization, while recognizing the incompatibility of bureaucratic government with the knoweldge-economy of the 21st century are opposed to blanket privatization, preferring instead what they term public entreprenuership (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). Osborne and Gaebler (1992) argue for a complete transformation of bureaucratic government into entrepreneurial government. In their view, government should not be abolished, but should be 'reinvented'. They argued that in this era of global competition, instant communication, a knowledge-based economy, and niche-markets, industrial era bureaucracy produces mediocrity, inflexibility, and an obsession with control. To replace this model of government, a new form of 'governance', which they described as entrepreneurial government, was recommended, borrowing private sector management practices such as decentralization, competition, organizational learning, and consumer orientation (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). Examples of the import model of reform, which is analogous to the non-market extension reform model described by Rivera (2001, p. 24) include decentralization, participatory farmer-led extension models and service delivery through non-governmental organizations.

In addition to analyzing the two broad extension reform themes of privatization and decentralization, the paper addresseses concerns about the rather technocratic, formulaic and mechanistic tone of the reform debate. It is argued that extension reform takes place within a political, social, economic milieu and is impingned upon by issues such as the nature of the state, institutional capacity, resource endowment, equity and social justice. Therefore an understanding of the institutional weaknesses of public sector extension in SSA, must start
with a thorough analysis of the nature of the African state, its colonial creation, its fractious multi-ethnic configuration, and the disconnect between formal institutions borrowed or imposed from outside, and indigenous African institutions (Dia, 1996).

African State: The Disconnect Between Formal & Traditional Institutions

On the need to place the extension reform agenda within Africa's unique political and cultural circumstances, the admonition of Englebert (1997) is very instructive. Quoting Whitaker (1991), Englebert (1997: 768) noted, “The World Bank insufficiently appreciated the extent to which the quality of the relationship between the state and society in Africa, as opposed to concern with the capacity of state institutions as such, is crucial for both economic development and democratic political formation.” Writing on the same subject, Dia (1991) warned that World Bank’s policy analysis and recommendations for Africa must go beyond neoclassical paradigms to include explicit consideration of the cultural dimension of economic and administrative behaviors. Unfortunately, this timely caution seems often to be lost on many analysts, who lacking an emic perspective of the intricacies of the state-society relationship, run the risk of misdiagnosing the true nature of extension problems and recommending unsustainable policy proposals for fixing them.

A thorough understanding of the contemporary condition of the African state, which have been variously described as failed, patrimonial, clientelist, and pseudo-state, (Englebert, 1997), and the perceived failure of its public institutions must of necessity take a historical and evolutionary perspective. Englebert (1997) correctly noted that the contemporary sub-Saharan Africa states were descendants of arbitrary colonial units designed as instruments of domination, oppression, and exploitation. Hence, some of the problems of governance in contemporary Africa states can be traced to their rather ahistorical evolution. Additionally, contemporary Africa states and their institutions are relatively young, with most African countries gaining their independence in the 1960s. Placed within this historical context, some of the failings of African governments and their institutions will seem less egregious than they normally would. For instance, when it is realized that formalized public sector extension in most African countries, average less than fifty years (discounting pre-independence extension services focused on resource extraction) compared to their centuries-old counterparts in the West, their failings become more understandable. However, this historical fact often gets lost in the debate about the performance of extension systems in SSA relative to their more advanced and much older counterparts in the West.

Another important factor in understanding the endemic crisis of Africa’s public institutions is what Dia (1991, p vii) describes as the structural disconnect between formal institutions transplanted from outside and indigenous institutions born of traditional African culture. This institutional disconnect is evidenced in the dissonance between the externally imposed bureaucratic form of civil service management based on formalization and objectivization, and Africa’s indigenous institutional management systems. Hence, when analysts blame extension’s bureaucratic structure for its inefficiency, the reality to anyone who is familiar with the fact that circumventing bureaucratic safeguards has almost become an art form in SSA, is that other factors might be more important. For instance institutional culture variables, such as dependence on patronage, official corruption, and nepotism, rather than structural dysfunction, may be at the heart of public sector extension problems in SSA.
Experience has shown that failure to pay adequate attention to the political intricacies of reform initiative is often a major contributor to the failure of many projects for planned institutional transformation. For instance, while it is generally recognized that the continued payment of huge farm subsidies in the West, in many instances, may not make too much sense both from an economic policy and a trade fairness standpoint, however most politicians know too well that removing these subsidies is tantamount to a “kiss of death.” Unfortunately, many analysts from the same West have no qualms about demanding that governments in the less developed countries implement reform policies that are unsustainable both from a political and social equity standpoint.

Extension Reform Agenda: Between Government & Market Failure

Public sector reform has dominated international development agenda over the past two decades. Undergirding the reform agenda are the two contending theories of government versus market failure, resulting in two broad reform themes. These two broad reform traditions have been variously described as minimalist versus restrained but strengthened government, decentralization versus privatization, export versus import reform model (Pinto, & Mrope, 1995) and market versus non-market market-based reform (Rivera, 2001). Presented in table 1 are the key differences between the two reform themes. It is however pertinent to note that in practice pure forms of these reform paradigms are rare, and that paradigmatic overlaps are the norm rather than the exception. At the core of their differences is their respective perception about what the role of government should be in managing market failure. While proponents of the restrained but strengthened government see a potential benefit of government intervention, especially for social equity reasons and in areas where market failure is rampant, the minimalist government persuasion sees government cures as often doing more harm than good. Hence, while the restrained but strengthened government perspective tends to prefer non-market solutions such as public entrepreneurship and decentralization, the minimalist state tends to prefer market-based reform.

It is not the intent of this paper to rehash the key components of the two extension reform themes of market and non-market proposals, since the literature is quite extensive on these subjects (Rivera, 2001; Farrington et al., 2002). Rather, this section’s purpose is to analyze the opportunities and challenges of implementing the various reform proposals in SSA, especially given its unique political, social, economic, historical, and cultural environment. The section draws heavily from the lessons learned from other public sector reform initiatives in the less developed countries.

In an international environment in which the withdrawal of the public sector from service provision has become the reform mechanism of choice, it is little wonder that the privatization of extension features prominently in the reform agenda. The term privatization can mean several things, ranging from complete government withdrawal from the function, including the sale of government assets, contracting out services to private organizations, to the use of vouchers to allow "customers" shop around (Winston, Burwick, McConnell, and Roper, 2002). While the almost frenetic clamor for privatization, which characterized the early stages of public sector, has subsided somewhat, it still remains the public sector reform policy of choice by many multilateral institutions, including the World Bank. Its most ardent proponents argue that even with its flaws, privatization was still preferred to the old status quo in which corrupt and incompetent government bureaucrats continue to deliver failing services indefinitely.
Although proponents of extension privatization and other market-based alternatives, often avoid the rhetoric of the public choice school, however, the application of the triage option as far as producers in "non-viable" villages has already been reported in Latin America (Farrington, Christoplos, & Kidd 2002). The triage option refers the tendency of private sector providers to focus on the most competitive market, thus leaving poorly integrated producers in the remote to stagnate and so encourage out-migration. Apart from the ethical issue raised by the spectacle of millions of resource-poor being left to stagnate or wither under a triage policy of rural development, there are serious and practical problems with extension privatization in SSA.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of the Two Dominant Public Sector Reform paradigm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTERISTICS</th>
<th>MARKET-BASED</th>
<th>NON-MARKET</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source of Failure</td>
<td>Government Failure</td>
<td>Government &amp; Market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Emphasis</td>
<td>Efficient Resource Allocation</td>
<td>Efficiency &amp; Social Equity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of Government</td>
<td>Minimalist</td>
<td>Restrained but Strengthened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Clientele</td>
<td>Market-Integrated Producers</td>
<td>Market-Integrated &amp; Remote Producers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Reform Instrument</td>
<td>Privatization</td>
<td>Decentralization/ Public entrepreneurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus of Service</td>
<td>Single Commodity/ Technology Transfer</td>
<td>AKIS/RD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fate of Resource-poor Producers</td>
<td>Triage Policy</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Provider</td>
<td>Private Sector</td>
<td>Plurality of Government, Quasi-private &amp; NGOs</td>
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Experience from other privatization schemes suggests that the assumption of improved quality under a privatized service system may be simply over-optimistic. Carnegie Council on Ethics & International Affairs (2003) in a report analyzing the impact of privatization, noted that while the privatization of traditionally competitive state enterprise shows evidence of increased productivity, the story when it came to natural monopolies has led to soaring price, cherry picking, denial of access and mismanagement. Continuing, the report noted that after the heady days of the booming nineties, when capital market liberation, and privatization went unquestioned, current economic slowdown and the spate of corporate scandals, has attenuated the almost blind adherence to the promise of privatization (Carnegie Council on Ethics & International Affairs, 2003). Corkery and Land (1997) also noted that privatization and the attendant large scale and rapid divestiture in countries with an under-developed private sector has been difficult, concluding that there is growing evidence
that, in certain circumstances, public enterprise can play an effective role in social and economic development.

Finally, for privatization to be successful, it is paramount that there exist adequate infrastructure for public oversight to avoid abuses, such as exploitation and rent-seeking behavior. In many SSA countries, the infrastructure for this critical oversight is either weak or non-existent. For these and other reasons, measures to enhance the performance of public enterprise where privatization is not appropriate are now attracting greater attention.

Under the general rubric of public entrepreneurship or the so-called new public management, the non-market approach to extension reform is opposed to blanket privatization, preferring instead to relieve the public sector from the stifling effect of bureaucratic rigidity, through decentralization, empowerment, and the infusion of successful private sector incentive-based management process such as competition, organizational learning, consumer orientation, and supply-driven service provision into public sector management. Extension decentralization, it is argued, will help to empower farmers and their local communities by bringing the locus of power and decision-making nearer the grassroots. As a technical package and from the philosophical standpoint of empowerment, decentralization represents the institutional ideal. However, experience garnered over the past two decades will seem to indicate that when inserted into the real world of institutional, social, economic, political, and cultural realities, institutional decentralization remains what it is, an ideal that is very hard to attain.

Llambi and Lindenmann (2001) noted that experience with decentralization in Latin America shows that few reforms have reached all their alleged goals, such as increased market competitiveness, poverty reduction, and that in many instances, serious short circuits and backlashes have resulted. They identified the three broad pre-conditions for successful decentralization, which they contend are usually lacking in many less developed countries, to include a conducive macro-political, macro-economic, and macro-institutional environment. Political commitment and social consensus, a comprehensive legislative framework and comprehensive civil service reform must characterize a macro-political environment conducive to decentralization. Macroeconomic environment relates to coherence between national economic strategies, sectoral policies and locally based investment strategies and a stable financial condition at the sub national level. Finally, the third precondition for successful decentralization is a macro-institutional environment characterized by an appropriate balance in the distribution of responsibilities and resources between central and sub national entities, and a rural environment that takes a territorialized view of rural development. These are definitely high hurdles to cross for many less developed countries, but especially for sub-Saharan Africa, which explains why decentralization has been such a hard reform policy to implement.

A critical analysis of the macro-economic, political and -institutional environments in most of SSA will seem to indicate that these preconditions for successful decentralization are either weak or non-existent. For instance, on the macro-political front, despite recent progress in transiting from dictatorial government (both the military and civilian variants) to elected governments, the infrastructure for legislative action, commitment to pluralism, and grassroots participatory democracy in most SSA countries are too weak to meet the precondition for decentralization. The fractious inter-ethnic struggle for power, dependence on government patronage to maintain the tenuous hold on power, combined with weak institutional capacity at the sub-national and local government level make decentralization a
very difficult reform proposal to implement. In Nigeria for instance, the centralization of resource control and revenue collection with the federal government maintaining a strangle hold is a politically contentious issue clearly beyond social science instrumentation or extension reform. However, until sub-national components gain some form of economic independence from the current situation where they all rely on the center for budgetary allocation, institutional decentralization of extension or any other public sector institution for that matter, will remain an effort in cosmetic window dressing. Hence structural or territorial decentralization without a concomitant decentralization of resource or revenue control and the strengthening of local management and operational capacity can only lead to the creation of additional layers of inefficient bureaucracies at the local government level (Key Informant Interview, 2004).

Qamar (2002), in his extensive analysis of extension decentralization initiatives in the Philippines, Indonesia and Tanzania reported that while decentralization is good in principle, the initial stage shows quite a bit of setback for extension. He noted that decentralized extension in Tanzania suffered from lack of operational budget, in the Philippines, political interference compromised extension effectiveness, and in Uganda resources were diverted to the construction of feeder roads, leaving extension agents unpaid for months, causing him to conclude that without adequate preparation and commitment, decentralization can truly become a double-edged sword, causing more harm than good (Qomar, p. 22). Hence, as attractive as decentralization may seem, it is not likely to constitute a short-term solution to the deep-rooted problem of extension service delivery in SSA.

Conclusions and Implications

Public sector dominated institutional mechanism for extension service delivery in sub-Saharan Africa is unequivocally non-sustainable. The magnitude of the challenge involved in providing extension services capable of promoting sustainable agriculture development far exceeds the institutional capacity, manpower, resource endowment and management capacity available in the public sector. Simply put, public sector extension systems in SSA lack the installed capacity to meet its institutional mandate. There is therefore no question that institutional reform and the search for alternative delivery mechanisms is not only urgently needed, but critical for economic sustainability.

The extension reform agenda is a most daunting challenge, with no easy solutions. Factors such as a weak infrastructure for private sector development and regulation, the general lack of the enabling macro-political, economic and institutional pre-conditions for decentralization, the historical disconnect between imported formal institutions and the indigenous African institutions, an international development environment that is both pro-market domination and hostile to the infusion of additional resources into the public sector reform, and finally the sheer difficulty of providing services to some of the most difficult, remotest and poorly integrated agricultural landscapes in the world, make the extension reform agenda for sub-Saharan Africa a herculean undertaking. It is therefore almost understandable why, given the complexity of the problem, that many analysts would rather choose the easy route of simply transferring reform models from other regions of the globe in the hope that they would work in the African context. The carcasses of many such past imported international development or reform models that litter the African development landscape clearly attest to the futility and non-sustainablity of such an import-model of
reform. Failure to take the more difficult and slower route of evolving home-grown extension reform instruments, that are in consonance with Africa’s unique, historical, cultural, institutional, economic and political realities can only lead to failure and frustration.

For instance, many of the extension reform proposals assume, erroneously, if I may add, that once the bureaucratic structure of public sector extension is dismantled through decentralization and institutional pluralism, that the problem of poor service delivery will be automatically eliminated. Often lost in this reform calculus are two fundamental facts. First, institutional culture is much harder to dismantle than institutional structure. Secondly, decentralization is only possible by a center that is willing to decentralize and a periphery that possesses the institutional capacity to take on decentralized responsibilities. In many instances in SSA, neither of these two prerequisites is met.

Another important issue in ongoing effort to reform public sector extension in SSA is the fact that the reform agenda has been driven largely by external pressure. As important as external inputs are in policy development and institutional reform in a region of the world where the requisite financial and human capital resources for reform are limited, and where the political class is unlike to willingly change a system from which it derives tremendous personal and political benefits, however, experience from many failed policies of the past, clearly demonstrate that sustainable institutional reform and development is only possible when the beneficiaries are not only engaged in the process, but play a central role in its conceptualization, implementation, and evaluation. This is the hobbessian choice that faces many development specialists in SSA.

Finally, while there is little, if any, doubt, that the existing institutional configuration for the delivery of extension services using the Ministry of agriculture-based public extension service is unlikely to result in the attainment of the goal of sustainable development, however, on-going efforts at reform are unlikely to achieve the desired result unless they are well-grounded within the unique human capital, political, socio-economic, and institutional capacity of the African environment. Lessons from almost five decades of failed well-meaning, technically-sound, but externally-devised economic policies in SSA should provide ample insight and guide (Economic Commission for Africa, 2000)

Therefore, as useful as the two broad themes of decentralization and privatization are as potential reform mechanisms for the weaknesses inherent in the current public sector dominated mechanism for the delivery of extension services in SSA, for reasons already discussed in this paper, they are not by themselves, sufficient at least in the short term frame, to meet the challenge. Although there are no magic bullets for resolving all that ail public sector extension in SSA, the next section focuses on some recommendations for action.

Recommendations

This author clearly acknowledges that it is much easier to identify potential pitfalls in any planned action for change, than it is to come up with alternatives. This is especially true in the context of reforming public sector extension services in SSA. Hence, this paper is rather long on criticism but short on alternatives. The task of devising more sustainable alternatives for reforming an institution as complicated as public sector extension goes beyond the capacity of a single paper, and is in fact the collective responsibility of the extension education profession. However, the paper proposes the following recommendations for action:
1. An empowerment model for the delivery of extension services based on social capital, the incorporation of farmer organizations and indigenous institutions, and using a multisectoral sustainable livelihood mechanism is a more sustainable approach than the current narrow focus on technology transfer in most reform discussions (see Alonge, 2003 for a more complete articulation of the empowerment model). As important as agricultural production is to rural economy, rural economies in SSA exhibit much greater diversification, what (Farrington, et al. 2002) describe as multiple livelihood strategies, than many analysts are wont to acknowledge. Consequently, any new extension strategy must focus on these multiple livelihood strategies, including but not limited to, agricultural productivity issues, food processing, marketing cooperatives, peri-urban part-time work, remittances, and other income-generating opportunities.

2. Given the remoteness and the wide spatial distribution of many villages in SSA often resulting in what some have described as non-viable units (Farrington, et al, 2002), the concept of empowerment nodes (Alonge, 2003, p. 12), involving clustering of villages into sustainable economic units for extension delivery and rural development activities, is recommended.

3. For the foreseeable future, the public sector will remain a major player in the delivery of extension services for reasons already discussed earlier in this paper. However, and more importantly, because the extension function goes beyond merely transferring productivity-enhancing technology, to include very important non-market, public good issues of resource management, and environmental sustainability, that are better addressed within a public sector framework.

4. The extension reform agenda shows a tendency to disaggregate the Agricultural Knowledge Information Systems for Rural Development, focusing on the extension delivery component almost to the exclusion of the research and development components. Privatizing or decentralizing the mechanism for the delivery of extension services without taking cognizance of the interconnectedness among the components of the AKIS/RD is almost a sure route to failure. This is the only rational conclusion to arrive at given the facts of a general lack of appropriate technology for many of Africa’s farming systems, the dominance of the public sector in technology development, and the well recognized poor infrastructure for private sector agricultural technology development. In order to successfully reform public sector extension, the interconnectedness of the AKIS/RD must be put front and center of the reform agenda. Attempting to reform the public sector extension system in SSA without addressing other components of the AKIS, such as agricultural research and development, and macro economic policies, will be tantamount to reengineering the marketing division of a struggling manufacturing enterprise while leaving the product and production lines untouched. It does not work in the private sector, and it won’t work with ongoing efforts to reform public sector extension in sub-Saharan Africa.

5. Institutional capacity building has almost become a cliché, in international development. However, for extension reform proposals such as privatization, decentralization, farmer-
led participatory models to be successfully implemented, capacity building across the board must become a top priority. It is in fact a pre-condition for any successful reform effort.

6. Finally and perhaps more importantly, the extension reform agenda will be successful to the proportion to which the beneficiary national authority feels a sense of ownership of the reform rather than a victim of coercive international transfer. As critically important as the involvement of external agencies is to ensuring successful extension reform, their role however, must be seen to be supportive, and advisory, nudging on rather than domineering or coercive. Experience has shown that while many less developed countries may seem to go along with the coercive influence of the threat of international sanctions or the lure of the inflow of badly needed financial incentives, in reality, they are adept at circumventing any policy they perceive as externally coerced. National pride and self-preservation usually tramp external pressure, no matter how great.

References


