An Anthropological Approach to Extension: Implications for Sustainability

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Abstract

Extension is in the process of going through a critical change; it is beginning to question how well it actually achieves its goal of serving people. There are valid criticisms regarding Extension and its historical role in development as a medium through which neo-colonialism has occurred, despite the original intentions and foundations of Extension. In this paper, we call on contemporary anthropological conceptualizations and a human rights based approach to Extension and international development to address such criticisms. Using the anthropological and human rights based literature, we can more fully realize the emancipatory goals inherent in Extension. This approach, along with anthropological conceptions, can be used by Extension program planners, adult educators, and evaluators to assist communities in realizing their development agendas in a sustainable manner by taking issues of gender, power, household relations, and the effect of the politico-legal system on the people directly implicated in and by international developmental efforts.
Introduction

It is well known within and outside Extension that planning and implementing successful international development programs is often difficult and complex. International Extension programs that are labeled “successful” are often not sustainable and/or emancipatory. Recognizing the challenges of long-term program success, Extension is in the process of going through a critical change, where it is beginning to question how well it actually achieves its goal of serving people. Expanding on this, it is time to critically evaluate Extension’s role as an agent of change in the development process. We must ask ourselves whether a program can be considered successful if it is not sustainable and directly beneficial to those who most need it. As an integral part of development, Extension then must closely consider the meaning of ‘development’ and ‘sustainability.’ For example, the Green Revolution of the 60s and 70s that serves as a paradigm on which new biotechnology and technological programs are based, have been shown to be highly unsustainable (Wright 1990). Though the Green Revolution has been heralded as a success story and a technical assistance program that “fed billions and billions of people,” the adverse effects of intensive monoculture, including the introduction and use of dangerous chemicals, dispossession of land and power, and disruption of social relationships, have yet to be recognized and given validation outside of anti-biotechnology activism and sociological and anthropological academia. When such considerations are taken into account within Extension – one of the mediums through which the Green Revolution and its subsequent programs occur – the purpose of international Extension and its notions of “success” must be re-evaluated and re-conceptualized. Axinn and Thorat (1972:5) state that, “the high proportion of failures of such as international technical assistance efforts testifies to the need for a deeper understanding of the process of agriculture Extension education.” We are arguing that it is not only the processes through which agriculture and Extension education occurs, but that we also need a deeper understanding of how these processes influence the lives and human rights of the people who they implicate. With these considerations, Extension will then be able to address the question, “How can we help people to create desired change that is both sustainable and appropriate?”

Purpose

The objective of this paper is to illuminate the complexities and possibilities for sustainable Extension and agricultural development by combining anthropological concepts with a human rights based approach to Extension. We will show that a human rights based approach combined with anthropological concepts allows us take interconnecting issues of gender, culture, power relations into account, while at the same time enabling development to redirect itself to the “basic guiding principles” of equity in the form of human rights, to which Extension should embrace.

Theoretical Issues / Concerns

Relating Current Anthropology with Extension and Development

According to contemporary anthropological discourse, “development” needs to be regarded as an emancipatory and a democratic process which contributes to people’s freedom to decide their livelihoods as they see appropriate, and be allowed voice in those decision-making processes (Agarwal 1994; Sen 1990). By the same token, “sustainability” must in
reality, adhere to the ideal that the processes of development must not compromise the basis for a prosperous and healthy livelihood/environment for future generations (Brundtland 1995). The purpose of Extension as highlighted by Rasmussen (1989) and others is to ‘help people help themselves.’ This idea is still the most appropriate for Extension and sustainable development. Recognizing that current development efforts have often not succeeded in doing this, Whitmore (1998:3) offers us some insight when he notes, “A common tendency in contemporary society is to identify a problem and then try to address it directly without giving careful consideration to its underlying roots. As a result, problems tend to persist or quickly re-emerge because their underlying causes are not addressed.” While the Green Revolution has “amplified the role of agricultural extension agents in transferring the new technology and practices from the research stations to the cultivators,” (Agarwal 1994:475) the “cultivators” themselves have experienced differential access to Extension agents due to existing structural biases. While structural problems that hinder program development and implementation indeed exist, i.e. government policies, accountability, funding, etc. (Feder and Zijp, 1999), the “underlying roots” suggested by Whitmore are those social-cultural institutions which need to be taken into account when designing and implementing programs that foster social and technological change. Without addressing the underlying roots of socio-cultural institutions, and perpetuating “Western” notions of development through technology transfer, modernization, and economic growth, many Extension programs will continue to fail to be sustainable.

For instance, one of the most contentious issues in the South is the fact that people do not own or have access to land. (But we must be careful to recognize that the legal redistribution of land alone is not enough. The socio-cultural institutions and power relations that de facto exist must support legal land redistribution.) Therefore, technology transfer, modernization of agriculture, and the like serve only the interests of a few large commercial landowners, while in the process marginalizing small-scale farmers and peasants (Wright 1990). We can, in this instance, begin to see how “development” has affected sustainability in many different spheres. Behind this modernization approach, involving technology and hybrid seeds, agricultural modernization has often involved the heavy use of pesticides, fertilizers, and irrigation. The effects of these practices are specific but have been quite harmful, varying across regions, nations and cultures, and classes (Wright, 1990). By making development “work” for large commercial landowners, the landless are left unable to determine the course of their own development, as they do not have the means necessary (land) to do so. These circumstances have been documented in many areas of the South, such as Africa, India, Mexico and the Philippines (cf Agarwal 1994, Wright 1990, Nussbaum 2000). One can see the inappropriateness in the very theoretical approach to the Green Revolution: for the South to imitate and translate the practices of North American and European agriculture without taking into account the conditions and agricultural practices already in place in the South.

A pedagogical view of the knowledge and capabilities of the South allowed the perpetuation of the Green Revolution through technological modernization, while local knowledges of science and the environment were treated as “backwards,” “non-modern,” and “nonproductive,” which according to agro-business, economists, and policy makers needed correction. This discourse continues within macro-developmental and funding agencies such as the World Bank, the WTO, and the IMF and has been noted by anthropologists (cf Ferguson 1994 and Escobar 1995). The anthropological literature points out that Extension
and development cannot remove itself from relevant aspects of culture, gender, power, and accomplishment from development; Extension must seek out local knowledges and question the variation that occurs within and outside of situated knowledges before they can identify with the people and their goals.

With this we must look at the discourse that disvalues “non-modernized” people and their capabilities so that Extension can avoid taking part in this subtle yet deterministic form of oppression. This euphemistic language is still used to justify the intervention of the “Third World’s” development by the North and attempts to conceal the meaning behind this discourse - that people in the developing world are undereducated, superstitious, incapable, reluctant, and backward (Escobar 1995, Borlaug and Shiva 1997). This language has severe and largely unrealized consequences: people who are in the developing process are judged and treated as children without reasonable ability to define their own development. Escobar (1995:159) has noted that, “The green revolution literature is full of cultural assumptions regarding science, progress, and the economy, in which one can discern the authorial stances of a father/savior talking with selfless condescension to the child/native.” Extension must be aware of the implications and existence of such discourse and cultural assumptions, and must avoid euphemistic thought and language that seeks to distract from underlying causes of exploitation and marginalization and invalidate accomplishments, capabilities, and intricacies of the nations of the South. Boone (1989:8) has stated that, “Extension must be idealistic, must have faith in the client’s ability to use knowledge to change his or her life; they must accept change as a positive; and they must trust the potential of the future to be better than the past and the present.” This idealism is essential to changing the hegemonic thought and discourse of development.

Relating Human Rights to Extension

A "human rights based approach" to international Extension and Extension education is imperative at this time as it holds the most potential for transforming development and addressing inequality. In order for development to be truly emancipatory, some basic rights must be in place. This places Extension, as a channel of the development process, in a unique position for realizing this goal (Freire 1982).

Rhoda Howard rightly perceives that “in principle, development is now usually taken to mean some combination of growth, self-reliance, and equal or equitable distribution of resources to all citizens; frequently political participation or citizen ‘empowerment’ is also included as an ingredient of development” (1993:115). It is the latter part of Howard’s statement where we see the most potential for “development” to occur. While Howard states that empowerment is frequently included as an ingredient of development, we argue that empowerment needs to be the guiding principle of development. It is not just economic development, but rather development in all of its conceptions as it relates to human beings. As guiding principles, Sen states that empowerment and development are defined by the expansion of freedom. Expansion of freedom is “both the primary end and the principle means of development” and that “the removal of substantial unfreedoms…is constitutive of development” (Sen 1999:xii). On the other hand, viewing development as a personal guiding principle recognizes that each individual will have her or his own definition and interpretation of development, which through institutional freedoms and the removal of unfreedoms can also be realized. A human rights approach can facilitate this development.
What would development through a human rights approach look like and how can Extension become a vehicle for this approach? Extension should reorient part of their focus towards rights and the establishment of rights, instead of concentrating on economics and the growing agro-industry. The approach of conceptualizing development as measurable mostly in economic indices of “goods attained” is problematic in that there is nothing inherent in this approach that impels a parallel promotion and protection of human rights. For example, if a woman does not have basic human rights, such as mobility and nutrition, it matters very little if she has a formal education. Her “right” to this education has, effectively, no use to her. If development were to focus its efforts on ensuring that human rights are in fact accessible and protected in the societies and institutions in which they exist (through information dissemination), people could use these rights as the basis for expanding their freedoms to decide which course of development to define for themselves.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes such rights as: “protections against state abuses of a citizen’s physical integrity and personal freedom; guarantees of substantive and procedural justice; the right to participate in one’s government; guarantees of the right to food, livelihood and an adequate standard of living; and the right to participate in the cultural life of a community” (Howard 1993:113). The Preamble to the Universal Declaration of 1948 and Article 2 of the two 1966 Covenants specify that rights are due to all persons regardless of sex (United Nations 1978). While the UN Declaration of Human Rights is by no means realized, it is indeed an important ingredient to empowerment and development.

By focusing on the dissemination and implementation of rights, Extension can be more active in its orientation. For example, while a human rights approach to development can be utilized in various ways and in different situations, it is useful to examine one instance where making a claim to a human right can in fact protect and ensure freedoms, which enable “development.” Among the list of rights expressed in the Declaration, the right to “livelihood and an adequate standard of living” (UN Declaration Article 25:1) stands out as of particular importance, as the physical well-being of a person provides the basis for her abilities in other areas of life. Calling for the protection of this universal right can take many different forms and vary by culture. To illustrate, we will draw upon Agarwal’s work in the South (Agarwal 1994).

One way in which development institutions and Extension in India could promote development would be to, as Agarwal suggests, focus on the right to livelihood and adequate standard of living. We can begin to see, through this example, that Extension has the possibility of playing a useful role in this process. As the vast majority of people in India depend on land as the primary means of securing their livelihood and standard of living, demanding that the right to land be recognized as a human right would provide an impetus for the empowerment of the disadvantaged – specifically women. Agarwal rightly views development as processual, and human rights should also be regarded as such when using them as a guide for development. In other words, appealing to the right to land will not automatically grant women all of the freedoms to choose their own development, because being granted land is not an end in itself. Instead, it is one of the starting points which if granted, will lead to other freedoms, which will in turn lead to a greater potential for choice; that is, for personal development.

Development is, of course, highly political. Ferguson observes that in many instances development processes deny “politics,” that is, it depoliticizes everything it touches.
Development through the lens of human rights addresses development outright politically, it makes a political claim to rights. It becomes apparent in approaching development and Extension through human rights, that such issues as claiming the “right” to land and how to use land are highly political. As ownership or legal control of land also affects marriage locality, political participation and decision-making, household decision-making, and what Agarwal terms women’s “bargaining power,” demanding legal rights to land as a human right may lead to other processes of attaining social equality and self-determination. Appealing to a human rights based approach allows Extension and development to truly “help people help themselves.” A human rights based approach works not only to provide information in general (relating to health care, education, nutrition, technology, etc.), but also works to advocate for and provide information about human rights at all levels: individual, community, state, national, and international.

Considerations

Viewing anthropological conceptions in tandem with a human rights based approach may appear contradictory. The anthropological conceptions discussed in the paper are those which emphasize ‘context’ and ‘relativity’ to each cultural setting. On the other hand, the human rights approach calls for a universal standard that can be used as a normative basis from which development should start from. So how are we advocating ‘universalism’ and ‘cultural relativism’? The answer is more apparent than it may seem. If, for instance, we start from the human right that calls for “a livelihood and an adequate standard of living,” this in no way determines or defines what that standard of living should look like. What a human rights approach calls for is that one can define one’s own development providing that this definition does not conflict with the basic human rights of others. That standard can and will be defined by each person, culture, etc. Therefore, it allows flexibility in definition and realization. For this reason, the combination of anthropological ideas/concepts with the human rights approach to development secures people’s basic rights and freedoms while at the same time allowing people, based on their particular cultural values, to preserve variation and diversity.

Conclusions

The ability of people to define the course of their own development is not only a democratic approach to development and sustainability, but also a human rights issue. This will directly affect the sustainability of people’s natural and social environments. The participation of greater numbers of people in the decision-making process will determine their acceptance or rejection of the developmental effort. Greater participation will, in turn, affect the sustainability of international Extension programs and international Extension itself.

In this paper, the authors have utilized anthropological concepts to address some of the less apparent, though exceedingly influential aspects of Extension and development. We have concurrently advocated a human rights based approach to Extension and development. It is the quality and aim of the development programs that are implemented and influence change that will affect the people who need it the most. Using the various anthropological concepts and ideas we have discussed and taking those into account within the human rights approach, Extension can become more in tune with the potentials that Freire, Mezirow,
Axinn and others have recognized in Extension; that is, not only as an end in itself, but part of a broader movement which truly assists, indeed emancipates, the most marginal.

**Educational Importance**

This analysis of developmental program sustainability provides Extension with multiple practical and applicable anthropological concepts that can be used to understand the community and its cultural constructs, which is of utmost importance in program development, implementation, and evaluation. Furthermore, utilizing a human rights approach to Extension and development can facilitate the development process in becoming a form of empowerment by allowing people to preserve their cultural traditions without compromising basic human rights. At the same time, by appealing to a normative standard of human rights, Extension can assist by protecting and advocating the livelihood of all people regardless of race, class, sex, gender, or religion. In conclusion, such concepts will further add to the variegated resource base that Extension has created and are applicable to any project and/or program within international Extension and development.

**Bibliography**


